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SITTING DAYS—2007

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- **Sydney**: 630 AM
- **Newcastle**: 1458 AM
- **Gosford**: 98.1 FM
- **Brisbane**: 936 AM
- **Gold Coast**: 95.7 FM
- **Melbourne**: 1026 AM
- **Adelaide**: 972 AM
- **Perth**: 585 AM
- **Hobart**: 747 AM
- **Northern Tasmania**: 92.5 FM
- **Darwin**: 102.5 FM
FORTY-FIRST PARLIAMENT
FIRST SESSION—TENTH 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
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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
HOWARD MINISTRY

Prime Minister
Minister for Transport and Regional Services and Deputy Prime Minister
Treasury
Minister for Trade
Minister for Defence
Minister for Foreign Affairs
Minister for Health and Ageing and Leader of the House
Attorney-General
Minister for Finance and Administration, Leader of the Government in the Senate and Vice-President of the Executive Council
Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry and Deputy Leader of the House
Minister for Immigration and Citizenship
Minister for Education, Science and Training and Minister Assisting the Prime Minister for Women’s Issues
Minister for Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs and Minister Assisting the Prime Minister for Indigenous Affairs
Minister for Industry, Tourism and Resources
Minister for Employment and Workplace Relations and Minister Assisting the Prime Minister for the Public Service
Minister for Communications, Information Technology and the Arts and Deputy Leader of the Government in the Senate
Minister for the Environment and Water Resources
Minister for Human Services

The Hon. John Winston Howard MP
The Hon. Mark Anthony James Vaile MP
The Hon. Peter Howard Costello MP
The Hon. Warren Errol Truss MP
The Hon. Dr Brendan John Nelson MP
The Hon. Alexander John Gosse Downer MP
The Hon. Anthony John Abbott MP
The Hon. Philip Maxwell Ruddock MP
Senator the Hon. Nicholas Hugh Minchin
The Hon. Peter John McGauran MP
The Hon. Kevin James Andrews MP
The Hon. Julie Isabel Bishop MP
The Hon. Malcolm Thomas Brough MP
The Hon. Ian Elgin Macfarlane MP
The Hon. Joseph Benedict Hockey MP
Senator the Hon. Helen Lloyd Coonan
The Hon. Malcolm Bligh Turnbull MP
Senator the Hon. Christopher Martin Ellison

(The above ministers constitute the cabinet)
HOWARD MINISTRY—continued

Minister for Fisheries, Forestry and Conservation and Manager of Government Business in the Senate
Senator the Hon. Eric Abetz

Minister for Small Business and Tourism
The Hon. Frances Esther Bailey MP

Minister for Local Government, Territories and Roads
The Hon. James Eric Lloyd MP

Minister for Revenue and Assistant Treasurer
The Hon. Peter Craig Dutton MP

Minister for Workforce Participation
The Hon. Dr Sharman Nancy Stone MP

Minister for Veterans' Affairs and Minister Assisting the Minister for Defence
The Hon. Bruce Frederick Billson MP

Special Minister of State
The Hon. Gary Roy Nairn MP

Minister for Ageing
The Hon. Christopher Maurice Pyne MP

Minister for Vocational and Further Education
The Hon. Andrew John Robb MP

Minister for the Arts and Sport
Senator the Hon. George Henry Brandis SC

Minister for Community Services
Senator the Hon. Nigel Gregory Scullion

Minister for Justice and Customs
Senator the Hon. David Albert Lloyd Johnston

Assistant Minister for Immigration and Citizenship
The Hon. Teresa Gambaro MP

Assistant Minister for the Environment and Water Resources
The Hon. John Kenneth Cobb MP

Parliamentary Secretary to the Prime Minister
The Hon. Anthony David Hawthorn Smith MP

Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Transport and Regional Services
The Hon. De-Anne Margaret Kelly MP

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

Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Finance and Administration
Senator the Hon. Richard Mansell Colbeck

Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Industry, Tourism and Resources
The Hon. Robert Charles Baldwin MP

Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Foreign Affairs
The Hon. Gregory Andrew Hunt MP

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

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

Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Defence
The Hon. Peter John Lindsay MP

Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Health and Ageing
Senator the Hon. Brett John Mason
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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
| Shadow Minister for Federal/State Relations, Shadow Minister for International Development Assistance and Deputy Manager of Opposition Business in the House | Robert Francis McMullan MP |
| Shadow Minister for Primary Industries, Fisheries and Forestry | Senator Kerry Williams Kelso O’Brien |
| Shadow Minister for Human Services, Shadow Minister for Housing, Shadow Minister for Youth and Shadow Minister for Women | Tanya Joan Plibersek MP |
| Shadow Minister for Health | Nicola Louise Roxon MP |
| Shadow Minister for Superannuation and Intergenerational Finance and Shadow Minister for Banking and Financial Services | Senator the Hon. Nicholas John Sherry |
| Shadow Minister for Education and Training | Stephen Francis Smith MP |
| Shadow Treasurer | Wayne Maxwell Swan MP |
| Shadow Minister for Finance | Lindsay James Tanner MP |
| Shadow Minister for Public Administration and Accountability, Shadow Minister for Corporate Governance and Responsibility and Shadow Minister for Workforce Participation | Senator Penelope Ying Yen Wong |
| Shadow Parliamentary Secretary for Foreign Affairs | Anthony Michael Byrne MP |
| Shadow Parliamentary Secretary for Defence and Veterans’ Affairs | The Hon. Graham John Edwards MP |
| Shadow Parliamentary Secretary for Environment and Heritage | Jennie George MP |
| Shadow Parliamentary Secretary for Treasury | Catherine Fiona King MP |
| Shadow Parliamentary Secretary for Education | Kirsten Fiona Livermore MP |
| Shadow Parliamentary Secretary to the Leader of the Opposition | John Paul Murphy MP |
| Shadow Parliamentary Secretary for Industrial Relations | Brendan Patrick John O’Connor MP |
| Shadow Parliamentary Secretary for Industry and Innovation | Bernard Fernando Ripoll MP |
| Shadow Parliamentary Secretary for Northern Australia and Indigenous Affairs | The Hon. Warren Edward Snowdon MP |
| Shadow Parliamentary Secretary to the Leader of the Opposition (Social and Community Affairs) | Senator Ursula Mary Stephens |
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The SPEAKER (Hon. David Hawker) took the chair at 12.30 pm and read prayers.

DELEGATION REPORTS

Australian Parliamentary Delegation to Canada and Germany

The SPEAKER (12.31 pm)—I present the report of the Australian Parliamentary Delegation to Canada and Germany, 14 to 28 April 2007. Earlier this year I was honoured to lead a parliamentary delegation to Canada and Germany. Today I am pleased to present the delegation’s report. The visit provided a valuable opportunity for the delegation to explore a variety of issues with our Canadian and German counterparts. We were able to find out about current political, social and economic developments in North America and Europe. We also promoted opportunities to broaden and strengthen Australia’s relations with Canada and Germany.

During our time in Canada, we found there is much that we share in common, despite our geographical separation. Our parliamentary systems, our strong economies and the challenges we face give us much to talk about and much to learn from each other. The delegation was particularly interested in the way in which Canada is dealing with the employment challenges generated by an economy enjoying strong growth as a result of a resources boom. Importing of labour to fill shortages in key industry sectors is one option being used. One downside of a low unemployment rate is that traditional industries such as agriculture often find it hard to get workers to undertake much of the manual work associated with the industry.

The delegation heard about the successful Seasonal Agricultural Workers Program, which sees around 20,000 workers come to Canada from Mexico and Caribbean countries to undertake seasonal agricultural work. The details of the program are outlined in the delegation’s report. The key point is that the program works because there are incentives for all participants—workers, employers and the participating countries—to make it work. Given similar labour issues facing Australian agricultural industries, the applicability of a similar scheme to Australian circumstances would be worth exploring.

The delegation’s report also focuses on discussions we held with Canada’s Prime Minister, Stephen Harper, and a range of federal ministers. An important point emphasised during those discussions was Canada’s eagerness to work with Australia in promoting democracy and good governance in regions of the world where there is a democratic deficit. During the meeting with the Prime Minister, the delegation advocated an expansion of the working holiday-maker arrangements that allow young Australians to work and holiday in Canada.

The delegation’s report outlines opportunities for Australia to broaden its ties with Canada. I was particularly interested to find out about the financial administration of the Canadian parliament, including its role in setting and administering its own budget. To broaden our links with Canada, the delegation has suggested that a committee exchange program be explored with the Canadian parliament, similar to that which Australia currently has with the New Zealand parliament.

In Germany, the delegation was fortunate to meet with a range of parliamentary, industry and community representatives. During those meetings, it was made evident that European and trans-Atlantic relations are a primary focus for Germany. At the same time, there is a growing recognition of the increasing influence and importance of the Asia-Pacific region. This could have future benefits for Australia, as Germany seeks to
take advantage of economic opportunities in our region. The delegation was interested to find out about Germany’s eagerness for NATO to move beyond its primary European focus and pursue partnerships with like-minded countries outside of Europe.

Environmental issues were also a focus of discussions, with the delegation attending a parliamentary session at which the German environment minister delivered a major policy statement on the environment and climate change. Details of the German approach to these issues are outlined in the delegation’s report. The delegation welcomed the opportunity to visit an agricultural community outside of Frankfurt. There we were able to find out about a cooperative approach to dealing with challenges in the industry, as detailed in our report.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank the Canadian and German parliaments, led by their presiding officers, for the warmth of their welcome, for the interesting programs that were arranged and for their generous hospitality. Thanks are also due to our High Commissioner to Canada, Bill Fisher, to our Ambassador to Germany, Ian Kemish, and to their staff for their work in ensuring the success of the visit. I am grateful to the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, the Parliamentary Library and the Parliamentary Relations Office for their contributions. Finally, thanks to all members of the delegation for their support and participation, to the delegation secretary, Andres Lomp, and to my senior adviser, Chris Paterson. I commend the report to the House.

COMMITTEES
Environment and Heritage Committee Report

Dr WASHER (Moore) (12.37 pm)—On behalf of the Standing Committee on Environment and Heritage, I present the committee’s report entitled Sustainability for survival: creating a climate for change: inquiry into a sustainability charter, together with the minutes of proceedings.

Ordered that the report be made a parliamentary paper.

Dr WASHER—In its 2005 report on sustainable cities, the committee identified a need for a national governance framework for advancing sustainability in Australia. It formed the view that a national approach would be an effective way of engaging all levels of government in their decision-making processes. In turn, the committee proposed a concept for coordinating action in this area that primarily involved the Australian government’s formation of a sustainability charter, supported by a commission and commissioner. This report further explores the concept of a national sustainability charter. The committee believes the charter itself should be aspirational in order to reach everyday Australians. It should define sustainability in an Australian context and contain clear and concise objectives and time frames. On their own, aspirational statements may not be sufficient to drive progress so the committee recommends that the charter also be linked to a set of measurable targets.

In the report the committee examines sustainability in the areas of the built environment, water, energy, transport, ecological footprint, economics, waste, social equity and health, and community engagement and education. The charter should cover these areas and address their interrelationships. The role of the proposed commission is fundamental to the charter. The committee proposes that the commission work with an advisory committee comprising sustainability champions to perform the initial task of creating the charter and to perform the commission’s ongoing role of influencing and guiding government, industry and the community to work towards positive outcomes. The
commission should report annually to parliament on Australia’s progress against the charter and review its terms when necessary.

Industry and community interest in advancing sustainability became evident during the inquiry. Among these two groups are an acute awareness of the pressing need to progress the sustainability agenda and as such a strong desire to adopt more sustainable practices. In fact, a wealth of research, strategies and technologies already exist to support progress in this area and some of these are discussed in the report. Despite high levels of industry and community interest in advancing sustainability, progress is deemed to be slow. The committee has identified that in Australia there is a need for stronger government leadership on sustainability, as well as increased efforts by government and greater uniformity in its approach. A sustainability charter, supported by a sustainability commission and commissioner, will provide guidance to public and private efforts to build a more sustainable future. In this report the committee recommends the Australian government establish a legislative framework for the proposed national sustainability charter, commission and commissioner.

The great level of industry and community support for this inquiry reflects a strong interest in advancing sustainability in Australia. I thank those who contributed to the inquiry by providing evidence and note also the efforts of the committee members and secretariat staff. I commend the report Sustainability for survival: creating a climate for change: inquiry into a sustainability charter to the House.

Mr JENKINS (Scullin) (12.41 pm)—In speaking to this report, Sustainability for survival: creating a climate for change: inquiry into a sustainability charter, I wish to make some general comments as well as to support the comments of the Chair of the Standing Committee on Environment and Heritage. On 8 October 1987 I was appointed to the House environment committee and it has been my good fortune to serve nearly 20 years on the committee in its various guises. It is the longest standing portfolio committee of the House. If we look back over its history, we see it has done a lot of very good work. It has been involved in all environmental debates over that period since its inception. It has been an agent to bring parliament to the community. It has always had great cooperation from those people in the community that have had a real interest in the environment.

I can remember only one inquiry of this committee that was in any way controversial. That was not because it concerned the environment; that was because we had Arts and Sport under the banner of the committee’s portfolio and there was a discussion about decisions made on whiteboards. In everything else we have had a bipartisan way of going forward and the work of the committee in the 41st Parliament has seen exactly the same situation. The honourable member for Moore, through his leadership, encouragement and ability to allow us to discuss things, has allowed all committee members to be able to make a contribution to the work of the committee. The professional secretariat staff that we have now has worked at the same level that I have witnessed over the last 20 years. The committee has always been well served by those who have assisted it in its endeavours.

This report is really about the way forward, and I hope that those opposite do not think I am being overly political in saying that it is really a little bit disappointing that, while the committee has moved forward from its last body of work—the sustainable cities inquiry—it has not had a government response to that report, which was tabled over two years ago. But the important thing
is that the committee has decided to continue to go forward. The way in which we have had the cooperation of the people in the community who have come before the committee and given us their ideas is an indication that the committee’s work is relevant to what Australians see as being important in our challenge to achieve sustainability in a world bedevilled by environmental problems, the greatest challenge of which is, of course, climate change.

The other thing that the House environment committee has been able to show through its work is that you do not have to be wedded just to your portfolio area. Many of the problems that confront us as a nation need a holistic approach. If you look at the items that we believe should be in the scope of the charter you will see that they are, of course, environmental in nature and include the built environment, water, energy and our ecological footprint. They then go to the way that the environment can meet the way that people operate, and this includes transport, economics and waste, and then we go to social equity, health, community engagement and education.

Those last two things are very important because, if government is not engaged with people and if government does not have an understanding of a person’s wellbeing, our policies are not worth while. So in this proposed sustainability charter we very much see that the way forward is to bring people with us. That is why the committee unanimously agreed that the charter should be aspirational in nature and that it should be in simple language that does not confuse people but brings them forward with us. But we stress that, underpinning that, there must be definite targets that will enable government, industry and others to know that we are proceeding, that we are going forward.

I hope that we might get a response to the sustainable cities inquiry, but I urge government to respond to both inquiries at the same time. It is urgent that we go forward. This matter will require action from all spheres of government, plus the community and industry. We have to make the decision to embrace a sustainability charter, as recommended by the committee, so that it will enable us as a nation to go forward in environmental matters. *(Time expired)*

**The SPEAKER**—Does the member for Moore wish to move a motion in connection with the report to enable it to be debated on a future occasion?

**Dr WASHER** (Moore) (12.46 pm)—I thank the member for Scullin for his wise words, and I move:

That the House take note of the report.

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

**MAIN COMMITTEE**

**Environment and Heritage Committee**

**Reference**

**Dr WASHER** (Moore) (12.47 pm)—I move:

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

Question agreed to.

**COMMITTEES**

**Procedure Committee**

**Report**

**Mrs MAY** (McPherson) (12.47 pm)—On behalf of the Standing Committee on Procedure, I present the committee’s report entitled *Making a difference: petitioning the House of Representatives*, together with the minutes of proceedings.

Ordered that the report be made a parliamentary paper.
Mrs MAY—On behalf of the Standing Committee on Procedure, I have pleasure in presenting the committee’s report entitled Making a difference: petitioning the House of Representatives. Petitions have a fascinating and important history. In 1818, John Hatsell, an early commentator on procedures of the House of Commons, said:

To receive, and hear, and consider the petitions of their fellow subjects, when presented decently, and containing no matter intentionally offensive to the House, is a duty incumbent upon [Members of the House], antecedent to all rules and orders that may have been instituted for their own convenience. Justice and the laws of our country demand it of them.

I quote this because it captures so much of the essence of petitioning. The House of Representatives is a chamber in the Westminster tradition, and the history of petitioning the House of Commons is thus part of our history of petitioning. Hatsell outlined three principles of petitioning as applied in the House of Commons of the 19th century. First, subjects had a right to ask the House to take certain actions. Second, petitioners themselves had certain obligations—that is, to present requests decently and not to include matter that was intentionally offensive. Third, the House had a duty to pay attention to such requests. Petitioners could expect a response, and it was therefore better to refuse to receive a petition which had no chance of success rather than to receive it and raise false expectations.

An interesting point about these principles is that they rest upon the fundamental assumption that petitioning could make a difference. In considering the practice of petitioning the House of Representatives today, the Procedure Committee had to address this issue of ‘making a difference’. If petitioners cannot rely on their petitions to effect change, is there anything the House can or should do about this?

The committee considers that the full potential for petitions to make a difference is not currently realised. We recognise that citizens and other residents now have other avenues. The redress of grievances of an administrative nature, for example, might be sought through the Ombudsman. Australians seeking to change legislation might now form a lobby group and try to influence outcomes through the media. The committee’s view is that these alternative routes should not be allowed to deny Australians the fundamental right to communicate directly with the people’s House. If petitioning is no longer considered effective, the reasons for this should be identified and addressed.

This report records how we think this can be done and outlines the committee’s own six principles of petitioning. First, petitions belong to the public. Petitions are the most direct form of communication between the public and the House. Petitions serve as a community-building process underpinned by the key objective of having the public voice heard. This process is important to our democratic system. Second, petitions sent to the House should be addressed by the House. Given that the standing orders require petitions to be addressed to the House of Representatives and to seek action by that House, the role of the House in facilitating a response should be strengthened. The House should have the capacity to respond to petitioners and advise them on the progress or outcomes of their petition. The committee considers the most effective way for the House to act in relation to petitions is to establish a dedicated petitions committee.

Third, governments should respond to petitions. Petitioners expect and deserve a response to the matters raised in their petition. The rules should be changed to encourage greater efforts by ministers and their departments to consider the terms of petitions which are referred to them by the House and
to respond to them in a timely fashion. Fourth, members’ involvement should be enhanced and streamlined. To improve the effectiveness of petitions their status must be enhanced. Members have an important role to play in raising and debating the issues and grievances contained in petitions and in facilitating a response. Fifth, petition rules should be relevant and fair. Preparing a petition should not be excessively difficult and the rules governing petitions should not prove unnecessarily onerous. The House must provide clear and accessible information and advice on the petitioning process.

And last, but not least, information technologies should be used more effectively. Historically, the essence of the petitioning process was the ancient right of people, irrespective of their numbers, to express serious concerns to the King. This ancient tradition can and should be modernised to reflect advances in information communication technologies. In particular, the committee accepts that in the 21st century the House can no longer ignore electronic petitions. The House of Representatives website itself also requires redesigning to make it more accessible.

Having said that and having put on the record today how the committee feels, I would also like to put on the record my thanks to the deputy chair—the member for Banks, who is in the House today—and also other members of the Standing Committee on Procedure. A number of members travelled overseas to look at petitioning processes and we had wonderful support from the secretariat. In particular, I would like to thank Judy Middlebrook. Judy has been with the secretariat for many years and she accompanied the Procedure Committee overseas. Judy is particularly supportive of establishing a committee of petitions within the House. I would like to pay particular thanks to Judy for all the support she gave the committee. I commend the report to the House.

Mr MELHAM (Banks) (12.53 pm)—by leave—The current petitioning process in the House of Representatives encompasses the following points. Petitions, like other documents, may only be presented to the House by a member. In 95 per cent of cases, the terms are read out to the House by the Clerk. Members have certain administrative duties regarding the petitions they lodge—for example, counting the number of signatories—but they cannot personally sponsor a petition or petition the House in their own right.

There were some concerns in submissions that members may be generating their own petitions. There are a number of rules set out in the standing orders and the Clerk or Deputy Clerk checks petitions for compliance before they are presented to the House. Those which do not comply with the rules are deemed out of order and they are not registered in the official records of the House. These rules were revised and simplified in 2001, but during the 41st Parliament 161 petitions have so far been found to be out of order, containing some 430,000 signatures. This means that about 40 per cent of the signatures to all petitions to the House are on out-of-order petitions.

Once petitions are presented to the House, the terms of the petitions are recorded in Hansard. It is possible for petitions to be referred to a particular committee, although this is not done in practice. The Clerk then refers a copy of the petition to the minister responsible for the administration of the matter raised in the petition. It is rare that any further action is taken, though ministers may respond by lodging a written response to the Clerk. Three out of 2,589 petitions since 1999 have received a ministerial response.
The committee did not think this was good enough and has made a series of recommendations to improve the situation. The major recommendation of the committee is the establishment of a petitions committee. This would be another of the House’s domestic committees, established under chapter 16 of the standing orders. Like other such committees, it would consist of members from both sides of the House, would be chaired by a government member and would be supported by senior parliamentary staff.

The committee would manage all aspects of the processing of petitions, including maintaining a petitions website that would be accessible from a button on the House of Representatives home page; publishing and disseminating a redesigned petitions pro-forma and ensuring that all members had hard copies in their offices to facilitate public access to petitioning; receiving all petitions and acknowledging receipt to the principal petitioner; ensuring petitions are consistent with the standing orders and negotiating with the principal petitioner, where necessary, to address any problems; exercising discretion to disallow petitions which are unlawful or otherwise offensive or inappropriate and notifying the principal petitioner in such cases; liaising with the principal petitioner regarding all stages of his or her petition; arranging administrative processing, including counting the signatories and arranging for presentation of petitions to the House, and putting terms of petitions on the website; and monitoring the standing orders relating to petitions and advising the House where improvements can be made.

The committee is aware of concerns that parliamentary committees are currently under-resourced and that members are often asked to sit on too many committees. This in turn has an effect on the ability of members to contribute as well as they would like to each of the committees they serve on. It could therefore be argued that increasing the number of committees would simply stretch members further.

The committee accepts that the establishment of a petitions committee would require additional resources or the reallocation of resources within the House department. It remains of the view that the benefit of a dedicated petitions committee is worthy of the support of the House. The committee discussed some of the objections to this view which might arise. For example, it might be considered that a compromise could be proposed in the form of a subcommittee of the Standing Committee on Procedure to be responsible for petitions.

The committee strongly cautions against any proposal to merge the existing Procedure Committee with the proposed petitions committee, for two reasons. Establishing a dedicated petitions committee should represent a conscious decision by the House and the government to give petitioning a much more prominent role and acknowledge that petitions can in fact make a difference to our democracy. To merge the proposed petitions committee with the existing Procedure Committee would reduce the effectiveness of both committees and their capacity to thoroughly investigate their quite separate subjects: House procedure, on the one hand, and individual petitions, on the other. Moreover, in no parliament reviewed in this report has a petitions committee been a subcommittee of the procedure committee.

A second concern is that a petitions committee might raise petitioners’ expectations that each petition would be actioned by the committee in the petitioners’ favour. Following analysis of the terms of petitions presented to the House so far this year, it is clear that in a number of cases the petitions committee would only be able to acknowledge the petition and refer its terms to the relevant
minister, as is currently the case. At the very least, the principal petitioner would get an acknowledgement from the committee advising him or her that the petition had been presented to the House, considered by the committee and referred to the relevant minister for information and possible response.

While any response issued by a petitions committee is a far better outcome than the current system provides, it is likely that the petitions committee would present two types of reports: regular reports recommending the referral of petitions to either a minister or the relevant subject committee, and reports of its own inquiries into a small number of petitions. In relation to the first type of report, the petitions committee would still be able to monitor the progress of its recommended referrals, as the Scottish PPC does, and present this on the committee’s website.

On the basis that a petitions committee would provide a demonstrable sign that petitions continue to be a respected form of democratic participation and ought to be taken seriously by a modern House, and that a petitions committee would be able to distinguish between petitions that can be actioned by the House and those that would require further government action, the committee recommends that a petitions committee be established in the House of Representatives. (Time expired)

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

Mrs MAY (McPherson) (12.59 pm)—I move:

That the House take note of the report.

The SPEAKER—In accordance with standing order 39, the debate is adjourned. The resumption of the debate will be made an order of the day for the next sitting.

Economics, Finance and Public Administration Committee

Report

Mr BAIRD (Cook) (1.00 pm)—On behalf of the Standing Committee on Economics, Finance and Public Administration, I present the committee’s report entitled Review of the Reserve Bank of Australia Annual Report 2006 (Second Report) together with the minutes of proceedings.

Ordered that the report be made a parliamentary paper.

Mr BAIRD—The August 2007 hearing was conducted in the light of a strong domestic economy but at a time when there was some volatility on global markets as a result of growing problems in the US sub-prime mortgage market. The rising delinquency rates in the subprime mortgage market had resulted in a sharp fall in prices to mortgage backed securities and collateralised debt obligations, which created problems for the holders of these products. During this period, a number of central banks acted to increase liquidity in the banking system. Notwithstanding these problems, the Reserve Bank of Australia reported that global growth remained strong. The RBA stated that, while there had been a slowing in the United States, this had largely been confined to the housing sector, with the wider economy still growing at a reasonable pace.

The June quarter CPI figures revealed an increase in inflation. The RBA raised its December 2007 underlying inflation forecast to three per cent, which was the top of its target band. On 8 August, based on the new inflation data and other information, the RBA raised rates by 25 basis points to 6.5 per cent. The committee examined the RBA on the accuracy of its inflation forecast in view of the fact that its August forecast for December 2007 inflation was 50 basis points above its May forecast. The RBA governor explained
that, while there was pick-up in inflation during 2006, one quarter revealed a softer figure. It is not clear whether that was a new trend or an aberration. Notwithstanding this, Mr Stevens concluded that the ongoing strength of demand in a fully employed economy might leave us with inflation pressure that is harder to manage than expected.

In conclusion, I take this opportunity to say a personal farewell. The public hearing on 17 August was my final hearing as chair of the committee, as I will not be standing for re-election in the forthcoming 2007 election. I took over from an outstanding chair—namely you, Mr Speaker—and it has been my pleasure to be in that role. I thoroughly enjoyed the responsibility and the challenge of being chair of the committee, and I appreciate the contribution of my fellow committee members. The committee has worked extraordinarily well together. I commend my colleagues from both sides of the House—Ms Bird, who is the deputy chair of the committee and the member for Cunningham, and also Dr Craig Emerson and my other colleagues. It has worked well.

It was also the view of the committee that the professionalism, competence and diligence of the secretariat members were quite outstanding. It was the view of the committee that we should write to the Clerk to reflect our high regard for the committee and to inform the Clerk that they represent the highest standards of parliamentary officers. I believe that should be recorded. It is with pleasure I commend this report.

Dr Emerson (Rankin) (1.03 pm)—I join with the committee chair to pay tribute to the work of the secretariat. I also take the opportunity to congratulate the chair, the member for Cook, for his outstanding service to the parliament. Most particularly, I have valued his interaction with me in his capacity as Chair of the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Economics, Finance and Public Administration. He has discharged his obligation with great credit to the parliament and to the people of Australia. He has been impartial, as best as you possibly can when you are a member of a political party, in ensuring that the right questions were asked and that members on both sides of the parliament were not constrained unduly. Thank you very much, the member for Cook and chair.

This review highlights the inflationary pressures in Australia. Those pressures are greater now than they have been at any time in the recent past. I recall that, when the underlying inflation forecast was 2¾ per cent, the Reserve Bank was very anxious about it. After the latest interest rate rise, the underlying forecast is still three per cent, which is at the top of the band. So there are very strong inflationary pressures persisting in the system. At the previous hearings, in February, I asked the Governor of the Reserve Bank whether the bank would increase interest rates in an election year. The answer was: ‘Of course. We can’t abrogate the conduct of monetary policy for one in every three years.’ At the most recent hearings in August, I asked a follow-up question—a supplementary, if you like: ‘Would the Reserve Bank increase interest rates in an election campaign?’ I must say that I thought the Governor might hedge or hesitate on that, but he did not. In fact, he was very forthright. He said:

... if it is clear that something needs to be done, I do not know what explanation we could offer the Australian public for not doing it, regardless of when the election might be due.

What he was saying was that, yes, the Reserve Bank, as an independent organisation—an inflation targeting Reserve Bank—would increase interest rates during an election campaign.
What are the prospects of that? I think they are real. I am not saying they will go up during the election campaign itself but, sooner rather than later, it would appear that the onward march of interest rates will continue. We have already experienced five interest rate rises since the last election and nine in succession since 2002. I was fascinated to hear the Prime Minister’s response to a question from the Leader of the Opposition on 8 August. He said:

My question is, again, to the Prime Minister. Prime Minister, did the Liberal Party run this advertisement during the party’s 2004 election campaign and does the advertisement state that the Liberal Party, if returned to office, would keep interest rates at record lows?

I thought that the Prime Minister’s response was astonishing, and I would imagine that the member for Cunningham was equally astonished. He said:

The Liberal Party ran many advertisements, and I remind the Leader of the Opposition of what I have said previously in the House. He can scour every transcript—and I will make them available—of every interview that I gave during that election campaign and he will find no such commitment.

So we have got the Prime Minister of Australia with this commitment to keep interest rates at record lows, and we saw placards on the podium and no doubt behind him, and now he says: ‘That wasn’t me. Don’t blame me; it is just the silly old Liberal Party’—of which he is the leader. He disowned, in this parliament, a statement that was made repeatedly during the 2004 election campaign: that the government, if re-elected, would keep interest rates at record lows. Now he seeks to deny it. No wonder Shane Stone described him as ‘mean, tricky and out of touch’. He certainly is very tricky. He is a very cunning politician, but no-one in Australia would accept the argument made by the Prime Minister in this parliament that he never made any such commitment but that it was just the silly old Liberal Party, with which he has some kind of loose connection, but he is not responsible for placards on the podium or behind him. The pressure will be on. The subprime lending problems in the United States may abate that pressure for a time but we are facing, sooner rather than later, the prospect of a 6th interest rate rise since the last election, when the Prime Minister did promise to keep interest rates at record lows.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Hon. IR Causley)—The time allotted for statements on this report has expired. Does the member for Cook wish to move a motion in connection with the report to enable it to be debated at a later time?

Mr BAIRD (Cook) (1.08 pm)—I move:
That the House take note of the report.

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

MAIN COMMITTEE
Economics, Finance and Public Administration Committee

Reference
Mr BAIRD (Cook) (1.09 pm)—I move:
That the order of the day be referred to the Main Committee for debate.
Question agreed to.

COMMITTEES
Economics, Finance and Public Administration Committee

Report
Mr BAIRD (Cook) (1.09 pm)—On behalf of the Standing Committee on Economics, Finance and Public Administration, I present the committee’s report entitled Home loan lending: inquiry into home loan lending
practices and the processes used to deal with people in financial difficulty, together with the minutes of proceedings. Ordered that the report be made a parliamentary paper.

Mr Baird—There have been significant changes to the practices in, and the structure of, the housing lending market over the past decade. A large number of new lenders have entered the market, generating intense competition with established lenders like banks and credit unions. At the same time, the use of traditional lending standards has declined among all lenders. Most are now willing to lend with little or no deposit and are permitting much higher debt servicing ratios.

The committee undertook this inquiry with a view to examining exactly how lending practices have changed and what effect the changes have had. The committee sought to examine the mechanisms in place to ensure borrowers are treated appropriately, with a particular focus on borrowers facing financial hardship. The committee received 27 submissions and held a roundtable public hearing with 30 key industry stakeholders. This format allowed the gathering of evidence within a short time frame.

The changes in the lending market have allowed more households to take on more debt. This has, of course, been supported by strong domestic and global economic conditions, which have markedly increased households’ ability to service debt. While some people have argued that the new lending practices have resulted in widespread irresponsible lending, the data does not support this. Loan arrears rates have increased in recent times but they remain low by international and historical standards. Data on housing repossessions has also shown an increase recently, but the data lacks detail and is thus an unreliable measure. The committee recommends that the Australian Bureau of Statistics begin collecting data in this area.

There are a range of reasons why a borrower may be unable to meet their mortgage commitments. They may be faced with a life event that adversely impacts upon their finances, such as job loss or relationship breakdown; there may be a lack of financial literacy; or they may have overburdened themselves. Most often it is not the lender’s fault but there are cases where it is. There are reportedly an increasing number of cases where lenders and/or brokers are engaging in predatory behaviour aimed at taking advantage of vulnerable borrowers. The regulatory framework for credit should offer consumers protection against inappropriate lending practices and should also provide guidance on lenders’ obligations to borrowers in financial hardship. Evidence to the inquiry suggested that the current arrangements do neither of these things as effectively as they could. As such, reform is needed.

The primary instrument for regulating credit is the Uniform Consumer Credit Code. The uniformity it brings to credit regulation is applauded; however, the code has a number of inadequacies which are not easily remedied because the state based code requires jurisdictional amendments. The current regulatory framework has very few controls on the conduct of mortgage brokers. The states and territories have been trying to coordinate a national licensing regime for brokers since 2002, but it is still not in place. The regulation of financial products is generally a Commonwealth responsibility, except in relation to credit. The committee believes this division is illogical and arbitrary and recommends that the Commonwealth assumes responsibility for credit regulation.

If credit were to be defined under the Corporations Act as a ‘financial product’ it would require providers of credit products
and advice to hold an Australian Financial Services licence. Licensees are subject to rules about quality of advice and disclosure and are required to belong to an external dispute resolution scheme. EDR schemes appear to be an effective and low-cost mechanism for resolving consumer complaints, but the schemes’ jurisdictional limits could be increased to enable more complaints to be dealt with. The committee recommends that the Banking and Financial Services Ombudsman increase the limit on cases it can consider to $500,000 and that this amount is indexed annually. It also recommends that other schemes consider the appropriateness of their limits. The committee also examined the effects of the changed lending market from the perspective of the financial system and the macroeconomy. By and large, the developments to date have caused minimal concern. 

Finally, I would like to thank all members of the committee for their cooperation, particularly the deputy chair, the member for Cunningham; I also thank the members of the secretariat—Andrew McGowan, Sharon Bryant, Stephen Boyd—for their outstanding work and professionalism. I commend their hard work, and I commend this report to the House.

Ms BIRD (Cunningham) (1.14 pm)—I endorse the statements of the Chair of the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Economics, Finance and Public Administration on the tabling of this report, Home loan lending—investigation into home loan lending practices and the processes used to deal with people in financial difficulty, and the Review of the Reserve Bank of Australia Annual Report 2006 report and express my appreciation of the tremendous support we get from the committee secretariat. With regard to the report before us, I particularly thank Mr Andrew McGowan for the work that he did.

This was an abbreviated report in that it was always intended to be a short-term process. We took submissions from invited people and had a one-day roundtable within which we had the opportunity to look at some of the issues that had been of some interest to committee members. I think it is fair to say that I had prompted this inquiry—perhaps to take the blame in some way; and the chair might appreciate why I say that—as a result of the fact that in the last 12 months, for the first time in my extensive three years in the parliament, I had presented to my electorate office two cases of people who had come into difficulty in repaying their mortgage and had found it extremely difficult to work through that process with their lender.

It caused me to reflect on the fact that, when I had my second son, which was 18 years ago, and had six months off without paid maternity leave—and it probably would not be too different these days—it became difficult for us to meet the mortgage commitments. We were a young married couple, and I was not a member of parliament then. I was able to wander down to my local bank branch to see the local bank manager, whom I had met on a few occasions. I had a chat with him and said that I had a definite return to work date and that I would be able to get back on top of the payments, and I asked whether we could organise some relief for a short period of time—and that was all very easy to do.

The two people I met with in my office had phone numbers that they rang where they ended up on those horrendous phone trees, saying ‘dial 1 for this’ and ‘dial 2 for that’, and they could not actually find their way through to a person to engage with about the difficulties they were having. They were, I would say, not particularly financially educated and so had no idea of the other advocacy organisations that they might be able to go to to get some help. One lady
was in imminent danger of losing her home—a home that she had had for 17 years. She had paid mortgage payments regularly without fault for 17 years, had hit, as the chair of the committee identified, a particular life circumstance that had caused some temporary problems and was about to lose her home as a result. I am very grateful that, with the advice of the ombudsman, we were able to work through to a solution where she did keep her home. A concern in the other case was the fact that the person had been encouraged to withdraw their super funds—and we heard evidence of this situation at the roundtable. My concern is that it is being seen as a too quick and easy resolution in some cases—though in some cases it may be an appropriate response.

That is the sort of thing that we are seeing happen in the community. We all know that credit is much more easily available. I laughed with my committee colleagues about the fact that my sons looked at me like I had two heads when I suggested lay-bying as a useful way of purchasing items—the concept that you had to leave something there and you could not pick it up until you had paid it off. That highlighted to me how the attitudes of the generations had changed to the access of credit. I think that is a good development overall, but it does mean that families are under much more complex financial arrangements in terms of family budgets, and their working world is also much more complex and less reliable than it once was. We have to ensure that those who provide services to them, particularly with things as significant as financing for their home, are committed to making sure that, when there are difficulties, they engage with the borrowers and help work through the issues. I think the committee’s recommendation in terms of extending that credit regulation coverage to some of these new players is important, and having them come under an external dispute resolution process will assist advocacy groups like legal centres to better chase up and resolve those issues.

Finally, I would make the point that we did get very interesting evidence on predatory lending behaviour. I made the point that, on the morning of the roundtable when I typed in the words ‘mortgage defaults’, I got three companies offering to sell me finance products. We know they are out there and we know they are particularly looking into regions and areas where people are having financial difficulty. The legal centres told us at the roundtable that refinancing and refinancing down the chain to less and less regulated lenders is a large part of the problem. I think the committee’s recommendations are a first step in saying that this needs to be given serious attention. (Time expired)

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Hon. IR Causley)—Does the member for Cook wish to move a motion in connection with the report to enable it to be debated on a later occasion?

Mr BAIRD (Cook) (1.20 pm)—I move:

That the House take note of the report.

Question agreed to.

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

MAIN COMMITTEE
Economics, Finance and Public Administration Committee
Reference

Mr BAIRD (Cook) (1.20 pm)—I move:

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

Question agreed to.
Mrs MIRABELLA (Indi) (1.20 pm)—On behalf of the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters, I present the committee’s report entitled Review of certain aspects of the administration of the Australian Electoral Commission.

Ordered that the report be made a parliamentary paper.

Mrs MIRABELLA—On behalf of the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters, I have pleasure in presenting the committee’s second report for 2007, Review of certain aspects of the administration of the Australian Electoral Commission. With a federal election approaching, it has been a timely exercise for the committee to review certain aspects of the administration of the Australian Electoral Commission. Although it may not sound like a particularly immediately exciting terms of reference that would excite the media or some who look to the two-dimensional aspects of politics to find something scintillating for a 10-second grab, it is very important and fundamental because it goes to the very question of how the AEC is adequately staffed to perform the very important role that it has in maintaining our electoral rolls and maintaining an adequate workforce in the lead-up to an election.

The terms of reference for the inquiry required the committee to direct much of its focus on the staffing arrangements across the AEC’s divisional office network. Currently there are 150 AEC divisional officers in 135 locations around Australia. The AEC is a somewhat unique organisation because its so-called business cycle is influenced by the relatively unpredictable timing of key electoral events and federal elections, which determine workload peaks and impact significantly on staffing requirements. The impacts of the election cycle are a key consideration for the AEC in determining the most appropriate staffing model for divisional officers.

The committee received evidence that raised a number of concerns regarding workforce issues in some AEC divisional offices. These concerns related to employment structure, staffing levels, career opportunities for staff, retention issues and the effectiveness of co-located divisional offices. Some of these concerns result from the AEC implementing a new divisional office staffing profile. To coincide with this new staffing profile the AEC also introduced a process of workload sharing in an effort to combat the diversity of the workload across each of its divisional offices, with some offices being tasked with processing up to three times the number of enrolment transactions as others. Specific concerns came from the co-located divisional office in Chatswood, New South Wales, which services four electoral divisions. The committee conducted a site visit to the Chatswood office as part of its inquiry and appreciated the opportunity to speak directly and openly with AEC employees about some of the issues identified in submissions.

Without an extensive body of evidence to draw on, it is difficult for the committee to determine whether the concerns raised during the inquiry are symptomatic of widespread issues within the AEC. While the committee is not in a position to draw comprehensive conclusions, it considers the concerns that were raised to be significant enough to warrant further investigation. Therefore, the committee has recommended that the Auditor-General examine the issue of workforce planning in the AEC in further detail.

The committee was also asked to consider whether the national tally room should be maintained beyond the next federal election. This was the subject matter of the inquiry.
that generated most media and public discussion. I am pleased to report that the committee supports the continuation of the tally room and is of the view that the abolition of the tally room would have a negative impact on the perception of the transparency of elections and democracy. Furthermore, the committee notes the value and logic of having a central tally room in the nation’s capital that extends beyond any monetary or logistical considerations. The committee has therefore recommended that the government ensure that the national tally room be retained for future federal elections.

I thank my fellow committee members for their contribution to this inquiry. The member for Melbourne Ports will be speaking on the report in a moment and, although neither he nor any other of the Labor Party members were there to consider the final draft of the report, I take their absence and lack of comment as an indication of bipartisan and unanimous support. I am sure that the member for Melbourne Ports will take the opportunity to make other political comments in any case. I would also like to thank Stephen Boyd, the secretary of the committee, and Justin Baker.

Mr DANBY (Melbourne Ports) (1.26 pm)—It is always a pleasure to follow my parliamentary colleague the honourable member for Indi. The Review of certain aspects of the administration of the Australian Electoral Commission report makes some reasonable and not very controversial recommendations about the administration of the AEC, and I am sure that an incoming government will give them due consideration. Historically, I too think it would be a pity to abolish the national tally room. As the member for Indi indicated, the presentation of this report gives me an opportunity to discuss electoral matters, presumably for the last time in this parliament since it is obvious that we are about to embark on an election campaign. As the election approaches, both the Australia Electoral Commission and the Australian Labor Party have launched advertisements urging people to enrol to vote. The AEC always runs such campaigns before elections, but this time the message is more urgent because of the changes made last year to the Electoral Act by the Howard government. These changes abolished the traditional five-day period of grace for eligible Australians to enrol when an election is called. For first-time voters the rolls will now close as soon as the writs for the election are issued. Labor opposed this change, which we argued was a step backwards for our democracy. We argued that in a country with compulsory voting it is undemocratic to put unnecessary obstacles in the way of people’s ability to enrol and vote. We estimate that even after the AEC’s campaign at least 100,000 people—mostly first-time voters—will not be enrolled and will lose their vote because of this change. That is about 800 to 900 per seat. For the 2004 election, 136,000 people used the five-day period to enrol.

The government argues that this had to be stopped to prevent electoral fraud, but during the long parliamentary inquiry into the changes it produced no evidence to back up this claim. I would point out that I attended nearly every hearing all around Australia, unlike the member for Indi. Australia has one of the cleanest electoral systems in the world. Electoral fraud was merely an excuse for these retrograde changes—an excuse that fools no-one. If, even after the advertising campaign, the same numbers of 18- to 25-year-olds are not enrolled, this will be a democratic scandal—a scandal that could easily have been avoided by leaving in place the current system that works. A Labor government would reverse these undemocratic restrictions. Of course, everyone should enrol as soon as they become eligible, but the fact is that most 18- to 25-year-olds are absorbed
in things other than politics. Some of them leave enrolment until the election is called. The AEC has testified before several inquiries that it has no problem with voters having that right. Labor agrees and, if elected, will restore that right.

But Labor wants to go further than just reversing these undemocratic changes. We want to expand Australia’s democracy to make it more effective and better equipped to serve the needs of the Australian people. That is why we want the federal parliament to move to fixed four-year terms—the same system that operates successfully in Victoria and many other places. This will produce a government less driven by short-term electoral advantage and also remove the Prime Minister’s right to pick an election date that suits his party.

I often disagree with the Melbourne Age—in fact, today I have an article published in another newspaper which is critical of the Age—but I thoroughly agree with their editorial yesterday on this issue. It argues:

That the Prime Minister still determines the election date, and leaves the country on tenterhooks while he makes up his mind, is something that requires revision in the light of recent days. The country at large has been in stasis because of the internal wrangling of a political party that happens to be the Government. The best way to avoid a recurrence is to adopt fixed terms—four years is more likely to encourage effective government than three—with a set election date.

Labor also wants to revive the debate about Australia’s head of state, which has lost momentum since the 1999 referendum. The Leader of the Opposition has outlined a staged process to move this issue forward, with a plebiscite to gain agreement on a model for an Australian head of state, then moving to a referendum to decide the issue. A referendum on fixed four-year terms could be held at the same time.

Australia has one of the world’s most advanced democratic systems, but we will only keep it if we resist all attempts to undermine it for political advantage. The Howard government has been driven purely by its own self-interest in closing the electoral roll and effectively disenfranchising young people in particular, who it does not think will vote for it. A Labor government will reverse these undemocratic changes, restore fairness to our electoral and parliamentary systems, and move to make them even better.

TELECOMMUNICATIONS (AMENDMENT) BILL 2007

First Reading

Bill and explanatory memorandum presented by Ms Kate Ellis.

Ms KATE ELLIS (Adelaide) (1.31 pm)—I have spoken previously about the concern over the placement of mobile phone towers in our communities. In the electorate of Adelaide, a number of my constituents are deeply concerned with the potential health impacts and the aesthetic implications of the increasing number of mobile phone towers being built. In particular, there is a very real concern about the impact of mobile phone towers in sensitive areas such as near childcare centres, schools and hospitals. However, under current law, residents are powerless to have their say on the placement of towers in their communities.

The Telecommunications (Amendment) Bill 2007 seeks to amend the Telecommunications Act to tighten the regulatory process surrounding the placement of mobile phone towers and their classification as either high- or low-impact facilities. It seeks to address those instances where we have effectively put the construction of these towers outside the democratic process. I wish to acknowledge my colleague the member for Capricornia, who is also supporting this bill. She too has been very vocal on this issue and active.
in response to the concerns within her community.

At present, local government and local communities have no power in regard to the placement of mobile phone towers which are classified as low impact. This bill aims to tighten the requirement for community consultation for towers which are classified as high impact and to encourage greater adherence to the code of conduct. The aim of this bill is also to prevent a tower which is located within 200 metres of a school, a childcare centre or a hospital, or in a residential area, from being classified as a low-impact facility. It would also prevent a tower being classified as low impact when the addition of that tower to a building would make the total height of all towers on that building exceed five metres.

The approval process for mobile phone tower placement differs greatly depending on whether the tower is classed as high impact, which is taller than five metres, or low impact, being under five metres. High-impact towers are subject to community consultation and local government approvals. Low impact towers are not, and residents have no avenue for important decision making over these facilities. However it is here that a deficiency in the current legislation lies.

While residents and local councils are consulted if one high-impact tower of five metres high is proposed, the law leaves telecommunications providers open to erect an unlimited number of low-impact towers despite their cumulative height reaching well over five metres. This has resulted in massive clusters of towers springing up in our communities, without local council input and state government planning permission and often against the will of the local occupants. This is the situation in my electorate where, in the most prominent example, a church roof is covered by, at last count, up to 19 mobile phone towers which are each just under five metres tall, meaning that, despite this being an enormous structure, under the Howard government legislation it is ludicrously still regarded as low impact. They are visually obstructive and residents are worried not only about the health impacts but also about the visual impact which these unattractive instalments may have on property prices. These towers are going up without the approval of local council, the church itself and its leaders and certainly without the approval of many of the local residents. That is what this bill today is essentially trying to address—those instances where we have effectively put the construction of these towers outside the democratic process.

Local communities have legitimate concerns about mobile phone towers and they deserve to have these concerns addressed. I am certainly not claiming that there is a link between phone towers and adverse health effects but the reality is that there remains widespread concern in our community and it has not been addressed by this government. What is needed is clear leadership on this issue and steps taken to reassure the community—steps which should include a national health audit of mobile phone towers to monitor the health of those living and working nearby high- and low-impact towers; the strengthening of public consultation requirements in the deployment of towers; and, in the immediate term, the empowerment of local councils to make planning decisions with respect to facilities located in close proximity to schools, kindergartens and hospitals. I urge the government to adopt this bill and give local communities a voice in the decisions which are affecting them. I believe residents should have a greater say in the placement of mobile phone towers in their neighbourhoods. I urge all members of this parliament to support this private members bill.
Bill read a first time.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Hon. IR Causley)—In accordance with standing order 41(d), the second reading will be made an order of the day for the next sitting.

PRIVATE MEMBERS’ BUSINESS
Salt and Healthy Lifestyle

Mrs MAY (McPherson) (1.36 pm)—I move:

That the House:

(1) recognises that:

(a) high blood pressure is a major risk factor for coronary heart disease, stroke, heart failure, peripheral vascular disease and renal failure;
(b) cardiovascular disease is the leading cause of death and disability in Australia, claiming the lives of 50,294 people in 2002, or 38 per cent of all deaths;
(c) around 3.67 million Australians are affected by heart, stroke and vascular diseases;
(d) 1.10 million Australians are disabled long-term by heart, stroke and vascular diseases;
(e) the prevalence of heart, stroke and vascular conditions increased by 18.2 per cent over the last decade; and
(f) the total burden of heart, stroke and vascular diseases is expected to increase over the coming decades;

(2) also recognises that:

(a) salt appears to be the necessary cause of high blood pressure; and
(b) controlling one’s salt intake plays a big role in controlling one’s blood pressure, which in turn reduces the risk of cardiovascular disease;

(3) calls on the Australian Government to:

(a) educate the Australian people on the dangers of a high salt diet; and
(b) follow the United Kingdom’s example and label food with green lights, which identify at a glance the best foods on the market for salt content; and

(4) on a bipartisan level, encourage Australians to reduce their salt intake and maintain a healthy lifestyle.

There is no doubt that Australians are facing many challenges with their health and none more so than high blood pressure. High blood pressure is a major risk factor for coronary heart disease, strokes, heart failure, peripheral vascular disease and renal failure. Salt looks to be the necessary cause of high blood pressure. If an individual is doing everything right by their health, eating plenty of fruit and vegetables, getting plenty of exercise and watching their alcohol intake, but not controlling their salt intake, that person’s blood pressure is still likely to continue to rise.

Salt is found in almost every food we eat, but the amount present in different foods varies a great deal. Most of the salt we eat—about 75 per cent—comes from processed foods. High-salt processed foods include soy sauce, processed meats, canned soups, canned anchovies and stock cubes. Some foods contain higher amounts of salt than you may expect. For example, a jam sandwich has only 30 per cent less salt than a vegemite sandwich because most of the salt comes from the bread. Sea, onion, celery and garlic salts are not low sodium substitutes. A bowl of cornflakes has about the same amount of salt as a small packet of plain chips, and some sweet biscuits contain as much or more salt than savoury biscuits.

Some manufacturers have cut the salt content of their foods in recent years—companies such as Kelloggs, Uncle Tobys, Campbell-Arnotts and Unilever. However, notwithstanding the cutbacks, nearly 30 per cent of our population has high blood pressure and over half of those cases are untreated. More alarmingly, a new study has found that the average four-year-old con-
sumes almost five grams of salt a day, more than double the recommended level. The salty Australian diet and lifestyle gives people a 90 per cent risk of dying from high blood pressure. In Queensland, a recent survey showed that four out of every five adults do not eat enough vegetables every day and most adults eat fast food more than three times a week.

I first became aware of the role of salt in our diet when I heard Dr Trevor Beard talking about the problem on Radio National earlier this year. Dr Beard pointed out that statistics on high blood pressure from the salt industry do not paint a true picture of the prevalence of high blood pressure, as they are based on a cross-section of ages. For those who reach middle age, nine out of 10 will get high blood pressure before they die. In response to a World Health Organisation report, the Australian Division of World Action on Salt and Health, AWASH, has launched a five-year plan calling on food manufacturers and caterers to cut the salt content of foods by 25 per cent. As I said a little earlier, some of those manufacturers have certainly taken up that challenge. We are yet to reach the 25 per cent drop, though. The Drop the Salt! Campaign says, in short, that reducing salt consumption will save lives. AWASH also believes that food labels in Australia are often too complicated to really help consumers make clear choices about what they are buying. The National Heart Foundation of Australia recommends the maximum daily intake of salt for adults is six grams a day, but Australian adults eat an average of nine grams per day.

The good news is that blood pressure can be significantly lowered through diet. About 15 per cent of the salt we eat comes from salt we add at the table or in our cooking. However, the difficulty of lowering salt intake becomes more complicated when buying pre-packaged foods and trying to decipher the labels. The information on nutrition panels on packaged food is often difficult to read, let alone understand, and is especially difficult for older people with failing sight. Hand in hand with an education program that will alert Australians to the dangers of a high salt diet, we need to adopt a green light system for low salt, or sodium, foods similar to what has been introduced in the United Kingdom. Green light labelling on foods identifies at a glance the best foods on the supermarket shelf for salt content. As I have said, reading labels is not easy and interpreting them can be very confusing. By adopting the traffic light food labelling system we would be making healthy shopping easier. It would mean that anyone could treat salt related health problems easily just by eating fresh food and selecting processed foods that have a green light for salt. Being healthy is about getting the balance right, and the green traffic light system would make that challenge a whole lot easier.

I urge the government and all members of this House to support a green traffic light labelling system on all our processed foods. By reducing the salt content in our diet, we are reducing the risk of high blood pressure and all the associated complications. The health benefits to the Australian people would be enormous, and the health benefits to the health budget would also be enormous—saving billions of dollars, I would estimate, on health costs to individuals in this country. This could be done by undertaking and ensuring that people stick to a healthy living plan and a healthy eating plan that lowers the salt intake on a daily basis to each and every one of us.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge Dr Trevor Beard, who is an honorary research fellow at the Menzies Research Institute in Hobart. Listening to Dr Beard on Radio National earlier this year certainly brought home to me just how important it is to reduce
salt in my own diet to remain healthy. I encourage all members of this House to stop and think about their own salt intake and how they can reduce it for a healthy and possibly longer life. So, instead of picking up the salt shaker, put the salt shaker back on the table where it belongs and check out the labels on the processed foods.

The SPEAKER—Is the motion seconded?

Mr Pyne—I second the motion.

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

STATEMENTS BY MEMBERS

Dental Health

Mr Martin Ferguson (Batman) (1.43 pm)—I rise this afternoon to address Australia’s dental health crisis and the great need to improve our dental health system. In the last fortnight, 2,419 people from my electorate of Batman signed a petition calling for the restoration of the dental scheme that was last in place under the Labor government prior to 1996. It is only a Rudd Labor government that will reinstate the Commonwealth dental program that the Howard government trashed. In 1996, the Howard government ripped $100 million per annum from public dental services to the detriment of ordinary Australians. This is important in my electorate, which has many aged people, because they now make up part of the 650,000-long waiting list for dental care in Australia.

I will be tabling a petition on behalf of my constituents to send a clear message to the Howard government that what they have done to dental care shows an appalling lack of understanding of the needs and aspirations of the Australian community. Shamefully, one in three Australians avoids dental care, because dental care is a luxury to them in terms of cost. Unfortunately, that effectively means many elderly and low-income families are the worst affected.

Three months ago, I visited my local Darebin Community Health Centre, which provides dental care to the less fortunate in my electorate. The dental surgeons and nurses at Darebin Health do a great job. However, they face constant demands for meeting community expectations due to inadequate funding and the inefficiency of the Howard government. I present the petition on behalf of the people of Batman. (Time expired)

Sri Lanka

Mr Randall (Canning) (1.45 pm)—I would like to bring to the attention of the House today the fact that a petition will be tabled after question time relating to the close links between Australia and Sri Lanka and drawing attention to the impact of the conflict in Sri Lanka on Australian citizens and businesses there. It also seeks support for a resolution of the Sri Lankan conflict that satisfies the aspirations of all communities without compromising the unity and territorial integrity of Sri Lanka. The petition calls for the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, or LTTE, and its front organisations to be proscribed under the Criminal Code Act 1995. I draw the attention of the House to several related articles. One of these articles, which is from last Friday, said:

Three men on terror charges have been accused of collecting $1.9 million in charitable donations from Australia’s expat Tamil community and using a chunk of the funds to buy electronic and marine equipment similar to that used in suicide bombings.

This case is before the Magistrate’s Court, so I will not say any more, but we cannot have terror organisations operating in Australia, collecting money for and on behalf of a
terrorist organisation in another country. We need to do something about the fact that there are front organisations operating here. This petition will go a long way towards addressing, in this country, the issue that a terrorist organisation like the LTTE should not have shadow groups here raising money for it and on its behalf for acts of terrorism back in its homeland. I support the petition, and I hope that other members of this House and the community will also support this good intention. (Time expired)

Prospect Electorate: Battle for Australia Commemorations

Mr BOWEN (Prospect) (1.46 pm)—On 5 September I attended the commemoration at Smithfield RSL of the Battle for Australia day. Smithfield RSL was the first RSL club in Australia to commemorate this battle, as many now do across the country. It refers, of course, to the battle for Milne Bay in 1942. The Battle for Australia day commemorates a series of battles in which Australia was defended, Kokoda being the most famous and prominent but also including Buna, Gona, Milne Bay and of course the bombing of Darwin. Six thousand Australians lost their lives on the Kokoda Trail, 243 people were killed in Darwin, and 161 were killed in the battle for Milne Bay—and the list goes on.

Ceremonies for the Battle for Australia commemorate the small group of men and women who could and can say, ‘I saved my country.’ There are very few people around the world who can say that, and it is appropriate that as a nation we commemorate them. The word ‘Kokoda’ is as important in the Australian legend as the word ‘Gallipoli’ and the word ‘Tobruk’. We must take every opportunity to commemorate those men and women who saved our nation.

I would particularly like to congratulate Mr Alex Pekin, who was the member of Smithfield RSL who initiated this commemoration. It was a very moving ceremony on 5 September, and I was particularly pleased to see so many young people and so many schools represented at the ceremony. I congratulate Smithfield RSL; Bill Newell, the president; and Alex Pekin for another wonderful commemoration of Battle for Australia day.

Dobell Electorate: Methadone Clinics

Mr TICEHURST (Dobell) (1.48 pm)—I would like to draw to the attention of the House Labor’s mismanagement of part of my electorate: the areas of Toukley, Noraville, Norah Head and Canton Beach. The state Labor government now want to put a fourth methadone clinic into Toukley. We already have three there, and it is leading to a lot of antisocial behaviour. We do not have sufficient police resources there to control behaviour, particularly at weekends.

I have written to the relevant state minister, Reba Meagher, to tell her to ensure that this does not go ahead. The concern that people have is this: if we have wall-to-wall Labor governments in our area, and if I am not re-elected in the area of Dobell, we will have compliant Labor members letting the state government get off the hook on all sorts of issues, and it is really not good enough. We need somebody who is going to stand up for people in the Toukley area and make sure that their concerns are heard and that the state Labor government and a Labor federal government, if it ever happens, do not go ahead with these things without consulting constituents.

Workplace Relations

Mr MELHAM (Banks) (1.49 pm)—I present a petition from 9,538 petitioners which has been certified by the Clerk. I collected these petitions from a delegates meeting of the CFMEU at Lidcombe on Friday,
31 August and undertook to present the petition on behalf of the members present.

The petition read as follows—

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

The petition of certain citizens of Australia draws to the attention of the House their protest against the unfair workplace laws introduced by the Federal Liberal Government, which are being used by employers to undermine the wages and security of Australian workers and the future continuation of our Industry Picnic.

Your petitioners therefore request the House to overturn this unfair legislation which attacks the rights and dignity of Australian workers.

From 9,538 citizens.

Mr Speaker, as you know, the Labor Party is pledged to overturn those unfair laws should it win the next election. This is a situation where the people are speaking with their feet. They are signing petitions—some have never signed a petition before—to say to this government, ‘We do not agree with what you have done.’ At the next election, they will vote with their feet by throwing this government out. It deserves to be thrown out. This is one of the largest petitions I have ever presented to this parliament in the 17½ years that I have been here.

Geelong Football Club

Corangamite Electorate: Geelong Ringroad

Mr McARTHUR (Corangamite) (1.50 pm)—The year 2007 could be the year of the Geelong Cats. Next Friday we face Collingwood in the preliminary final, and the following week we hope to be in the grand final.

I wish to put on the record my thanks to the federal Treasurer for finalising the third stage of the Geelong ring-road, a project of $186 million. I thank the Treasurer for being there on Friday and I also note his words of support for the upgrade of Skilled Stadium to the extent of $14 million. It is important that Geelong Football Club remain at Skilled Stadium and that the stadium be upgraded and competitive with public stadiums around the world.

Geelong is the only regional football side and I am delighted with the support that the Treasurer has given to the project. I am hopeful that the government will provide $14 million for the upgrade and that Geelong will win the premiership as well. It could be the year of the Cats in 2007, with Skilled Stadium getting fixed up and with Geelong winning the premiership.

Climate Change
Rights at Work

Mr JENKINS (Scullin) (1.52 pm)—Mr Speaker, to curry favour with you—and also, because the people I represent in the northern suburbs are probably more likely to barrack for Collingwood than Geelong—I indicate that Collingwood might have some luck on Friday, although my heart and head say Geelong. Today I wish to present some petitions under standing order 209B that I received after the cut-off for petitions later today. The first is from 99 petitioners who urge the House to call on the Howard government to end the 11 years of delay, denial and inaction on climate change; ratify the Kyoto protocol; drive a clean energy revolution by substantially increasing the mandatory renewable energy target; invest in clean energy research and development; and help Australian families to green their homes. It is no use having aspirational targets without having underpinning targets as goalposts.

Also, I wish to table a petition from eight petitioners to add to the 9,000 from the member for Banks about rights at work. These people ask the House to ensure that the government upholds Australians’ rights at work. It draws attention to their opposition to
the government’s plans to move employment conditions from awards, change the way minimum wages are set to make them lower and use individual contracts to undercut existing rights and conditions. This is going to be one of the bellwether issues of the upcoming election, and I think the government has underestimated the strength of feeling that people have about these matters. It will be one of the issues that decide the election because, without a change of government, Australians’ rights at work will not be defended. I hereby present the petitions.

The petition read as follows—

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

This petition of certain citizens of Australia draws to the attention of the House the Howard Government’s eleven years of delay, denial and inaction on climate change. Your petitioners therefore request the House to call on the Howard Government to:

• End the eleven years of delay, denial and inaction on climate change.
• Ratify the Kyoto Protocol.
• Drive a clean energy revolution by substantially increasing the Mandatory Renewable Energy Target and investing in clean energy research and development.
• Help Australian families to green their homes.

From 99 citizens.

The petition read as follows—

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

The petition of certain citizens of Australia draws the attention of the House to the fact that Australians should have basic rights at work, including decent minimum wages and awards conditions, protection from unfair dismissal and the right to reject AWA individual contracts and negotiate collectively with their employer.

The petitioners also draw the attention of the House to the fact that we oppose the Howard Government’s plans to:

• Remove employment conditions from awards.
• Change the way minimum wages are set to make them lower.
• Use individual contracts to undercut existing rights and conditions.
• Keep unions out of workplaces and reduce workers’ negotiating and bargaining rights.
• Abolish redundancy pay and protection from unfair dismissals for the 3 million people who work in small businesses
• Reduce the powers of the independent Industrial Relations Commission to settle disputes and set fair minimum standards at work.
• Take away rights at with laws that unilaterally override and weaken State industrial relations systems, awards and agreements.

The petitioners therefore ask the House to ensure that the Government upholds Australians’ rights at work and does not implement these plans that we oppose.

From eight citizens.

Sydney (Kingsford Smith) Airport

Mr MURPHY (Lowe) (1.53 pm)—I wish to again draw to the attention of the House the disgraceful failure by the Howard government in relation to fixing aircraft noise associated with Sydney airport. I will be speaking in more detail in the grievance debate later this afternoon in relation to this very important matter for my constituents in Lowe in Sydney’s inner west.

The latest figures published by Airservices Australia indicate that we are receiving 31.78 per cent of air traffic movements to the north of Sydney airport. The Howard government promised that we would receive only 17 per cent of air traffic movements to the north of Sydney airport when they introduced the long-term operating plan. They promised to fix aircraft noise in Sydney, particularly for
my constituents. It was attempted by the previous member for Lowe, but sadly the government did not listen to him and he had to resign from the government. It is an absolute disgrace that we are receiving twice as much noise as we were promised by the government and that the government has sold the airport to Southern Cross Consortium, which has been bankrolled by Macquarie Bank. As an airport, Sydney airport is working very well as a shopping centre and a car park but it is not delivering in relation to the environmental impact on the people I represent. I will be going into more detail later this afternoon about this. (Time expired)

Political Propaganda in Schools

Mr BARTLETT (Macquarie) (1.55 pm)—I have received a number of complaints about teachers handing out political propaganda at the school gate and in some cases in the school grounds. This happens in every election but it is totally unacceptable, for two reasons. Firstly, it is an abuse of teachers’ positions to peddle political messages and it is unfair to the majority of teachers who do not believe that the classroom or playground should be abused in this way. The second problem is that the Teachers Federation campaign is blatantly dishonest. Their claims that the Howard government has cut funding for state schools simply are not substantiated by the facts. In fact, clearly, the opposite is the case.

In the last 11 years the government has increased direct funding to state public schools by 120 per cent—that is 70 per cent in real terms—despite an increase of only 1.2 per cent in enrolments in state schools. We have increased funding for state schools in fact far faster than the New South Wales government has increased its funding for its own state schools. If the Teachers Federation were really interested in public education rather than partisan politics they would be attacking the state Labor government, not the Australian government.

Sustainable Cities

Mr JENKINS (Scullin) (1.56 pm)—One of the indicators of the lowering of standards of this government in the way it perceives parliament is the way in which responses to parliamentary committees have been delayed. In particular, I want to stress that Sustainable cities, the report of the House Standing Committee on Environment and Heritage tabled over two years ago, has not been responded to. The Minister for the Environment and Water Resources, who was a member of that committee and took a very active part in the committee’s deliberations, still has not been able to ensure that, through government processes, there has been a response to that report.

You would have thought that those opposite—those representing seats in Western Sydney, the Central Coast, the regional cities like Geelong—would be urging the government to put in place a response to that report that would enable policies to ensure that the cities of Australia develop sustainably, that we attack the problems of climate change and that we have a government that is willing to go into partnership at the federal level with state and local governments to put in place proper infrastructure such as public transport. Public transport on the urban fringes of Melbourne is deplorable. There is a need to recognise that federal policies dictate the way in which our cities develop, and the government should have a response to the increasing population. If this government cannot do it, they should get out of the way. They should indicate when the election is going to be, so they can move aside and put in place a Rudd Labor government to ensure that these things are— (Time expired)
Local Government Funding

Mrs HULL (Riverina) (1.58 pm)—I rise today to raise the plight of local government and the lack of funds that they are having to cope with at the moment. Local governments have had an enormous amount of cost-shifting put upon them by the various state governments. You will find that many of our local governments, particularly in small rural communities, do not have the rate bases to enable them to meet all of the demands that have been placed on them and are continuing to be placed on them due to this unrelenting drought that has been gripping New South Wales and areas in Victoria. Many of their rate bases have been depleted enormously by the separation of land and water. They have significant problems because of the value of their rates going down but they still have to provide the same level of upkeep and maintenance on their roads and the same level of services in their local communities.

It is a fact that local government has a very significant role in the day-to-day operations of many people across Australia. Local governments are the closest to the people and provide a significant amount of assistance in the health sector, the road sector— (Time expired)

Sydney (Kingsford Smith) Airport

Mr MURPHY (Lowe) (1.59 pm)—Mr Speaker, I again bring to the attention of the House the disgraceful failure of the government to meet its 17 per cent target of air traffic movements to the north of Sydney airport. I am very pleased the Prime Minister is here in the chamber. Prime Minister, the latest figures are that we are getting 32 per cent of all air traffic movements to the north. As a good friend of mine, you should do something about it to look after my constituents.

The SPEAKER—Order! It being 2 pm, in accordance with standing order 43 the time for members’ statements has concluded.

CONDOLENCES

Mr Peter Robert Cleeland

The SPEAKER (2.00 pm)—I inform the House of the death on 16 September 2007 of Peter Robert Cleeland, a member of this House for the division of McEwen from 1984 to 1990 and from 1993 to 1996. As a mark of respect to the memory of Peter Cleeland, I invite honourable members to rise in their places.

Honourable members having stood in their places—

The SPEAKER—I thank the House.

MINISTERIAL ARRANGEMENTS

Mr HOWARD (Bennelong—Prime Minister) (2.01 pm)—Mr Speaker, I inform the House that the Minister for Employment and Workplace Relations is unwell and will be absent from question time today. I will answer questions on his behalf.

QUESTIONS WITHOUT NOTICE

Farms

Mr RUDD (2.01 pm)—My question is to the Prime Minister. I refer to the Prime Minister’s announcement today of further assistance measures for farmers affected by drought, for which the opposition offers complete bipartisan support. I also refer the Prime Minister to my question to him on 29 May this year, when I asked whether existing exceptional circumstances drought arrangements provided sufficient support for farm businesses and farm families, and whether any further changes might be possible to assist drought hit farmers. Has the Prime Minister given further consideration to any changes to support arrangements for drought affected farmers?

Mr HOWARD—Yes.
Mrs HULL (2.02 pm)—My question is addressed to the Prime Minister. Would the Prime Minister outline to the House how the Australian government is assisting communities who are suffering from the drought, including my community across the Riverina electorate?

Mr HOWARD—I thank the member for Riverina for her question. Of course she, along with many other members in the Liberal and National parties, constantly has the interests of Australian farmers and rural Australia at heart. The Australian Labor Party are busy getting rid of the one and only farmer they did have and replacing him with another trade union official. I say to the member for Riverina, as I have been able to say to farmers around Australia already, that earlier today I announced an additional $430 million in drought assistance measures to provide security to farmers in the grip of the worst drought on record, many of whom face a very unhappy and uncertain situation over the coming spring.

Today’s announcement will extend the 38 areas of agricultural production currently EC declared until March 2008 through until September 2008. That will provide plenty of advance warning and assurance to those farmers who are sorely in need of both our understanding and our assistance, although that understanding and assistance and the need for it falls far short of their desperate need for Mother Nature to provide some rain. This particular extension alone will cost some $340 million.

I might also inform the House that there are many farmers in Western Australian agricultural zones and in Tasmania outside already declared areas that have experienced low rainfall for the past 18 months and have a less than 50 per cent chance of receiving average rainfall in the next three months. However, they are not currently covered by EC declarations. These farmers are facing the very grim prospect of a second consecutive failed season, so today I have announced interim EC assistance for those further areas of Western Australia and Tasmania. This will provide access to income support to approximately an additional 4,000 farmers in these two states and it will allow the state governments to focus their efforts on completing applications for full exceptional circumstances assistance, which includes interest rate subsidy payments. Importantly, this will mean there is no delay in payments to farmers while state governments prepare their paperwork. The estimated cost of this additional measure is some $90 million.

The government continues, and I thank my colleague the minister for agriculture on this matter, to have under consideration some other proposals that have been put to it by the National Farmers Federation and others to see whether there should be some further alterations to those already announced by the government to the operation of the exceptional circumstances assistance. Let me say to the farmers of Australia: we will stand, as a government, shoulder to shoulder with you through this terrible drought. Fortunately, this nation is strong enough fiscally and strong enough economically to give help to our fellow Australians so desperately affected by this terrible drought.

Advertising Campaigns

Mr RUDD (2.06 pm)—My question is again to the Prime Minister. Will the Prime Minister inform the parliament how much taxpayers’ money has been spent on government advertising since 1 January of this year? Further, how much more taxpayers’ money does the government plan to spend on advertising before the election? Prime Minister, will you report back to the parliament...
with those figures before the end of question time today?

Mr HOWARD—Mr Speaker, I am happy to provide, in the appropriate way, at the appropriate time, in the appropriate detail, any information sought by the Leader of the Opposition.

Thai Air Accident

Mrs MOYLAN (2.07 pm)—My question is to the Minister for Foreign Affairs. Would the minister advise the House on the tragic plane crash in Phuket? Are any Australians involved and what is the Australian government doing to assist?

Mr DOWNER—First, can I thank the honourable member for her question. I can confirm, as I think everyone in the House knows, that a One-Two-Go Airlines flight from Bangkok to Phuket tragically crashed on its arrival in Phuket yesterday afternoon. The details of the crash and the cause of the crash remain unclear and the number of those killed has not yet been confirmed, though there are estimates coming from the Thais that 87 people have been killed and perhaps somewhere in the vicinity of 43 injured and that quite a number of those who have been killed are foreigners.

The Thai authorities have now provisionally identified one of the victims as an Australian. But, because of the uncertainty about the identification process, the Thai authorities are proceeding with further disaster victim identification methodology, in particular DNA assessment, so this process could take quite some time. Obviously, both under international protocols and for perfectly understandable other reasons, it is important that they get this process right.

The Australian Federal Police are willing to provide a disaster victim identification team to assist the Thais with all of the disaster victim identification work that they have to do. The Federal Police have good experience of working with the Thais in this area: they did so during late 2004 and early 2005 in response to the tsunami. So my department is now putting the offer to the Thais and the AFP team is at the ready to go.

I can also confirm that an Australian has been hospitalised with non-life-threatening injuries and our honorary consul in Phuket is providing consular assistance. Also, a consular officer has arrived in Phuket from Bangkok and another consular officer from Bangkok is on his way there. It is possible that other Australians may have been on the flight but at this stage we are not able to confirm that, and consular officials are seeking to confirm the nationality of the passengers unaccounted for. The manifest does not detail the nationality of the passengers because this was a domestic flight, not an international flight, so reconciling our passport and immigration records with names is obviously an insufficient way of establishing someone’s nationality and the appropriate identification and a good deal more work will need to be done. But at this stage we are not able to confirm that any other Australian has been deleteriously affected or has been killed.

As I have said, we are reinforcing our consular presence in Phuket. We are very conscious of the fact that there are a large number of Australians living in Thailand. Well over 3,000 of those people are registered with our embassy, and about 300 of them live in Phuket. There are probably more than 300 Australians living in Phuket but 300 of them are registered with our embassy. So this is a very tragic event, we are very happy to provide assistance to the Thai authorities as best we can, which is through the provision of a disaster victim identification team, and we will continue to provide extensive consular assistance to those Australians affected.
Advertising Campaigns

Mr RUDD (2.11 pm)—My question is again to the Prime Minister. Can the Prime Minister confirm that since the last election his government has spent $93 million on advertising its extreme industrial relations changes, $25 million on a campaign to promote the government’s climate change credentials and $69 million on superannuation advertising? Why won’t the Prime Minister commit to informing the parliament today how much taxpayers’ money has been spent on advertising since 1 January this year and how much more taxpayers’ money the government plans to spend on advertising before the next election?

Mr HOWARD—I do not really have a lot to add to the answer I have previously given but since the Leader of the Opposition asked me the second question and before he asks me the third question I happened to come across in my files a very colourful—no, I won’t say it is colourful; it is not very colourful as it is rather dully written—booklet that says, ‘Queensland the smart state: water for the future’. Now this is a very expensive booklet that was widely publicised by the Queensland government. It puts me in mind of the Labor Party’s three-mines uranium policy, which really said that there was good uranium—that is the uranium you get out of the three mines that were opened under Labor governments—and there is bad uranium—and that is all the other—so I suppose that, if you sort of plagiarised that description to government advertising, this is good government advertising, because it is Labor government advertising, and any other government advertising is bad advertising because it is not Labor government advertising. I rest my case.

The SPEAKER—Has the Prime Minister completed his answer?

Mr HOWARD—Yes, Mr Speaker.

DISTINGUISHED VISITORS

The SPEAKER (2.13 pm)—I inform the House that we have present in the gallery this afternoon Mr John Langmore, a former member for Fraser. On behalf of the House I extend to him a very warm welcome.

Honourable members—Hear, hear!

QUESTIONS WITHOUT NOTICE

Nurses

Mrs MARKUS (2.13 pm)—My question is addressed to the Prime Minister. Would the Prime Minister outline to the House the government’s future plans to train more nurses to help strengthen the Australian health system? Is the Prime Minister aware of alternative approaches to future plans?

Mr HOWARD—I thank the member for Greenway for asking me a question regarding the practical response to the shortage of nurses in Australia which I announced on Friday at the St George Private Hospital, along with the Minister for Health and Ageing. What this very practical policy does not involve is the establishment of a committee or an agency; it just involves doing something.

I saw the Leader of the Opposition with his pseudo-American, ersatz launch of the campaign on Saturday. There he was, complete with—what do you call them?—teleprompters, rear vision mirrors, those things that have your words printed on them. I thought to myself, ‘Here is American politics, arrived in Australia big-time.’ I thought I was the bloke who was too close to the Americans! You could have fooled me, Mr Speaker.

Anyway, let me return to something that is far more important than the Leader of the Opposition’s meeting in Penrith, and that is the practical announcement I made on Friday, along with the health minister, to establish 25 Australian hospital nursing schools at
a cost of $170 million over five years. What this will do is allow young men and women to leave school and start working as a nurse immediately. So, far from it being a return to the old days, it is an embrace of a commonsense approach. I have been greatly encouraged by the positive reaction to this proposal from so many men and women in the nursing profession. This will provide enrolled nurse hospital based training within major public and private hospitals at diploma or advanced diploma level.

What the government will do is fund infrastructure for on-site educational facilities and pay for up to four clinical training staff at each participating hospital. Over five years we will provide $20 million in wage subsidies to provide incentives to students. It will be $500 a student per week to hospital nursing schools for the first three months that the young man or woman is undertaking the training, recognising that in those first three months the hospital will need some financial help in order to engage them. We will pay a tax-free $1,500 commencement bonus and a $2,500 completion bonus per student, paid to each hospital nursing school, plus the direct payment to students—the tax-free bonus—of $2,000 after six months and a further tax-free bonus of $3,000 on completion.

We expect more than 500 students undertaking training alone in those 25 schools each year. These places, let me stress, are over and above the places provided through the university system. They include the 3,700 new commencing nursing places since 2005, which will grow to over 10,100 by 2011. It also includes the 395 new commencing university places announced by the Minister for Education, Science and Training last week. We have increased funding for nursing clinical training from $690 to $1,045 per nursing unit of study and we have increased the per student funding for university based nursing courses next year by $109 per student.

Therefore, in total last week we increased nursing training places by some 900—and that, incidentally, is broadly consistent with the call by the Australian Nursing Federation and other peak nursing groups for 1,000 initial nursing places for training from 2009.

I mention that because the Leader of the Opposition, in a negative way, was bagging this proposal, saying it was wrong, saying it was a lurch back to the 1950s. Yet I have in my possession a letter dated 13 August 2007, over the joint signatures of Jill Iliffe, the Federal Secretary of the Australian Nursing Federation; Rosemary Bryant, the Executive Director of the Royal College of Nursing; Karen Cook, the Chief Executive Officer of the Australian Nursing and Midwifery Council; Sally Goold, the Chairperson of the Congress of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Nurses; John Daly, Chair of the Council of Deans of Nursing and Midwifery; and Barbara Vernon, the Executive Officer of the Australian College of Midwives. All of these organisations together wrote to the minister and said what they wanted was an additional 1,000 fully funded places each year beginning in 2009. The combined announcements I made and the minister made last week provide 900 of that 1,000. So for the life of me I do not know what the Leader of the Opposition was getting at last week when he attacked this proposal.

This is a practical response to a difficult issue. It will encourage people to go straight from school. People who want to be nurses can become nurses from day one. They will have the opportunity of experiencing what it is like from the very beginning. If they do not like it, they will give it away, but they will not have to spend some 18 months to two years at university before having any real interaction with a hospital for a sustained period of time. It makes common sense to provide an additional stream, and I want to commend the minister for working
up this proposal. He has brought his customary energy to it and I think it is going to be widely accepted in the Australian community. I do not for the life of me know what the Leader of the Opposition was getting at last Friday.

Nurses

Mr Rudd (2.20 pm)—My question is to the Prime Minister. Prime Minister, isn’t it the case that in the lead-up to the 2004 federal election the government was advised that Australia required an additional 19,000 enrolled and registered nurses? Isn’t it also the case that over the last three years nearly 10,000 applicants for nursing places have been turned away from our universities? Can the Prime Minister confirm that the government’s pre-election announcement just now on nursing schools will only provide a maximum of 500 additional nurses per year? Given the Prime Minister’s previous answer, where he said it was his responsibility to do something about the nursing crisis, why has the Prime Minister conspicuously failed to do so over the last three years?

Mr Howard—It is quite obvious that the Leader of the Opposition did not listen to the last answer I gave. I actually announced something. I did not announce the establishment of ‘Infrastructure Australia’. I did not announce the establishment of a ‘National Health and Hospitals Reform Commission’. Can I say to the Leader of the Opposition that spin and process is no substitute for substance.

I have done a little bit of homework and I have gone through some of these lists. Every time the Leader of the Opposition opens his mouth he establishes a new committee or a new inquiry. We have got, for example, the new ‘Department of Homeland Security’; we have got the new ‘Department of Innovation, Industry, Science and Research’; we have got the new ‘Minister for Housing and Urban Development’; we have got ‘Coast Guard’; we have got ‘FairWork Australia’—

Ms Roxon—Mr Speaker, I rise on a point of order on relevance. None of this goes to what he has done for the last four years—

The Speaker—The member will resume her seat. The Prime Minister is illustrating his answer. He is in order.

Mr Howard—We have got the ‘Office of Climate Change’; we have got the ‘Office of National Security’; we have got the ‘Office of Work and Family’; we have got the ‘Office of Early Childhood Education’. And, as for inquiries, we have got a cost of living, pressures for older Australians inquiry; we have got a grocery inquiry; we have got the Garnaut climate change inquiry; we have got the federal and state relations review—

Mr Swan—Mr Speaker, a point of order on relevance.

The Speaker—The member will resume his seat. I will rule on his point of order. The member will be aware that the question was rather long and the Prime Minister is certainly answering the question. The Prime Minister is in order.

Mr Howard—The opposition leader asked me about the structure of government—so I go on. We have got a review of federal and state relations; we have a review of defence bases; we have got a review of ADF pay and conditions; we have got a review of government innovation and industry assistance programs—

Mr Albanese—Mr Speaker, a point of order under standing order 104.

The Speaker—The Prime Minister has only just begun to continue his answer. I call the Prime Minister, and if there are frivolous points of order taken I will deal with them.

Mr Howard—Instead of announcing inquiries, we actually announced proposals—we actually announced a plan or a pol-
icy. If the Leader of the Opposition had been thinking about nurses, he would have announced another inquiry, and he would no doubt have had that spokesman from the Nursing Federation that attacked our proposal as the first person to fill a position on the inquiry so he would know what was the result. I do not want to bore the House, but this list goes on and on. Can I say that in Australian politics at the present time there is only one list longer than this and that is the list of the former trade union officials that will constitute the federal parliamentary Labor Party, irrespective of the result, after the next federal election.

Economy

Dr SOUTHCOTT (2.25 pm)—My question is addressed to the Treasurer. Would the Treasurer inform the House of the latest information on Australia’s credit rating? How does this compare with the record of previous governments?

Mr COSTELLO—I thank the honourable member for Boothby for his question. I can tell him that today Standard and Poor’s reaffirmed Australia’s foreign currency sovereign credit rating at AAA, which is the top credit rating that can be given. Why does it matter what a sovereign credit rating is? It matters for this reason: if the sovereign rating is the ceiling, all private borrowers work back from that. If the sovereigns are downgraded in credit ratings, banks and other financial institutions that borrow are also downgraded. They do not go higher than the sovereign. At AAA for foreign currency, Australia is now at the top of the international ratings agencies. Standard and Poor’s said:

Of course, in net terms we have no debt. That is because the government has paid off Labor’s $96 billion of net debt. The high funding of government pension liabilities is a consequence of this government establishing the Future Fund, which is now funding liabilities into the future.

It was not always the case that Australia had a AAA credit rating on foreign currency sovereign issues. We were first downgraded in 1986 when the then Labor Treasurer talked of this country becoming a ‘banana republic’. And it bears remembering back to those days—I do not think anybody would suggest that Australia is a banana republic today.

Opposition members interjecting—

Mr COSTELLO—I did hear a voice from the past, the member for Brand, out of his Rip van Winkle-like sleep from the back, interjecting in support of the Labor Party and its downgrading of Australia’s credit rating in 1986. Who today would describe Australia as a banana republic? Yet that is the way the Treasurer of the country was describing Australia under Labor in 1986. We were downgraded a second time, incidentally, in 1989. In 1989 Australia was downgraded a second time when the Treasurer of the country then told us we were heading for ‘the recession we had to have’. We were downgraded in 1986, we were downgraded in 1989, and it was the election of the Liberal and National parties that determined to do something about it. We recovered that first downgrading in 1999 after we had balanced Australia’s budgets and we recovered that second downgrading in 2003 after we had paid off Labor debt. This took hard work. When we decided to restore Australia’s credit ratings we did not set up a committee; we did not say we would set up a committee to have inquiry or an investigation into what had to be done here in Australia. We set about hard work,
balancing our budget, repaying debt, setting up the Future Fund, getting this country back on the footing that it deserves to be on so we can have opportunities in the future.

The one person who had no part at all in any of the great economic reforms in this country was the Leader of the Opposition—standing in the way, opposing every hard step that had to be taken. He had no part in the work that got Australia to where it is now, and there would be no reason to trust him to do the hard work which is required to get us to where we want to be in the future. We want to be a positive, prosperous country with room for all and on a strong financial footing. The Leader of the Opposition has no part in that vision for Australia’s future.

Advertising Campaigns

Ms GILLARD (2.30 pm)—My question is to the Prime Minister. Can the Prime Minister confirm that the taxpayer-funded government advertising bill for this year alone will be in excess of $200 million? Is the Prime Minister delaying the election just so he can keep this massive taxpayer funded advertising blitz going?

Mr HOWARD—It is obvious that the Deputy Leader of the Opposition did not spend any time in Sydney over last Christmas. It was impossible to turn on your television set without being told about Morris Iemma’s plan for the future of New South Wales. At one stage, Cricket Australia was considering introducing four-ball overs to allow enough time for all the advertisements! Talk about hypocrisy. Give us a break!

Infrastructure

Mr HARDGRAVE (2.31 pm)—My question is addressed to the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Transport and Regional Services. Would the Deputy Prime Minister update the House on how the government’s plan for infrastructure is building the road and rail networks Australia needs for the future, including in my electorate of Moreton?

Mr VAILE—I thank the member for Moreton for his question. I recognise what a great job he has done in representing the constituents of Moreton for many years, particularly given his 37-year history as a local in the area. He knows the people he represents—he is in sync with their aspirations and, having worked in the private sector, he knows what it is like to make a quid. That obviously cannot be said of his Labor opponent, who is another former union boss. His opponent has been put up in the electorate of Moreton. He does not know the constituency—the people in the electorate of Moreton. The member for Moreton has done a fantastic job over the years in advocating their interests.

The member for Moreton asked about our national road and rail plan. In this year’s budget we announced a further $22.3 billion to add to the existing $15 billion that is currently being spent on road and rail infrastructure across Australia. As a result of good economic management and running budget surpluses over the past 10 years, we can afford to spend money on infrastructure in Australia. We are in the process of investing $38 billion in infrastructure across Australia, including on relatively small projects such as the level crossing in Moreton between Beaudesert Road and the main north-south rail link at Acacia Ridge. It is only $25 million, but it is a piece of infrastructure that the member for Moreton has fought to achieve for a number of years to remove a major safety issue on Beaudesert Road. Those are the sorts of things you can achieve in office, particularly when you run a strong economy—you have the ability to spend money, without having to borrow it, on infrastructure that is very much needed across Australia.
The government’s plan goes right across all categories of roads and rail. It is about improving highways, making them safer, making them more efficient, driving the Australian economy and making it more prosperous. It also improves safety conditions on local roads for mums and dads taking their kids to school. Those are the sorts of things we are doing as a result of a well-run economy.

The alternative that has been proposed by the Australian Labor Party, if they happen to win office later on this year, is another bureaucracy—another inquiry. Instead of making decisions, they will have an inquiry for 15 months to find out what the priorities are. And the member for Batman will probably chair it! There will be a 15-month freeze on decisions, when costs are escalating and when there is a demand for investment to be made right across Australia. So, along with the 50 or so other committees, inquiries and bureaucracies that the Leader of the Opposition has announced, Labor will do the same with infrastructure investment: they will freeze decision-making so they can have a further inquiry. What Labor is offering is the establishment of committees and further inquiries to look at the options. Establishing committees in order to put off decisions is weak leadership. It is not strong leadership; it is weak leadership.

Mr Brendan O’Connor interjecting—

The SPEAKER—Order! The member for Gorton!

Mr VAILE—that is what the Leader of the Opposition is offering Australia. The coalition government is offering strong, decisive leadership and investment—investment that we are proving we can do as a result of running a strong economy in Australia.

Advertising Campaigns

Ms GILLARD (2.35 pm)—My question is again to the Prime Minister. Will the Prime Minister confirm that further taxpayer funded Work Choices advertising has been booked for the weeks commencing 30 September and 7 October?

Mr HOWARD—I stand by all of the advertisements that have been run on Work Choices. The guidelines that we are following in relation to government advertising are, I am advised, the same guidelines that were followed by the previous Labor government.

Taxation

Mr MICHAEL FERGUSON (2.36 pm)—My question is addressed to the Treasurer. Would the Treasurer inform the House about the steps the government has taken to reform Australia’s tax system? Treasurer, are you aware of any alternative policies?

Mr COSTELLO—I thank the honourable member for Bass for his question, and I wish him well in the election. I assume that he is running against a union official in the forthcoming election; there is a 70 per cent chance that he will be, and I wish him very well.

Mr Brendan O’Connor interjecting—

The SPEAKER—The member for Gorton is warned!

Mr COSTELLO—The member for Bass asked me about steps the government has taken to reform Australia’s tax system. The government has cut tax in the 2003, 2004, 2005, 2006 and 2007 budgets. As a consequence of that, if you are on an annual income of $30,000 today you will be paying a top marginal tax rate of 15 per cent. Under the Labor Party, if you were earning $30,000, you were paying a top marginal tax rate of 34 per cent—which is more than double. If you are on $50,000 today, you will be paying a top marginal tax rate of 30c in the dollar. Under the Labor Party you were paying a top marginal tax rate of 47c in the dollar.
In addition to that, the government introduced GST to abolish wholesale sales tax and nine other state taxes. The government cut company tax. The government halved capital gains tax for individuals. The government cut petrol excise and abolished indexation. The government has introduced the childcare tax rebate, the mature age workers tax offset and the senior Australians tax offset; and the government has abolished all taxes for people over 60 who take superannuation from a taxed fund. This is light years from the tax system that the Labor Party used to run. Strangely enough, we did not implement those tax reforms by setting up a committee. We did not sit around and say we would have a council. What this government actually did was: we took some decisions and we fought for reductions in tax.

When we were fighting to reduce taxes, I did not notice anybody in the Labor Party assisting. In fact, we heard the Leader of the Opposition—with surely one of the more inane speeches ever delivered in this parliament—calling tax reform a day of fundamental injustice which would live in infamy throughout the centenary of the Australian parliament.

Mr Cameron Thompson—Is he going to abolish it?

Mr COSTELLO—That is a very good question, because I have been asked if I am aware of any alternative policies, and the answer is: I am not. Certainly the Labor Party have no tax policy, and judging from what the Deputy Leader of the Opposition was asked on Sunday, and the way she floundered around in answering it, they have still not decided whether or not they will have a tax policy at the next election.

The member for Lilley, who is charged with being Treasurer in a future Labor government, said this to the National Press Club on 16 May:

I am not anticipating taking forward any significant change to the personal income tax system at this stage.

We have a Labor Party which has opposed every tax reform in the last 10 years, we have a Labor Party which has not even made up its mind whether or not to have a tax policy, and we have a Leader of the Opposition who has no economic credentials whatsoever. Let me remind the House that when this government introduced the $600 annual payment for the family tax benefit, the member for Lilley—the shadow Treasurer—went around Australia saying that it was not real money. This payment was paid to every eligible family in Australia and, rather than have to admit that he wanted to abolish it, he walked around Australia saying that it was not real. This is what you get from a political apparatchik: somebody who repeats a rhetorical line over and over again rather than engaging in substance. The people of Australia are interested in substance. They are interested in $600 payments that go into bank accounts and can pay bills for their children. They are interested in getting taxes lower. They are interested in tax reform, they know that the heavy economic lifting in this country has always been done by this government, and they will not trust a policy or a party that does not have any answer whatsoever to that policy.

Prime Minister

Ms PLIBERSEK (2.42 pm)—My question is to the Minister for the Environment and Water Resources. I refer the minister to his recent official four-page newsletter, circulated to voters in his electorate of Wentworth, boasting about the government’s environmental credentials. Can the minister explain why this newsletter does not once mention the Prime Minister by name nor make—

Government members interjecting—
The SPEAKER—Order! The member for Sydney has the call.

Ms PLIBERSEK—Shall I start again, Mr Speaker?

The SPEAKER—The member for Sydney has the call and the member for Sydney will be heard.

Ms PLIBERSEK—Can the minister explain why this newsletter does not once mention the Prime Minister by name or make any reference to the Howard government?

Mrs Bronwyn Bishop—Mr Speaker, I rise on a point of order. Standing order 98(c) says that this is not a matter which is associated with any of the minister’s official duties at all and is quite out of order.

The SPEAKER—The question relates to a publication by the minister. The question is in order. I call the Minister for the Environment and Water Resources.

Mr TURNBULL—I thank the honourable member for the question, and I am glad that she pays attention to my newsletter—

Mr Howard—It’s a good newsletter.

Mr TURNBULL—It is a very good newsletter; the Prime Minister agrees with that. It is a newsletter by me as the local member, and naturally it focuses on me.

Ms Plibersek—Mr Speaker, I think the Prime Minister wanted me to table it.

Mr Howard—Yes.

Ms Plibersek—Excellent. I seek leave to table the newsletter.

Leave granted.

Hospitals

Mr BAKER (2.45 pm)—My question is addressed to the Minister for Health and Ageing. Would the minister advise the House on discussions with the Tasmanian government on the Mersey hospital at Latrobe in Tasmania? Are there any alternative hospital policies, and what is the government’s response?

Mr ABBOTT—The member for Braddon was a champion local footballer and now he is the champion fighter for health services in north-western Tasmania—the best fighter for health services in north-western Tasmania that they have ever had in that area.

I say to the member for Braddon and to the House that the Commonwealth’s proposal for the Mersey hospital is certainly not about swapping one lot of public servants for another lot of public servants. This is about a better way of running public hospitals—a way of running them in response to local patients and local clinicians rather than in response to distant bureaucrats. People do not really care who runs public hospitals; they just want them better run, and that is what this Commonwealth proposal is all about—a better run public hospital at the Mersey in Tasmania.

I should point out to the House that the Tasmanian government is already spending the money that it will no longer need to spend on the Mersey hospital. I am pleased to inform the House that negotiations between Commonwealth and state officials are progressing well. But I do say to the Tasmanians that they should not hold up this agreement. They should not delay this agreement, because the Leader of the Opposition has opposed it from the start and, if he ever gets into government, there is no guarantee of any additional health funding for north-west Tasmania.

I have been asked about alternative policies. Funnily enough, it is another talkfest. If you look at Labor’s policy, you see that they have announced a national health reform commission, a health and hospital advisory group, a national preventative healthcare strategy supported by a task force, a national commissioner for elderly people and a pre-
ventative healthcare partnership with the states and territories, and they have called for a review of regulatory regimes for complementary medicines, a review of the Medicare schedule for midwives, a review of Medicare psychiatric consultations and a review of medical research ethics guidelines. But all the reviews in the world do not make a single policy. And you can have any number of talkfests, but all the talkfests in the world do not deliver a single extra doctor, a single extra nurse or a single extra hospital bed.

The Leader of the Opposition did, however, come up with one concrete policy. He said the other day that Labor would establish a $2 billion fund to improve public hospitals. He also said on that day:

We either have a solution for the total health system or we are simply cherry picking bits out of it to make a political point.

Since then he has done nothing but cherry pick. This fund has been raided on at least three separate occasions since then. He raided the fund to the tune of $220 million to set up alleged super clinics; he raided the fund for PET at Newcastle; he raided the fund for an MRI at Cairns; and I presume he is going to spend $450 million on aged care as well as sundry other electorally specific announcements. It is a $1.3 billion health slush fund and it is falling fast.

Mr Burke interjecting—

The SPEAKER—Order! The member for Watson will withdraw that remark.

Mr Burke—Am I being asked to withdraw the word ‘liar’?

The SPEAKER—Yes.

Mr Burke—I withdraw.

The SPEAKER—Thank you.

Mr Albanese—Mr Speaker, I rise on a point of order. On what basis did you make that ruling?

The SPEAKER—The member for Grayndler is well aware that, if he wishes to ask questions of the Speaker, he will do it at the appropriate moment.

Mr ABBOTT—Mr Speaker, let me just make the point that these claims from the Leader of the Opposition are typical of the kind of slipperiness we get from this bloke, who never says quite what he means and is never exactly what he seems. The more people see and hear of this man, the more obvious it is that he is a phoney. That is why he can never be trusted with Australia’s great Medicare system.

Advertising Campaigns

Mr GARRETT (2.52 pm)—My question is to the Minister for the Environment and Water Resources. Can the minister confirm that since 1996 the Howard government has spent $1.8 billion on advertising and only $878 million on climate change programs? Minister, how much money was spent on the taxpayer funded ‘climate clever’ mail out from its inception—including design costs, market testing, staffing and production—to the time it was cancelled?
Mr TURNBULL—The first part of the honourable member’s question has a false premise in it because the statement he has made about spending on climate change is simply wrong. The government has committed $3.5 billion—

Ms Macklin—Spent?

The SPEAKER—Order! The minister has the call.

Mr TURNBULL—We have spent and committed $3 billion to $3½ billion directly on climate change mitigation and a gigantic amount of money in addition to that to climate change adaptation. The $10 billion National Plan for Water Security alone can be viewed as the single largest climate change adaptation measure of its kind anywhere in the world.

Mr Tanner interjecting—

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

Mr TURNBULL—As far as the ‘climate clever’ campaign is concerned, the honourable member asked what was the cost between inception and cancellation. I do not know whether the honourable member in his efforts to minimise energy usage has sold his television set, but the campaign is underway now and it is on television.

Mr Albanese interjecting—

The SPEAKER—The member for Grayndler is warned!

Mr TURNBULL—The brochures will be mailed out to people who request them and they will be distributed in newspapers. We have made a decision to get the maximum coverage of these important issues. We are all committed, I thought, on both sides of the House to energy efficiency, but apparently not on the Labor side of the House.

Mr Albanese interjecting—

The SPEAKER—The member for Grayndler is warned!

Mr TURNBULL—How else can we encourage households to be efficient in their use of energy without telling them what options are available to them? Both the first and second parts of his answer are built on a false premise.

Indigenous Affairs

Mr TOLLNER (2.54 pm)—My question is addressed to the Minister for Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs. Would the minister advise the House why Australia joined Canada, New Zealand and the United States last week in declining to ratify the Draft Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples? Is the minister aware of any other approaches and what is the government’s response?

Mr BROUGH—In response to the member for Solomon, in simple terms we did this because it is in Australia’s interest. It is in the interest of all Australians that we all get treated equally under the law and under the Constitution—that we are one under the national flag. In fact, the rights that would have been conferred upon some Australians over others as a result of the Draft Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples would have done more to split Australians, to damage reconciliation and to put one group of Australians in a privileged position over and above others.

Let me demonstrate, Mr Speaker: this declaration would provide a particular group with the right to veto decisions of a democratically elected parliament. This is not something that the Howard government would countenance. Secondly, it would provide rights over land that could override legitimate interests in land held by others and open up the question of compensation. Thirdly, it would place customary law in a superior position to national law. This is the
very reason that New Zealand’s Maori Affairs Minister also said that the declaration was not compatible with New Zealand law. Nor is it compatible with Australian law.

I was asked if there were any alternative approaches to this issue. There clearly have been many alternative approaches to this position by the Leader of the Opposition and by his spokesperson, the member for Jagajaga. In the Weekend Australian on Saturday we saw that the member for Jagajaga committed a Rudd government to making Australia the 144th signatory to the protocol. In other words, Labor supports these very divisive measures that would split and provide one set of rights for one group of Australians against others. I thought at the time ‘How long would it take before the member for Jagajaga was again pulled back into line and that we would see a lack of leadership on the Labor Party’s side as they went backwards and forwards—flipped and flopped—between one position and another?’ I did not have to wait long because here on Monday the Australian newspaper reported that the member for Jagajaga said that Labor, if elected, would probably not draft the laws needed to support the declaration—more they were aspirational.

What does that actually mean? It means that you are trying to be all things to all people. Real leadership, not new leadership, is when you have a position, you take it and you argue it in the nation’s interest—in the interest of all Australians. You do not form a committee. You do not form a task force to report some time later. You do not have one position on Saturday and another one on Monday. You have a position, you stand by it and you argue it in the nation’s interest. Labor seems incapable of doing it. New leadership is not weak leadership; it is not indecisive leadership. What we have from the other side is no leadership—no leadership whatsoever on the issue of Indigenous affairs. Over the last 12 months, we have seen the Labor Party in one instance vote against the government’s legislation in the House. They opposed the crimes amendment bill which removed customary law as a mitigating factor in bail and sentencing hearings in Commonwealth matters. That was just one year ago. Last month they reversed that position by supporting the Northern Territory intervention legislation, which included the ruling out of customary law as a mitigating factor.

Then on Saturday, we had the member for Jagajaga saying on behalf of the federal Labor Party that the Labor Party would endorse this UN declaration and ratify the rights of Indigenous people, which would have put customary law above the law for all other Australians. Then today, Monday, we have yet again a different position being cast. They are casting around trying to be all things to all men and walking both sides of the street. Real leadership is something that only the Howard government has demonstrated when it comes to Indigenous affairs.

Liberal Party: Leadership

Mr McMULLAN (2.59 pm)—My question is to the Prime Minister. Did the Prime Minister tell the electors of Bennelong on Thursday that he was being up-front with them when he warned that he may force a by-election in that seat some time after the next election? Why did the Prime Minister change his mind on Saturday and tell his constituents that he would serve the full three years as the member for Bennelong only if the government won the next election? Which of these two statements was a lie or were they both lies?

Mr HOWARD—I am not aware that I made the first statement.

Opposition members interjecting—

The SPEAKER—Order! The Prime Minister has the call.
Mr HOWARD—In words of one syllable, I say to the member for Fraser what I said to my constituents on Saturday—that is, if the government is re-elected and if I am re-elected, I will serve my full term, the full three years, and I will not inflict a by-election on them. I will not do what Bracks and Beattie have done.

Immigration

Mr TICEHURST (3.00 pm)—My question is to the Minister for Immigration and Citizenship. Would the minister inform the House about the new citizenship test? Is the minister aware of any alternative policies?

Mr ANDREWS—I thank the member for Dobell for his question. It is always a delight to visit the member for Dobell in his electorate. He is one of the hardworking members on this side and a very good member of parliament. I note in passing, of course, that his opponent, once again, as we expect from the Labor Party each time now, is yet another union hack. These people want to turn the House of Representatives into the Trades Hall Council.

Today I had the pleasure of launching the new Australian citizenship test. It was appropriate to do today because this is Australian Citizenship Day. Most Australians, I believe, would agree with the proposition that Australian citizenship is a privilege, not a right, that citizenship of this country requires an overriding commitment to Australia, to our values, to our laws and to our community. It is important therefore that people who wish to become Australian citizens understand and demonstrate a commitment to the values that guide us and how our society works.

These values, which are in the new Australian citizenship resource material, are, I believe, common and unite Australians—values such as respect for the freedom and dignity of the individual, support for Western liberal democracy, and commitment to the rule of law, parliamentary democracy and equality of men and women, among other things. The Australian government has also decided that applicants for permanent visas and provisional visas which lead to permanent visas will be expected in future to sign a statement that they will respect certain values, including the ones I have outlined, and obey Australian laws before being granted a visa.

The honourable member for Dobell asked me whether there are any alternative policies. When the citizenship test was announced, the Leader of the Opposition ducked that issue and said on 13 December 2006:

... on Mr Howard’s precise list of values, we’ll spend some time working our way through those and also his list of rights and responsibilities, I want to subject those to some careful examination as well.

Here we are nine months later and we are yet to hear what the Leader of the Opposition values in this regard. No doubt if he gets asked a question about it today he will say, ‘I’ll set up a committee to tell me what they should be.’ We know that, while the Leader of the Opposition ducked the question, some people in the Labor Party were setting out what the Labor Party really thinks. I see that the member for Banks said in parliament on 21 May:

This test that is being introduced by this government is a disgrace.

Mr Melham—Absolutely!

Mr ANDREWS—Absolutely a disgrace! Good to hear it again from the member for Banks. He believes in something, unlike the Leader of the Opposition. He went on to say on 21 May:

The test is the first thing that should be repealed when there is a change of government; it should not decide who becomes an Australian citizen.

Here we have the real voice of the Labor Party—the member for Banks who actually
believes in something and has the guts to come out and say what he believes in, rather than the Leader of the Opposition, who is simply dodging the question once again. What we have here is one more example of the distinct pattern which is emerging so far as the opposition is concerned. Once again we see Mr Rudd, the Leader of the Opposition, say one thing, or in this case not say anything, while his colleagues give voice to the real views of the Labor Party. The Leader of the Opposition dodges issues. He has dodged the issue. If he does not dodge issues, he says, ‘We’ll set up a committee,’ or, ‘We’ll set up a review.’ The Australian people deserve better.

Mr Burke—Mr Speaker, I rise on a point of order. I ask the minister to table a copy of the test he just referred to. We have not seen it yet.

Mr Andrews—The honourable member knows that the test is confidential. He fully well knows that.

Opposition members interjecting—

The Speaker—Order! The minister has the call. The question to the minister is whether he was quoting from a confidential document.

Mr Andrews—I was quoting from a confidential document but, on a point of order, the honourable member fully well knows that the values are set out in the resource booklet, which is available.

Liberal Party: Leadership

Mr McMullan (3.06 pm)—My question is to the Prime Minister and follows on from his previous answer. I refer to the transcript of a 7.30 Report interview of 12 September in which, in response to the statement from Kerry O’Brien—

Opposition member interjecting—

Mr McMullan—it could have changed depending on the day of the week.

That is a sensible point to raise. Kerry O’Brien said:

You’re not going to be there for the full three years, at some point in the three years, there’ll be a by-election—

To which the Prime Minister replied:

... whether there would be a by-election or not is something that I would determine then.

Did you mean it when you said it and do you mean it now?

The Speaker—Before I call the Prime Minister, I remind the member for Fraser he should not use the word ‘you’.

Mr Howard—My position is this—and I will say it very slowly so that the member for Fraser might take it in; I will start at the very beginning while the member for Fraser can take it in: if I am re-elected and my government is re-elected I will serve my full term.

Ms Macklin interjecting—

The Speaker—Order! The member for Jagajaga is warned!

Mr Howard—I know you do not like that. I would also remind the member for Fraser that the answer to which he referred—

Mr Melham interjecting—

The Speaker—Order! The member for Banks is warned!

Mr Howard—was given in interview on Wednesday, not on Thursday. Your original question was wrong.

Veterans’ Affairs

Mr Neville (3.07 pm)—My question is addressed to the Minister for Veterans’ Affairs. Would the minister advise the House of the recent veterans support package, announced by the government, to further assist our nation’s veterans?

Mr Billson—I thank the member for Hinkler not only for the question but for his tireless work for the veterans’ community.
He is a terrific advocate for the veterans not only in this parliament but within the Howard government. Last week at the RSL National Congress in Melbourne the Prime Minister announced a comprehensive $330 million package to assist veterans. This package said that, from March 2008, all veterans’ affairs disability pensions will be referenced to both CPI and male total average weekly earnings in the same manner that the service pension is currently indexed. In addition, the general rate table, the table of compensation that is paid for pain and suffering and loss of function, will be increased by five per cent for all of the table from March 2008, and that will benefit some 140,000 disability pensioners. In addition, more than 13½ thousand veterans who receive the extreme disablement adjustment payment, which is for people with profound lifestyle impacts from their service related conditions after their working life, will also receive a fortnightly increase of $15 from March 2008. These are real, substantial benefits for the veterans’ community. Not only were these announcements extremely well received on the night; the veterans’ community has acknowledged and recognised what a terrific package it is, including ‘Blue’ Ryan from the TPI Association. ‘Blue’ is not well at the moment; we wish him well with his recovery.

What we also saw at the RSL National Congress was the spectacle of how Labor is developing its policies. Whilst the Prime Minister was making this substantial $330 million commitment, the Leader of the Opposition and his shadow spokesman were carving out swathes of the Leader of the Opposition’s speech, realising that the package that the Prime Minister had offered was infinitely superior and infinitely more principled and would deliver real benefits beyond the policy that Labor had announced only hours earlier. To hang out the shadow spokesman in the way the Leader of the Opposition did, who was spruiking the ALP policy three hours earlier, only to see the Leader of the Opposition junk half his speech, junk the fourth effort Labor had at veterans’ affairs disability pension policy, to embrace what the government had done was quite a spectacle. Then, some three days later, I found a request to my office from the opposition saying, ‘Can you share with us the detail of the package and the costings and how it actually works—and the projections?’ Is that the action of an economic conservative? I do not think so. They are reckless actions. At least, to the credit of the Leader of the Opposition, he has decided that ‘me too’ is the right way to go when it comes to veterans’ affairs policy.

Ms King—Yes, you really would have done something!

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

Mr BILLSON—To so fulsomely embrace what the Prime Minister announced and then ditch the fourth effort of the ALP policy on the run was quite a spectacle to see. I understand why the opposition are unsettled by this. Their $55 million policy lasted a handful of hours—their fourth go at it. But, more particularly, what became clear was just how unprincipled the Labor Party is in going about its policy development. It got it wrong four times, ditched its own policy, less than a day old, embraced what the government was doing and then wondered what it had actually embraced. Is it the kind of ‘economics’ we are going to see more of as we go towards the election? Contrast this: the sound, principled leadership of the government; the sound policies; the substantial benefits that are forthcoming; and the costed, credible, committed action agenda of the government versus the reaction and the political spin of the Leader of the Opposition. I
think the veterans’ community has every right to be completely sceptical of all that Labor says about this subject—promises on the run. It is not even clear what the policy represents, and that builds on the terrible track record of Labor in veterans’ affairs. We cannot be certain that Labor is not going to change again.

What we can be certain about, as the Treasurer has outlined, is that MTAWE wage related benefits are most beneficial when the economy is strong, when there is strong real wages growth. We do not have to think back very far to remember the period of negative real wages growth under the former Labor government. MTAWE is not worth anything when you have negative real wages growth, as we had under the former government. So my message to the veterans’ community is clear: if you want principled leadership, sound policy, substantial benefits and, above all, costed, credible and committed policy, MTAWE benefits will be there, the economy will continue to grow and you will not risk what Labor did to the veterans’ affairs portfolio when they were last in office.

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

PETITIONS

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

Immigration

To the Honourable the Speaker and the Members of the House of Representatives in Parliament assembled:
The humble Petition of the Citizens of Australia, respectfully showeth:

That we reaffirm our support for the Constitution of the Commonwealth of Australia which states “Whereas the people of New South Wales, Victoria, South Australia, Queensland and Tasmania humbly relying on the blessing of Almighty God, have agreed to unite in one indissoluble Federal Commonwealth” (Constitution Act 9th July 1900) and the affirmation of 69% of our Australian population that they are Christians, and the statement of one of our founders that “this Commonwealth of Australia from its first stage will be a Christian Commonwealth” (Sir John Downer 1898), and the Opening Prayer of the Parliaments “Almighty God we humbly beseech Thee to vouchsafe Thy blessing upon this Parliament. Direct and prosper our deliberations to the advancement of Thy glory” and recognises the importance of these beliefs in ensuring the ongoing stability and unity of our Christian nation.

Your petitioners therefore pray the Parliament of Australia will:

1. Review our Commonwealth Immigration Policy to ensure the priority for Christians from all races and colours, especially from persecuted nations, as both immigrants and refugees.

2. Adopt a ten year moratorium on Muslim immigration, so an assessment can be made on the social and political disharmony currently occurring in the Netherlands, France and the UK, so as to ensure we avoid making the same mistakes; and allow a decade for the Muslim leadership and community in Australia to reassess their situation so as to reject any attempt to establish an Islamic nation within our Australian nation.

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

by Mr Downer (from 39 citizens)
by Mrs Hull (from 12 citizens)
by Mr McArthur (from 10 citizens)
by Mrs Moylan (from 13 citizens)
by Mr Pearce (from 12 citizens)
by Mr Ruddock (from 11 citizens)
by Mr Schultz (from 130 citizens)
by Mr Somlyay (from 20 citizens)
by Mr Windsor (from 83 citizens)
Dental Health
Petition to the Honourable Speaker and Members of the House of Representatives assembled in Parliament:
This petition of certain citizens of Australia draws to the attention of the House, the long dental waiting lists and the Howard Government’s failure to help fund dental care.
Your Petitioners therefore ask the House to:
• Re-establish a Commonwealth Dental Health Program.
• Ease the cost pressures on working families by contributing to the cost of dental care.
• Help keep people out of hospital for preventable dental conditions.
• End the Blame Game and work with the States and Territories to fix Australia’s dental care system
by Ms Hall (from 56 citizens)
by Ms Owens (from 3,759 citizens)
by Ms Roxon (from 69 citizens)
by Ms Vanvakinou (from 179 citizens)

Nuclear Waste
Petition to the Honourable Speaker and Members of the House of Representatives assembled in Parliament:
This petition of certain citizens of Australia draws to the attention of the House its objection to a nuclear reactor or high level nuclear waste dump being built in our area. Your petitioners therefore request the House to reject any nuclear reactors or high level nuclear waste dumps being built in our community.
by Mr Garrett (from 370 citizens)
by Ms Owens (from 48 citizens)

Immigration: Asylum Seekers
To the Honourable the Speaker and the Members of the House of Representatives in Parliament assembled:
Whereas the 1998 Synod of the Anglican Diocese of Melbourne carried without dissent the following motion:
‘That this Synod regrets the Government’s adoption of procedures for certain people seeking political asylum in Australia which exclude them from all public income support while withholding permission to work, thereby creating a group of beggars dependent on the Churches and charities for food and the necessities of life;
and calls upon the Federal government to review such procedures immediately and remove all practices which are manifestly inhumane and in some cases in contravention of our national obligations as a signatory of the UN Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.’
We, therefore, the individual, undersigned attendees at State James’ Anglican Church Dandenong
VIC. 3175, petition the House of Representatives in support of the above mentioned Motion.
AND we, as in duty bound will ever pray.

by Mr Crean (from six citizens)
by Mr Griffin (from 46 citizens)
by Mr Anthony Smith (from 14 citizens)

Blood Donation

This petition of certain citizens of Australia draws to the attention of the House, the current review, required under the Australian-United States Free Trade Agreement, of the offshore processing of blood plasma products from blood donated by Australians.

There are widespread concerns about the impact on volunteer donors if Australian blood is processed overseas. Australians who donate their blood have the right to ask if competition for the sake of the Australia/US FTA is more important to the Howard Government than the guarantee of one of the safest blood supply systems in the world.

Your petitioners ask the House to ensure that:

- Australian plasma is not shipped offshore for processing;
- Blood products will not become unaffordable or unvailable to those people in Australia with rare blood disorders;
- Australia maintains self-sufficiency in blood and blood products; and
- Australia’s voluntary blood donation system is not undermined.

by Mr Georganas (from seven citizens)
by Ms Roxon (from 278 citizens)

Human Rights: Falun Gong

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

The petition of certain citizens and residents of Australia draws to the attention of the House that: Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and the international community have noted the deteriorating human rights situation in China.

UN Special Rapporteur on torture Mr Manfred Nowak reported in March 2006 that Falun Gong practitioners accounted for 66% of the victims of alleged torture while in custody in China and his March 2007 submission lists hospitals, transplant centres, detention centres and courts in China that have all been involved in either the removal of organs from live Falun Gong practitioners or administering the use of these organs.

In their comprehensive report into organ harvesting in China, human rights lawyer David Matas and former Canadian Secretary of State for Asia-Pacific Affairs David Kilgour came “to the regrettable conclusion that the allegations are true”.

One year has passed since both the Australian Government and Opposition expressed verbal support for an investigation into the organ harvesting allegations. Thus far, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has refused to allow any independent investigation.

Falun Gong practitioners in China are still being persecuted behind closed doors.

Falun Gong practitioners can be killed at any time to supply the organ harvesting trade.

Your petitioners therefore request the House to initiate a resolution to:
- Request the Prime Minister John Howard to openly urge the CCP delegates at APEC ’07 that Australians want the Communist regime to immediately and unconditionally:
  I Stop the persecution of Falun Gong and release all Falun Gong prisoners of conscience.
  II Allow open access to jails, labour camps, detention centres and related hospitals to the UN and/or the Coalition to Investigate the Persecution of Falun Gong in China (CIPFG) to conduct independent investigations.

by Mr Griffin (from 42 citizens)
by Mr Ruddock (from 197 citizens)

Workplace Relations

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

The petition of certain citizens of Australia draws the attention of the House to the fact that Australian employees are worse off as a result of the Howard Government’s changes to the industrial relations system.
The petitioners call upon the Howard Government to adopt a plan to produce a fair industrial relations system based on fairness and the fundamental principles of minimum standards, wages and conditions; safety nets; an independent umpire; the right to associate; and the right to collectively bargain.

The petitioners therefore ask the House to ensure that the Howard Government delivers:

1. Proper rights for Australian workers who are unfairly dismissed.
2. A strong safety net of minimum awards and conditions.
3. An independent umpire to ensure fair wages and conditions, and to settle disputes.
4. The right for employees to bargain collectively for decent wages and conditions.
5. The right for workers to reject individual contracts which cut pay and conditions, and undermine collective bargaining and union representation.
6. The right to join a union and be represented by a union.

by Mr Tanner (from 23 citizens)
by Mr Kelvin Thomson (from 47 citizens)

Human Rights: Falun Gong
To the Honourable The Speaker and Members of the House of Representatives Assembled in Parliament:

The petition of certain citizens and residents of Australia draws to the attention of the House that:

Witnesses, including an investigative journalist and a veteran military doctor have revealed that Falun Gong practitioners are being held in at least 36 concentration camps in China where they are routinely subject to the forced removals of their organs which are then sold for transplants. The bodies are quickly cremated to destroy all evidence.

Your petitioners therefore request the House to:

I. Call for the Australian Government to fully support the International Coalition to Investigate the Persecution of Falun Gong (CIPFG), and demand that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) immediately open the doors of all concentration camps, forced labour camps, hospitals, prisons and detention centres throughout the People’s Republic of China in order to allow independent teams to investigate the charges of illegal detention, torture and live organ removal for transplants.

II. Demand that the CCP regime release all detained Falun Gong practitioners immediately.

by Ms Burke (from 100 citizens)
by Mr Ruddock (from 19 citizens)

Vietnamese Hui Clubs
To the Honourable the Speaker and Members of the House of Representatives Assembled in Parliament:

This petition of certain citizens of Australia draws the attention of the House to the fact that at present many residents of the Vietnamese community are concerned, due to the alleged fraud of Thi Thu Van Nguyen and her husband Duc Trinh Huynh.

They have taken advantage of a gap in Australian law and stolen money deposited into a Hui savings club by many members of our community. Hui clubs are informal clubs that exist in the Vietnamese community and we believe are as yet unregulated by the Government. They are designed to assist members of the community in financial ventures when they find it difficult because of language and administrative barriers to loan money from established lenders.

Your petitioners therefore request the House to:

1. Enact regulations to govern Hui clubs or explain how existing regulations govern their existence and enforce them.
2. Work with the Vietnamese Government to find and return any money that has been illegally sent to Vietnam by the alleged defrauders.
3. Arrange for the Taxation office to provide material to Hui investors explaining how they can pay tax on money invested in Hui.

by Mr Albanese (from 402 citizens)
Whaling
To the Honourable the Speaker and Members of the House of Representatives assembled in Parliament:
The petition of certain citizens of Australia draw to the attention of the House:
Japan’s intention to pursue an expanded ‘scientific’ whale hunt, including a quota of humpback whales, within the Australian Whale Sanctuary.
The Howard Government’s failure to protect the whale population in Australian waters despite laws passed by the Parliament in 1999 which gave it the power to do so.
Your petitioners therefore request the House to call on the Howard Government to:
1. Enforce Australian law banning the slaughter of whales in the Australian Whale Sanctuary.
2. Monitor whaling vessels operating in Australian waters, and intercept vessels operating illegally in the Australian fishing zone.
3. Take Japan to international courts such as the International Court of Justice or the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea to end the slaughter of whales.
by Mr Bevis (from 79 citizens)

Indigenous Communities
To the Honourable the Speaker and Members of the House of Representatives assembled in Parliament:
The Petition of certain citizens of Australia draws to the attention of the House:
1. The findings of the Little Children are Sacred Report that the sexual abuse of Aboriginal children in the NT is serious, widespread and often unreported; Aboriginal people are not the only victims and not the only perpetrators of sexual abuse; and most Aboriginal people are committed to solving problems and helping their children;
Your petitioners therefore request the House to:
1. Work more closely with Aboriginal people to overcome child abuse in Northern Territory Aboriginal communities
2. Adopt the plan developed by the Combined Aboriginal Organisations of the Northern Territory; which builds on the recommendations of the Little Children are Sacred Report and programs that are already in Aboriginal communities
by Ms Bird (from 226 citizens)

Education of Students with a Disability
To the Honourable the Speaker and Members of the House of Representatives assembled in Parliament:
The petition of certain residents of the State of Victoria draws to the attention of the House the inequitable funding for students with a disability, particularly those in non government schools and the resulting lack of portability.
Your petitioners therefore request the House take immediate action to ensure that eligible students with a disability are able to access equal funding and that funding be portable across all sectors government and non government.
by Mr Broadbent (from 161 citizens)

Medicare Office: Moe-Newborough
To the Honourable Speaker and Members of the House of Representatives assembled in Parliament:
The Petition of certain residents of Moe and Newborough and surrounding communities in the state of Victoria, electoral division of McMillan, draws to the attention of the House:
1. The lack of a Medicare Office in the Moe-Newborough community and the hardship this imposes on local residents.
2. At the 2001 census Moe-Newborough had a combined population of 15,387 and 30,342 residents within a 30-kilometre radius.
3. There is a significant proportion of the population in receipt of pensions, carer allowances and parenting payments.
4. It is the only significant population centre in the region that does not have a Medicare Office.
The petitioners therefore respectfully request the House to do all in its power to ensure that a Medicare office be returned to Moe as a matter of urgency.
by Mr Broadbent (from 2,352 citizens)
Medibank Private: Sale
To the Honourable Speaker and Members of the House of Representatives assembled in Parliament to oppose the sale of Medibank Private:

This petition of certain citizens of Australia registers its protest to the sale of Medibank Private and calls on the House to oppose the sale of Medibank Private.

by Ms Burke (from 279 citizens)

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

The petition of certain citizens of Australia draws to the attention of the House recent statements made by the President of Iran, Mr Moahmoud Ahmadinejad, in which he:

(1) calls for the destruction of the State of Israel;
(2) warns that any Muslims who support the State of Israel will burn in the Umma of Islam; and
(3) denies the Nazi genocide against the Jews of Europe and demonise Jews.

Your petitioners therefore request the House to:
(1) condemn the statements made by the Iranian President;
(2) call on the Australian Government to:
   (a) refer the incitements to, genocide by President Ahamdinejad and other Iranian leaders to the appropriate agencies of the United Nations for account;
   (b) initiate in the International Court of Justice an inter-state complaint against Iran, for its crimal violation of the Convention on the prevention and Punishment of the Crime of genocide; and
   (c) urge the United Nations to act against Iran’s threats towards the State of Israel; and
(3) affirm the principle that no country should be allowed to call for the elimination of another.

by Mr Danby (from 349 citizens)

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

The petition of certain citizens of Australia draws to the attention of the House its objection to send water from the Northern Rivers of the State of New South Wales to Queensland. The petitioners therefore request the House to reject any plans to send water from the Northern Rivers of the State of New South Wales to Queensland.

by Mrs Elliot (from 308 citizens)

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

Certain Sisters of St Joseph, their Associates in Mission and network partners, affirm that Indigenous peoples make a unique contribution to the diversity and richness of the Australian culture. The United Nations Draft Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples explicitly encourages harmonious and cooperative relations between States and Indigenous Peoples. The Declaration is of utmost importance in upholding human rights and challenging discrimination against and marginalisation of Australian Indigenous peoples. We the undersigned, therefore request the House to exercise your leadership of the Australian people by signing the Draft Declaration.

by Ms Annette Ellis (from 698 citizens)

Environment: Webber Esplanade
To the Honourable the Speaker and Members of the Parliament of Australia.

This petition of Residents of Australia draws to the attention of the House the publicly announced plans of the Cook Shire Council to carry out rock wall construction and land reclamation on Cooktown’s foreshore. This work is planned for the Endeavour River, namely on Webber Esplanade from the Powder Magazine building to the Game Fishing Club lease. This work poses grave threats to the environment of Australia’s most historic river including interfering with iconic barramundi breeding grounds, threatening the navigable channel and the marine environment. It will also
destroy a number of small natural beaches and replace them with a vertical wall of jagged rock.
Your petitioners therefore request the House to stop the rock wall construction and reclamation of Webber Esplanade, Cooktown as a matter of urgency.

by Mr Entsch (from 193 citizens)

Airport Development and Aviation Noise Ombudsman

Petition to the Honourable Speaker and Members of the House of Representatives:
The petition of residents of Australia draws the attention of the House to residents’ right to:
• complain against how airports affect their quality of life;
• have complaints heard fairly, independently and impartially;
• see that airport businesses are not above the law.
The petitioners call upon the House to establish an Airport Development and Aviation Noise Ombudsman who will:
• investigate residents’ complaints fairly and impartially;
• communicate with residents promptly and honestly; and
• see that airport companies abide by the law.
by Mr Martin Ferguson (from 87 citizens)

Television Sports Broadcasting

Petition to the Honourable Speaker and Members of the House of Representatives assembled in Parliament:
The petition of certain citizens of Australia draws to the attention of the House:
• The Socceroos’ international games attract the attention and support of the Australian population;
• Socceroo matches deserve at least equal status to Australia’s international cricket and rugby matches;
• The Socceroo’s international performance is of national importance and is of cultural significance; and
• Socceroo matches warrant being televised on free-to-air television.
Your petitioners therefore ask the House to:
• Recognise soccer as a national game and provide support for its ongoing development in the Australian community;
• Recognise the Socceroo’s international games as events of national importance and cultural significance; and
• Return competitions involving the Socceroos to free-to-air television through the anti-siphoning list at the earliest opportunity.
by Mr Georganas (from 20 citizens)

Health Services

Petition to the Honourable Speaker and Members of the House of Representatives assembled in Parliament:
This petition of certain citizens of Australia draws to the attention of the House, the crisis in medical workforce due to the neglect of the Howard Government.
• Your petitioners therefore ask the House to:
• Increase the number of undergraduate university places for medical students,
• Increase the number of medical training places, and
• Ensure Australia trains enough Australian doctors, nurses and other medical professionals to maintain the quality care provided by our hospitals and other health services in the future.

by Mr Georganas (from 24 citizens)

Health Services

Petition to the Honourable Speaker and Members of the House of Representatives assembled in Parliament:
This Petition of certain citizens of Australia draws to the attention of the House, the problem attracting and retaining staff in public health services and aged care facilities and restriction of workforce mobility within the industry.
Your petitioners therefore ask the house to:
Amend the Fringe Benefits Tax Assessment Act 1986 so that:
local governments operating aged care facilities are able to qualify for fringe benefits tax exemptions granted to public benevolent institutions for employees involved in the aged care facility; and

- fringe benefits exemptions applying to public employers delivering health services in hospital-based settings also apply to public employers providing health services in other settings.

by Mr Georganas (from 35 citizens)

**Australia Post: Services**

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

The citizens of Guildford Township Victoria respectfully draws to the attention of the House:

- The need for and advantage to our community being able to access EPOS (Australia Post’s Electronic Point of Sale) equipment due to the lack of banking facilities in Guildford, a significant elderly population and high number of home-based workers such as farmers and artists who work locally, an extremely limited public transport service and the inefficiency, expense and environmental consequences of a 20km (round trip) journey for the sole purpose of accessing funds elsewhere.

- That it is vital to the ongoing viability of the Post Office (which is a significant cultural and social ‘hub’ of the township) to offer as comprehensive as possible service to township residents, businesses and ‘passing trade’.

- That the Guildford PO did not meet the transaction number criteria when The Rural Transaction Centre Programme (which subsidized EPOS equipment installation into Licensed Post Officers) existed.

- Our Post Office is a small business with a limited (but loyal) local client base. There is a high level of support existing in the community from those wanting to access an EPOS service at the Post Office. We believe transactions conducted at the Post Office and other local businesses would rise significantly if EPOS is made available.

Your petitioners therefore respectfully call on the house to grant funds to establish an EPOS (Australia Post’s Electronic Point of Sale) service in our Licensed Post Office at Guildford, Victoria.

by Mr Gibbons (from 311 citizens)

**Shortland Electorate: General Practitioners**

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

Request that the House take immediate action to guarantee the replacement of General Practitioners in the Shortland electorate which includes Lake Macquarie and the northern part of the Central Coast.

Dr Gurcharan Singh Thind who has been practising for more than 20 years in the Lake Macquarie area and has surgeries in Blacksmiths and Marks Point, is retiring on 31 January 2006. Dr Thind’s replacement is proving to be extremely difficult due to the failure of the Government to issue provider numbers.

Your petitioners therefore respectfully request that the House do everything in their power to ensure that the greatest effort is made, as soon as possible, to issue provider numbers for proposed replacements of General Practitioners in the Shortland electorate.

by Ms Hall (from 16 citizens)

**Nuclear Power**

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

We the undersigned petitioners request the Federal Government exclude Lake Macquarie and the Hunter Region as potential nuclear power station sites as these would be high risk generators with disastrous consequences should an accident occur.

We therefore pray that the house opposes the proposal to build 25 nuclear power plants in Australia.

by Ms Hall (from 11 citizens)
Mammograms
To the Honourable the Speaker and Members of the House of Representatives assembled in Parliament.

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

by Ms Hall (from 15 citizens)

Health: Outer Metropolitan Doctors Scheme
To the Honourable Speaker and Members of the House of Representatives assembled in Parliament.

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

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

by Ms Hall (from 16 citizens)

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

This petition of concerned citizens draws the attention of the House to our opposition to any proposal to transfer water from the Clarence River system to south east Queensland.

We support the position of Luke Hartsuyker, Steve Cansdell and Chris Gulaptis who oppose any proposal to divert water from the Clarence River System for the purpose of supporting unsustainable development in another State.

We therefore pray that the House reject any such proposal.

by Mr Hartsuyker (from 1,015 citizens)

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

The petition of certain citizens of Australia draws to the attention of the House that Japanese whaling operations are currently being conducted in Australian waters in contravention of:

1. The Antarctic Treaty
2. The Southern oceans whale sanctuary

Your petitioners therefore request the House to:

1. Immediately send Australian naval vessels to Antarctica to enforce the treaties and conventions currently being violated and to arrest and bring to justice any violators of Australian and International law.
2. Implement a continual program of naval surveillance in Australian Antarctic waters to discourage illegal hunting of whales and to prosecute any individuals or vessels found violating Australian law.

by Dr Lawrence (from 1,248 citizens)

Environment: Point Lonsdale Development
To the Honourable Speaker and Members of the House of Representatives assembled in Parliament of Australia.

Rising sea level must restrict new home construction on Lonsdale Lakes.

This Petition of certain electors of the Division of Corangamite draws to the attention of the House that under the provisions of the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act, an Environmental Effects Statement assessing the potential impact of global warming and rising sea levels on any proposed residential development across the Lonsdale Lakes corridor wetland, which connects coastal wetlands of international, national and state significance at Point Lonsdale in Victoria, requires the approval of the the Minister for Environment and Heritage.

The low lying coastal land and waterways of Lonsdale Lakes are already subject to flooding from overland flows and the risk and extent of
flooding will be made worse due to rising sea level.
Global warming will cause sea levels to continue rising long into the future, ultimately exceeding predictions for the remainder of this century.
Knowingly allowing the release of land titles for the construction of homes, which will ultimately be compromised by an increasing incidence of flooding cannot be tolerated by any government.
Your petitioners request the House to ensure that any proposal to release land for the construction of people’s homes on the most vulnerable coastal lands such as Lonsdale Lakes, which are already subject to flooding from overland flows, be rejected and declared unsuitable for housing given that no amount of engineering works can promise protection against the relentless rise in sea level.

by **Mr McArthur** (from 100 citizens)

**Environment: Geelong Water Recycling Project**
To the Honourable Speaker and Members of the House of Representatives assembled in Parliament:
The petition of certain electors of the Division of Corio draws to the attention of the House that Federal Funds are being assigned to assist in the construction of a Sewage Treatment and Water Reclamation Plant for Geelong’s Northern Suburbs. This excellent project will deliver water reclaimed from sewage for use by industries as process water.
Currently the proposed site is only 300 metres from houses in Norlane. We submit that it should be located at Avalon, adjacent to the south-west corner of the Melbourne Sewage Treatment Plant. This is approximately 10 kilometres from the suburbs of Corio, Norlane and North Shore.
Your petitioners therefore request the House to pass legislation to partially fund this project with the proviso that it be located at Avalon.

by **Mr Gavan O’Connor** (from 1,215 citizens)

**Housing: Victims of Domestic Violence**
To: The Honourable the Speaker and Members of the House of Representatives assembled in Parliament:
The petition of residents of Australia draws to the attention of the House that the availability of safe and affordable accommodation for women and their children escaping domestic violence is in serious decline throughout Australia. Unfortunately many women and their children are being forced to stay in violently abusive relationships because they have nowhere else to go. Women’s shelters only offer a temporary respite of about three weeks. There appears to be no safe and affordable accommodation available for women and their children to access after this short respite. As a result many women and their children are being forced to remain or reunite with their violent partners or become homeless.
Your petitioners therefore request the House invest a proportion of the government’s expansive surplus into providing the safe and affordable accommodation that these women and their children deserve and urgently need so that they can escape domestic violence safely because to domestic violence - Australia says no.

by **Ms Plibersek** (from 1,055 citizens)

**Sri Lanka**
To The Honourable The Speaker and Members of The House of Representatives Assembled b in Parliament:
The petition of certain citizens and residents of Australia draws to the attention of the House that the two nations of Australia and Sri Lanka share a longstanding friendship based on immigration, trade and sport, and by membership of the Commonwealth of Nations. Being countries located on the ‘Indian Ocean Rim’, they also share strategic interests, including maritime security, prevention of, money laundering, anti the crackdown on global terror networks.
The petition also draws to the attention of the House that the ongoing conflict in Sri Lanka has a significant impact on Australians of Sri Lankan origin, as well as on ‘Australian Companies who have invested in .Sri Lanka. Large numbers of Sri Lankan Australians who travel to Sri Lanka on a regular basis are at great risk because of Tamil Tiger (LTTE) terrorism, as explicitly stated in Travel Advisories issued by the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade.
Your petitioners wish to point out that the LTTE is not only the biggest impediment to peace in Sri Lanka, but is also a player in global terrorism. It continues to use its international network to raise material and financial support, often using deception on general public of Australia and coercion of the Sri Lankan community. The ongoing investigations into the Tamil Tiger network in Australia which recently led to raids in Melbourne and Sydney, and the charging of two persons for involvement in terrorism related activities is a case in point.

Your petitioners therefore request the House to:

- Support a resolution of the Sri Lankan conflict that satisfies the aspirations of all communities without compromising the Unity and Territorial Integrity of Sri Lanka.
- Assist the people of Sri Lanka with both humanitarian and economic measures.
- Ensure that Australian Aid to Sri Lanka is not siphoned off by ‘front-organisations’ of armed groups to fund campaigns of violence.
- Support measures to share defence and intelligence capabilities that are of benefit to both Australia and Sri Lanka.
- Impose further sanctions on the LTTE by listing it under the Australian Criminal Code Act of 1995, until it has given up terrorism in word and deed.

Thanking You.

by Mr Randall (from 1,448 citizens)

**Pine Gap**

To the Speaker and Members of the House of Representatives of the Federal Parliament of Australia assembled:

We, the undersigned citizens of Australia, are totally-opposed to any Australian involvement in the development, testing or operation of the United States’ Ballistic Missile Defence system. This includes use of facilities in Australian territory for any of these purposes.

We request that the Australian government disengages from planned involvement in this system and ensures that the Pine Gap joint communications facility will not be used in the Ballistic Missile Defence System. If this means closing this base, so be it.

And your petitioners will in duty bound ever pray.

by Mr Stephen Smith (from 185 citizens)

**Climate Change**

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

This petition of certain citizens of Australia draws to the attention of the House the Howard Government’s eleven years of delay, denial and inaction on climate change. Your petitioners therefore request the House to call on the Howard Government to:

- End the eleven years of delay, denial and inaction on climate change.
- Ratify the Kyoto Protocol.
- Drive a clean energy revolution by substantially increasing the Mandatory Renewable Energy Target and investing in clean energy research and development.
- Help Australian families to green their homes.

by Mr Tanner (from 49 citizens)

**Welfare Reform**

To The Honourable The Speaker and Members of The House of Representatives Assembled in Parliament:

**WE THE CITIZENS OF AUSTRALIA** are concerned with the lack of reform for our welfare system as recommended by the McClure Report that was commissioned: “to provide advice to the Government on... approaches to welfare reform” (July 2000, ‘Participation Support for a more equitable society: Final Report of the Reference Group on Welfare Reform, p. 2).

We your petitioners wish to draw to the attention of the House a seminal proposal of that report, published in The Australian newspaper on 20 December 2004 regarding harmonisation of existing welfare payments to achieve a less discriminatory outcome for welfare recipients. This was: “A single welfare payment was ... proposed by the landmark McClure report... commissioned by the Howard Government with a base sum plus add-ons to reflect personal circumstances.”
Our primary concern is that reform as contemplated by that Report has not occurred and that certain groups of welfare recipients continue to be inequitably assessed under the present system. Austudy recipients for instance are the group from which the future professionals and high net income producers of our country including doctors, lawyers and engineers are eventually derived. It is by their efforts that our wealth and national skills base will be enhanced for the benefit of future generations. Yet this very group who stand to benefit us the most are disadvantaged from the outset by being relegated to significantly lower Austudy payment than others such as Newstart and Abstudy recipients. Moreover, Austudy recipients are deprived of rental assistance while others who have dependant children and or a partner who receive a Centrelink payment are permitted rental assistance. Austudy recipients may earn more (although many are unable to) before their benefit is reduced does nothing to alleviate the discriminatory effects of that benefit. All students should be entitled to rent assistance to relieve them of financial burden while studying and freeing them to focus on their academic achievements similar to that provided by governments of foreign students studying in Australia.

Considering the recent revelations regarding migrants, would it not be more commonsensical to implement the McClure recommendations to facilitate increasing numbers of professionals right here in our own country? How can it be that our Government has consistently failed to implement all the McClure recommendations so publicly heralded over the last 5 years to stamp out the discriminatory effects identified within Australia’s welfare system? It is for these and many other reasons that we your petitioners remain concerned that the current system continues to produce inequitable and discriminatory results.

Your petitioners therefore request the House to abolish the system of Austudy as it currently exists, and aligning student benefits with those of Newstart and Abstudy—so long as they remain engaged in full time study and/or practicum. Secondly, implement a new welfare system that those capable of working aged 16 to 64 years may access a new base pay-they-System plus add-on payments to assist the recipient to manage their personal circumstances as recommended by the McClure Report. We need a new system which takes into proper consideration the recipients personal circumstances in a non-discriminatory way regardless of race, marital status, and whether the recipient has dependents or not.

by Mr Truss (from 112 citizens)

Organ Harvesting

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

A Canadian report released on 6 July 2006 came to the conclusion that China has been committing crimes against humanity, that the authorities have been harvesting vital organs from thousands of unwilling Falun Gong practitioners and killing them in the process. Mr David Kilgour, a former Canadian MP and Secretary of State for Asia Pacific, and international human rights lawyer Mr David Matas initiated an independent investigation into the allegations of organ harvesting from live victims.

“We have concluded that the government of China and its agencies in numerous parts of the country, in particular hospitals but also detention centres and 'people’s courts', since 1999 have put to death a large but unknown number of Falun Gong prisoners of conscience. Their vital organs, including hearts, kidneys, livers and corneas, were virtually simultaneously seized involuntarily for sale at high prices, sometimes to foreigners, who normally face long waits for voluntary donations of such organs in their home countries.”— Pg. 44 of the report.

YOUR PETITIONERS THEREFORE REQUEST THE HOUSE TO INITIATE A RESOLUTION TO:
I. Urge the CCP to unconditionally release all Falun Gong practitioners and give full access to jails, labour camps, detention centres and related hospitals for the Coalition to Investigate Persecution of Falun Gong in China (CIPFG) and/or the UN to conduct independent investigations;
II. Establish a Senate Committee Inquiry into the allegations of Organ Harvesting;
III. Discourage Australian citizens from traveling to China for organ transplants; and prevent companies, institutions and individuals providing goods and services and training to China’s organ transplant programs until such time as it is beyond reasonable doubt that no organs used have been harvested against the will of the donor.

by Mr Windsor (from 1,621 citizens)

Dental Health

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

Draws attention of the House to the inadequacy of Dental Health Care which can lead to life threatening diseases.

Your petitioners therefore request the House that we, the undersigned, implore you to introduce a National Dental Health Scheme, as a matter of urgency, to be funded by a 1% levy of taxable income, this amount to be added on to the Medicare levy.

by Mr Windsor (from 354 citizens)

Petitions received.

PRIVATE MEMBERS’ BUSINESS

Mesothelioma

Ms OWENS (Parramatta) (3.20 pm)—I move: That the House:

(1) notes:

(a) that Australia has the highest reported rate of mesothelioma in the world;
(b) that there has been a four to five-fold increase in the rate of mesothelioma since the early 1980s and that it is estimated that this rate will continue to increase for the next five to 10 years;
(c) the chemotherapy agent Alimta is the only treatment registered for use in mesothelioma, and in combination with Cisplatin, represents the ‘gold standard’ for mesothelioma treatment in Australia;
(d) treatment by Alimta can significantly increase a patient’s survival time as well as improve a patient’s quality of life in its final stages;
(e) Alimta is listed on the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme (PBS) for persons who have contracted lung cancer for smoking, but is not approved for patients with mesothelioma;
(f) access to Alimta for mesothelioma patients is currently inequitable across Australia, with some States and companies providing various schemes to compensate victims of asbestos exposure and some patients having to pay for Alimta privately at great expense; and

(g) the UK National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence recently approved the use of Alimta in the treatment of mesothelioma sufferers and the governments of France, Sweden and Japan subsidise the drug for sufferers in those countries; and

(2) calls on the Government to take all necessary action to support the inclusion of Alimta on the PBS for the treatment of all mesothelioma sufferers.

It was with great sadness that I visited local hero and anti-asbestos campaigner Bernie Banton a few weeks ago at Concord hospital. Bernie had just been diagnosed with mesothelioma, the most debilitating and aggressive of asbestos related diseases. Bernie Banton is well known as the anti-asbestos campaigner who worked tirelessly to hold the corporate giant James Hardie accountable to thousands of asbestos sufferers nationwide. His epic struggle helped lead to the establishment of a $4 billion compensation fund and brought some financial security to asbestos victims and their families.

Bernie then moved on to fight for the establishment of an asbestos diseases centre at Concord hospital—a centre now established and treating Bernie. At the time he was diagnosed with mesothelioma, Bernie had already been campaigning for some time to have the drug Alimta listed on the Pharma-
ceutical Benefits Scheme for all mesothelioma victims, even though he himself would have been eligible to be treated with Alimta and will be so treated now. But many Australians who contract the disease will not be eligible, and it was for an end to the lottery for mesothelioma sufferers that Bernie was campaigning—a lottery in which the quality of your treatment is determined by where you live, how you contracted the disease and your capacity to pay.

Mesothelioma is the worst of the asbestos diseases, a fatal and aggressive cancer that attacks the lining of the lungs, heart and abdomen. Mesothelioma is linked with exposure to asbestos fibres and can take 30 to 40 years to develop. There is no proven cure. Australia has the highest asbestos mortality per capita in the world, and for the next 20 years around six Australians are expected to die every day from asbestos related disease. Currently, approximately 600 cases of mesothelioma are recorded annually, and the incidence and mortality rates for the disease for women have doubled in the last 10 years. We can expect another 11,000 cases to appear between now and 2020.

Recent clinical evidence shows that median survival rates for mesothelioma patients increases from 9.3 months from diagnosis to 12.1 months from diagnosis when Alimta is used in combination with Cisplatin, compared to the use of Cisplatin alone. This combined treatment is known as the standard of care among clinicians. Alimta not only increases life expectancy by inhibiting tumour growth but improves a sufferer’s quality of life in its final stages through reduced fatigue, cough, pain and loss of appetite. But, while some victims of mesothelioma are receiving fully subsidised access to standard of care treatment, a new report by the Allen Consulting Group shows that between 35 and 50 per cent of Australian victims of mesothelioma are not getting access to critical treatment for their disease.

There are extreme access inequities between mesothelioma patients in different states, among those attending different hospitals and between those exposed to asbestos via occupational hazard and those who cannot establish how they were exposed. The absurdities of the inequity of access to Alimta are clear: Alimta is available on the PBS to a person who is suffering from lung cancer caused by smoking; it may not be subsidised for a person living in New South Wales who has been casually exposed to asbestos fibres through renovating the family home; workers whose employment in New South Wales exposed them to asbestos fibres will receive Alimta free through the New South Wales Dust Diseases Board, but it would not be available to the wives of workers who were exposed to asbestos while washing their husbands’ asbestos-laden clothes; and the subsidy is available to all sufferers living in Western Australia, including wives, through its public hospital system but it is not available to a person living in South Australia through the same public hospital system.

We are particularly aware of asbestos related disease in my electorate because James Hardie spent 45 years manufacturing asbestos products in Camellia in the heart of the Parramatta electorate. It started operation in 1937 and ceased making asbestos products in 1983. James Hardie was thought of as a good employer. Whole families worked there—fathers, sons and brothers. Bernie Banton and his brothers left school in the seventies to work in the local factory. Ted, the oldest brother, got his younger brother a job at James Hardie. Ted died of mesothelioma and the two younger boys, Albert and Bernie, both contracted asbestosis. Bernie, still a father of teenage children, has also contracted mesothelioma.
Treatment for this disease should not be based on how or where it was contracted or whether the victim can afford to pay the $20,000 per course. Victims in this prosperous country should not be forced to fight to receive standard of care treatment or justify why they should receive equal access to treatment. Given the severity of the disease and the havoc that it wreaks on families, this is an issue that simply cannot wait. I commend the motion to the House.

The SPEAKER—Is the motion seconded?

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

Mr CADMAN (Mitchell) (3.25 pm)—Bernie Banton is a friend and acquaintance of mine also. I think most people in north-western Sydney know Bernie as a fine Australian committed to the cause and carrying the cause for many of his colleagues who suffer this dreadful disease. In Australia we rely on the Pharmaceutical Benefits Advisory Committee to establish which pharmaceuticals should be available and how they should be made available. Members of this House may have sentimental and emotional attachments to particular causes, but it has been the tradition and practice of government after government to refer these decisions to experts, to have experts advise the government and then for the government to finally make the decision as to whether the nation can afford to support a particular product.

The Minister for Health and Ageing, The Hon. Tony Abbott, went on the ABC’s 7.30 Report on 29 August—just a couple of weeks ago—to indicate that the second application by the manufacturers of Alimta, the product that we are speaking about, will get a fair hearing from the PBAC in November at its November meeting. This is the second application made by the firm to have their product recognised. The PBAC is required to consider the clinical effectiveness and the cost benefit and value for money of the proposed medicine as compared to other available treatment. Alimta is listed on the PBS as ‘for locally advanced or metastatic non-small cell lung cancer, after prior platinum-based chemotherapy’.

The PBAC recommended the listing of Alimta for the treatment of non-small cell lung cancer as it was shown to be as effective as other therapies that are subsidised for this condition and no more expensive. It is basically for those who are suffering from lung cancer caused by smoking. It may seem unfair that smokers with non-small cell lung cancer receive this drug and others may not. However, not all non-small cell lung cancer is caused by smoking; there are other reasons for the development of non-small cell lung cancer apart from smoking.

Previous submissions to list Alimta for the treatment of pleuromesothelioma were unsuccessful because the effectiveness of this drug in the treatment of the condition has not at this point been demonstrated. It is going to come before the PBAC in November, and the company will be putting the case to the panel of experts that we rely on to assess these things. At this point the expert body can make another assessment of whether this particular product combined with other drugs is going to be successful or not. I think in the first demonstration it was shown that on its own it was not successful, but overseas it has been used with other products and in that instance has been proven, so the company says, to be successful. The company has made it public that the new submission will be going forward, and I know that the committee will be considering it.

Up to $42 billion will be provided by the government to states and territories over the next five years to support medical and health programs, and it has been chosen by the
Western Australian government to pick up the cost of this product. The Commonwealth, if it is so indicated, will be able to consider the report of the committee when it comes forward with its recommendations approximately six weeks after the November meeting. I know that for many people involved with mesothelioma time is a critical factor. Whilst delays are to be regretted, the decision is only weeks away, not years away. The government will at that time, with proper advice and under proper consideration, be able to give advice to all sufferers and families of sufferers.

Mrs IRWIN (Fowler) (3.30 pm)—The words ‘fibro’ and ‘western suburbs’ go together like ham and eggs. In Sydney and most other capitals, regional cities and towns, the housing boom of the postwar period was dominated by the use of asbestos cement sheeting. This material was inexpensive, easy to work with and easy to apply. Like millions of other Australians, I was raised in a fibro home. Other forms of asbestos were widely used in industry for heat insulation, and many workers were exposed to asbestos in its raw form. But this wonder material hid a deadly secret.

By the mid-1960s, contact with asbestos was linked to fatal lung diseases. Mesothelioma is a rare and fatal form of cancer caused by exposure to asbestos. Diagnosis occurs often as long as 20 to 40 years after exposure. From then, the survival rate is only 42 per cent for one year and five per cent for five years. There are at present over 600 cases of mesothelioma, with an expectation that there will have been 18,000 cases by 2020. This is the highest rate in the world.

The standard treatment of mesothelioma is a combination of agents Cisplatin and Alimta. A single course of treatment of Alimta currently costs between $20,000 and $25,000. Alimta is not listed on the PBS for the treatment of mesothelioma, leaving some sufferers to meet the full cost of this treatment.

In New South Wales, sufferers who can prove that their case was caused through their employment may have their treatment funded by the Dust Diseases Board as workers compensation. Access to free treatment varies from state to state. Western Australia provides universal access through public hospitals. In some cases, private health insurance may cover the cost where the treatment is given as an in-patient service. In the case of New South Wales, access to treatment can be delayed waiting on approval from the Dust Diseases Board. Treatment with Alimta is most beneficial when it is begun in the earliest stages of the disease. Any delay can reduce its effectiveness.

While Alimta is included on the PBS for other forms of lung cancer, it is not approved for mesothelioma. Funded access to Alimta for the treatment of mesothelioma across Australia is an absolute dog’s breakfast. Between 35 per cent and 50 per cent of mesothelioma sufferers who would benefit from a course of Alimta experience problems obtaining subsidised or compensated access to treatment.

While the extension of survival may only be from 9.3 months to 12.1 months with the use of Alimta, what needs to be considered is the improvement in the quality of life for sufferers. Diagnosis with mesothelioma is a death sentence. There is no cure. Early treatment with Alimta can extend the survival of sufferers but, more importantly, it can make a big difference to the quality of life of sufferers. It can mean the difference between being confined to a bed and being able to move about. It can make a huge difference to the level of pain encountered.

The importance of this cannot be underestimated. For those now diagnosed with
mesothelioma and the tens of thousands whose diagnosis will be revealed in the years ahead, the prospect of facing a lottery when seeking the best available treatment should not be happening in our health system. A factor in survival for sufferers is reducing stress levels. Putting sufferers through a series of hoops to gain access to treatment is cruel and heartless. To deny access to treatment which reduces pain in the disease’s terminal stages is shameful. We would not treat animals the same way we treat victims of mesothelioma. At a time when our budget surplus is growing, we should be able to find the $5 million a year to fund the treatment of mesothelioma using Alimta.

The government must act with the greatest urgency to provide relief for the hundreds of mesothelioma sufferers in need of treatment, and it must act now to improve hope for the thousands of people who, in the years ahead, will be diagnosed with mesothelioma across those towns and suburbs where we are surrounded by fibro. This is a national disaster on a scale not seen before in this country. (Time expired)

Mr SLIPPER (Fisher) (3.35 pm)—I would like to commend the honourable member for Parramatta for raising this motion in the House. We are fortunate in this country to have a Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme which really is world first-class. What the government must always do is make sure that the scheme remains affordable so that—unlike in schemes in other countries, including New Zealand—important lifesaving drugs are able to be included on the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme.

We cannot have a situation whereby anyone can get any drug listed on the scheme at whim, because many of these drugs are inordinately expensive and sometimes the benefits of these drugs are not always easily and quickly proven. We therefore have what many would describe as a very appropriate and accountable system for listing medicines on the PBS. The Australian government relies on the advice of the Pharmaceutical Benefits Advisory Committee. This is an independent expert committee.

I have read about the prognosis for sufferers of mesothelioma and, as the honourable member who spoke before me mentioned, it is not good. It does seem as though Alimta provides additional quality of life as well as an extension of life. The honourable member mentioned in her speech that, while the extension of time of life may not be substantial, the quality of life is substantially improved. I am not a medical person and I am not really in a position to know whether that is in fact the case, but I am happy to accept what the honourable member says she believes and I am happy to take it at face value.

I understand that a prior application was made for the use of Alimta on the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme to fight mesothelioma and that that was unsuccessful because the committee considered that it was not adequately proven that the benefits that would flow from listing it as well as the improvement in health outcomes warranted the cost. My understanding is that there has now been a new submission made for Alimta to actually be listed for the treatment of malignant pleural mesothelioma in combination with Cisplatin and that the November 2007 meeting of the Pharmaceutical Benefits Advisory Committee will consider that further application.

My experience of the way this committee operates is that it does look at all of the points put before it and it does try to come up with a rational and appropriate response. That does not mean that on every occasion the committee does get it right, but we simply could not substitute the current system
with a system whereby whatever drug was desired to go on the PBS would or would not go on depending on the degree of pressure that was placed on the health minister at the time. Drugs have to be listed in accordance with their medical benefits and in accordance with the advantages, provided that the drugs are provided by companies at a reasonable cost. This is what the committee must take into account when determining whether or not to recommend the listing of a particular medicine.

Speaking personally, given all the material that I have read, I am strongly supportive of the listing of this drug on the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme. But I do make that statement with the caveat that I am not a medical person and I am not medically competent to make that decision. The written evidence that has passed before me indicates that this drug would indeed improve the quality of life of sufferers of mesothelioma as well as improve the length of life that sufferers of this disease actually have. So in that sense I feel well disposed towards the principle of listing it and I hope that when the Pharmaceutical Benefits Advisory Committee considers this matter again in a couple of months time it will be able to look very closely at the case being put forward by the company—and I hope that the case is compelling and cogent—and as a result decide Alimta will be able to be listed on the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme for mesothelioma sufferers. Having said that, I am really proud that this government has endeavoured to make sure that our Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme remains viable and—(Time expired)

Mr Byrne (Holt) (3.40 pm)—I rise with pleasure to support the motion before the House that was moved by the member for Parramatta. I do so having met two very brave people that are fighting the ravages of mesothelioma and also having heard of their hopes and aspirations as to this treatment using Alimta in conjunction with Cisplatin and for Alimta, in particular, to be listed on the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme. We have heard during the discussion in this place from people who do not have experience of suffering mesothelioma about the process through the Pharmaceutical Benefits Advisory Committee. In my view, the reason this motion has come before the House is the great measure of concern of those that advocate on behalf of those with mesothelioma who are seeking recourse to this treatment. On the three previous occasions when they believe that a justifiable case has been put to the Pharmaceutical Benefits Advisory Committee for the listing of this particular drug, this drug has not been listed on the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme. That has indeed caused them a great measure of concern.

The fact is that the advisory groups that act on behalf of those that are experiencing the ravages of mesothelioma—and I would like to mention the Asbestos Diseases Society of Victoria and its director, Leigh Hubbard—have a great deal of concern about where this is going. There is no certainty as to this particular matter being considered by the Pharmaceutical Benefits Advisory Committee. There has been some discussion about the cost and about the fact that we cannot bring every new-generation drug onto the market, however much hope the drug itself might offer to those that are experiencing the difficulties of fighting for their life. It is interesting that that argument has been put because that was the same argument that was put for those that were not strongly supportive of Herceptin being listed on the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme. In fact, I can recall—and there is an eerie similarity here between those that are now advocating for Alimta to be listed on the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme and those that were advocating for Herceptin—very similar arguments where you would have women who
had HER2 breast cancer and their treatment would cost not between the $15,000 and $20,000 that has been proposed for Alimta but between $65,000 and $90,000. In the case of Herceptin it was a life-saving treatment but in the case of Alimta it is a treatment that, as early studies are indicating, can prolong life expectancy and—very importantly for those that are fighting for their lives, literally fighting to breathe—ease suffering and offer a greater degree of optimism as to the capacity to cope with life.

Particularly when we are talking about the costs, and given the cost of treatment with Alimta is between $15,000 and $20,000, if you extrapolate them out—given the number of people that are projected to need access to this particular drug—we would be talking, if it were to be listed on the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme, about $33 million over five years. I am really struggling, as I stand in this House, to understand that we have a $17 billion cash surplus on one hand and on the other we are having an argument about a $33 million amount of money to be spent over five years, particularly when we are seeing campaigns advertising Work Choices legislation, that has not even been brought into the House, at a cost of $50 million.

How can anyone sustain such an argument particularly when you have countries that have in fact listed for reimbursement Alimta for the treatment of mesothelioma? These are countries such as Japan, Korea, Austria, Belgium, the Czech Republic, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Turkey and, most recently, the UK. All of these countries have referred to studies which have been before the PBAC, such as the one that I now hold, which is a phase 3 study of pemetrexed in combination with Cisplatin versus Cisplatin alone. This is from eminent leaders in the field and it proves that this treatment works. So we are talking about $33 million over a five-year period of time and we are asking that this drug be listed by the PBAC not only to potentially prolong people’s lives but also to ease their suffering. If we call ourselves a civilised society and if we call ourselves a community that cares about people, we would list this drug. (Time expired)

Mrs HULL (Riverina) (3.45 pm)—Members have risen in this House numerous times to support the provision of life-saving and life-enhancing drugs, and this is yet another occasion. We have heard a lot of the speakers go through the issues of mesothelioma sufferers and their inability to access a choice of medication. It has been stated in the debate that the PBAC has rejected past submissions for the use of Alimta for mesothelioma on a wide scale but that it has indicated that there was not enough evidence and that any improved survival was accompanied by improved quality of life. The PBAC has said that Alimta treatment maybe did not represent value for money, that Alimta can have toxic effects and that patients with mesothelioma are more likely to develop serious side effects than those patients with non-small cell lung cancer.

The PBAC is an independent advisory board. This is a bipartisan issue; it is not a political issue. There is an independent board to assess these applications. Those on the board are the appropriate medically trained people to assess the applications of all drugs that may be looked at to treat certain illnesses, so it is appropriate that they assess it. I ask the PBAC, as an independent advisory body, to consider whether, if Alimta does not agree with a patient and the side effects are intolerable for that patient, the patient will use it. The issue here is that sufferers of mesothelioma must be provided with a choice. It is also a fact that there are patients who react favourably. We have heard about
those who do not react favourably to Alimta, but there are those who do react favourably to the combination treatment of Cisplatin and Alimta and, for these people, multiple courses of the treatment may be required. Of course, these courses cost much more. If a single course can cost up to $25,000, then if Alimta is agreeable to the body it will cost a lot more money.

It is for this reason that some sufferers are not made aware of the possible option of Cisplatin and Alimta. It is suggested that some clinicians choose not to discuss these options with somebody who may not be financially able to consider this treatment; or a surgeon may consider that it is beyond the means of their patient to access this treatment so they do not discuss it. But it is also noted that mesothelioma patients in rural and regional areas are less likely to be diagnosed with this disease or to be diagnosed correctly and informed about Alimta. This is an inequity of different proportions for different areas and for the many patients and sufferers who would get enormous advantage from the use of Alimta.

We heard some significant stories the other day, and anyone who has had personal dealings with mesothelioma, or cancer in general, will always hear a heartbreaking story. We have heard many stories, provided by many strong and courageous mesothelioma sufferers, which have really convinced me that, as a bipartisan effort, the PBAC needs to sincerely look at the positive values that can be provided to the sufferers of mesothelioma who can adequately take this treatment without side effects. Bodies react differently to every sort of treatment, but this treatment must be made available as a choice of treatment. If you are racked with mesothelioma and pain, any treatment or assistance to reduce that in your last stages of life are welcomed and should be made available.

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

**Israeli Soldiers**

**Mrs MIRABELLA** (Indi) (3.51 pm)—I move:

That the House:

(1) notes that:

(a) Palestinian terrorists infiltrated Israel’s sovereign border from the Gaza Strip on 25 June 2006, attacked an army post inside Israel’s sovereign territory and kidnapped Corporal Gilad Shalit into Gaza;

(b) on 12 July 2006—in a similar aggressive cross-border attack from southern Lebanon—Hizbollah terrorists infiltrated sovereign Israeli territory and kidnapped Israeli Defence Force Reservists Ehud Goldwasser and Eldad Regev;

(c) there is no territorial dispute between Israel and Lebanon, since Israel withdrew from her security zone in May 2000, under the supervision of the United Nations; and

(d) these young soldiers were serving their active duty within Israel’s borders and now, for more than nine months, have been denied their basic human rights; and

(2) urges the Government to exert pressure on the terrorist organisations, their supporters and financial backers in the Gaza Strip and southern Lebanon, so that the missing soldiers are returned unharmed to their families and the country of Israel.

I am honoured to move this motion regarding three captured Israeli soldiers. This motion is about the condemnation of the taking of hostages for political purposes and the request for immediate and unconditional release of the IDF soldiers. Debate on this motion has importantly coincided with the visit to Aus-
tralia, and attendance in the gallery this afternoon, of Mr Shlomo Goldwasser, who is the father of one of the captured soldiers, Ehud Goldwasser. I am sure that all members of the House would join me in welcoming him to Australia and supporting him at this difficult time.

As confronting and difficult as it may be, it is important for us to highlight the distressing plight of Mr Goldwasser’s son Ehud, as well as his son’s fellow comrades Eldad Regev and Gilad Shalit, since their capture by Palestinian terrorists in July 2006. Shlomo Goldwasser and his family have spent the last year travelling to communities around the world raising awareness of the uncertain fate of his son and the other captives and highlighting the human toll that this has taken on the families and their communities. It would not be an easy task to continuously and so publicly relive the horror and emotional trauma of not knowing where your son is and whether he is well. I have had the pleasure of meeting with Mr Goldwasser today and I commend his and his family’s determination and persistence.

In this whole sorry episode, we know of some facts, facts that are contained in the motion I have submitted for debate. They are that on 25 June 2006 Palestinian terrorists crossed Israel’s clearly delineated sovereign border with the Gaza Strip, attacked an army post inside Israel’s sovereign territory and kidnapped Corporal Gilad Shalit into Gaza. On 12 July in a similar aggressive cross-border attack from southern Lebanon, Hezbollah terrorists proceeded to attack an Israeli army unit that was patrolling within sovereign Israeli territory along the Israeli side of the border, abducting IDF soldiers Ehud Goldwasser and Eldad Regev and forcibly taking them back across the border into Lebanon.

There is no territorial dispute between Israel and Lebanon, as the United Nations Secretary-General and Security Council ratified Israel’s complete and total withdrawal from all Lebanese territory in May 2000. The act of the abduction of these Israeli soldiers constitutes an egregious violation of Israel’s national sovereignty. These young men—husbands, students, cherished members of a family, with their lives ahead of them—were merely serving their active duty within Israel’s borders and have now been denied their basic human rights. For 14 months, neither the Goldwasser family nor the Regev family have heard news of their son; no-one has received any sign of life. Sadly, their current whereabouts and status remain unknown.

As members of parliament in one of the longest serving democracies in the world, we have a responsibility and an absolute need to stand up collectively against terrorists. We need to exert pressure on the terrorist organisations involved in the abduction, on the government of Lebanon, on the Palestinian Authority and on terrorist supporters and backers in Australia, in Lebanon and in the Palestinian Authority to ensure that Gilad Shalit, Ehud Goldwasser and Eldad Regev are released unconditionally, immediately and without harm.

Today, under the cloud of terror and military abduction, we join with our Israeli friends in solidarity to offer our support during these dark times and to hope and pray that this devastating episode in the lives of these three young men and their families will soon be over and that the soldiers will be released unharmed to the arms of their loving families, who have endured so much. I commend the motion to the House.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER—Is the motion seconded?
Mrs Bronwyn Bishop—I second the motion.

Mr McCLELLAND (Barton) (3.56 pm)—The opposition strongly supports this motion. Today both sides of Australian politics are joining to voice their support for the release of three young Israelis who have spent over a year as hostages. The core of the issue is the human tragedy that this hostage taking has caused. We also recognise here today Ehud’s father, Shlomo Goldwasser, as representing the three pairs of parents who are anxiously awaiting news of their sons and hoping for their return. To him I would like to convey the deepest sympathies and concern of the Australian people. We also send our best wishes for the health of his son and the other two boys, as well as our hopes for their speedy release.

All three detainees were abducted on Israeli territory. The abductions violated international law; the laws of war prohibit the taking of hostages. International law requires conflicting parties to release detainees as soon as the reason for their detention ceases. It has never been lawful to take hostages, and any reason based on that motive is invalid. Those who took the hostages are also in violation of Security Council Resolution 1701, which calls for the unconditional release of the abducted Israeli soldiers. It is now incumbent on the international community to take such steps as are necessary to enforce that resolution.

All three soldiers were reportedly injured during their capture, but their captors have unreasonably refused access by the Red Crescent and the Red Cross to determine their health, offer them humanitarian assistance and enable them to communicate with their families. These rights and obligations are enshrined in the laws of war, which have an ancient tradition. They have been the creed of warriors throughout centuries. To demean those laws and principles demeans the captors, who fail to recognise basic human decency. These people are not warriors; they are condemned by their own actions as common criminals.

Tragically, both of the kidnappings occurred when there was optimism in the Middle East. Israeli Prime Minister Sharon had taken the decision to withdraw from all settlements in the Gaza Strip, and his new Kadima Party had also begun to reduce the number of settlements in the West Bank. The actions of the kidnappers have damaged progress towards peace. They have not acted in furtherance of their own people’s rights; they have damaged them. A return of the hostages would be a vital confidence-building step for the impending international peace conference, which includes Israel and the Palestinian Authority.

The bottom line is that failure to release the hostages against international pressure raises questions of third-party intervention, but the captors should have the courage to turn their back on those third-party instructions. They should act in the interests of their own people. If they fail to do so against world pressure, the world is entitled to ask what benefits have been promised to them for failing to do so.

It is my sincere hope that this resolution, along with the many other voices of support from around the world, will convince the captors that they must release their captives in order to rejoin the international community. A failure to do so will reinforce the conclusion that they are not responsible representatives of their people, that they are not acting as warriors pursuing a noble goal, that they are merely common criminals who have engaged in illegal conduct and they are, by their own actions, defined as a criminal group—indeed, terrorists—intent on operating outside the universally accepted stan-
dards of humanity. These standards have been developed not in the last decades but over centuries as principles of basic human decency that have been offered by warriors and combatants throughout the ages. On behalf of the Australian Labor Party I call for the immediate release of all three hostages to end the pain of their families and to begin healing the many wounds of this very troubled region.

Mrs BRONWYN BISHOP (Mackellar) (4.00 pm)—In rising to second this motion, I note that in this instance the actions of Hezbollah and Hamas—where two young soldiers were kidnapped by Hezbollah and one young soldier kidnapped by Hamas—are in violation of international law and fly in the face of UN Security Council Resolution 1701. Israel is a functioning democracy in the Middle East—one that we in this country admire because it has the courage to stand and remain free. Present with us today is the father of Ehud Goldwasser, who was kidnapped by Hezbollah. We welcome you to this country, Mr Shlomo Goldwasser, to witness this bipartisan motion where both sides of the chamber join in the condemnation of the action taken against the three young soldiers, your son included. They remain captives and their fates are entirely unknown.

Set out in the motion are the technical details of how and when those kidnappings occurred. What is not set out is the suffering of the families. So much time has passed, yet no attempt has been made to ensure that the United Nations resolution is complied with. In that troubled part of the world, terrorism is so rampant. There is so much discussion and dispute about actions that have been taken, but this motion brings together all people on all sides of arguments that revolve around the Middle East. These kidnappings are in clear breach of international law. The head of Hezbollah, Sheik Nasrallah, admitted that it was his intention to take hostages, so here was a clear intention of a breach of international law.

In this parliament we will always stand up for those people who speak out and seek help to right blatant wrongs, and this is one of those instances. The families of those men whose fates are still unknown continue to fight to have the UN resolution complied with. We in this House today stand with them, side by side, and say, ‘Let them be released.’ The private anguish of a father and the families of young men who have been taken in this way—in a way which brings dishonour to Hezbollah and Hamas—needs to be pointed out and recognised because, so often, those organisations try to say that they act in a charitable manner and that they seek to win the hearts and minds of people from whom they try to hide their terrorist faces. Should they wish to live up to the charitable ideals that they sometimes espouse, they could go some way towards giving legitimacy to some of those claims by releasing those young men now. And that is what we in this place would ask to happen.

Mr DANBY (Melbourne Ports) (4.05 pm)—I commend the honourable member for Indi for introducing this motion. As the honourable member for Barton, the shadow foreign minister, has made clear, the motion has the opposition’s support. For many months—ever since the three hostages were kidnapped in Israel in an unprovoked military abduction—this issue has been in the forefront of the minds of many people in my electorate and in the Australian Jewish community around Australia. I commend in particular two people from the Australian Jewish community, Dr Danny Lam and Philip Chester, who have organised the visit to Australia of Mr Shlomo Goldwasser, the father of Master Sergeant Ehud Goldwasser. I think having Shlomo here has helped the House to focus on this issue of the abductions.
I might say that it is not only this House that has examined this issue. As Mr Goldwasser explained to us just before this debate, similar resolutions have been passed in the Russian upper house, in the House of Commons and in the French, Italian and US senates. Moreover, as the member for Barton so clearly pointed out, United Nations Security Council Resolution 1701 demands— it is international law—that these three soldiers abducted from areas inside their own territory be released.

Like people in those international assemblies and our visitors here today, I am angry that these three young Israeli servicemen were abducted from inside Israeli territory and, like them, I am distressed that these three men have been held ever since by the terrorists of Hamas and Hezbollah. Hamas and Hezbollah are terrorist organisations. I am frustrated that efforts to secure their release by Israeli and international negotiators, government and non-government, have been unsuccessful.

Our awareness of this tragic situation has been heightened by the visit of Shlomo Goldwasser. Ehud Goldwasser was abducted by Hezbollah terrorists on 12 July 2006. Mr Goldwasser is here with us today in Parliament House, and I know that he has had a sympathetic hearing from members on all sides. I want to pay tribute to him for his fortitude over the past 14 months, and to all other family members of the three abducted soldiers—the other soldiers being Corporal Gilad Shalit and Sergeant Eldad Regev. I know that you have had a sympathetic hearing from the Minister for Foreign Affairs and the shadow foreign minister; we have just had a meeting of the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade; and you are going to meet the Leader of the Opposition. Mr Goldwasser, this is surely an indication, along with this debate, that the Australian parliament supports you and supports the freedom of your son. I hope that the people who are holding the soldiers understand the contempt that they are raising in Australia by their actions in keeping your son and the two other men.

The abduction of the three men did not occur by accident. It was a coordinated attack on Israel by Hamas, operating from Gaza, and Hezbollah, operating from southern Lebanon. These are both territories which Israel had evacuated. There were no Israeli forces in either Lebanon or Gaza at the time of the abductions, which is why the terrorists crossed into Israeli territory to seize these three soldiers. What unites Hamas, a Syrian-backed Sunni organisation, with Hezbollah, an Iranian-backed Shia organisation, is their determination to destroy the state of Israel.

There are mainstream Palestinian organisations which are, at least in rhetoric or in principle, prepared to come to a peace agreement. But unfortunately Hezbollah and Hamas are not. The aim of the abductions was to provoke Israel into military action and to set back the peace process. Sadly for the people of the region, Hamas and Hezbollah—and their controllers in Syria and Iran—succeeded in this objective. As Mr Goldwasser pointed out, Israel went to the extent of going to war to free his son; similarly, they have been trying to release by military means Gilad Shalit in Gaza—unfortunately, to date, to no effect.

These three young men will be released only through international pressure on those holding them: the leaderships of Hamas and Hezbollah and the Syrian and Iranian regimes which sponsor, arm, fund and train those organisations. This is not something that Israel can do itself. The pressure must come from the international community, and this motion is part of that pressure. I know that Mr Goldwasser and all the families con-
cerned are grateful for statements of support of this kind. I commend this motion to the House. These abductions are a breach of the Geneva convention and the world will judge the credibility of the Prime Minister of Lebanon, Mr Sinora, and Sheikh Nasrallah on this issue. (Time expired)

Mr CIOBO (Moncrieff) (4.10 pm)—In this day and age, it is so frequently the case that we find that time marches on. It is also too frequently the case that when matters are overtaken by more recent matters, people turn their attention elsewhere. That is the reason why the motion before the House, which has the bipartisan support of the chamber, is so fundamentally important. It builds on a global commitment to make sure that this parliament and other parliaments around the world, together with the United Nations through UN resolution 1701, maintain a focus on the absolute necessity of recognising that terrorists must never be permitted any oxygen or any chance to continue the kinds of atrocious activities that they undertake.

I congratulate the members for Indi and Mackellar for the motion that is before the House today. I know that the member for Melbourne Ports is, as of right, a very good friend of the state of Israel, and likewise the member for Barton. As Chair of the Australia-Israel Friendship Group, I stand in wholehearted support of this motion. The sad reality is that groups of individuals like Hamas and Hezbollah, who often portray themselves as in some way men of peace or people attempting to obtain some kind of justice, smack that very notion down when they engage in this most egregious activity. The two instances among many that we are talking about today are, of course, the abduction of Corporal Gilad Shalit from Gaza by Hamas on 25 June 2006 and the abduction of Ehud Goldwasser and Eldad Regev in southern Lebanon, but in the Israeli state, on 12 July 2006 by Hezbollah.

I welcome Shlomo Goldwasser, who is in the public gallery today. I hope that he takes comfort from the fact that we in this parliament and so many others around the world, together with the United Nations, will not turn our backs on these kinds of activities but will continue to apply the diplomatic pressure that is such a necessity. At a time when there are so many events taking place, let us never lose sight of the fact that Israel remains the only truly functioning democracy in the Middle East. Let us not lose sight of the fact that, as free peoples, Israelis have the right to defend themselves. And let us not lose sight of the fact that the crimes that are undertaken by Hamas and Hezbollah are absolutely among the most rank types of crimes that can take place. Others have gone through the scenarios that took place with respect to these abductions, but I turn my mind back to when I was in Israel in 2004 together with the member for Indi. We travelled to the northern border of Israel and stood a matter of metres from the Lebanon-Israel border—literally metres from the concrete barrier and the high fortifications. There we stood and looked not at a nation state army that was patrolling the border in southern Lebanon but at a terrorist organisation that commanded those posts.

As we looked across no-man’s land, a space of perhaps 50 to 100 metres, we saw members of a terrorist organisation that manned that outpost—members of a terrorist organisation that, in this instance, crossed across into Israel and abducted both Ehud Goldwasser and Eldad Regev. They took them forcibly from Israeli sovereign territory back into south Lebanon and now continue to refuse access by the Red Cross to ensure that those soldiers are safe. That kind of terrorism can never be countenanced. Those kinds of activities must never be forgotten. I
say to Shlomo Goldwasser, who is in the gallery, that he should take comfort from the fact that we will stand in solidarity with him until such time as we know that these men have been returned safely to their nation-state and until such a time as Israel can live in peace and not be under sustained attack from terrorist organisations like Hamas and Hezbollah.

Mr Ripoll (Oxley) (4.15 pm)—Firstly, I want to recognise all the speakers who have contributed to this very important motion moved by the member for Indi. I thank the member for Indi for moving this motion. I also thank the member for Mackellar, who seconded the motion, the member for Moncrieff, who just spoke, and, from the Labor side, the member for Barton—who is the shadow minister for foreign affairs—and the member for Melbourne Ports. We all come in here in unison, as this parliament is in unison, to pass this motion and to recognise that more needs to be done and that there is a need for a global voice and global action, particularly in this case with the three hostages that have been taken. I offer my deepest, heartfelt sympathy to Ehud’s father, Shlomo Goldwasser, who is here representing the three pairs of parents—who I know would be anxious and always awaiting news and hoping for the return of their sons. I convey to them my deepest sympathies and those of my party and the parliament itself.

The motion notes that Palestinian terrorists did infiltrate Israel’s sovereign border—and we have heard from many other speakers of the details of how that took place on the Gaza Strip on 25 June last year—and attacked an army post inside Israel’s sovereign territory. The three soldiers who were kidnapped were Corporal Gilad Shalit, Ehud Goldwasser and Eldad Regev. These soldiers did not deserve what happened to them, nor was it something that was warranted under any act. In fact, it is contrary to a United Nations motion and contrary to many conventions. In particular, it is contrary to and in violation of international law and the laws of war, which prohibit the taking of hostages and also require parties to release detainees as soon as the reason for the detention ceases. It has never been lawful to take hostages for any reason. The taking of those hostages is also in violation of Security Council resolution No. 1701, which calls for the unconditional release of the abducted Israeli soldiers. There is an opportunity here for the international community to speak up, as our parliament is doing and as a number of other parliaments around the world have done. The United Nations and the parliaments of France, Russia and Britain have also come forward.

What is particularly sad about this incursion and the taking of these hostages is that this happened at a time when there was truly some optimism about peace, when there was truly some chance of moving forward with recognition of the right of Israel as a state, movement towards a peaceful settlement and recognition of people in that area in the Middle East. There is no doubt in my mind—or in the minds of many others—that it was an act of terrorism and aggression that these hostages were taken and that it was an act that was meant to derail any decent processes towards peace or moving forward in that region. That deeply concerns me because, on so many occasions in the past, we have seen many efforts made by Israel to find solutions and to try to find peace for the Middle East, but terrorist organisations such as Hamas and Hezbollah refuse to accept that a solution can be found.

I cannot imagine what the families or the people who live in the Middle East or in Israel would be feeling or how distressing this must be for them—not knowing but always holding on to hope. We all pray with you for the very swift release of these soldiers. I say
on behalf of my party that we condemn the actions by Hezbollah and Hamas and we pray for the swift release of all three of the soldiers—Ehud Goldwasser, Eldad Regev and Corporal Gilad Shalit. This parliament will continue to support any efforts made by Israel to find peace and we fully support this motion put forward by the member for Indi.

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

GRIEVANCE DEBATE

Question proposed:
That grievances be noted.

Howard Government

Mr HAYES (Werriwa) (4.21 pm)—In 1964 Donald Horne wrote The Lucky Country. The original passage from which the title came was an ironic reflection on the position of Australia at that time. For those who do not recall, the opening sentence of The Lucky Country is:

Australia is a lucky country, run by second-rate people who share its luck.

Donald Horne’s argument was, in essence, that Australia had developed as a nation at a time when it could reap the benefits of technological, economic, social and political innovations that were being developed in other countries; however, rather than doing so, rather than being one of those clever countries, Australia had just been lucky.

The reason I hark back to those comments today is that the situation faced then almost parallels the situation now faced by Australians. There is no doubt that China’s great booming economy and the rapidly emerging economy of India have had a significant influence on the prosperity of Australia—the prosperity we are currently experiencing. China has become the effective engine room of the Australian economy and a great many are sharing in the benefits, not to mention the current government, which is experiencing an unprecedented growth in tax revenues as a result.

Despite the years of growing tax receipts this government has systematically failed to invest in the renewal of our social and economic infrastructure. This government’s neglect is felt more keenly in the outer metropolitan areas of Sydney, such as Liverpool and Campbelltown and the surrounding suburbs. For example, take the section of the Hume Highway between Ingleburn and Campbelltown. North of the Brooks Road overpass at Ingleburn, both sides are soon to be four lanes each way. South of Brooks Road, there are only two lanes each way. Needless to say, when you try to pack four lanes of traffic into two lanes you end up with what is known locally as the Brooks Road bottleneck. The bottleneck at Brooks Road has placed an artificial limit on potential economic development in the Macarthur region and has also not allowed the potential of the M7 to be fully realised. For the last couple of years I have raised this matter with the government. We all recognise the importance of the Hume Highway in Australia’s land transport and trade networks, yet this government has resisted doing anything about unblocking this section of roadway. The government resisted taking this issue seriously until four days after the shadow minister for roads and I announced that a Rudd Labor government would widen this section of road. Years of resistance to the widening disappeared in four days of electoral desperation.

Local residents will not be fooled by desperate election promises by a desperate government. What is more, residents in other outer metropolitan areas throughout this country will not be fooled by last minute backflips on a range of issues. They will not
be fooled by this government’s attempts to gloss over decades of neglect on climate change. They will not be fooled by a government that continues to resist providing high-speed, high-quality broadband services to suburbs like Prestons, Hornsby Park, Hoxton Park, Austral and others, whose residents are being told that they should be satisfied with a second-rate wireless service and not the full fibre-to-node service that is now considered internationally as being the base level of service for most other advanced, developed countries. They will not be fooled by a government that promised to keep interest rates low and yet has presided over five consecutive interest rate rises since the last election, in 2004. They will not be fooled by the millions of dollars wasted on government advertising at the expense of investment in child care, health services and education.

Consider the litany of complaints and genuine grievances of the Australian public and the mood for change. You cannot help but turn your mind back a little to the time when there was a similar mood for change in this country. In November 1972, the then member for Werriwa said:

Will you believe with me that Australia can be changed, should be changed, must be changed, if we are to have for ourselves and our children a better Australia, with a better grip on the realities of living in the modern world, and in our region as it really is?

He went on to say:

And will you believe with me that a new government, a new program, a new team, is desperately needed to provide that change?

That must resonate, even with the member for Macarthur, who obviously did come out some four days after and try to match Labor’s commitment to widen the F5, which he has not been able to do for the six years that he has been in office.

As men and women enter polling places in this coming election I dare say that they will be asking these very questions. At this election voters will be faced with a choice of either a forward-looking Labor Party with plans to restore fairness in the workplace and invest in the future of our nation or a coalition government who will say or do anything to get re-elected and, more importantly, to give the Prime Minister a final lap of honour at taxpayers’ expense. This government has not detailed any plans. The last time that members opposite were similarly silent during an election campaign, what did we get? We got those extreme, unfair Work Choices laws that were brought in with no mandate. We ended up with workplace laws that mean that no matter how hard Australians work they can never be relaxed and comfortable in their workplaces; they can never go to work safe in the knowledge that they cannot be sacked without reason.

In the south-west of Sydney in electorates like Werriwa and Macarthur we have heard stories about unfair treatment in the workplace quite often, I have to say, as the member for Macarthur will attest. The Minister for Employment and Workplace Relations recently visited the electorate of Macarthur and claimed that he did not hear any complaints about Work Choices. Maybe he should have spoken to employees when they were out of earshot of their employers. He should have spoken to people at Esselte in Minto. He should have spoken to people like Reynaldo Cortez, or Reinaldo Martinez, or Errol Ogle or some of the many other people who have approached me but have been far too afraid of the ramifications to speak out publicly. They have all felt the sharp end of the Work Choices legislation.

The Minister for Employment and Workplace Relations has a way with words. Last week he described the Prime Minister as ‘the Don Bradman of Australian politics’. I would
like to remind the minister that, sadly, Don Bradman was bowled out for a duck in his very last innings, but surely the minister was not expressing doubts about the Prime Minister’s ability to put in a good innings in what is now officially his last.

I ask members opposite to note the grievances of those Australians who have been overlooked, ignored, betrayed, disappointed, snubbed, ostracised, disenfranchised and angered by the inaction and neglect of this government on so many issues. Unlike this government, a Rudd Labor government will take on the difficult issues and address the legitimate concerns over the future resulting from more than a decade of neglect under the Howard government. Labor has announced plans to tackle climate change, to restore fairness to our industrial relations system, to invest in the infrastructure that our economy needs to compete with the world at the highest level, to invest in broadband and to set out on an education revolution to equip us for the future. That is the type of investment in our combined futures that the Australian public is expecting from its national government and it is national leadership that will only be delivered by a Rudd Labor government.

Valedictory

Miss JACKIE KELLY (Lindsay) (4.31 pm)—Valedictory speeches are always hard. It is a time to thank people who have been involved in your career—its highs, its lows, its achievements and its mistakes. However, after nearly 12 years of campaigning in Lindsay, my list of thankyous is so long I dare not start in case I forget someone from the electorate, this place, my family or friends, or anywhere else. But I know who they are and I thank them all again now, as I have on other occasions.

However, there is one person who I do want to thank by name, personally and in public. He is someone I have often forgotten to mention and frequently forgotten to thank. He has been there for the highs but more particularly for the lows and especially for all the times in between—my husband, Gary Clark. I do not believe that marriage to me has been easy. I am amazed I am leaving parliament still married to the original. It should not have taken me so long to realize that time with my husband is very important. Public life means that evenings out with the Glenbrook scouts or Penrith councillors, attending CUA stadium to watch my mighty Panthers, presenting trophies to netballers at Jamieson, soccer players at Glenmore Park, cricketers at Emu Plains, hockey winners at Kingswood and all the Penrith Valley footy codes combined, manning Liberal Party stalls and attending party meetings and other AGMs of worthy organisations like the Red Cross, the CWA and seniors clubs, take priority over family time. All those things combined lead your spouse to feel that they rate very low in your priorities. I know Gary understands that I was achieving something worthwhile. I am sorry for the neglect I know he frequently felt. Australia is in a much better position to cater for our children’s future now than when I entered this parliament in 1996.

It was about this time in 1995 that I was preselected for the Liberal Party in the seat of Lindsay and it seems I have been campaigning in a marginal seat ever since. I was very surprised to win Lindsay on 2 March 1996, but I was not the only one. John Howard was equally surprised, but when I was disqualified from serving on 11 September 1996, no-one worked harder for my re-election than John Howard. The Lindsay by-election on 19 October 1996 has gone down in the political lore of both sides of the House. I owe John a lot and wish him every success in the future and hope he sees my 12 years of unexpected service as repayment. I
apologise for not being with John in the trenches for this one, but Gary is thrilled that he finally rates higher in my priorities than the Prime Minister.

In my first term I served on two committees, which are listed elsewhere. I was re-elected at the 1998 election on 3 October. Again I was surprised to return, when 19 of my colleagues who also fought the GST election with me did not return. Keeping the confidence of the voters of Lindsay at that time is something I am very proud of. Hindsight shows they were right to trust me and the government and not the vicious scare campaign of the Labor Party.

I was appointed the Minister for Sport and Tourism and Minister Assisting the Prime Minister for the Sydney 2000 Games on 21 October 1998. During my time as minister I got married, had one child and was pregnant with my second when I sought re-election in 2001. I oversaw the preparation of our athletes at the Australian Sports Commission for the Sydney Olympics. Although not very many world records were broken, our Australian athletes collectively gained more medals than at any other games and were higher up the medal table than ever before. This was in large part due to the strong anti-doping stance I took in the lead-up to the games, the international conference of concerned governments I convened in Sydney and the new EPO test this government was able to introduce in the weeks leading up to the games. Sydney is widely regarded as one of the cleanest games in recent memory.

I was the tourism minister during the infamous collapse of Ansett airlines and the associated hardships for that company’s employees, but, due to my action and that of the transport minister, the tourism air routes were back to capacity within weeks and the tourism industry rode relatively unscathed through this incident. I introduced the green paper for tourism, which resulted in a very successful white paper appropriately funded, which has stood the industry in good stead for many years. The vast number of evening engagements in this industry put incredible pressure on my family life and, combined with other personal issues, resulted in me lowering my workload after the elections on 10 November 2001 and taking on the duties of Parliamentary Secretary to Prime Minister on 26 November 2001.

I cannot recommend to any woman campaigning in a marginal federal seat while seven months pregnant. My husband was there through it all and I truly owe him that election. I oversaw urban sprawl and the status of women in a very varied role with the Prime Minister. In 2003 I had a very bad car accident, nearly killing myself and my two children. It was with a lot of cajoling from my colleagues that I ran for re-election on 9 October 2004. I thank them for that and this term was for them. During this term I resigned all higher offices and focused on my true loves of innovation and technology. In 2003 I had a very bad car accident, nearly killing myself and my two children. It was with a lot of cajoling from my colleagues that I ran for re-election on 9 October 2004. I thank them for that and this term was for them. During this term I resigned all higher offices and focused on my true loves of innovation and technology. I was the first person to use a laptop on the floor of this House. In fact, the then Speaker kicked me out for it. I am glad we see things differently and have equipped this House for laptop use in the chamber. I also was the first person to have an iPod in here. Luckily I did not get kicked out for that infringement.

I just wish this House had been as ready to action my ideas on a child-care centre for this place. Thank you for the 22-place centre for children under 18 months, but I do not think it will be very successful, and the issue will need to be revisited in the future. I will not be able to benefit from the centre, but hopefully parents who come after me in this place will be able to manage a better work-life balance than I have been able to because of the modern use of the space in this place. I give full credit to this government on all we have achieved in child care but urge those
who will be staying to continue the instal-
ments on work-life balance for working
mothers. We need flexibility, and our em-
ployers can do that for us. Employers must
be a part of the child-care solution for our
nation.

I believe our future is in hydrogen fuel
cells, not nuclear, but that is a question that
is 30 years away. From my experience in the
planning of Badgerys Creek airport, 30 years
out from ever needing a solution you often
get yesterday’s solution to tomorrow’s prob-
lem. Technology is rapidly evolving, so do
not discount new innovations that provide
solutions, be it an offshore airport, fast-train
technology or silent jumbo jets. However,
there are some things that do need to be
planned now, such as roads. Major roads
should be built by those who can afford them.
Therefore, I support the Pacific High-
way and the M2 extension to Dubbo becom-
ing roads of national importance so that, fi-
nally, New South Wales residents can get
action, rather than waiting for the nincom-
poops in the New South Wales government
to get it right. Given my experience of the
ineffective, inefficient New South Wales
Iemma government, I believe our govern-
ment will be re-elected because we have
been a good government, and that is a rare
commodity in politics today. The last 12
years of hard work have not been in vain. We
have many achievements already listed in
other valedictories. I think we have many
achievements still to come, such as a single
number for citizens to identify with govern-
ment agencies, a national smart driver’s li-
cence, rollover for departing defence mem-
bers to gain the most from their MSBS con-
tributions and many more which I will list
elsewhere.

Motherhood is the greatest thing we do. I
am not sure that anyone would read anything
that I have said in Hansard 100 years from
now or even 10 years from now, except my
children, Dominique and Lachlan, who are
watching this on webcast—or maybe their
children or their grandchildren. As a gov-
ernment we have done a stupendous amount
to give mothers the financial choice to stay at
home with their children if they choose to:
family tax benefit part B; the $5,000 baby
bonus, regardless of whether you have
worked part time or full time for 12 months
or just two; the child-care benefit, even if
you are not in the workforce; the First Home
Owners Scheme; the 30 per cent private
health insurance rebate; and assistance with
your school of choice. In 1996, families in
Lindsay earning the average wage of
$40,000 were paying 43c in the dollar tax.
Today, families on $75,000 are paying only
30c in the dollar tax. This has helped fami-
lies tremendously with managing on one in-
come and paying a mortgage—or paying
exorbitant rents in Sydney, thanks to Morris
Iemma’s incompetence.

I am going to take advantage of the oppor-
tunity to be there for my children during
their critical years—at least after 3 pm and
on weekends. No doubt I will get busy with
my various interests in technology and inno-
vation but nowhere near as busy as I am
now. May I advise those in this House and
those listening that a good marriage is based
on more than finding the right partner; it is
about being the right partner too. Gary, my
one true love, father of my children, I could
not have done it without you. I go back to
live amongst the residents of Lindsay with
my head held high.

Refugees and Asylum Seekers

Mr DANBY (Melbourne Ports) (4.40
pm)—I want to commend the member for
Lindsay on her heartfelt valedictory, particu-
larly on the things she said about family.
Those things, I think, are felt widely on all
sides of this House. I know the sacrifices my
better half and my children make on my behalf to enable me to be here.

Today I want to talk about a subject that has been close to my heart ever since I have been a member, and indeed since before I was elected: the subject of refugees and asylum seekers and the unfortunate—indeed, shameful—way this government has treated some of the most wretched and unfortunate groups of people in this category. I know I am far from being alone among members of this House in being the child of immigrants but I think that, apart from my good friend the honourable member for Throsby, the member for Banks and the honourable member for Fairfax on the other side, with whom I had the privilege of travelling to Hungary last year to mark the 50th anniversary of the Hungarian Revolution, we are perhaps alone in being the children of refugees.

When my father arrived at Station Pier in Melbourne in 1939 as a refugee from Nazi Germany, without his family, without his assets, without even his name— which he had to change before he was allowed into Australia— he was part of the outpouring of 150,000 German Jews who followed the Kristallnacht pogrom of November 1938. Few countries were willing to take them in. As the great leader, Chaim Weizmann, said, the world at that time was divided between ‘countries where Jews could not live and countries which Jews could not enter’.

The Australian government in the 1930s had a quota system for refugees. Under the Evian agreement of July 1938, Australia agreed to take a grand total of 1,500 German and Austrian refugees of the hundreds of thousands of desperate people who were seeking to find new homes after being forced out of their old ones. We had a delegate at the Evian conference who infamously observed that Australia ‘did not have an aliens problem and did not seek to import one’. This disgraceful so-called refugee conference—the Evian conference— directly led to the 1951 United Nations Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, to which Australia is a signatory. Under that convention, signatories are obliged to provide sanctuary to refugees. A refugee is defined as ‘a person who, owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country’.

I will say one thing for the Australian government of the 1930s. They did not take my father and the thousands of other people trying to find new homes at that time and pack them off to remote Pacific islands in the hope that people would forget about them, nor did they refuse to allow boatloads of refugees to enter Australian waters. Nor did they exploit the plight of these refugees for cheap electoral purposes by whipping up a bogus fear campaign about Australia being swamped by refugees. That happened in some places, but thankfully not here. Let us remember who some of the people were on that Tampa ship. They were Afghan refugees—from the country that we now have troops in, trying to prevent the re-establishment of the Taliban, the very people who caused those people to flee—the very victims of Islamist violence we are righteously fighting who were packed off to the Pacific.

Since 2001 the Howard government has been guilty of the things I have mentioned. It was guilty of them in 2001 and it is still guilty of them today. This government’s record on asylum seekers has been, to put no finer point on it, a disgrace to Australia. It has done great damage to Australia’s good name around the world. If you say ‘Australia’ to the people of Norway, they do not
think of kangaroos or the Barrier Reef. They think of Captain Arne Rinnan, the Norwegian captain of the *Tampa*, who rescued 439 Afghan and Iraqi refugees at sea and then was not allowed to land in Australia and whose courageous actions were shamelessly exploited by the Prime Minister and the then Minister for Immigration and Multicultural Affairs to win the 2001 election.

I hope this is the last time I will have to make a speech on this subject; in fact, I am confident it will be. After this coming election, I hope we will have a government which, while being tough on border protection, meets its obligations towards genuine refugees. I do not just hope that will be the case; indeed I know it will be. The Leader of the Opposition said last month:

The vast majority of asylum seekers sent to Nauru end up being brought to Australia anyway, despite this government’s extreme rhetoric to the contrary. Individuals simply suffer in the interim in order to protect the pride of the Prime Minister. The Howard government’s use of Nauru as an immigration detention centre is not only a waste of money; it is inhumane. I believe that Australia is better than this Howard government policy. Labor would immediately shut down the Nauru and Manus Island detention centres and end the so-called Pacific solution.

The case for closing the offshore detention centres on Nauru and Manus is primarily a moral and legal one, but there is also an economic dimension to this whole scandal of sending people to the Pacific. As Connie Levett of the *Sydney Morning Herald* reported last month, the Pacific solution has cost the Australian taxpayer more than $1 billion since 2001. A report prepared by that excellent aid agency Oxfam has calculated that it costs more than $500,000 per person to process asylum seekers in island detention centres. The cost of holding asylum seekers in a mainland centre, according to the department of immigration’s own figures, is a tiny fraction of the costs of the Pacific solution. It costs $1,830 a day to keep someone on Christmas Island, compared with $238 a day at the Villawood detention centre in Sydney. I quote from the *Herald* article:

“The Pacific solution is neither value for money nor humane,” said Andrew Hewett, the head of Oxfam Australia. “In six years since *Tampa* the cost of the Pacific solution to the Australian taxpayer has been $1 billion. We are calling on the Australian National Audit Office to investigate the full financial cost of the Pacific solution."

I cannot imagine that, in what I hope are the dying days of this government, the Audit Office will respond to any such requests at the behest of this government, but perhaps a new government might get the Audit Office to do that.

The current government tries to tell us that the Pacific solution has deterrent value. Indeed, it is true that the number of people trying to come to Australia as refugees has dropped. But, as the Oxfam report points out, this has no connection with the government’s policy. Figures from the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, or the UNHCR, show a similar drop in the number of people seeking asylum in other western countries. This is due to improved security conditions in source countries, particularly Afghanistan.

Let us look at the record of the Pacific solution. In 2001 the Prime Minister said, talking about the people on the *Tampa*, ‘There is no way that those people are going to be allowed to come to Australia.’ And what eventually happened? What happened to those people who languished in desolate camps in Nauru and Manus for months and, in some cases, years? By 2006 the majority had been resettled in Australia. Of the more than 1,062 people on Nauru and Manus, 615 were resettled in Australia. Most of the rest were accepted by New Zealand. That exercise cost the Australian taxpayer hundreds of millions of dollars, to no good end whatsoever.
Of course, this government is all in favour of immigration in certain circumstances. It is in favour of bringing in workers under the 457 visa scheme as a source of cheap labour which can be used to drive down the wages and conditions of Australian workers. This government sees the work visa scheme as a convenient fix to the current skills shortage, a shortage brought about by its own failure to invest in training Australians and in Australian education.

Under Labor, this abuse of the work visa scheme will end. Labor supports a temporary skilled migration program but not the use of temporary skilled migration to drive down Australian wages and conditions. Labor will require temporary work visa holders to be paid the going market rate of pay. Temporary skilled migration should only occur where the relevant position cannot be filled by an Australian or permanent resident or by a permanent migrant with the requisite skills.

Neither I nor the Labor Party advocates an ‘open door’ policy on migration. Labor believes in an orderly migration program. It is strongly opposed to any form of people-smuggling and supports strong measures against secondary movements of asylum seekers. Labor does acknowledge that it is sometimes necessary and desirable to process arrivals offshore. The government has spent $396 million completing the immigration processing centre on Christmas Island. We acknowledge the usefulness of that centre for processing certain types of unauthorised arrivals, such as the Sri Lankans who arrived by boat last year. The existence of that centre provides another good argument for closing the expensive, makeshift and inhumane centres on Nauru and Manus.

It is a sad fact that, in the current security environment, we have to keep a very close watch on our borders and we need a tough border security regime. That, incidentally, is why Labor advocates the creation of an Australian coastguard. Since our borders are maritime ones, and since the principal path of entry by illegal immigrants is by sea from Indonesia, that gateway must be guarded, and under Labor it will be guarded more rigorously than it is now, by people who are trained and equipped for that specialist task. Our overstretched Navy, which I had the honour of being deployed with on the RIMPAC 2006 exercises with HMAS Stuart and HMAS Manoora can then be deployed for the tasks it is raised and trained for: the maritime defence of Australia and the projection of naval force in overseas operations. (Time expired)

Moreton Electorate: Roads

Mr HARDGRAVE (Moreton) (4.50 pm)—I rise to talk to the House about the plans that the Australian Labor Party have announced to widen the Kessels Road corridor in my electorate, through to the Mount Gravatt-Capalaba Road and through the honourable member for Bonner’s electorate, to create a Kessels highway extension of the Ipswich Motorway through suburbia. The Labor Party’s plans are quite clear. This is why they are in favour of widening the existing Ipswich Motorway corridor, starting at Granard Road, Rocklea. They will head down through Granard Road, Riawena Road, Kessels Road and Mount Gravatt-Capalaba Road to allow a rat-run for interstate trucks through all the days and nights of the week, to allow them a short-cut to the port of Brisbane. It is a folly which shows how arrogant and stupid they are in opposition and how sad and arrogant they would be if they were ever in government.

The reason I make that point is very plain: last November I wrote to 28,000 households in my electorate, and 84 per cent of people wrote back to me and said that putting Kessels Road under Mains Road was the wrong
option but putting Mains Road under Kessels Road worked for local residents, and that is what they are in favour of—84 per cent of people in Moreton therefore are saying that the Labor Party’s announcement of doing the exact opposite to what would suit local residents is a big mistake; 84 per cent of people in my electorate therefore are very concerned that the Labor Party’s complete arrogance and stupidity, their crazy Kessels highway plan, will put big interstate trucks ahead of the transport flows and the transport corridors along Mains Road.

Just last week, a longstanding local Sunnybank resident, a former Labor state member and a former Brisbane Labor deputy mayor, Len Ardill, told ABC Radio that whatever happened at the Kessels and Mains Road intersection had to favour local residents and had to deal with the traffic flows along Mains Road. If you look at what the Labor Party have proposed, there will still be traffic lights restricting the flow of traffic along Mains Road dealing with vehicles coming off Kessels Road because of the necessary off ramps for this new Kessels highway. So local residents do not get one less set of lights when it comes to the Kessels Road-Mains Road intersection; in fact, if they are turning, as many do, from Sunnybank to go down Kessels Road to Garden City, there is a fair chance they will have two sets of lights where there is currently one. So the delays are only going to get greater under Labor’s proposal, which is why I have said quite plainly—and I have had the Deputy Prime Minister there most recently, Mr Vaile; of course, the Minister for Local Government, Territories and Roads, Mr Lloyd, has also been there, had a look and understands it; the Prime Minister has been there and he understands it—that by doing anything at that intersection other than putting Mains Road under Kessels Road locals are going to be disadvantaged, but the Labor Party have completely forgotten about that.

It is not hard to fathom that, if you are going to spend $300 million, as Labor have proposed, to put Kessels under Mains to create this Kessels highway, it is all about more trucks coming. It is all about more heavy interstate trucks coming off the Ipswich Motorway going onto the extension of Ipswich Motorway along the Kessels Road corridor. They might slip through the Mains Road intersection all right but they will end up down at Garden City—Garden City is a big regional shopping centre on the south side of Brisbane and it has already got world’s worst practice as far as traffic jams are concerned—so all we are going to see is yet again locals disadvantaged by heavy vehicles.

I know the member for Bonner can speak very eloquently about this too, but if you go along Mount Gravatt-Capalaba Road through Wishart you will have more B-double trucks driving along that road than you currently have past people’s letter boxes. It is bad enough that people through Robertson and Salisbury put up with that in my part of southside Brisbane and when you consider that the current 20-foot equivalent units, the TEUs, measure out of the Queensland rail freight yard at Acacia Ridge is some 380,000 TEUs a year and the forecast is for 750,000; it is bad enough when you consider what it is now. Those forecasts show how bad it will be in the years ahead, so what does Labor do? Announce locals can wait while it is made easier for interstate trucks.

The widening of the Kessels Road corridor will wipe out thousands of local jobs as local businesses will be gone. They are not my words; they are the comments of local retailers long the Kessels Road corridor. Once Kessels Road clags up even further, the trucks will do what they are already doing
now in increasing numbers—that is, starting to use alternative roads like McCullough Street and Padstow Road through Sunnybank, Macgregor and Eight Mile Plains. They even use Granadilla Street, a street that winds through suburbia between the two. It is all perfectly illegal, but the thin blue line of the Queensland Police Service is so thin and narrow that they never get around to nabbing these trucks.

All Labor is planning to do is bring more and more trucks. We have already invested $1.3 million to take 221,000 heavy interstate trucks off local roads at night with a toll-free trial over the last couple of years. The government have supported my approach to take the toll off the southern Brisbane bypass, which is the Logan and Gateway motorways. That is the road that these heavy interstate trucks should be on. They should go on the Logan Motorway at Gaiiles. They should travel along the Logan Motorway through the bottom end of the city of Brisbane, come up the Gateway Motorway in the midst of Karawatha Forest and head to the Port of Brisbane that way. Of course, the Queensland government have got a toll on that. It is the only toll road in Queensland.

We have campaigned long and hard to get that toll removed, and if the toll was to come off then I think more and more trucks would make good use of it, particularly if the state government and the Brisbane City Council combined to make a no-go zone for heavy vehicles other than local deliveries in and around the Greater Sunnybank area. They cannot say it cannot be done, because I campaigned in favour of such a proposal when it came to Beaudesert Road at Moorooka a few years ago. The Labor councillor at the time said, ‘You can’t do that.’ Interestingly enough, Lord Mayor Councillor Newman and Graham Quirk, who is in charge of roads in the city of Brisbane, have made it happen, and local residents at the local school at Moorooka have got a far more palatable environment than they had because trucks are told to go around—to use Ipswich Road instead.

It also needs to be done at Fairfield Road and Venner Road through Fairfield and Annerley. We need to make sure that local residents are not tripping over big trucks which are just finding their way, with no signs, no measurements about where they should go and no restrictions—just find your way. Trucks are like water: you cannot stop them but you can direct their flow. Let us face it, around Oxley Road through Sherwood, Graceville and Chelmer they feel the effect of this lack of planning and lack of concern by the state government and indeed the Brisbane City Council.

The need for noise barrier fences is also something that is well established in the debates in this place. The government has, through the good offices of the former Minister for Transport and Regional Services, the member for Gwydir, Mr Anderson, made available money half-a-dozen years ago for noise barrier fences along Riawena Road, Salisbury. Last year’s state election campaign saw the member for Yeerongpilly, Mr Finn, again promise that fences would be built. Commonwealth money has gone in, millions of dollars. Nothing has been done. Where has the money gone to? Riawena Road residents are putting up with this. The residents around Salisbury who back into Riawena Road are sick of the noise and likewise people at Drewvale, a purpose-built road, which had a toll put on it by Labor—the only toll road in Queensland—through Drewvale and Kuraby, are also demanding that there be some sort of noise attenuation program introduced there.

At the Kuraby tollbooth at Persse Road—and if I could get rid of the tollbooth this would not be a problem—residents are
awoken at night as trucks have to slow down for the tollbooth, using their air brakes, and then speed up and rev away. They go from 100 down to zero and back up again. There are no noise barrier fences for residents around Kuraby and they are right to say they want something different. In the case of Drewvale, residents are hearing the noise from over the hills and far away, but it is nevertheless bouncing around. What we need to do is look at the example of the Brisbane City Council’s work along Compton Road where a riparian corridor has been built. Essentially, two large tunnels have been built over the top of Compton Road, joining two parts of Karawatha Forest. I think the same thing should be done on the Logan Motorway and the Gateway Motorway. That would control some of the noise issues and give some life to the ambitions of people in the Oxley Creek Catchment Association with regard to the Flinders Peak to Karawatha riparian corridor. We need to use roads like the Logan and Gateway motorways. We need to take the tolls off these roads. We need to get the big interstate trucks off Kessels Road, McCullough Street, Padstow Road, Beenleigh Road and Compton Road. And local residents should not have to pay a toll, especially at the Kuraby tollbooth.

I have talked about this and we have acted. We have got some results; we need more. The last thing we need to do is to allow Labor’s crazy Kessels highway plan to come to fruition. I will be campaigning on this agenda item very vigorously between now and polling day. (Time expired)

Federal Election

Mr KELVIN THOMSON (Wills) (5.01 pm)—The federal election draws ever closer. In most countries the big question when they have an election is: who will win? In Australia, almost as big a question is: when will the election be? In my view, this is an anachronism, a hangover from the past. It is time we moved to set our election dates, to fix the length of the parliamentary term. The United States has fixed election dates for its president every four years; everyone knows when the vote will be held. It is a much better arrangement than the uncertainty, speculation and opportunism that we have in Australia. Many other countries have also moved to fixed four-year terms—Finland, Norway, the Netherlands, Portugal, Sweden, Switzerland, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland, amongst others. In Australia, the states and territories have been moving to set their election dates. Everyone knows when the next elections will be held in New South Wales, Victoria, South Australia and the Australian Capital Territory. This is a good system for everyone. It gives business certainty, it gives the voters certainty and it adds a measure of decorum to the whole political process.

In my view, four-year parliamentary terms are better than three-year periods. While I have no wish to see governments avoid scrutiny and I am all in favour of accountability mechanisms such as freedom of information, controls on election expenditure and lobbying, whistleblower protection and robust Senate estimates committees, I think we have too many elections in Australia. The average period between federal elections since 1901 has been 945 days or 31½ months—well short of the three years provided by the Constitution—and, of course, we have a plethora of state elections to add to that. So it is time we put to stop to the Prime Minister having the power to call an election at the time of his choosing. Prime ministers do not use this power in the national interest; they use it in their party’s interest or even their own personal interest. The power allows for arbitrary, partisan and capricious election dates and it generates uncertainty, speculation and game playing. Its time is up.
People will quite reasonably ask: what do you do about the Senate? Clearly, we should have simultaneous elections for the Senate and the House of Representatives. Labor’s national conference has resolved in favour of simultaneous four-year fixed terms for both the House and the Senate. This avoids having senators who would be elected for eight years. It also lowers the threshold for election to the Senate, which would mean that minor parties would be given a much better chance of being elected. The truth is that the Labor Party treats the minor parties much better than they treat us. We reformed the Victorian Legislative Council with the introduction of proportional representation, which enabled three Greens party members to get elected. They could not have got elected to the old Legislative Council in a pink fit. We do not get any thanks for that—the Greens party are mostly voting with the Liberal Party in the Legislative Council. Nevertheless, it is better that we run the risk of minor parties controlling the Senate than continue to have an uncertain, outdated system with too many elections and too much power in the hands of the Prime Minister. There is not much to be said, from recent experience, in favour of the government controlling the Senate. They rammed through Work Choices, leaving employees vulnerable to instantaneous dismissal for no reason at all, and they stifled proper attempts to have the Senate investigate the AWB scandal.

While the nation waits with bated breath for an election to be called—at least, some of it does—we are being subjected to a veritable blitzkrieg of taxpayer funded advertising promoting the Liberal Party’s policies and actions. I remind the House that in September 1995—12 years ago now—the then opposition leader, John Howard, promised that a Liberal government would ‘ask the Auditor-General to establish a set of guidelines for government advertising’ and said, ‘We will run our advertisements past the Auditor-General and they will need to satisfy those guidelines.’ This turned out to be one of the Prime Minister’s notorious non-core promises, a deceptive piece of propaganda designed to get voters to support him. This government spent a staggering $1.7 billion in the past decade on such notorious propaganda campaigns as the GST ‘Unchain My Heart’ ads, the Strengthening Medicare campaign and the Work Choices campaign.

Back in the 1930s, George Orwell saw clearly and nailed, in books like *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, the way in which fascist and communist governments used government resources to indoctrinate their own populations, to manipulate people and to elevate political propaganda into an art form. One wonders what George Orwell would make of today’s government advertising campaigns if he were still alive. I suspect he would see, as he saw back in the 1930s, the outrageous irony of governments using the people’s own resources to manipulate them and to keep them acquiescent, passive and apathetic.

After the ‘Unchain My Heart’ campaign, the Auditor-General, to his great credit, produced a set of guidelines designed to draw the line between bona fide government advertising and political advertising, for which the Liberal Party should be paying, not taxpayers. The government ignored those guidelines. Two years ago, in September 2005, I presented to the parliament a private member’s bill, the Government Advertising (Prohibiting Use of Taxpayers’ Money on Party Political Advertising) Bill 2005. It would have delivered on the Prime Minister’s 1995 promise to bring to bear the independent authority of the Auditor-General on government advertising.

The Auditor-General proposed guidelines to ensure government advertising ‘be pre-
presented in an objective and fair manner’ and ‘not be liable to misrepresentation as party political’. My private member’s bill would have made these guidelines a legal requirement for governments. That private member’s bill of 2005, like the Auditor-General’s report of 1998, was ignored.

And what have the consequences been? While all the polls are indicating that the electorate wants the government to listen to it more and to pay more attention to it, the government are instead out there with a taxpayer funded megaphone, a taxpayer funded loudhailer, screaming into the electorate’s ear because they think the electorate will get the message if only the government yell a little louder. We have had a renewed avalanche of Work Choices advertising. In May, the Special Minister of State told the House that the government had approved the advertising campaign because it passed the value for money test, yet the minister was unable to tell the House how much the advertising campaign would cost. That is plainly ridiculous. How can it possibly be value for money if you do not know what the cost is? It is like going home to your family and saying, ‘I’ve just bought a horse; I think it’ll be great value for money,’ and, when the family asks how much it cost, saying, ‘I don’t know; the owner hasn’t sent me the bill yet.’

Last week, the government launched a new climate change initiative, not ratifying Kyoto, bringing in emissions trading or lifting the renewable energy target—all of which would be useful—but, you guessed it, an advertising initiative: a $25 million climate change advertising campaign. A government which spends 0.05 per cent of the federal budget on tackling climate change can find $25 million for an advertising campaign; 0.05 is a blood alcohol limit, not a climate change strategy. Since the last election we have seen $93 million spent advertising Work Choices, the policy that dare not speak its name; $63 million spent on superannuation advertising; $27 million spent advertising private health insurance; and the $25 million climate change campaign, to which I have just referred. Two hundred million dollars of taxpayers’ money has been spent just this year. With apologies to Winston Churchill, never before has so much money been hosed up against a wall by so few in so short a time.

As well as introducing fixed dates for federal elections and curbs on taxpayer funded advertising, there is much more we can do to lift standards of public accountability. Last Thursday in the Main Committee I referred the House to the publication by the Australasian Study of Parliament Group Accountability Working Party entitled Be honest, Minister!: restoring honest government in Australia. That paper makes numerous serious recommendations to improve the conduct and accountability of ministers. It includes a detailed section on contact with lobbyists and proposes the registration of all lobbying activity. It proposes curbs on the post-parliamentary employment of ministers and parliamentary secretaries to tackle the perception of impropriety where holders of ministerial office have accepted lucrative employment or directorships shortly after leaving office. This is especially concerning where the former minister’s new employer has benefited from a decision made by the minister during their period in office. If this government wants to show it has a vision for the future, it should pick up these reforms and implement them. (Time expired)

Flinders Electorate: Seniors

Mr HUNT (Flinders—Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Foreign Affairs) (5.11 pm)—In this grievance debate, I wish to raise a grievance in relation to the neglect of seniors within my electorate by the members of the state government of Victoria. But
I do not just want to grieve; I want to present an alternative plan for seniors in the electorate of Flinders. I think it is our duty as members of parliament never simply to be critics but to be constructive proponents of that which must come before us. I want to set out first the failures at the state levels, but I wish to devote the bulk of my time to a constructive plan for the seniors in the electorate of Flinders. The people of Rosebud, Rye, Dromana, Hastings, Somerville, Mount Martha, Koo Wee Rup, Lang Lang, Grantville, San Remo and Phillip Island together make up what is demographically the fifth-oldest electorate in Australia. While seniors are a fundamental part of our society, this is especially so in the electorate of Flinders.

The problems that I have with the policies that have been put into place by the state government in Victoria are very simple. We have seen an exposure of our seniors: firstly, in relation to community safety and, secondly, in relation to health and recreation. In relation to policing, we see a risk that the police stations of Dromana and Sorrento may be closed. I set forth an absolutely ironclad pledge to fight this plan to the absolute end so as to prevent these stations from being closed down. The police on the Mornington Peninsula do a fantastic job, but there is more which needs to be done to give them the support that they need in order to support the community.

We also see services to Koo Wee Rup hospital being wound back. That, in turn, affects the quality of services available to seniors in the Western Port area. It is fundamentally important that we preserve these areas of support, whether it is at Rosebud Hospital, which has lost services; at Koo Wee Rup hospital, which has lost services; or through Warley Hospital, one of the state’s very small number of bush nursing hospitals. Warley Hospital is a community hospital—not a private hospital as the former Premier of Victoria Mr Bracks said—that is not-for-profit and has been owned by the community since the 1920s. It was founded by the community and it is run by the community.

In response to this neglect, I believe that there are three pillars to our plan for seniors in Flinders—for the Mornington Peninsula, for Western Port and for Bass Coast. Firstly, there is the issue of community safety. In relation to policing there are four points that we must pursue vigorously. Firstly, we need to work for and establish a new 24-hour police station in Somerville to protect and serve the people of Somerville, Baxter, Pearcedale and Tyabb. We have to ensure that it is not a case of robbing Peter to pay Paul, but that additional police are made available to the Mornington Peninsula to serve out of such a 24-hour police station in Somerville. For me, this is a fundamental task for the coming years—to fight, just as we did for a Somerville Secondary College. We were told by the state that it would be impossible to have a Somerville Secondary College but local community people set their sails and never wavered from the push for the college and we now have a tremendous college. Now the task is to pursue a 24-hour police station for Somerville and, similarly, to make sure that the current police on Phillip Island are given the support and the numbers to allow them to operate their facility on Phillip Island for 24 hours a day. Those two stations together would be fundamentally important. Secondly, we also have to protect Dromana and Sorrento police stations. In addition, we need to secure more police for Hastings. This brings me to the last of the community security points: we need to work towards having security cameras for the shopping villages in Mount Martha, Baxter and Somerville. These are things which are important for our seniors and our community as a whole, and they give our seniors the confidence, safety and security to live their lives in a way which
befits the service they have given to the community.

I move now from community safety to the issue of health. Three years ago we were able to secure Medicare offices for Rosebud. I am now delighted that within two weeks, as the first health pillar for seniors, we are opening a Medicare office in Hastings which will, as of 1 October, provide services for the seniors of that region. That is a tremendous outcome. The Medicare agency will be attached to the Centrelink office and will be a tremendous benefit for seniors who would otherwise not be able to get to Mornington or Frankston easily because of the poor state public transport.

In addition to that, when it comes to health, we need to ensure that the winding back of Koo Wee Rup hospital services is reversed. These services should be made available on a full-time basis to the people of Koo Wee Rup, Lang Lang, Bayles, Catani, Tooradin and all the surrounding towns. It is a service centre for people in a rural area. To take those services away or to wind them back is not a generous activity and is not sustainable or acceptable. We will work with the people of Koo Wee Rup to ensure that the services at their hospital are real and available to the seniors.

Beyond that, it is time for Warley Hospital to be given some support at the state level. We have given significant support at the federal level. We have pledged 40 additional aged-care beds for Warley Hospital and that will bring an enormous revenue stream into that township. I am working with the Minister for Health and Ageing on a package for Warley Hospital and I am hopeful that we will be successful in winning that fight. I am delighted that Mr Abbott has been supportive. It is my task in this place to make that case and to see if we can be successful in securing those outcomes.

The third element of our health package is aged-care places. Over the last few years we have managed to secure 600 new aged-care places for the people of Flinders. Whether that is at Somercare in Somerville, in Mount Martha, Domain by the Bay, Rosebud or many of the other different sources of beds in Cranbourne or elsewhere on Phillip Island, these are facilities which make a big difference to the elderly who have served our community so well for so long. It also significantly provides support and comfort for their children who are now approaching an older age. They know that their parents will be cared for and will have adequate support. This is a tremendously important outcome for the seniors in Flinders.

This brings me to the last point I want to make on recreation. There are two great tasks in relation to recreation. The first is to secure an aquatic centre for Rosebud, Rye and Dromana. What we need to do there is simple: we need to repeat the magnificent work of the Mornington Peninsula Shire Council in creating the Hastings Aquatic Centre. That aquatic centre has helped seniors throughout that area. Now our task is to help the council to do the same thing in Rosebud. I set myself to work with the council to attract federal funding, and I believe it is a good case. Similarly, for Phillip Island and all of those who have proposed a Phillip Island Aquatic Centre, the tremendous work of Pam Cameron and Colin Grey is something which should be supported. I hope, over time, when the application is finally in place, we will be able to support it. That is obviously something for the future. There is a little more work to be done, but these two aquatic centres are part and parcel of a solution which will help seniors, give them recreation and help if they have bodily ailments which they need to overcome with hydrotherapy.

Ultimately, there is a plan for seniors in Flinders. It is about community safety, health
services and recreation, and about providing appropriate facilities. I am delighted to commend it to the House. *(Time expired)*

Lowe Electorate: Aircraft Noise

Mr MURPHY (Lowe) (5.21 pm)—On behalf of the constituents I represent in my electorate of Lowe in Sydney’s inner west, I again grieve about the ongoing failure of the Howard government to solve the aircraft noise problems affecting residents in Sydney. I have lost count of the number of questions on notice that I have tabled in this House over nine years to both the Minister for Transport and Regional Services and the Prime Minister concerning aircraft noise associated with Sydney (Kingsford Smith) Airport. Each and every time my questions have been arrogantly dismissed by successive Ministers for Transport and Regional Services and the Prime Minister. I will not stop putting questions on the *Notice Paper* to the Howard government and I will continue to hold the Howard government accountable until justice is done for the people of Sydney and my constituents of Lowe.

As I mentioned to the House and to the Prime Minister shortly before question time today, current statistics published by Airservices Australia reveal that aircraft movements to the north of Sydney airport make up 31.78 per cent of all aircraft movements. This is among the worst results since the long-term operating plan was introduced by the Howard government in 1996.

It is timely to remember the history of the mismanagement of Sydney airport. On 13 February 1996, just prior to the 1996 election, the coalition released its aviation policy entitled ‘Soaring into tomorrow’. In that aviation policy was the coalition’s then solution to aircraft noise problems in Sydney. In it the coalition announced that it would not sell Sydney airport ‘until there is a satisfactory solution to the current aircraft noise problem in Sydney’. As it turns out, that policy was not worth the paper it was written on. In a monumental act of betrayal, the Howard government flogged off Sydney airport for a ridiculous $5.6 billion. Worse still, the government sold it without fixing the aircraft noise problems in the inner west or placing any caveats on the airport’s new owners with respect to noise reduction.

The practical repercussion from this unilateral decision of the Prime Minister was to abandon a core policy promise to ensure that Sydney’s aircraft noise problem would be resolved before the sale. The failure to provide any real solution for the distribution of aircraft noise prior to the sale of Sydney airport means that the inner west residents of Lowe and Grayndler have had to endure the brunt of Sydney airport’s relentless demand growth. Rather than impose conditions on the sale of Sydney airport, the Howard government pandered to commercial interests and laid the path for the inner west to be bombarded with aircraft noise. This has meant more planes, bigger planes and more noise. Rather than shield my constituents from unfair levels of noise, the Howard government gave carte blanche to the private operators of the airport.

Under the master plan, we have been promised that over the next 20 years we will get close to 500,000 aircraft movements. How dare the Howard government sell out the people of Sydney, including those in my electorate of Lowe. Despite selling out residents in the inner west, the Prime Minister did no such thing in his now marginal seat of Bennelong. That brings me to the age-old issue of the Prime Minister’s deliberate direction of flights away from his electorate and over the roofs of residents in Lowe and elsewhere. ‘Put the aircraft noise anywhere but not in my backyard’ is the Prime Minister’s mantra. On 14 August 2007, Mr Howard made an extraordinary admission in an
interview with Jenny Brockie, on the SBS Insight program:

I stick up for a cause I think is just in my own electorate. This is not the first time I have done it. I mean, I stuck up very strongly years ago before I was Prime Minister for my residents in relation to aircraft noise when you had the notorious Bennelong funnel, they used to call it, where the former government used to, one could be forgiven for suspecting they made sure the planes flew over my electorate and not over neighbouring electorates. I will stick up for my local constituents if I think they have a just case.

As the federal member for Lowe I too believe the residents of Lowe have a ‘just cause’. Yes, I too, along with many members of other federal electorates, including Grayndler, Sydney, Watson, Kingsford Smith, Wentworth, Barton, Blaxland and North Sydney, may, to use the Prime Minister’s own words, be forgiven for suspecting the government has made sure the planes fly over our electorates and not over Bennelong. The numerous speeches I have given in this House and the hundreds of questions on notice I have tabled prove that it is the Prime Minister who has substituted the ‘Bennelong funnel’ with the ‘Lowe funnel’. That is what we now have: aircraft are funnelled over the rooftops of Lowe, almost invariably using flight modes 9 and 10, which means that planes frequently take off and land over the rooftops of my constituents. Each and every day the LTOP target of 17 per cent of all movements to the north of Sydney airport is routinely breached by almost twice that number. What may we say to the Prime Minister? What possible conclusion can we reach from this fact? Again to use the Prime Minister’s own words, we could be forgiven for suspecting that this government, since 1996, has made sure the planes fly over the electorates of Lowe and elsewhere and not over Bennelong.

Now that the airport is a private business we may never, ever see the inner west aircraft noise problems properly resolved. Indeed, commercial pressure may be applied on the Howard government to take a sledgehammer to rules that are there to protect us. As if this is not unfair enough, further insult to injury is added by arrogant disregard for sufferers of aircraft noise in Sydney. In the lead-up to the 1996 election, pamphlets were distributed in the Lowe electorate promising the following:

No new areas in Lowe will be affected by aircraft noise.

The pamphlet went on to quote the Prime Minister, John Howard, in a press statement he made on 8 February 1996:

I want to state categorically that those who have not been affected by disruptive and loud aircraft noise in the past in the seat of Lowe will not be affected in the future. Additionally, the Coalition’s policy will result in a dramatic reduction in flights over the electorate of Lowe. The federal seat of Lowe will experience a very substantial reduction in aircraft noise.

The brochure concludes with the brave promise that ‘we will halve the number of planes over Lowe’. To say that residents in Lowe were betrayed and abandoned following the sale of Sydney airport is a gross understatement. The Southern Cross Airports Corporation Holdings Ltd annual report of 2003 states:

On 25 June 2002, the Commonwealth Government announced the sale of Sydney Airport to the Southern Cross Airports Consortium for $5.6 billion. The sale transaction was completed on 28 June 2002, at which time Sydney Airport Corporation Limited (SACL) was acquired by Southern Cross Airports Corporation Pty Limited. Southern Cross Airports Corporation Pty Limited (SCAC) is the parent company and Southern Cross Airports Corporation Holdings Limited (SCACH) is the ultimate parent company of SACL.
That statement was signed by none other than the former long-time head of staff to the Prime Minister, Mr Max ‘the Axe’ Moore-Wilton. At the time of that statement, Mr Moore-Wilton was both Chief Executive Officer and Chairman of Southern Cross Airports Corporation Holdings Ltd. What more evidence of complicity do we need than that? The Prime Minister’s former chief of staff himself oversaw the sale of the Sydney Airport Corporation Ltd to Southern Cross precisely opposite to the 1996 coalition’s aviation policy that Sydney airport would not be leased ‘until there is a satisfactory solution to the current aircraft noise problem in Sydney’.

The betrayal of the people of Sydney with respect to aircraft noise problems is complete. For the reasons I have just given, there can be no trust or confidence in the systematic nature of the misrepresentations of successive coalition governments to the people of Sydney, including my constituents of Lowe. Now that Sydney airport has been privatised, there are only limited options to ensure that aircraft noise problems in the inner west are not exacerbated. The sale of Sydney airport may mean that the Howard government has made it difficult to resolve aircraft noise distribution problems in the inner west, but the government cannot sit back and allow the problems to get worse. The Howard government cannot allow the interests of a privatised Sydney airport to keep outweighing the interests of the inner west residents. Inner west residents who are woken up by the sound of jet engines should have a right to complain to an independent umpire with investigative powers, not to a token hotline that is regularly ignored, as is the case currently.

The Sydney Airport Corporation has no right to be above scrutiny and accountability. The government must establish an aviation ombudsman to oversee all operations at Sydney airport. Furthermore, despite the apparently intractable commercial bind this government has sacrificed to Southern Cross—a consortium headed by Macquarie Bank—a legal way must be found to enforce the long-term operating plan and to ensure that the people of Sydney are protected against unfair distribution of aircraft noise.

The usage of Sydney airport is only set to increase with time. The full privatisation of Sydney Airport Corporation Ltd means that Macquarie Bank—‘the ‘millionaires’ factory’—will continue to suck every ounce of blood from its investment. This will mean more parallel runway operations in order to increase the number of flights in and out of Sydney airport. It will also mean that Sydney will eventually become a jet-only airport. The flights over Sydney are guaranteed to increase in size and number. Eventually, in perhaps five or 10 years, Sydney airport will become another Heathrow—outgrown and suffering diseconomies of scale. All this is the result of a totally failed aviation policy, cynically made in 1996 and founded upon misleading promises that were, in hindsight, never going to be honoured.

We in the inner west are now paying a heavy price for the greed and treachery of this government. We have only the Howard government to thank for this shameful situation. Those affected by aircraft noise in Sydney cannot wait to flog the Howard government on election day, because it has betrayed the people of Sydney at every opportunity.

(Time expired)

Deakin Electorate: Level Crossings

Mr BARRESI (Deakin) (5.31 pm)—I grieve today for the thousands of motorists and public transport users in the eastern suburbs of Melbourne, particularly those in the Deakin electorate. I also grieve for the safety of commuters who use our public transport system daily and who, through the neglect of
the state government, are at risk because of a lack of quality rail infrastructure and investment in making our rail system safe.

In my electorate of Deakin, in Melbourne, more than 250 trains are scheduled per day on the Belgrave-Lilydale line to transport over 100,000 passengers to and from the city. Each day these trains travel over multiple level crossings. In my electorate alone, there are six level crossings, the majority of which intersect some of the busiest and most vital north-south roads in Melbourne—roads such as Mitcham, Springvale and Blackburn. In fact, all but one of the six level crossing sites are approximately 100 metres from the Maroondah Highway—the lifeblood corridor for the eastern transport system.

The proposition that it is vital for these crossings to be addressed and for the grade separations to take place can be reasonably argued on the grounds of safety. But equally one can argue that, unless the grade separations take place, improvements to public transport infrastructure, such as putting more trains on the line, cannot take place. The concentration of level crossings in my electorate is not an isolated situation. Most areas of metropolitan Melbourne have a level crossing intersecting them and make up the 250 level crossings throughout the inner Melbourne area.

One of the most dangerous black spot sites, if not the No. 1 black spot site, is the level crossing at the Nunawading train station, near the intersection of Whitehorse and Springvale roads. With more than 120,000 cars travelling through this intersection each day, Springvale Road is consistently ranked by the peak motoring body, RACV, as the most dangerous black spot site in Victoria. As a result of this bottleneck, cars can be delayed by up to 20 minutes. This has led to significant traffic congestion, and the once quiet suburban streets have been turned into busy thoroughfares, with impatient drivers looking for ways around the key area.

Given these circumstances, I am pleased to say that the federal government came to the party in 2004 by providing $1.5 million to fund the local Whitehorse City Council to conduct an engineering study into the best way to resolve this issue. With that engineering study currently underway and the council yet to release its findings from the report, the federal government, in order to get the ball rolling on major works, has also contributed $25 million to fund any initial construction. You would have thought, Madam Deputy Speaker, that with a $25 million contribution from the federal government, the state government would say: ‘This is a serious issue. Perhaps we should look at it and make a contribution of our own.’ That has not been the case. In fact, there has been deathly silence from those in the state government. The federal government has come to the party on the issue of a level crossing, which, traditionally, it would not fund, and the state government has turned its back on the money. This is a shame. It is absolutely contemptible of the state government to do this, and it certainly shows how they rate the motorists and the public transport users of the eastern suburbs.

Quite rightly, constituents have come up to me in the streets and asked why their state government has not fixed Springvale Road. I, like many residents, welcomed the state government’s intervention in the grade separation that took place at the Middleborough Road level crossing, which is located at one end of my electorate. This was an important project and brought much-needed improvement to a bottleneck in eastern Melbourne. But even the council was mystified as to why Middleborough Road was chosen above Springvale Road. The only reason was pure politics. Even the RACV and the Whitehorse City Council—a Labor dominated council—
said that Springvale Road needs to be fixed, but the state government turned its back.

The state government has done a good job at Middleborough Road, but that is not the end of it. Let us keep going. When the Middleborough Road grade separation took place, it paved the way for the construction of a possible third railway line from Box Hill right through to Ringwood—a promise which has been made on a number of occasions and is still to be delivered. In the case of Springvale Road, it appears that the state government does not care, despite it being one of the most dangerous intersections in Melbourne. To get an idea of the frustration that we have out there, even state Labor members—not candidates—in the lead-up to the state election in November 2006 were pleading with me, ‘Phil, can you fix Springvale Road for us?’ I said: ‘You’ve got Peter Batchelor, the state transport minister. Go and talk to him.’ The answer from these Labor members was: ‘He’s not interested. He doesn’t want to talk about it.’

Indeed, in the 2007-08 state budget, then state Treasurer John Brumby did not allocate one cent to help upgrade the site. The state Labor member for Mitcham, Tony Robinson, now a minister in the Brumby Labor government, has not fought on behalf of his local community to get the state government to fix this problem. In fact, Mr Robinson’s answer to the traffic problem is to place red light speed cameras at the level crossing. The ETU’s candidate for Deakin has also been silent on this issue. In a survey he sent to constituents in Deakin recently, the issue of roads—and more importantly Springvale Road—was not even on his list of important issues. The response of the Electrical Trade Union’s candidate to the No. 1 issue out there in the eastern suburbs of Melbourne in terms of traffic was to turn his back. This is Labor’s way: ignore the biggest road issue in the east, pretend you understand the concerns of the locals and do the bare minimum work to understand the locals as you surf on the back of a Rudd presidential bandwagon. It is lazy politics and ignorance of the community at best.

 Constituents of Deakin can rightly reach the conclusion that Labor does not care about fixing this issue. I would urge as many people from Melbourne as possible who are affected by this issue to send a message to their Labor state MPs and candidates to join with the federal government to fix Springvale Road. I have a petition out at the moment and the response to that petition has been overwhelming. I have been surprised that the response has not come just from the Whitehorse City Council end of my electorate but from throughout the electorate. This road is used by motorists from throughout the eastern suburbs of Melbourne. It is also important to those who want to see an upgrade of the train system that goes through that crossing.

The New South Wales government, Madame Deputy Speaker Bishop—the government of your state—in stark contrast to its Victorian counterpart, has had a plan in place to fix level crossings. I know that it is rare to hear a Melbourne based MP praise the efforts of his Sydney counterparts but the state New South Wales governments—not just the current government—and their respective transport bodies, such as the NRMA, deserve credit for addressing the level crossing problem over a number of decades.

According to New South Wales Department of Transport reports, the New South Wales government has eradicated nearly all of the level crossings across Sydney. It has reduced their numbers down to 12 through gradually grade separating a few of them each year based on their use and traffic. This was done in response to the unfortunate rail disasters that have occurred in New South
Wales in the last 20 to 30 years. Surely we do not need these sorts of disasters in order to ignite the state Labor government of Victoria to take action. In this debate, I am proposing that a similar approach be adopted by the Victorian state government and that it begin eradicating these dangerous level crossings so that disasters similar to those which occurred in New South Wales and, most recently, the unfortunate disaster that we saw in country Victoria at Kerang can be avoided in future. We do not need those sorts of disasters in order to prompt us to take action.

In June this year, the state government announced that it would invest $33 million in safety upgrades and advertising about safer driving at level crossings. While any funding to improve road safety is always welcome, what is required is a far deeper solution to the problem, and that means grade separating these dangerous intersections. The Victorian state government makes more than $400 million from our roads in fines and penalties, and it is time that this money was put back to good use and used to fix the level crossing time bomb that is sitting in the government’s lap. The New South Wales government shows that it can be done and I strongly urge the Victorian state government to do the same.

Why hasn’t this been done? The only reason I can put it down to is that the state government does not want to come to a project which the federal member for Deakin—me—has been proposing for a number of years. That is at best. If I can be a little bit more conspiratorial, I would have to ask whether there is something in the contract with Connect East, which is building the infamous tollway, which prevents the government from undertaking improvements to Springvale Road. If there is something in that contract, then say so and address the many concerns and questions that the motorists of the eastern suburbs have about this issue. We need it fixed and we need it fixed now. I urge the people of the east to join me in this fight.

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

That grievances be noted.

Question agreed to.

THERAPEUTIC GOODS AMENDMENT BILL 2007

NORTHERN TERRITORY NATIONAL EMERGENCY RESPONSE AMENDMENT (ALCOHOL) BILL 2007

Assent

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

QUARANTINE AMENDMENT (COMMISSION OF INQUIRY) BILL 2007

Second Reading

Debate resumed from 13 September, on motion by Mr McGauran:

That this bill be now read a second time.

Mrs ELSON (Forde) (5.42 pm)—Tonight, I rise in support of the Quarantine Amendment (Commission of Inquiry) Bill 2007. The purpose of this bill is to enable a commission of inquiry into the outbreak of equine influenza in Australia to operate under the Quarantine Act 1908 but with powers under the Royal Commission Act 2002. A public inquiry into the outbreak of EI is obviously called for because of the serious effects of the current outbreak and the need to ensure that quarantine measures are being adequately undertaken and enforced. As this is my last speech in the House, in expressing my support for the bill I would like to reflect
on my journey to this House and give thanks to those who took the ride with me.

It was a unique and interesting political journey that took this girl from Lota who left school at just 13 to the hallowed halls of the national parliament just over 11½ years ago. My story says a lot about the wonderful nature of our democracy here in Australia. It was a special honour to have chaired the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Vocational Training, having never attained a university degree myself. That says a lot about our egalitarian society. We value ability and judge people for who they are and not for the letters that they have after their name.

I gained preselection 12 years ago without the backing of any faction within my party, without the support of any special interest groups and without having to be indebted to anyone. I had absolutely no financial resources behind me. With a very large family, money was, understandably, always extremely tight. Forde is a lower socioeconomic area and our campaigns have always been run on a shoestring. They have always been about grassroots, community based campaigning. This is in stark contrast to the way politics is conducted in most countries around the world, where financial backing and huge budgets are crucial—just take a look at the current US elections. I am proud that it has never been about money; I am proud that it has never been about status or social standing. Again, that is something that is very uniquely Australian.

I stood in this place 11½ years ago and proudly explained my working-class origins as one of nine children, having left school early to help out my dad when he took sick. Like many of the Howard government’s class of ’96 I came to this place from the real world, from a real job raising funds for the disabled. I knew all about the challenges families face, having raised eight children through the tough times under Labor. Politics was never going to be my career but it was a way I could further serve my community. I am pleased to be able to stand in this place today and say that I have done my very best for my community over the past 11½ years. I also believe that as a member of the Howard government I have made a very significant contribution to the future of Australia.

The biggest change I have seen in my local area is among those in the lower socioeconomic areas. I have seen the way those who previously struggled to find work are now in well-paying jobs. I have seen the way this has translated to a pride in themselves and their communities and how they have been uplifted and strive to achieve even more. That is the proudest achievement, in a social sense, of this government.

The achievements of this government are many; it would take more time than we have today to list them all. We have brought some really positive programs to the political landscape like Work for the Dole, Green Corps, Volunteer Small Equipment Grants, reinstating the black spots program and recently the hugely successful Investing in Our Schools Program.

By paying back the $96 billion debt that Labor left behind we have delivered consistently lower interest rates. They have basically stayed between six and eight per cent for the past 10 years. I am well aware that the recent interest rate increases have impacted on family budgets. That is regrettable and I do understand that it is a concern for many people. But it is also important that we look at this in perspective. Interest rates have gone up by just one per cent since December 2003. That is one per cent in nearly four years. Under Labor, interest rates increased by 3.5 per cent in just one year and hit a massive 17 per cent. I remember it well be-
cause, like many other families, David and I took out a second mortgage to keep our home at that particular time. So I do have to say I find Kevin Rudd’s ‘mortgage stress’ concerns, and the hype and anxiety being whipped up at the moment, as just a bit rich. Interest rates will never stay the same but they will stay lower under a Howard government. Our track record has proven that.

I am proud of the fact that the Howard-Costello team have managed the economy in a way that has allowed people to own their own homes and businesses and to plan for the future with certainty. The quarter percent rises are certainly regrettable but I think they are a lot more manageable than what we experienced under Labor. Under Labor, interest rates did not increase in small increments; they went up by whole percentage points—in fact, by a whopping two per cent in one month. And there is plenty to suggest that Labor will put pressure on interest rates again. I am deeply concerned that the state Labor governments are going into debt again around the nation, at a time of prosperity. They are racking up debt; not just one or two—most of the Labor state governments are running deficits. It is clear evidence that Labor just cannot manage money. It is clear evidence that now is not the time to switch to a federal Labor government.

That said, I do not want to take up a huge part of my last speech in this House debating political issues or the outcome of the coming election. That is for the Australian people to decide. I do know that the Howard government still has the passion, the drive and the right vision for Australia. While several of my colleagues from the class of ’96 are also retiring, that simply gives us an opportunity to refresh and renew our ranks with new people and new ideas that will take us into the future.

In my own electorate of Forde I am pleased that my good friend Wendy Creighton has been selected to represent our party. I know that, with the support of the people of Forde, Wendy will make an enormous contribution to this place. She is a strong woman. She runs her own small business as well as being a driving force in our local community. She also has six boys, so she will have no problem dealing with the sometimes blokey nature of this place. I take this opportunity to wish Wendy well. She knows I am behind her 100 per cent and will always be here to offer help and guidance if she wants it. But I know she will make her own positive contribution. She is a strong lady with a determined nature. If there are ministers out there breathing a sigh of relief that I will no longer be persistently knocking on their doors, I want to assure them that Wendy is just as determined as I am. She will not take no for an answer when it comes to getting the right outcome for the people of Forde. That is the way it should be. That is what being a good member is all about.

Today is an opportunity for me to say thanks to the many people who have supported and encouraged me over the years. A few weeks ago I was honoured when a farewell community afternoon tea was hosted by my local FEC. I was joined by over 350 local residents. It was a superb afternoon, one I shall never forget. It reminded me of the reason we are all in this job: to make a difference and to support others who are working in our local community with the same aim. I have been very privileged to get to know some true community heroes over the past 11½ years—the voluntary workers who keep the wheels turning for all our local community and sporting organisations and charities. Once again there are far too many to list, and I would not want to leave anyone out. They know who they are and I thank each and every one of them today.
When this job finishes it will be a pleasure for me to join their ranks and to work in a voluntary capacity to help others and ensure our local communities continue to offer support, friendship and important services. One of the most positive things our government has done is support these local community groups through the Volunteer Small Equipment Grants. They really make a difference and they allow us to recognise the valuable contribution that is made by our volunteers at CWAs, Soroptimists, Rotary clubs, seniors citizens clubs, PCYC, Quota, chambers of commerce, Red Cross, Meals on Wheels, hospital auxiliaries, RSLs, P&Cs, rural fire brigades, Landcare, sporting clubs, community centres, Blue Care, the Salvation Army, St Vincent’s drought relief, arts centres, theatre groups, Lions clubs, progress associations, the RSPCA, WIRES, Bays, Lead On, the SES—and the list could go on and on. To all the wonderful people in these groups who give their time so generously, a big thankyou. It has been a privilege working with you. To those who go that extra mile in their chosen professions—the policemen, the business men and women, the veterans, the nurses, the teachers, the fire fighters, the ambos, the members of our Defence Force—and to all the good people who give a little more and who genuinely care, I say thanks on behalf of our community and our government.

There is a special group of people who give up their time to make a difference who have provided me with constant feedback, advice and hands-on support. I want to send a very warm thankyou to the local members of the Liberal Party in Forde. I have been very lucky to have had many terrific people with me from the very beginning, and some wonderful people came on board throughout the last 11½ years. There are a few people for whom I will take time to make special mention of today. Firstly, thanks to John Wallerstein. John was treasurer of my first campaign and he served many years in various positions on the FEC. John has always been passionate about his politics. He has been a terrific driving force of the local party and I know many branch members will join me in thanking him for his valuable contribution over the years. There are some others who were with me during that first campaign and each one since: Ken and Patricia Turnbull; Bert and Vivienne Bowman; Tom Plunkett; Joy and Ross McDougall; and my current FEC chairman, Lin Petterwood, and his wife, Barb. I know there are others and I apologise in advance to those I miss for not having the time here today to list them all.

I want to send an extra special thankyou to and to recognise a special group of Liberal Party members who have been fantastic volunteers in my office. Firstly, there is Shirley Bertoldo, who was with me in the very beginning and has helped wherever possible, including by sewing several hundred aprons for election days. Then there is my terrific trio, Barrie Smith, John Skeers and Jerry Nowakowski. Barrie has been with me from the early days, always ready to lend a hand. Despite significant health challenges, Barrie has been a constant in the Liberal Party for many years, including recently taking on the role of FEC secretary. Thanks a million, Barrie. John and Jerry are permanent volunteers in my office—ever dependable and crucial to the smooth running of the office. John is also the treasurer of the FEC and the most efficient money man you could ever find. These guys are a true godsend. These three extraordinary men have been gifted with wonderful wives, who also pitch in regularly and are a delight to be around. Barrie and Elaine, John and Gwendoline, Jerry and Claire—all six of you are beloved by my staff team and of course by David and me, and I thank you so much.
I know there have been many others who have volunteered over the years: Reg and Delaune Pollard, Brian Fletcher, Mark Boothman, Sylvia Seaton, Penny Lumley, Andrew and Phylis Hopkins, and Elizabeth Jobson. I send a very special thanks for and recognise in this place the inspirational Phil German, who passed away last year. Phil was a foundation and life member of the Liberal Party and the first person on deck whenever there were envelopes to be stuffed or a job to be done. We all miss him, and I want to acknowledge what an important member he was of our FEC.

And when it comes to my team, I have also had the greatest group of hardworking electorate office staff anyone could ever wish for. It was a special thrill for me when so many former staffers came along to my farewell and read out messages of support from my colleagues. To Margaret, Nikki, Megan, Aidan, Andrew, Bev, Desley and Alicia I say thank you for your help over the many years. To Cay McVeigh, who was a remarkable whips clerk for me and now does an incredible job as the chief whip’s clerk, I have a huge thankyou to say to you, Cay. To my current staff—Cherry Adams, Jasmine Smits, Lynette Skeers-Fulwood, Pam Hardgrave, Maureen Logan and Selma Schuller—I say I will always be immensely grateful for what you have done for me. Maureen has been with me for many years and her husband, David, and I were state candidates in adjoining electorates together back in 1992. I thank Maureen and David for their many years of support and service.

Selma has been with me every step of the way. In fact, she is the one who encouraged me to stand for preselection for Forde and has run my campaigns for preselection and for every election campaign since. She is a talented electorate office staffer who was in this business before I was elected, and she also happens to be my eldest daughter. Both Selma and her husband, Andrew, have been such a big part of my political career. Their advice, support and hard work are greatly appreciated. They are a fantastic political team together and I have been pleased to have them in my corner. They are a couple who are fiercely patriotic and, I have to say, committed to doing their duty for this country. They have taken the Treasurer’s advice to heart: in fact, they have had one child for Mum, one child for Dad and three for the country!

That neatly leads me into the one big team that I give greatest thanks to. That is my family: Selma and Andrew, Kellie and Stuart, Billy, Eddie and Samantha, George and Kristy, Davie, Johllene and Talena, and my wonderful 15 grandchildren—Jasmine, Jesse, Nicholas, Caitlyn, Jillian, Georgia, Clancy, Ryan, Edward, Alissa, Natalie, Emily, Jordan, Haydon and Kaylee. I should point out that we have No. 16 due next month. I am very proud of that.

David and I count our blessings every day that we have such a large, close-knit and incredibly supportive family. We have faced some challenges together, particularly in recent years, but our love and commitment for each other has always helped us through the tough times and made our bond even stronger. They have all supported me every step of the way on my political journey. Some of them have a keen interest in politics; others don’t, but every one of them has worked for me at every election day since 1996 and has helped me before then.

While I am so proud to have represented my community in the federal parliament, my biggest achievement in life will always be my children and grandchildren. My best decision would have to have been marrying David and spending my life with this great man. No woman could ask for a more supportive, encouraging and loving husband. He
has always been 100 per cent behind me every step of the way. He has a deep commitment to the Liberal Party, a fierce love of our great country and a strong sense of decency and of the family values that we hold so dear. He is a rock, and I am so glad he is my rock. I do look forward to what the next chapter of our life together holds for us. I take this opportunity to thank David from the bottom of my heart and to let him know that I never would have got to this place without his encouragement, his support and his love. It has been very much a team effort.

I would like to place on record my gratitude and thanks to Brian Gassman, Warren Morten, John Dyer, Tony and Gail Stevens, Peter and Marjorie, and Howard Lawrence for their support over many years. I am very grateful to have had the opportunity to be a member of the federal parliament. I want to thank the men and women who work in this building and keep the wheels turning: the attendants, the clerks, the cleaners, and our special Linda and staff of the cafeteria. Special thanks for all their assistance especially go to Ian Harris and Bernard Wright, gentlemen in the true form.

I want to very quickly thank my colleagues in this place—I have made some very good friends here and shared some unique experiences—especially those on both sides of the House whom I have travelled on delegations and committees with. I do not want to single out people for fear of missing someone—there are many people I have lots of time for and respect greatly—but I do want to thank Jo Gash for her friendship over the years and I want to thank and acknowledge David Jull, who is also retiring at this election. He is an icon in Queensland. When David and I first joined the Liberal Party we were members of his branch. I want to thank Brendan Nelson, who I think has a wonderful future in our party. He has been a friend to many and has one of the most positive, compassionate and constructive attitudes of anyone in this place. And of course I want to thank and acknowledge our Prime Minister, John Howard, for his remarkable leadership. I am amazed by his stamina, his patience and his commitment. Having worked closely with him for the past 11½ years, I believe that he is the genuine article: he is totally committed to doing what is right for Australia and our country. I thank him for the time he has given me and the respect he has always shown me.

Finally, I thank the voters of Forde who have put their confidence in me and in the Howard government at the last four elections. I appreciate the opportunity I was given and I thoroughly enjoyed working with you all. I want to particularly thank my daughter Talena, who has come here tonight too. May the Forde electorate continue to grow and prosper, making our special part of Queensland an even better place to live in for our children and grandchildren.

Mr GAVAN O’CONNOR (Corio) (6.00 pm)—I congratulate the member for Forde on her contribution to this parliament and on the speech she has just given to it.

The Quarantine Amendment (Commission of Inquiry) Bill 2007 is legislation the opposition intends to support in the main. It forms part of the government’s response to the equine influenza outbreak that was revealed by the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry on 23 August 2007. According to the minister’s second reading speech:

The purpose of the Quarantine Amendment (Commission of Inquiry) Bill 2007 is to amend the Quarantine Act 1908 to allow for a comprehensive, independent inquiry into the August 2007 outbreak and spread of equine influenza in Australia.

The inquiry is to be headed by a former Justice of the High Court, Ian Callinan, and has been given the specific powers and protec-
tions of a royal commission, within the quarantine-specific context of the Quarantine Act. It is indeed a curious structure in which the inquiry will be undertaken. I am not sure that the minister has adequately explained to this parliament, to the industry and to the Australian community his reasons for going down this path. I am aware that the minister has stated that Commissioner Callinan will have access to quarantine officers already working on internal investigations into the outbreak and that independent people engaged by the Commonwealth can be made available to the commissioner to help him undertake his inquiry.

I note the presence in the chamber tonight of the honourable member for Corangamite. He knows more about sheep than he does about horses, but our respective histories go back a long way as far as horses are concerned. I could elaborate on that in this speech but I will not. Needless to say, on this side of the House we rode the horses. We rode the horses in our family, and I am privileged that my forebears appear in the Stockman’s Hall of Fame in Queensland. They developed their horse-riding skills, indeed their buck-jumping skills, down on the property of the honourable member for Corangamite. Yes, in some strange and twisted way the fates of the two members who represent the Geelong region in this place are entwined. But getting back to the speech—

Mr McArthur interjecting—

Mr GAVAN O’CONNOR—You would not have lasted a second on Curio; let’s face it! If the great Curio had been around today, under the incompetence of your minister it would probably have picked up equine influenza and nobody would have ridden it—not my forebears, not yours. Be that as it may, we have before us a bill to establish an inquiry, and I am sure that the honourable member for Corangamite will make a contribution to the debate.

The structure proposed is an interesting one, to say the least. It is appropriate as an opposition that we point out areas of potential concern. We know from past experience that an inquiry process can be nobbled—if I can use horsing parlance—by this government and that terms of reference can be structured to insulate ministers and the government from being fully accountable for their actions or lack of them. The minister states:

These amendments will enable a comprehensive, independent and quarantine specific inquiry to be conducted. As well as providing the commissioner with all the necessary powers of a royal commission, it makes available the unfettered expertise of experienced quarantine officers and other quarantine-specific powers under the Quarantine Act.

The operative words here are ‘quarantine specific inquiry’. The minister obviously will seek in this process to insulate himself and the government from anyone questioning their administrative competence in the matter. As we know, this government has a sorry record when it comes to quarantine. We all remember the black sigatoka outbreak that cost the Queensland banana industry in excess of $40 million, and the citrus canker outbreak that cost the industry across Australia—not only in Queensland—tens of millions more. We have also had outbreaks of fire ants.

We all remember the celebrated lashing the previous minister for agriculture got from one of his own side, Senator ‘Wild Bill’ Hefernan, who found Brazilian beef had been dumped on the Wagga tip at a time when that country was having problems with foot-and-mouth disease. I cannot verify this but there is a ‘stranger’ in the House, Senator Macdonald, who might be able to clarify this matter for us. It is rumoured that ‘Wild Bill’
would have dumped the minister on the Wagga tip if he had got hold of him after that particular outbreak. I hope the stranger in the House can clarify that particular point, because it was a significant breach of protocol for suspect beef to find its way onto the Wagga tip. Senator Heffernan may want to revisit this issue after the next election, because there will be a political carcass he can dump on the Wagga tip and that will be of the previous minister, who had an appalling record in quarantine matters.

This government has real form—if I can use another term from racing parlance. It has a horse in the political stakes; it is called Sheer Incompetence! Sheer Incompetence ought to be the name of the government’s horse in the quarantine stakes. Over on this side of the House, we will enter one too. It will be called Eternal Vigilance, because we have been vigilant on quarantine matters over the past decade. While this government has dithered and failed to do very important things in the quarantine area, we in the opposition have led the policy debate on quarantine matters. We have led the policy debate and the government has played catch-up all along the way.

If it is a race between Eternal Vigilance and Sheer Incompetence today the government may well win, but let me tell the honourable member for Corangamite, it is about the only race it will win in the political stakes coming up. We know about the interest of the member for Corangamite in the horseracing industry and we know about his interest in the sheep industry. He is going to take a very active interest in them after the next election because he may not be in this House.

The importance of the equine industry to regional and national economies was eloquently outlined to the House by the member for Hotham on 13 September 2007. I have to congratulate the member for Hotham for his contribution on that day. We all know—and the member for Corangamite knows—that he is an ardent Shinboner fan, and barely four days after the lashing that they got at the hands of Geelong, he was able to come into this House and artfully pick the government’s arguments to pieces on this particular bill. He also offered us a snapshot, in statistical terms, of how important this industry is.

We are talking about an equestrian industry worth $1 billion a year. Some 70,000 horses are registered nationally in that industry. We are talking about a racing industry that, according to the Australian Racing Board, will have a direct input into the Australian economy of some $41 billion over the next five years. Some $1.6 billion comes into federal and state coffers as a result of this industry. It is estimated that some 77,000 people are employed in the racing industry. So when we talk about this industry we are talking about an industry that, I believe, is the fourth largest in the Australian economy. It reaches into every region of Australia, particularly into the rural sector and regional areas, and it is of national economic significance. When we have an outbreak of equine influenza of the type that we have just witnessed we see very quickly and clearly the economic impacts of a quarantine breach on local economies and on the national economy.

Given the economic impacts, it is not hard to appreciate why many Australians, particularly in regions such as mine, have more than a passing interest in this matter. In the Geelong region we are blessed with a very strong equine industry. The Geelong Racing Club holds the Geelong Cup and that is a very important part of the social calendar which is coming up. Its race meets are run throughout the year and, as we know, there are many enterprises and many individuals who derive their livelihoods from the racing industry in
Geelong. The Geelong Harness Racing Club at Beckley Park stages events that are also an important part of Geelong’s sporting calendar.

Also coming up is the Geelong Show. The honourable member for Corangamite and I, over many years, have delivered our bipartisan support to this very important event in the cultural calendar of the Geelong region. As we know, the show and the racing club are going to be affected by this outbreak. We do not know yet what the impact will be on the Geelong Racing Club carnival but we hope that it will be minimal. Then there are the recreational riders in the pony clubs around Geelong. They are very strong indeed. Of course, many young people learn their skills, first up, on their farms before going into other areas of activity in the industry. So this industry is very important to the Geelong economy and we were particularly concerned when we heard about this outbreak.

In my electorate, Animal Health Australia is charged with the responsibility of identifying these diseases and the particular strains. That scientific input is critical to the strategies that are mounted under AUSVETPLAN to contain the disease and to eradicate it. AUSVETPLAN is quite specific on the strategies required to contain an outbreak once it has occurred. They say:

Containment relies on the following principles:

- quarantine of cases and in-contact horses;
- immediate imposition of horse movement controls until the extent of the outbreak is clarified—

I will come back to this particular point. They go on:

- once the extent of the outbreak is clarified, effective movement controls over horses, equipment and fomites in declared areas; and
- effective tracing and surveillance.

I issued a press release on 4 September that was picked up by the local and national media. It related to the institution of the horse standstill under the AUSVETPLAN in response to the minister’s announcement. I was particularly concerned about a talkback caller to ABC radio, who claimed to have watched horse floats travelling south along the Hume Highway on Saturday and Sunday, 25 and 26 August. This was after horse movements were prohibited for 72 hours in the proclamation on 24 August.

Let us go back to that important element in the AUSVETPLAN in containing the disease outbreak: immediate imposition of horse movement controls until the extent of the outbreak is clarified. That particular caller, apparently, had a farm very close to the Hume Highway and was very experienced in this industry. He was appalled by the movement of horse floats over those two days and questioned whether in fact we could contain the outbreak in Victoria. But, more importantly, when you dig deeper into this matter and you ask why the floats were not intercepted by the police in response to the AUSVETPLAN, we have a problem here which goes back to 1991. The AUSVETPLAN has indicated that the Achilles heel in all of this is the powers of police to intercept and to stop the movement of such floats and horses once this proclamation is made. Of course, this is a very important matter, because if you are going to contain the spread of such a virulent disease and limit its impacts then you have to clarify the roles of police, their powers of interception and their powers to stop the movement of stock.
We on this side of the House are very concerned about the minister’s reporting requirements to the parliament. We will be taking up the matter in amendments which are being proposed by the opposition. It is important that we are able to bring any minister of any political persuasion on the floor of this House to account for their actions, or lack thereof, in these matters.

I read with interest the interjections of the minister when the member for Hotham was talking. He asked the member for Hotham to raise the matter of Reins of Fire. We want to talk about the rings of incompetence, not the Reins of Fire. There are some big rings of incompetence around these ministers when it comes to quarantine matters. I know the honourable members in this chamber representing Queensland know exactly what I am talking about—and I am not talking about Liberal ministers here. I can see the smile is broadening on the face of the honourable member for Leichhardt. He knows, as I know, just how incompetent these National Party ministers have been in these portfolios, particularly when it comes to quarantine matters. We are not interested in Reins of Fire; we are interested in rings of incompetence which surround these particular ministers.

The inquiry and the $110 million that the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry has announced are welcome. We will not complain about that. But we on this side of the House have been proposing a major inquiry and overhaul of Australia’s quarantine processes for many years. We all know that the trading environment of Australia has changed dramatically. We are now in a global trading environment. That puts particular pressures on our quarantine service that were not there previously. We know that the transmission of exotic pests and diseases is now much easier and that there are more virulent strains of these diseases which are wreaking havoc on plants and animals in other parts of the world. We know about the mass movements of people and that these particular diseases can be transmitted not only by equipment and fomites but also by people. We also know that the international movement of animals is quite substantial and that we are in an era of bioterror. So it puts an enormous strain on Australia’s quarantine service.

Labor proposed many years ago that a major inquiry and overhaul be undertaken so that we could address some of these rather significant issues. I am rather disappointed that we get to this point with an EI outbreak and that the minister is proposing what we consider to be a limited inquiry that will effectively shield him from accountability on this and other matters. We will be raising these concerns and amendments later on in the debate.

Mr ENTSCH (Leichhardt) (6.19 pm)—I rise tonight to speak in support of the Quarantine Amendment (Commission of Inquiry) Bill 2007, the purpose of which is to amend the Quarantine Act 1908 to enable a comprehensive independent inquiry to be conducted on the recent outbreak of equine influenza, which has had such a devastating effect on Australia. I take the opportunity, given that this will be my last speech in this place, to reflect on my time here and to share some of the events in which I have a great amount of pride. I also wish to reflect on a couple of areas where I am a little disappointed I have not been able to achieve as much as I would have liked, but I will keep working on that.

I was first elected to parliament in 1996. I am one of the class of ’96 and forever proud. It was a wonderful group of Australians who came into this place almost 12 years ago. I have enjoyed my time here immensely, and it is with a certain degree of pride but also sadness that I make this, my final speech. In the...
time I have been here, initially I had the privilege of serving as Chair of the Joint Committee on Native Title and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Land Fund and the somewhat contentious debate on native title and the Wik legislation. In 1998 I was appointed to the position of Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Industry, Science and Resources. In 2001 I was appointed as Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Industry, Tourism and Resources. I served in that position until I stood down in 2006—and I see that my good friend Bob Baldwin is here, who followed in my much smaller shoes, but I am sure he is doing a great job.

I was sitting here earlier listening to Kay Elson, one of my many friends and a colleague from 1996. I gave my maiden speech before she gave hers, and I took great pride in saying that I started working late in my 14th year cleaning toilets in railway stations. I thought, ‘Beat that’. Kay gave her speech right after me, and she said, ‘I’ve got eight kids and I left school at 13’—so I just got blown out of the water. That reflects the immensely diverse backgrounds of so many of us in that particular intake.

I raised many issues in my maiden speech. One of them was mobile phone, television and radio reception, which was almost non-existent at that time. I can remember saying that if you had a mobile phone and you were more than five or 10 kilometres from the CBD of Cairns, you could not use it. In 151,000 square kilometres there was a lot of area there where it was not possible. The same could be said for basics like radio and television. Outside of Cairns and the coastal inhabited areas, when you get into the cape, other than the ABC there were no other radio or television services available, and in some places there was not even that. As for the internet, I think they were still working on it. It almost did not exist. Here we are 11½ years later and now I can stand on Saibai Island or Boigu Island, less than three kilometres from the mainland of Papua New Guinea, and make a mobile phone call. I can go down to the local community hall and get on the internet, and I can watch a number of television stations and listen to both commercial and public radio broadcasts. That is a huge step forward and I think we can take a great deal of pride in what we have been able to achieve in that area.

I also raised issues related to security in Cape York. Around the time I got into this place there was a boat washed up on the shores of Holloways Beach, about eight or 10 kilometres from the CBD of Cairns. On the boat was a load of Chinese migrants who were dressed in white shirts and trousers, ready to become Australian citizens. Unfortunately for many of them, the information that they were given was quite wrong, and they had tickets arranged for them on the Kuranda tourist train, headed north instead of south. The system that we inherited in 1996 was not really effective, but I can assure you that there have been very significant changes and there are many people in remote areas who sleep a lot more safely and who are a lot more comfortable with the changes that we have introduced.

I mentioned in my speech a dear old friend called Ettie Pau. He was a member of the first Torres Strait Light Infantry, and he shared a story with me about the first Torres Strait Light Infantry Battalion and how all the Torres Strait Islanders who served on it had never been recognised for their contribution. One of my great achievements was to get the Pacific Star medal awarded to those veterans. Unfortunately, of the 850 who served only about 80 were still alive at the time. Nevertheless, their families were very proud to receive the medals, and it was a major achievement.
Another achievement that many of my colleagues would recall was in the area of mental health. I tend to take things and become almost obsessive about them, and I tend to repeat myself time and time again almost ad nauseam. When the announcement came that there was $1.9 billion for mental health, that was a wonderful achievement. When we talk about achievements of this government, I think that is one of the great ones. Unfortunately I do not think the states have stepped up to the plate to the degree that they should have, and I would hope that eventually they will find the conscience to do that. Rather than looking for opportunities to blame others, I would hope that they would put their hands in their pockets and contribute, particularly in relation to accommodation, which is desperately needed in that area.

Another area that I raised in my maiden speech was the imbalance of family support, family law matters et cetera, and I think we have come a long way to restoring balance in that area. I think we can draw a tremendous amount of pride from what we have been able to achieve in that area, and this is going to be a very positive thing for a lot of the children who will now have the opportunity to spend a bit more time with both parents.

There are a lot of areas where I can walk away and say, ‘Yes, we have achieved significant results,’ and they are areas that I am very proud of. In my own electorate there have been a whole range of areas where I have gone in to bat: from cattle yards in the Port of Weipa, to $19 million for the esplanade, to a whole heap of funding for Peninsula Development Road, and of course we started the floodproofing of the Bruce Highway. A significant amount of money has been spent, and as quickly as the state government agencies can do the work the money is there for them. I do wish, however, that we could look at a process whereby we could start putting a lot of this work out for tender so that we would not be locked into state government bureaucracies. If they could tender along with private enterprise I would bet that we would get a lot more bitumen for our bucks. I think that is something that we should be working on.

I also look at a lot of the smaller things that I have done. I recall the compensation package that I got for banana growers for the loss of their crops through black sigatoka, and the package for the tobacco growers, which meant a hell of a lot to a small group of people. It was something that I did with a great deal of pride. In the broader picture, there are achievements that I think will have long-term and very positive impacts on our country. I have to say that some of these were not necessarily popular, but I think they were right and necessary at the time. All of us who were here in 1996 can remember the gun laws. I can assure you that, within my electorate, they were not real popular. Nevertheless, I can tell you now that, on reflection, there are a lot more kids in my area who have never seen a gun—growing up in households where they do not exist anymore. Over time, I think we are starting to break down that gun culture, which I think will reflect very positively on our community as a whole.

Of course, there was the liberation of East Timor, tax reform and all the other things that we have done, many of which caused us some grief at the time but I believe were the right decisions. Industrial relations reform was another correct decision. I watch all the stuff on TV about industrial relations. I do not know where they drag these people from to do cameo performances about how dreadfully they are treated. They do not come through my electorate office—and I have 80-odd thousand people in my electorate. Two years after the fact, you do not see them coming into my office complaining about it.
So I just wonder where all those people are from. Maybe they are members of Actors Equity. I am just not too sure.

Another decision, which is probably rather contentious but I will also mention it, was the decision to go into Iraq and Afghanistan. It was a decision that I supported at the time and I stand by that decision. I think it was the right decision. It was a very difficult decision but, given the circumstances, I think in time you will find that we made the right decision. I do not step back from that decision for one moment.

It is important that we recognise that we are living in a very different place economically compared to when we came here in 1996—zero debt, continual budget surpluses and five consecutive tax cuts. It is pretty positive stuff. I can remember sitting down and watching TV on budget nights and thinking, ‘What are they going to hit now—cigarettes, alcohol, petrol?’ One would never think that we were going to get tax cuts. We really have changed things and, in some ways, we have probably created a bit of a rod for our own backs—because there is an expectation. Nevertheless, I think that, under good fiscal management, we will be able to continue to offer benefits for the Australian people—as we promised we would.

There are a few areas that I would like to briefly mention where I wish that I could have done better. One relates to a small population in the north of the Daintree who have been very badly treated over a long period of time and vilified because they live in a very special area. One of the things that I have been able to achieve from a federal perspective is to get recognition that residents in these types of communities who contribute positively to their community are in fact part of the solution and should not be seen as part of the problem. For that I am very proud, but they still have a very difficult life in dealing with a lot of the things that we take for granted. For example, the state government has legislated to prevent them having mains power. Hopefully, at some stage, that injustice can be resolved.

Another one relates to the representative areas in the Great Barrier Reef and bureaucracies and agencies providing very dishonest advice to the minister. What was suggested was going to be a $1.5 million impact is so far $200 million and still growing. But the money side really is irrelevant when you have a look at the destruction of their lifestyles. Hopefully in time we can deal with that. Another area of course is social and economic equity for same-sex couples, and I make no apology for that. I wish I could have done more in that area. This is not a morals issue; it is a social justice issue—and it is one that I will continue to push. Hopefully we will get some changes on that in the not too distant future.

We do not come into this place and achieve what we do without the tremendous support of those who work with us. At this point I would like to first of all acknowledge my office staff: my senior electorate officer, Lyn Warwick, who has been with me almost as long as I have been in this place—probably nine or 10 years; my media adviser, Shar Lindsay; Clare Zappala, my executive assistant, is sitting here in the chamber—and it is lovely to see you in here, Clare; Colleen Lubomirski, Arlene Amey and Kimberley See Kee, who mans my office up in the Torres Strait. Without their support and the work that they do behind me, there is no way in the world we could have achieved the things we did. I also acknowledge those staff who worked with me prior to my present staff, because they also played a very significant role.

In acknowledging the staff, I also acknowledge the volunteers I have had in my
office and the party members who have stuck with me through thick and thin, some of whom were there when I got preselected as the most unlikely Liberal candidate back in 1996. I also acknowledge my colleague Brendan Nelson, who continually used to change my speeches when he sat beside me to embarrass me profoundly—nothing has changed; Faye and Hal Westaway, who gave me very strong support in the early days; Gladys Potter, who was the chairman of the women’s council and has been a very supporter; and Henry Pain, whose claim to fame was, he told me, that he had John Hewson preselected. He said that he saw something in me that he thought was worthy of support and he got in behind me when we did not think it was going to happen.

At this time I would also like to acknowledge my family. The reason that I am leaving this place is my family. I have a 13-year-old son who is in desperate need of his dad. Every time I sit back and worry about the consequences of my leaving—sometimes I feel it might be a little bit premature—I think of the fact that the basis on which I am making this decision is that my son, after living away from me since he was two, moved back with me permanently at Easter time. It was on the basis that if I was prepared to sacrifice the time or give up my career he wanted to come back and live with his dad. I am very proud of that. I am enjoying my son’s company immensely.

I have another son, who is working very hard trying to establish his own business, three of the most wonderful grandchildren and a daughter-in-law, Amanda, whom I am very proud of—Jason, with his business, Steven and Harley and, of course, the love of my life, none other than my first granddaughter, Sarah Victoria, who is just over two years old. I thought we could not have girls on my side of the family, but my son did very well and I am very proud of her. She is a beautiful young child. I would also like to recognise my partner, Elle Taylor. I am wearing a badge that she acquired for me for my valedictory speech today. It is a medallion that was minted in 1927 and was issued to all the members and senators in commemoration of the opening of the first national parliament of Australia. I do not know where she found it, but she did. Only 114 were minted at the time, and this one was worn by somebody. She found it in some obscure antique place somewhere outside Canberra. She also insisted that I wear another tie that was not quite as outlandish as those that I have.

Finally, thank you very much to all of my colleagues and my friends, particularly those who were part of the dinners for orphans, which we have regularly on Thursday nights. I am going to miss those. And thank you to the staff as well. I see that two very dear friends, Anne-Maree from Alex Somlyay’s office and Lorraine, are in the chamber. We never differentiated between staff and members at these functions and enjoyed it immensely. To all of my colleagues here, it has been a wonderful journey and one that I would not have missed for quids. I am going to miss it. I work through my life in about 10-year intervals. I am looking forward to the next 10 years which, if they are half as productive as these 10 years have been, will be something special. Thank you and good luck.

Mr McGauran (Gippsland—Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry) (6.40 pm)—in reply—I thank the member for Leichhardt for that very personal and moving valedictory speech to this parliament. As both the member for Leichhardt and as a parliamentary secretary in various responsibilities, he has accumulated a distinguished record of service. On behalf of his colleagues on this side of the House and the wider parliament and community, I thank and con-
gratulate him and wish him all the very best with his extended family.

Turning to the Quarantine Amendment (Commission of Inquiry) Bill 2007 before the House, I reiterate the government’s intention and resolve to get to the bottom of how the outbreak of equine influenza occurred in Australia. Even with the most cursory examination of the bill, no-one could conclude otherwise. The bill allows for a full and independent inquiry, which needs to be formally commenced as quickly as possible. I am therefore anxious that the bill proceed through the House to the other place and come into force without any further delay so that the Hon. Ian Callinan can commence his responsibilities and duties as commissioner. Mr Callinan is a jurist of the highest order with a good working knowledge of the horse industry. He is eminently qualified for this role and he is ideally placed to conduct a thorough and searching inquiry into the outbreak. Through the bill, Mr Callinan will be provided with all the necessary powers and protections of a royal commission. He will also have access to all of the relevant quarantine specific powers that are already contained in the Quarantine Act 1908. The commissioner will have the power to hold public meetings, to compel witnesses and the production of documents, to direct Quarantine officers to assist his investigation and to direct his own independent investigators.

The effects of the outbreak of equine influenza have been severely felt across horse related industries. In New South Wales alone thousands of people have been affected by the outbreak in the most harsh of economic terms. Queensland has also not been spared great financial and, at times, emotional hardship. The government is providing much needed assistance to the tune of $110 million to those people and businesses that have been directly affected, not just in the thoroughbred industry—although that is the largest commercial entity of the horse industry—but also, just as importantly, the harness and equestrian industries.

It is also essential that the bill be passed as quickly as possible so that this comprehensive, independent inquiry, which has been so sought after by those who have been directly and indirectly affected, can commence its operations. I commend the bill to the House.

Question agreed to.

Bill read a second time.

Consideration in Detail

Bill—by leave—taken as a whole.

Mr GAVAN O’CONNOR (Corio) (6.44 pm)—by leave—I move:

(1) Schedule 1, item 5, page 4 (lines 1-8), omit paragraph 66AY(1)(a), substitute:

(a) conduct a Commission of inquiry into matters specified in the instrument of appointment relating to the following:

(i) the outbreak and spread of equine influenza in Australia in 2007;

(ii) quarantine requirements and practices relating to the outbreak and spread;

(iii) Australia’s quarantine requirements and practices that relate to equine importation and whether these requirements and practices accord with international best practice;

(iv) any matters incidental to the matters referred to in subparagraphs (i), (ii), and (iii);

(2) Schedule 1, item 5, page 4, after subsection 66AY(4) (after line 16), add

(5) the Minister must table the Commission’s report in each house of the Parliament within five sitting days of its receipt.

As I said in my speech on the second reading, Labor does support the general thrust of the Quarantine Amendment (Commission of Inquiry) Bill 2007 but, through the amendments that have been circulated in my name,
we believe that we can improve it and we ask the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry to consider the amendments.

We on this side of the House are not convinced that the legislation will necessarily deliver the comprehensive and open inquiry that the minister has just referred to. Schedule 1, item 5A lists a number of matters on which the terms of reference must be based. However, the current bill requires an inquiry to be conducted into all or any of the matters on that list. I ask the minister: if the government considers all the matters on this list to be important, why has it used the words ‘all’ or ‘any’ in this bill? These words seem to give the government the flexibility to ignore matters on its own list. Two of the matters on the list require the commission to inquire into matters concerning the outbreak of the disease, but there is no requirement in the bill, as far as we can ascertain, to inquire into its spread. Surely finding out how this disease has been spread is just as important as finding out how the disease came into the country in the first place? I ask the minister why the legislation was not framed to ensure that the inquiry covers the spread of the disease as well as how it entered the country.

Labor believes that it is important that the inquiry also focus on how Australia’s current quarantine structures and practices stack up against international best practice. Labor’s amendments will ensure that this happens. This government has form when it comes to bearing reports that are politically embarrassing or critical of its actions. That is why we are moving an amendment that will require the report to be tabled on the floor of this parliament.

Labor has already asked the government a number of questions relating to the management of this particular matter and of equine quarantine. We are yet to receive responses to those answers. I ask the minister again to provide answers to the questions that the opposition has raised in relation to the warnings the government may have received in recent years about the possibility and impacts of an equine influenza outbreak—allegations that workers at the Eastern Creek quarantine facility have regularly left the premises without changing their gear or showering, in clear breach of normal quarantine requirements; allegations that the minister acted to bend the rules relating to the normal allowable period, in order to allow three horses from France to enter the country; and allegations that, against normal quarantine protocols, horses from Europe and Japan have been allowed to intermingle while they have been in quarantine.

We have yet to receive adequate answers to these questions. I now invite the minister to provide them to this House. Labor’s amendments will improve the inquiry by ensuring that it is comprehensive and open, and that the report is tabled on the floor of this parliament not only for members of this parliament to see but for the industry and the general community to see as well. I urge the government to support these amendments.

**Mr McGauran** (Gippsland—Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry) (6.48 pm)—I have looked at the amendments proposed by the opposition and find no merit in them for two reasons. The first reason is that their principal concerns are already covered in the terms of reference. Justice Callinan, who has approved these terms of reference—there can be no doubting his resolve and independence in leaving no stone unturned to get to the truth of these mat-
ters—inserted the words ‘any other matter incidental to these’. He will have a free range and capacity to look at not only the escape of equine influenza from quarantine and the circumstances surrounding it but also its penetration into the horse population.

I venture to suggest that, in all likelihood, the epidemiological trail needs to be followed before the inquiry can determine its initial breach of the quarantine system. I would think that, as a matter of common sense, the inquiry would have to look at the effect of the virus on the horse population, how it travelled and how it was spread, before it can determine its original source. Remember that this is an inquiry incorporating a large team of investigators who will follow the human trail, interview those who handled the horses or who came in contact with them, as well as those who handled horses who were subsequently infected, in parallel with an epidemiological trail as to the strain’s own journey. I have no doubt at all that every aspect of the cause and outbreak of equine influenza will be pursued by the inquiry under the terms of reference that are not limiting on Justice Callinan.

The second issue is that I have made it clear that the findings of the inquiries will be made public. The Hon. Ian Callinan himself has indicated his preference to conduct as many of his hearings in public as possible or appropriate. However, the government does not support a legislative requirement that the report be tabled in parliament for one important reason: it could narrow the scope of what Justice Callinan can include in his report. The report might contain personal information or commercially sensitive material that could not be made public without unfairly disadvantaging individuals involved in the inquiry. If required to table his report, Justice Callinan would effectively be limited to only including information that could be made public. It is never a legal requirement that the reports of royal commissions be tabled, and with good reasons. In the case of the Royal Commission into the Building and Construction Industry, the government was able to act on the commissioner’s recommendation that one volume of his report remain confidential as it might unfairly prejudice future criminal prosecutions. Accordingly, without knowing the exact nature of Justice Callinan’s report, it would be inappropriate and potentially irresponsible to include any legislative requirement that the report be tabled. Nonetheless, the government remains fully committed to making the findings of the report public, as I have made clear many times in preceding weeks.

Finally, the member for Corio asked me to answer some perfunctory questions that were put to me by the member for Hotham last week. That would require me to make a judgement about the efficacy and workings of the quarantine system, and I am not prepared in any way to criticise or condone a system that Justice Callinan is being empowered by this parliament to inquire into. It would be grossly improper of me to in any way seek to exonerate the AQIS, the quarantine system or those associated with it from the private sector, just as it would be for me to criticise it. Let us leave these things to Justice Callinan’s inquiry and let it get on with its job.

Mr GAVAN O’CONNOR (Corio) (6.52 pm)—I take the minister’s comments in relation to Justice Callinan and the investigation not only of how this disease entered the country but also of how it spread. As I understand what the minister is saying, there are two specific matters that he has directed Justice Callinan to inquire into and then any other matters incidental to those. Under this umbrella, the minister is suggesting that the issue of the spread of the disease will require Justice Callinan to investigate and report.
From the opposition’s point of view, we take the minister’s second reading speech at its word. In that speech, as I recall—and I must admit that I do not have it in front of me but I did quote from the minister’s second reading speech in the contribution I made to this debate—he refers to the fact that this investigation will cover not only how the disease entered the country but also how the disease spread. I say to the minister: if you are willing, in your second reading speech, to be quite specific about the nature of this inquiry, I simply invite you to incorporate that particular provision in the bill. It seems a logical extension of what you have already said in your second reading speech to incorporate that specific provision in the bill, and then there will be no argument. There will be unanimity on both sides of the House and in the industry and the community about the particular inquiry.

We restate some things that perhaps we do not like to restate on the floor of the House time and time again. But on this side of the House we are sick and tired of the government initiating inquiries where there are, shall I say, ‘nobbled terms of reference’. I used that term in my speech. I am not suggesting that the minister is nobbling the terms of reference; I am merely saying that we have had a very bad experience in terms of AWB and the capacity of the terms of reference in an inquiry to actually limit where the justice entrusted with the task of the inquiry can go. All we are simply asking the minister to do in the amendments we have proposed is to be true and specific to what he has already stated in his second reading speech ought to be the subject of inquiry. We do not think it is a big step to take. I think it would certainly temper any ongoing criticism we might have of the minister and what he might be attempting to do in framing the terms of reference to shield himself and the government in an election environment and a post-election environment from proper scrutiny. We are simply asking that this matter be transparent and that the government be accountable. We think the best way to do that is to implement the amendments that we have proposed, because they are very specifically consistent with the terms that have been used by the minister in his second reading speech.

Mr McGauran (Gippsland—Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry) (6.57 pm)—With the greatest respect to the member for Corio, I think his paranoia is clouding his judgement. These terms of reference are all-encompassing. They were drafted in consultation with Justice Callinan, and there is a catch-all provision which says: ‘... any other matters that are incidental to these ...’ The member for Corio concedes that there is no prospect of determining the cause of the outbreak in Australia unless you follow the epidemiological trail and discover just how it was transmitted from horse to horse and what handlers were involved. After all, it is possible for people to conclude that there was a human breach of the quarantine facility either at Mascot airport, when the horses first landed from Japan, or at the Eastern Creek facility.

Mr Fitzgibbon—What was the source country?

Mr McGauran—Japan is almost certain to have been the source country.

Mr Fitzgibbon—Will the inquiry extend to events in the source country?

Mr McGauran—Sure—well, there may not be any need to. Justice Callinan will want to know whether it is the exact strain of the equine virus. What we know is that the Japanese and Australian virus is the Wisconsin 2003 variety, but the Animal Health Laboratory at Geelong wants to go one step further and make sure it is the exact strain.

CHAMBER
am sure that Justice Callinan would want to satisfy himself as to the link with Japan, but it seems too much of a coincidence that the horses arrived from Japan on approximately 8 August, equine influenza was notified in Japan on 15 August and both events happened to involve the same family of equine virus, Wisconsin 2003. But, from the moment the horses landed at Mascot and were transported to Eastern Creek, it would seem to a lot of people that somebody breached the quarantine safeguards—somebody in contact with the influenza-affected horses left and then transmitted it to another horse, because none of the horses with equine influenza that arrived from Japan have ever left protective custody. So Justice Callinan will of course follow the trail of humans and of the virus itself.

I appreciate the points being made by the member for Corio, but they are unnecessary. We could get into a word game here in which every possible scenario has to be reduced to print. I much prefer, with the agreement of Justice Callinan, the broad terms that in no way hinder his lines of inquiry.

Mr FITZGIBBON (Hunter) (6.59 pm)—I thank the minister for attempting to answer my question, which inappropriately came by way of interjection. Can I say that I am genuinely seeking information here as this impacts significantly on my electorate. My question really was: what activities, if any, does AQIS undertake or participate in in the source country before the horse actually leaves that country? Is there any suggestion that there was a breakdown within the source country and, again, will the inquiry extend to any activities that did or did not take place in the source country?

Mr McGAURAN (Gippsland—Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry) (7.00 pm)—Now that the honourable member for Hunter phrases it in those terms I see the logic of his question. And you are right: of course Justice Callinan will want to know how the horses were handled in Japan before they arrived in Australia to see whether or not procedures were followed in that country and whether or not there were any faults or errors that led to the horses being infected with equine virus and coming to Australia. It is a very good point; I had not quite appreciated it. My understanding is that the standard operating procedures were followed in Japan. The horses were isolated for the required 14 days in quarantine in Japan at a quarantine station and they were in the care and under the authority of the Japanese quarantine officials. At this stage I am not aware of any breakdown in the system there but, again, that is a matter for Justice Callinan.

Mr GAVAN O’CONNOR (Corio) (7.01 pm)—I will make some concluding comments. I hope the minister takes the amendments that are proposed in the spirit in which they are being proposed. I am certainly not paranoid about this matter. I do this in the context of the fact that in 2004 the government was warned of the potential devastation that this disease, if it entered the country, could have on the Australian equine industry. Of course, the matters relating to how governments and ministers responded to the industry’s concerns in 2004 will not be covered, as I understand it, by this inquiry. That is an overall political concern that we on the opposition side would have because, at the end of the day, governments and ministers—whether it is the current minister or previous ministers—must be responsible on the floor of the House for the portfolios that they administer.

This a very critical area in Australian agriculture and the Australian equine industry. This particular disease has already devastated the industry in two states and has the potential to wreak economic havoc in my and the minister’s state of Victoria. I put on
the public record that warnings about the virulence of this disease and its potential impact on the Australian industry were around, as far as the industry was concerned, in 2004 and that those matters and how the government responded to them at the time will not be the subject of this inquiry. That is the simple point I am making.

Mr McGauran (Gippsland—Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry) (7.03 pm)—Again, I appreciate the member for Corio taking the time to clarify his concerns for me so that I better understand them. No, I do feel that the first term of reference would cover any of the events involving industry, AQIS or the government in the lead-up to the outbreak having a relevance to Justice Callinan’s considerations. The first term of reference refers to ‘the circumstances that have contributed to the outbreak of equine influenza in Australia’. I would take it, on my interpretation, that anybody with a concern or a grievance previously held about the conduct of the quarantine system with regard to the importation of horses will make themselves known and heard, bearing in mind that there will be public hearings. If the member for Corio is referring to the highly publicised exchange of letters in, I understand, late 2004 and through the early part of 2005 between the Australian Racing Board and my predecessor as minister for agriculture, these are sure to be closely examined by the inquiry for no other reason than that the ARB are certain to bring them to the judge’s attention. If there were no public hearings and there was no opportunity for people to come forward with their views and experiences of the past practices of the quarantine system, as well as current ones, then I would concede the member for Corio’s point. But I think the fact that there will be public hearings and Justice Callinan will be calling for persons with a view on the working of the system as it applied to imported horses should satisfy him.

Question negatived.

Bill agreed to.

Third Reading

Mr McGauran (Gippsland—Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry) (7.06 pm)—by leave—I move:

That this bill be now read a third time.

Question agreed to.

Bill read a third time.

NATIONAL GREENHOUSE AND ENERGY REPORTING BILL 2007

Second Reading

Debate resumed from 12 September, on motion by Mr Turnbull:

That this bill be now read a second time.

upon which Mr Garrett moved by way of amendment:

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

“whilst not declining to give the bill a second reading, the House:

(1) notes that:

(a) the bill was hastily drafted without any genuine consultation with stakeholders, including state governments, industry groups and environment groups;

(b) the bill was hastily drafted and introduced so as to prevent due public and parliamentary scrutiny; and

(c) significant government amendments were circulated less than 24 hours before the second reading debate so as to prevent due public and parliamentary scrutiny;

(2) is concerned that the bill does not reflect the urgent need to establish an effective emissions trading scheme; and

(3) therefore demands that the Government amend the legislation according to the unanimous recommendations of the Senate inquiry’s report”.

CHAMBER
Mr JENKINS (Scullin) (7.06 pm)—Five days ago when I started my remarks on the National Greenhouse and Energy Reporting Bill 2007 I indicated my disquiet that this was yet a further example of the lack of consultation that characterises the way in which the government develops its policies. This bill has been looked at by the Senate Standing Committee on Environment, Communications, Information Technology and the Arts, which held a public hearing on 3 September. That public hearing was characterised by groups like the Australian Industry Greenhouse Network, which represents major Australian emitters, indicating that the government had not consulted them when the bill was drafted. Likewise, state governments indicated that they were not consulted. Environment groups testified that the reporting thresholds were too high and that more information should be publicly disclosed. In the short public discussion through that process, we saw great problems with the way that the government has ignored sitting down with stakeholders to try and make sure that the piece of legislation that is before us is appropriate. Certainly the opposition has come to the conclusion that, regrettably, the way in which this bill is couched has the potential to slow action. It might also undermine, at least in the short term, some of the initiatives that have been put in place by the state government.

Labor have a different tradition and a modern attitude to the way in which we should put in place these pieces of public policy. That has been characterised by previous governments. Certainly the intent of new leadership is to show that, by sitting down with stakeholders, we can achieve outcomes that are solid and can be more readily achieved. The Prime Minister has come into this place quite often and talked about coal and has indicated from across the chamber that he believed the opposition’s attitude was a threat to the jobs of coalminers. That was a total fix and was spin being placed on the reality of Labor’s position. That has now been proven by the joint announcement last week of the ACF, the Australian Conservation Foundation, and the CFMEU Mining and Energy Division. When two parties to a discussion about public policy like the ACF and the CFMEU Mining and Energy Division come forward with an agreed policy about a direction for action on climate change, it shows the paucity of the position that has been often put by the Prime Minister.

Both Don Henry, the Executive Director of ACF, and Tony Maher, the General President of the CFMEU Mining and Energy Division, indicated their unanimous support and called for the government and the opposition to commit to (1) setting science based legislative targets to cut greenhouse emissions, (2) substantially increasing the existing mandatory renewable energy target and (3) joining the international effort by ratifying the Kyoto protocol before the end of 2007. Tony Maher went on further to say that he felt that the Prime Minister and not conservationists were the biggest threat to coalminers. The main debate has been going on not at the extreme ends of this debate but in the middle. Tony Maher indicated that it is clearer day by day:

That decade of inaction means that we’re a decade behind where we need to be in terms of clean coal technology.

There we have it. We have a different attitude to the way in which we can go about ensuring that we reach the outcomes. We can reach those outcomes if we have a government that embraces inclusion rather than a government—that has been very exclusive in its dealings about public policy. Who else can contribute to the way in which we achieve outcomes that are necessary for climate
change? In this case, the analogy is correct: the work is at the coalface. The point is that these things are going to be implemented at every part of the chain. If we do it domestically then we are better placed to not only dictate to but, more importantly, assist those with whom we trade in the wider global market for our resources to ensure that they use those resources in the cleanest way possible. To consider that the emerging giants like China and India are not interested in ensuring that their use of our coal is the best and cleanest way is to not give them credit for their understanding. They recognise that they cannot develop and grow their economies in the absence of ensuring that they treat their environment in the most sustainable way possible.

This is the challenge for us all. That is why it is absolutely churlish of the government not to recognise that, by not taking that step and ratifying the Kyoto protocol, they place themselves outside of the discussions that will continue. Their catchcry is to act in Australia’s best interest. We now come to a stage where the next step—a multilateral international agreement on climate change flowing on from the Kyoto protocol—is the game in town. To put Australia outside of the processes to ensure that that is going to happen simply seems irresponsible and not in Australia’s best interest.

So we confront an opportunity in the run-up to the next election for the Australian public to sit in judgement on two sets of policies or directions in this area which are polls apart. They can decide that, after a decade of inaction, the attitude that we should see is one that is in some parts softly-softly but, more drastically, is done in closed quarters, without open debate. Contrast that with the way the opposition leader, Kevin Rudd, has ensured that, in the development of Labor’s policies, we sat down with stakeholders to have an acute understanding of the way matters economic, matters environmental and matters social are very important to the challenge of confronting climate change. So when we look at a piece of legislation such as the one before us it should in fact become a tool for us to reach the goals that we need. It is important that we get the best tools, the most appropriate way of going forward.

It is interesting that in the run-up to APEC we had this indication by the Prime Minister that, by getting climate change on the agenda, this would be one of the most significant discussions that we would see. The Sydney declaration, whilst in its aspirational sense is perhaps of some importance, I contend is of little importance compared with the journey that we have been on because it is based on an assumption that countries such as China, which were outside those target processes of Kyoto, were in some way not engaged in the continuing debate. If you look at the number of countries that are involved in the Kyoto processes and the Kyoto protocol, it is much greater than the number that had the target set as protocol 1 countries of the Kyoto protocol. I think what we really need to see is that once and for all we have a national government that is willing to show leadership on this issue and that is willing to sit down with all the stakeholders—the industry groups, the state government and those within the community who have a special interest in these matters—and together go forward.

As I said earlier in this debate, that was the attitude that characterised the Hawke-Keating years, when there were negotiations where people sat down and got directions that were agreed by all parties—that feeling of consensus, accords and other processes that enable us to go forward on a complete basis of inclusion in the best interests of the Australian community. (Time expired)
Mr ALBANESE (Grayndler) (7.18 pm)—After 11 years of inaction and denial on climate change, the National Greenhouse and Energy Reporting Bill 2007 represents a hastily cobbled together attempt by the government to look as though it is doing something, just before the election is called. The bill establishes a single national framework for reporting greenhouse gas emissions and energy consumption and production by corporations by 1 July 2008. By the 2010-11 financial year the reporting framework will apply to approximately 700 companies that emit more than 500,000 tonnes.

This bill has been developed, however, without appropriate consultation with state governments, industry bodies or environment groups. Given that the National Emissions Trading Taskforce, established by state governments, put out a discussion paper last year, it is extraordinary that the federal government has not consulted with them properly. Given the importance the economic transformation to a carbon constrained economy will have for industry, it is extraordinary that there has not been proper consultation with them. And, given the importance of climate change as the moral challenge for our generation, it is extraordinary that there has not been proper consultation with environment groups. But of course this is a government that has been in denial over climate change for 11 years.

In 2003 the Treasurer put forward a submission to cabinet for an emissions trading scheme. It was supported by his department, it was supported by the Department of the Environment and Heritage, it was supported by the Department of Industry, Tourism and Resources and it was supported by the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet. But it was not supported by the Prime Minister, a Prime Minister stuck in the past and not capable of making the leap forward into the policies that are required of a modern government in the 21st century, a Prime Minister who does not have the support of the majority of his own cabinet colleagues. Even they have realised that he is so out of touch with what is needed for leadership in this nation in 2007 and beyond that they informed the Prime Minister collectively last week that they had come to the view that it was time he retired.

We also know that the basis of the Treasurer’s submission to cabinet in 2003 was the number of reports that were produced by the emissions trading group in the Australian Greenhouse Office. The group did all the research and produced the reports but the government’s response was not to implement the policy but to abolish that group. When Labor raised—as we have continued to do day after day, month after month and year after year—the need for a price on carbon and the need for market based mechanisms to drive the transformation to a carbon constrained economy by having a national emissions trading scheme, the Prime Minister’s response and rhetoric up until last year was that this was a Labor tax. I remember debating the current minister’s predecessor, Senator—

Mr Turnbull—Were you a senator then?

Mr ALBANESE—Unlike you, Minister, he was prepared to debate at forums occasionally but not very often; he was prepared to engage in that. He used to argue that emissions trading was a tax, that this was Labor’s new tax that was going to ruin the economy and jobs. But of course what we have here is finally a government being dragged into the end of the last decade. That is where they are up to now.

I say that because in 1997, when Australia signed the Kyoto protocol, we signed it on the basis that market based mechanisms were the key to driving that change. We signed it on the basis that, to quote the Prime Minister
of the time, it was a ‘win for the environment and a win for Australian jobs’. We got a very good deal out of Kyoto. We got the second highest target, of 108 per cent, in the industrialised world. Only Iceland has a higher target.

But we got more than that because, in order to get Australia in as part of the system, the countries which met at Kyoto in 1997 agreed that you could take into account land-use changes and they agreed that that could be retrospective to 1990. So we got this 108 per cent target, but in reality it was much more generous than that because we know that if it were not for the decisions of the New South Wales and Queensland state Labor governments to stop broad-scale land clearing in their states Australia would be massively over our very generous target. As it is, it is unlikely that we will hit our target anyway.

If you look at the projections from the Australian Greenhouse Office, you note—and these are the last ones that I looked at—they have us increasing our emissions by 27 per cent by 2020. We know that we need to stabilise emissions and turn them down. Australia is one of the few industrialised countries on earth to be going in completely the wrong direction. If you look at the countries that have been successful in driving down their emissions while having sustained economic growth, such as the United Kingdom, Denmark and Germany, one of the lessons you learn is that they have used market based mechanisms to drive that change through. They have recognised that those mechanisms are an essential part of driving that new technology. When we talk about the policy changes that are there, it is not just about having emissions trading; it is also, in terms of ratifying Kyoto, about getting access to the clean development mechanism and other mechanisms that do engage a developing world to drive that change through.

You only have to look at the draft Sydney declaration and compare it with what came out of the Sydney declaration to realise how isolated Australia is on these positions, because the two documents are very different. The original draft declaration that went forward spoke about welcoming ‘the initiative by the United States to convene a group of major economies to seek agreement on a detailed contribution to a post-2012 global arrangement’. But after this was added ‘under the UNFCCC’. And then this was added:

We pledge our support for the initiative of the Secretary-General of the United Nations in convening a High-Level Event on Climate Change. The countries that have ratified Kyoto—which is every industrialised country in the world except for Australia, the United States and Kazakhstan; they are the only three countries to have signed the Kyoto protocol but not ratified it—want truly global action. They want action through the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change. Later this year, in a couple of months time, there will be a really significant meeting which will be held in Bali, and at that conference there will be two streams: firstly, the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change; and, secondly, the third meeting of the parties to the Kyoto protocol. They will be discussing what the post-2012 changes and improvements will be to the Kyoto protocol.

Quite clearly Kyoto was a first step. As with all international agreements such as this, the nations of the industrialised world, because they were the cause of the problem and they also had the economic strength to show leadership and take action first, were given specific binding targets under Kyoto. The task is to get the rest of the world including China and India to move forward. But it is very hard when, having negotiated such an extraordinarily generous deal, Australia walked away from its commitments under the Kyoto protocol.
The post-2012 regime will not be something new. We have forgotten that there is none of this rhetoric about new Kyoto and all that nonsense—that has all disappeared, gone. Even the Australian has stopped its front-page headlines of ‘Kyoto dead’ and there being a new framework. It has stopped that. It has come to the reality that Kyoto is the driving force that everyone except for those three countries has decided upon. The question is: how you influence the post-2012 regime? Australia, because of our vulnerable environment of where we are positioned and our climate, has a lot to lose by dangerous climate change. We also have a lot to gain because of where we are positioned through the economic opportunities that would come about if we were not isolated on this issue.

At that Bali conference, the post-2012 discussions, which will not be finalised there, will largely be influenced by what is happening now. I hope that the minister understands that the first commitment period of Kyoto has not even started yet—it is 2008 to 2012—let alone decisions about how it will take place in practice. Of course there have to be improvements. We are talking about a global economic transformation, about mechanisms such as the clean development mechanism being a driving force there. We are talking about the joint implementation measures for which Australia could have significant economic opportunities for investment if we were a part of it. Those changes will influence what the second commitment period post 2012 will look like. But we are not a part those discussions and our officials and bureaucrats go along to those meetings and just take notes. They are not able to participate; they are not around the table.

I hope that Australia is able to be represented at both forums. Certainly, if the election was being held at the time it should be—which is right now—then there would be the opportunity. If Labor are elected we will ratify the Kyoto protocol and once again be a part of the global system. We know the pressure that would then be on the United States to come in and be part of the global solution. Indeed, the structure of Kyoto is an American design. It was not designed by the Europeans. It was designed bearing in mind what George Bush senior’s administration did in dealing with the sulphur dioxide issue in emissions trading and having those market based mechanisms there. I think it is tragic that whilst the rest of the world is moving ahead—and I have sat in an emissions trading room in London where emissions trading is actually taking place successfully—all we are doing here in legislation in Australia in 2007 are some preconditions for emissions trading. Way back in 1998 the Sydney Futures Exchange spent millions of dollars developing a system because they wanted Sydney to be at the centre of the action when it comes to what will be the world’s biggest market.

I also want to take the opportunity in this debate on climate change to reflect on an ad I have just seen on television, an extraordinary ad about the Climate Clever campaign, given that during question time on 16 occasions in four days the Prime Minister said that this campaign did not exist. There were 16 occasions over four days. During question time on 23 and 24 May the Prime Minister denied on five occasions that he had approved a climate change advertising campaign and then during the sitting week, 28 to 31 May, for a further 11 questions he remained in denial, misleading parliament 16 times over four days. What is the basis of this policy? Using taxpayers’ funds to pretend that the government is actually doing something.

There is nothing wrong with the idea that individuals should take action to reduce their carbon footprint. There is nothing wrong with that at all. But what is required is gov-
ernment leadership. It is absurd to suggest that the climate change challenge can be met by people turning off their taps or taking individual action. It actually needs leadership from government and from industry. That is why you need an emissions trading system. That is why you need a significantly increased mandatory renewable energy target. Unless you have that, you will not get the drive in investment in solar, in wind, in tidal, in geothermal and in the innovation that is required.

In 1996 we were 10 per cent of the world’s solar industry. Today we are two per cent. We have gone down enormously during that period. We have companies packing up and moving overseas. We are the only country in the world where renewable energy production, manufacturing plants, are actually closing down. They are closing down because the government has not put those mechanisms in place.

The government’s response was to have a campaign that it is so ashamed of in terms of its record that it denies the campaign even exists. When we asked very specific questions in this parliament about the little old lady with the kettle—we clearly had copies of the ads and waved them around in parliament—the government denied it because the government has, of course, been in denial about climate change. In the Age on 30 May, this is what Michelle Grattan said about that process:

It was the day that John Howard looked panicked rather than prime ministerial.

... ...

Howard had got himself into an absurd and unnecessary position by trying to deny the existence of planned climate change advertising on the ground it does not exist until it gets the ministerial tick. He simply sounds devious, stubborn and slightly crazy. He has, over several parliamentary days created a bigger problem than he needed to have.

It is not surprising that the government is embarrassed about its performance on climate change. It has been a part of holding the world back when it comes to taking action on climate change. That is why, at the 11th hour of its term, the government is introducing legislation not to have a national emissions trading scheme but just to have the first step to set up a precondition.

There is no more apparent area in which the government shows that it is simply incapable of providing the leadership that is required to move the nation forward than that of climate change. Climate change requires guts, which the Treasurer certainly does not have. He has just sat back and allowed the Prime Minister to do it all, even though he had an emissions trading proposal before the cabinet in 2003. Climate change requires courage and vision in the interests of future generations. (Time expired)

Mr TURNBULL (Wentworth—Minister for the Environment and Water Resources) (7.39 pm)—in reply—I thank honourable members for their contributions. A national high-quality greenhouse and energy dataset is a foundation requirement for establishing a successful emissions trading system and informing all Australian governments in their decisions. The National Greenhouse and Energy Reporting Bill 2007 will establish Australia’s first nationwide mandatory system for collecting high-quality greenhouse and energy data from industry. This bill will allow for a more comprehensive and accurate picture of Australia’s greenhouse gas emissions and energy use than ever before.

One of the bill’s strengths is its provisions to reduce the number of reports that businesses are required to submit under the current patchwork of programs across jurisdictions. In some cases, the number of reports will reduce from eight down to one. We will consult widely with industry and state and...
territory governments in coming months to ensure that government reporting require-
ments are streamlined as soon as practicable.

Because of the urgent need for data to un-
derpin the introduction of the Australian emissions trading system, which the gov-
ernment intends to implement by 2011, discus-
sions on streamlining will not delay the collection of data under this system. The bill will see the national greenhouse and energy reporting system up and running by 1 July 2008. I thank the participants in the debate and commend the bill to the House.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr Bar-
resi)—The original question was that this bill be now read a second time. To this the honourable member for Kingsford Smith 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.

Consideration in Detail

Bill—by leave—taken as a whole.

Mr TURNBULL (Wentworth—Minister for the Environment and Water Resources) (7.41 pm)—I present a supplementary ex-
planatory memorandum to the bill. I ask leave of the House to move government amendments (1) to (11), as circulated, to-
gether.

Leave granted.

Mr TURNBULL—I move:

(1) Clause 5, page 3 (line 17) to page 4 (line 6), omit the clause, substitute:

5 Act excludes some State and Territory laws

This Act is intended to apply to the exclusion of a law of a State or Terri-
tory, or a part of such a law:

(a) that provides for the reporting or disclosure of information related to:

(i) greenhouse gas emissions; or

(ii) greenhouse gas projects; or

(iii) energy consumption; or

(iv) energy production; and

(b) that the regulations provide is a law, or part of a law, to which this sec-
tion applies;

so far as the law, or part of the law, would otherwise apply in relation to
a constitutional corporation.

(2) Clause 16, page 14 (line 16), omit paragraph 4(b), substitute:

(b) any other matters, required by the regulations, that relate to the follow-
ing:

(i) the identity of the controlling corporation and members of the

corporation’s group;

(ii) whether the corporation is re-

quired to be registered under sec-
tion 12 or has applied for regis-

tration under section 14;

(iii) whether the corporation has

complied with provisions of this

Act;

(iv) information that is published

under section 24.

(3) Clause 16, page 14 (lines 17 to 25), omit subclause (5).

(4) Clause 20, page 19 (lines 18 and 19), omit paragraph (3)(b), substitute:

(b) the registered corporation:

(i) is not entitled to acquire the in-
formation from the other person;

or

(ii) is entitled to acquire the information from the other person only
because the other person is
obliged to assist the corporation to comply with this Act; and

(5) Clause 21, page 20 (line 33) to page 21 (line 14), omit subclause (4), substitute:

(4) A report must:

(a) be based on methods determined by the Minister under subsection 10(3), or methods which meet criteria determined by the Minister under that subsection; and

(b) include any information specified by the regulations for the purposes of this paragraph.

Civil penalty: 1,000 penalty units.

Note: Under Division 137 of the Criminal Code it may be an offence to provide false or misleading information or documents to the Greenhouse and Energy Data Officer in purported compliance with this Act.

(6) Clause 21, page 21 (line 15), omit “paragraph (4)(c)”, substitute “paragraph (4)(b)”.

(7) Clause 21, page 21 (after line 22), at the end of the clause, add:

(6) A report is taken not to be a report under this section unless:

(a) it is given in a manner and form approved by the Greenhouse and Energy Data Officer; and

(b) it is given to the Greenhouse and Energy Data Officer within a period specified in the regulations; and

(c) subsections (3) and (4) have been complied with.

(8) Clause 23, page 23 (line 19), at the end of paragraph (1)(b), add:

; or (iv) if the person is an employee of the Commonwealth or of an authority of the Commonwealth, or is appointed to an office under a law of the Commonwealth—a law of a State or Territory or the performance of duties in relation to a law of a State or Territory.

(9) Clause 27, page 27 (line 7), omit “may”, substitute “must”.

(10) Clause 27, page 27 (after line 12), after sub-clause (1), insert:

(1A) However, the Greenhouse and Energy Data Officer may refuse to disclose information under this section if satisfied that there would not be adequate security measures in place in relation to the confidentiality of the information.

(11) Clause 56, page 44 (after line 11), after paragraph (e), insert:

(ea) refuse to disclose information under section 27; and

The government is grateful to those who provided submissions during the recent Senate Standing Committee on Environment, Communications, Information Technology and the Arts inquiry into the bill’s provisions. We are mindful of the recommendations made by the Senate committee and have considered a number of issues raised through that process. The government seeks to amend the provisions concerning state and territory laws so that only laws or parts of laws specifically named by regulation can be excluded. This will ensure that COAG’s goal of streamlining can be achieved while providing a further safeguard against possible unintended effects on other laws.

With regard to these provisions, I reiterate the government’s intention to continue to work cooperatively with states and territories to transition to a single national reporting system that meets their needs. A further amendment will clarify the Australian government’s obligation to provide data to states and territories, provided that certain conditions are met relating to security of data and streamlining of reporting. The amendments will also establish a right of appeal to the Administrative Appeals Tribunal to enable state and territory governments to appeal
against a decision of the Greenhouse and Energy Data Officer not to disclose greenhouse and energy information. Taken together, these amendments demonstrate the government’s willingness to work cooperatively with state and territory governments to set up the least burdensome national reporting system.

Question agreed to.

Bill, as amended, agreed to.

Third Reading

Mr TURNBULL (Wentworth—Minister for the Environment and Water Resources) (7.43 pm)—by leave—I move:

That this bill be now read a third time.

Question agreed to.

Bill read a third time.

HEALTH INSURANCE AMENDMENT (MEDICARE DENTAL SERVICES) BILL 2007

Second Reading

Debate resumed from 16 August, on motion by Mr Abbott:

That this bill be now read a second time.

Ms ROXON (Gellibrand) (7.44 pm)—The purpose of the Health Insurance Amendment (Medicare Dental Services) Bill 2007 is to amend the Health Insurance Act 1973 in order to provide for the expansion of the government’s failing Medicare dental program for people with chronic conditions and complex care needs. Labor will be opposing this legislation. Labor has consistently and loudly highlighted not only the weaknesses of this particular policy but also the Howard government’s negligent approach to the dental health needs of Australians over the last 11 years. A decade of Howard government neglect cannot be fixed by throwing millions of dollars at this failing policy.

There is little doubt that Australia is in the midst of a potentially catastrophic dental care crisis. Currently, there are 650,000 Australians on public dental waiting lists around the country, many waiting years for treatment. Thirty per cent of Australians reported avoiding dental care due to the cost. Dental workforce shortages mean that Australians simply cannot get in to the dentist when their teeth need attention. In the public sector it means long waiting lists; in the private sector it means not being able to get in to see a local dentist at short notice. These dental workforce shortages are particularly felt in outer metropolitan, regional and rural areas, where there are very few dental professionals.

These problems with accessing affordable dental care are contributing to Australia’s deteriorating dental health. The deterioration of the oral health of Australians is the most worrying factor in this debate today. Tooth decay ranks as Australia’s most prevalent health problem, while gum disease ranks as the fifth highest. Untreated dental decay in the Australian adult population stands at over 25 per cent—that is, more than a quarter of Australians are not getting the dental care that they require. A recent study found that one in six Australians had avoided certain foods during the last 12 months because of problems with their teeth. About 50,000 Australians a year are being hospitalised for preventable dental conditions which have escalated into more serious problems because they have not been able to access treatment when needed.

Perhaps the biggest indictment of all is that, while Australian kids had world’s best teeth during the mid-1990s, there are now pockets of real concern. For example, between 1996 and 1999, five-year-olds experienced a 21.7 per cent increase in deciduous decay. This was matched by soaring hospitalisation figures for the removal or restoration of teeth. According to statistics of the New South Wales Chief Health Officer, between 1994 and 2004, hospitalisation rates
for children under five have increased by a staggering 91 per cent. Think about that for a moment: over a decade there has been a 91 per cent increase of hospitalisation rates for our children with dental health problems. This finding was confirmed by disturbing claims information, recently released by the health insurer MBF, which showed a 42 per cent increase in children being treated in private hospitals for dental cavities.

It is clear that Australians need action on dental health. But, rather than addressing this range of issues to improve accessibility to affordable dental care and therefore improving the oral health of Australians, the Howard government have instead spent much of the past decade cynically playing the blame game on dental health. Time and again, Prime Minister Howard and Health Minister Abbott have deflected criticism onto the states and territories, reiterating that Australia’s public dental crisis and deteriorating oral health standards are entirely a state and territory problem.

In seeking to blame the states and territories, the Prime Minister and the Minister for Health and Ageing have conveniently ignored two key facts. Firstly, it was the Howard government which scrapped Labor’s Commonwealth Dental Health Program in 1996, ripping $100 million a year from Australia’s public dental system. While state and territory governments have more than doubled their investment in public dental care over the past decade, the impact of the Howard government’s decision in 1996 is still reverberating today, not least on the hundreds of thousands of Australians languishing on public dental waiting lists. But let us be clear about this: dental care in Australia is in crisis because of the underfunding that I have mentioned and the workforce shortages. I emphasise these twin issues, because our current dental crisis is far more complex than the all too familiar Howard government one-liner, ‘It’s all the states’ fault.’

The Howard government seems to have forgotten that the training of dental professionals is uniquely a Commonwealth government responsibility. The Howard government’s neglect in this area is longstanding, and it is not as though it has not had sufficient warning of what was coming. A national oral health training strategy for oral healthcare providers and other health professionals was recommended by the Senate Community Affairs References Committee as long ago as 1998, but the Howard government has failed to act.

In 2003, researchers highlighted that there would be a shortage of 1,500 dental professionals by 2010 unless action was taken. In 2004, dental graduation levels were found to be at their lowest level for over 50 years. Belatedly, the government recently increased dental training places at Australia’s universities, and Labor welcomes the recent budget announcement of a new dental school at Charles Sturt University. But comprehensive and strategic national policies are required to ensure a long-term solution to this crisis. Not enough has been done to address in particular public sector shortages and regional and rural demand for dental professionals.

To give the House an example, I recently visited Bathurst, where I heard from locals how hard it was to get in to see a dentist, with many clinics having closed their books to new patients altogether. Meanwhile, those who relied on public services faced long waiting lists for attention from the dental clinic run by the Greater Western Area Health Service. More than 5,700 people were waiting for a public dental assessment, with another 2,200 people on treatment waiting lists, despite having been clinically assessed with a range of oral health problems. The public dentists were doing their best within
their resources, but they were simply run off their feet. In Cairns it was a similar story, where the Edmonton clinic in the southern part of Cairns had 4,000 people on their waiting list. When you consider that the Cairns region has a population of around 130,000, and there are nine public dental clinics in the broader region, that waiting list of 4,000 at just one service really hits home. Everyone I spoke to in Cairns about the dental crisis pointed to workforce shortages as the key issue: the region simply cannot attract the dental professionals they need. The story was the same again in Burnie in Tasmania, where I visited in April. A fully equipped public dental clinic was there, in good condition, to be used, but there was insufficient staff to run the place. As a result, there were almost 4,000 people on the general waiting list in Northern Tasmania.

I give these examples to show that there are two reasons for the crisis in dental care in Australia. It is an underfunding and resourcing issue which is severely exacerbated by the actions of the Howard government, and it is a workforce shortage issue, which is entirely the responsibility of the Howard government. It would be reasonable to expect that in these circumstances the Howard government might be looking to develop effective policy solutions to address these areas and to tackle the dental health needs of Australians. But, alas, we do not see solutions to any of those problems in the bill that is before us today.

After all, when we are discussing these facts and figures about waiting lists and preventable hospitalisation, workforce shortages and clinics that are closing their lists to people who need to see a dentist, we must always remember we are talking about people. We are talking about Australians who sometimes have such severe dental problems that not only their health but also their entire work and social lives are affected. These are people who may be having trouble eating, who will not go to visit friends, who will not socialise, who cannot apply for a job or who cannot get a job—simply because they cannot get the dental treatment that they need.

Unfortunately, the Howard government is far more interested in playing the blame game than it is in providing solutions for this dental crisis. The Howard government’s dental health initiatives have been limited to the subsidies of 30 per cent or more for those with private dental health insurance—rebates that Labor supports—and this ineffective Medicare dental program for people with chronic conditions and complex care needs.

This program was initially announced in March 2004 and commenced in July that year. According to the minister’s media release of 10 March 2004, which announced the inclusion of dental services in the government’s enhanced primary care program, this was ‘a health care measure, not a dental care scheme and will only be available where dental treatment is required to treat a chronic medical condition’. Under this policy, Australians were eligible for assistance with their dental care if they had a chronic medical condition, like valvular heart disease, diabetes or malignancies of the head and neck, and they had poor oral health or a dental condition which was exacerbating their chronic and complex disease, and they were being treated under a multidisciplinary care plan. These complex and restrictive eligibility criteria, which limited the program to people with chronic conditions and complex care needs, have severely limited the uptake of the program in the three years it has been operating.

Extremely high out-of-pocket expenses have also proven to be a significant barrier to uptake. Under the original policy, patients could claim up to three items in one calendar year, at a cost of $220 per year, for a pro-
gram of treatment. But, according to 2005-06 data released earlier this year, the average out-of-pocket expenses for assessment or treatment by a dental specialist under Medicare item 10977 was a whopping $692. It is hardly surprising that this has adversely affected the program’s take-up.

Complex referral processes between GPs and dentists have also been cited as a significant problem. In evidence to the Senate Standing Committee on Community Affairs, which examined this bill, the Australian Dental Association stated that the paperwork in the initial system was ‘a bit cumbersome’—a significant understatement—and that the administration of the scheme, most particularly practitioners’ unfamiliarity with Medicare, continues to cause concern. The AMA noted in their submission to the committee that there was ‘some ongoing concern that GPs have difficulty locating a dentist who will accept the rebates as full payment when referring patients’.

To get an idea of just how poorly this program has been executed, I refer again to the minister’s media release of 10 March 2004, when the program originally commenced. It stated that the new dental services would provide ‘for up to 23,000 people under multidisciplinary care plans’. In fact, in the three years between its introduction in July 2004 and June 2007, the program provided for around 7,000 patients at a cost of $1.8 million—well, well under estimates and certainly seriously underspent for the allocation that the government had made.

As I said earlier, Labor has consistently and loudly highlighted the weaknesses of this policy: its restrictive nature and the small number of people it is able to help. The government explicitly introduced this measure three years ago as a healthcare measure, not a dental care measure. But, on any assessment, this program has failed spectacularly as either. Although the health minister has on occasions openly acknowledged this failure, the government announced in this year’s budget not that it would look at addressing the restrictive eligibility criteria of the program, not that it would replace this failing program with something more effective and not that it would look more broadly at how to tackle Australia’s dental crisis. No, the government announced that it would pour an additional $377 million into an expansion of this failing and flawed program—and that amount has subsequently been increased to $384.6 million. A program that is so flawed that it has managed to spend only $1.8 million in three years has now been allocated $385 million over four years. It almost defies belief that, without changing the criteria or a range of other problems with this program, it would be possible for the government to spend this sort of money in the program the way it is currently designed.

The budget announcement included a change in the benefits available under this program, but this was also subsequently adjusted. If this bill passes through the parliament, from 1 November eligible patients will be able to access up to $4,250 worth of Medicare funded dental treatment over two consecutive calendar years. I admit that this might sound good to a casual passer-by, and the change might go some way to addressing the out-of-pocket expenses incurred by eligible patients, but the key problem of how few people are eligible remains well and truly in place. Given the extremely poor take-up to date, the bad design of this program and the lack of its utilisation to date, Labor has no confidence that the extended program will be any better, particularly because the government has failed to address the range of other problems besetting this Medicare chronic disease dental program. Most importantly, the eligibility criteria remain totally unchanged by this legislation.
Further, the government has failed to address the complex and restrictive referral processes identified as cumbersome by dentists and doctors alike. In fact, the department revealed to the recent Senate committee examining this legislation that the current three Medicare items will be expanded to more than 450 Medicare items under the extended programs. It hardly sounds to me that that is actually simplifying the process for doctors and dentists. Labor is not convinced that moving from three Medicare items to 450 Medicare items can possibly simplify this program or encourage greater take-up by patients or practitioners.

Mr Deputy Speaker Barresi, we know what this means. It means that people in your electorate, people in my electorate and people in the electorates of everybody who sits in this House will not be able to be assisted by this program. Throwing hundreds of millions of dollars at this failing program is not just an appalling piece of public policy. Labor objects to the continuation of a policy that not only is failing on its own narrow objectives but also will do very little to address Australia’s public dental waiting lists, will do nothing to make dental care more affordable and accessible to Australian families and fails to even contemplate Australia’s dental workforce crisis.

What do this bill and this policy do for our children? What do they do for older Australians in aged-care facilities? What do they do for those on really low incomes or working families with not a lot of extra cash to spare? What does this policy do for most Australians? The answer to all of those questions is: absolutely nothing. Labor considers that it is plainly inadequate to provide funding for acute dental services after the government has removed its contribution to general and preventative dental care, as was provided through the Commonwealth dental program previously.

The Prime Minister says that Australians have never been better off—but tell that to the Australians who cannot chew their food. Tell that to the people in Bathurst, in Cairns, in Burnie or in any of our seats around the country who have been waiting for years to access basic dental care. A decade of Howard government neglect cannot be fixed by throwing millions of dollars at this failing policy. It is Labor’s view that an investment of the magnitude proposed by the government should be directed towards a broad based Commonwealth scheme that better addresses the priority oral health needs of those groups in the community most in need of assistance. For these reasons, Labor will be opposing this bill.

The bill itself is actually very brief. The provisions simply provide the legislative framework for the policy detail still to be fully revealed by the government. The bill makes amendments to the Health Insurance Act to, firstly, enable a monetary limit on Medicare benefits for dental services to be introduced for eligible patients. The limit of $4,250 over two consecutive calendar years will be set out in a ministerial determination under subsection 3C(1) of the Health Insurance Act. Secondly, the amendments provide for Medicare benefits to be paid for the supply of dental prostheses, such as dentures, under the new dental items.

According to the explanatory memorandum, details such as the Medicare dental items, including the schedule fees, the eligibility requirements for dental providers and patients, and other administrative requirements will all be set out in a ministerial determination under subsection 3C(1) of the HIA. Perhaps when we see the rest of that detail we will be surprised by the policy developments outlined by the government, but for now Labor is not convinced that this policy is worthy of our support. Pouring hundreds of millions of dollars into a failing
program which has not even been able to spend $2 million over the last three years of operation is not good policy and will not help the hundreds of thousands of Australians in need of dental care.

Rather than support a failing policy, Labor will instead draw on these funds to support Labor’s own dental policy. Rather than focus on a policy with such restricted eligibility, a Rudd Labor government will re-establish a Commonwealth dental program and ease the cost pressures on working families by contributing to the cost of dental care. Rather than constantly blaming the states for the crisis in Australia’s dental health, a Rudd Labor government will end the blame game and work with the states and territories to fix Australia’s dental care system, to provide services for those people in our communities who are desperately in need of dental care and to ensure that working families who are currently under pressure to choose whether they get the dental care that they need, whether they pay their childcare costs or whether they pay for their groceries or their petrol will not be put in the position where their children cannot get the basic dental care that they need. It is for these reasons that we oppose the bill and think that the money could be much better spent on a program that supports working families.

Mr TUCKEY (O’Connor) (8.04 pm)—It is interesting that, in the last seconds of the speech that was made by the member for Gellibrand, we were actually given some inkling of what Labor’s alternative policy is. We did not actually get the detail—though the member for Gellibrand had another 10 minutes of speaking opportunity—but we did get that they are going back to the Paul Keating system. In her opening statement on the Health Insurance Amendment (Medicare Dental Services) Bill 2007, the member for Gellibrand chose to mislead the House by attacking the Howard government for a piece of Keating legislation which, if she had been around at the time or observant she would know, was Labor government policy for four years.

The Keating legislation to which she referred was introduced with a four-year sunset clause. The Howard government did nothing to cancel that program; it cancelled itself by legislation which, if the member for Gellibrand had been present at the time she would know, was passed by a Labor government under then Prime Minister Paul Keating. So why not tell this House the truth? What substance is there in your rhetoric when you cannot even take the blame for your own actions? It was always possible for the Howard government to reinstate that program. As I recollect, it expired in the first three years of the Howard government. But what was the Howard government trying to do at that time? It was trying to save Australia from the ‘recession we had to have’. There was no money for people’s teeth; there was no money for anything. The government of the day owed $96 billion.

They lecture us now as to how they might spend the surpluses, which were generated, through a lot of political pain, by something that was introduced by the Howard government in difficult times. That is what the member for Gellibrand is talking about. I never stopped taking notes. She had to introduce the blame game argument—that is about as far as their policy initiatives go. You cannot blame the states. I was not around at the time of Federation, but I have read a lot about it. It was not the Australian government in its initial stages that decided that it would not have responsibility for dental treatment. That was a decision of state governments. They were the ones who said, ‘This is what you the Australian government’—the Commonwealth—‘can do.’ They had the power, and they kept dental treatment for themselves. They also retained in-
come tax, but could not hand it over quickly enough during the Second World War. When Malcolm Fraser offered it to them, one of their luminaries, Mr Wran, started a public campaign about double taxation.

In the end, the Howard government had to introduce the GST—at great political cost, I might add—for very good tax reform reasons but also to prop up the states and give them some money. What did the Prime Minister say during that campaign? This is a response to the blame game argument—’We are going to take the political pain of introducing a new tax regime so that there is a source of money, the GST, a growth tax, so that the states can meet their fundamental chosen responsibilities.’ Those responsibilities were not imposed upon them; they were chosen. And what were they? They were public health, public policing and education.

We have a potential federal minister, a shadow minister, explaining to us why there is some fault in a government that continues to try and restrict the exposure of the Australian taxpayer to something that state governments chose as their own responsibility. She says that we have a shortage of people and that that is all the Howard government’s fault. It is like the shortage of doctors. After the Hawke government implemented the original bulk-billing arrangements, they were so generous that one doctor was able to buy an AFL football team with the proceeds of his business. They were so panicked about that that they cut—

Mr Brendan O’Connor interjecting—

Fran Bailey interjecting—

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr Barresi)—Minister and member for Gorton, you are very audible.

Mr TUCKEY—She is the same minister that I complained about once before. She never stops talking. But we will deal with that matter tomorrow.

Fran Bailey interjecting—

Mr TUCKEY—No, I am sorry: you do it all the time.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER—The member for O’Connor has the floor.

Mr TUCKEY—Thank you for your protection from the chatterbox. The fact of life is that all of these things were implemented because there was no money left. The Australian people and parliament had a debt of $16 billion in 1991. By 1996 it was $96 billion—it went up $80 billion. There was no hope of the Australian government under Mr Howard re-establishing a program that the Labor government of the day implemented for only four years. It was a catch-up program. The Labor Party did not want the responsibility. They will make Paul Keating a hero one day; they did it with Gough Whitlam—he was the last Prime Minister to be elected on an ‘It’s time’ platform. It only took Australia about 30 years to get over his first 28 days of government. Anyway, there is no blame.

Because of the chatting of the minister, I lost my thought for a minute. The facts of life are that, in response to the growth in the bulk-billing sector, the Hawke government reduced the intake to universities by 4,000. As everyone knows, 10 years is the minimum time for a GP to hang out their shingle independently. And you wonder why there has been a shortage thereafter. It is a matter of record how many new places have been opened up. But what are the state governments doing about trying to encourage people to enter the dental profession? It is fairly highly rewarded. They are doing nothing. And what do they say to the nurses and doctors whom they employ? ‘Take a two per cent wage increase.’ Half of those doctors and dentists that have been fully employed by Labor state governments would be better
off going up to the Pilbara and driving trucks.

We are told that if we elect Labor all the workers at McDonald’s are going to get a pay increase. But what are they going to do for the dentists? What are they going to do for the nurses? There is a good reason why there is a high proportion of unionism in the public sector. They are primarily workers employed by state governments, and they think that they need a union to protect them. Those who choose a private sector employer have long had the opinion that they do not need a union. When we talk about union heavies—and they will populate this place in ever-increasing numbers after the election, whatever the outcome—we find out that the last two presidents of the ACTU, the incumbent and the other one who has already secured a position here, were school teachers. Where are the miners? Where are all those people who used to think that it was necessary to be protected by a union?

The whole presentation of the member for Gellibrand was about the blame game. Their colleagues in state governments, who—by their own decision 100 years ago—are obliged to provide dental services to the community, do not want to provide such services. They so grossly underpay their nurses, their incumbent doctors, their in-house doctors and their dentists that no-one wants to work for them. Then they tell the poor old Australian taxpayer: ‘Well, you stump up for it. We’ve got all the money from the GST out of you and it’s not enough.’

Since the advent of what I call the McGinty-McTiernan government, 18,000 public servants have been employed in Western Australia. A couple of former leaders of the Labor Party who were just frontmen found that they were dispensable. Change them over and you have a revolving-door process of state Labor government leaders. They build up their superannuation to a point where it cannot be improved and they get feelings of disability. Premier Gallop got worried about himself, for which he had good reason: about five or six of his ministers were going to get the chop after there had been accusations of corruption. They were all in the Burke faction. But the fact is that these people have a fundamental responsibility. It is not a blame game.

Let me say something about private industry. As a youth, I had the opportunity to apply for a cadetship with the scientific section of CSR. At that time this was a common practice, as there were no free universities and no HECS. You got a Commonwealth scholarship; otherwise, your parents had to put you through university. Industry stood up, as did state governments—in particular in forestry, as I recollect—and it provided cadetships. Cadetships meant that young people could go to university on a small wage, which was provided by their employer, and be trained. The employer paid the universities fees, whether they were government or private sector, but during the so-called holidays you went back to work for your employer. It was a wonderful scheme.

Then everybody got lazy when Whitlam said, ‘We’ll have free university training.’ You do not get free apprenticeship training; you get a wage that is usually inadequate—and, of course, you pay for your TAFE fees. That is how the working class is treated. We have seen argument after argument from the frontbench of the Labor Party that the elite, the people who go to university, need special treatment. But where is a state government dentistry cadetship? I hope the next speaker on behalf of the Labor Party, if they have one, will explain to us where they are.

Mr Brendan O’Connor—There are plenty more to come after you.
Mr TUCKEY—I am pleased to hear it. I hope the next one who stands up to speak will tell us how they are going to deliver their policies. When it comes to the blame game, Paul Keating—who, as I said, might one day become one of their icons—said that whenever you have to give money to state governments make it specific. I plead guilty that our choice was to do otherwise. We took the political pain for the GST and gave it all, without conditions, to state governments. As I have said, in Western Australia there are 18,000 new public servants, but nearly all of them are in jobs where they are told, ‘Don’t come tomorrow.’ I will tell you what: they are going to stop that.

I was reading the BRW as I travelled back to Canberra and I found it interesting to see that Australian mining companies have now invested $18 billion in Africa. And I might add that the interest being shown to the mining sector by South Australia, to its credit—and there is no-one here to take that credit—now exceeds that being shown by Western Australia, the great mining resource state, because that state government has gone into lockdown. It cannot approve anything and it worries about everything. The Chinese communist president had to go there the other day to tell it to get its bureaucracy into gear. Fancy an Australian state government having to take advice on bureaucratic management from a communist. We like the Chinese and the man is only demonstrating that modern communism can have a business orientation. But it is pretty rough when one of our nation’s state governments has to be given a touch-up by the president of the communist Chinese about providing the Chinese with the opportunity to buy things off us—because that is all they want to know: ‘Can we buy from you?’ Of course, nothing is happening in Western Australia under that state government.

What are we talking about today when we talk about the blame game? A responsibility of state governments, under our Constitution, is to deliver dental services, but how can they if they have no programs to assist people to access such services? Past governments, Labor and Liberal, from my recollection, just to quote a case, used to employ forestry cadets—and I am sure that the member for Lyons would think that is a good idea, considering his constituency—but no more does that happen. However, when you get down to it, if state governments need workers, such as qualified medical practitioners in their hospitals, what are they doing about it?

I have to say that I am just as highly critical of industry. They thought the taxpayer would pay up. In these green chambers, you can make any promise that you would like to make, but each and every one of them is a burden on the taxpayers—and, of course, the massive union generated growth in wages has only benefited the tax office. When I was a youth, my father paid very little tax. He earned £6 a week, raised four kids and owned his own home. What have we achieved in this country since then? Anyone now in his job has to earn $1,000 a week and that is only half of what they need to keep their family—and those opposite will stand up and say, ‘We want more of that.’

But what are the government doing? They are showing compassion. Paul Keating showed some compassion. He thought he could put up some money for four years to let the states catch up. We thought we could put money to local government for local roads to let the states catch up, but the minute we provided the money they cut back on their contribution to local roads. This legislation is quite simple. What does it do according to the explanatory memorandum? The explanatory memorandum says:
The purpose of the Bill is to amend the Health Insurance Act 1973 ... in order to increase access to dental treatment under Medicare for people with chronic conditions and complex care needs. These people do not just need a filling. Maybe they should have that before they go to Bali. Maybe they should, because they are struggling families that are forced to earn 100 to 150 grand a year to survive, still notwithstanding the significant reductions we have delivered and the attack of the opposition on people in those wage brackets as some sort of wealthy elite. Everything I hear from the opposition on Work Choices is all about the McDonald’s economy. If you are working at Spotlight or McDonald’s that is the area of their care. But there are a lot of people with similar qualifications earning 150 grand a year in Western Australia working on mines—and we want to go back to the situation where those people are going to be dictated to by trade unionists so that we can lock up our customers from getting product for five and six weeks! I have seen it all. They say, ‘We’d better invest in Africa; we’d better invest in Brazil because you can’t trust Australia.’ Are we going back to that? Is that what we are voting about?

It struck me the other day that people better start giving more value to their vote, if the polls are correct, than selecting a babysitter. You would be very careful about who you selected to look after your kids, yet people seem to think they can offer the management of their country to a mob of people whom I referred to the other day as including an inexperienced public servant, an ambulance chaser and a rock singer.

This is good legislation and it is worth while, and it is going to help people in chronic need. It is not taking over responsibility of state governments. (Time expired)

Mr ADAMS (Lyons) (8.24 pm)—We will move on to the Health Insurance Amendment (Medicare Dental Services) Bill 2007—and the dentists all suffering under Work Choices legislation. Dental services have been an issue for nearly 12 years now. In Tasmania, particularly in the seat of Lyons, I have hundreds of constituents who just cannot get in to see a dentist, let alone afford dental treatment, and it is severely affecting their health.

This bill amends the Health Insurance Act 1973, which of course was a Labor bill, in order to provide for the expansion of the government’s Medicare dental program for people with chronic conditions and complex care needs. It also puts a monetary limit on Medicare benefits for dental services to be introduced for eligible patients. The limit is $4,250 over two consecutive calendar years, and it will be set out in a ministerial determination made under subsection 3C(1) of the health insurance amendment.

Medicare benefits will be paid for the supply of dental prostheses, such as dentures, under the new dental items. The government’s Medicare dental program for people with chronic conditions and complex care needs was initially established in July 2004 and has been hampered by extremely low take-up due to complexity of referrals and the high copayments involved. It is very difficult for people to get hold of these benefits. The government announced in the last budget that it would pour an additional $377 million into this failing program, probably knowing that it would not be spent. The budget announcement included an annual diagnostic consultation and increased the maximum benefits available for dental treatment to $2,000 in benefits for each calendar year. The government subsequently announced that eligible patients would have up to $4,250 worth of Medicare funded dental treatment over two consecutive calendar years, increasing the cost of the program to $384.6 million over four years—but refer-
erals, copayments and restricted eligibility would all remain.

There will be no impact on the cost or availability of dental treatments to the wider community, including families, from this bill or the policy changes that underpin it. No assistance will be provided to most of the 650,000 people on public dental waiting lists. When the Howard government scrapped Labor’s Commonwealth Dental Health Program, it could quite easily have continued it. There was a need; the assessment was that there was a need, and it should have continued. It led to the public dental list blow-out, and there has been a sharp deterioration in dental health standards among low-income people and, of course, young children. Despite the states and territories more than doubling their funding to public dental care since the CDHP was abolished, the Howard government has constantly asserted that the states and territories are totally to blame for Australia’s dental care crisis.

The Howard government’s initiatives on dental health have been limited to subsidies of 30 per cent or more for those people with private dental health insurance and the ineffective Medicare dental program for people with chronic conditions and complex care needs. The targeting of the existing program to people with chronic conditions and complex care needs has severely limited the uptake of the program to date, with only 7,228 Australians helped with their dental care between July 2004 and June 2007. While I am very pleased we have been able to help those people, that is only just over 7,000 out of 650,000. The need for high copayments from patients and complex referrals from GPs have been additional impediments that have stopped more people taking up this program.

Nationally, the rising cost of dental care is a major cost of living issue for families and has contributed to a national dental crisis which has left one in three Australians avoiding dental care because of the cost. The increase mentioned earlier to $4,250 worth of Medicare funded dental treatment over two consecutive calendar years may assist in reducing the high copayments, but the retention of limited eligibility, to people with chronic conditions and complex care needs, will necessarily mean that only a small proportion of the population will be able to take up this assistance. So there will be no impact on the cost or availability of dental treatment to the wider community, including families, from this bill or the policy changes it underpins. No assistance will be provided to most of the 650,000 people on public dental waiting lists.

Labor have been highly critical of the program and we indicated at the time of the budget that, in government, we would be likely to use the increase in funding to invest in dental care for the benefit of ordinary Australians. Australia is facing a crisis in dental care, with one in three people reporting that they avoid dental care due to the cost and with more than 650,000 on waiting lists for public dental care, some waiting years for treatment. In recent years we have seen a dramatic increase in kids’ tooth decay and up to 50,000 hospitalisations annually for preventable dental conditions. People are ending up in hospital because their teeth have gone bad. Talk about a health system that needs some help! But it is not only young people; most people on age pensions and self-funded retirees have been leaving their teeth out of their health care with disastrous results. I have had a number of cases recently where people have given up on public dental waiting lists and are trying to access private ones, but are taking out loans to have their teeth done. Others simply cannot eat anything hard. This is an awful situation.

One of the first acts of the Howard government when it came to power in 1996 was
a shameful decision to abolish the Commonwealth Dental Health Program, ripping $100 million from public dental health. The state and territory governments have doubled their investment in dental health care over the past decade, but John Howard and Tony Abbott continue to blame the states for Australia’s dental crisis. The impact of the increased need for health services for dental health is an appalling state of affairs and one that can only be laid at the feet of the Howard government—and, if that was not bad enough, it has ripped money out of the health system as well. The Howard government has failed to meet the rising costs of providing health care by providing adequate funding and so the states have had to find and spend more money.

My electorate has been affected harshly by this. Because of the withdrawal of dental and health funding, the people of Lyons are suffering. Because of the lack of funding from the Howard government, the sustainability of many services in Lyons is under threat. Dental services are at a bare minimum. A lack of health funding has resulted in the communities of Ouse, Beaconsfield and Rosebery facing closures, and some elderly people have had to move away from their local area. Dental services across the electorate of Lyons are lacking. Many people must travel to major centres for dental and health care. There is no reason why the provision of dental health services could not be undertaken through a multipurpose health care approach to health care delivery. Is the Howard government interested in this approach? No.

I have been working with a number of communities concerned about health services, particularly the Ouse community. This community wants to extend services in its local area, not close them down. This community wants to build independent living units and continue to provide additional health promotional services. I see no reason why dental services could not be added to the list. On 21 August I presented my policy ideas to that community for discussion, sending information to the Mayor, Deirdre Flint, and to the Chair of the Medical Subcommittee of the Central Highlands Council, Ann Jones. The ideas for discussion included using the concept of multipurpose health centres for care delivery in regional areas of Tasmania, particularly in Lyons. Labor developed the idea of the multipurpose health centre and, in fact, the first one was built in my electorate, at Oatlands. The Howard government has failed to be innovative and extend this concept in any way. The Howard government has been too busy taking away funding from the dental health scheme to worry about health in regional Tasmania. My ideas presented for discussion also raised the issue of improving transportation, undertaking a comprehensive health needs analysis and improving community education regarding the problems our health system is facing. While Medicare benefits for the supply of dentures is a good idea, it is not much use if you cannot get to the dentist in the first place.

After 11 years of playing the blame game and denying that dental care was its responsibility, in its last budget the Howard government took a small step towards addressing the national dental crisis. Why can’t we have innovation? Why can’t we have multipurpose health centres delivering a whole range of health outcomes and drawing money from state and Commonwealth governments, the community and anywhere else that they can source income opportunities? Unfortunately, this belated and long overdue measure to supply dental care to people with chronic diseases will do nothing for the vast majority of people on public dental waiting lists around the country, nor will it make dental care any more affordable. Labor be-
lieves Australia should use its prosperity to help people get the basic dental health care they need and deserve. That is why Kevin Rudd announced in December 2006 that a Rudd Labor government would restore Commonwealth funding for dental care. It is on the table.

Mr Richardson interjecting—

Mr ADAMS—I hope your constituents who need dental care know that Labor will deliver. Labor is committed to ending the blame game and working cooperatively with the states to deliver better dental care. Labor will reinstate the Commonwealth dental program to make sure working families can get decent dental care. It is about time what has been ripped out of health and dental care is put back in. It is obvious that the Howard government is incapable of understanding why this should happen or doing anything about it. This is a tired government. The speaker who came before me, the member for O’Connor, did not mention anything about the future; he just attacked his own minister at the table. His speech was that of a member of a tired government and of a government lacking any direction. I think it summed up the government quite well. He did not look at the bill or offer anything by way of innovation or the broader picture. His mind was locked into other matters. It is unfortunate that we have a government that has failed. It is a tired government that has run out of time. It is lacking any policy direction or policy ideas. It is time for new leadership in Australia; it is time for a Rudd Labor government to restore the balance in both health and dental care.

Mr RICHARDSON (Kingston) (8.40 pm)—I rise today in support of the Health Insurance Amendment (Medicare Dental Services) Bill 2007. I am very proud to stand here today and contribute to the debate on this very important measure, which was introduced by the coalition government in the last budget. Since my election three years ago, I have come to understand a problem I did not really know existed before the good people of Kingston brought it to my attention: the problem of the South Australian state Labor government completely dropping the ball when it comes to publicly funded dental treatment.

State governments are responsible for the provision of state funded dental services and some of our most vulnerable and disadvantaged citizens rely on them to provide this service. I do have one state government funded dental service in my electorate of Kingston; however, its complete lack of resources and appropriate funding from the state Labor government has led to an influx of complaints to my electorate office like nothing before.

Given the vulnerability of a number of these cases, my staff and I did all we could to assist them and, in a number of situations, it was simply the case that misunderstandings had occurred between the service and the patient because no-one had the time—and the centre certainly did not have the resources—to listen to the full story from the patient. My staff and I used to contact the service on a case-by-case basis to try to resolve the individual problem or misunderstanding. But not long before we announced the federal dental scheme in the last budget, the state Labor government and one of the local state Labor members instructed my local state government funded dental service that they were not to speak directly with me or my staff, leaving the constituents of Kingston with nowhere to turn once they were abandoned by the state Labor government. I was very worried for my constituents, who were left with no-one to rely on for assistance with their dental health other than a state Labor government who simply did not care about their plight. I wrote to both the...
federal Minister for Health and Ageing and the Prime Minister, explaining that, while this was a state issue, the people of my electorate were suffering and asking that they please do something to address the issue.

This government—the Howard government—responds to the needs of the Australian people. I was thrilled, therefore, when this announcement was made on budget night. This bill seeks to introduce that very important budget night announcement. It will increase access to dental treatment under Medicare for people with chronic conditions and complex care needs—the young and the old. From 1 November 2007, new items will be introduced onto the Medicare Benefits Schedule, which will enable patients to receive $4,250 in Medicare benefits over two consecutive calendar years for dental service. Importantly, though, this bill and this program go even further. The amendment will also allow Medicare benefits to be paid for the supply of dental prostheses, including dentures. This measure is vital for older Australians who rely on their dentures and many of whom suffer great discomfort and fail to eat proper and balanced diets because of the pain caused by inappropriate dentures. This measure is possible only because of the strong and disciplined economic management of the Howard government—strong economic management which is beyond the grasp of our Labor state governments.

It is that failure of Labor state governments to grasp the basic principles of disciplined economic management that has meant state governments cannot afford to provide the basic services they are responsible for like hospitals, roads, public transport and, in this case, basic dental services. It is the state Labor governments’ failure to grasp basic principles of disciplined economic management which has meant our frail, sick and elderly have been long-suffering victims of failing state dental systems. Above all else it is the failure of state Labor governments to manage their budgets—as would be the fear with a federal Labor government, if Rudd were to be successful, with federal Labor’s poor financial track record—that has made this measure and therefore this bill so very necessary.

Members opposite will stand here and whinge and complain about the abolition of dental assistance to the states in 1996. But this government, under which more funding has been handed to the states than ever before, inherited a $96 billion Labor debt when it came to power in 1996. And we had to make some tough spending choices to pay that back. The abolition of dental assistance to the states was this government telling the states that it was simply not going to pick up their slack anymore. The time had come for the states to pay for that which they were and are responsible for.

Then came the GST. This year the South Australian government is expected to receive $3.9 billion in GST revenue. This federal government mistakenly believed that when the states started receiving their GST windfall they would actually start providing decent levels of service in the areas they were responsible for. But, when it came to trusting Labor premiers with money, we were very wrong. To this day the state Labor governments are letting down the constituents of their states and still failing to provide basic levels of service.

This brings me to why this bill is so very necessary. The federal government can no longer sit back and watch as Australians suffer at the hands of these irresponsible state Labor governments. Too many sick and elderly Australians were suffering because the states would not provide a decent dental service, so once again we the federal government have been forced to step in and pick up the slack. Over the next four years this
measure is expected to cost $384.6 million across the entire nation, and yet the South Australian government has effectively told the South Australian people that it cannot possibly find enough money in its $3.9 billion in GST revenue to provide a decent dental program. That said, this government manages to find the money for things like a tramline extension in the city which no-one wants. You really do have to question the South Australian state Labor government’s priorities.

Nonetheless, the residents living in the southern suburbs in the electorate of Kingston, South Australians in need—and, in fact, all Australians in need—will now have access to a decent and effective program which will provide for their dental health because of the hard work, responsible economic management and correct priorities of the federal government. This is yet another ever-present reminder of the fact that the Australian people simply cannot trust Labor with money. No Labor government, state or federal, can be trusted with money as all have a poor financial track record. Fortunately, we do not have a federal Labor government at this time. Surely we all hope that that does not occur. Fortunately, as we do not have a Labor federal government, we can afford to bail out the Labor states over and over again. In the interests of the Australian people and the fine people of Kingston, who I am proud to represent, I commend this very important bill to the House.

Mr BRENDAN O’CONNOR (Gorton) (8.51 pm)—I rise to speak to the Health Insurance Amendment (Medicare Dental Services) Bill 2007 and to raise my concerns about the way in which the government has gone about looking after people in the dental health area. Having listened to the member for Kingston suggest that a state Labor government is at fault for almost everything in this world, I have to say that what he said is a bit of a joke. In fact, I would expect a member of the government in this House, a member who said he was concerned about the constituents of Kingston, to front up to a minister of this government, not a minister in the chamber in South Australia, and ask, ‘Why did this government’—and this is a fact—‘abolish the dental scheme that Labor introduced well before the election of 1996?’ Why hasn’t the member for Kingston even considered talking to the Prime Minister or the Minister for Health and Ageing and asking them to make sure that the constituents of the electorate of Kingston are looked after in the dental health area?

All he has managed to do in the last 10 minutes is talk about another level of government and talk about the problems that he says are the concern of state legislatures. The reality is that in the end the member for Kingston has no regard for the dental health needs of the constituents of his electorate. The reality is that if the member for Kingston were to concern himself more with the dental health concerns of his constituents he would be asking the Prime Minister why—and this is a fact—Labor’s dental scheme was abolished in 1996, why the 600,000 beneficiaries of that scheme were no longer beneficiaries and why there are 650,000 people now on waiting lists. There is no point in the member for Kingston coming in here to tell this community, via this chamber, that after 10 years the government has chosen to introduce a bill on dental health and that it is okay as the last 10 years did not matter. That is effectively what has been acknowledged here today by the government. The government has introduced a bill that acknowledges that fact. The member for Kingston is leaving the chamber. He does not want to listen to this debate. He comes in here with a speech written by somebody—I do not know whom—in which he wants to blame other governments. If only he were a vigilant
member, if only he were to concern himself with the concerns of the thousands of constituents in the electorate of Kingston who have been queuing up and waiting for years for their dental problems to be attended to and if only he had listened to this debate, but he has walked out of the chamber—he has now left the chamber after giving his little rehearsed speech.

The reality is that for 10 years this government has failed to attend to the dental health concerns of this nation. We know that the last Labor government had in place a dental scheme that actually attended to those concerns. Indeed, the fact is that in the last 10 years the Prime Minister and the ministers in turn responsible for this particular area have refused to accept any responsibility whatsoever for it. They have failed to accept that it is their responsibility, in conjunction with the states, to look after people’s dental health.

This bill will in some way attend to the concerns of the people in my electorate of Gorton. I have people, and I am sure you do as well, Mr Deputy Speaker, who have been waiting for some years to have basic dental needs attended to. Because this bill is going to provide insufficient support in this important area, Labor will not support it. But this bill also underlines the fact that there has been no support by this government from 1996 until now. The basis upon which the government has failed to support the nation’s dental health was that supposedly it was not its responsibility. The government was lying then or it is lying now when it says it did not have to attend to such things. This bill, which proposes to commit $384 million over four years, is welcome but has been a long time coming and there are still so many other things that the government must attend to.

We know, and I think the community is becoming increasingly aware, that dental health is critical. Poor dental hygiene, poor oral health and related problems not only affect people’s teeth and gums but indeed have the potential to affect people in so many other ways such as the compounding chronic conditions of diabetes and cardiovascular disease and cancer. So, looking at the health area holistically, any doctor, whether it be a dental specialist or a general practitioner, would say that if a country did not spend sufficient funds and provide sufficient resources to allow people to have proper dental health care then there would be consequences in other health areas. The fact is that this is a very belated effort by this government in the shadow of an election to introduce a bill that goes to dental services, it having denied its responsibility for a decade.

So, while the member for Kingston and other members of the government can blame the state governments all they like, it is incumbent upon government members, not only opposition members, to tell ministers and the others in the executive—and, indeed, the Prime Minister when he is not consumed by his own ambitions and his own survival—that they must listen to the community in each electorate that has been crying out for support in this area. There has not been any effort by government backbenchers to put any pressure whatsoever on the executive to have it attend to this very important area of public policy. I believe that the member for Kingston and other members who have spoken so far on this bill have been disingenuous in their efforts to ensure that funding is properly provided for this area. I have no complaint with their criticising state governments where it is due, and I have no complaint with their criticising state governments over this area, but to solely blame state governments for a lack of provision of dental health services is absolutely absurd. Indeed, the job of federal members in representing constituents in this House is to tell the execu-
tive to attend to the concerns of their constituents. I know that in my electorate and I know, from what other members have told me, in other electorates dental health is critical to so many people: it has been a policy failure of this government and the government has been in denial. The government has been so for more than 10 years and now, at the death knell and in the shadow of an election, it is choosing to introduce a dental health scheme.

Debate interrupted.

**ADJOURNMENT**

The SPEAKER—Order! It being 9 pm, I propose the question:

That the House do now adjourn.

**Victorian Greens**

Mr MARTIN FERGUSON (Batman) (9.00 pm)—I rise this evening to talk about the slimy shade of the so-called Victorian Greens, the party that seeks to present itself as virtuous and full of principles. Let us deal with a few facts. On 12 September 2007, the *Melbourne Age* exposed an internal Greens document which revealed that the Labor Party is the Greens’ main electoral enemy in Victoria. The official Greens document was produced after the 2004 federal election and was marked ‘For Green Eyes Only’. We were green with envy when we came across it.

The 105-page document refers to a Greens’ head office directive that getting rid of the Howard government was not part of their campaign strategy. Despite all the Greens’ parading against the Howard government, the document is absolutely clear and unequivocal: while the Greens posture about the evils of the Howard government, their real objective is to defeat the Labor Party, not the Howard government. That is why they run very hard in Melbourne, a seat the Liberals cannot win.

The Greens’ highly sleazy endeavour at winning the seat of Melbourne has involved dedicating large amounts of human and financial resources that could have been used productively towards a change of government. I am sure they did not tell the donors their real intentions with respect to those donations—in essence, money taken under false pretences. The Victorian Greens’ righteous posturing on symbolic issues gives the impression that they assume a higher moral ground on their political conduct. However, the expose has shown that they are a cheap and nasty version of the clean image they present, or seek to present, to the voting public.

Since the 2006 Victorian state election, in the upper house the Victorian Greens have voted with the Liberal Party on 68 per cent of parliamentary business. To suggest that there was no deal between the Liberal Party and the Greens in Victoria is just not factual. The record speaks for itself. The Greens have voted with the Liberals under the obligation of their preferences deal at the last state election even when it has gone against their own so-called political party principles. The Greens even voted against their own position on the Victorian Renewable Energy Bill and the Nuclear Energy Bill.

Greens Senate candidate Richard di Natale has unconvincingly stated that the leaked document did not provide proof that a widely suspected formal preferences arrangement existed with the Liberal Party at the last state elections. If the Greens are that cheap to sell out so quickly, how could they possibly be trusted with more than the limited responsibility they already have in the Senate and in the Victorian upper house? The Greens’ double standards make the electorate ponder: what other so-called party principles are they negotiating for preference deals at this time?
The expose has made the Victorian public rightly question the Greens’ integrity beyond their conduct at a Victorian level. I refer, for instance, to the fact that the so-called Senate leader of the Greens, Bob Brown, had to resort to deliberate dishonesty to launch a personal attack on me at a recent Northcote forests forum as a case in point. Not only did they distribute misleading misinformation in my own electorate, he and his colleagues were loose with the truth when they accused me of ‘backing the woodchippers plan to have our native forests logged, chipped and then burnt for electricity’. Bob Brown knows I support the responsible use of waste to generate electricity—and I emphasise ‘waste’. It is regrettable that it revealed the Greens’ double standards and dirty tricks, but I hardly find it surprising because I have always contended that they have no principles. The Greens’ purposeful misrepresentation and lies are motivated by desperation to win votes even if it means deliberately misleading the public at a local, state and national level.

However, the Victorian public is not easily fooled and has made their support for Labor very clear at the weekend. The resounding support for Labor in the by-elections at Williamstown and Albert Park was a great victory in its own right. It was also an indication of the Victorian public’s disgust at the Greens’ double standards. The Greens truthfully are no different from any other political party. They will do whatever deal they can and trade off whatever principles they can for their own political benefit. They are not to be trusted. They are a grubby little party, a party of double standards and no principles. I seek leave to present the Greens voting pattern in the Victorian upper house side by side with the Liberal-National Party’s voting pattern since the last Victorian election.

Leave granted.

Smith Family: Learning for Life

Mr HENRY (Hasluck) (9.05 pm)—I wish to pay tribute tonight to a truly wonderful child education arrangement in Australia called the Learning for Life program initiated and developed by the Smith Family. We are constantly bombarded with requests to sponsor children in danger all over the world—a very worthy cause indeed. However, there is no shortage of kids who need our help in our own backyard.

The Smith Family estimates there are 717,000 Australian kids living in households who do not have an equal chance to grow and learn. Many of them are already behind when they start school and never get the chance to catch up or realise their abilities. No child in Australia should face such a bleak future. Many of the financially disadvantaged have never been on a school excursion, never taken part in extracurricular activities and never participated in events such as a trip to the zoo, simply because these things need extra money to participate. The Smith Family advises me that many of these kids try to avoid school on such activity days by pretending to be sick. Often they do not even tell their parents about the activity because of the financial pressure the family is under. For many low-income families these additional services are simply an unattainable, unaffordable luxury. Unfortunately, the financial pressure on some Australian families is so heavy parents are forced to choose between paying everyday bills and putting food on the table. The education needs of their children often suffer. But this is where sponsorship can make such a big difference in giving these kids a chance to build and secure a better future.

I am pleased to say that, since being elected as the member for Hasluck, I have sponsored two children in need through the Smith Family’s Learning for Life sponsor-
ship program in Western Australia. They are Rebecca, who is in year 5 at primary school, and Jayden, who is in year 6 at primary school. It gives me a quiet sense of satisfaction to know that I can help these two young Australians to gain an education. I chose kids who are in primary school because, without the basics of reading, writing and arithmetic, it is very difficult for children to go forward in this life.

In 84 communities nationwide, the Smith Family is helping more than 26,000 disadvantaged children realise their potential through Learning for Life and its many programs. Currently, there are more than 133 Learning for Life workers working at Australian locations. They are trained professionals with backgrounds in education, social work or psychology. Learning for Life workers build community capacity by collaborating with local groups and organisations to ensure that the services delivered are relevant and meet the needs of the individual community. Since 1988, 46,000 disadvantaged students in Australia have been helped by Learning for Life—a truly wonderful and remarkable effort and record. The Smith Family has received feedback from students on how they have benefited from this much-needed support.

The Smith Family now has another sponsorship drive underway, which I would urge all Australians, and particularly all parliamentarians, around the country to support. In Western Australia, I am one of 2,000 sponsors, but the Smith Family says that it needs 7,000 more Australians to become sponsors so that more children who, through no fault of their own, need a proper education can receive just that.

Sponsorship provides direct financial assistance for essentials such as textbooks, school equipment and uniforms. It also gives our sponsored child access to a critical network of support, which includes tutoring, mentoring, coaching and literacy programs, as well as social, sporting and cultural activities and camps. One hundred per cent of your contribution will directly benefit your sponsored student. From just $27 a month—less than a dollar a day—you can sponsor an Australian child and help them to build and secure a better future.

The Smith Family’s core initiatives are delivered through Learning for Life and are based on integrated programs. These provide needed assistance to those facing financial disadvantage throughout their life and are crucial to developing a commitment to lifelong learning. This is achieved through four complementary programs which enrich and optimise the students’ learning capacity and educational experience and contribute to their sense of health and wellbeing. The four programs are financial scholarships, personal support, personal development and literacy skills. The program enables students to effectively develop their potential, overcome issues associated with social isolation and increase self-esteem and motivation. By sponsoring an Aussie kid, we are letting them know that someone else cares about them and their future—for many children that alone is something very special.

Workplace Relations

Mr DANBY (Melbourne Ports) (9.10 pm)—I rise tonight to talk about the extreme and unfair industrial relations legislation, the so-called Work Choices laws, and its affect on my electorate. When the election is called, I will be reminding voters of Melbourne Ports of who is responsible for this legislation. I will be asking them to re-elect me on the basis of Labor’s intention to repeal the Work Choices laws and replace them with fair, equitable and balanced workplace laws. I also want to talk tonight about the impact of this legislation on young people.
and the industries in which they work—which are predominantly those in the retail and hospitality sector.

The foundation of Work Choices is the Australian workplace agreements, designed for no other purpose than to keep wages low and the unions out of workplaces. It is a system that is designed to disadvantage young workers, who are expected to negotiate their own wages and conditions as they embark on their first experience of employment. Many young employees have never had the benefit of experiencing collective bargaining. They do not know what their entitlements are or what their colleagues are receiving. They do not know about penalty rates, shift allowances or overtime provisions.

In such a scenario, nine times out of 10, the young person will sign an agreement because they have no other choice if they want the job. Furthermore, they will have no security of employment and little or no recourse to an unfair dismissal case. If this legislation is allowed to stand, many young employees in my electorate will be at risk of spending their entire working lives as casuals, at call of an employer to tell them whether or not they have a day’s work. They will be working long hours, without overtime penalty rates, shift allowances or annual leave, while at the same time knowing that their employer may sack them tomorrow and they will have no recourse.

This represents a return to 19th century work practices, 19th century attitudes and 19th century conditions. It is a rejection of the basic Australian philosophy of the fair go that we have known since Federation. A fair go in the workplace has been the objective of the Australian labour movement since the 1890s. Labor acknowledges the changes in the global and domestic economy since the 1970s—indeed, most of the far-reaching changes were enacted by the Hawke and Keating governments. Only once in Australian history have we seen a government make such a fundamental attack on the principles of fairness in the workplace, and that was under Stanley Melbourne Bruce—and we all know what happened to him.

Hospitality and retail are very important industries in my electorate of Melbourne Ports. They are industries in which many local young people expect to find their first job. My office receives many calls from young people. Some of the stories we hear are disturbing. Let me give an example: a young man was employed in a hotel as a drinks waiter, but he was also required to replace the night concierge at short notice. He signed an individual agreement when he commenced work. He did not know that the agreement he signed had no provisions for overtime or penalty rates. So when he sat up all night on the concierge’s desk, often after a shift serving drinks, he was being paid the flat rate that he earned as a drinks waiter—no time and a half, no shift allowance.

It is no wonder that respected academics are concluding that the social fabric of Australia is being changed by these laws and that the most disadvantaged are those in the 18 to 25 age group. A study by Justine Evesson, at the Australian Centre for Industrial Relations Research at Sydney university, looked specifically at the drop in income for hospitality workers since the introduction of Work Choices. The study found that people working in the retail sector had an average income loss of between two per cent and 18 per cent. Casual part-time sales assistants working a 12-hour week in retail lost an average 12 per cent of their earnings. Permanent part-time retail workers, retaining their usual shifts, lost 18 per cent.

In the hospitality sector, the losses were between six per cent and 12 per cent. Permanent part-time waiting and bar staff who
were working a 21-hour week of split shifts lost an average of 12 per cent of their income. Those with the most prolific losses were liquor store workers, fast-food workers, bakery workers and restaurant and cafe workers. These represent many of the people in my electorate. It is no wonder the government has also enacted the bodgie changes to the electoral legislation which will effectively shave off the electoral roll 800 to 900 young people in the 18- to 25-year-old age group. These are the people who are affected terribly by the Work Choices legislation.

The government likes to boast about the rise in real wages over the past decade. What it fails to mention is that those rises took place under a system that it has now demolished. If this government is re-elected, the rise in real wages will stop and go into reverse. Of course, we know that if this government is re-elected—and Senator Minchin has gasbagged about it—there will be Work Choices 2, which will be an even more draconian wave of legislation. Young people such as those whom I have mentioned deserve a fair go. We need to see a return to the decent values of a fair day’s pay for a fair day’s work. I hope we will soon have a government that does not just talk about Australian values but puts them into practice.

Kingston Electorate: Southern Expressway

Mr RICHARDSON (Kingston) (9.14 pm)—I rise this evening to bring to the attention of the House a matter which is very important to my electorate of Kingston—that is, the one-way road which connects Adelaide’s southern suburbs to the CBD, the Southern Expressway. In 1993 the Liberal South Australian government were desperate to provide infrastructure and, more importantly, adequate transport services to the southern suburbs. But, saddled with the former Labor government’s massive State Bank debt, they were unable to provide the funds to support the freeway they envisaged. Determined to provide for the south, the Liberals built a three-lane expressway which travels one way in the morning at peak hour and reverses in the evening. The road was a temporary measure, with land set aside to complete the expressway and to make it go both ways, when the state was not riddled with debt and the money was available. The sad reality is that the Rann government was elected, a government which believes that the southern suburbs end at Glenelg, and it has simply ignored and abandoned the south, those who live in the south and those who trusted it to provide for their ever-growing needs.

Despite the Rann Labor government receiving a massive injection of funds from the GST and stamp duty, despite still receiving massive windfalls from taxes and duties that they were meant to abolish after the GST was implemented and despite the revenue they receive from poker machines and the mining boom, they have failed to complete our road. Instead, they have blown out their budget by keeping their union mates happy and by employing more and more public servants and running up state debt.

As is usually the case, the federal government has stepped in. The Prime Minister recently announced that the federal government would provide $100 million towards the completion of the expressway, making it a duplication. This funding amounts to half the cost estimated by the RAA to complete the road. Predictably, the state Labor government immediately responded by claiming they did not have the money to fund the other half and that the project was not a priority for them—once again, letting down southern suburbs residents. It is estimated that this year the South Australian Labor government will receive $3.9 billion in GST. That is $3.9 billion on top of the other state levies and taxes, poker machine revenue and
stamp duty revenue. And they are telling southern suburbs residents that they cannot afford $100 million to fix our one-way road.

The real problem is twofold. The first problem is that they do not want to fix it because it is in the south and they could not care less about us. The second is that they are simply inept at managing their budget. They are, as is the tradition with Labor governments, always borrowing money and spending it to keep their union mates happy. We all know Labor governments cannot manage money, but this is simply not good enough. While I have no doubt that the people of the south will tell the Rann Labor government what they think at the next state election, I am not willing to let this situation continue until 2010. I am standing up right now for the people of Kingston, as I have in the last two to three years, and demanding that the government pay their fair share and live up to their responsibilities. If the Labor senators from South Australia are serious about representing their state then they must stand up, talk to their state mates and demand that they fund our expressway.

Senator Wortley, for example, is quite happy to put out fear-provoking propaganda in my electorate. Perhaps instead she could try standing up for the people of my electorate within her party and demand Mike Rann’s Labor government do something in the south. We need the expressway to go both ways. The increase in small business and company trucks departing the Lonsdale area for the city and interstate has tripled. New homes and dwellings have doubled. The state Labor government must finally do their bit for the south and provide their half of the funding. Pay your way, Mike Rann, and deliver the goods. The federal money is on the table: $100 million. The road will only cost $200 million. Eighty per cent of my electorate utilise that road. The people of the southern suburbs of Kingston, the companies and industry which work there and frequently drive on that road deserve it.

(Time expired)

Chisholm Electorate: Caroline Chisholm Awards

Mr Peter Robert Cleeland

Ms BURKE (Chisholm) (9.19 pm)—Tonight I wish to again put on the record my appreciation and thanks for all the volunteers in my electorate of Chisholm. Chisholm is blessed by an extraordinary number of people who volunteer their time and effort to support many worthwhile community activities in my electorate. On Saturday I had the pleasure of hosting the seventh Caroline Chisholm Awards, which I initiated within my electorate because I thought that the unsung heroes in our voluntary organisations deserved some thanks. All the volunteers will tell you that they do not want recognition or thanks; they do it because they get so much back. But we as a community must say thank you. It is a terrific opportunity for the organisations which these individuals volunteer for to say thank you. In the seventh year I thought we would not get too many nominations because we have been going for a long time and I thought we had recognised a lot of the people. But this year we received more nominations than we have ever received, and we actually recognised 91 people at a ceremony on Saturday. We rejected a few of the applications because they did not meet the criteria that we set.

Those recognised included people such as Laurie Coles, 92 years of age. She is a woman of many attributes. Laurie is a founding member of U3A Waverley and is also its oldest member. She joined U3A in 1985 and offered to conduct a music appreciation class. Since that time she has continued as a tutor to classes of up to 20 members. Laurie’s classes give so much pleasure to so many and these fortnightly classes have en-
couraged many friendships. For the past few years these classes have been conducted at Laurie’s home, as she no longer drives. Laurie’s thirst for knowledge remains unquenchable.

Lucille Horro is a 72-year-old who lives in public housing in Chadstone. For 12 years she has devoted much of her time to assisting others through the Assemblies of God church, St Mary Magdalene’s Primary School and the Baptist Church. She has made many contributions to the community. Probably her biggest contribution has been to effect positive change for public tenants living around her local area. She was pivotal in setting up the Ashburton, Ashwood and Chadstone Public Tenants Group, which has existed for 1 ½ years. This group goes from strength to strength and continues to empower residents living in public housing. Lucille managed to transform the dream of such a group into a reality. This group consists of people who are inspired to make life better for all in the community. Over the past year Lucille has been instrumental in organising two forums, where a panel of speakers from the Office of Housing make themselves available to local tenants. I can testify that these forums have been a huge success. We have had some positive feedback from these forums.

Eileen O’Neill has given 15 years of volunteer service to the Louise Multicultural Community Centre. As a volunteer, she has taught English to migrants and refugees, which has enabled them to participate more fully in Australian life. She has always enjoyed the contact she has had with people from the many varied cultures that she has taught, and she has felt that it was a way of giving back to the community. There are people from 20 different countries at the Louise centre. Much loved by her fellow volunteers and students, this remarkable 79-year-old makes an outstanding contribution to strengthening the Australian community.

Bryan Paten is a volunteer at CARA, which is an organisation that provides specialist residential care and support to young women aged between 12 and 18 years who are victims of abuse and who are part of the Victorian child protection system. Bryan Paten’s relationship with CARA began about 15 years ago. His initial involvement was through the Glen Waverley Rotary Club, which at the time were doing some maintenance work at the CARA house in Syndal. After this work was completed, Bryan continued his involvement in CARA as a private citizen. Bryan started off collecting much-needed items like toiletries, fresh produce, groceries, cash donations from friends and neighbours, and Easter baskets which were delivered to each girl. He has been Santa for the past eight years, bringing much joy and delight to the girls.

Bryan has gone on to be a highly valued board member and has served on the board for approximately seven years. He is currently president but is also a past secretary. Bryan has genuine empathy with and interest in the children. Even though his role at CARA has been more formal, he has never lost the connectedness to the girls or the CARA program. He also works his magic with the Young Mums program, offering support to vulnerable young mothers and their babies.

These people are extraordinary. They give generously of their time, and there were 91 people who excel like these individuals do.

In the short time available, I want to put on the record my condolences at the death of Peter Cleeland, a former member for McEwen. I knew Peter on and off for years—like his membership of this place, which was on and off for a couple of years too. Peter was an amazing community member who did so
much for his community. His last act was to be very involved in the establishment of the Outer Eastern Legal Service. My sympathies go to his partner, Jan—who I know will be suffering, because they were a very close couple—and to his children, his grandchildren and the community he served. I know he will be greatly missed.

Wakefield Electorate: Crime

Mr FAWCETT (Wakefield) (9.24 pm)—I rise tonight to address the House about an issue which is incredibly important for the community of Wakefield, and that is the issue of crime. Crime takes many forms, from minor crime and break-ins through to violent crime. Much crime is associated with drugs. I get frequent feedback from people who want to know what can be done as a community and what government can do. One of the things that has been very encouraging in Wakefield is that the councils and I have been able to establish a very good working relationship to address a number of these issues.

One of the bits of feedback I frequently get from people in the community is that they would like to see more things for young people to do. They have concerns that young people are often left after school or on weekends with few activities to entertain or occupy them or to help them develop constructive habits. The fear is that some of them get involved in gang activity and that leads to involvement in drugs and crime and other undesirable outcomes.

The City of Playford have worked with us through the National Community Crime Prevention Program to obtain funding. Under the current round, they have received a grant of $479,550 under the National Crime Prevention Program, which is aimed at diverting antisocial behaviour of young people and providing a range of activities that these people can become involved in. This is the third such program that the Community Crime Prevention Program has funded in Wakefield over the last three years. It has very successfully put in place programs to get young people involved in something constructive. We have also been able to work with a number of community groups, and this has been very positive, with smaller grants of up to $5,000 to look at things like security doors, security bars and security lighting for sporting clubs and other buildings, as well as closed-circuit TV systems at the very local level.

Probably the most significant development, which I am very happy to report to the House tonight, is a response to the danger factor that is presented by young people and some older people riding unregistered trail bikes and ‘monkey bikes’ or minibikes in reserves, on streets and throughout the suburbs. This is a problem to such an extent that I had an email the other day from a family in Smithfield Plains who said that they had not had an hour’s sleep because of people racing up and down the pathway in a reserve outside their home throughout the night and into the morning.

There is a real problem for the police in that they get reports throughout a whole range of areas: Craigmore and up in the hills face where there are some reserves, in Salisbury and throughout parts of Elizabeth and the city of Playford. Generally speaking, by the time the police get there the people who are committing the crime have moved on or, even if the police do arrive and see them, the police recognise that it is unsafe for them to chase these young people to try to apprehend them.

We have had a number of meetings and we have worked out that the key missing element—the failure mode, if you like—in this whole situation is evidence that the councils and the police can use to prosecute
the people or, in some cases, confiscate the motorbikes or monkey bikes that are used in these incidents. Under the National Community Crime Prevention Program, I have worked with the City of Salisbury and the City of Playford, along with SAPOL. The City of Salisbury has taken the lead role. I thank Pat Trimboli, who has ended up being the point of contact, and Colin Pitman and Leigh Hall from the City of Playford. We have put in an application under the Community Crime Prevention Program and have been granted $200,000 to purchase a CCTV system which is mobile and will be able to be used at a number of known hotspots and a number of known entry points into reserves. This will mean that we can gain evidence, particularly by recording the facial features and identifying the people concerned, and then we can go to the high schools or other places where the young people are known to get names and identities so that the councils and the police can take action.

I welcome this partnership in Wakefield, which has meant that together we will be able to address something that is of very significant community concern. It will be for the benefit of the young people involved and also the community in the electorate of Wakefield, which I am privileged to represent in this place.

House adjourned at 9.30 pm

NOTICES

The following notice was given:

Mr Laurie Ferguson to move—

That the House:

(1) notes that 2007 marks the seventy-fifth anniversary of the Great Ukrainian Famine—Holodomor—of 1932-1933, caused by the deliberate actions of Stalin’s communist Government of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics;

(2) recalls that an estimated 7 million Ukrainians starved to death as a result of Stalinist policies in 1932-1933 alone, and that millions more lost their lives in the purge that ensued for the remainder of the decade;

(3) notes:

(a) that this constitutes one of the most heinous acts of genocide in history;

(b) that the Ukrainian Famine was one of the greatest losses of human life in one country in the twentieth century; and

(c) that it remains insufficiently known and acknowledged by the world community and the United Nations as an act of genocide against the Ukrainian nation and its people, but has been recognised as such by the Verkhovna Rada (Parliament of Ukraine);

(4) honours the memory of those who lost their lives;

(5) joins the Ukrainian people throughout the world, and particularly in Australia, in commemorating these tragic events; and

(6) submits that the Australian Government support a resolution to the General Assembly of the United Nations, which may be submitted by the Government of Ukraine, that the Holodomor in Ukraine in 1932-1933 be recognised as an act of genocide against the Ukrainian nation and its people.
Ms KING (Ballarat) (4.00 pm)—It is with great pleasure that I am here in the chamber today to talk on the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Health and Ageing report on the inquiry into the health benefits of breastfeeding. I would like to start by thanking the committee secretariat for their incredibly hard work on a very complex report that was put together in a very short time. I want to thank our committee secretary, Mr James Catchpole, who attended pretty much all of the public hearings we had; Pauline Brown, who is here in the chamber today and who did a wonderful job of pulling together the information on a very complex, very sensitive matter in a very comprehensive way; Meg Byrne, who also served on the committee as research officer for a period of time; and Lauren Walker, who served as administrative officer. The secretariat really did keep us on track with what was a very complex topic. I also want to acknowledge the almost 500 submitters to this inquiry. I have served on a number of inquiries in my time in parliament but this one attracted a large number of submissions. It certainly attracted a large amount of interest, and I want to thank and acknowledge the many people—including the Australian Breastfeeding Association from my own electorate in Ballarat—who put in very comprehensive submissions to this inquiry. I also want to acknowledge the chair of the committee, Alex Somlyay, who I would have to say—having served under a number of chairs—is probably one of the best chairs I have worked with. I want to thank him for his courage on a very emotional and very difficult topic. Alex really embraced this topic and was at every hearing. He learnt an enormous amount through the time as chair. I think the recommendations strongly reflect his position and his views on this matter. I want to thank him for providing me and the member for Shortland, as members of this committee, with a really great opportunity. Alex embodies what we all like to see in chairs. For those of us in opposition he really is someone who has been very good to work with.

I want to start in this debate by recognising that the topic of breastfeeding engenders enormous amounts of emotion. A lot of guilt, a lot of anger and a lot of emotion poured out of the submissions we received to this inquiry. As members of parliament, the way we had to tackle this inquiry was by recognising the emotions that existed around this topic but also by removing ourselves from that and looking at the science and at the facts. We had to look at what the evidence and the science were saying in relation to breastfeeding. I want to refer a little bit to the report. The evidence on breastfeeding is extremely strong. The reason the World Health Organisation and our own National Health and Medical Research Council have dietary guidelines for breastfeeding is that the science is quite strong. There is significant evidence to suggest that the rates of breastfeeding in Australia are not where they could be or where they possibly should be, but I will start off particularly with the science in relation to breastfeeding. The report states:
There is solid evidence for the protective effects of breastfeeding against three classes of infectious disease in babies: gastrointestinal illnesses, respiratory tract infections, and otitis media (middle ear infections).

Also:

Exclusive breastfeeding appears to confer a greater protective effect against gastrointestinal and respiratory illnesses, while partial or minimal breastfeeding is not as protective.

There is also evidence that:

The incidence of asthma and allergies may also be reduced by breastfeeding for longer.

And:

Some studies suggest that breastfeeding could also have a positive effect on a child’s neurodevelopment—although there is some concern still about that evidence. The report also says:

Breastfeeding may help to prevent a number of other conditions including some childhood leukaemias, urinary tract infections, inflammatory bowel disease, coeliac disease and sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS). There is also evidence of possible associations between breastfeeding and lower rates of dental occlusion, bacteraemia, meningitis and type 1 diabetes. Further research is required to determine the significance of these associations.

But there is certainly evidence out there. The report also says:

Strong evidence is accumulating to show that children are less likely to be overweight or obese if they have been breastfed as babies. Babies who are breastfed for at least three months have a lower rate of obesity during childhood, with the protective effect increasing if breastfeeding continues until six months. This protective effect may also extend into adulthood.

Evidence also suggests that breastfeeding protects against a range of chronic illnesses which can develop in adulthood, including type 2 diabetes, heart disease and high blood pressure.

The scientific evidence certainly is quite compelling on breastfeeding. It particularly talks about breastfeeding exclusively for at least six months with further protective effects being available when breastfeeding continues beyond six months, but the evidence really does concentrate on exclusive breastfeeding up to six months. As parliamentarians, our job is not to judge the choices that women make about breastfeeding but to look at the science. What are the health benefits? What does science say about breastfeeding? We need to look at the incidence of breastfeeding in Australia. The evidence is compelling that breastfeeding has such a protective impact on children’s health and adult health into later life.

The rates of breastfeeding that we looked at across the country really were of concern. Whilst the Commonwealth does have a national breastfeeding strategy, it has not implemented many of the measures in that strategy. Also, financial resources have not been associated or attached to that strategy as would warrant the evidence that we saw in relation to breastfeeding. The data that we looked at in the report says that the rates coming out of hospital are really encouraging. Approximately 83 per cent of babies are being breastfed on discharge from hospital, but that drops—based on the 2001 figures—to around 48 per cent of all children being breastfed by the age of six months. So really the job of the inquiry was to look at the question: if the science is so compelling about the health benefits of breastfeeding, what do we as parliamentarians need to do to encourage breastfeeding? There are a number of recommendations that we came up with. As I said, it was not the job of the committee to make
judgements about women’s choices; the job of the committee was to look at the health benefits of breastfeeding and what we as a parliament do and we as a government have responsibility for. The recommendations go into the development ‘of a national strategy to promote and support breastfeeding in Australia’, including a role for the Commonwealth to provide ‘leadership in the area of monitoring, surveillance and evaluation of breastfeeding data’.

Currently, the breastfeeding data that is available in this country is inadequate. There is a lot of inconsistency in the definitions that are used and we really did struggle during the inquiry to determine exactly what the breastfeeding rates were with those different definitions. The Department of Health and Ageing has developed a national system of monitoring of breastfeeding in Australia and the committee recommended that that be implemented. We also recommended that there needed to be further research into the ‘long-term health benefits of breastfeeding for mother and infant’ and that there needed to be a solid ‘evaluation of strategies to increase the rates of exclusive breastfeeding to six months’. The committee heard a great deal of evidence on the difficulties and barriers that many women face in continuing breastfeeding, particularly exclusively for six months. We think there are some terrific strategies out there that are working and we encourage research into and further evaluation of those strategies. We recommended:

That the Department of Health and Ageing fund research into best practice in programs that encourage breastfeeding, including education programs, and the coordination of these programs.

We also recommended that the Australian Breastfeeding Association be funded to expand its current breastfeeding helpline to become a toll-free national breastfeeding helpline. Again, many of the stories that the Australian Breastfeeding Association told us about the lack of advice and information available to women and the immediacy of that advice being available for women really was concerning. Having a funded national toll-free number available to more women would certainly assist in making that advice available. We acknowledge that the Commonwealth has put some money into the funding of a national education campaign. We think that needs to be broadened to look at the health benefits of breastfeeding for mothers and babies and also to look at the supportive role that the community can play in breastfeeding.

I encourage everybody to read the total report. There has been some commentary on some recommendations in the report. I encourage people to look at the entire report and understand that we have looked very closely at the difficulty women face in making these sorts of choices. We thought long and hard about the implementation of the MAIF agreement. I believe most strongly that the voluntary code is not working in this country and it really is a token effort. I encourage people to read the entire report. Again I thank the committee for their hard work.

Debate (on motion by Mr Wakelin) adjourned.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs Committee Report

Debate resumed from 13 August, on motion by Mr Wakelin:

That the House take note of the report.

Ms ANNETTE ELLIS (Canberra) (4.11 pm)—I rise today to make some fairly brief comments on Indigenous Australians at work: successful initiatives in Indigenous employ-
ment, a report by the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs. In so doing, I am obviously going to be referring to the fact that Labor members of the committee put in a dissenting report. I want to talk to that point, but I preface those comments by saying very clearly that, in the 11½ years that I have been in this parliament, I have become even more convinced of the value of committee work in the parliament. I am a very strong supporter of the parliamentary committee process. I believe, should I be so bold as to say this, that in fact some of the best work in this parliament can and does occur in those parliamentary committees.

This report, which is the only piece of work done by this committee during this parliamentary term, is, sadly, disappointing. It could have been, and should have been, a major work on Indigenous issues, with particular reference to employment and all of the associated subjects that inevitably are discussed when you talk about Indigenous employment. I find with Indigenous issues generally that it is very difficult to talk about one just policy area because they all become interrelated.

I refer to the minority report, which is at the back of the committee’s report, and to where we quite openly say that it was a bit of a precedent in committee reporting that Labor members of the ATSIA committee were not prepared to endorse the majority report of this inquiry. We were dissenting not because of any strong fundamental disagreement with the few recommendations the report proposed—although we do not necessarily agree with all of them—but because of the report’s failure in our view to come to grips with the gravity of the problem or to suggest policy settings and programs which would have any real prospect of increasing employment.

The deputy chair of the committee, my colleague Dr Carmen Lawrence, has I think already spoken in passing on this in the House at the tabling of the report. She explained very clearly that we tried to have the chairman’s draft of the report as it was initially presented to the committee modified to some degree. We were at first hopeful that that could happen, but sadly that was not the case. The chairman’s draft with some minor alterations, generally speaking, became the report of the committee. Hence the position that we four members of this committee have taken with this dissenting report. It was very difficult for me and my colleagues to make this decision because we have a very strong view—and I do personally—about the potential of work of committees. We made some constructive suggestions along the lines of trying to get some further consideration into the draft report and sadly failed.

We suggested in reporting the results of our inquiry that we should try to get from the evidence the understanding of what economic development settings seem to be successful in generating new opportunities for Indigenous people, what maintains the employment for those already in the workforce, what improves the labour market readiness and what helps overcome the obvious obstacles to Indigenous people when they face attempting to get employment. In particular, we really wanted to see those questions posed but also tested and tested strongly so that we could recognise not only where the successes lay but how we could help guarantee the growth of those successes, and what actually works and does not work.

Some of the things that we were hoping we could test—that we think would be sensible to test—in ascertaining the effectiveness of certain things would be, for instance, ensuring that Indigenous people are involved in the planning and implementation of economic development and employment programs which affect them, or providing financial incentives to employers.
or including Indigenous employment obligations in government contracts and agreements with the private sector. There is a whole list of possible topics on page 211 that the committee and we have put up, but we would have liked to have seen these things tested and to show where they work and where they do not work, why they do or do not work and where the emphasis should be in the future—for example, whether or not supplementing CDEP programs to provide services in education, health, construction, maintenance and so on works.

I am sorry that that was not the case. I do not wish to be overly critical of the chair or the other members of the committee; it is just that we had different views on how this should and could, in our view, have been taken forward. I think we have to also remember that this inquiry and then this report, at the time that it was published, had a background of the Northern Territory intervention action, where there was a great deal of concentration nationally within the media, politically and in the community on Indigenous issues around the country generally. I just think that maybe we had a great opportunity that we did not take complete and full advantage of with this report.

A great number of individuals came and gave evidence. I want to urge anyone who is interested in these vital issues affecting our Indigenous communities, when they look at this report, to carefully consider the report but also our dissenting report and understand why we have taken the position that we have. It is important that people look at this in context and see where we thought that a little bit better could have been done in relation to the issue.

I want to thank those people who did come forward as individuals—Indigenous people, people in community organisations. Every time I am lucky enough to be involved in work in this parliament which is dealing with Indigenous people I am overwhelmed by their readiness to come forward and talk about their lives, issues and problems—to share it—all with a view to trying to assist us and them to work together to come up with good solutions that we can work on in partnership with them. I am always impressed by their readiness, their sincerity and their wish to participate—given that I am sure this part of our community has been inquired into so many times that they would have every right to wonder why we are walking through their door again. They never stop willingly wanting to participate. I pay regard to all of those individuals and organisations, whether they gave witness and/or whether they made submissions to the inquiry.

I also want to thank my colleagues on the committee. It is always interesting and gratifying, in my opinion, to travel with parliamentary colleagues from whichever part of the House on committee inquiries. I always enjoy it immensely because you really get to know each other and understand each other’s viewpoints. I want to thank all of my colleagues for that. I want to pay regard also to the committee secretariat particularly, in this instance, for their forbearance and for their assistance through this process—a slightly difficult process towards the end. I thank them. As always, we are so well served in this place by the professionalism and sheer hard work of the people who find themselves attached to our parliamentary committees, so I want to thank them as well.

As we are so near an election, who knows what will happen to this report, who knows what will happen to the recommendations, who knows what will happen to the thoughts that we have outlined in our dissenting report; but I would like to think that in the future, no matter where it all ends up, any future programs and incentives and considerations which have an impact on the employment opportunities for our Indigenous communities look at this work.
and consider all of the aspects as put forward at both ends of this report—that they may even have the time to consider the information in some of the submissions and some of the evidence in the *Hansard*. In both cases I think they will find a font of information and advice that would be very useful.

**Mr SLIPPER** (Fisher) (4.20 pm)—I was listed to speak in this debate on the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs report entitled *Indigenous Australians at work: successful initiatives in Indigenous employment* following the honourable member for Grey but, given the fact that I had to chair another House of Representatives standing committee report consideration, I was not able to do that. So I just want to thank my colleague Mr Wakelin for deferring to me to allow me to say just a few words in support of the report and his chairmanship of the committee during the period of this parliament.

At the outset, I want to mention to the House what a privilege it has been to serve on the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs under the chairmanship of the honourable member for Grey. I have served, as other members have, on very many parliamentary committees, but I have never come across such an easygoing, accommodating and reasonable chairman as the honourable member for Grey. I suspect that even those honourable members who signed a minority report would agree that Mr Wakelin is an excellent and very accommodating chairman. He wants everyone to have his or her say and he wants the widest possible range of views and thoughts so that the committee, in its deliberations, is able to bring forward the most appropriate report.

I do have to place on record that I was sorry that the four Labor members found it necessary to lodge a minority report. I suppose I am pleased it is called a minority report and not a dissenting report in one sense, because all of us, regardless of where we sit in the House, are seriously concerned about Indigenous disadvantage—and that is one of the reasons why, I suspect, each of us comes from our life’s experience to be part of this particular committee. Having said that I regret the fact that there is a minority report, I do respect the right of the honourable members to sign up to a minority report so that they feel that their views are adequately expressed. I do not, however, support the minority report; I support the majority report, which was carried by a majority of the committee.

The honourable member for Canberra made a very valid point when she said that Indigenous Australians are probably being more reported on and there have been more inquiries into Indigenous disadvantage than probably any other area of government or social activity in Australia. When I was Chairman of the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Family and Community Affairs, the member for Grey and, I think, the member for Canberra were part of an inquiry we had into Indigenous health.

**Ms Annette Ellis**—Seven years ago.

**Mrs Irwin**—So was I.

**Mr SLIPPER**—I find it appalling that there is still this difference in life expectancy for Indigenous Australians—

**Ms Annette Ellis**—Still.

**Mr SLIPPER**—that there is a 20-year difference between the life expectancies—

**Ms Annette Ellis**—Nothing has happened since we did that.

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MAIN COMMITTEE
Mr SLIPPER—There has historically been a 20-year gap—

Ms Annette Ellis—The deputy chair was on the committee too. It is still the same.

Mr SLIPPER—I thank the honourable member for her interjection, but what I am trying to say is that I think it is inappropriate in 2007 that the life expectancy for Indigenous Australians is clearly less than it is for non-Indigenous Australians.

Ms Annette Ellis—It is inappropriate and unacceptable.

Mr SLIPPER—It is unacceptable and inappropriate, and it is a situation that ought not be allowed to continue. It is one of those issues that unite the parliament. Whatever we can do to improve Indigenous health outcomes is very important—and I am very proud to be part of this government, which has done a lot in the area of practical reconciliation. But of course the job is never finished. There is always more to be done, and we ought to focus on Indigenous needs with a view to making sure that Indigenous Australians have the same life opportunities and health outcomes that other Australians do.

Having that said, this is a report—as no doubt you are likely to very shortly remind me, Mr Deputy Speaker—on Indigenous Australians at work. The effort of the committee was to look at what was happening well, look at what was happening not quite so well and bring forward recommendations which would encourage an expansion of positive outcomes and try to do away with those less than positive outcomes.

I support all of the recommendations of the committee. I do hope that the government of the day considers this report, Indigenous Australians at work, closely and carefully. I am convinced that, regardless of the result of the election, the government of the day will certainly do that and we will, in the fullness of time, see a response to this report.

I also would like to mention how sorry I am that the member for Grey is choosing to leave the parliament voluntarily at this next election. I have known the honourable member for Grey since about 1993, when we were both elected. In fact, we sat next to each other in opposition. On occasions I originally got his name wrong. I think I referred to the honourable member for Grey by the name of his predecessor, Mr Lloyd O’Neil. Having said all that, the present member for Grey has been a wonderful colleague. He has been an excellent representative for the people of Grey. Rural South Australia is losing a keen advocate and, I have to say, Indigenous Australians are also losing a keen advocate. The report is the honourable member’s valedictory report in a sense, but I wish him every success in the future. I commend him on his chairmanship and on what this report actually contains. I believe that this report, if accepted by the government, will make a real difference. I commend the report to the House.

Mr WAKELIN (Grey) (4.27 pm)—Mr Deputy Speaker, I seek leave to make some further remarks without closing the debate.

Leave granted.

Mr WAKELIN—It has been a pleasure to be part of the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs over a couple of parliaments now and to be its chairman. The report Indigenous Australians at work: successful initiatives in Indigenous employment endeavoured to find something positive that was happening in Indigenous affairs, to report on it and see whether the parliament could benefit from that experience in the community. I thought today that, in the time allocated, rather than go through all...
the recommendations which the government is considering, I would simply bring out some of the positives. I will start with my own foreword to the report, where I said:

The Aboriginal face on the Australian $50 note is David Unaipon, author, inventor and sometimes thought of as “Australia’s Leonardo”. As a remarkable example of the capacity of Indigenous people, I am sure that there are many David Unaipons across Australia and I dedicate this foreword to his memory and the future creativity of every Indigenous Australian.

In discussing our request to the Minister of the need for a positive approach to Indigenous matters, employment was an area where progress could be demonstrated. At a time of strong economic performance at the national level and with workforce shortages a growing reality, the opportunities for further development of Indigenous employment appeared to be significant.

Over the past two years we were fortunate to share the views and better understand the outcomes for many individuals, companies and the wider community in this vital human activity.

The central role of work and the workplace in most Australian’s lives is something that we perhaps take for granted – but the lessons of the past two years remind all of us that the variation in workforce participation by Indigenous people is very much a result of a complex set of factors which some achieve with significant success and others have a more limited result.

The above is very much a two way street with some employers leading the way and with many employees open to opportunities and both able to achieve great results.

The recurring theme of many people who presented before the Committee was the overwhelming impact of welfare policies as a deterrent to sustainable employment. The need for Government policies to strike a better balance between the incentives for work and the incentives to be distracted by welfare is vital.

I will just take some quotes from the report which say it much better than I can:

Welfare dependency is an enemy to Indigenous advancement.

That was from Mr Jack Pearson in his submission, No. 102, a very clear view, and it was a recurring theme: welfare dependency is an enemy to Indigenous advancement. I go to the minerals industry have a look at its contribution. I hope it will become clear why I have chosen this quote:

In the minerals industry—

this is from the text of the report—

60 per cent of their operations have neighbouring Indigenous communities. The mining industry has a vested interest in Indigenous land and communities; many resources are located on Indigenous land interests and companies need workers.

Not only does the mining industry have a very significant interest in accessing the land but it is the largest employer of Indigenous people in Australia. The minerals industry and its role, its memoranda of understanding and its general approach have been quite remarkable in its opportunities. I will just give one example from the report:

The Committee views Rio Tinto’s Argyle Diamond Mine’s Indigenous Employment Strategy as a ‘best practice model’. The company focuses on recruiting locally, and has set high targets for Indigenous employment and retention. Since 2000 Aboriginal employment has gone from less than five per cent to 23 per cent. Targets have been reset and it is hoped that by 2010, 40 per cent of the workforce will be Aboriginal. Argyle attributes its success to two strategies:

- A four day hiring and selection process which is culturally appropriate but still provides a robust assessment of candidates’ employability; and
• Training programs to skill-up Indigenous people, so that they can assist with the development of their communities. In 2003 Argyle entered into a contract with the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations ... to employ 150 trainees, which has resulted in 73 apprentices and trainees. Additionally, the mine’s procurement contracts require contractors to employ local Indigenous people.

I go now to the Indigenous Land Corporation, another successful employer. The ILC’s primary land management initiative is the Indigenous Pastoral Program. The IPP, as it is called, was established in 2003 with the signing of a MOU through the Northern Territory government, the ILC and the Northern Land and Central Land councils. The ILC submitted that at this time the organisation was the 19th largest cattle producer in Australia, running approximately 38,000 head of cattle. The ILC had some interesting things to say about the CDEP and the impediments to sustainable work practices.

I will also just mention here Australia Post. Australia Post have considerable success in the Indigenous employment area. Of Australia Post’s workforce, 1.7 per cent are Indigenous across all business streams and—this next point is quite important—27 per cent of full-time employees are above base grade level. That is, there is a spread throughout their organisation.

Some may know of Tjapukai, a very large tourism project and company in Cairns. Ernest Brimm, one of their senior people there in Cairns, said:

… the new spirit of freedom that is hopefully growing in the Aboriginal community at large [is] freedom from dependence on government handouts; freedom from a century of oppression; freedom from the cycle of poverty. We are proud of what we have accomplished.

And so they should be. Daniel Tucker of Carey Mining in Western Australia makes an interesting comment about reconciliation, which was also to be considered as part of our report. Also, I quote Mr John Corboy, a businessman:

Personally, I am not enormously into reconciliation; I am enormously into affirmative action. I think, beyond any doubt, there is an undeniable case that the Aboriginal members of our community do need to have the playing field levelled.

Simply put, in terms of the mining percentages, just to remind us, at Comalco—another one of the Rio stable—17.5 per cent of the workforce is Indigenous, with a target of 35 per cent by 2010 to be Indigenous; Comalco in Gladstone, in Queensland, 6.5 per cent; Pilbara Iron, 3.8 per cent of the workforce, with a target of 15 per cent—and I could go on to many others. I mentioned Argyle, BHP Billiton, Groote Eylandt, the National Tertiary Education Union et cetera and Tangentyere in Alice Springs.

In the time available, I wish to acknowledge a great man. Dr Dennis Foley has run a 10-year study—I think it is in excess of 10 years—of Indigenous entrepreneurship and small business progress for the Indigenous community. He has such commitment to this. To me, it is quite remarkable that a man would regard it as so important to the progress of Indigenous people that he would just dedicate so much time to it. He simply makes this point about the relationship of entrepreneurship, small business, to Indigenous progress:

It enables a certain part of Aboriginal Australia to move forward and be in control of what they are doing. They become a part of a wider society. They still maintain their Indigenousness. They do not lose their Aboriginality—that is for sure. They can still control it, but it is far easier to control your cultural beliefs when you have control of your financial resources. When you do not have control of your financial resources, you do not really have control of your life.

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MAIN COMMITTEE
I now want to move on to Warren Mundine, who is an inspiration to me. I will give you a quote from Warren’s perspective. He said:

Profit is not a bad word—it has been in Aboriginal communities for many years in regards to enterprises. We have to sell that as a good word.

He deliberately used the word ‘shareholders’. He also makes the point:

I am an optimist and we are living in exciting times. The leadership is changing: we have a younger, more articulate, more educated leadership coming forward.

It is with some pleasure that I acknowledge this report. It is a very brief snapshot of those who participated in it.

Debate (on motion by Ms Hall) adjourned.

BUSINESS

Rearrangement

Mrs GASH (Gilmore) (4.37 pm)—by leave—I move:

That order of the day No. 3, committee and delegation reports, be postponed until a later hour this day.

Question agreed to.

COMMITTEES

Economics, Finance and Public Administration Committee

Report

Debate resumed.

Mr SECKER (Barker) (4.38 pm)—I am not quite sure what operations of the parliament occurred just then, but I am sure all is well. I find it very interesting that we have had the Australian Labor Party trying to get Australians to believe that because of the government’s so-called poor management and interest rates rises there has been a mortgage stress crisis. But what I find even more interesting is that when we set up an inquiry to look into home lending practices and whether there is any mortgage stress, only one Labor member attended that committee meeting. Here we are in the Main Committee, and both the Labor Party members who were listed to speak have pulled out. That shows the interest of the Labor Party on this whole matter. I think there is no better saying for the Labor Party than: ‘Hypocrisy, Labor is thy name.’

In reality, leading Australian industry stakeholders, banking experts, finance brokers, and government and consumer agencies did not list either as the cause for home loan defaults or mortgage stress. Interest rates were not the cause. That was very clear. Not one of the experts in the area said that there was any sort of problem as a result of interest rates. In fact, when it came to home loan defaults, the four main reasons highlighted at the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Economics, Finance and Public Administration roundtable meeting were: marriage break-up, loss of job, gambling problems and, in 50 per cent of cases, incorrect information supplied by the person taking out the loan—and here we mean income or existing debt levels. So in actual fact half of them are caused by the applicants themselves.

The level of home loan defaults is now 10 times less than when Labor was last in government. So, if we have a crisis now, it must have been one hell of a crisis when Labor was last in government. Even though interest rates have risen—and nobody likes that when they have
borrowed for a home or a business—they still remain lower than they were at any time during the 13 years of the Hawke-Keating Labor government. So Labor’s suggestion that we have a crisis is not borne out by the facts.

Labor has dishonestly redefined the term ‘mortgage stress’ to mean those paying more than 30 per cent of gross income in loan repayments. But, as the Reserve Bank pointed out at this hearing, that definition has only ever been applied to income earners in the lowest 40 per cent bracket—not to everyone. In fact, the lending institutions take that into account; they use that formula for those on lower incomes. That is the only time that there is an actual need to use that definition. Instead, Labor applied that definition to 100 per cent of income levels, and that provided a grossly inaccurate end figure.

Labor has also tried to use figures of indebtedness from the high-priced Sydney market and apply them to the rest of Australia, where loans are much lower and are not affected by falling home values. Unfortunately, some people in west Sydney have been affected by that problem. In my electorate assets are still continuing to rise in value and the loans are nowhere near the size of the loans in the high-priced market of Sydney or in some parts of Perth, which is now, it seems, the high-priced house capital of Australia. We must be doing something right over there.

There is no home loan crisis. In fact, the rate of forced sales or repossessions is at near-record lows. The facts show us that less than one in 7,000 home loans default. If that is a crisis, it is a very interesting definition of ‘crisis’. Labor have failed to show any evidence of a crisis and their spin has been proven to be a fraud. Of course, no home loan borrower wants to see interest rates increase, as we saw just recently this year, but a 0.25 per cent rate rise is nothing compared to the increases under Labor, where they actually increased by one or two per cent overnight—not over two or three years. That is the difference between Labor and this coalition government.

I also take this opportunity to note with interest the results from the home loan inquiry that showed that generation Y—and we read about this in the papers—were more prepared to have higher debts for their homes. The reason for that is that generation Y’s life experience under a coalition government has been one of relatively benign and consistent interest rates, lower inflation and much higher employment security, with the lowest unemployment rate in 33 years. So, because things are pretty good under this government, they are more prepared to take a risk than someone who grew up in the Depression years or during World War II, for example, when things were a bit tougher, and who obviously has a much more conservative view when it comes to borrowing.

It is not that generation Y are wrong—which is proved by the fact that fewer than one in 7,000 home loans default—it just shows that generation Y are much more interested and prepared to take that risk because they have had this consistency. They did not have to go through the Whitlam years from 1972 to 1975 in this country and they did not have to go through the 13 years of Labor when interest rates went up to 17 per cent and unemployment went up to 11 per cent. They were really shocking times. They did not have to go through that; generation Y have had a very consistent economy with lots of jobs.

It is interesting to note that Econtech, a highly respected group of economists, often quoted by Labor, I might add, has predicted that after three years of a Labor government—which reminds me a bit of the Gough Whitlam three years—inflation would rise to five per cent and
unemployment would increase by 319,000 people, which is about three per cent. So, we
would go from 4.3 per cent to something like 7.5 per cent. We certainly would not have any
skills shortages then because they would all be unemployed and they would be fighting for a
job. GDP would drop by 2.4 per cent, and that is in terms of every Australian. That would
mean a decrease of $2,700 for every Australian. Of course, home loan interest rates would
increase to double figures for the first time since Labor was last in government, in 1996. This
is what Econtech, a group that Labor often quotes, is saying about Labor’s plan. This is be-
cause Labor has promised a return to an industrial relations system controlled by unions that
even former Labor Prime Minister Paul Keating said, on 9 June this year, was stupid.

It is the committee’s recommendation that the Australian Bureau of Statistics begin collect-
ning and publishing data on housing repossessions. There is a need for better information in
this area, which would also lead to a better informed public debate on housing lending and put
an end to ridiculous rumour-mongering like we see sprouting from the opposition. Further to
that, it is the committee’s firm belief that there is a need for a new approach to credit regula-
tion. The key driver of this is the aim to reduce the practices of predatory lenders and brokers,
even though it is actually a reasonably small amount in the whole scheme of things. The
committee recommends that the Commonwealth government regulate credit products and
advice, and this includes the regulation of mortgage brokers and non-bank lenders.

Finally, the committee recommends that the board of the Banking and Financial Services
Ombudsman increase its jurisdictional limit to $500,000, and other external dispute resolution
schemes consider the appropriateness of their limits. All in all, I think a very good day was
spent by the committee and I support its recommendations.

Mr KEENAN (Stirling) (4.48 pm)—I rise to talk on the report of the inquiry by the Stand-
ing Committee on Economics, Finance and Public Administration into home loan lending
practices and the processes used to deal with people in financial difficulty. I note, like the
member for Barker does, that although we hear a lot of sound and fury at the moment, a lot of
faux anger about the state of the mortgage market and the state of the home lending market in
Australia, only one of the Labor members has even bothered to comment on the tabling of this
report. I find that extraordinary. They are very happy to come and do the sound bites about
mortgage stress—so-called mortgage stress—or about how working families out there are
hurting, yet when it comes to doing any work—coming in here and talking on the report—
they are absolutely nowhere to be seen. I think it shows you how seriously we should take this
opposition; a sound bite opposition that is more interested in stunts than anything else.

The committee prepared this report after a one-day roundtable hearing in Canberra. I would
like to thank all the people that took the time to come down. It is a reasonably modest report.
There are three recommendations out of the report, and I would encourage the government to
seriously consider them.

The day was opened by a contribution from the Hon. Nick Greiner, who will be well
known to many Australians and is probably as distinguished an Australian as you would find
anywhere. He was appearing in his capacity as chairman of PMI Mortgage Insurance, so he
would have some idea about the state of the mortgage market in Australia. He commented I
think very importantly—because this was borne out by almost all the other speakers on the
day—that we are not in some sort of crisis of mortgage defaults. In fact, it is exactly the oppo-
site. Mortgage defaults are at historically low levels. This is contrary to some of the media
reporting that you might hear. The reality is that mortgage defaults are at incredibly low levels. The member for Barker commented previously that only one in 7,000 people are actually defaulting on their mortgages, so we have an extraordinarily robust system, and I think anybody who calls that a crisis is guilty of hyperbole of the highest order. I think this is the most important point that you would take out of the day: we do not have some crisis in home lending in Australia.

We hear of this term ‘mortgage stress’. Apparently that is defined as paying more than 30 per cent of your income on mortgage payments. I think that is a ludicrous definition. I pay more than 30 per cent of my income on mortgage payments; it does not necessarily mean that I am in mortgage stress. The point is that the household wealth of Australians has changed substantially. In fact, astonishingly, if you look at the figures, household wealth in Australia—this is in real terms—has actually doubled in the past nine years. That is quite an extraordinary figure. Household wealth has doubled in real terms within the last nine years. Australians do have more debt, but they are also far wealthier. If debts are anchored to assets, that is a totally different thing than debt that is anchored to consumer spending.

It is also very important to point out that interest rates are much lower than they have been historically. We have heard a lot of talk about interest rate rises, but they remain at what is historically a very low level. During the past decade, as we would all know, house prices across the country have increased markedly. In my home state of Western Australia in the past few years we have seen an explosion in what it costs to purchase a house. Obviously, people are going to have to take on more debt if they are going to get into these markets.

There is another point arising from the inquiry that I think is worth mentioning, and that is how good deregulation of the financial system has been for Australian consumers. The margins that are charged by banks are now substantially lower than they would have been in previous years. Competition is extraordinarily beneficial for people who are entering the mortgage finance market. Finance is much easier to obtain. I will go back to that because obviously that can lead to problems, but I think it is important to note that my family has a background in real estate. We have owned a real estate agency for many years, and my parents started it with their partners. One of the most important things they could do for the client was to find housing finance. It was extraordinarily difficult to do that. The banks were extraordinarily uncompetitive. They had extraordinarily stringent criteria for loaning money and, as a result, people who could afford to repay a loan would not be able to access finance. The situation could not be more different today. There are a vast amount of institutions in the market. They compete very heavily for your business. They charge much lower margins than they would have charged 10 or 15 or 20 years ago and the consumer has access to a wonderful wealth of market information. It is very easy for a consumer to jump on the internet and compare rates and service from home loan lending institutions. You will find that even the big four banks—you might, possibly unfairly, say they are not organisations that in the past have been strictly focused on customer service—will come to your house on the weekend to talk to you about housing finance.

Competition has been an extremely good thing for consumers—I think that is very important—but it can have a downside. A downside is that people might be accessing credit when they should not be accessing credit. What we heard at the roundtable and what the report makes clear is that there is actually not a lot of evidence that there is a lot of unsustainable

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lending going on. Lending practices have changed. They are vastly more competitive, but there is not a lot of evidence that people are getting mortgages when they should not.

I think it is an important point to make because the Australian market is terribly different from the US market. If you look at the US subprime market there is a lot of evidence of predatory lending. There is a lot of evidence that people have been lent money when they should not have been lent money. They have been lent money when they had no hope of being able to repay that mortgage. But the Australian market stands apart from that. The Australian market is extraordinarily different.

When we talk about low-doc loans and easier access to credit, I think we should remember that that can actually be an extraordinarily good thing, although there may be a negative side. It is a good thing that people can access housing finance. There are whole classes of people who, 20 years ago, would never have been able to buy their own homes and now they are able to buy their own homes, thanks to deregulation of the market and thanks to the increased competition within that market.

This report makes three recommendations. I think most reasonable people would agree that recommendation 1 and recommendation 3 are reasonably non-controversial. Recommendation 1 is that the ABS begin collecting and publishing annual data on housing repossessions. The data should be disaggregated to include, as a minimum, breakdowns by loan type, lender type, primary cause and location. I recommend that the government think seriously about this recommendation. It makes sense for that information to become available, and I hope it is a recommendation that they will consider and agree to.

Recommendation 2 is probably the recommendation that the government would need to look at in the most detail and it is one that is possibly worthy of greater consideration. The committee recommends that the Commonwealth government regulate credit products and advice. This includes the regulation of mortgage brokers and non-bank lenders. We currently have an unusual system in which this is regulated at the state level, and the committee was of the view that it would be beneficial if it were regulated at the Commonwealth level. If the Commonwealth were to consider that, I certainly hope that they would do so by way of light-touch regulation. I do not think we heard evidence that the system is irrevocably broken or that bad practices are widespread throughout the industry. I note that the industry’s peak body was one of the organisations that recommended national regulation.

Recommendation 3 is that the board of the Banking and Financial Services Ombudsman increase its jurisdictional limit to half a million dollars. This limit should be indexed annually and other dispute resolution schemes should consider the appropriateness of the limits. Most people would agree that that is a sensible response to the fact that mortgages have substantially increased because household wealth has increased and so has the size of the average mortgage. I do hope that the government will look seriously at these recommendations. (Time expired)

Mr BRENDAN O’CONNOR (Gorton) (4.58 pm)—It is true to say I was a late starter in the debate on the report of the inquiry by the Standing Committee on Economics, Finance and Public Administration into home loan lending practices and the processes used to deal with people in financial difficulty because this report—a very important one—has just been tabled in the parliament. I have just been listening to a number of government members and others speak on the report. Indeed, I listened to the member for Cunningham in the main chamber,
when the report was tabled, refer to the importance of this particular report. I agree with her and I agree with the sentiments in general from the committee members that the report is timely and could also provide some assistance to people who could find themselves in some financial stress as a result of being highly geared or finding the mortgage being a difficult debt to service.

I listened to the member for Stirling say that it was a ludicrous proposition that a household paying more than 30 per cent of its income on mortgage repayments was under mortgage stress. He went on to say—and I was listening on the monitor—that it was ludicrous because he spent in excess of 30 per cent of his income on his mortgage and he did not find himself under financial stress. I am glad that the member for Stirling is not under financial stress, but I think it is important to distinguish parliamentarians, who are on a minimum of $130,000 gross per annum, from householders, for example in my electorate, whose household income is $50,000. If you are spending 30 per cent of your income when you are on $50,000, or even in excess of that, of course you are going to feel the strain compared with somebody on $130,000 or more, given there might be other householders deriving income in the member for Stirling’s household—and I do not know. I think he is right in saying that, if a person is paying 30 per cent or more, it does not necessarily dictate that they are under stress. But I think it is unequivocal that, if you are servicing a mortgage with 30 per cent or more of your income and you are on a household income of no more than $50,000, $60,000 or $70,000 per annum, there is enormous strain, because the discretionary income of somebody on half the pay of the member for Stirling or, indeed, me is far less than ours is. The capacity to pay that mortgage is far less given all the other necessities of life for families. Therefore, whilst I accepted the view that it did not necessarily dictate mortgage stress to be paying 30 per cent or more of one’s income to service a mortgage, it seemed insensitive of the member for Stirling—or, indeed, any other member—to conclude that people on low to moderate household incomes would not suffer some strain as a result of that proportion of the income being provided to the mortgage. I think the member, with respect, was wrong in blithely disregarding that assertion.

It is fair to say that there has to be some arbitrary measure to consider the strain that Australian householders are under. I think it is important to note that there was strain during the recession; there was strain on households when interest rates hit 17 per cent. In this debate it is important to remember the proportion of income to service the mortgage, not just the interest rate percentage. What we know is that, on average, a higher proportion of household income is being used to service a mortgage now than it was in the recession in 1991. That is for a variety of reasons and does not necessarily place everybody under strain, but I think it is important for the government to at least acknowledge there are people hurting out there. I do not think the government accepts that there are people who are unable to get into the housing market, firstly, because houses prices have gone up so fast and so high that people are out-priced and are excluded from buying a home. That is happening now more and more. It is also true to say that people are mortgaging themselves up to their eyeballs to buy a house and get into the housing market. The problem for people is this: there has been exponential growth in the price of houses but not the same comparative increase in salaries or wages.

On one hand, if you are the owner of a house or houses, you would feel comfortable with that situation because you could see the value of your property going up—there is equity. For
those people who have found themselves in a position of having bought real estate prior to the increases, it is a bit like winning lotto—good timing, you could say, good luck. But the fact is that they are beneficiaries of the rate of increase in the value of land and houses. But for those people—singles or couples or families—who are seeking to enter the housing market now without equity and on an average wage, it is very difficult.

It is very difficult for people who have taken that plunge, knowing that it does not seem to be getting any better and that it is not going to get any cheaper. You have to get into the market to be able to build up equity in a house and hope the house will increase in value, so you build up some equity and you feel secure. There is advice being provided to people that they should take the leap and buy a house because things are not going to get better in this area, things are only going to get worse. People then find themselves very heavily geared and find themselves sailing very close to the wind financially and therefore under enormous strain to service their mortgage, their debt. It is important, therefore, for this committee to conclude, among other things, that there needs to be proper collection of statistics that would allow for a proper analysis of what is going on regarding repossessions.

In recommendation 1, the committee recommends that the ABS begin collecting and publishing annual data on housing repossessions and that the data should be disaggregated to include, as a minimum, breakdowns by loan type, lender type, primary cause and location. I think that is a very sensible recommendation and I would support it.

In recommendation 2, the committee recommends that the Commonwealth government regulate credit products and advice and this includes the regulation of mortgage brokers and non-bank lenders. There is no doubt—and certainly this report in its introduction concludes—that there has been a growth in the lending industry, which can be a good thing because it can bring about competition which should bring down prices. But there has also been some imprudent behaviour by lending institutions, for example, providing loans to people which are well in excess of what they can pay back. I know people say, ‘How paternalistic should we be? If people think they can pay back the loan, who are we to say they are not in a position to?’ But that is why you have experts and that is why you have people to make decisions in everyone’s interests to ensure people can pay the mortgage. The worst thing that can happen is to provide money to a couple and for that couple or family not to be able then to properly service the debt, let alone pay the debt off.

This report was timely. I do not agree with the member for Stirling, who says that 30 per cent of your income is not necessarily stress. Try living on $50,000 a year, not $130,000, and you will find that 30 per cent of that income being put off to service the mortgage is a difficult task for families in this country, no less than it is for the constituents of the electorate of Gorton. (Time expired)

Debate (on motion by Mrs Irwin) adjourned.

Environment and Heritage Committee Report

Debate resumed.

Mr JENKINS (Scullin) (5.09 pm)—I welcome this opportunity to make some further remarks to the inquiry into Sustainability for survival: creating a climate for change: inquiry into a sustainability charter, a report of the Standing Committee on Environment and Heri-
In doing so, I wish to perhaps put in greater detail and context the reasons that this inquiry came about. On 12 September 2005, the House environment committee tabled the **Sustainable cities** inquiry. At present, the committee, the parliament and the nation still await a response from the government to this report.

In the recommendations of **Sustainable cities**, the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Environment and Heritage, under the heading ‘Governance and policy frameworks—developing a national approach’, recommended that the Australian government ‘establish an Australian sustainability charter that sets key national targets across a number of areas, including water, transport, energy, building design and planning’ and ‘encourage a Council of Australian Governments agreement to the charter and its key targets’. Further, the committee recommended:

... that all new relevant Australian Government policy proposals be evaluated as to whether they would impact on urban sustainability and if so, be assessed against the Australian Sustainability Charter and the COAG agreed sustainability targets.

Further, the committee went on to recommend that:

... the Australian Government establish an independent Australian Sustainability Commission headed by a National Sustainability Commissioner ...

It is a little disappointing, when we meet here two years later, to indicate that there has not been a response to those recommendations and the recommendations in toto of the sustainable cities inquiry. In that report, at 3.85, it says:

The committee urges in the strongest possible manner that these recommendations be implemented in totality in the shortest possible timeframe. The time is right and as a nation we need to make the right decisions.

That was two years ago. In the absence of any decisions, that is still the case.

Given that the committee was of a view, what was to be the next step? The next step of course is this inquiry into a sustainable charter, and the committee’s report **Sustainability for survival: creating a climate for change**. Regrettably, this inquiry arose out of the committee using to the fullest the devices that are allowed by the standing orders. Remember, primarily the way that a committee gets a reference is to have it referred by a minister, a member of the executive. Given that there had not been a response within the time frame to the committee’s report, back on 16 February 2006 the committee resolved under the provisions of standing order 215(c) to undertake an inquiry into a sustainability charter. How did it do that? The standing orders allow that we can adopt a matter arising from a study of a departmental annual report referred to the committee. So the device that was used in the motion to make this reference was that, in the 2004-05 Department of the Environment and Heritage annual report, there was a reference made to a ‘policy approach required to achieve a sustainable Australia’. So, arising out of a report that started in the 40th Parliament, the first public discussions with the community by way of hearings and visits having been in January 2004, two years later after having reported to the parliament—a nearly six-month delay in having any response to that report—the committee decided to go the further step to flesh out what was required of a sustainability charter.

I think that the House committee can be pleased with the report that they have tabled and with the recommendations they have made. It is interesting—in the context of the debate that goes on about matters to do with the environment, matters to do with sustainability and, to the
extent that they overarch, matters to do with climate change—that the committee make no apology that they have suggested that the sustainability charter should be aspirational in nature but that it should overarch the technical work that would go into ensuring that there were definite goals that had to be achieved. That has been the intent of the committee right through.

Remember, this is a journey that started in the 40th Parliament. We are now towards the end of the 41st Parliament. The House environment committee, with a number of people being members of that committee, has indicated bipartisan support for the recommendations of both reports that the government needs to show leadership.

Further, we have acknowledged that in the Australian federal system, under the national leadership of the federal government, we require that the federal government embrace the hopes and aspirations of the state government. In fact, this is a problem which needs to be tackled by all—local government, the wider community, industry groups, people, families—under any configuration. There is some discussion, and the chair in his foreword to the report we are discussing today, *Sustainability for survival: creating a climate for change*, indicated that economic matters have to be taken into consideration and some people might be baulking at those because they think that there is an economic cost. He went on to say that people had to understand that we need to look at what the economic cost is if we do not take action.

But we should also remember that there are plenty of people that think that there can be productivity dividends as a result of the work that would lead to sustainability. I quote from the original sustainable cities inquiry, where Marcus Spiller, the past President of the Planning Institute of Australia, said:

The fact is that, if we had sustainable cities, there would be a significant productivity dividend to the country. In other words, GDP would be greater, other things being equal, if we had better functioning and efficient cities.

So there is the potential, the opportunity—and it is an opportunity that is lost if we see a government like the Howard government not respond to these recommendations. This is an issue where we must ensure that, when we see agreement by parliamentarians across the chamber in this case, executive government does not ignore that body of work. Often it really distresses me that those who by virtue of their membership of this parliament become executive members of government should, once they become executive members of government, turn their backs on the workings of the parliament. This exercise about sustainability is an example of the potential for an Australian parliament to reach out to the community that we represent and to come up with solutions that are valid and that will be successful if put in place.

I want to say something to all those people over these two inquiries who have given of their time, given of their good advice and entered into the discussions, because not of all of them can be satisfied by the deliberations of the committee; that is not the nature of it. These committees have tried to make sure that, by this bipartisan decision to agree with a framework, we go forward. But how are we going to encourage people to front up yet again if government ignores this process? I hope that, when we see whichever government is in place after the election, either the Howard government will have a conversion on the road to Damascus or a Rudd led Labor government will see that these types of exercises are very important. I, for one, look forward to working with Minister Garrett and Mr Rudd’s other ministers in a holistic approach by a Rudd Labor government on the issues that are raised and seeing the sustain-
ability charter being successfully implemented by cooperation across all future governments. *(Time expired)*

Mr KERR (Denison) (5.20 pm)—In responding to the report *Sustainability for survival: creating a climate for change*, perhaps I might acknowledge the significant contribution of both the Chair of the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Environment and Heritage, the Hon. Mal Washer, and the member for Scullin, who has performed an estimable task not just during this committee but, I understand from corridor conversation, in his nearly 20 years as a continuing member of the environment committee—and he will achieve that 20-year milestone if this parliament extends to its longest possible term. When we reflect upon this document, it is important to recognise that it is simply a recognition that the environmental footprint imposed upon Australia has been most heavy in those parts of urban settlement along the eastern coast, along the coastal zones, and that the vast majority of Australians live in cities. It is also where the greatest environmental pressures and demands are placed. Failure to deal in a comprehensive and cross-portfolio way with those pressures and demands is to condemn most of our other long-term aspirations—including those relating to climate change, clean water and energy efficiency—to failure.

When the committee set upon its task early in this parliament and developed its report for sustainable cities, it did so in a way that recognised the fundamental importance of this area of policy for future governments. I do think it is somewhat sad that the current Minister for the Environment and Water Resources, Minister Turnbull, who played a very constructive and engaged role as a member of the committee and made some considerable intellectual input into its framing and its strategies, has not responded to the publication of the committee’s report since it was brought down some two years ago. As the member for Scullin has pointed out, we still await a response from the government in relation to this landmark report.

That has led to the further report to the parliament from the charter inquiry, which was tabled just recently. In that regard, the starting point of recommendation is that, in the next parliament, whoever is to be Minister for the Environment and Water Resources introduce a bill for an act to establish a statutory national sustainability commission headed by a sustainability commissioner. I am not certain of the reason for the current minister not having progressed his thinking in relation to this report. It may be that he is thwarted by his cabinet colleagues. That seems to me to be a likely scenario, given the government’s head-in-the-sand approach in relation to a whole range of other environmental issues. It may be that the minister is overwhelmed with his own political survival, with a lot of other pressures that have come upon him in relation to climate change and, more latterly, the debate about a pulp mill in Tasmania, and he has not focused his formidable intellectual talent on the sustainability of our cities. But, whatever is the motivating reason, it is unfortunate that we have not reached a point where the government has put on the table its response to one of the most significant reports of a parliamentary committee that has been generated from the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Environment and Heritage in the 20 years that the member for Scullin has been a member of this committee and in the 20 years that I have served as a member of this parliament.

There can be no real progress on the major issues that affect our environment in this country unless we address in an effective, comprehensive and coordinated way the issues that the sustainability charter would have us address. You need only go in brief to the issues referred
to in this report to recognise the nature of the issues that are arrayed before us as we live in our urban environment. We need to address the built environment, including the cost of construction, land utilisation, building materials, energy utilisation and energy efficiency. We need to deal with the supply of water to our cities, the use of waterways and their maintenance; discharge and reduction; and the reduction of energy use with the distribution and maintenance of its supply. We need to look at energy as a provider of all the services that we rely on for the household comfort we take for granted, in order to make certain that we draw down less on unsustainable yields and abate greenhouse emissions and that we build together a framework that allows us to join with other nations in dealing with the challenges of climate change.

We need to look at transport—not just the emissions of motor vehicles but also our road systems, our public transport provision—and at making certain that cities become liveable. Without that, we simply do not have an effective response to one of the key ingredients of our contribution to global warming. We need to look at the economics of our administration of our cities, the management of our waste streams, and we also have to look at the health impacts of our planning for urban living.

These are integrated, comprehensive issues that we shy away from to our great detriment. This committee had the foresight to put forward the recommendations that it did in its last report. It did so with a degree of delight and it recognised with a degree of delight when a former member of this committee became the minister for the environment. In fact, if members care to look at the photograph that is on the wall in relation to this committee, we deliberately invited the minister, as a former member of this committee, to take part in that photograph simply because it recognised the contribution he had made. But that contribution stopped when he became a member of the executive. For two years, we simply had silence on one of the most significant of those challenges that Australia faces. Alongside the skills crisis and the education crisis, we have this crisis of inaction in responding to a principal report of the House of Representatives on an issue that ought to be at the forefront of every member’s mind because every member shares a common interest in making certain that the success of our community is not lost as we fail to grapple with the overarching and interlinked challenges of what is an increasingly unsustainable form of urban design and an unsustainable form of ignorance of the challenges that we face in building a better and more sustainable framework for future policy.

With those few remarks I am content to simply put this document on the record. Plainly it will not be implemented by this government in the current parliament. The government has had ample time to respond, to put down the building blocks of what it might have seen as a sustainability charter. The work is to be left to future parliaments. I am happy to yield the balance of my time to the incoming minister for the environment, who I trust will give greater priority to the need to develop the charter that is recommended by the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Environment and Heritage and place it where it should be—at the centre of Australian government policymaking.

Mr GARRETT (Kingsford Smith) (5.28 pm)—I certainly want to add to the remarks of the member for Denison and assure him that we will indeed give due attention to the matter of a sustainability charter and recognise that there has been a significant lack of action on the part of the government and notorious tardiness in dealing with this very important matter.
I want to thank the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Environment and Heritage and its chair, the member for Moore, and the deputy chair, the member for Throsby, for the committee’s bipartisan report on its inquiry into a sustainability charter, *Sustainability for survival: creating a climate for change*. This report has two principal recommendations. The first is the establishment of a statutory national sustainability commission headed by a sustainability commissioner.

The roles of the commission as set out in the report include: preparation of a sustainability charter, evaluation of progress towards goals and targets, reporting on this to both houses of parliament and conducting inquiries into sustainability matters. The committee suggests the minister should head the office of the national sustainability commission and be an independent statutory officer. The second principal recommendation is to establish an aspirational national sustainability charter with objectives and milestones containing ‘a supplementary technical implementation agreement containing targets’—and we think this is a very important recommendation. The committee suggested the national sustainability charter should at a minimum cover the following sectors: the built environment, water, energy, transport, ecological footprint, economics, waste, social equity and health, and community engagement and education.

Labor will look very closely at the recommendations of the House environment committee. But I am pleased to say that the broad thrust of the committee’s recommendations is consistent with ALP policy, which also proposes the establishment of a national sustainability charter, commission and commissioner. Labor will certainly be outlining this position in more detail in the lead-up to the election.

Labor has a proud record in sustainability policy, best illustrated by the Hawke-Keating Labor government’s national strategy for ecologically sustainable development. The development of this strategy followed on from the 1987 report of the World Commission on Sustainable Development entitled *Our common future*, which also was known as the Bruntland report, named after its chairman.

Australia’s national strategy for ecologically sustainable development under the Hawke-Keating government was almost certainly the first example of a country preparing a national strategy for its sustainable development, and that was pioneering policy in those times. Australia under the previous Labor government was leading the world in this area—and I really do mean leading the world—using those words and giving those words their proper meaning. Subsequently, various UN conferences on sustainable development required all countries to prepare national sustainable development strategies.

Unfortunately, the Howard government abandoned the Hawke-Keating government’s pioneering effort to develop and implement a national sustainable development strategy—and that was a great, great pity, because that early promise and that early momentum came to nought once the Howard government was elected.

Australia’s unique and priceless natural environment and resources are under enormous pressure from climate change now. And after 11 years of neglect, mismanagement and tardiness by the Howard government on nearly all of Australia’s indicators of environmental health, we continue to go backwards. It has been noted before but it must be emphasised when we speak on these matters that Australia’s biodiversity has declined in the past decade. Notwithstanding that investment from the Natural Heritage Trust, notwithstanding the fact that
the community has rightly applied itself to the issue of conserving and protecting the environment, we still have a decline in our biodiversity— with terrestrial bird and mammal species listed as extinct, endangered or vulnerable rising by some 41 per cent between 1995 and 2005. These are terrible statistics. In 2000 about 5.7 million hectares were assessed as having a high potential to develop dryland salinity and about one-quarter of our surface water management areas as being close to or exceeding sustainable extraction limits. This represents a significant policy failure on the part of the Howard government with a clear lack of strategic priority focus and no national targets or performance indicators—which is the Howard government’s approach. So there is real merit in this proposal from the committee for a national sustainability commission, and a Rudd Labor government would, if elected, adopt a comprehensive policy for the protection and conservation of our natural environment.

I note that this report builds on the excellent bipartisan work of the House environment committee and in particular their previous inquiry into sustainable cities. It is a true disgrace that the Howard government still has not responded to the Sustainable cities report more than two years after its release. The environment minister was an enthusiastic contributor to this landmark report, but he has failed to respond to the report as minister. We were told in Senate estimates in February this year that the environment department had prepared a response to the report but was awaiting the minister’s approval. Seven months later the minister still has not released the government’s report.

If there was ever a test for Minister Turnbull and his capacity to act, this was it. He was an enthusiastic member of the committee and then as minister he has done absolutely nothing about it. This was a highly significant report because it was bipartisan in its advice, two years in the making, where the sustainable future of our cities was considered.

When the Standing Committee on Environment and Heritage tabled its findings on its inquiry into sustainable cities, it called for concerted national action and for the Australian government to assume a leadership role—that was the quotation—but we are still waiting for the Howard government to assume that leadership role. Clearly, at this point, new leadership is required. If the Howard government will not take the necessary action and provide that leadership, it is time for new leadership to develop a more sustainable Australia.

I note that in question time today a number of questions were put to the government, including to the Minister for Employment and Workplace Relations, about climate change spending and about the policies of the government in responding to this most important issue which we now face. It is a fact, as report after report indicates—with some clarity and I think some pungency—that the urgent need for us to respond nationally to the likely impacts our natural environment will face as a consequence of climate change is ever more evident. Yet it remains a fact that the government, in its time in office, has spent twice as much on advertising as it has on climate change programs. In relation to climate change programs, it has now significantly underspent.

We have had inquiries conducted by the parliament with some producing significant bipartisan recommendations— particularly the inquiry into sustainable cities, which went to the heart of Australians living sustainably on the continent. With the majority of Australians living in capital cities or suburbs, many on the east coast of Australia, in urban and suburban conurbations, there is a desperate need for national leadership and an implementation of sustainability principles in planning and the way in which we manage our cities. Here we had a
set of bipartisan recommendations. The coalition, the Labor Party, the Democrats and the Greens, every single party in the parliament, signed on to this particular report and its recommendations. Yet Minister Turnbull does not have the capacity to act. That speaks volumes for the emphasis this government gives to sustainability and looking after the environment. That speaks volumes when we consider the report before us today—Sustainability for survival: Creating a climate for change—by the Standing Committee on Environment and Heritage on its inquiry into a sustainability charter. The government just does not take the environment seriously.

So long as we have a government that is willing to spend twice as much on government advertising as on climate change programs, then we get a clear sense of where this government’s priorities lie. There is now an urgent need for us to develop a national approach to figuring through the right mechanisms, means and ways of ensuring that we get this country onto a sustainable footing and that we manage the challenge of climate change. In particular, a national sustainability commissioner, who is able to look at a range of measures, evaluate progress towards goals and targets and assess whether or not taxpayers’ money is being put to good use, seems to be an eminently worthwhile and important suggestion. We certainly do feel that in the area of leadership, in addressing climate change and in responding to the important and critical environment challenges that we have, this government’s failure to take into account the work that is done in the parliament on reports of this kind and its treatment of the recommendations of earlier committees with contempt and lack of action are the surest signs that it is neither prepared nor willing to take the issue of the environment seriously. A Rudd Labor government, if elected, would take the environment seriously and would work robustly to address the issues raised in this particular report.

Debate (on motion by Mrs Irwin) adjourned.

Family and Human Services Committee

Report

That the House take note of the report.

Mrs IRWIN (Fowler) (5.39 pm)—The winnable war on drugs: the impact of illicit drug use on families is the second report on this issue by the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Family and Human Services and its predecessor the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Family and Community Affairs. I have taken part in both inquiries, which has meant an involvement of more than six years with this issue, and I could add to that my interest in the issue for some years prior to the first inquiry.

What has been significant for me—and I am sure that I can say the same for all other members who have taken part in these inquiries—is that we have all been touched by the human stories we have encountered. We often hear terms like ‘war on drugs’ and ‘the fight against drugs’ but, having met with the full range of people in some way involved in the treatment of illicit drug users, I feel humbled by the small role played by parliaments in addressing the many problems associated with drug abuse.

As members of parliament we can be very much like armchair generals in the so-called war on drugs. While we can afford the luxury of being able to sit back and talk about strategies, there are those in the trenches who see the grim realities on a day-to-day basis. I think of
those who attend incidents of overdose and trauma resulting from drug abuse: our police and our ambulance services. In recent years we have seen a dramatic decline in the number of fatalities occurring from drug overdoses. With the assistance of new treatments, together with the dedication and compassion of those officers, many lives have been saved. For our hospital staff who work in detox units, the medical staff who begin the process of rehabilitation and the social workers who do their best to put broken lives back together, these are often thankless tasks and are not well appreciated by the community.

As we know all too well, successful outcomes in the field of drug rehabilitation are not all that common. It takes extraordinary dedication on the part of these people to continue to work in this field. We also owe them our respect for their experience and professionalism in their field. It is offensive to dismiss these professionals as elites and to give equal standing to so-called common-sense remedies rather than strategies and treatments based on scientific studies and reviews.

Of those that we have heard from in our inquiries, it is the families and friends of those involved in illicit drug use that have had the most profound effect on me. The grief, anguish and frustration has come through in so many submissions and discussions that I have had over the years. The parents, brothers and sisters and especially the children of illicit drug users can truly be considered the victims. Yet they also suffer most from the stigma that attaches to illicit substance abuse. In the main they form the backbone of many agencies active in the field of drug awareness, referral and rehabilitation. As we all know, they are active lobbyists. Those parents, siblings and friends are very much at the coalface. What strikes me most is their dedication. Many have lost someone close, yet their response is to devote a great part of their lives to help others. They participate to spread the message about the harm of illicit drugs. But, for many, the most important service they perform is assisting in the counselling of families with an illicit-drug-using member. For other families, their close support of rehabilitation services is the backbone of those services.

I should not forget those who have devoted their professional lives to the treatment of drug addiction. These are people like Dr Alex Wodak, a man I greatly admire, a recognised world leader in the field. When I met with leading researchers and professionals in the field of drug addiction treatment in Europe in 2003, almost everyone I met was aware of the work of Dr Wodak and recognised his great leadership in the field. Witnessing the work of people like Dr Wodak, someone who sees the effects of drug addiction each and every day, you cannot simply dismiss them as elites or part of a drugs industry. There are no silver bullets to cure drug addiction. It takes years of painstaking research to understand this complex problem. It is unworthy of a parliamentary committee to malign the reputation of such dedicated professionals.

From the terms of reference, the committee’s inquiry and report might have been expected to deal with specific issues related to the impact of illicit drug use on families. Instead, the inquiry focused on attempting to legitimise the political stance of the Prime Minister. From the outset, in paragraph 1.2, the report’s introduction takes its lead from the quotation attributed to the Prime Minister’s statement of 16 August 2007:

This statement flies in the face of the National Drug Strategy adopted by the Council of Australian Governments. The purpose of the report is to provide a fig leaf for the government’s
denial of the success of the National Drug Strategy. The government uses the language of ‘tough on drugs’, but at agency level it supports the principles of harm minimisation. The committee’s rejection of evidence based analysis and insistence on zero tolerance and drug-free treatments puts at risk the valuable work of government and non-government agencies which lead the world in addressing the health, social, economic and law enforcement consequences of illicit drug use.

This report stands in stark contrast to the report of the Parliamentary Joint Committee on the Australian Crime Commission which recommended that:

... in the execution of the National Drug Strategy, harm-reduction strategies and programs receive more attention and resources.

The major point of disagreement with the majority report is the approach to the policy of harm minimisation. The report, at paragraph 1.50, places its interpretation on this policy, stating:

This message—
zero tolerance—
is undermined in the community by those who advocate for a harm minimisation or harm reduction approach, that merely seeks to reduce the harm arising from drug use without the goal of seeing each individual drug free.

The report then states, at paragraph 1.52:

The zero tolerance approach to drug policy has been hindered by drug industry elites within Australia who advocate for treatment approaches that aim to reduce harm—but do not have the aim of enabling users to become drug free.

In accepting submissions of individuals and agencies committed to zero tolerance based largely on anecdotal evidence and rejecting the substantial submissions put forward by the recognised government and non-government agencies, the report fails to make an objective assessment of harm minimisation. The report includes in harm minimisation programs the following: methadone and buprenorphine maintenance programs, needle and syringe programs, supervised injection facilities, non-injection routes of administration, overdose prevention interventions, pill testing, RaveSafe interventions and tolerance zones. Of these, only the last does not apply to the opiate drug heroin. Yet the report states that heroin use appears to have stabilised and declined in recent years and, at paragraph 1.18, states:

Heroin use dropped from 0.8 per cent of people aged 15-64 years in 1998 to 0.2 per cent in 2004. While much of this decline is attributed to the heroin drought, the report states that there were almost 39,000 people receiving pharmacotherapy treatment in June 2006. At the same time, the report states:

... the rate of admissions to hospitals for opioid use has declined significantly since 1998-99

So I would think that any minister who took the recommendations of the committee on board would be praised by the heads of their department as very courageous—in a Yes, Minister fashion. The committee ignores the fact that for many agencies dealing with drug addiction, their immediate goal is to limit the clients’ reliance on illicit drugs and to stabilise their lives as much as possible.

When we introduce criteria that require goals for clients to be drug free, do we mean drug free now or drug free at some time in the future? One thing that research tells us is that age
cures drug addiction. So we could say that, if we keep addicts alive long enough, they will eventually be drug free—but we must keep them alive. My concern with the requirement for so-called drug-free treatments is that accepting these criteria for funding may lead to established treatments losing their funding. As I said, there are currently 39,000 people on methadone and maintenance programs. What would happen if we were to have a zero-tolerance drug-free approach? The results of such a policy would be unthinkable.

Mr CADMAN (Mitchell) (5.50 pm)—I was amazed to hear the remarks of the deputy chairman, the member for Fowler. They cannot be reflected in the minority report because it says that Labor supports the majority of the report’s 31 recommendations. The member for Fowler must be expressing personal views and not those of her party or of the committee.

Mrs Irwin—You know that’s not true.

Mr CADMAN—You know that not all of your members signed it.

Mrs Irwin interjecting—

Mr CADMAN—I did not interrupt you; you just keep quiet.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Hon. DGH Adams)—Order!

Mr CADMAN—’Labor members support the aim of helping those who use to become drug free.’ That is a statement that supports making sure that people do have an opportunity of living a drug-free life, and that should be the aim of every agency and every professional. What we have failed to hear from the Australian Labor Party, particularly the deputy chairman, is that that is their personal goal—that everybody should have the object of becoming drug free at one stage or another in their lives. That should be the goal. That is a life set free. That is a life that is saved permanently. That is the only way; it is the only philosophy that should guide drug programs.

I was part of the committee that presented the Road to recovery report in August 2003. Four years later we have a similar report, The winnable war on drugs. One of the main features in the 2003 report was to have a recovery program for every addict. I believe cannabis was outed for the first time in that report as being a serious problem and an addictive product, particularly the products that are grown under hydroponic circumstances. Cannabis was outed as a serious problem. Also in that 2003 report, there was support given for successful programs and not necessarily the loudest claimants. So the recommendation was that governments look at successful programs, ones that are producing results, rather than funding the loudest claimants.

It was indicated in that earlier report that families are intimately involved in recovery programs and in the management of addicts, and in many instances the responsibilities they accept are absolutely enormous. The report in 2003 indicated that there were inadequate detoxification opportunities and that harm minimisation should be replaced with a focus on harm prevention and treatment of dependent people. A far-sighted proposal was that there should be roadside testing for drug affected drivers.

In this current report being debated by the House, it is appropriate four years later to revisit the same scene. In many areas there had been some growth and improvement; in others, not a lot. The growth in the use of methamphetamines in particular and its impact on families and young people was something that was of great concern to the committee. Methadone remains the main treatment, and the naltrexone trial recommended by that previous committee has
only just been commenced. That is a disappointment because, despite the wonderful results of
dedicated researcher Dr George O’Neil, little attention has been paid to the processes and
funding of that program to determine what is the very best. In the committee’s examination of
and visits to the Perth naltrexone centre, I know that I for one was absolutely amazed and de-
lighted with the results. They were not always permanent results, but they were results which
could be measured and held and then, over a period of time, people could be set free from
drugs.

There are still not enough detoxification opportunities around Australia. It was amazing to
us that the National Drug Strategy set by premiers and the Commonwealth cannot be ques-
tioned by the body advising the Prime Minister. The advisory body is to give advice to the
government; they should not be bound by any particular thing but should be able to give free
and frank advice outside the normal approach.

I think that the committee was really taken by the words of Professor Gary Hulse, a profes-
sor at the University of Western Australia. Professor Hulse, in reviewing the work that has
been done on drugs, mentioned harm minimisation in his comments. He said:
Harm minimisation should be, if anything, a stepping stone to stabilise someone to move them towards
abstinence. Getting people out of the narcotic network should be the final objective. I am yet to meet a
heroin dependent person who says, ‘I love being where I am. I love doing these things. I love ripping
off people. I love having to do tricks for men down the road.’ They love heroin. It is an issue of break-
ing that nexus. Harm minimisation is very fine. Harm minimisation for those people who relapse is a
necessary component, but it should be focused at then trying to shift them along that process back to
where they are not using.

That is a fine objective. The committee was particularly taken by the results obtained in Swe-
den and endorsed strongly by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, which Sweden
has held up as a most remarkable landmark for their impact on reducing drug use amongst
teenagers—from something over 20 per cent down to six per cent. Australia has a figure ap-
proaching 30 per cent of use by teenagers, of all drugs. That is one of the highest in the world.
We can take a lesson from Sweden. Despite the detractors, they are getting great results. There
is wide consensus in Sweden about the overall goal of drug policy. A drug-free society is what
they want, and its objectives are to reduce the recruitment of young people to drug use, to en-
able drug users to stop their drug abuse and to reduce the availability of illicit drugs. That is
the goal of Sweden and they are having marvellous success saving lives and giving young
people new opportunities.

One of the recommendations of this committee was that naltrexone implants should be
made available on the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme and that the success of that program
should be monitored. In looking at families in particular, there were many areas where grand-
parents and kin were taking responsibilities far beyond what was reasonable. It appears that
the family authorities in the states have an attitude that children, no matter what damage ap-
pears to be done to them, should remain with their mothers and their fathers. A more balanced
approach is needed. There is far too much damage being done to children. Speaker after
speaker and submission after submission from workers and from foster parents indicated that
a more permanent arrangement is far more suitable for children.

Children are growing up in circumstances where they really do not understand the treat-
ment being meted out to them by their parents. In fact, the most recent figures show that of
the five-year-old children concerned, more than 50 per cent have had four to five placements with foster parents. So it is a constant movement from one parent to another parent hoping that they will find a solution. Children should not be with parents when they are undergoing treatment. The default proposal put forward in this report is a way of illustrating that, when all else fails, adoption should be considered. Adoption is never considered. Grandparents or kin adoption—to a sister, a brother or grandparents—is a solution that must be to the forefront and is one of the recommendations of this committee. Detoxification and rehabilitation are used and more is needed.

So this report is a worthy addition to known information. It builds on the previous report. It refines some areas. It dwells on families and the role of families. It also dwells on the new drugs that are on the market and the dreadful impact that those drugs are having on the lives of some of our young people. I commend the report. I thank those who participated, despite the differences.

Debate (on motion by Mr Neville) adjourned.

Main Committee adjourned at 6.01 pm
QUESTIONS IN WRITING

ANZAC Rifle Range
(Question No. 4982)

Mr Garrett asked the Special Minister of State, in writing, on 7 December 2006:

(1) What measures have been implemented from the management plan to deal with the existence of asbestos at the ANZAC Rifle Range.

(2) Has there been recent testing of heavy metals in the groundwater at Malabar Headland.

(3) What are the results of the latest tests and how do they vary from the results of previous tests.

(4) What progress has been made toward finalising Part Two of the Facility Management Plan for Malabar Headland.

(5) Is he consulting with the New South Wales Government to identify a suitable site for relocation of the ANZAC Rifle Range; if so, (a) what were the dates and times of consultations undertaken to date and (b) what, if any, any decisions concerning Malabar Headland have been reached.

(6) Is $9 million still available from the Federation Fund to relocate the rifle range.

(7) Does he support a joint initiative between Randwick City Council and the Department of Finance and Administration to conduct a feasibility study of the management of the wetlands on Malabar Headland and is he aware that Randwick City Council has offered to share the cost of this exercise.

(8) Does he support the extension of a walking track through the western portion of the headland; if so, will he provide written confirmation of the Government’s support for the construction of a walking track along the western portion of the headland.

(10) Has he, or his department, provided any previous form of support for the walking track.

(11) When will he release the final Facility Management Plan.

(12) Will he consult with the local community before deciding on the future of Malabar Headland; if so, what form will these consultations take.

(13) Will he rule out Malabar Headland as a prospective site for any nuclear power plant.

Mr Nairn—The answer to the honourable member’s question is as follows:

(1) An asbestos audit of the buildings at the ANZAC Rifle Range has been conducted and management plans developed. As recommended by the audit, work was undertaken to remove and dispose of the hazardous asbestos and to apply appropriate asbestos warning labels to asbestos cement sheeting.

(2) Heavy metal testing has been done on a quarterly basis since May 2002, with the most recent heavy metal testing undertaken in April 2007.

(3) Heavy metal concentration has not changed significantly in the most recent test compared to previous tests. The concentration of lead and other heavy metals leaving the site in leachate has occasionally been detected at levels that exceed Australian and New Zealand Environment and Conservation Council (ANZECC) and Agriculture and Resource Management Council of Australia and New Zealand (ARMCANZ) National Water Quality Guidelines for Recreational Water Quality (2000). This is a common occurrence where drains and landfill areas discharge. The Department of Finance and Administration (Finance) has developed a facility management plan for the site and is currently working with State and Local Government agencies to collectively address the exceedences.

(4) Part Two of the Facility Management Plan provides a series of action plans that are being implemented. The Facility Management Plan Part Two is progressively updated as tasks are completed and as priorities change and our knowledge of the site improves. Facility Management Plan Part
Two has not been prepared for publication but Finance continues to work with stakeholders to ensure that they are aware of the immediate work plans.

(5) The relevant Commonwealth agencies have had various consultations with NSW Government agencies since 1998, however, the NSW Government has failed to identify a suitable alternative site that will cater for the full range of shooting disciplines conducted on the ANZAC Rifle Range. (a) See above. (b) The Australian Government has now agreed to permit shooting groups to continue to use the ANZAC Rifle Range.

(6) No. The unspent $8.862 million from the Federation Fund has been returned to consolidated revenue.

(7) Yes. Finance and the Randwick City Council are discussing a feasibility study and cost sharing arrangements.

(8) Finance is continuing to work with Randwick City Council and the Department of the Environment and Water Resources to investigate the feasibility of constructing a walking track in accordance with the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999.

(9) There was no Question 9 received.

(10) See answer to Question 8.

(11) Part One of the Facility Management Plan has already been completed and is available for perusal by the public (a copy is in the Randwick City Council library). Part Two is an internal management tool used to respond to and address the recommendations contained in Part One.

(12) Finance consults with relevant State and local government officials in relation to the management of the Malabar Headland site.

(13) No consideration has been given to the use of Malabar Headland as a prospective site for a nuclear power plant.

**Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs: Electricity and Water**

(Question No. 5223)

Mr Kelvin Thomson asked the Minister for Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, in writing, on 7 December 2006:

(1) For each financial year since 1 July 2004, what sum has the minister’s department spent on (a) electricity and (b) water

(2) Since 1 July 2000, what measures has the department instigated to reduce electricity and water usage?

Mr Brough—The answer to the honourable member’s question is as follows: The information below provides the identifiable amount spent on electricity and water for each financial year from July 2004 until 31 December 2006. The figures provided relate to the Department of Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs and its predecessors as Machinery of Government changes have occurred in that time.

For the 2004-05 financial year, identifiable costs (which are not comprehensive) were: electricity $357,973 and water $12,608. In 2005-06 costs were electricity $606,963 and water $9,396 and in 2006-07 (to 31 December 2006), electricity costs have been $485,005 and water $66,666.

In the majority of leases held by FaCSIA, the cost of supplying water is included in the overall lease outgoings and is not separately identifiable. In the case of electricity, the majority of leases identify electricity charges as a separate and identifiable cost.
The measures instigated by the department to reduce electricity and water usage since 2001 are outlined in the Department’s Sustainability Reports for 2002-03, 2003-04 and 2004-05. These reports can be accessed at:

Electricity reduction measures include installation of state of the art air-conditioning and lighting systems in the new Centraplaza building, retrofitting double halophosphor tube lighting to single tube lighting in some sites, reducing the number of older stand-alone office peripherals such as printers and faxes, replacing older appliances with more energy efficient versions and the replacement of cathode-ray tube computers with liquid crystal display screens on all new and replacement computers.

Water reduction measures include the installation of waterless urinals in one large FaCSIA site, installation of dual flush toilet systems in new fitouts where possible, turning off water features, reducing the watering of landscaping and the implementation of staff awareness initiatives aimed at reducing water consumption.

Child Care
(Question No. 5473)

Ms Macklin asked the Minister for Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, in writing, on 26 February 2007:

(1) Has he, or his department, placed a moratorium on the approval of ‘in-venue’ family day care services in Victoria; if so, (a) by whom was the decision made and on what date, (b) what is the policy justification for the moratorium and (c) is the decision under review.

(2) How many ‘in-venue’ family day care services are currently operational in each State and Territory.

Mr Brough—The answer to the honourable member’s question is as follows:

On 27 September 2006, I imposed a moratorium on approving new Family Day Care In Venue Care (FDC IVC) sites while the department, at my request, assessed how FDC IVC supports and promotes access to quality child care in regional and remote areas of Australia.

At the time the moratorium was imposed, there were 80 FDC IVC sites in operation with 76 of these sites in Victoria, 2 in Western Australia, 1 in New South Wales and 1 in Tasmania.

I lifted the moratorium on the approval on FDC IVC sites on 22 March 2007.

A fact sheet, Family Day Care In Venue Care Review and Changes, is available on the department’s website at www.facsia.gov.au

Fincorp Payments
(Question No. 5698)

Ms Plibersek asked the Minister for Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, in writing, on 8 May 2007:

(1) In respect of the Fincorp property and finance group, which was placed in voluntary liquidation on 23 March 2007, what arrangements has Centrelink made for Australian investors in Fincorp, who are eligible, based on income assessment, to apply for interim income support during the company’s administration.

(2) Can existing, or potential, Centrelink clients apply for an interim re-assessment of their assets on the basis that Fincorp holdings were frozen on 23 March 2007 and (a) are no longer providing income, (b) cannot be sold and (c) are worth only a fraction of their pre-administration value.

(3) Has the Government asked Fincorp’s administrators (a) when unsecured investors might reasonably expect to be repaid any portion of their investment, or (b) how many cents in the dollar unse-
cured investors might reasonably expect to receive back; if so, what are those details; if not, why not and when will such information be sought.

(4) Has there been any other occasion upon which the Government has made interim re-assessments of the assets of Centrelink clients or applicants following the involuntary liquidation of an investment company; if so, what are those details

Mr Brough—The answer to the honourable member’s question is as follows:

The Minister for Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, the Minister for Employment and Workplace Relations and the Minister for Education, Science and Training have exercised their powers under section 1084 of the Social Security Act 1991 to provide exemptions for financial investments in Fincorp from the income test deeming rules for income support recipients. The determinations commenced from 23 March 2007, when the Administrators were appointed.

In addition to the deeming exemptions under section 1084, Centrelink clients and potential clients can apply to have their investments in Fincorp disregarded under the asset test hardship rules. The hardship rules can assist people who are affected by the asset test, have assets that are unrealisable and are in severe financial hardship. For the purposes of these rules, investments with Fincorp are regarded as being unrealisable. Affected individuals can apply to Centrelink for consideration under these provisions.

This information is generally provided by the Administrators at the second creditors meeting. This has not yet taken place.

Section 1084 deeming exemptions and the asset test hardship provisions are long standing provisions of the Social Security Act 1991 which have been used on many occasions to assist Centrelink clients or applicants.

Dads in Distress Program

(Question No. 5900)

Ms Macklin asked the Minister for Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, in writing, on 31 May 2007:

Does his department currently have, or has it previously had, a funding agreement with the Dads in Distress program; if so,
(a) when did the agreement (i) commence and (ii) conclude,
(b) what was the total value of the agreement,
(c) under what program and Budget Output Group was Dads in Distress funded,
(d) has the department received a request from Dads in Distress for a continuation of funding and
(e) has that request been declined; if so, why; if not, what are the details of the new funding agreement.

Mr Brough—The answer to the honourable member’s question is as follows:

In July 2004, Dads in Distress, Coffs Harbour, received funding of $300,000 (GST exclusive) under Local Answers Round One. The funding will cease on 1 August 2007.

In July 2006, Dads in Distress Frankston (VIC) received $50,000 under Local Answers Round Three. The funding will cease on 31 October 2007.

In May 2007, Dads in Distress was advised in writing that the Local Answers Round Five funding round was open. The outcome of Local Answers Round Five has not yet been announced.

Funding under the Local Answers program, part of the Stronger Families and Community Strategy, is from Budget Output Group 4-4-2-SFCS.
In June 2006, Dads in Distress received $101,000 for communication of reforms to the Child Support Scheme. Funding will cease in December 2007. The Child Support Scheme Reform Communication: Key Advocacy Group funding is part of Budget Output Group 3.2, Child Support Policy.

In March 2007, the Family Relationship Services Branch received a request for funding from Dads in Distress. This proposal was declined for the following reasons:

- The funding proposal was received outside an advertised competitive selection process, which is critical to ensuring the Australian Government engages providers that can deliver the highest value services to the community for available funding. The level of funding sought ($1,360,000 over three years) could not be met through the Family Relationships Services Program.
- Significant Australian Government funding is already provided to support men and their families through competitively selected services under the Family Relationships Services Program. The total funding for Men and Family Relationship Services over four years (2005-06 to 2008-09) is over $42 million, including $5 million for new services announced in the 2005-06 New Family Law System Budget.
- Dads in Distress do not meet the standards documented in the Family Relationships Services Program Approval Requirements, as they primarily deliver voluntary peer support groups. However, Dads in Distress may apply for Men and Family Relationship Services funding as a consortium member or partner organisation for services commencing in 2008-09.

**Media Training**

(Question No. 5958)

Ms Burke asked the Minister for Defence, in writing, on 12 June 2007:

Did the (a) Minister and (b) his/her personal staff receive any media training in 2006; if so, (i) what was the cost of the media training and (ii) what was the name and postal address of each company engaged to provide media training.

Dr Nelson—The answer to the honourable member’s question is as follows:

(a) and (b) No.

**Australian Capital Reserve Ltd**

(Question No. 6055)

Mr Murphy asked the Minister for Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, in writing, on 19 June 2007:

(1) Did the Minister issue a joint press release on 7 June 2007 in respect of government assistance for Age Pensioners who had invested with the collapsed Australian Capital Reserve (ACR) Limited.

(2) Can the Minister confirm that part of the press release which states, inter alia, that “the deeming exemption means that any financial investment an age pensioner has in ACR will be exempt from the deeming rules” and “this move will provide some relief for age pensioners, who would have been unfairly disadvantaged without this exemption”; if not, why not.

(3) Can the Minister advise whether the deeming exemptions are extended to Disability Support Pensioners who had invested with the collapsed Australian Capital Reserve Limited; if not, why not.

Mr Brough—The answer to the honourable member’s question is as follows:

Yes. The Minister for Human Services and the Minister for Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs did issue a joint press release on 7 June 2007 in respect of government assistance for Age Pensioners who had invested with the collapsed Australian Capital Reserve (ACR) Limited.
Yes. The joint press release does state “the deeming exemption means that any financial investment an age pensioner has in ACR will be exempt from the deeming rules” and “this move will provide some relief for age pensioners, who would have been unfairly disadvantaged without this exemption”.

The Minister for Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, the Minister for Employment and Workplace Relations and the Minister for Education, Science and Training have exercised their powers under section 1084 of the Social Security Act 1991 (the Act) to provide exemptions for financial investments in ACR from the income test deeming rules for income support recipients. The determinations commenced from 28 May 2007, when the Administrators were appointed.

Age Pension
(Question No. 6060)

Mr Andren asked the Minister for Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, in writing, on 20 June 2007:

1. How many applications for concessional asset treatment for older Australians residing in rural and rural residential areas have, to date, resulted in the granting of (a) a full Age Pension and (b) a part Age Pension.
2. How many (a) full and (b) part Age Pensions have been granted because the applicant satisfied (i) the ‘private land use test’, (ii) the ‘extended land use test’, or (iii) both tests.
3. How many applications for concessional asset treatment for older Australians residing in rural and rural residential areas have, to date, not resulted in an Age Pension being granted.
4. How many of the unsuccessful applicants did not satisfy (a) the ‘private land use test’, or (b) the ‘extended land use test’ (i) in total, (ii) because they did not have a 20-year continuous attachment to the land and their principal home, (iii) because they did not meet the effective use of land requirement, or (iv) because they did not have a 20-year continuous attachment to the land and their principal home, and did not meet the effective use of land requirement.

Mr Brough—The answer to the honourable member’s question is as follows:

As of 6 April 2007, 13,582 existing age pensioners satisfied the extended land use test and benefited by having some land, which would previously have been assessed under the assets test, exempt under the new concessional assets test treatment. Of these, 12,842 benefited by having the full value of their home property exempt from the assets test, and 740 benefited by having part of the value of their home property exempt from the assets test.

As of 6 April 2007, 495 people were granted Age Pension for the first time as a result of satisfying the extended land use test under the new concessional assets test treatment. The break-up of grants for full Age Pension or part Age Pension is not available. However, of the 495 people granted Age Pension, 422 benefited by having the full value of their home property exempt from the assets test, and 73 benefited by having part of the value of their home property exempt from the assets test.

All people granted Age Pension as a result of the new concessional assets test treatment satisfied the extended land use test. For social security purposes a person can not satisfy both tests. A person can satisfy the extended land use test and have all the adjacent land on the same title as the principal home exempt from the assets test. If a person does not satisfy the extended land use test, they can, under the private land use test, have two hectares of land on the same title as the principal home exempt from the assets test.

Centrelink does not collect data on applications for the extended land use test, or reasons why an applicant failed the extended land use test.
Australian Capital Reserve Ltd

(Question No. 6154)

Mr Murphy asked the Minister for Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, in writing, on 7 August 2007:

(1) Did he issue a joint press release on 7 June 2007 with the Minister for Human Services in respect of government assistance for Age Pensioners who had invested with the collapsed Australian Capital Reserve (ACR) Limited.

(2) Can he confirm that part of the press release which states that “the deeming exemption means that any financial investment an Age Pensioner has in ACR will be exempt from the deeming rules” and “this move will provide some relief for Age Pensioners, who would have been unfairly disadvantaged without this exemption”; if not, why not.

(3) Can he advise the date from which the deeming exemption came into effect; if not, why not.

(4) Can he advise whether the exemptions will be applied to Age Pensioners who were deemed to have received income from ACR prior to the date identified in Part (3), even though no actual income was ever received; if so, how; if not, why not.

Mr Brough—The answer to the honourable member’s question is as follows:

Yes. The Minister for Human Services and the Minister for Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs did issue a joint press release on 7 June 2007 in respect of government assistance for Age Pensioners who had invested with the collapsed Australian Capital Reserve (ACR) Limited.

Yes. The joint press release does state “the deeming exemption means that any financial investment an age pensioner has in ACR will be exempt from the deeming rules” and “this move will provide some relief for age pensioners, who would have been unfairly disadvantaged without this exemption”.

The determination commenced from 28 May 2007, when the Administrators were appointed.

The deeming exemption applies from the date of the determination. Until a specific exemption is employed the deeming rules apply to all financial investments and are a simple and fair way of assessing income from financial investments.

Defence: Seasprite Helicopter

(Question No. 6218)

Mr Fitzgibbon asked the Minister for Defence, in writing, on 14 August 2007:

In respect of the Seasprite helicopter: (a) what progress has been made with the helicopters since his announcement of 25 May 2007 that the Government would continue with the project; (b) has his department signed a new contract with Kaman Aerospace for rectification of the Automated Flight Control System; if so (i) when and (ii) what is the dollar value of the contract, (c) how many flying hours have the Seasprite helicopters logged since 25 May 2007; and (d) since 25 May 2007, (i) how many hours have Defence personnel spent training in the Seasprite flight simulator at the Kaman Aerospace premises in Nowra, NSW and (ii) what sum has been spent on maintenance of the Seasprite.

Dr Nelson—The answer to the honourable member’s question is as follows:

(a) Kaman has continued software error correction and testing of the Integrated Tactical Avionics System. The initial phase of rectification work on the Automatic Flight Control System has progressed towards a further series of flight tests on the Kaman aircraft in the USA. Successful completion of this flight testing is one of the steps required to lift the ADF suspension of flying.

(b) No.

(c) None, as the suspension on flying has not been lifted.
(d) (i) None, as the simulator has not yet been accepted by the Commonwealth.
(ii) $149,509.

**HMAS Sirius: Helicopter Landings**

(Question No. 6259)

Mr Fitzgibbon asked the Minister for Defence, in writing, on 15 August 2007:

In respect of landing helicopters on HMAS *Sirius*: (a) which Australian Defence Force (ADF) helicopters have been certified to undertake such landings; (b) have there been difficulties with certification of helicopters to undertake such landings; if so, (i) what are the details and (ii) what steps have been taken to resolve the problems; (c) when will ADF helicopters be able to undertake such landings; and (d) what sum was spent on fitting a helicopter landing deck to HMAS *Sirius*.

Dr Nelson—The answer to the honourable member’s question is as follows:

(1) (a) Vertical Replenishment (VERTREP) was the only essential flying capability required for HMAS Sirius. Recent flight trials have given a clearance recommendation for this capability, which includes a helicopter hovering over the ship’s deck to transfer underslung loads. During the ship’s refit, an area on which helicopters could land was constructed but, as it was not classed as ‘essential’ no services or maintenance facilities were provided for this function. No ADF helicopters have yet been certified to land on the Sirius.
(b) Yes.
(i) HMAS *Sirius* conducted Flight Trials from 30 April 2007 to 23 May 2007 in Bass Strait and Storm Bay, Tasmania using a Seahawk helicopter. During the trial, it was identified that the motion of the ship produced an unpredictable roll that currently precludes the landing of helicopters while underway. It does not prevent the conduct of VERTREP and transfer operations. The trial gathered significant data relating to landings and take offs which will form the basis of further trials should the ship’s roll characteristics be improved.
(ii) The Defence Science and Technology Organisation (DSTO) has been tasked to investigate HMAS *Sirius*’ motion, and to recommend possible options for remediation.
(c) DSTO will report by early 2008 on possible options. The results of this report will describe what modifications could be made to improve the motion characteristics of the ship. The extent and viability of these modifications, the ship’s operational schedule and the need for further trials will determine the way forward.
(d) The cost of providing the VERTREP area was approximately $8 million. The cost to upgrade the VERTREP area to a landing area was approximately $0.64 million.

**Navy Frigates**

(Question No. 6260)

Mr Fitzgibbon asked the Minister for Defence, in writing, on 15 August 2007:

In respect of the staffing of Navy frigates: (a) how many Principal Warfare Officers are currently available to serve; (b) how many Principal Warfare Officers would be required to staff all Navy frigates at full establishment; (c) how many Fire Control Officers are currently available to serve; (d) how many Fire Control Officers would be required to staff all Navy frigates at full establishment; (e) how many mechanical engineers at senior sailor level (Leading Seamen and Petty Officers) are currently available to serve; (f) how many mechanical engineers at senior sailor level would be required to staff all Navy frigates at full establishment; and (g) would a shortage of mechanical engineers at senior sailor level preclude the 24-hour operation of some Navy frigates.
Dr Nelson—The answer to the honourable member’s question is as follows:

(a) 222.
(b) 79.
(c) 76.
(d) 61.
(e) 191.
(f) 171.

(g) Yes, subject to the watch keeping qualifications of the sailors onboard. The award of Engine Room Watch Keeping certificates is linked to proficiency rather than rank.