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SITTING DAYS—2008

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Month</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>February</td>
<td>12, 13, 14, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March</td>
<td>11, 12, 13, 14, 17, 18, 19, 20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May</td>
<td>13, 14, 15, 16, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30</td>
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<tr>
<td>June</td>
<td>2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 23, 24, 25, 26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>August</td>
<td>26, 27, 28, 29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>September</td>
<td>1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October</td>
<td>13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>November</td>
<td>10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>December</td>
<td>1, 2, 3, 4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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- **PERTH** 585 AM
- **HOBART** 747 AM
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FORTY-SECOND PARLIAMENT
FIRST SESSION—FIRST 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—Mr Harry Alfred Jenkins MP
Deputy Speaker—Ms Anna Elizabeth Burke MP
Second Deputy Speaker—Hon. Bruce Craig Scott MP

Members of the Speaker’s Panel—Hon. Dick Godfrey Harry Adams MP, Hon. Kevin James Andrews MP, Hon. Archibald Ronald Bevis MP, Ms Sharon Leah Bird MP, Mr Steven Georganas MP, Hon. Judith Eleanor Moylan MP, Ms Janelle Anne Saffin MP, Mr Albert John Schultz MP, Mr Patrick Damien Secker MP, Hon. Peter Neil Slipper MP, Mr Peter Sid Sidebottom MP, Mr Kelvin John Thomson MP, Hon. Danna Sue Vale MP and Dr Malcolm James Washer MP

Leader of the House—Hon. Anthony Norman Albanese MP
Deputy Leader of the House—Hon. Stephen Francis Smith MP
Leader of Opposition Business—Hon. Joseph Benedict Hockey MP
Deputy Leader of Opposition Business—Mr Luke Hartsuyker MP

Party Leaders and Whips
Australian Labor Party
Leader—Hon. Kevin Michael Rudd MP
Deputy Leader—Hon. Julia Eileen Gillard MP
Chief Government Whip—Hon. Leo Roger Spurway Price MP
Government Whips—Ms Jill Griffiths Hall MP and Mr Christopher Patrick Hayes MP

Liberal Party of Australia
Leader—Hon. Brendan John Nelson MP
Deputy Leader—Hon. Julie Isabel Bishop MP
Chief Opposition Whip—Hon. Alex Somlyay MP
Opposition Whip—Mr Michael Andrew Johnson MP
Deputy Opposition Whip—Ms Nola Bethwyn Marino MP

The Nationals
Leader—Hon. Warren Errol Truss MP
Chief Whip—Mrs Kay Elizabeth Hull MP
Whip—Mr Paul Christopher Neville MP

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Members</th>
<th>Division</th>
<th>Party</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abbott, Hon. Anthony John</td>
<td>Warringah, NSW</td>
<td>LP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adams, Hon. Dick Godfrey Harry</td>
<td>Lyons, Tas</td>
<td>ALP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Albanese, Hon. Anthony Norman</td>
<td>Grayndler, NSW</td>
<td>ALP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andrews, Hon. Kevin James</td>
<td>Menzies, Vic</td>
<td>LP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bailey, Hon. Frances Esther</td>
<td>McEwen, Vic</td>
<td>LP</td>
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<td>Baldwin, Hon. Robert Charles</td>
<td>Paterson, NSW</td>
<td>LP</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bevis, Hon. Archibald Ronald</td>
<td>Brisbane, Qld</td>
<td>ALP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biggood, James Mark</td>
<td>Dawson, Qld</td>
<td>ALP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Billson, Hon. Bruce Fredrick</td>
<td>Dunkley, Vic</td>
<td>LP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bird, Sharon Leah</td>
<td>Cunningham, NSW</td>
<td>ALP</td>
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<td>Bishop, Hon. Bronwyn Kathleen</td>
<td>Mackellar, NSW</td>
<td>LP</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bishop, Hon. Julie Isabel</td>
<td>Curtin, WA</td>
<td>LP</td>
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<td>Bowen, Hon. Christopher Eyles</td>
<td>Prospect, NSW</td>
<td>ALP</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bradbury, David John</td>
<td>Lindsay, NSW</td>
<td>ALP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Broadbent, Russell Evan</td>
<td>McMillan, Vic</td>
<td>LP</td>
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<tr>
<td>Burke, Anna Elizabeth</td>
<td>Chisholm, Vic</td>
<td>ALP</td>
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<td>Burke, Hon. Anthony Stephen</td>
<td>Watson, NSW</td>
<td>ALP</td>
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<td>Butler, Mark Christopher</td>
<td>Port Adelaide, SA</td>
<td>ALP</td>
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<td>Holt, Vic</td>
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<td>Campbell, Jodie Louise</td>
<td>Bass, Tas</td>
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<td>Corangamite, Vic</td>
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<td>Moncrieff, Qld</td>
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<td>Blaxland, NSW</td>
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<td>Nats</td>
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<td>Collins, Julie Maree</td>
<td>Franklin, Tas</td>
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<td>Combat, Hon. Gregory Ivan, AM</td>
<td>Charlton, NSW</td>
<td>ALP</td>
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<td>Costello, Hon. Peter Howard</td>
<td>Higgins, Vic</td>
<td>LP</td>
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<td>Parkes, NSW</td>
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<td>Crean, Hon. Simon Findlay</td>
<td>Hotham, Vic</td>
<td>ALP</td>
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<tr>
<td>Danby, Michael David</td>
<td>Melbourne Ports, Vic</td>
<td>ALP</td>
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<td>D’Ath, Yvette Maree</td>
<td>Petrie, Qld</td>
<td>ALP</td>
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<tr>
<td>Debus, Hon. Robert John</td>
<td>Macquarie, NSW</td>
<td>ALP</td>
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<td>Downer, Hon. Alexander John Gosse</td>
<td>Mayo, SA</td>
<td>LP</td>
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<td>Dreyfus, Mark Alfred, QC</td>
<td>Isaacs, Vic</td>
<td>ALP</td>
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<td>Dutton, Hon. Peter Craig</td>
<td>Dickson, Qld</td>
<td>LP</td>
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<td>Richmond, NSW</td>
<td>ALP</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ellis, Annette Louise</td>
<td>Canberra, ACT</td>
<td>ALP</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ellis, Hon. Katherine Margaret</td>
<td>Adelaide, SA</td>
<td>ALP</td>
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<td>Emerson, Hon. Craig Anthony</td>
<td>Rankin, Qld</td>
<td>ALP</td>
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<td>Macarthur, NSW</td>
<td>LP</td>
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<td>Ferguson, Hon. Laurie Donald Thomas</td>
<td>Reid, NSW</td>
<td>ALP</td>
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<td>Ferguson, Hon. Martin John, AM</td>
<td>Batman, Vic</td>
<td>ALP</td>
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<td>Fitzgibbon, Hon. Joel Andrew</td>
<td>Hunter, NSW</td>
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<td>Mallee, Vic</td>
<td>Nats</td>
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<td>Garrett, Hon. Peter Robert, AM</td>
<td>Kingsford Smith, NSW</td>
<td>ALP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Gilmore, NSW</td>
<td>LP</td>
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<td>Georganas, Steven</td>
<td>Hindmarsh, SA</td>
<td>ALP</td>
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<tr>
<td>Members</td>
<td>Division</td>
<td>Party</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------</td>
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<tr>
<td>George, Jennie</td>
<td>Throsby, NSW</td>
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<td>Kooyong, Vic</td>
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<td>Bendigo, Vic</td>
<td>ALP</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gillard, Hon. Julia Eileen</td>
<td>Lalor, Vic</td>
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<td>Brand, WA</td>
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<td>Bruce, Vic</td>
<td>ALP</td>
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<td>Haase, Barry Wayne</td>
<td>Kalgoorlie, WA</td>
<td>LP</td>
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<td>Hale, Damian Francis</td>
<td>Solomon, NT</td>
<td>ALP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hall, Jill Griffiths</td>
<td>Shortland, NSW</td>
<td>ALP</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hartsuyker, Luke</td>
<td>Cowper, NSW</td>
<td>Nats</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hawke, Alexander George</td>
<td>Mitchell, NSW</td>
<td>LP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hawker, Hon. David Peter</td>
<td>Wannon, Vic</td>
<td>LP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hayes, Christophor Patrick</td>
<td>Werriwa, NSW</td>
<td>ALP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hockey, Hon. Joseph Benedict</td>
<td>North Sydney, NSW</td>
<td>LP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hull, Kay Elizabeth</td>
<td>Riverina, NSW</td>
<td>Nats</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hunt, Hon. Gregory Andrew</td>
<td>Flinders, Vic</td>
<td>LP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Irons, Stephen James</td>
<td>Swan, WA</td>
<td>LP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Irwin, Julia Claire</td>
<td>Fowler, NSW</td>
<td>ALP</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jackson, Sharryn Maree</td>
<td>Hasluck, WA</td>
<td>ALP</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jenkins, Henry Alfred</td>
<td>Scullin, Vic</td>
<td>ALP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jensen, Dennis Geoffrey</td>
<td>Tangney, WA</td>
<td>LP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Johnson, Michael Andrew</td>
<td>Ryan, Qld</td>
<td>LP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Katter, Hon. Robert Carl</td>
<td>Kennedy, Qld</td>
<td>Ind</td>
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<tr>
<td>Keenan, Michael Fayat</td>
<td>Stirling, WA</td>
<td>LP</td>
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<td>Kelly, Hon. Michael Joseph</td>
<td>Eden-Monaro, NSW</td>
<td>ALP</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kerr, Hon. Duncan James Colquhoun, SC</td>
<td>Denison, Tas</td>
<td>ALP</td>
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<tr>
<td>King, Catherine Fiona</td>
<td>Ballarat, Vic</td>
<td>ALP</td>
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<td>Laming, Andrew Charles</td>
<td>Bowman, Qld</td>
<td>LP</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ley, Hon. Sussan Penelope</td>
<td>Farrer, NSW</td>
<td>LP</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lindsay, Hon. Peter John</td>
<td>Herbert, Qld</td>
<td>LP</td>
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<tr>
<td>Livermore, Kirsten Fiona</td>
<td>Capricornia, Qld</td>
<td>ALP</td>
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<td>McClelland, Hon. Robert Bruce</td>
<td>Barton, NSW</td>
<td>ALP</td>
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<td>Macfarlane, Hon. Ian Elgin</td>
<td>Groom, Qld</td>
<td>LP</td>
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<td>McGauran, Hon. Peter John</td>
<td>Gippsland, Vic</td>
<td>NP</td>
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<td>McKew, Hon. Maxine Margaret</td>
<td>Bennelong, NSW</td>
<td>ALP</td>
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<td>Jagajaga, Vic</td>
<td>ALP</td>
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<td>Fraser, ACT</td>
<td>ALP</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Forrest, WA</td>
<td>LP</td>
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<td>Greenway, NSW</td>
<td>LP</td>
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<td>Corio, Vic</td>
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<td>McPherson, Qld</td>
<td>LP</td>
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<td>Banks, NSW</td>
<td>ALP</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mirabella, Sophie</td>
<td>Indi, Vic</td>
<td>LP</td>
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<td>Cook, NSW</td>
<td>LP</td>
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<tr>
<td>Moylan, Hon. Judith Eleanor</td>
<td>Pearce, WA</td>
<td>LP</td>
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<tr>
<td>Murphy, Hon. John Paul</td>
<td>Lowe, NSW</td>
<td>ALP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neal, Belinda Jane</td>
<td>Robertson, NSW</td>
<td>ALP</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Bradfield, NSW</td>
<td>LP</td>
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<tr>
<td>Members</td>
<td>Division</td>
<td>Party</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------------</td>
<td>----------------</td>
<td>-------</td>
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<td>Neumann, Shayne Kenneth</td>
<td>Blair, Qld</td>
<td>ALP</td>
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<td>Hinkler, Qld</td>
<td>Nats</td>
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<td>O’Connor, Hon. Brendan Patrick John</td>
<td>Gorton, Vic</td>
<td>ALP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Owens, Julie Ann</td>
<td>Parramatta, NSW</td>
<td>ALP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parke, Melissa</td>
<td>Fremantle, WA</td>
<td>ALP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pearce, Hon. Christopher John</td>
<td>Aston, Vic</td>
<td>LP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perrett, Graham Douglas</td>
<td>Moreton, Qld</td>
<td>ALP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plibersek, Hon. Tanya Joan</td>
<td>Sydney, NSW</td>
<td>ALP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Price, Hon. Leo Roger Spurway</td>
<td>Chifley, NSW</td>
<td>ALP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pyne, Hon. Christopher Maurice</td>
<td>Sturt, SA</td>
<td>LP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raguse, Brett Blair</td>
<td>Forde, Qld</td>
<td>ALP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ramsey, Rowan Eric</td>
<td>Grey, SA</td>
<td>LP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Randall, Don James</td>
<td>Canning, WA</td>
<td>LP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rea, Kerry Marie</td>
<td>Bonner, Qld</td>
<td>ALP</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ripoll, Bernard Fernand</td>
<td>Oxley, Qld</td>
<td>ALP</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rishworth, Amanda Louise</td>
<td>Kingston, SA</td>
<td>ALP</td>
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<tr>
<td>Robb, Hon. Andrew John, AO</td>
<td>Goldstein, Vic</td>
<td>LP</td>
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<tr>
<td>Robert, Stuart Rowland</td>
<td>Fadden, Qld</td>
<td>LP</td>
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<td>Roxon, Hon. Nicola Louise</td>
<td>Gellibrand, Vic</td>
<td>ALP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rudd, Hon. Kevin Michael</td>
<td>Griffith, Qld</td>
<td>ALP</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ruddock, Hon. Philip Maxwell</td>
<td>Berowra, NSW</td>
<td>LP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saffin, Janelle Anne</td>
<td>Page, NSW</td>
<td>ALP</td>
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<tr>
<td>Schultz, Albert John</td>
<td>Hume, NSW</td>
<td>LP</td>
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<tr>
<td>Scott, Hon. Bruce Craig</td>
<td>Maranoa, Qld</td>
<td>NP</td>
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<td>Secker, Patrick Damien</td>
<td>Barker, SA</td>
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<td>Sidebottom, Peter Sid</td>
<td>Braddon, Tas</td>
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<td>Fisher, Qld</td>
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<td>Casey, Vic</td>
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<td>Smith, Hon. Stephen Francis</td>
<td>Perth, WA</td>
<td>ALP</td>
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<td>Snowdon, Hon. Warren Edward</td>
<td>Lingiari, NT</td>
<td>ALP</td>
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<td>Southcott, Andrew John</td>
<td>Boothby, SA</td>
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<td>Stone, Hon. Sharman Nancy</td>
<td>Murray, Vic</td>
<td>LP</td>
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<td>Longman, Qld</td>
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<td>Nats</td>
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<td>O’Connor, WA</td>
<td>LP</td>
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<td>Vaine, Hon. Mark Anthony James</td>
<td>Lyne, NSW</td>
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<td>Vale, Hon. Danna Sue</td>
<td>Hughes, NSW</td>
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<td>Vamvakinou, Maria</td>
<td>Calwell, Vic</td>
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**Members of the House of Representatives**

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<td>Washer, Malcolm James</td>
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<td>Windsor, Anthony Harold Curties</td>
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<td>Wood, Jason Peter</td>
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<td>Zappia, Tony</td>
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**PARTY ABBREVIATIONS**

ALP—Australian Labor Party; LP—Liberal Party of Australia;
Nats—The Nationals; Ind—Independent

**Heads of Parliamentary Departments**

Clerk of the Senate—H Evans
Clerk of the House of Representatives—I C Harris AO
Secretary, Department of Parliamentary Services—D Kenny (Acting)
RUDD MINISTRY

Prime Minister Hon. Kevin Rudd, MP
Deputy Prime Minister, Minister for Education and
Minister for Employment and Workplace Relations and
Minister for Social Inclusion Hon. Julia Gillard, MP
Treasurer Hon. Wayne Swan MP
Minister for Immigration and Citizenship and Leader of the
Government in the Senate Senator Hon. Chris Evans
Special Minister of State, Cabinet Secretary and
Vice President of the Executive Council Senator Hon. John Faulkner
Minister for Trade Hon. Simon Crean MP
Minister for Foreign Affairs Hon. Stephen Smith MP
Minister for Defence Hon. Joel Fitzgibbon MP
Minister for Health and Ageing Hon. Nicola Roxon MP
Minister for Families, Housing, Community Services and
Indigenous Affairs Hon. Jenny Macklin MP
Minister for Finance and Deregulation Hon. Lindsay Tanner MP
Minister for Infrastructure, Transport and Regional
development and Local Government and Leader of the
House Hon. Anthony Albanese MP
Minister for Broadband, Communications and the Digital
Economy and Deputy Leader of the Government in the
Senate Senator Hon. Stephen Conroy
Minister for Innovation, Industry, Science and Research Senator Hon. Kim Carr
Minister for Climate Change and Water Senator Hon. Penny Wong
Minister for Environment, Heritage and the Arts Hon. Peter Garrett AM, MP
Attorney-General Hon. Robert McClelland MP
Minister for Human Services and Manager of Government
Business in the Senate Senator Hon. Joe Ludwig
Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry Hon. Tony Burke MP
Minister for Resources and Energy and
Minister for Tourism Hon. Martin Ferguson MP
Minister for Home Affairs
Hon. Bob Debus
Assistant Treasurer and
Minister for Competition Policy and Consumer Affairs
Hon. Chris Bowen MP
Ministers for Veterans’ Affairs
Hon. Alan Griffin MP
Minister for Housing and
Minister for the Status of Women
Hon. Tanya Plibersek MP
Minister for Employment Participation
Hon. Brendan O’Connor MP
Minister for Defence Science and Personnel
Hon. Warren Snowdon MP
Minister for Small Business, Independent Contractors and
the Service Economy and
Minister Assisting the Finance Minister on Deregulation
Hon. Craig Emerson MP
Minister for Superannuation and Corporate Governance
Senator Hon. Nick Sherry
Minister for Ageing
Hon. Justine Elliot MP
Minister for Youth and
Hon. Kate Ellis MP
Minister for Sport
Hon. Maxine McKew MP
Parliamentary Secretary for Early Childhood Education and
Childcare
Hon. Greg Combet MP
Parliamentary Secretary for Defence Procurement
Hon. Mike Kelly MP
Parliamentary Secretary for Defence Support
Parliamentary Secretary for Regional Development and
Northern Australia
Hon. Gary Gray MP
Parliamentary Secretary for Disabilities and Children’s
Services
Hon. Bill Shorten MP
Parliamentary Secretary for International Development
Assistance
Hon. Bob McMullan MP
Parliamentary Secretary for Pacific Island Affairs
Hon. Duncan Kerr MP
Parliamentary Secretary to the Prime Minister
Hon. Anthony Byrne MP
Parliamentary Secretary for Social Inclusion and the
Voluntary Sector and Parliamentary Secretary Assisting
the Prime Minister for Social Inclusion
Senator Hon. Ursula Stephens
Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Trade
Hon. John Murphy MP
Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Health and
Ageing
Senator Hon. Jan McLucas
Parliamentary Secretary for Multicultural Affairs and
Settlement Services
Hon. Laurie Ferguson MP
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<th>Position</th>
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<tr>
<td>Leader of the Opposition</td>
<td>Hon. Brendan Nelson MP</td>
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<td>Deputy Leader of the Opposition, Shadow Minister for Employment, Business and Workplace Relations</td>
<td>Hon. Julie Bishop MP</td>
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<td>Deputy Leader of the Opposition in the Senate and Shadow Minister for Defence</td>
<td>Senator Hon. Nick Minchin</td>
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<td>Deputy Leader of the Opposition in the Senate and Shadow Minister for Innovation, Industry, Science and Research</td>
<td>Senator Hon. Eric Abetz</td>
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<td>Shadow Treasurer</td>
<td>Hon. Malcolm Turnbull MP</td>
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<td>Shadow Minister for Health and Ageing and Leader of Opposition Business in the House</td>
<td>Hon. Joe Hockey MP</td>
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<td>Shadow Minister for Foreign Affairs</td>
<td>Hon. Andrew Robb MP</td>
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<td>Shadow Minister for Trade</td>
<td>Hon. Ian Macfarlane MP</td>
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<td>Shadow Minister for Families, Community Services, Indigenous Affairs and the Voluntary Sector</td>
<td>Hon. Tony Abbott MP</td>
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<td>Shadow Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry</td>
<td>Senator Hon. Nigel Scullion</td>
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<td>Shadow Minister for Human Services</td>
<td>Senator Hon. Helen Coonan</td>
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<td>Shadow Minister for Education, Apprenticeships and Training</td>
<td>Hon. Tony Smith MP</td>
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<td>Shadow Minister for Climate Change, Environment and Urban Water</td>
<td>Hon. Greg Hunt MP</td>
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<td>Shadow Minister for Finance, Competition Policy and Deregulation</td>
<td>Hon. Peter Dutton MP</td>
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<td>Shadow Minister for Immigration and Citizenship and Manager of Opposition Business in the Senate</td>
<td>Senator Hon. Chris Ellison</td>
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<td>Shadow Minister for Broadband, Communications and the Digital Economy</td>
<td>Hon. Bruce Billson MP</td>
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<td>Shadow Attorney-General</td>
<td>Senator Hon. George Brandis</td>
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<td>Shadow Minister for Resources and Energy, Tourism</td>
<td>Senator Hon. David Johnston</td>
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<td>Shadow Minister for Regional Development, Water Security</td>
<td>Hon. John Cobb MP</td>
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<td>Shadow Minister for Justice, Border Protection and Assisting Shadow Minister for Immigration and Citizenship</td>
<td>Hon. Chris Pyne, MP</td>
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<td>Shadow Special Minister of State</td>
<td>Senator Hon. Michael Ronaldson</td>
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<td>Steven Ciobo MP</td>
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<td>Shadow Minister for Environment, Heritage, the Arts and Indigenous Affairs</td>
<td>Hon. Sharman Stone MP</td>
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<td>Shadow Assistant Treasurer, Shadow Minister for Superannuation and Corporate Governance</td>
<td>Michael Keenan MP</td>
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<td>Shadow Minister for Ageing</td>
<td>Margaret May MP</td>
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<td>Shadow Minister for Defence Science, Personnel and Assisting Shadow Minister for Defence</td>
<td>Hon. Bob Baldwin MP</td>
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<td>Shadow Minister for Veterans’ Affairs</td>
<td>Hon. Bronwyn Bishop MP</td>
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<td>Shadow Minister for Employment Participation and Apprenticeships and Training</td>
<td>Andrew Southcott MP</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
SHADOW MINISTRY—continued

Shadow Minister for Housing, Shadow Minister for Status of Women
Hon. Sussan Ley MP

Shadow Minister for Youth, and Shadow Minister for Sport
Hon. Pat Farmer MP

Shadow Parliamentary Secretary Assisting the Leader of the Opposition and Shadow Cabinet Secretary
Don Randall MP

Shadow Parliamentary Secretary Assisting the Leader of the Opposition, Northern Australia
Senator Hon. Ian Macdonald

Shadow Parliamentary Secretary for Health
Senator Hon. Richard Colbeck

Shadow Parliamentary Secretary for Education
Senator Hon. Brett Mason

Shadow Parliamentary Secretary for Defence
Hon. Peter Lindsay MP

Shadow Parliamentary Secretary for Infrastructure, Roads and Transport
Barry Haase MP

Shadow Parliamentary Secretary for Trade
John Forrest MP

Shadow Parliamentary Secretary for Immigration and Citizenship
Louise Markus MP

Shadow Parliamentary Secretary for Local Government
Sophie Mirabella MP

Shadow Parliamentary Secretary for Tourism
Jo Gash MP

Shadow Parliamentary Secretary for Ageing and the Voluntary Sector
Mark Coulton MP

Shadow Parliamentary Secretary for Foreign Affairs
Senator Marise Payne

Shadow Parliamentary Secretary for Families, Community Services
Senator Cory Bernardi
CONTENTS

MONDAY, 18 FEBRUARY

Chamber
Governor-General’s Speech—
Address-in-Reply.............................................................................................................. 479
World Youth Day ................................................................................................................... 508
Questions Without Notice—
Mr Brian Burke ................................................................................................................ 509
Pakistan .................................................................................................................................. 509
Distinguished Visitors......................................................................................................... ... 510
Questions Without Notice—
Mr Brian Burke ................................................................................................................ 510
Workplace Relations......................................................................................................... 511
Mr Brian Burke ................................................................................................................ 512
Climate Change ................................................................................................................ 512
Distinguished Visitors......................................................................................................... ... 514
Questions Without Notice—
Mr Brian Burke ................................................................................................................ 514
Foreign Investment ........................................................................................................... 514
Mr Brian Burke ................................................................................................................ 515
Aged Care ........................................................................................................................ 515
Economy .......................................................................................................................... 516
Fuel Prices ......................................................................................................................... 518
Newcastle Electorate: Roads ............................................................................................ 520
Kosovo .................................................................................................................................... 521
Investing in Australia ......................................................................................................... 522
Trade ..................................................................................................................................... 522
Workplace Relations ......................................................................................................... 523
Skills Shortage ................................................................................................................... 524
Days and Hours of Meeting ............................................................................................. 526
Skills Shortage ................................................................................................................... 527
Vocational Education and Training .................................................................................. 528
Bombing of Darwin: Anniversary .................................................................................... 529
Fuel Prices—
Suspension of Standing and Sessional Orders ................................................................. 530
Questions to the Speaker—
Quorum Requirements ................................................................................................... 533
Personal Explanations ......................................................................................................... 533
Speaker’s Panel................................................................................................................... 533
Ministerial Statements—
Australia-United States ‘Open Skies’ Agreement .............................................................. 534
Aged Care Amendment (2008 Measures No. 1) Bill 2008, Appropriation (Drought and Equine Influenza Assistance) Bill (No. 1) 2007-2008 and Appropriation (Drought and Equine Influenza Assistance) Bill (No. 2) 2007-2008—Returned from the Senate .............................................................................. 538
Committees—
Membership....................................................................................................................... 538
Governor-General’s Speech—
Address-in-Reply.............................................................................................................. 539
CONTENTS—continued

Adjournment—
  Paradise Point Bowls Club ................................................................. 598
  National Primary Industry Centre for Science Education ..................... 599
  Cowan Electorate: Blackmore Primary School ....................................... 600
  Shortland Electorate: Homelessness ..................................................... 602
  Local Grants Scheme ........................................................................... 603
  Ballarat Electorate: Australian Ex-Prisoners of War Memorial .......... 604
Notices ........................................................................................................ 605

Main Committee
Apology To Australia’s Indigenous Peoples ............................................... 608
Monday, 18 February 2008

The SPEAKER (Mr Harry Jenkins) took the chair at 12 pm and read prayers.

GOVERNOR-GENERAL’S SPEECH

Address-in-Reply

Debate resumed from 14 February, on motion by Mr Hale:

That the Address be agreed to.

Mr BRUCE SCOTT (Maranoa) (12.01 pm)—I began my contribution to the address-in-reply debate just before question time last Thursday and I will continue where I left off. I referred to the emergency situation in many communities in Queensland and particularly the great local leadership that is being shown by local communities and councils in areas where the floods have occurred. I said that in Charleville the mayor was working with his councillors and the local SES—in many cases these volunteer SES people are council workers—and I stressed the importance of local government at a local level. Unfortunately, what we are going to see—and we may already have witnessed this in Queensland—is an arrogant state Labor government that is prepared to trample on democracy in Queensland and is not prepared to listen to the results of the plebiscite that was funded by the previous coalition government in Canberra. We are going to see the forcing of amalgamation of councils against the will of the people and against an overwhelming no vote on amalgamation in so many local council areas.

Government members interjecting—

Mr BRUCE SCOTT—Members opposite perhaps do not want to listen, but I ask them to consider the examples that I put forward. Emerald has had unprecedented rain recently. Over 3,000 people have been displaced from their homes because of the emergency that arose with flooding in that area. Who was at the forefront of the organisation of the safe movement of people and their goods and chattels from their homes? It was the local council, led by local leadership—because the council is local. We did not hear much about the Bauhinia Shire Council, but that is the neighbouring shire in Central Queensland. It is suffering just as much devastation from the flooding and the water coming over the Fairbairn Dam—as we saw on television and heard on the radio in Emerald. Once again, at a time of national emergency, local leadership and the local council were leading the community and being there—because they are the local council.

On 15 March this year we are going to see the amalgamation of those shires. The local government elections will be held on that date and the councils will be forced together. The Bauhinia Shire will lose its CEO and its representation at a local level. Should we have another emergency—which is inevitable—the local councils, the local representatives in those communities, will not be able to show leadership in times of emergency. The headquarters will be in Emerald, some 60 kilometres away. Jericho Shire is about 150 kilometres away. It has been forced to amalgamate with the Barcaldine Shire Council. They have had emergencies because of the flooding that is occurring in Central Queensland and have been able to respond. The local people in the region have been moved safely out of their homes because a local council understands their needs. The equipment is available locally and the local council area is able to respond and ensure the safety of its residents. The headquarters of Jericho Shire will move to Barcaldine, as will the Aramac Shire. Aramac Shire is about 150 kilometres north of Barcaldine. It is going to be forced to amalgamate by an arrogant Labor government in Queensland that did not listen to the people of Queensland in
the recent plebiscite. I think in the Aramac Shire the plebiscite recorded a 96 per cent no vote on the stupidity of forcing amalgamation against the will of the people. Eighteen months ago in Aramac a minicyclone went through the town. Many houses were unroofed. Working families were without a roof on their house. Who dealt with that situation immediately? It was the local council—a mayor, councillors and workers of the council. In so many of these smaller communities the workers are also the SES, the local volunteer State Emergency Service people. That council will be forced to amalgamate with the Barcaldine Shire Council, along with the Jericho Shire Council. We are going to lose all this local leadership has been so important and effective and that has been with these communities for more than 100 years.

We heard during the election campaign that the present Prime Minister was very concerned about this matter. I welcome the member for Flynn. I know he cannot interject and this may be an unfair attack on him—he has not made his maiden speech—but we saw these great advertisements in Emerald in the Courier-Mail saying that Kevin Rudd, the member for Griffith and current Prime Minister—he was Leader of the Opposition at the time—did not like it; he thought it was dreadful and he said so. He went to see Anna Bligh, the Premier of Queensland. We thought: ‘Here’s a breakthrough. He’ll be able to convince Anna Bligh. He’s running for the office of Prime Minister of this country; he’ll have some influence over the Labor Party in Queensland. After all, he is a Queenslander.’ Of course, the people of the electorate of Flynn thought: ‘Okay, perhaps we should vote for the Labor Party because they will listen. They’ll listen to the plebiscite results.’ In the shire of Aramac, 96 per cent of people said, ‘No, we do not want this madness to occur in our community.’ But where is the Prime Minister on this now that he is the Prime Minister? He is nowhere to be seen. He is silent on the issue. Against the will of the people he is forcing this madness of amalgamation of shires with no net benefit to the community.

Local government is more than just roads, rubbish and rates. In these country shires it is not only about the leadership they have shown in times of national emergency; the council workers in some of these towns are also the volunteer SES people and the volunteer fire men and women. So, when there is a fire in the town, who comes to the fore? The local council workers. If you take the council out of the town and put the central office 100 kilometres away, what is going to happen in those communities where you do not have those volunteers any longer and you have to respond to a fire or another emergency? Some of these councils in these areas in rural Queensland also provide childcare facilities; they are also the local undertakers. I will never forget the big rally that we had in the now electorate of Flynn. In Barcaldine last year a lady from one of the western shires came up to me and told me she was very upset, as most Queenslanders still are, at this forced amalgamation. She said, ‘Who’s going to bury me when we don’t have a local council in the area?’—because they are also the local undertakers. So councils are more than roads, rates and rubbish.

Mr Sidebottom—I think they voted Labor, didn’t they?

Mr BRUCE SCOTT—I hear the other side interjecting, but these are members of parliament, recently elected, who are in safe Labor seats and live in metropolitan Australia and obviously take a very citycentric view of the needs of rural and regional Australia.

We heard the Prime Minister, prior to his being elected Prime Minister, say: ‘I’m going to be a Prime Minister for all Austra-
lians.’ I am sure the member for Flynn, possibly in his maiden speech when he makes it in this House, will get up and say, ‘I’ve been to see the Prime Minister and I have urged him to go and see Anna Bligh, the Premier of Queensland, before 15 March and say, “Call off this local government election because it is going to hurt me in my own constituency of Flynn.”’ I urge him to do so and I will be right behind him, as will be the majority of those councillors in Queensland who have said they would like to have an opportunity to decide and have input into the size, shape and sustainability of their local council. They are not opposed to some form of amalgamation or sharing of services between councils. They are very happy to do that, but they want to have a say in how it occurs, the size that they could manage and the shape that it should be, rather than this madness that we have in Queensland. All I say to the Prime Minister is: ‘Listen to the people of Queensland. Use your influence and authority as the Prime Minister to stop this madness in Queensland before it is too late.’ What we have seen is this Labor government demonstrating that it is uncaring, ignorant and arrogant when it comes to the situation of local government elections and the forced amalgamation in Queensland.

I want to talk a bit about the issue of economic management. We have heard a lot from the Treasurer and the Minister for Finance and Deregulation that they believe there has to be pain in the community and pain for working families because there is this inflation bubble that is coming at us all. I say to the Treasurer, to the finance minister and to the Prime Minister, that I well remember the pain that the Labor Party last inflicted on working families in Australia when Paul Keating, the Labor Treasurer at the time, said, ‘This is the recession we had to have.’ That is the sort of pain that the Labor Party knows—‘this is the recession we had to have.’ What working family will ever forget the interest rates that were inflicted by a previous Labor government? Let us look at the comparison between the numbers that the Labor Party inherited from the good economic management of the coalition when we were on the Treasury benches and what we inherited when we came to government in 1996. Let us look at the current inflation rate as opposed to the inflation rate in 1996. Inflation in 1996 was 3.7 per cent; today it is 2.96 per cent. That is what they inherited: a better inflation number than when we came to government.

Let us look at the current unemployment rate—another economic measure of importance for us all. When we came to government in March 1996, unemployment was 8.2 per cent; today it is 4.1 per cent. I will never forget the spectacle as, prior to the 1996 election, I was going to high school speech days and looking at all those young Australians leaving school for the first time with the hope of a job or of going on to further education. Youth unemployment when we came to government was 30 per cent. In other words, in 1996 the prospect for 30 per cent of young people was to join a dole queue. Today we do not have enough young people to fill the job opportunities that are out there. That is what we inherited when we came to government in 1996 as opposed to what the Labor Party—Kevin Rudd, the Treasurer and the finance minister—have inherited from the good economic management under a coalition government.

The Treasurer and the Prime Minister are now trying to blame the US subprime market as part of the problem. I have news for the government: we went through the SARS crisis, and we managed the economy—we continued to grow it. We went through the 9-11 period, when thousands of people worldwide in tourism, the finance market and the aviation industry lost their jobs. We continued to
manage the economy well. We went through the Asian meltdown, and we continued to manage the economy well and deliver budget surplus after budget surplus. When we came to government in 1996 we had a $96 billion deficit that we had to deal with. The Labor Party, the new Prime Minister and the new Treasurer—what did they inherit? No debt and $60 billion in savings that is putting downward pressure on interest rates.

So when they come into this place or do media conferences and say, ‘We’ve got to have pain,’ I ask the Treasurer and I ask the Prime Minister: do you want to inflict pain on working families like you did when Paul Keating said that this country must have a recession, and we saw a million people out of work? Is this the sort of pain we are going to see because they have an inability and a lack of experience to manage this complex economy? Don’t they want the challenge? Are they shifting the blame to the coalition for our economic management? Is that what they are doing? Are they shifting the blame because they do not know how to handle it? I rather liked the cartoon the other day of the Treasurer standing there with half-a-dozen levers in front of him and not knowing which one to pull. I think that is what we are seeing—this blame game where it is always someone else’s problem. They were elected on 24 November; they have the power to make sure that the economy continues to grow, that interest rates are kept low and, importantly, that unemployment is kept low. But will they take it up? Will they deliver? It is a great challenge. It looks like the blame game is going to continue. It is always going to be our problem. Notwithstanding the state of the economy that we delivered to the Labor Party, they do not appear to want to have that responsibility because they do not know how to handle it.

Another economic measure of the real strength of the economy and our economic management is real wages growth whilst we were in government as compared with the period when the Labor Party were in government, from 1983 to 1996. Real wages growth for working families in that 13 years of ‘hard Labor’ in this country was minus 0.2 per cent. Yet under our term in government real wages growth over the 11-year period from 1996 to 2007 was 16.4 per cent. That meant families were better off, working people were better off and people were sharing the wealth of the country and getting more reward for their hard work and their effort. Compare that with 13 years of ‘hard Labor’; there was no real wages growth in that 13 years. That is another measure of the competence of the coalition government as compared to the incompetence of the Labor government when it comes to economic management.

Let us also see how we shared the benefits with people on fixed pensions. We provided a 25 per cent of male total average weekly earnings measure on top of the CPI—whichever was the greater—so those on pensions, veterans and war widows had the benefit of sharing in some of the wealth and prosperity of our nation. We had not only the CPI increases twice a year but also the other measure of 25 per cent of male total average weekly earnings—whichever was the greater. They would benefit from that measure as well. I will continue to take the fight up to the Labor Party on their style of economic management. It is about time they realised that they are the government and that they have to stop the blame game. If they got out of their little ivory towers—(Time expired)

The SPEAKER—Order! Before I call the honourable member for Bass, I remind the House that this is the honourable member’s first speech. I ask the House to extend to her the usual courtesies.
Ms CAMPBELL (Bass) (12.20 pm)—Thank you, Mr Speaker and members. Mr Speaker, I too wish to congratulate you on your elevation to Speaker of this House. Already you have displayed what fine skills you bring to this place. I rise for the first time in this place to speak on the address-in-reply to the Governor-General’s speech, in which His Excellency outlined the Rudd Labor government’s positive plans for the future of Australia. I would like to begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land we are meeting on. I also wish to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land we now call Northern Tasmania. I respect their continuing culture and the unique contribution they make to the life of our nation. It is therefore both an honour and a privilege for me to wear traditional shell necklaces handmade by Dulcie and Lola Greeno and to wear a piece of Tasmanian Aboriginal culture into the chamber. These necklaces are made of black crow and maireener shells collected on Flinders Island and at Low Head. The necklaces took six weeks to create from shells which were collected during the spring tide and then cleaned, dried and finally threaded. For both these incredible women I have the utmost respect and once again thank them.

I would also like to say at the outset that it is an immense privilege to speak in this place today. Putting oneself forward for public service is a challenge and a great honour, and regardless of where we sit in the House I extend my congratulations to all new members of this House. I am very humbled that the people of Bass have sent me here as their representative. It is truly an honour. I would also like to acknowledge my predecessor, Michael Ferguson, and thank him for his service to the community over the past three years. I wish Michael and his family all the best for the future.

The electorate of Bass is in many ways a microcosm of Australia. Ours is a hardworking, innovative and resilient community involved in traditional pursuits, such as farming and sustainable forestry, as well as new and emerging industries, such as tourism, winemaking, engineering and information based industries. Bass is also a tolerant community. It is a diverse, multicultural society. The oldest continuing culture in the world exists peacefully side by side with the culture of those who are freshly arrived from such places as Sudan, Sierra Leone and Liberia. The beauty of the landscape and the strength of our community make Northern Tasmania simply the best place in the world to live. While I am sure many members will make that claim of their homes, it is only in this instance that it is true.

On 24 November 2007 it became evident that the people of Bass were indeed an excellent barometer for the mood of the country. On that day the people of Bass, like the people of the nation, determined to forge a new future for our country and our local communities. They said yes to proper funding for health care and proper investment in the education of our young people; they said yes to ensuring our innovative, local business operators will have access to the skilled workforce they will require to continue to grow; they said yes to Australia reclaiming its place at the forefront of the fight against global warming—a fight in which Tasmania has long led the way as a generator of clean, renewable energy; and they said yes to a fair go for the first Australians and for refugees. In so doing, the people of Bass demonstrated their decency and their belief in a fair go—not just for themselves but for all Australians. Mr Speaker, it is therefore truly an honour to take my place on your right and behind a Prime Minister and Australia’s first female Deputy Prime Minister, who are lis-
tening to the people of Bass and who are already delivering for them.

Prime Minister Kevin Rudd’s first act after taking his oath of office was to sign the instrument of ratification for Kyoto and attend the Bali conference on climate change. How proud we are for our country to be so ably represented on this global stage. This new Labor government has dismantled the so-called Pacific solution, which sent a message to the world that Australians do not care about people fleeing persecution for political, religious or social reasons—a message which, of course, misrepresented the view of the vast majority of Australians. The Prime Minister has already delivered on Labor’s commitment to recognise the damage done and apologise for the destroyed childhoods of the stolen generations. And the first piece of legislation to be introduced into this place since the election of the Rudd Labor government has begun the work of meeting Labor’s commitment to restore fairness to the workplace without removing flexibility. These are the acts of a government which is intent on keeping its bond with the people of Bass and the people of Australia. It is a government of which I am proud to be part as we deliver on each and every commitment we made to the people of Bass during the last election.

They say it takes a village to raise a child. Put another way, I suppose, we are all products of those who surround us—our parents, siblings, friends and those in our community. In the time remaining to me today I would like to pay tribute to some of the very important people who have shaped me and helped me along the journey here and whose wise counsel I will seek as I strive to be an effective advocate for the community of Northern Tasmania. I pay tribute to my mother, Patricia, who raised me, along with my three sisters, Vicki, Julie and Diane. From my mum, who did shift work at Coats Patons wool mill in Launceston, I learned of the resilience of working people. As she struggled in her desire to provide for those she loved, her daughters, I also saw just how important it is that workers and their families are offered not an iron fist but instead a helping hand. My sisters showed me unconditional love as a child, as they still do, and I draw inspiration from them each and every day.

Also in the village that raised me were my grandmother and my grandfather. When I was 13 years of age my grandparents moved in with my mum and me—my eldest sisters had already left home. Mum took on looking after them in their old age, along with everything else. At the time I thought it was socially inappropriate to be living with my grandparents. Only in adulthood does one realise what a privilege it actually was. Because of my extended family experience, I learnt a great deal.

My grandfather was a returned soldier. He was a veteran of the Second World War and a survivor of the Changi Japanese prisoner of war camp. He went to war full of youth and with a sense of duty and left behind a young bride and four children. That bride, my grandmother, and those children, my mother and uncles, did not see or hear from him again for four years. Only occasionally, mostly on Anzac Day, did my grandfather allow me the tiniest glimpse of what he had seen and experienced in captivity as a kid barely out of his teens. As a child I sat wide eyed and open mouthed at my grandfather’s recollections. Unfortunately, they were the all-too-familiar horrific stories we have come to know.

Understanding how my grandmother felt took a little more time. It is only as we grow up that we realise that the effect of war goes deep behind the front line. It deeply affected in the most part women, children and the old.
I wonder what it was like for my grand- 
mother to not know for four years whether 
her husband was alive or dead and to wonder 
what the future without him might hold, and 
then learning to build a life with the man 
who eventually returned—a man as loving 
and seemingly unaffected as he was. This 
was the part of the story only my grand-
mother could share with me. In both their 
cases it is a story of duty, sacrifice and de-
termination. It is a story I have dwelt upon in 
the past and from which I will draw strength 
when, from time to time, the duty and re-
ponsibility of representing the people of 
Bass and the inevitable attacks from my po-
litical opponents will seem overwhelming.

Beyond one’s family, of course, there are 
the inspirational people whom fortune con-
spires that you should meet. In my case they 
include educators such as Roger Francis, 
who taught me at Ravenswood High School 
and who nurtured my love of music, and my 
Ravenswood High School principal, Rodney 
O’Rourke. He led while staying on the same 
level as his staff and students, never looking 
down upon his students, and was a man who 
did his utmost to help the school community. 
Other educators, such as Phyllis Robinson 
and Tex Austin, also supported my develop-
ment at Ravenswood High School. In my 
political campaign, another educator, Eliza-
beth Daly, a Northern Tasmanian education 
superintendent, believed in me enough to 
authorise all of my election material. I sin-
cerely appreciate her support.

I am also fortunate to have been mentored 
by strong and intelligent women who were 
also previous federal members for Bass— 
Sylvia Smith and Michelle O’Byrne. I would 
like to acknowledge the support of the only 
remaining chapter of the Australian Labor 
Party Sisterhood, the ALPS, which was es-
tablished by Margaret Whitlam. I would also 
like to recognise the support of EMILY’s 
List, who merely want our parliament to 
more accurately reflect Australian society.

In the time remaining I must thank as 
many of those who contributed to Labor’s 
campaign in Bass as I possibly can. I sin-
cerely thank David O’Byrne and the LHMU 
team, who, together with other committed 
volunteers, doorknocked around 18,000 
homes. They did this in all temperatures and 
conditions. As the member for Bass, I will do 
my utmost to be worthy of their efforts.

In the end, I cannot thank my mother, 
Patricia Crooks, and my sisters, Vicki, Julie 
and Diane, enough for their support. My 
young daughters, Sommer and Izabella, have 
also shared with me in this immense political 
struggle. As members with children will well 
know, children have an amazing knack of not 
too subtly bringing us back to earth when-
ever we become a little bit too full of our-
selves. Mine are experts in that art and I love 
them deeply for it.

There are so many other people I would 
particularly like to thank. I would like to ac-
knowledge Cindy O’Connor and the Your 
Rights at Work team, who, over the last three 
years, committed their time and energy with 
one single goal in sight—to put fairness back 
into the workplace. I, together with working 
families in Bass, congratulate them on this. I 
thank the many volunteers who staffed my 
campaign office and worked so tirelessly. I 
thank the LHMU, HACSU, MUA, CFMEU, 
SDA, NUW, AWU, ANF, CPSU and all un-
ions who showed their support. I thank Carol 
Brown; Mick Leppard; Betty Grey; Mike 
Howe; Sophie, Matt and Ava Wheatley; Kate 
and Simon Brown; Michelle Cripps; Adam 
Clarke; the sartorially superior Mr Rick 
Youseff; Matthew Jose; Jack Lake; Ross, 
Annie and Peter Hart; Alex Cramb; Sharyn 
and Dean Lahey; Sue and Mike Walley; 
Maria Mischis; Debbie, Thomas, Joseph and 
Michael Kindermann for loaning their hus-
band and father, Paul, to my campaign for
the best part of three months without com-
plaint and, best of all, without charge; and, of
course, Kevin Rudd and Julia Gillard, to
whom I offer not only my thanks but my
congratulations.

I am here today because I want to serve
my community and because my community
has honoured me and selected me to do so.
When Ansett collapsed in 2001, my immedi-
ate thoughts were for my 400 fellow work-
ers. What had they lost? We did not know.
But, as Disraeli said, ‘There is no education
like adversity,’ and I learned from the adver-
sity we faced at that time. Stung by that cri-
sis, and with the help of the labour move-
ment, I was given the opportunity to join a
team which fought for the entitlements of
400 northern Tasmanian workers who had
lost their jobs that day.

Over the past 11 years those opposite,
when in government, laid many charges
against the labour movement, against unions
who were trying to protect workers and their
conditions. What a pity they have not experi-
enced what I and so many other working
people have experienced. In my case, the
union movement gave me the opportunity to
help secure the entitlements of others. It also
taught me that individuals can make a differ-
ence and made me proud to be part of any
organisation that will fight to improve the
lives of workers and their families—
organisations such as the union movement
and the Labor Party.

If I could borrow some words from one of
Australia’s greatest treasurers and prime
ministers, Ben Chifley:
I try to think of the Labor movement not as put-
ing an extra sixpence into somebody’s pocket, or
making somebody prime minister or premier, but
as a movement bringing something better to the
people, better standards of living, greater happi-
ness to the mass of the people.

We have a great objective - the light on the hill -
which we aim to reach by working for the better-
ment of mankind, not only here but anywhere we
may give a helping hand. If it were not for that,
the Labor movement would not be worth fighting
for.

If the movement can make someone more com-
fortable, give to some father or mother a greater
feeling of security for their children, a feeling that
if a depression comes there will be work, that the
government is striving its hardest to do its best,
then the Labor movement will be completely
justified.

Although uttered 60-odd years ago by the
great Ben Chifley, these words ring true to-
day. I can attest firsthand that the labour
movement is still about putting the extra six-
pence in the pockets of workers. Ask the 400
former Ansett employees in Launceston. Ask
the thousands of low-paid workers freed
from the burden of Work Choices. But ask
also those who have benefited from universal
education and health care. Ask those who
have seen the environment made into a main-
stream issue by the Whitlam, Hawke,
Keating and now Rudd Labor governments
whether the labour movement limits itself to
the sixpence. It does not—and nor do I. I
look forward to representing the needs of the
people of Bass in this place over the next
three years and I will do so with all the en-
ergy, patience, skill and compassion I pos-
sess.

Mr LINDSAY (Herbert) (12.35 pm)—I
have a number of issues I would like to raise
with the parliament this afternoon. They are
wide ranging and relate to my electorate in
North Queensland. I represent Herbert,
which is the city of Townsville, the largest
tropical city in this nation and a city that is
going absolutely gangbusters. We have re-
cently had an election and I want to thank all
of those who supported me in my re-election
to the parliament. Seats either side of me had
swings of 14 per cent, and we have new gov-
ernment members as members for those
seats, but I survived with the confidence of the people of Townsville and I very much appreciate their confidence in me.

It was a very interesting election. I give a commitment today to the people of Townsville that I will work to ensure that all of the promises that were made by the government are delivered. I am sure that I will be able to work with the government to ensure that that happens. I will go a step further than that: I will work very hard with the government to make sure that all of the promises that I made to the electorate are delivered as well. They included things like the on-off ramps on the Douglas arterial in Riverside Gardens. I congratulate my colleague from North Queensland, the member for Leichhardt, who knows the importance of Townsville—in relation to Cairns—as the capital city of Northern Australia. I am glad to have that recognition. In relation to the roundabouts on the Douglas arterial, currently residents of Riverside Gardens have to do a round trip of six kilometres to get onto North Queensland’s only motorway. That is unacceptable. We should be able to move people on and off that motorway with on-off ramps in a strategic location.

I also intend to make sure that the Upper Ross community centre is delivered. It will use $6 million worth of funding from the better regions program. In addition, the three-laning of the Mount Low Parkway is very important to the residents of the northern beaches. Currently there is a very significant safety problem on that road, where vehicles wanting to turn into private driveways are being involved in rear-end collisions on that very busy road. That is why we need that particular road to be three-laned.

Mr Speaker, it will not have escaped your attention that we have had a bit of rain in North Queensland. In fact, we have finally had a pretty decent wet season. North Queenslanders will remember wet seasons of decades ago, and the traditional wet season has come back. It has rained with some ferocity in the north and right down the coastal strip. That has been good; the underground aquifers have been recharged. But people in Mackay have suffered very significantly. Places have been flooded that have never really been flooded before.

You have to feel for the people whose homes were inundated and whose property was destroyed. It has been heartbreaking for some. It floods and rains in North Queensland—and one of the issues relating to that is the fact that communications are affected, particularly in relation to the roads. We have to redouble our efforts under the former government’s AusLink program, which the current government has embraced, to make sure that we do as much as we can to flood-proof the Bruce Highway, because these days, with just-in-time delivery mechanisms for supermarkets, you need the roads to be open 24/7. That is how the supply chains work these days. It is unacceptable for supermarkets to run out of bread or milk, and that is what has been happening. We will redouble our efforts to make sure that we are able to continue the supply of goods throughout the coastal area of North Queensland.

There are some other very significant promises which I want to touch on in relation to the election last year. In the area of road funding, the current Australian government has announced that it will provide $100 million to four-lane the seven-kilometre stretch from Cluden through to Vantassel Street on the Bruce Highway. That includes widening a bridge over Stewart Creek and building a rail overpass. That will be very welcome. It is a part of the highway that is currently very congested. I am pleased that the Labor government took up my commitments to duplicate the five-kilometre portion of the Doug-
For members of parliament one of the joys of this job is that you can argue and fight for projects for your electorate, and, when you get them and you see the results that they bring, it gives you great pleasure. The Douglas arterial road was a project that did not exist, and I certainly went in to bat for it. It was built after a lot of argy-bargy with the state government. It has been the most successful new road project in the north. It has been so successful that we are now going to have to duplicate it. That is the vote of confidence that the people of Townsville-Thuringowa have placed in that particular project.

I also arranged for the Townsville ring road, which connects to the Douglas arterial road, to be completed. That, too, will be built to motorway standard and it will be opened by the end of this year. That will provide terrific access from the northern beaches through to the university, the hospital and Australia’s largest defence base at Lavarack Barracks. Australia’s largest defence base, incidentally, is shortly going to become even larger. The 3rd Battalion of the Royal Australian Regiment is going to move from Holsworthy to Townsville. That means we will have to spend $350 million on new working accommodation at Lavarack Barracks, build a significant number of Defence Housing homes and provide all sorts of new infrastructure in the north. This will be a big boost to the economy.

Townsville is known throughout the Defence Force, and throughout our community, as Australia’s garrison city, and it well deserves that reputation. It shows that, with our military presence—and I also note that there is a large presence of the Royal Australian Air Force in Townsville—we support our nation and the parliament. In relation to RAAF Townsville, we have all the Caribous being transferred to Townsville from Amberley. About eight of them have already arrived; there are still six to come, and that will mean that all of Australia’s Caribous are based in Townsville. More base infrastructure will be built to look after them. We do, however, need more hardstand at Townsville Airport, and I encourage defence planners to get that project underway, because when it gets busy at RAAF Townsville it gets really busy. It is nothing to see a couple of C17s and a raft of F/A18s and the like present and trying to find space to park.

Over the road from RAAF Townsville, at the same airport, is 5th Aviation Regiment, arguably the second busiest unit in the Defence Force, with its Chinook helicopters, CH47s and Black Hawks, which will soon be replaced by the MRH90s. They will be a welcome addition. There will be, perhaps, another $40 million spent on that. The centre of gravity for defence in Townsville is certainly building.

I digressed there for a minute but I now go back to road funding. We also need to ensure that the $60 million pledge to build 30 new overtaking lanes between Sarina and Cairns is spent quickly. Overtaking lanes, in my view, are the best short-term fix for the problems of the highway that we currently have. $105 million has been allocated to build 30 new overtaking lanes between Sarina and Cairns, where there are the top 10 black spots.

But it is disappointing that currently none of that road building will actually start until at least mid-2009 and may not be completed until 2014. There is a real bottleneck there in road construction, and we hope that we can fast-track that to get the benefits to the users of the highway. An interesting promise that both the government and the opposition made in the election was to bring V8 super-
cars to Townsville. Mr Speaker, I do not know whether you are a supporter of V8 supercars—perhaps you are a petrolhead; I do not know—but what you would probably agree is that a V8 supercar race is a great family day. In every city which has an event like that, it would be enjoyed by the majority of the city. Some people say, ‘Look, it’s an environmental disaster.’ Well, it is not. Some people say, ‘It closes roads.’ Yes, it does, but only for a short while. The V8 supercars are much more than cars, and the focus that their presence puts on the cities where they race is nothing short of extraordinary. People all around the world see the images of Australian cities running V8 supercar races. Some $10 million from the current Australian government will see V8 supercars come to Townsville mid next year, and I will be very pleased to be there for the first race.

We are also looking for $3.4 million that has been pledged for the Townsville International Sports Centre. That will enable the Murray Sports Complex, which is used by every child in Townsville at some point in their life, to be upgraded. Under the leadership of Mayor Tony Mooney, the Townsville City Council is pushing that program through. There is also funding from the state government.

I want to move now to something that is rather concerning—that is, this letter I received last week from Anthony Wemm. He has given me his okay to use his name. He is a front-line paramedic in the Queensland Ambulance Service. This will concern all members, as it concerns me. It would not surprise me if this issue is the same in every electorate in Australia. It is an emerging issue in relation to what happens when a paramedic attends an incident to help people—there are physical attacks that occur. It is anathema to all of us. You do not call an ambulance to attack the paramedics or to physically injure them; normally you call an ambulance so you can be taken to hospital and get some medical attention. But Anthony says:

During my 3 years of employment as a Paramedic stationed in the Townsville region, some memorable instances have been being chased to my ambulance by a patient with a large butcher’s knife, blood thrown and spat on myself, kicked in the head by a patient in the rear of the ambulance and recently, set upon by two bystanders attempting to kill a patient in my care and/or myself resulting in physical injuries.

On an averaging weekly basis, I get verbally abused and/or threatened of violence to myself and/or threats of taking my life. That is extraordinary, and I think that all of us have to make sure that our ambulance officers—and indeed our police—are kept as safe as possible. Anthony observes:

Furthermore, our current court system and given punishments are seriously flawed at deterring this violence towards our frontline Paramedics. Offenders are acutely aware that if they do get caught, that they will receive little if not no punishment under the current Queensland Criminal Code.

That is very sad. Anthony says:

Queensland Ambulance Service paramedics have a saying that I wish to share: ‘Police have Pepper spray, Batons, Bullet Proof Vests and Guns for protection, Paramedics only have a cheap plastic Mag torch and their mouth so I hope you’re a good runner or can fight.’

If that is the situation, that is terrible. Anthony and his wife believe that the Queensland Ambulance Service cannot provide a reasonable and safe working environment to practise in as front-line paramedics and save lives. He says:

Although the Queensland Ambulance Service and Queensland Government Politicians do publicly comment that there is zero tolerance towards violence on Paramedics but with the current attitudes displayed in our court system, I believe that this zero tolerance is not being taken seriously.
I ask my colleagues in the parliament today to reflect on that, and I ask the community and the Queensland government to reflect on that, because our people who give front-line service saving lives should not be subjected to that kind of abuse.

Mr Speaker, I draw your attention to a very recent article in the Townsville Bulletin entitled ‘Boom: we’re hot’. It basically says, as I would like to advise the parliament today, that more than $14 billion worth of major projects are on the drawing board for my region. We have been named as the hottest property investment location in the country, and we certainly deserve that. The cranes on the skyline have multiplied, and building is going on at great pace. That is good for our economy. It is good for our city. It ensures that all the services that we as a city that has a great lifestyle need are provided. Certainly Townsville is currently undiscovered except by the property developers. We welcome them and we certainly want to see that continue.

I would like to finish with an issue that I have raised with the state government in relation to Jezzine Barracks. Jezzine Barracks has a long history with the Australian Defence Force—in particular, the Army. The Army currently has the 11th Brigade based at Jezzine Barracks. It is a premier seaside location. The 11th Brigade are moving out to Lavarack Barracks to be with the Australian Regular Army. I negotiated, through the former Prime Minister, the gifting of the land to the Townsville City Council because of its importance to our community and its importance to military history. Defence of course wanted to sell it off. I was not having a bar of that. We were able to give $25 million worth of prime land to the community.

However, the deal was this: the Australian government would match, dollar for dollar, a $10 million contribution from the Townsville City Council to do the redevelopment. That gave us $20 million. But, in addition to that, the Australian government said that they would match a similar contribution from the state government, which would give us $40 million. Our problem as a community is that the state government will not commit to their $10 million, which means we lose $10 million of the Commonwealth’s contribution. The state government have written to me. Andrew McNamara, the Minister for Sustainability, Climate Change and Innovation, said:

I can confirm the former Premier’s agreement that the gifting of the site to the Townsville City Council is likely to be of great benefit to the region and the state as a whole. So they understand the importance of it. But he then goes on to say:

Once the proposal has evolved to the master plan stage, the Queensland government would be pleased to consider options for a contribution.

Thank you, Minister. That means that the trust who are developing the master plan do not know how much effort they should put into it. They do not know if they are going to get the money. They do not know how much effort they should put into developing that master plan. The current chair, John Bearne, would find this a very difficult situation to be in. I can understand the Queensland government wanting to have some control or some sort of say over what happens, because they are putting money in. We have arranged for two of their representatives to be on the trust so they do have that input. The trust is also working in a bipartisan way.

It does not matter whether it is the Australian government, the state government or the local authority; we are all working together to get the best outcome for the community because this is a once in a lifetime opportunity to develop such a magnificent piece of real estate for the benefit of Townsville’s citizens. Those of you who have been to
Monday, 18 February 2008    HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES 491

Townsville and seen the Strand know that it is magnificent—as opposed to the mudflats in Cairns. We are very proud of what we do and we want to add to that by developing Jezzine Barracks. I certainly ask that the Queensland government make an early commitment to Jezzine Barracks for the sake of our city and our community.

The SPEAKER—Order! Before I call the member for Petrie, I remind the House that this is the honourable member’s first speech. I ask the House to extend to her the usual courtesies.

Mrs D’ATH (Petrie) (12.55 pm)—Mr Speaker, I rise to speak for the first time in this chamber. I do so extremely proud of the fact that the people of Petrie have chosen to put their faith in me to represent their interests. I am also humbled by the people who have come before me into this chamber wanting to serve their community and their country. I would like to extend my congratulations to the Speaker and his deputies on their election to the most esteemed positions in this parliament. I also congratulate all of the government’s new ministers and parliamentary secretaries on their important roles; I intend to have much interaction with them during my term of office to ensure the utmost local input from my community to the most important decision makers of this country. I would like to also acknowledge on this important occasion of my first speech my gratitude to the Prime Minister for the formal apology to the Indigenous communities of Australia on 13 February 2008. This will be a day forever remembered in the hearts and minds of those who suffered in the past and will forever form part of tomorrow’s history. My local Indigenous communities, along with many other people in the community, welcomed the apology.

Petrie is a vibrant electorate and one of the fastest-growing areas in south-east Queensland. The electorate stretches from the outer metropolitan northern Brisbane suburbs of Stafford Heights and Everton Park to the Redcliffe Peninsula. The peninsula runs along beautiful Moreton Bay. Through the redistribution in 2006, North Lakes moved into the seat of Longman, and areas of Everton Park, McDowall and Aspley moved into Petrie. I welcome all of those new constituents into the area and look forward to the opportunity to represent them over the coming years. The electorate stretches over six state electorates and three councils, including parts of Brisbane City Council and Pine Rivers Shire Council and the whole of the Redcliffe City Council. With the amalgamation of councils in Queensland, we will now see the northern end of the electorate become part of the new Moreton Bay Regional Council, the result of the Pine Rivers Shire Council, the Redcliffe City Council and the Caboolture Shire Council being amalgamated.

With a new council—which will bring a new mayor and new councillors, in addition to those that make up the Brisbane City Council wards—six state members and me as a new federal member, there is much need for cooperation between the three levels of government locally. I look forward to taking a lead role in this cooperative working relationship by inviting all representatives after the council elections to hold regular meetings each year to discuss the long-term plans for managing the future growth of our communities.

I would like to acknowledge the service of the previous member for Petrie, Teresa Gambaro. Ms Gambaro gave 11 years of service to the electorate as an MP. I wish her and her family the very best for the future. In 2007, the people of Petrie made a choice for change. I am grateful for the opportunity provided to me by the community. I intend, through my passion, enthusiasm, commit-
ment and dedication, to show the people that I am their local voice, their local advocate, and that I will work for a better future for the whole community.

My path here has been from a simple home life where politics was never discussed. My father was a carpenter and my mother was a secretary. Many years were spent moving between rental properties. I watched as my parents, never complaining, worked to put food on the table and a roof over our heads for me and my brother and sister. I left school and went into the full-time workforce when I was 15 years old. I have cleaned tables; I have worked as a receptionist; I have worked in a bearing company, spending many long nights doing stocktakes of O-rings. It was in my early 20s that I realised the importance of an education; so, while continuing to work full time, I commenced my education at night school. I continued to study for the next 14 years, finishing as a qualified lawyer.

Aside from my decision to further my education, the path that my life has taken has been directed by certain events that I consider turning points in my life. The first was meeting my husband, George, who once again is here today to support me. George encouraged and supported me through all of my career choices, studies and political involvement. Most of all, he has been not just a supportive husband but also, as a father, the most dedicated parent I know. We have two beautiful children: my son, Cameron, who is five, and my daughter, Emma, who is seven. George’s commitment in supporting me has not altered the fact that he himself has contributed significantly to society through his work as a police officer.

Having said that my personal support came from my family, I will say that my inspiration and passion has blossomed from other events. In 1989 I commenced work at the Queensland Industrial Relations Commission, as a typist in the typing pool. In 1992 I was fortunate enough to get the opportunity to work as an associate to then Commissioner Deirdre Swan. I have much to thank the now Deputy President for. Deputy President Swan gave me a chance. She treated me more like a peer than an employee. I am truly grateful for the knowledge that she imparted to me and feel privileged to have worked with her.

Working within the commission fuelled my interest and enthusiasm for ensuring that there is fairness in Australia’s workplaces. However, the significant change in my career came when I went to work for the Australian Workers Union. The AWU is the external force through which my true passion to help people and my belief in social justice were discovered and nurtured. Opportunities to continually expand my knowledge and experience were invaluable, and the support and encouragement provided to me by the likes of Bill Ludwig, Joe Ludwig and Bill Shorten have been, and will always be, appreciated in whichever course my future takes. I would like to thank each of those people for their friendship, support and encouragement. I would also like to thank Paul Howes, the new National Secretary of the AWU, and his wife, Lucy, for their support and friendship. A special thank you also goes to all AWU members, who work every day to improve their working conditions and support their fellow workers.

In 1996 I chose to join the Labor Party. Through this great party, I broadened my experience beyond just workplace relations and was able to contribute to many policy debates.

I spent over 13 years working for a union that chose to put workers first. It was an organisation that was pragmatic about its objectives and its broader social responsibility,
always recognising that growth in business means growth in jobs and opportunities for workers. The AWU has always sought to balance obligations to job security and improved wages with the sometimes conflicting need to see that businesses and the economy remain strong. These philosophies were instilled in me during this time and continue with me today in my new role. I have had the opportunity to work with employees and employers from small businesses through to multinationals; and from retail, health and hospitality through to construction and local government all over Queensland and across Australia. Few people get the opportunity to have such diverse interaction with so many people in so many industries across such a large geographic area. Having the ability to listen and negotiate with such diverse interests gave me a greater understanding of working with people and a willingness not to judge people but to be forgiving, tolerant and accepting.

As part of my journey of development, I was given the privilege of participating in an exchange program with the United Steelworkers. This occurred in late 2005, when my family and I travelled to Canada and the United States to work for three months. America is a great country; it has many ordinary, everyday people who do extraordinary things for their fellow Americans. But it also has many things that, as a nation, Australia should not seek to replicate, for it is not the future that we should seek. Unfortunately, in 2005 that appeared to be exactly what we were doing with our health system, our welfare system and our labour laws. We were following a path that would lead only to placing a burden on the people of Australia. It was about governing for some, not for all. It was about destroying what Australia knew to be Australian values of fairness and equity.

It was at this time that Work Choices was introduced. These laws went against all the basic values of fairness in the workplace and in society. The future implications for people’s living standards and the social fabric of our society were under threat. This was not just a theory but what I had witnessed in the United States and what I saw as Australia’s future. This experience permanently moved me to want to make a bigger contribution, a personal contribution, by fighting for a change in the direction of our country’s policies through a change of government. I knew that, as a Labor candidate, I could help make this change.

I have also been given great hope and inspiration, great strength and energy over the past 18 months. That momentum has come about through the amazing efforts of businesses, community groups and individuals whom I met while campaigning. They make my heart swell with pride and with an overwhelming desire to work not for the people of Petrie but with them. While we go about our business as local members of parliament, the people throughout the communities go about their business, helping, healing, educating, training, employing and conserving. During 2006, 18,091 people volunteered their time to help others across the electorate of Petrie. These people neither ask for recognition nor expect thanks, but are certainly deserving of it. To ensure that I am their voice in government and that they are being listened to, we as a government must forever educate ourselves and inform ourselves, as their local representatives, about the needs of the communities we serve. We need to genuinely listen.

As a 37-year-old mother, as a wife and as a working woman, I am proud of what I have achieved so far in my life. It gives me pride to know that what I have achieved may give others inspiration to follow their dreams and goals in life. That is why it is a pleasure now...
to be representing an electorate that includes my old high school, Redcliffe State High. I hope that my contribution in the future, both in the electorate and in the parliament, will inspire future school students and my own children to achieve their goals. Having children has changed my life. They give me another dimension, which provides me with a much better understanding of working parents—those seeking to juggle life’s commitments and striving to achieve a work and family balance. I want for my children what many parents want: to instil in our children an understanding of the differences in cultures, beliefs and opportunities across countries and within countries; and to teach them values and the importance of tolerance, acceptance and empathy. Our children are the future, and there is nothing more important than looking after that future for the greater good of this nation.

Of course, on a much more basic level, what parents like me and many others I have met throughout the community of Petrie want is a good quality of life, good health, opportunities for ourselves and our children, and to ensure that we leave behind a better future for all. Now that I have been fortunate enough to have the faith of the electorate placed in me, my job is to ensure that ‘fairness’ is not just a term thrown around from time to time, but something that we all strive to achieve in the way we treat others and the way we wish to be treated in our daily lives. My concern is that this fairness has been eroding over recent years.

It is important that we focus on the future prosperity of the country as a whole, not just on sectors of the community. My role and our government’s vision cannot be short term. Our communities and our country deserve more. We need to be looking to the future, planning long term for our economy, our environment, our education and our infrastructure to deal with the growth in population. The ideas, desires, abilities and potential are already in the people of Petrie, young and old. I have seen much ingenuity and entrepreneurship occurring on a daily basis. I have seen a lot of determination and commitment to providing necessary community services, which have been able to prevail despite rising costs, regulation and demand. My responsibility is to help bring inclusiveness and collectivism to our levels of government and to have a genuine working relationship with all levels of government and with the broader community. This is essential, because there are a lot of practical measures that need to be taken to ensure that, as a government, we are ensuring long-term prosperity for our society.

My aim through government is to ensure that children are given the best education, irrespective of whether they attend government, non-government, independent, religious or secular schools. Our youth and adults should have access to training opportunities to advance their educational qualifications and gain skills that lead to fulfilling employment. We need to ensure that training opportunities are available locally and that long-term, secure employment is also available locally. This will take commitment from the business community, training organisations and education and parliamentary representatives. I see the future of our economy, our communities and our families being driven by education and training.

These areas obviously need to be supported with necessary infrastructure and social support, but for a community to be strong and provide opportunities we must get back to the basics. We must re-educate our youth, teachers, parents and adults who want a better future for themselves that education and training is paramount. Whether you are a cleaner, a child carer, a plumber, a chef, a teacher, a lawyer or a doctor, training is important. I look forward to the opportunity of
working with my local schools to implement our education revolution, of watching our young children thrive on early childhood education, to seeing our national literacy and numeracy programs provide much needed support for future learning and to seeing our trade training centres provide young people with opportunities outside of university studies to gain self-esteem and confidence and to have a career path by the time they leave secondary education.

We once again need to have pride in obtaining a trade. From an employer perspective they will have the opportunity to have workers who have already shown commitment to training of a trade, who have shown competency in the field, who have completed their schooling education and who have shown ability in time management. These are the types of workers that businesses of today are looking for in the future. Our obligation is to deliver this workforce for the betterment of the local communities and the economy.

We also need to ensure that those on dental and hospital waiting lists in Petrie are provided with the necessary medical treatment within the recommended treatment times. With a 20 per cent decline in bulk-billing services over the past 10 years, and a waiting list for the Redcliffe and Caboolture district alone of 7,000 people for dental treatment, these services cannot be addressed quickly enough. The establishment of a new GP superclinic in Redcliffe is a positive move forward in improving our health services in the area. With more than 28,000 people in the electorate over the age of 65 the areas of health, dental treatment and housing affordability are crucial. It is equally important that we do more as a society to recognise the contribution that our older Australians have made and continue to make in so many areas of their lives. That is why I am excited about Labor’s plans for addressing the needs of Australia’s ageing population. I know that my community will benefit from this important policy.

Many people on the Redcliffe Peninsula have to wait six or seven years for public housing and this is not uncommon in other areas of the electorate as well. There is, of course, also limited public housing for those people with disabilities. On the issue of rental strain, approximately 30 per cent of our pensioners in north Brisbane are in the rental market. These people have limited ability to supplement their income when rental prices increase. At the other end of the scale we have only two youth shelters, with a total capacity of six beds each, which are currently not used to capacity because of budget restrictions.

With rental and house prices rising faster than household income, the issue of housing affordability, including rental, home ownership, emergency shelter and public housing, is one that cannot be pushed into the background any longer. I have already commenced discussions with local groups about the demand in the area for emergency shelter, and during the campaign I participated in a workshop organised by local housing groups where we discussed different ideas to address the problem. I also conducted a forum with the then shadow minister, Tanya Plibersek, on housing affordability to ensure that this issue is at the forefront of the community strategy for long-term solutions.

When a caravan park closes in the area—which has been occurring—approximately 60 people can need urgent low-cost rental or emergency accommodation, neither of which is readily available.

Although these are all national issues, there is nothing more local than not being able to get access to a local GP or getting your teeth fixed or worrying whether your children are going to get the best education depending on the school you choose or won-
dering whether you can go to work without the fear of being sacked without any recourse. Older Australians are expressing concerns not just about the impact of increasing cost of living pressure for themselves but also about whether their children and grandchildren will ever be able to afford a home. These are the things that concern my local community and are being played out in people’s homes and workplaces on a day-to-day basis.

Aside from the important issues that I have highlighted, there is of course the global problem that is impacting locally—and that is climate change. The environment and climate change are very much on the minds of the people in my community. Having an electorate with such beauty brings with it a responsibility to ensure the ecosystem around the bay and in the bay is protected. It also takes in the responsibilities of the river systems. The electorate has very devoted groups and initiatives to educate and protect our local area. The Mountain to Mangroves Festival is a wonderful initiative that runs each year. The various catchment groups, the Redcliffe and District Wildlife Rescue, the Dugongs, the Redcliffe Environmental Forum and the Australian Conservation Foundation are just some of the groups that I have got to know over the past 1½ years. These and many more are amongst the wonderful groups that already perform exceptional work in the community. However, at a local level there is more to be done between the local, state and federal representatives in conjunction with the local environmental groups. Through the ideas of these groups and the support of the governments, improvements can be made. I look forward to the opportunity of working closely with these groups. I also believe that we must continue the work already started in our schools to educate our children on the issue of the environment and climate change, as we need to ensure not only that they understand the issue’s importance but that they get to contribute to the future of the community and country in which they will be growing up and raising their families.

There is, of course, one further issue that the people of Petrie not only expect but demand be addressed by the federal Labor government and for me to advocate on their behalf. This is, of course, the abolition of the Work Choices laws. The government now has the opportunity to deliver a balanced industrial relations system for the 21st century and beyond. I personally saw and heard during the campaign many heartbreaking stories of the effects of these laws. I am enthusiastic at the opportunity to be part of a government that will bring fairness back into the workplace.

Of course, I have many people to thank for Labor’s success in Petrie. On a personal note I would like to thank my family: George, Emma and Cameron. Thank you, George, for your words of wisdom and for being a great sounding board even when I did not make any sense. To my children, thank you for all the handmade notes, signs, flags and chants that you created during the campaign to support me. It just goes to show that the simplest things, having come from the heart, do truly inspire and encourage you to go on. To my broader family, Anna and Mike, my father Bob, my sister Cherie and brother Brett, their partners and my nieces and nephews, thank you—even though at times you did not necessarily understand why I would want to take on such a challenge. To my mother, who passed away two years ago, there is so much that I have missed sharing with you. I can only hope that you would have been proud of my achievements. To my friends, thank you for the brief relief of laughter and enjoyment with our families that reminded me of the importance of good friends around you in life.
To the AWU, thank you for all the support you have shown me. I also thank the other unions who have supported me and whom I have worked beside over many years. To the Prime Minister, the Deputy Prime Minister and all Labor members, thank you for your support and encouragement during the campaign. Watching your efforts and commitment during the past year has been an inspiration.

Specifically to the Hon. Wayne Swan—who not only will be a great Treasurer for this nation but is also an amazing local member for the seat of Lilley, a neighbouring seat to Petrie—I thank you and Kim for your support. I have had the benefit of observing Wayne’s commitment locally over the years and have aimed to live up to his standards during the campaign and beyond. I look forward to continuing our close working relationship for the seats of Lilley and Petrie.

To Tim Gartrell, Milton Dick, Anthony Chisholm and all other staff at the ALP both nationally and in Queensland, thank you. To my campaign manager Jimmy Sullivan, Laura Gowdie, Dave Mortleman and family, and to all of the Labor state members and councillors across Petrie, thank you for your support. I look forward to us working together in the future.

Of course, the campaign would not have achieved the result that it did without the commitment and dedication of branch members and volunteers. A special mention must also go to Troy Fernandez, Bradley Heilbronn, Gavin Brady, Rosemary Hume, Winston Harris, Terry Sullivan, Phil Hay and Mick Carey. Thank you all for your support.

Time does not allow me to convey all that I wish to achieve for my local community. Many other issues need to be addressed by government and many other wonderful ideas need to be supported and encouraged. This I give a commitment to do. The issues I have spoken about today are not insurmountable but are nonetheless a monumental task ahead for us all to tackle over the coming years. As a member of the new Rudd Labor government, I embrace the task ahead and welcome this opportunity.

Mr BROADBENT (McMillan) (1.16 pm)—On hearing the speeches from the members for Bass and Petrie—as they throw themselves into each other’s arms—we should never forget what an honour it is to be in this House as members representing the communities that sent us here. I note that both members spoke about the influence of teachers on their life’s activity, their work, their families and their having arrived in this place. For me it brings back memories of teachers—who have had an influence at one time or another on all of us in this place. Obviously, the member for Bass and the member for Petrie were very proud of the teachers in their respective high schools.

I was recently trying to complete two outdoor chairs that I have been building at Phillip Island, and I remembered Brian Jones, my woodwork teacher in forms 1 and 2 at Koo Wee Rup. Because I was struggling to get the chairs made in the way I wanted them made, I was thinking, ‘Where’s Brian Jones when you need him?’ Brian, I do not know whether you are still out there today teaching woodwork somewhere and looking after incapable students like me, but I send you my best regards—as the members for Bass and Petrie did for their teachers.

I enjoyed the member for Petrie’s address and the inspirational enthusiasm that comes from a new member of parliament. I also noted her list of requests for the government as to what she intends to achieve in this place. I wish her all the best in her inspired enthusiasm and I hope that she will achieve for her community a lot of the aims she has set before the parliament today. As a member
who came here in 1990, came back in 1996, went out in 1998 and came back in 2004, I have heard many new addresses—and I remember back to my own first address, which I will get to in a minute.

I want to say how important the role of teachers in our community is. I raise this today in response to the two maiden addresses because teachers change students lives. In my own electorate of McMillan, on a weekly or daily basis I see the inspiration that students in my schools get from the teachers who are investing in their lives. That is all I want to say. They do a great job and we should never forget just how important they are to the life of our country, the lives of our families and the activity they bring.

Sadly, there are more people on the other side of the House than on this side of the House. That means some people decided how they would vote before the election. Some thought the government of the day was not listening, others were concerned about our IR changes—that was reflected across the nation—and others just thought it was time for change.

The member for Petrie said the simplest things come from the heart. I missed the next little bit, but I think she was talking about her kids. There are those in my electorate who have talked to me since the election and have said there was not enough heart. It is great to have a very strong economy, as the member for Brand talked about in his maiden address. It is great to have policies on the environment but it is very hard to be green if you are broke. That is why a strong economy is extremely important.

I want to say something to the people who are listening to this broadcast today. They are listening to the first speeches and to what I have to say. They are all over the country. They are in trucks and they are in sheds. Some are in schools today. Some are ladies at home who are listening to what is going on as they go about their daily activity looking after the kids—and I will come to that in a moment. Some are sitting in the gallery, interested in what is happening in the democratic centre of this nation. But they are all listening. I want to say to them that I recognise that you have had a say. As member for McMillan and as a part of the previous government, I recognise that you have spoken and that you decided to change the government.

When I was in Leongatha on Australia Day, I was talking about how democracy can work at a local level, going up to state level, and how it can work at a federal level given the input of the people that are there. But I could feel people wanting to say to me, ‘Yes, but, Russell, your mob’s just been thrown out acrimoniously.’ I said to the gathering—and there were a lot of people in Leongatha: ‘Yes, the system works. Yes, the people have spoken. Yes, my people were thrown out. However, in my view the system worked without a shot being fired in anger.’ Ours is a great and safe democratic nation. One of the reasons so many people want to come to this nation, to live here and be a part of it, is its stability of government. In any newspaper you pick up you can see instability right across the world, but not here, whatever the criticisms of what we do—and there are many. We should never forget in the prosperous times those people who fall through the cracks and are missing out. I believe, given my endeavours in this House, we have always looked at those people who have fallen through the cracks, those who just do not fit and might need a little bit more help, and at how government can address providing that help.

I come to where we are today. We are in opposition. I have a voice, and I intend to use that voice strongly on behalf of not only the people of McMillan but people right across
this nation, from Launceston to Lang Lang and from my beloved Geraldton—of course, it is not part of my electorate but it is a place of great favour to me—right across to the suburbs of Brisbane. I have to mention here the former member for Petrie, Teresa Gambbaro. A friend of mine, she was a great servant of this parliament and of the people of Australia while she was the member for Petrie. There is absolutely no doubt about that; that is my experience of her. I sat with her, during the last parliament, in our party room and I know from my conversations with her that the seat of Petrie was never far from her mind. Even when she had the added responsibilities given to her by the Prime Minister, the former member for Petrie never took her eye off the welfare of the people of her electorate. She was an electorate server. She cared deeply for her area.

I say today to the former member for Petrie: remember that when the swing is on, the swing is on. Someone once said to me—and this was on the second time that I was defeated: ‘Russell, don’t take this personally. I didn’t vote against you. It wasn’t personal. It was just about your government. It was just about the times.’ I said: ‘Well, I have personally lost my job. My staff have personally lost their jobs. I do take it personally.’ Anybody here who does not think they take their job seriously and personally should not be in this place. It is a place all about your personal relationship with the people of Australia, in particular the people of your electorate.

So all those are important issues that you have to deal with in change—and I have referred to the mighty change that there will be. It will involve changes that this government wants to implement and that we, as an opposition, will have to look closely at. If those changes are IR changes, we will need to be diligent in our approach to make sure that the changes that the new government will make will not wind back the clock so far as to damage the strong economy that Australia has today, one that has been bequeathed to the government.

We made some promises during the election campaign. One of the most important ones that Labor committed to as well is for a new Trucks In Action pavilion through the Regional Partnerships scheme. I was at Trucks In Action at the weekend, having been invited by Robbie Radford, the Lardner Park events chairman. It was exceptionally well run by Mark Cockerell and his team. I had the great experience at the time of meeting Max Luff and his wife, Max being the founder and chairman of the Border Express transport firm, and hearing his story of how he changed his life at 50, went into business and made a great success of the business that was there. I mentioned trucks before. I mentioned someone who might be in a truck listening to this speech today. I was in awe of the way the Trucks In Action people go about their business and of the sorts of equipment that we have in this country. It reminds me, given all the activity in my electorate of McMillan, that nothing would be moved without trucks and without the expertise of their drivers, the controllers, the dispatchers and all the people that are involved in the trucking industry. So I am pleased to have them gather in my electorate at Lardner Park—and this involves no personal claim by me as it is all done by the people behind Trucks In Action, a great show and a national event. I recognise the industry today. I recognise Stuart St Clair’s organisational body and I recognise that there are truck drivers—and their families—out there doing it hard and doing the hours, that there will be changes that the government will be making to transport regulations and that the drivers will have to learn to deal with those and all the difficulties. It was good to hear that there are success stories in the trucking industry.
as there are in lots of other businesses. I wish Trucks In Action and Max Luff in particular all the best.

What was the election campaign about? What people talked to me about were petrol prices, groceries and interest rates. Going back, I am known as a workplace flexibility advocate. I cannot walk away from what I have said about that before, what I have said about that in the past, because I believe it is best for business. I believe the legislation that was put in place created a whole lot of jobs—some 300,000 jobs—right along the south-east seaboard of Australia. This has a lot to do with the unfair dismissal laws rather than the generality of the IR laws, but they are very important and we must keep tabs on this government as to what it intends to do with the IR laws. That is not on the table yet. I look forward to that being on the table and to being able to understand that. Today we have an unemployment level of 4.1 per cent, a figure that has never been dreamed of and never been thought possible during the time that I have been in this House. This parliament thought it could only ever get to five or six per cent, as the lowest, yet here it is at 4.1 per cent.

I come from a time back in the early nineties when I know that we had 22 per cent unemployment amongst young people and we had up to 16 per cent unemployment in the general population. Our interest rates today are hovering around eight per cent but have in the past been up to 22 per cent for small businesses—they had a tough time—and up to 18 per cent for householders, and inflation was around three per cent. I can remember inflation doubling and tripling in one year into double figures.

So I hope that in its efforts as a new government, and because there was so much emphasis on Work Choices, the government does not stretch that elastic band too far and that it actually has regard for the people on the lowest level in our society, the unskilled. Whilst it may introduce laws that will protect the skilled and the unionists, it must have regard for people who are unskilled. I would expect new members of this House in particular, without naming anybody, to have regard for this when those on the government side are framing those new laws. We as a community have to look after the unskilled and the less able. They might not quite have the skills—and for no reason other than their life and the shoes that they have walked in. They may be as bright as anybody else, but the shoes that they have walked in have not allowed them to have the skills that others might have. I think we have brought 170,000 skilled workers into this country just to fill the gaps, and I know the government today is looking at other ways to change the 457 visa so that it will become more acceptable to the community and allow more people in to fill those skills gaps. Accept that, in a strong economy, you are going to have gaps. But I would plead with the government to make sure that in its approach to its legislation the least able, the unskilled and the lowest paid are not further cut out of the employment section. That is very important.

Where are we today? I received an email today from someone who I would say would be a typical lady with kids. I will call her Dianne to get right away from her name. She says that she is a constituent of mine and that she writes to me through much frustration and angst regarding the current childcare policies in place with council run family day schemes which she finds incredibly unfair to working families who choose this style of child care mostly because they cannot afford the private sector. In my electorate, quite often the private sector does not even exist in certain areas. She says that she has four children and that they have progressively been
part of the family day care system for the past 11 years. She goes on to say:
I find myself currently dumbfounded at the situation I find myself in.
I will not say where she is from or where she is going. She tells me:
With a family of six to feed, clothe and educate, a mortgage, interest rates continually rising, petrol costs going through the roof, and the day to day cost of living more than doubling in the past 10 years (although wages have NOT), and myself only recently returning to work after three years of having no income, we now find ourselves in a fair degree of financial hardship (as are millions of other low income families).

This lady is typical of ladies not just in my electorate but in your electorate, Madam Deputy Speaker Burke, and in every electorate across the nation. She continues:
I returned to work, not because I wanted to, as I would rather have continued looking after my two youngest children until they reached school age, but because if I didn’t find a job we were risking the roof over our heads and the food on our table. Apparently however, trying to do the right thing to make things easier, such as returning to work, may not necessarily be the right thing to do after all.

Firstly, we immediately find the costs of childcare and petrol to get to and from work, almost outweigh any financial benefit I receive from working—no real encouragement to stay in employment, is it?
It is that encouragement to stay in employment that we have got to look at. She goes on at quite some length here in her letter and she says:
Unfortunately, because my husband and myself both work we do not meet the criteria for so much as a health care card or any assistance in any way, shape or form to help meet these costs. On top of this, another interest rate rise this week (plus the extra one OUR lender put on last week as well) and another one on the way means I need to find even MORE money each month to keep us afloat.

Where is it supposed to come from? How poor do you have to be to qualify as ‘poor’?
She finishes by saying:
This may just be the thing that will give me no choice but to stop working again and go back to being paid to stay home, becoming a burden on the taxpayer again and taking advantage of all the benefits available.

There are lots of issues that we need to look at in that group of people who are on the edge. They are on the edge even though they are working. We have got to find ways to encourage families like that. The benefits we give them now are important. There is no doubt that we have got to look at establishing ourselves as a parliament that addresses the issue of mums like this who want to work. They want the socialisation of work and they want the opportunity to work, but particularly in country areas we have found that matching work opportunities with childcare arrangements is very difficult. Even the Welfare to Work program can be very difficult, and I am talking to the Minister for Employment Participation, Brendan O’Connor, at the moment about how we are going to get the appropriate flexibility into child care in rural Australia. The women in rural Australia know what it is like to try to milk a shed full of cows at the same time as they have got babies and kids in the home.

Mr Speaker, I thank you for the opportunity to address the House today. There are many issues that the new government will face. I hope, like the members for Bass and Petrie, that the whole-of-government approach reflects the same enthusiastic energy and inspiration as those two members. In his address the member for Brand talked about family, a strong economy and the importance of those things to him in his participation in this place. We need to drive our strong economy with the emphasis on those who are least able to look after themselves being protected by our investment in our communities.
The SPEAKER—Order! Before I call the honourable member for Port Adelaide, I remind the House that this is his first speech. I ask the House to extend to him the usual courtesies.

Mr BUTLER (Port Adelaide) (1.36 pm)—I am honoured to rise today to address the House as the new member for Port Adelaide. While doubtless some of my colleagues, including the member for Bass, will feel obliged to protest, the simple, objective truth of the matter is that there is no better electorate in the country for a Labor Party MP to represent. The community of Port Adelaide is a fiercely proud and tribal group, characteristics best epitomised by our famous football teams. As with all other major port communities in the nation, its history is built heavily on the struggles and achievements that took place on the waterfront and in the families which supported those workers. The local Aboriginal people, the Kaurna people, continue to have a strong attachment to the area and I pay respect to their elders and that continuing attachment.

I also have the honour today of formally taking over the reins from Rod Sawford in representing Port Adelaide. Rod’s passionate style of representation of his community and of his favourite policy area, education, was a credit to him. I wish him, Aldona and their family all the best for the future. It is impossible to take this mantle without feeling the heavy presence of Mick Young standing over your shoulder. Twenty years on from Mick’s retirement as the member for Port Adelaide, his name is still recalled with deep affection and respect at almost every meeting and event that I attend. I am acutely aware that I have big shoes to fill.

This House sits at a time of significant economic challenge. It is timely, therefore, to say something about the former government’s economic management credentials. One of the most exciting things about 2007 was the way in which our party reclaimed its economic management mantle, a mantle earned through the hard work of economic reform through the Hawke and Keating years. Those were serious reforms and set the nation up for the 16 years of uninterrupted growth that we have experienced to date. By contrast, the former government assessed that it was simply able to surf the wave of the best terms of trade our nation has enjoyed in decades and a once in a generation mining boom. Even with those blessings, however, the former government oversaw a profound unbalancing of the economy. Australia is now one of the most heavily indebted nations in the developed world. The member for Higgins yielded the economic reins with foreign debt tipping around $600 billion—or about 60 per cent—of GDP, a percentage matched by only one or two developed countries in the world.

The current account deficit remains stuck at six per cent of GDP. Without the amazing terms of trade we currently enjoy, it would be much higher. It is interesting to compare that record with a similar economy, Canada, which 10 years ago, had a current account deficit stuck at around three per cent. By contrast with Australia, Canada has, through the resources boom, been able to turn that deficit into a surplus.

The former government leaves a legacy to Australia of a $5 billion deficit every month, which we are forced to service through one of the highest interest rate regimes in the developed world and a seemingly ever-appreciating dollar. Fortunately, this sloppy approach by the former government to our long-term economic health is salvaged somewhat by the national savings base of more than $1 trillion underwritten by the Hawke-Keating decision to create compulsory occupational superannuation.
Our current inflationary pressures are a further legacy of the former government. For some time now, the quarterly CPI figures have masked a two-tiered dynamic at play with consumer prices. While the prices of essential items were increasing by four per cent to six per cent per year, the member for Higgins hid behind a CPI figure that has been depressed by a continuing decline in the price of many discretionary items such as new cars, consumer electronics and the like. While that is a boon for consumers with spare dollars in their pockets, pensioners and low-paid workers must spend their money on the essentials of life.

The ABS figures for calendar year 2007 reveal how difficult that is. During those 12 months, rents rose by 6.4 per cent, health costs by over four per cent, vegetables by 8.6 per cent, bread by 8.8 per cent, milk by 10.1 per cent, education costs by over four per cent and transportation costs by 5.6 per cent. The former government also fiddled while Australia slipped into one of the worst housing affordability crises in the developed world. From 2000 to 2005, residential property prices in the developed world rose by over US$30 trillion. That increase, equivalent to about 100 per cent of the combined GDP of those countries, represents the biggest asset bubble in human history. Australia’s price increases were right at the top of that table. By 2005, Australia’s price-rent ratio was 70 per cent higher than the 25-year average to 2000, an increase in the ratio that far outstripped other overheated property markets such as the UK and the US. Logic and experience dictate that a price-rent ratio so far removed from the historical average will see rents rise, prices fall, the market stagnate or a combination of all three. Other than periodically injecting a bit more froth into the housing bubble, the former government did nothing to confront this looming crisis. The Rudd Labor government, by contrast, has a plan to make housing more affordable for all Australians.

The inflationary pressures now buffeting Australian households are, as the Reserve Bank has reminded us time and time again, a product of well-known capacity constraints in the economy. In spite of swimming in the highest tax receipts in Australia’s history, the member for Higgins will be written into the history books as the Treasurer who neglected to renew Australia’s infrastructure. Instead of putting together a serious plan to deal with skills shortages, the former government played games and squandered scarce training dollars in the pursuit of ideological dogma. It is well known that increases in labour supply in recent decades have overwhelmingly come from increases in female work participation rates.

Under the Howard-Costello government, Australia’s female participation rate became stuck at levels 10 per cent lower than those seen in Canada and Britain and 15 per cent lower than those seen in Scandinavia. Government has a leading role to play in lifting the participation rate by those extra percentage points. Instead, we remain one of only two OECD countries without paid maternity leave. The last decade saw us fall to the back of the pack whereas we once led the way in providing high-quality, affordable child care for working families.

The former government continually ignored community calls for a better balance in this country between work and the other parts of our lives. I was privileged in recent years to chair Barbara Pocock’s Centre for Work and Life at the University of South Australia. The work of that centre, and others like it, clearly shows that there is a way we can continue to have a productive economy while still allowing Australians to enjoy family and leisure time. The Rudd Labor government’s commitment to these issues will
help bring more women into the workforce and help clear one of the key capacity constraints driving inflation and restraining growth.

Many of the sins of the former government I have described were sins of laziness. More egregious a sin, however, was the steps taken by the former government to exacerbate a creeping growth in economic inequality in this country. The long boom has seen an explosion of low-paid jobs. About half of all new jobs created in the 1990s paid less than $300 per week gross and almost 90 per cent paid less than $500. In the same period, the real weekly earnings of the lower paid ABS occupational categories—for example, sales and clerical workers and elementary service workers—declined by 14 per cent.

In their submissions to the annual national wage case, the former government tried to depress the wages of low-paid workers even further. In the decade to 2006, the minimum wage moved by an average of $14.70 each year before tax if you were full time. The former government submissions, if successful, would have seen those modest increases limited to $9.70. Combined with the now repudiated Work Choices laws, this represented a fundamental challenge to the postwar economic consensus that guaranteed all Australians a fair share of the nation’s growing productivity and wealth, a consensus enshrined not so much in the tax transfer system, as was the case in Europe and the UK, but in the wages system—a compact described by academics as ‘the workers’ welfare state’.

The implication by the former government that low-paid workers were somehow not contributing to the nation’s growing productivity was an insult. In the early 1990s, for example, a typical commercial cleaner in the Adelaide CBD would have been allocated a three-hour shift to clean one floor of a major building. Now that same cleaner will probably be required to clean two floors and would be lucky if their shift had not been reduced to two hours.

Although paid work had come to be taken in the postwar period as a guarantee against poverty, the Howard years saw the re-emergence of sizeable numbers of wage workers officially classified as living in poverty. NATSEM has estimated that 27 per cent of adults who now live in poverty earn a wage. The Smith Family has reported that fully 45 per cent of Australians living in poverty live in a household that includes a wage earner. If there is one thing only that I could do in my time in this place it would be to get a better deal for low-paid workers in Australia.

While the former government provided no leadership in this area, there are exciting examples available from the Blair and Clinton governments. Those governments deployed a mix of modest increases to the minimum wage combined with significant tax credits. An overemphasis on tax credits, however, involves an effective subsidy to employers who continue to pay low wages. I believe that we should reassert the right of workers in Australia to receive a wage that enables them to live in modest comfort. That wage should be benchmarked to the needs of an individual, with the family tax benefit system left to deal with the needs of dependants.

I was privileged to serve over the past several years as a member of the South Australian Social Inclusion Board. While the concept of social inclusion has existed in Europe for a few decades, it is relatively new to politics in the English-speaking world. Tony Blair established the Social Exclusion Unit early in his prime ministership, and Mike Rann led the way in importing the approach to Australia. As is the case with so many cutting edge global policy innovations,
the idea of a multidimensional approach to
serious disadvantage completely eluded the
former government. The results of such an
approach, however, are on the record.

South Australia’s Social Inclusion Initiative has seen our state reduce its homeless
numbers—the only jurisdiction to do so. I
chaired significant parts of our state’s review
of our mental health system. The resulting
report by the Social Inclusion Board has
been overwhelmingly adopted by the Rann
government and will see the most sweeping
changes in our treatment of mental health
issues in a generation. As well as the capac-
ty to deal with seemingly intractable issues
of disadvantage, the social inclusion model
brings a new approach to government policy
development and service delivery. Our ex-
perience shows that solutions to serious dis-
advantage usually cross departmental and
ministerial boundaries—boundaries that are
too often jealously guarded. The Social In-
clusion Initiative has made steady progress
to a model of joined up policy development
and service delivery, and I am tremendously
excited by the commitment of the Deputy
Prime Minister to take this initiative to a na-
tional level.

The election of a new government also
brings an opportunity for Australia to reposi-
tion itself within the international commu-
nity. Labor’s approach to international rela-
tions rests on the three pillars of our alliance
with the United States, our engagement with
Asia and our participation in the forums of
the United Nations. This approach reflects a
rationalist concept of international relations
which I strongly support: a middle ground
between the realism of bilateral relations
with great powers and the liberal internation-
alism enshrined in the UN. In an increasingly
globalised international environment, the
time of the English school of rationalist
thinking on international relations has come—the thinking of writers such as Hed-
ley Bull and Martin Wight. The rationalists
recognised the reality that ours is a system of
autonomous states that pursue their own in-
terests. They also saw, however, that an in-
ternational community of those states had
emerged which could, in many instances, be
reconciled with those interests.

I am a strong believer in an activist inter-
national community that is willing to exer-
cise influence and, if need be, power to pre-
vent systematic abuses of human rights. As
the son of someone sent to Vietnam at a
young age to fight in a highly contested ex-
ample of such intervention, I am acutely
aware of the dangers of that approach. Such
interventions must be supported by a consen-
sus of the international community and not
just a few powerful players, and the interven-
tion must be based on a plan that is achiev-
able and time-bound and that is not simply
likely to create different problems.

A well-known South Australian sports
commentator once said, ‘Fortune favours the
lucky,’ and I have certainly had my share of
luck over the years. I will never forget the
opportunities I received in working for the
Liquor, Hospitality and Miscellaneous Union
for the past 15 years. I got to work with some
of the hardest working but most poorly re-
warded members of our community: clean-
ers, hospital workers, childcare workers,
workers in aged care and disabilities, hospi-
tality and tourism workers and people work-
ing in a range of manufacturing sectors.

At 26 I withdrew my candidacy for a tra-
ditional Labor seat in the state parliament to
take on the role of Secretary of the LHMU, a
decision I have not once regretted. As well as
the opportunity to continue to work daily
with those workers, I was given the experi-
ence of managing a budget of $7 million to
$8 million and 60 staff and dealing with em-
ployers that ranged from small community
based childcare centres to some of the big-
gest companies operating in this country. To all those South Australians who have been a part of the LHMU in those years, and particularly to the delegates, staff and officials, I say my first thanks. They are noble and brave people.

For their mentoring and support, I thank Jeff Lawrence, who will be a great ACTU secretary, and his inspirational successor, Louise Tarrant. At a national level I would also like to thank Brian Daley, Helen Creed and Michael Crosby for their advice and friendship. Locally, I made too many friends at the ‘Misos’ to name, but I would like to mention my most recent leadership group of Chris Field, Sharon Holmes and David Di Troia, who I am very pleased to have succeeded me as secretary, as well as my friend and PA for 14 years, Katerina Mesidis, who I will miss terribly.

I also received great support from many different unions in South Australia, none more so than from the Australian Services Union, with which I enjoyed a close friendship for all that time. My oldest friend in the party is Patrick Conlon, who has one of the sharpest minds I have ever encountered and without whom I would likely not have taken this rather challenging, and some might say questionable, lifestyle choice. I have also benefited from the close support over many years of Penny Wong and Jay Weatherill, among many others, and all of us learned about national politics if not quite at the knee of Nick Bolkus then at the barbecues of Nick Bolkus. I have learned an enormous amount from Don Farrell, who is soon to join us elsewhere in this building. His dignified and strategic approach to politics is an asset to our party.

One is nothing in this place without great staff. Already I have wonderful support from Julie, Lisa, Christine, Dung and Tim; but I would like particularly to thank David Gray, who has long been something of an adviser to me and who I am glad has joined me in my new career. I have also been lucky to have a wonderfully supportive family. My late grandmother knew my great-grandfather and my great-great-grandfather, who were both Tory premiers of South Australia. I think she had resolved that it was time for a change in our family’s political leanings. My mother raised my brother and me, and I never ceased to be amazed at her capacity to show us such unending love while having to keep all those balls in the air. I have enjoyed a great friendship with my father, David, and my siblings, Dan, Victoria, Rowan and Lydia, and have greatly appreciated the advice and companionship of my stepfather, Kevin.

The most important people in my life, though, are my wife, Suzanne, and my two gorgeous children, Ellie and Isaac. Suzanne and I have been best friends since we were teenagers, and I cannot imagine, and dread, what type of person I would be without us having been side by side all those years. While I have great hopes for what I can achieve in this place, my heart will always be back in Adelaide with them. I thank the House for its attention.

Ms LEY (Farrer) (1.54 pm)—It is a pleasure to speak to the address-in-reply motion on day 4 of the 42nd Parliament. It is an immense privilege to represent the people of Farrer in this place. To represent my constituents well and with energy is my No. 1 wish for the term of this parliament. I thank the people of Albury, Deniliquin, Broken Hill, Hay and Menindee for their trust. May I also thank the residents of the local government areas of Greater Hume, Corowa, Balranald, Wakool, Wentworth, Urana, Berrigan, Murray, Jerilderie and the unincorporated area of far west New South Wales. Thank you for the faith you have shown in re-electing me to this place to be your voice, in
many cases so very far from where you live. As your local member I will do my best to bring your issues, your concerns and your fears to the attention of the government.

There will be big-picture items such as what is happening with water. There will also be important matters brought to me by people who have, in many cases, reached the end of the line and for whom the parliament is the place of last resort. Often these are the people in our society whom we rarely encounter in our everyday lives until they feel there is no-one else to turn to but their elected representative. I am sure many members of parliament would agree that the assistance we provide in these cases gives us the greatest sense of satisfaction—for example, helping a person in their 50s gain early access to their superannuation because of a terminal illness; cutting through the misunderstandings and red tape to help families and individuals receive emergency payments; finding a way for a Vietnam veteran to get tertiary studies paid for by the government of the nation that sent him to war; or negotiating an act of grace payment so that a separated father who inadvertently gave incorrect details to the Child Support Agency gets a refund. Often as I sit listening to these stories and knowing that I cannot help I feel disappointed and frustrated. I recall mentioning this to Bishop George Browning, recently retired as the Anglican Bishop of Canberra-Goulburn. He said to me, ‘You absorb their pain.’ It is true. By hearing, understanding and empathising, we do play a part. And, although we cannot always wave a magic wand there and then, as policy is developed over the years it is the marginalised that we often have in our thoughts—it is their hardships and stories and the anecdotes from their lives that come to mind. And, in thinking about how a particular proposal would affect them, we often test it in the real world better than a pile of position and discussion papers ever would.

I thank my office staff most sincerely for the part they play in providing a sympathetic and understanding face and voice to all who come to call. I also thank the liaison officers from all our government departments, especially Centrelink. We contact them with our constituents’ problems and they act on them swiftly and positively. I also thank the local staff of Telstra Country Wide. The relationship between governments, oppositions and Telstra is somewhat problematic. Indeed, it can be good one day and not so good the next. But our local contacts are always there to listen to complaints and try to fix them. I really appreciate this.

The electorate of Farrer has now doubled in size. It stretches from the edge of the Greater Hume Shire, east of Albury along the Murray to Wentworth and the South Australian border, up to Broken Hill and beyond to Tibooburra and Cameron’s Corner—nearly 200,000 square kilometres, influenced by three time zones, from the dog fence in the far north-west of New South Wales to Lake Hume, which is the largest water storage on the Murray River, at Albury, with six times the holding capacity of Sydney Harbour and 370 kilometres of shoreline. It is defined by the Murray River and the Darling River, by both irrigated and dryland agriculture and horticultures, by the important mining town of Broken Hill, by the regional city of Albury and by the smaller towns and villages in between.

People often express surprise at the size and shape of my electorate and what they perceive to be an impossible task in representing such a diverse community, across an area that is slightly more than three times the size of Tasmania and nearly nine-tenths the size of Victoria. I do not mind the size, the distances I travel or the fact that I seem to be...
constantly on the road or in the air. I have
great affection for western New South Wales
and a great passion for its people. I wish I
could do more, see more and learn more, but
there are not enough hours in the day. I ap-
preciate that all federal electorates must con-
tain the same number of voters, but country
people are disadvantaged. It is one of the
reasons why the PM’s new sitting timetable
is flawed. A ‘Rudd day off’ in parliament on
Fridays: government ministers shoot
through, government backbenchers talk to
empty benches and the opposition is not able
to do its fundamental job of holding the gov-
ernment to account. For me, my time here is
never wasted, but, if the Friday sitting day is
going to be devoid of ministerial account-
ability and question time, I would prefer to
spend it in my electorate.

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

WORLD YOUTH DAY

Mr RUDD (Griffith—Prime Minister)
(2.00 pm)—Mr Speaker, on indulgence, I
would like to take the opportunity on behalf
of the government and the parliament to rec-
ognise the event which occurred today in the
Great Hall. This was the official welcoming
to the parliament of the cross and icon which
are the symbols of World Youth Day. The
Leader of the Opposition and I attended in
the company of Cardinal Pell, the
Archbishop of Canberra and Bishop Anthony
Fisher, together with Catholic schoolchildren
from across Canberra and the wider region.

It was an important occasion to symbolise
on behalf of both sides of Australian politics
the extent to which we and this parliament
support this important celebration of the
Catholic faith later this year in Sydney.

World Youth Day will be a major event,
bringing to Australia tens of thousands—
probably hundreds of thousands—of pil-
grims from around the world. It will also be
accompanied by a visit to Australia, the first,
by Pope Benedict, the Holy Father. Both the
Leader of the Opposition and I have already
indicated publicly how much a welcome
guest the Holy Father will be when he visits
Australia and how important an event World
Youth Day will be not just for the Catholic
faith in this country but for the wider Chris-
tian community.

I conclude by saying that those measures
commendably promised in support of World
Youth Day by the previous government of
Australia have been embraced by us as the
next government of Australia to make sure
that this event is as successful as possible
and important for the community of faith in
Australia.

Dr NELSON (Bradfield—Leader of the
Opposition) (2.02 pm)—Mr Speaker, on in-
dulgence, I join the Prime Minister in
strongly endorsing his remarks about World
Youth Day and the visit of the cross and icon
here to Australia. This is an extraordinarily
important event for all Australians, whether
Catholics or Christians, because it is a cele-
bration of faith and of the fragile yet power-
ful belief in hope. It is also a recommitment
by all of us to young people, not only young
Australians but all those young people
throughout the world who are very much our
future.

Obviously I join with the Prime Minister
on behalf of this side of the House in cele-
brating this major event and providing and
committing all of the support that we can to
His Eminence Cardinal George Pell and
those Catholics who will come from all parts
of the world.
QUESTIONS WITHOUT NOTICE

Mr Brian Burke

Dr NELSON (2.03 pm)—My question is to the Prime Minister. I refer the Prime Minister to the fact that Mr Brian Burke is the disgraced former Labor Premier of Western Australia and a convicted criminal. Does the Prime Minister endorse the statement of his foreign minister that he has not had a conversation with Brian Burke in a decade and a half and he wished that ‘more people had followed that example’?

Mr RUDD—I thank the Leader of the Opposition for his question. As I have said on a number of occasions, with the benefit of 20/20 hindsight I would not have met with Mr Burke. As I have said on many occasions, I got that wrong. And, as I have said on many occasions, had I been aware of what subsequently became apparent through the ACCC inquiry, I would not have met him. As for the member for Perth’s comments, he of course had the benefit of particular insights in the West. I recognise his better insight on these questions. I should have had that insight myself at the time. I accept full responsibility for my actions.

Pakistan

Ms PARKE (2.04 pm)—My question is to the Prime Minister. Can the Prime Minister inform the House of the importance of today’s election in Pakistan to both regional and international security?

Mr RUDD—I thank the honourable member for Fremantle for her question. Today are the first parliamentary elections in Pakistan for six years. These elections were scheduled for 8 January but were postponed because of the tragic murder-assassination of Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto on 27 December. Benazir Bhutto was a woman of great courage. She refused to be cowed by the extremists, and she paid the ultimate price for that with her life. The government is pleased that these elections are proceeding. The government has consistently urged its counterpart in Islamabad to return to the democratic processes in Pakistan as quickly as possible.

There are of course difficult circumstances on the ground in Pakistan. The political environment is tense, and the physical security within that country represents huge challenges for those wishing to exercise their democratic right. A suicide bomber over the weekend killed over 40 people and injured more than 100. I condemn unequivocally this suicide attack, as I condemned unequivocally the murder of Benazir Bhutto. Extremists behind these attacks cannot be allowed to succeed in derailing Pakistan’s elections.

The critical challenge for the future is to see extremism marginalised in Pakistan, and the challenge for the democratic process in Islamabad and more widely across Pakistan is to ensure that that occurs. That can be assisted by there being a free, fair and transparent democratic process through the conduct of these elections. That will be important for a full restoration of confidence in the political and electoral processes of that country on the part of all the citizens of Pakistan, whatever their religious beliefs and whatever their political beliefs. In a small way, Australia is making a contribution to voter education campaigns through a program run by the Asia Foundation.

This is not just a matter for Pakistan itself, though primarily the exercise of the democratic right to elect the next government of that country is of first relevance to the people of that country; it is also pivotal for the future of regional and international stability. What happens in Pakistan through these elections and the government which emerges from it will fundamentally shape so much of the global community’s war against terrorism and what happens in the adjacent country of
Afghanistan, where we currently have troops deployed.

This therefore is not simply a passing election of remote or marginal consequence or interest to the Australian people. This country, Australia, has a deep strategic interest in the outcome of these elections in Pakistan and what flows from those elections. We have 1,000 troops next door in Afghanistan, and their future and the future of their operations are deeply shaped by events in Pakistan and therefore will be deeply affected by events which proceed from this election. Also, in the wider war against terrorism, the fact that al-Qaeda has been able to safely base its operations in the border regions between Afghanistan and Pakistan and in the north-west of Pakistan itself will in turn be affected by what happens with the electoral process and its outcome in Islamabad. Also the outcome of the Pakistani elections will shape the future of the relationship between Islamabad and New Delhi, India and Pakistan representing nuclear weapons states within our own region. It will also, of course, affect radically the lives and aspirations of more than 100 million Pakistanis themselves in a rapidly growing country with a rapidly increasing population and will shape so much of their future as well. For democracy itself the successful conclusion of these elections is important intrinsically because of the future of the democratic project across wider South Asia.

These elections therefore go to the core interest which we have as international citizens but specifically when it comes to our strategic interest with our troops on the ground deployed in Afghanistan and the wider war against al-Qaeda and terrorist organisations. We the government and the people of Australia will be watching carefully the outcome of events in Pakistan in the days ahead and hopefully the successful and peaceful conclusion of that democratic process.

DISTINGUISHED VISITORS

The SPEAKER (2.08 pm)—I inform the House that we have present in the gallery this afternoon His Excellency Zacarias Albano da Costa, the Minister for Foreign Affairs of the Democratic Republic of Timor Leste. On behalf of the House I extend to him a very warm welcome.

Honourable members—Hear, hear!

QUESTIONS WITHOUT NOTICE

Mr Brian Burke

Dr NELSON (2.09 pm)—Could I firstly, on indulgence, strongly endorse the remarks of the Prime Minister in relation to Pakistan and the democratic elections. It is not overstating it to say that the outcome of not only the democratic process in Pakistan but security arrangements within that country will determine the outcome in Afghanistan and therefore the struggle against terrorism globally. I strongly support the remarks made by the Prime Minister in that regard.

My question is to the Prime Minister. Will the Prime Minister inform the House whether there are any additional emails, telephone conversations or indeed any other contact between himself and his office and the convicted criminal Brian Burke which have not been previously disclosed?

Mr RUDD—I thank the Leader of the Opposition for his question. The emails that we released yesterday were in direct response to a challenge to do so by the Leader of the Opposition and in response to multiple requests by members of the press gallery. They are all the email contact which exists between me and my office and Mr Burke. That is on the basis of an exhaustive search of our email records yesterday.

Secondly, in various previous statements of mine I have indicated that from time to
time there was some telephone contact between me and Mr Burke. I said this last year. Thirdly, on the question of meetings with Mr Burke, I have indicated that we met on three occasions, and the details of those meetings are outlined in my earlier statements.

Workplace Relations

Mr Hayes (2.10 pm)—My question is to the Minister for Education and Minister for Employment and Workplace Relations. Will the minister detail the waste associated with the production of the WorkChoices booklet?

Ms Gillard—I thank the member for Werriwa for his question. I can advise the House that today the Prime Minister and I went to the national mailing and marketing centre in Canberra to send the final of these WorkChoices booklets off to be pulped—436,000 of them off to be pulped. Let us remind ourselves that last October when the Howard-Costello government decided to introduce Work Choices it knew Work Choices would hurt working families. As verified by John Howard’s autobiography, the cabinet sat around the table and talked about how many working families would lose out under Work Choices and they decided to go ahead with it anyway. A deliberate decision was taken to rip off working families. But in order to disguise that deliberate decision, the Howard government—

Mr Hartsuyker—Mr Speaker, I raise a point of order. It goes to relevance. This question was about the WorkChoices booklet.

The Speaker—Order! The Deputy Prime Minister can put the booklet down.

Ms Gillard—but the propaganda did not end there. It was joined by a to-do list, a Work Choices to-do list. It was joined by a Work Choices mouse pad. The propaganda continued, apparently under the guise of informing Australians about their rights.

Mr Hockey interjecting—

Ms Gillard—I think the Manager of Opposition Business is saying he still uses one of those mouse pads. But this propaganda war is now at an end. Six million of these booklets were produced, but Australians know a con when they see one. They did not want these booklets, just like they did not want the Howard-Costello government’s Work Choices laws. So 3.5 million of them ended up being shredded by the Howard government itself. These booklets sat in storage containers around the country costing taxpayers, to add insult to injury. They paid the $2 million for the booklets, then they paid $110,000—

Mr Secker—I raise a point of order. The Deputy Prime Minister is ignoring your demand to put down that article.

The Speaker—I thank the honourable member for Barker. The Deputy Prime Minister’s use of the props is excessive.

Ms Gillard—I am just reminding everybody of the Work Choices propaganda that Australian taxpayers paid for—$2 million on those booklets and then $110,000 to store
them from October 2005 until 28 September 2007, more than $3\frac{1}{2}$ million of them. And, on the topic of pulping fiction: whoever is the Harvey Keitel-Winston Wolfe character of the Howard-Costello government, whoever used to do the clean-up jobs, then ordered that these booklets be pulped—and they were pulped, immediately before the election campaign started. But we found 436,000 of them that the clean-up job missed, and we are ensuring that today they are pulped, just like the Rudd Labor government will pulp Work Choices.

On the question of pulp fiction, the Manager of Opposition Business is today trying to get away with the biggest fiction of them all: he is trying to pretend that members of the Howard government, Howard government ministers, did not know that Work Choices could hurt Australian working families. He is trying to pretend that the only Australians who did not know Work Choices could hurt working families were the Australians sitting around the Howard government ministerial table. Apparently they are the only ones who missed out on the news. The member for Higgins, hunched over Ian McLachlan’s wallet note—apparently he missed out on the news.

Ms Gillard—I am searching for an explanation, Mr Speaker, which could possibly make the version from the Manager of Opposition Business true. So here we have the Howard government ministers around the ministerial table—the only Australians who do not know, according to him, that Work Choices is hurting working families, so self-absorbed are they by their divisions: the member for Higgins hunched over his wallet note, the current shadow minister for family and community services hunched over the John Howard defence minutes because that was his role, the current shadow Treasurer hunched over a number sheet—apparently the only ones who were so self-absorbed they did not know that Work Choices was hurting working families. Well, this truly is fiction. Each and every one of them knew that it was hurting working families. Before the election they defended Work Choices with propaganda, and now they defend it with their Senate numbers. It is time to do what the Australian people want and vote for Labor’s—

The Speaker—The Deputy Prime Minister will resume her seat. I take it that the Deputy Prime Minister has finished.

Mr Brian Burke

Dr Nelson (2.17 pm)—My question is to the Prime Minister. I refer the Prime Minister to reports yesterday of his relationship with Brian Burke. Did the Prime Minister at any time seek the advice of the convicted criminal Brian Burke on leadership issues within the Australian Labor Party?

Mr Rudd—I thank the Leader of the Opposition for his question. In the various conversations I would have had with Mr Burke, they dealt with politics in general, state and federal; they would have dealt with the state of the parties, state and federal. I have no particular recollection of a conversation on the leadership of the Labor Party itself.

Climate Change

Mr Marles (2.18 pm)—My question is to the Prime Minister. Will the Prime Minister inform the House of how the government is tackling climate change and why decisive action is needed now?

Mr Rudd—I thank the honourable member for Corio for his question. Climate change, for the government and for the nation, represents core economic business and
core environmental business. That is why we as the government have embarked upon a comprehensive set of measures to deal with this challenge. These measures go to what we do in terms of international diplomacy. They go to the question of what we do in our domestic arrangements for the future development of an emissions trading scheme. They go to the question of what we do on the future of mandatory renewable energy targets. They go to how we harmonise such mandatory renewable energy targets across the states and territories to create a unified system for the country. They go to mitigation measures including, for example, $130 million which the minister for primary industries has already announced for use by primary producers to assist in their mitigation measures on farm and on property. And they go to a range of other measures which can be embraced by individuals and families—for example, the solar rebate programs which will be unfolded by the government during this year.

It is this sort of multifaceted approach which is necessary to deal with the overall challenge of climate change. All this is made possible in terms of Australia’s international diplomacy by the fact that, within the first 11 minutes of the existence of this government, we proceeded to ratify the Kyoto protocol. Within the first 11 days of this government’s existence, we handed the instrument of ratification to the Secretary-General of the United Nations, Ban Ki-moon, at a UN climate change conference in Bali. And within that framework we have, through the agency of the minister newly appointed for climate change, embarked upon a range of negotiations with our partner governments around the world—within the framework, for the first time, of the Kyoto protocol—to ensure that we have an effective Bali road map ahead, which goes from this conference at Bali through the Warsaw conference which will be held later this year, through to its destination point, which will be the Copenhagen conference at the end of next year.

These are difficult and challenging negotiations, but negotiations of which we could not be fully part were we not ratification members of the climate change convention. As a result, we the government, through the agency of the Minister for Climate Change and Water, are expending every energy possible to ensure that those negotiations can come to a successful conclusion. This would not have been possible had the previous government been returned to office. This would not have been possible because that government had embarked upon a series of measures and statements the end point of which was to refuse, after 11 years, to ratify the Kyoto protocol. It took us 11 minutes to ratify Kyoto and 11 days to present the instrument of ratification—after 11½ years that that government had still refused to ratify.

The program of work we have before us of course goes beyond international diplomacy. It goes also to the targets we set for this nation for the future, and those must be compatible with what we agree on globally as well. Therefore, the work that has been commissioned by the Treasury in terms of the independent Garnaut report—one which we began by commissioning independently, from opposition, in the middle of last year—will be important. When that report comes down it will be one of the sources of advice, together with what the Treasury says and what we also have from the Department of Climate Change and elsewhere, in shaping our overall framework for the delivery of an effective emissions trading scheme for the country.

Beyond that, a core challenge which the minister is wrestling with is also how we evolve an effective mandatory renewable energy target regime for the country, given
the conflicting state regimes which exist. These are important items of work for the nation. They are of core relevance to the business community and to the general community. They are of fundamental relevance to whether we have in place in this country a set of measures which underpin long-term economic growth. But Australia is now back in the circle. We are back in the negotiating ring fully—not half-heartedly—as demonstrated by the response to us as the new government of Australia by the international community when we presented our instrument of ratification in Bali in December.

This will be serious, difficult and challenging work ahead, but we are prepared to exert every element of the government’s energy to bring these negotiations to a successful conclusion. I commend the work done thus far by the Minister for Climate Change and Water. This is a very difficult task that she has before her, but this is fundamental economic and environmental business for the nation. It is one of the core priorities for this government. It is one of the core priorities upon which this government was elected, and it is a government determined, as in other spheres, to honour the pre-election commitments it gave to the Australian people.

DISTINGUISHED VISITORS

The SPEAKER (2.23 pm)—I inform the House that we have present in the gallery this afternoon the Hon. Tony Stewart, Deputy Speaker of the New South Wales Legislative Assembly. On behalf of the House I extend to him a very warm welcome.

Honourable members—Hear, hear!

QUESTIONS WITHOUT NOTICE

Mr Brian Burke

Dr Nelson (2.23 pm)—My question is to the Prime Minister. I refer the Prime Minister to Brian Burke’s offer on 11 October 2005 and again on 22 November 2005 to organise a journalists dinner with the Prime Minister. I ask the Prime Minister: why was he actively involved in making arrangements for this dinner, including adding his staff member Mr Alister Jordan? Why did the Prime Minister tell Mr Burke on 29 November—after he had been sent a guest list—that ‘this looks great’? Doesn’t this directly contradict his statement to the Australian people on 1 March 2007:

… my recollection is that I found out that arrangements had been put in place, that’s when I became concerned, that’s when I took action …

Prime Minister, on which occasion were you telling the truth?

Mr Rudd—I thank the Leader of the Opposition for his question. When the invitation was extended by Mr Burke for the dinner in question, you are right: initially, I said yes. Then, subsequent to that, I became progressively uneasy about it. I then said no and communicated that by the means contained and outlined in the emails concerned. As I said in my remarks in response to the Leader of the Opposition’s first question, this, with the benefit of 20/20 hindsight, is something that I would have preferred not to have done. I did so. It was a mistake, and I have accepted full responsibility for it.

Foreign Investment

Mr Ripoll (2.25 pm)—My question is to the Treasurer. Will the Treasurer outline the government’s approach to foreign investment in Australia by state owned enterprises, including by sovereign wealth funds? What is the government doing to protect the national interest in sensitive sectors?

Mr Swan—I thank the member for his question. Australia welcomes foreign investment. Foreign investment helps to develop our industries. It creates jobs and prosperity and provides access to new technol-
ogy, skills and overseas markets. These are all very good things for the Australian economy. While we encourage foreign investment, we must also ensure that foreign investment is consistent with the national interest. Under the Foreign Acquisitions and Takeovers Act 1975, it is my job as Treasurer to ensure such investment is consistent with the national interest. I have the legislative powers to, in certain circumstances, prohibit proposals that are contrary to our national interest or to impose conditions as I see fit to protect our national interest.

On Sunday, I released guidelines, or principles, to enhance the transparency of Australia’s foreign investment screening regime. The six principles set out the main factors to be considered in determining whether investments by foreign governments and their agencies are consistent with Australia’s national interest. These relate to the investor’s independence from its own government and its commercial conduct. Further, the principles look at the proposed investment’s impact on competition, government revenue or policy, national security considerations and the overall contribution to the economy. These principles are to be applied on a case by case basis to judge whether investments by a foreign government or its entities is in the national interest. The principles are consistent with the approach that was applied by the previous government through the Foreign Investment Review Board. What is new is that there has been heightened public interest and heightened commercial interest in these proposals. That is why the Rudd government has moved to provide full transparency in relation to these matters. The government will ensure that investment in Australia continues to enhance our national interest and our national prosperity.

Mr Brian Burke

Dr NELSON (2.28 pm)—My question is to the Prime Minister. Will the Prime Minister confirm that, on the night of the postponed journalists dinner on 12 December 2005, he stayed in Perth? What was the purpose of this trip to Perth? Did he have any contact with Brian Burke during this time?

Mr RUDD—I thank the Leader of the Opposition for his question. My recollection is that it was about the time of the state funeral of Peter Cook, the former Minister for Trade—that is my recollection—and that I was in Perth for that purpose. The Leader of the Opposition is correct. I was, therefore, there on the evening when the original scheduled time for this dinner occurred. I did not attend it. I do not recall having any contact with Mr Burke at that time whatsoever.

Aged Care

Ms BURKE (2.28 pm)—My question is to the Minister for Ageing. What is the latest information on the April 2007 gastroenteritis outbreak at Broughton Hall nursing home?

Mrs ELLIOT—I thank the honourable member for Chisholm for her question. Members will be aware that in April 2007 there was a major gastroenteritis outbreak at Broughton Hall nursing home in Camberwell, Victoria. Out of the 22 residents affected, tragically five died. On 17 April 2007, the previous Minister for Ageing announced that Ms Rhonda Parker, who is now the Aged Care Commissioner, would investigate an allegation that a staff member from the Department of Health and Ageing and/or the Aged Care Standards and Accreditation Agency did not respond to calls for help from a Broughton Hall resident. The resident involved was Mr Merson Dunstan, who was in his early 80s. During the outbreak he was taken to hospital and subsequently died. In May 2007, Ms Rhonda Parker’s report was finalised and delivered to the then Minister
for Ageing. That was almost 10 months ago and the Dunstan family has heard very little since.

On 7 February 2008, my office contacted Rhonda Parker to inquire about the investigation and express concern about the lack of feedback to the Dunstan family. A day later, on 8 February, Ms Rhonda Parker provided a summary investigation report. I have been advised that the full report was unable to be released publicly due to legal constraints imposed by the Privacy Act. Ms Parker’s investigation has found that, whilst the allegation that departmental staff and/or agency assessors ignored pleas for help was not substantiated by the evidence, she believed there needed to be changes. Ms Parker recommended that during a disease outbreak departmental staff be required to check on actual nursing home residents rather than just examine documentation and meet with management and staff. It is a very sensible recommendation and I do not see why the previous government did not act on it. I have asked the department to work on implementing Ms Parker’s recommendation.

Mr Hockey—Mr Speaker, I rise on a point of order. This is a ministerial statement. The minister is directly reading from a piece of paper. There are other forms of the House available for her to make this sort of statement, with an appropriate reply from the opposition. This is ridiculous.

The SPEAKER—The question was within order and the answer was within order.

Mrs Elliot—On Sunday, 10 February, I hand-delivered a copy of Ms Rhonda Parker’s summary investigation report to the family of the late Mr Merson Dunstan. I also took the opportunity to apologise for the previous government’s and the previous minister’s failure to provide any information to the Dunstan family. Whilst it does not bring the matter to a close, I hope it is a step forward for the Dunstan family. It must have been a very frustrating and indeed a very sad nine months for the Dunstan family, and our thoughts are with them as they now face the coroner’s inquest later this year. I now table the summary investigation report provided to the Dunstan family.

Economy

Mr Turnbull (2.34 pm)—My question is addressed to the Treasurer. I refer to the recent 35-year record low in unemployment, of 4.1 per cent, and the record high in labour force participation, of 65.2 per cent. Given the Reserve Bank’s stated intention to tighten monetary policy to slow economic activity in order to lower inflationary pressures, what does the Treasurer regard as Australia’s current non-accelerating inflation rate of unemployment expressed as a percentage? If the Treasurer regards that rate to be higher than 4.1 per cent, how many Australian jobs does he believe should be sacrificed to achieve it?

Mr Albanese—Mr Speaker, I rise on a point of order. With regard to standing order 100, the question clearly asked for an opinion of the Treasurer. It is clearly out of order. I understand they are new to asking questions but they do need to be in order.

Mr Hockey—Mr Speaker, I also rise on a point of order. In the first place, section 100 has been interpreted liberally by previous speakers. The question is specifically about the non-accelerating inflation rate of unemployment. If the Treasurer does not know the answer, he should not have the job.

The SPEAKER—The question is well and truly in order up until towards the end and I think even the last bit is probably in order as well.

Mr Hockey—No more protection!
The SPEAKER—Order! The question has been asked. I would have thought there was a wish to have an answer.

Mr SWAN—I do thank the member for his question because it is a good question. As I indicated to the House only last week, we are optimistic about the future of the Australian economy. Unemployment is at a record low. We are in our 17th year of straight economic growth and that is a good thing for Australia, but what Australia has to do is deal with the economic challenges that are emerging. As I indicated last week, we have an uncertain international environment and we are not immune from international fallout. But the biggest challenge the Australian economy faces is dealing with the inflation challenge—the parting gift of the Liberal Party of Australia to the Australian people. We should always aim—

Mr Turnbull—Mr Speaker, I rise on a point of order which goes to relevance. The question was about the non-accelerating inflation rate of unemployment, and the Treasurer has made no reference to it at all.

Mr SWAN—I would like to make it very clear that the objective of the Rudd government is to get unemployment as low as we possibly can. But there is one hurdle, and that is the level of elevated inflation. The highest level of inflation in 16 years was left to the incoming government. That elevated inflation, which has been on the march for the last couple of years, has produced seven interest rate rises in a row. That is the legacy of the Liberal Party of Australia. That is the parting gift of the Liberal Party of Australia to the incoming government. We have taken responsibility for that from day one. The Prime Minister has put out there his five-point plan. Very important to ensuring that we have sustainable growth in this economy is to put in place our five-point plan to tackle inflation, and we are doing just that.

Mr Hockey—Mr Speaker, I rise on a point of order. Again, the question was very specific. It was asking the Treasurer about the non-accelerating inflation rate of unemployment. It should be easy for him to answer it; he is the Treasurer.

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

Mr SWAN—We all know that those opposite dropped the ball on inflation. If anyone wants any proof of that, watch Four Corners tonight.

Mr Dutton interjecting—

The SPEAKER—Order! the member for Dickson!

Mr SWAN—What we will see on Four Corners tonight is all of the disunity in the former government on display in all of its glory.

Mr Ciobo interjecting—

Mr Andrews—Mr Speaker, I rise on a point of order. I ask you two things: firstly, could you draw the Treasurer back to the question and, secondly, could he answer what NAIRU is.

The SPEAKER—Order! Before the Treasurer returns and answers the question, can I ask that the members for Dickson and Moncrieff just modify their enthusiasm. Take the example of the member for Dunkley and not the member for Sturt.

Mr SWAN—I think Australians, as they are watching Four Corners tonight, when all the disunity is on display, when the complacency of the former government is on display—

Mr Turnbull—Mr Speaker, I rise on a point of order which goes to relevance. I have asked the Treasurer a question about a very important and very well-known economic term—the non-accelerating inflation rate of unemployment. He has not even mentioned it. Doesn’t he know what it is?
The SPEAKER—Before giving the Treasurer the call, I remind him that promos for ABC programs are out of order. The Treasurer.

Mr SWAN—Mr Speaker, I have answered the question. We aim to get it as low as possible. That is the objective of the Rudd government: to get it as low as possible. But I am sure the Australian people will want to know tonight—

Dr Nelson—Mr Speaker, I rise on a point of order. To assist the Treasurer with relevance, I table the non-accelerating inflation rate of unemployment. He might consider that.

The SPEAKER—The Leader of the Opposition would have to seek leave, and leave would have to be granted. Is leave granted? Leave is not granted. The Leader of the Opposition will resume his seat. Can I take it that the Treasurer, having used the words ‘I have answered the question’, has completed his answer?

Mr SWAN—I think Australians will want to know, when these meetings were taking place at the Quay Grand, who was running the Australian economy. Who was fighting the fight against inflation?

Mr Anthony Smith interjecting—

The SPEAKER—Order! The honourable member for Casey is warned! And the honourable member for North Sydney will be outside phoning a friend.

Mr SWAN—Who was guarding against reckless spending while they were out there stabbing each other in the back? This government will always put the national interest above the petty interests of those opposite and what they were doing at that time.

The SPEAKER—in fairness to the member for Leichhardt, as somebody who is yet to be able to defend himself from interjections, I think that we should go a little easy on him. I call the member for Leichhardt.

Fuel Prices

Mr TURNOUR (2.42 pm)—My question is to the Assistant Treasurer. What has the government done in its first few months in office to introduce greater transparency into the petrol industry?

Mr BOWEN—I appreciate the question from the honourable gentleman and I appreciate the opportunity to outline to the House the actions the government has taken in its first few months in relation to transparency in the petrol market. On 18 December, less than a fortnight after the Rudd government was sworn in, we issued formal monitoring powers to the ACCC. These powers give the ACCC the ability to subpoena documents and witnesses if they fear anticompetitive conduct at any point in the petrol supply chain.

Importantly, on Saturday we fulfilled another election commitment with the announcement that Mr Pat Walker will be Australia’s new petrol commissioner. Mr Walker has been Consumer Protection Commissioner and petrol commissioner in Western Australia for the last 10 years. Under his leadership and the leadership of the Western Australian government, petrol prices have been a major focus of the Department of Consumer and Employment Protection in Western Australia. Indeed, Perth has gone from being one of the more expensive cities in Australia for petrol to one of the cheapest. I have asked the new Petrol Commissioner to investigate the recent increases in LPG and diesel prices which have been causing concern across the country, and particularly in relation to diesel in rural and regional areas, and to report back to the government on what more can or should be done. I welcome the endorsement from the Leader of the Opposition of that action.
The ACCC’s petrol report, handed to the government last December, underlines the need for these sorts of actions. The ACCC found the wholesale petrol market in Australia to be ‘a comfortable oligopoly’. Perhaps it is comfortable for producers, but it is not comfortable for consumers. It is important to understand that our position in government is the same as it was in opposition. The biggest impact on Australian petrol prices comes from world oil prices. But, when world oil prices are so high, it is incumbent on the government of the day to do everything possible to put downward pressure on prices by ensuring the market is working competitively—something the previous government did not do. They shrugged their shoulders and said over 11 years, ‘Australian working families have never been better off.’ Therefore they chose not to take action in relation to petrol prices. This government has a different approach. We believe that through competition and transparency we can put downward pressure on petrol prices, and that is what we will continue to do.

There is, of course, more to do. We will continue to work with the ACCC on their suggestions and recommendations for action, including investigation of the so-called buy-sell arrangements between oil companies, which mean that a problem in a refinery of one producer flows through to other producers and all consumers pay more for their petrol. We will also continue to work on the issues of transparency and more information for consumers that the ACCC raised in their report.

Given that I have been asked by the honourable member for Leichhardt about the government’s actions since the election, it is appropriate that I inform the House of some of the third-party commentary on those actions in relation to transparency in the petrol market. Peter Kell, the CEO of Choice, has said:

We are pleased to see the federal government stepping in on behalf of consumers in relation to petrol prices—

Mr Hockey—Mr Speaker, I rise on a point of order. It was a very specific question. It did not ask for third-party references. I ask you to sit him down. Otherwise, get another question up from our side.

The SPEAKER—The minister will use the third-party endorsements incidentally to his answer.

Mr BOWEN—Peter Kell said:

We are pleased to see the federal government stepping in on behalf of consumers in relation to petrol prices and are especially pleased to see the ACCC has now been given a greater monitoring role.

The President of the NRMA, Mr Alan Evans, said:

Prime Minister Kevin Rudd and Assistant Treasurer Chris Bowen should be congratulated for acting quickly to expand the powers of the ACCC and work towards appointing a Petrol Commissioner as soon as possible.

On the weekend Mike Harris, Chief Executive of the AAA—

Government members interjecting—

The SPEAKER—Order! The minister will resume his seat. There is simply too much noise for anybody to hear what is going on except for the interjectors hearing their own voices.

Mr BOWEN—Mike Harris, the Chief Executive of the AAA, the peak motoring body for Australia, said:

The AAA motoring clubs—
Mr Secker—Mr Speaker, I rise on a further point of order. He is defying the chair. There is no way that this is incidental.

Mr BOWEN—The AAA, the premium motoring organisation in Australia, said:
The AAA motoring clubs—the NRMA, RACV, RACQ—
And all the state motoring organisations—
welcome ... Mr Walker’s appointment and we believe the scope of his brief will ensure motorists are paying a fair and reasonable cost for their fuel.

There is just one more. I did say I would inform the House of third-party independent commentators. I must admit: the next one is not a third-party independent commentator. She is the former leader of the Country Liberal Party in the Northern Territory. She said on 18 December, after I was interviewed on Darwin ABC radio:

We know governments and the ACCC are doing what they can on petrol, and I don’t think people expect more than that. I am pleased to hear what the federal minister had to say this morning. I am glad that at least one conservative leader has taken a constructive approach to the issue of petrol prices in Australia. I note that the leader of the National Party has called for the GST to be reduced on petrol. Eleven years in office and they never came up with that idea.

The SPEAKER—Order! The minister is now starting to debate the issue.

Mr BOWEN—Eleven years in office and now all of a sudden they think they have a plan. I am not sure if it is actually official National Party policy. We can never be sure these days.

The SPEAKER—Order! The minister will resume his seat.

Opposition members interjecting—

The SPEAKER—Order! Members on my left ought not get too overly excited.

Newcastle Electorate: Roads

Mr TRUSS (2.50 pm)—My question is to the Minister for Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Local Government. In light of the government’s views that removing infrastructure bottlenecks is critical to fighting inflation, will the government support the coalition’s pre-election promise to provide $780 million to complete the F3 to Branxton link road? Does the minister agree with the member for Hunter and now Minister for Defence, who said after the coalition’s announcement that Labor would absolutely match this funding to remove bottlenecks from the Newcastle area?

Mr ALBANESE—I thank the shadow minister for his question. At the election Labor made a clear commitment not only to continue with AusLink 1 but also to expand our funding for AusLink 2. What we need is a plan to deal with infrastructure in an integrated fashion. We need a plan for road and we need a plan for rail. We need a plan that recognises that we need to get our goods to port and we need to get our people around our cities. With regard to the specific question which the minister raised, I am very pleased that this week I will be introducing into the parliament legislation to create Infrastructure Australia. Infrastructure Australia will conduct an audit of the infrastructure needs of the nation, both now and into the future. It will be able to establish an infrastructure priority list based upon objective criteria, with input from the Commonwealth, input from the state, input from local government, as well as input from the private sector.

Mr Hockey—Mr Speaker, I raise a point of order. The question was very specific. It was about the F3 to Branxton link road and the Labor Party’s commitment of $780 million to build the road. It was a very specific question and I ask for a specific answer.
The SPEAKER—Without the chair giving commentary on the matter contained in the response, I do believe that the minister was attempting to explain the process involving not only this project but also other projects.

Mr ALBANESE—This government does indeed have a very different approach towards these processes. What we will not do is make promises during election campaigns to the point whereby they simply do not add up. With regard to the now opposition’s AusLink commitments, during the federal election campaign they just made promises regardless of whether or not they added up. They made promises because they knew they were never going to be in a position to fulfil them.

What is interesting about the specific question raised by the shadow minister is that he was the minister prior to the election. Did he do anything about it? No. Did the previous National Party minister do anything about it? No. Did the minister before that do anything about it? No. And yet, just 11 weeks post the November 24 election, they have come in here and put forward specific questions about commitments that were given. I will tell you what we will be doing. We will be doing two things. One, we will be establishing a proper process so that assessments can be given in terms of priority, establishing one that consults with Commonwealth-state governments and the private sector. Two, we will be repairing the state of the Commonwealth finances caused by the national pork-barrelling and waste whereby the former government were prepared to just make commitments regardless of whether they added up.

Kosovo

Ms VAMVAKINOU (2.54 pm)—My question is to the Minister for Foreign Affairs. Will the minister update the House on recent developments in Kosovo?

Mr STEPHEN SMITH—I thank the member for Calwell for that question. Yesterday the government of Kosovo unilaterally declared independence for the nation-state of Kosovo. This unilateral declaration of independence followed a long period of negotiation between Kosovo and Serbia, largely under the auspices of UNMIK. As members would appreciate, this long period of negotiation has not been successful. There has been no agreement between Kosovo and Serbia. I think it is true to say that there will not be unanimous community welcoming of yesterday’s unilateral declaration of independence, and that was reflected in the debate in the Security Council yesterday. Having said that, Australia very strongly supports recognition of Kosovo’s independence. We believe that that is the best way forward for peace and stability not only in Kosovo but also in south-eastern Europe. The Australian government urges the relevant leaders—Prime Minister Thaci of Kosovo and President Tadic of Serbia—to ensure that whatever disagreements there are between Serbia and Kosovo, whether on the unilateral declaration of independence or on other matters, they are resolved peacefully and in a way which does not incite violence.

The Australian government also urges this view upon relevant parts of the Australian community. We know that attitudes towards the independence of Kosovo are strongly held in sections of the Australian community, and whatever views are expressed should be expressed by way of restraint so as to ensure that all persons’ views in this matter are respected.

The Australian government’s approach to recognition is that the Australian government recognises nation-states, not governments. The criteria for the recognition of nation-
states are that we find a permanent population, a defined territory, a capacity for effective government and a capacity to have relations with other nation-states. We believe that these criteria are met in the case of Kosovo; and, as a consequence, we are very favourably disposed to recognition of Kosovo. We are currently in discussions with our allies, partners and friends about our approach, and after these discussions we look forward to formal recognition of Kosovo at an early opportunity.

I think one of the very key priorities for Kosovo into the future is to ensure the rights and the safety of minorities in Kosovo, including and in particular the protection of cultural and heritage sites. We have seen in Kosovo and in south-eastern Europe in the last decade or so a very sorry history. Australia played its part with the warm and generous welcoming of Kosovar refugees to our shores a few years ago. The Australian government very strongly believes that the best way forward for peace and stability in Kosovo and in south-eastern Europe is to recognise the independence of Kosovo under international supervision, and after appropriate discussion with allies, friends and other nation-states, we hope very quickly to move to such a formal recognition.

Investing in Australia

Mr ROBB (2.58 pm)—My question is to the Minister for Foreign Affairs. I refer the minister to the damning report of comments he made to a New York meeting on 25 January, when he warned off more than 200 prominent investors who had gone to the meeting to hear the merits of investing in Australia. I ask: does the minister stand by his comments in New York that Australia is not an attractive investment destination?

Mr STEPHEN SMITH—I never made any such comment. My comment in New York at a lunch of potential or prospective and current investors into Australia was along the following lines: firstly, that one of the things that has made Australia a prosperous nation has been Australia being an attractive place for capital investment—originally and historically, overseas capital investment and, more recently, domestic capital investment led by Labor’s great superannuation reforms; and, secondly, that we had been a prosperous society by being a great trading nation.

I encouraged investors to invest in Australia by making points which went to the attractiveness of investment in Australia. I also drew attention to one of our current problems. That problem is called inflation. I made the point that, far from being negligent and complacent about inflation, the new Rudd Labor government had made combating inflation its highest economic priority. I would have thought that any investor contemplating investing in Australia, either a domestic investor or an overseas investor, would want to ensure, would want to know, would want to be confident that the government of Australia was on the case when it came to making sure that inflation and, as a consequence, interest rates were under control, rather than being negligent and complacent about it as our predecessors had been for a long period of time.

Mr Robb—Mr Speaker, given that the minister has withheld his speech from his website, I seek leave to table the damning newspaper report.

Leave not granted.

Trade

Ms GRIERSON (3.01 pm)—My question is to the Minister for Trade. Could the minister advise the House of the likelihood of a successful outcome to the WTO Doha Round and why this is important to Australia and the global economy?
Mr CREAN—I thank the honourable member for her question. I will deal with the ‘why’ first. Over the last five years without a Doha conclusion the growth in world trade has been twice the rate of growth in world output. The message from that is clear: if we can get growth in world markets, and through the liberalisation of our trade agenda, that will create the environment for sustained economic growth. It is important not only for us but also for the global economy. That is the reason that it is critical that we get a successful outcome in the Doha Round—not just any outcome, but an ambitious one that deals with agriculture, with industrial goods and with services.

As to the likelihood of that outcome, in my judgement, whilst it will be terribly difficult, it is doable. There has developed a new political will—and this was demonstrated at the recent conference of trade ministers in Davos—to achieve a successful and ambitious outcome. This has been backed up in the dynamic of that political will in three new texts that have recently been issued in Geneva dealing with those three areas that I talked of before. But it is one thing to have the text; it is another to maintain the political will to achieve the outcome. I think—and this seemed to be the view of the ministers present—that, at this time of global uncertainty in the world economy, trade ministers can do a great deal by introducing some certainty to that uncertain environment.

Finally, can I just say that, even if we do succeed in Doha, this is really only the beginning of the next set of trade rounds. We on this side of the parliament have always taken the view that what we need to do is get the most ambitious outcome at the multilateral level, to reinforce and enhance that at the regional level and to reinforce it again at the bilateral level. We have never been against bilateral trade arrangements; our criticism of the previous government is that they reversed that order. They put the emphasis on the bilateral rounds and they achieved outcomes that drew away from the multilateral outcome both in resources and in terms of outcome.

It is also our view that the previous government squandered the opportunity presented by our riding the resources boom to sustain our economic future. In terms of their leadership of the Cairns Group, we do not believe they took the opportunity that that structure presented to reach out to the newly emerging groups in this Doha Round. This government will take a new strategic direction and make a new commitment to achieving the outcome at the multilateral level, enhancing it at the regional level and enhancing it again at the bilateral level—WTO-plus. That is what this country needs. But you have to start at the beginning. The previous government never got there. We hope to help turn that around.

Workplace Relations

Ms JULIE BISHOP (3.05 pm)—My question is to the Minister for Education, Minister for Employment and Workplace Relations and Minister for Social Inclusion. I refer the minister to the John Holland Aviation Services agreement 2007, a collective agreement negotiated and agreed on behalf of workers by the unions. I draw her attention to the fact that this union collective agreement trades away more than 30 award conditions, such as penalty rates, overtime loading, leave loading and public holiday loading. Does the minister support such union agreements?

Ms GILLARD—I note that the agreement that the Deputy Leader of the Opposition has in her hand would have been negotiated under the previous government. But, putting that to one side, I will explain Labor’s industrial relations policies, which can be read by any of the members of the Work
Choices political party in this parliament. If they read those policies, they will find that you can make a collective agreement which has in it flexibilities but the underlying benchmark is a no disadvantage test against the full award. The underlying benchmark under Work Choices in its initial phase was against five protected conditions—only five—which means that everything else could have been signed away, and routinely was. Indeed, the then Howard-Costello government advocated the trading away of conditions for nothing in the example of Billy.

Ms Julie Bishop—Mr Speaker, I raise a point of order on relevance. I referred to this specific agreement and asked whether the minister supported such union agreements.

Ms Gillard—I am explaining, or endeavouring to explain, to the Deputy Leader of the Opposition that I am for collective agreement making when parties choose to do it. Whether parties choose to use a union or choose not to use a union is a matter for them; that is a question of freedom of association.

What is the job of government? The job of government is to set the appropriate benchmark to make sure people are protected. What is the appropriate benchmark? It is the full award. What was the benchmark under the Work Choices party? It was five minimum conditions. That meant leave loading—about which she claims to be concerned—could be traded away for nothing, penalty rates could be traded away for nothing, overtime could be traded away for nothing and so on and so forth. They sat there and knew it was happening and did nothing about it.

I understand that, as the Four Corners show will reveal, they are deeply divided about a number of things, but the one thing they all seem to believe—

Ms Julie Bishop—Mr Speaker, I raise a point of order on relevance. This is not about the program on television this evening. The question was: does the minister support such union agreements? It is a very simple question. If she is unable to answer the question, she should say so.

The Speaker—the Deputy Prime Minister knows that the promo is out of order and she will continue her response to the question.

Ms Gillard—I do not contend that the Four Corners show is relevant but it is going to be interesting to watch; there is no doubt about that. Irrelevant or not, I suspect a lot of people in this parliament will be watching it.

The benchmark the government has set is a full no disadvantage test against an award. That means that you always get better than the award. Under the Work Choices party, you could always get worse than the award. Using their Senate numbers to keep Work Choices going is what they are guaranteeing today—more rip-offs of working families.

Ms Julie Bishop—I seek leave to tender the agreement that is signed by the AMWU, the ASU, the AWU and the National Union of Workers. The 34 award conditions that are traded off are in annexure 3.

Leave not granted.

Skills Shortage

Mr Trevor (3.10 pm)—My question is to the Minister for Resources and Energy. In February 2005 and again in February 2006 you noted that $20 billion worth of major infrastructure and resource projects could be in jeopardy as a result of skills shortages. Are skills shortages still a serious capacity constraint in the resources sector, and what action is the government taking to address this issue?

Mr Martin Ferguson—I thank the honourable member for Flynn for this question. I am pleased to have him in the House because he grew up in Gladstone and has...
lived and worked there for most of his life, in one of the key regional resources and energy regions of Australia. More importantly, he joins a growing band of regional members of the government, such as the representatives of Capricornia, Dawson, Leichhardt, Lingiari, Solomon, Lyons, Hunter and Brand, who have a good appreciation of the importance of the resources and energy sector to the Australian community. They very much appreciate that the resources and energy sector in Australia represents some major challenges.

It is interesting to note that the Leader of the National Party did not, for example, question the Minister for Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Local Government today about the AusLink investments in key regional centres—investments which the opposition failed to match during the election—such as the AusLink money being spent in places such as Dampier, Karratha, Bunbury and Esperance to try and overcome some of the infrastructure blockages in those key resources centres around Australia.

Let us go to the issue of skills shortages. We all appreciate that the resources and energy sector is vital to Australia’s future. One of the responsibilities of the Minister for Trade is not only to ensure that we maintain momentum on resources and energy but also to guarantee that we diversify the Australian industry base so as to make sure that, whilst we ride the resources boom for the foreseeable future, we open up additional employment and export opportunities for Australia. That is very important to the future of Australia. This is about a government actually confronting Australia with the need to make the hard decisions on a variety of fronts to guarantee that Australia is best positioned to confront the challenges of the 21st century. The resources sector is one of those vital sectors. It represents five per cent of Australia’s GDP. Importantly, when you add the downstream processing and associated minerals activity, it represents 20 per cent of Australia’s GDP. It also represents more than half of Australia’s export opportunities at the moment. We are talking about a nation that sees the resources and energy sector as being very much central to where we go in the next 20, 30 and 40 years.

One of the problems is not only infrastructure blockages but huge shortages of skills in Australia. We have to make sure that we do everything possible to overcome these key skills and infrastructure blockages, because in the resources and energy sector they are very much central to our future wealth and prosperity as a nation.

Let us deal with some of the backlog with respect to potential investment in Australia in the foreseeable future. At the moment, the investment planned in the resources sector is estimated at about $30 billion, up from $22 billion in 2006-07 and more than double the average expenditure over the last quarter of a century. So one of our challenges is to work with a whole-of-government approach to try and overcome some of the skills shortages at the moment, skills shortages which are in danger of stranding resources and energy development in Australia. You have to understand that, once it is stranded and investment goes elsewhere, it will be a long time before Australia attracts that investment back, and we will therefore miss out on important skilling and export opportunities.

I am pleased to say, in a complimentary way, that the Minister for Immigration and Citizenship recently announced an increase in skilled migration of 6,000 people for this current financial year, with a special focus on the resources and construction sector.

More importantly, I am also pleased to say that during a recent visit to the Pilbara with the Minister for Families, Housing, Commu-
nity Services and Indigenous Affairs we had an important opportunity to actually sit down with key resource companies such as Woodside, Chevron, BHP and Rio to talk about the problems that confront them. They reinforced to us that the issue of skilled labour is one of the biggest problems in Australia. They also appreciate our endeavours not only to increase skilled migration but also to build integrity back into the 457 visa class, because it is important to their future. We also had the opportunity to talk about the support that the minister for Indigenous affairs is going to give to the resources and energy sector to try and maximise Indigenous employment and training opportunities.

I also welcome the recent announcements by the Prime Minister and the Deputy Prime Minister of not only creating additional training places but also bringing on Skills Australia. This is not just about government at federal and state levels acting on this front. It is also about reminding the private sector: ‘Training is not a cost of running your business; it is an investment in your future.’ So we are looking to that new partnership. I encourage those key resource companies in major regional centres in Australia to actually start doing the work now with their local high schools and local communities: be on the ground running when we announce and put in place key election commitments to put apprentices back in schools, where they belong—to get these young people to start their apprenticeships at school. That will give us a better opportunity to enable them to finish school and also to start an apprenticeship, which will create great career opportunities for the rest of their lives. I simply say in conclusion that the resource and energy sectors are important to Australia, and the responsibility of all ministers, including me, is to actually do what we can to overcome the blockages on the infrastructure front and the skills front that could leave Australian resources stranded. In doing so, can I say time is not on our side. Our responsibility is to make sure we take the hard decisions to enable a modern Australia to confront the 21st century and guarantee working people a vibrant future.

**Days and Hours of Meeting**

Mr BRUCE SCOTT (3.17 pm)—My question is to the Prime Minister. Given that the Prime Minister has just had a pay increase of some $95,000 and that in his capacity as Prime Minister he has had two free houses and a private jet made available to him, will the Prime Minister commit to not being a part-time Prime Minister and to attending parliament each scheduled sitting Friday?

Mr RUDD—I thank the honourable member for this question. As I said in response to a question in this place last week, firstly, the number of question times in this House this year will increase relative to the average annual number of question times through the duration of the Howard government. That is very important. Secondly, the number of sitting days for the parliament will also be greater than was the case under the Howard government. These provide ample opportunities for members to ask questions of the executive—a greater number, in fact, than existed on average over the years of the Howard government—and a greater opportunity for members such as the member for Maranoa to raise questions in this place and to use the opportunity to stand up in private members’ business to put forward the interests of the good people of Maranoa and the challenges that they face. As the government peruse observations and reflections made by the member for Maranoa about what needs to be done in Charleville, Roma and places like that, we will be very attentive to what those contain and will reflect on them in the responses we provide.
Skills Shortage

Mr BRADBURY (3.19 pm)—My question is to the Minister for Employment Participation. Could the minister advise the House of how the government is addressing the skills shortage through its employment services policy?

Mr BRENDAN O’CONNOR—Mr Speaker, as this is my first opportunity, can I congratulate you on your election to high office. I think you have already shown a great capacity to chair this magnificent chamber.

The SPEAKER—Help me by getting to the answer.

Mr BRENDAN O’CONNOR—I thank the honourable member for Lindsay for his question. It is a very important question. Indeed, this particular area of public policy has a great bearing on Western Sydney. I know he understands that and I certainly will want to work with him on this particular matter over the course of the parliamentary term. Skills and training are vital to Australia’s future prosperity and our ability to compete on the international stage. We all know that a skilled society is central to the next wave of economic reform, but the previous Liberal government left Australia with its worst skills shortage in living memory. That shortage has critically affected key industries and put at risk our economic growth. This is exemplified by the migration occupations in demand list, which has seen the number of occupations on the shortage list increase by 400 per cent since 1999. In less than 10 years, there has been a fourfold increase of occupations on that particular list, which is indeed an indictment of the previous government. We told the Australian people we would improve employment services to get more Australians into work and to help employers get skilled labour to boost their productivity. We will create a new suite of employment programs which will provide better opportunities for training and indeed for a more skilled workforce. The Rudd government are committed to addressing the severe skills shortages in Australia. Before the election, we actually committed to 450,000 vocational education and training places over the next four-year period, which I think is a significant commitment to providing the training required for Australians. In the area of my own portfolio, 175,000 places out of those 450,000 will be provided specifically for Australians entering and re-entering the workforce from unemployment. We are already acting on that commitment, and that is why 20,000 of those training places will be rolled out between 1 April and 30 June this year.

The second part of the honourable member’s question asks why Australia is facing such a severe skills crisis, which is putting at risk our long-term economic prosperity. For almost 12 long years vocational education and training was relegated to the bottom of the government’s priorities. It was not even regarded as a significant matter by the previous government. There is a case in point with respect to that particular assertion. Under the previous government the number of apprenticeships and traineeships commenced as a result of a Job Network placement fell by more than half. Between 1998 and 1999 there were 32,807 places compared with only 14,925 in the financial year 2006-07. That is a disgrace. That is an indictment of the self-absorption, the self-interest and the incompetence of the previous government. If you want to see some more signs of that, watch Four Corners tonight because we know there will be versions of history and revisionism going on. There will be many versions, as we know. It will underline—

The SPEAKER—Order! The Minister for Employment Participation is starting to debate the answer.
Mr BRENDAN O’CONNOR—how absorbed the previous government was. There was no investment in training; there was just a ‘get them into any job at any cost’ mentality. In my portfolio, that blinkered approach created an employment system with the wrong emphasis, where training and education had little or no value. I refer the House to the words of the Age’s economics editor, who only on 5 February said: ‘The Howard government dropped the ball on skills training.’ Indeed it did. And as recently as two days ago the Daily Telegraph reported on a survey conducted by the National Centre for Vocational Education Research. It found that 80 per cent of large employers have had difficulty recruiting over the last 12 months. That is 80 per cent of large employers, up from 68 per cent in 2005.

The Rudd government is currently waging a war on inflation. We will continue to fight that war, something that was neglected by the previous government for more than a decade.

Vocational Education and Training

Mr ANTHONY SMITH (3.25 pm)—My question is to the Prime Minister. I refer the Prime Minister to his pledge to the Australian people in this House on 10 May last year where he promised ‘to build new trades training centres and upgrade existing facilities and equipment in all of Australia’s 2,650 secondary schools’. Can the Prime Minister guarantee that every single secondary school will have its own trades training centre at the school as he pledged?

Mr RUDD—I thank the honourable member for his question. Building on the answer which has just been given by my honourable colleague concerning vocational education and training: this is core business for the new Australian government. It was marginal business for the government we replaced. You see that in the pattern of expenditure; you see that also in the inflation challenges that are before the Australian economy. We have had warning after warning from the Reserve Bank about skills shortages in the Australian economy, going back years and years, about which the previous government did nothing, as a consequence of which we have inflationary pressures unleashed in the Australian economy—

Mr Anthony Smith—Mr Speaker, I rise on a point of order going to relevance. Could the Prime Minister simply answer yes or no to whether his pledge still stands?

The SPEAKER—I call the Prime Minister.

Mr RUDD—Part and parcel of dealing with the skills shortages is what we do with voc ed and training. And a core part of that is what we do with voc ed and training in schools. I remember visiting schools during the election campaign, including the school that the Treasurer and I attended as kids. It is an absolute disgrace that, at this stage in the country’s history, trades training centres such as that have barely changed an inch since we attended that school back in the early to mid-1970s. And you see this pattern right across the country, with mums and dads across Australia saying, ‘I want my kids to have decent access to voc ed at school’—

Mr Anthony Smith—Mr Speaker, I rise on a point of order on relevance again. The Prime Minister needs to answer a simple question. He promised 2,650 secondary schools would have their own trades training centre. Will they or won’t they?

The SPEAKER—Order! The member for Casey will resume his seat. I call the Prime Minister.

Mr RUDD—Therefore the challenge lies in making sure that kids from working families have decent opportunities for trades training in schools. The previous government just waved goodbye to that and for 11½
years did fundamentally nothing for hundreds and thousands of young Australian kids wanting to pursue a trade. Kids wanted to pursue a career in the motor trades, a career in carpentry or other careers in industrial design, but there were no real opportunities available to them. They had to wait for an alternative government to stand up here—and I recall doing so—at the dispatch box in the budget reply and say, ‘Enough is enough: this government, were it to be elected, would be committed to delivering trades training centres to each of Australia’s 2,650 secondary schools.’ We have committed funding for doing that into the years ahead. It will be delivered, as we undertook at the last election, because we are a government committed to honouring our undertakings to the Australian people, unlike those who preceded us, who categorised their promises into that which was core and that which was non-core, because they did not believe in the promises they gave in the first place.

**Bombing of Darwin: Anniversary**

Mr HALE (3.28 pm)—My question is to the Minister for Veterans’ Affairs. Can the minister explain to the House the significance of the bombing of Darwin, which is being remembered tomorrow, and the government’s plans to commemorate this period of Australia’s war history?

Mr GRIFFIN—I thank the honourable member for his question. Following the fall of Singapore on 15 February 1942, then Labor Prime Minister John Curtin predicted the beginning of war on Australian soil. He said: The fall of Singapore opens the battle for Australia. Our honeymoon is finished.

Four days later, war came to Australian shores with two air raids launched on Darwin. The two air raids killed more than 250 people and wounded between 300 and 400 people. Twenty military aircraft were destroyed, eight ships at anchor in the harbour were sunk, and most civil and military facilities in Darwin were devastated. The air attacks on Darwin continued until November 1943, with Darwin being attacked some 64 times. This was testament to Darwin’s pivotal role in the war effort into the islands.

During the war other towns in Northern Australia were also attacked, with bombs being dropped on Townsville, Katherine, Wyndham, Derby, Broome and Port Hedland. The battle for Australia was a struggle that encompassed a nation’s heart and soul, as Australia resisted the enemy’s attacks on its soil and territories. The threat of invasion was very real. The struggle stretched our nation’s resources to the limit. Men and women in uniform and men, women and children on the home front responded to the call. The battle for Australia comprised the bombing of Northern Australia, the Battle of the Coral Sea and those battles along the Kokoda track and from Milne Bay through to Buna, Gona and Sanananda. The defence of Australia became a springboard for victory.

The Battle for Australia Commemoration National Council was formed in 1988 to encourage annual commemoration of the battle for Australia on the first Wednesday in September each year. The date coincides with the anniversary of the Battle of Milne Bay, which proved to be the first of many Japanese land defeats in the Pacific war and a turning point in the defence of our nation.

This government went to the electorate promising to formally recognise Battle for Australia Day as a national day of observance—action the previous government would not take. Work is underway for the Governor-General to issue a proclamation to observe Battle for Australia Day on the first Wednesday in September each year. It will not be a public holiday or an alternative to Anzac Day or Remembrance Day, but it will
provide all of us with the opportunity to reflect on the momentous events that helped shape our nation and to remember those who lost their lives to protect our freedom and way of life.

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

FUEL PRICES
Suspension of Standing and Sessional Orders

Mr HARTSUYKER (Cowper) (3.31 pm)—I move:

That so much of the standing and sessional orders be suspended as would prevent the Honourable Member for Cowper from being called forthwith to address the House on the following Matter of Definite Public Importance: “The failure of the Rudd Labor Government to adequately address the issue of rising petrol prices which is placing upward pressure on interest rates and inflation and adversely affecting Australian families,” and for other members to then be called to address the House on this matter and for the time limits provided for in Standing Order 1 in relation to Matters of Public Importance being applied to the honourable Member for Cowper and other members speaking.

Mr Albanese—Mr Speaker, I rise on a point of order. I am not sure what this is exactly. The standing orders are very clear about the matter of public importance and about what time it takes place. We have a ministerial statement that has been scheduled as requested—I might add by you and by the members opposite. Proper notice has been given. It is the next item on the agenda, and I ask you to call it on.

The SPEAKER—The member for Cowper is seeking leave and can finish his motion.

Mr HARTSUYKER—Mr Speaker, the whole of the Australian nation is waiting for ‘Crazy Kev’s’ discount petrol—

The SPEAKER—Order! I misled the Leader of the House. The member for Cowper moved a motion. The motion has been completed. He is now addressing his motion.

Mr HARTSUYKER—Yes, Mr Speaker. They’re waiting for ‘Crazy Kev’s’ discount petrol—

Mr ALBANESE (Grayndler—Minister for Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Local Government) (3.33 pm)—I move:

That the member be no longer heard.

Question put.

The House divided. [3.37 pm]

(The Speaker—Mr Harry Jenkins)

Ayes…………… 79
Noes…………… 64
Majority……… 15

AYES
Adams, D.G.H.  Albanese, A.N.
Bevis, A.R.  Bowen, C.
Bradbury, D.J.  Burke, A.E.
Burke, A.S.  Butler, M.C.
Byrne, A.M.  Campbell, J.
Champion, N.  Cheeseman, D.L.
Clare, J.D.  Collins, J.M.
Combet, G.  Crean, S.F.
D’Ath, Y.M.  Danby, M.
Debus, B.  Dreyfus, M.A.
Elliot, J.  Ellis, A.L.
Ellis, K.  Emerson, C.A.
Ferguson, L.D.T.  Ferguson, M.J.
Fitzgibbon, J.A.  Garrett, P.
Georganas, S.  George, J.
Gibbons, S.W.  Gillard, J.E.
Gray, G.  Grierson, S.J.
Griffin, A.P.  Hale, D.F.
Hall, J.G. *  Hayes, C.P. *
Irwin, J.  Jackson, S.M.
Kelly, M.J.  Kerr, D.J.C.
King, C.F.  Livermore, K.F.
Macklin, J.L.  Marles, R.D.
McClelland, R.B.  McKew, M.
McMullan, R.F.  Melham, D.
Murphy, J.  Neal, B.J.
Neumann, S.K.  O’Connor, B.P.
Mr HOCKEY (North Sydney) (3.40 pm)—Mr Speaker, the government have brought this upon themselves by closing down—

Mr ALBANESE (Grayndler—Leader of the House) (3.40 pm)—I move:

That the member be no longer heard.

Question put.

The House divided. [3.42 pm]

(The Speaker—Mr Harry Jenkins)

Ayes ............ 79
Noes ............ 64
Majority ....... 15

AYES

Adams, D.G.H.    Albanese, A.N.
Bevis, A.R.       Bowen, C.
Bradbury, D.J.    Burke, A.E.
Burke, A.S.       Butler, M.C.
Byrne, A.M.       Campbell, J.
Champion, N.      Cheeseman, D.L.
Clare, J.D.       Collins, J.M.
Combet, G.        Crean, S.F.
D’Ath, Y.M.       Danby, M.
Debus, B.         Dreyfus, M.A.
Elliot, J.        Ellis, A.L.
Ellis, K.         Emerson, C.A.
Ferguson, L.D.T.  Ferguson, M.J.
Fitzgibbon, J.A.  Garrett, P.
Georganas, S.     George, J.
Gibbons, S.W.     Gillard, J.E.
Gray, G.          Grierson, S.J.
Griffin, A.P.     Hale, D.F.
Hall, J.G. *      Hayes, C.P. *
Irwin, J.         Jackson, S.M.
Kelly, M.J.       Kerr, D.J.C.
King, C.F.        Livermore, K.F.
Macklin, J.L.     Marles, R.D.
McClelland, R.B.  McKew, M.
McMullan, R.F.    Melham, D.
Murphy, J.        Neal, B.J.
Neumann, S.K.     O’Connor, B.P.
Owens, J.         Parke, M.
Perrett, G.D.     Plibersek, T.
Price, L.R.S.     Raguse, B.B.
Rea, K.M.         Ripoll, B.F.
Rishworth, A.L.   Roxon, N.L.
Saffin, J.A.      Shorten, W.R.
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| **NOES** |
|----------------|------------|--------|
| Abbott, A.J. | Andrews, K.J. | | |
| Bailey, F.E. | Baldwin, R.C. | | |
| Billson, B.F. | Bishop, B.K. | | |
| Bishop, J.I. | Broadbent, R. | | |
| Ciobo, S.M. | Cobb, J.K. | | |
| Costello, P.H. | Coulton, M. | | |
| Downer, A.J.G. | Dutton, P.C. | | |
| Farmer, P.F. | Forrest, J.A. | | |
| Gash, J. | Georgiou, P. | | |
| Haase, B.W. | Hartsuyker, L. | | |
| Hawke, A. | Hawker, D.P.M. | | |
| Hockey, J.B. | Hull, K.E. | | |
| Hunt, G.A. | Irons, S.J. | | |
| Jensen, D. | Johnson, M.A. | | |
| Keenan, M. | Laming, A. | | |
| Ley, S.P. | Lindsay, P.J. | | |
| Macfarlane, I.E. | Marino, N.B. | | |
| Markus, I.E. | May, M.A. | | |
| McGauran, P.J. | Mirabella, S. | | |
| Morrison, S.J. | Moylan, J.E. | | |
| Nelson, B.J. | Neville, P.C. | | |
| Pearce, C.J. | Pyne, C. | | |
| Ramsey, R. | Randall, D.J. | | |
| Robb, A. | Robert, S.R. | | |
| Ruddock, P.M. | Schultz, A. | | |
| Scott, B.C. | Secker, P.D. | | |
| Simpkins, L. | Slipper, P.N. | | |
| Smith, A.D.H. | Somlyay, A.M. | | |
| Southcott, A.J. | Stone, S.N. | | |
| Truss, W.E. | Tuckey, C.W. | | |
| Turnbull, M. | Vale, D.S. | | |
| Washer, M.J. | Wood, J. | | |

* denotes teller

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<td><em>Original question put:</em></td>
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<td>[3.44 pm]</td>
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<td><em>That the motion (Mr Hartsuyker's) to be agreed to.</em></td>
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<td>The House divided.</td>
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Mr PYNE (Sturt) (3.48 pm)—Mr Speaker, I wish to make a personal explanation.

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

Mr PYNE—Yes, most grievously.

The SPEAKER—Please proceed.

Mr PYNE—The Minister for Ageing in question time today said that I received a report from the Aged Care Commissioner in May 2007 about which I did absolutely nothing. The facts are that I did receive a report from the Aged Care Commissioner. I referred it to the Aged Care Standards and Accreditation Agency to implement the administrative matters in that report that would have assisted in further investigations into the future, and those parts of the report that were germane to the Department of Health and Ageing, which I was a part of, I asked to be implemented.

SPEAKER’S PANEL

The SPEAKER—Pursuant to standing order 17(a), I lay on the table my warrant nominating the honourable members for Menzies, Brisbane, Cunningham, Hindmarsh, Page, Hume, Fisher, Wills, Hughes and Moore to be members of the Speaker’s panel to assist the chair when requested to do so by the Speaker or Deputy Speaker.
MINISTERIAL STATEMENTS
Australia-United States ‘Open Skies’ Agreement

Mr ALBANESE (Grayndler—Minister for Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Local Government) (3.50 pm)—I ask leave of the House to make a ministerial statement relating to the Australia-United States ‘Open Skies’ Agreement.

Leave granted.

Mr ALBANESE—Last week the Australian government successfully negotiated an open skies agreement with the United States. This development represents a watershed for trans-Pacific aviation. Under the new agreement, Australian and United States airlines will be able to fly an unlimited number of services between our two countries through any combination of other destinations. This agreement has been a priority for me and the government since our election last year. The agreement with the United States opens the way for increased competition, new services and the potential for lower fares on one of Australia’s most important air routes. The United States is Australia’s third largest aviation market, with 48 Australian and 17 US services weekly on the Australia-United States route. In 2007, nearly one million passengers travelled each way between Australia and the US—around 496,000 Australians departing for the US and 459,000 American arrivals in Australia.

Over the last 10 years, the Australia-US route has seen an average annual growth of 3.3 per cent, a figure with real hope of substantial improvement through this landmark open skies agreement. The Rudd Labor government is committed to opening further opportunities for Australian aviation, trade and tourism, resulting in the creation of jobs for Australians. Tourism is already responsible for around half a million jobs in Australia, and this agreement should help to further strengthen our tourism industry. The agreement allows airlines to determine how many flights they operate and the destinations they wish to serve in the United States and beyond, based on consumer demand and commercial decisions without interference from government. This enables a wider range of options for consumers and a more competitive market.

Previously, entrants were only guaranteed a start-up of four services a week, making it difficult for new airlines to commence operations on a commercial basis. The Australia-US agreement negotiated last week now opens the way for V Australia, the Virgin Blue subsidiary, to commence services from November this year. I am very pleased to advise the House that V Australia has confirmed that, with the signing of this agreement, it will now proceed to introduce 10 services a week to the US from the end of this year. V Australia is investing more than $2 billion in the purchase of six new long-range B777 aircraft. This is an investment in Australian jobs, Australian skills and opening up new markets for Australian companies. The agreement will provide certainty for Qantas and Jetstar to plan and grow into the future and widen the network of cities they can serve in the United States and beyond the US market. The Qantas Group currently operate 48 services a week on the Pacific route. They have indicated that this will increase to 51 services a week from March of this year. It also opens greater opportunities for dedicated air freight services and greater access for Australian carriers to destinations in the US and beyond. The agreement has been welcomed by Australian airlines and the tourism industry. In a statement on Friday, 15 February, the Tourism and Transport Forum said:

The new arrangements will result in more choice and improved access for U.S. visitors, enabling
the industry to more effectively market Australia’s tourism experiences in the USA.

Liberalising Australian skies and opening markets for Australian carriers will drive growth through competition and remove unnecessary regulatory burden on businesses. Aviation is a major industry in Australia and growth can only mean more jobs for Australian workers in the aviation industry and more choice for Australian consumers. Australia has been a long-standing leader in the benefits of liberalisation, and the international aviation sector has been no small element of the picture. Australia has extensive experience of the benefits of liberalisation. Following deregulation by Labor, our domestic market has gone from strength to strength. We now have one of the most competitive domestic aviation markets in the world. In recent years, we have seen the global growth of new low-cost international carriers. Jetstar and Pacific Blue are now adding to the range of competitive services available to and from Australia. The new generation of low-cost international carriers—Jetstar, Pacific Blue and foreign operators such as Tiger Airways and AirAsia X—will continue to build competition in the Australian market, offering cheaper fares and new options for tourists travelling to and from countries such as Singapore, Malaysia, Japan and New Zealand. The agreement concluded with the US will now enable a second full-service, long-haul Australian international airline. With V Australia’s entry into the lucrative Australia-US market, we anticipate a new dimension in competition on the route.

As an island nation with a significant tourism industry, the airline industry is a major contributor to Australia’s economy. Our tourism industry and our high-value, time-sensitive export industries depend on these links, supporting a whole raft of downstream industries. We need to make sure that we are maximising the benefits that a strong Australian based aviation sector can offer our country. This does not mean opening our skies while other countries keep their own markets closed. This would do nothing but allow other airlines to exploit our markets without allowing the Australian airline industry to compete. Australia is by no means the end of the world, but we are in many ways the end of the line in global transport linkages. Our position as an end-point destination leaves us with few competitive traffic rights to trade in order to gain access to valuable markets overseas. Beyond the realm of air services agreements, broader commercial settings in other countries, such as government subsidies and support, bankruptcy protection and divergent tax regimes, create further market distortions. These accentuate the competitive advantages many foreign airlines enjoy, compounding their geographic advantages over end-point Australian carriers.

Unlike most sectors, the trade in air services is closed until governments act to open the market. The new Rudd Labor government will drive an active strategy to further liberalise the aviation sector, seeking cooperation with like-minded partners. In a system of unbalanced economic advantage, we must take a pragmatic approach to our liberalisation strategy, acting in the overall national interest. We will aim to reduce restrictions which limit growth while ensuring that the Australian industry can compete with international operators on a balanced playing field. We are committed to growing Australian based international airlines, as aviation is our critical link to the rest of the world. Importantly, as government removes unnecessary economic regulation and opens our skies, we must ensure that safety and security are not compromised. All new services must continue to meet the requirements of the Civil Aviation Safety Authority and secu-
rities to keep our skies safe and secure.

Since my appointment on 3 December last year, I have met with the CEO of Qantas, Geoff Dixon, and the CEO of Virgin Blue, Brett Godfrey, to consult on the details of the proposal. On 5 February, I welcomed the US ambassador, His Excellency Robert McCallum Jr, and economic counsellor Edgard Kagan to Parliament House for discussions on the proposal. I want to place on record the government’s thanks to the US ambassador for his active support of the deal. I am proud to commence my term as Minister for Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Local Government with this success in the United States. I thank my colleagues the Minister for Tourism and the Minister for Trade for their support. I would like to congratulate the officials from my department and Australia’s embassy in Washington who worked so hard to negotiate this deal, in particular Mr Stephen Borthwick, Australia’s lead negotiator, and his team.

This agreement also demonstrates the strength of the Australia-US relationship. The United States is one of Australia’s most important economic partners, and the agreement will provide great opportunities for increasing trade and commercial links between our two countries. Just as important is the recognition that the strength of our relationship is based upon the personal interaction of our citizens. The increasing two-way travel between Australia and the United States which will derive from this agreement will have a long-term benefit in increasing understanding and friendship between our two great nations. More broadly, this agreement on one of Australia’s most important air routes signals the next step in growth not only for Australian aviation but also for our tourism and business sectors.

Mr Byrne (Holt—Parliamentary Secretary to the Prime Minister) (3.59 pm)—by leave—by leave—I move:

That so much of the standing and sessional orders be suspended as would prevent Mr Truss speaking for a period not exceeding 9 minutes.

Question agreed to.

Mr Truss (Wide Bay—Leader of the Nationals) (3.59 pm)—I thank the Minister for Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Local Government for making a statement to the House today on the Australia-United States ‘Open Skies’ Agreement and, in particular, for choosing to make a ministerial statement rather than answer a dorothy dixer at length, as many of his colleagues did during question time today. I also congratulate him and the Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Local Government in good grace on the completion of this air services agreement.

The minister spoke about his pride in this achievement and complimented a number of people who were involved in the agreement. If he had been a trifle more gracious, he might have even acknowledged that this was a set of negotiations that was commenced by the previous government and was well advanced when he took office. In fact, I can recall that, when Virgin Blue came to me, as Minister for Transport and Regional Services, and expressed their interest in opening up services to the United States, the barriers that exist with the four-flights rule arose as an issue that would need to be addressed.

These discussions go back for something over two years. In July of last year, following detailed discussions at an official level in the United States, it was agreed that there should be a discussion about a more comprehensive new air transport agreement. Then, on 29 September 2007, Minister Vaile and the US Secretary of Transport, Mary Peters, for-
mally confirmed each country’s commitment to further strengthening the aviation relationship through a more ‘open skies’ arrangement.

This new air services agreement is a significant advance and will provide more opportunities for air services between Australia and the US. However, we should avoid picking up too much of the US terminology of ‘open skies’ in relation to an agreement like this one. Whilst it is true that it will allow some more liberalisation of arrangements, it is a long way short of ‘open skies’. The minister used the word ‘landmark’, although this agreement goes little further than the agreement negotiated in 2006 with the UK; it is very similar in content. However, it is nowhere near as free and open as is our arrangement with New Zealand, which is perhaps the closest anywhere in the world to a genuine open skies arrangement. The Americans like to use the term ‘open skies’ but in reality there is still a host of restrictions in place which prevent competition with US airlines.

I do not think we should ever use the term ‘open skies’ in the context of an agreement with the US. Indeed, the minister in his statement made the comment, in looking at what our aviation policy should be, that we should ‘not open our skies while other countries keep their own markets closed: this would do nothing but allow other airlines to exploit our markets, without allowing the Australian airline industry to compete’. The reality is that this agreement actually does that, because the United States is not lifting the restrictions on Australian airlines operating in the US. It will still not be possible for an Australian airline to run domestic services in the United States, whereas a US airline is quite at liberty, and has been for a long time, to operate air services within Australia. The minister then went on to make the very valid point that many international airlines are supported by government subsidies, bankruptcy protection and divergent tax regimes, all of which create market distortions. Of course, again, that classically applies to the US market.

While this is a freer and more open agreement, the reality is there will still be substantial restrictions on the capacity of an Australian airline to operate within the US, and it is simply unlikely that the US Congress would agree to the lifting of those sorts of restrictions. It is perhaps a little unfair to characterise this as an ‘open skies’ agreement. Nonetheless, it will provide significant opportunities for Virgin Blue—or V Australia now—to undertake services to the US, as it has planned, and hopefully allow other airlines to enter the route.

As the minister rightly mentioned, tourism to and from the United States is particularly important. The shadow minister for tourism, the member for Moncrieff, is amongst those who have spoken very effectively on the importance of this agreement and the need to open up better transport links with the United States. We would like to have more visitors, more tourists, from the United States. It is a high-yield market and it is disappointing that more US tourists do not come to this country.

There are two significant airline initiatives which could boost tourism numbers from the United States to Australia. The first is to allow low-cost carriers on the route to encourage people to put competitive fares on to that market. With Jetstar and V Australia now committed to providing low-cost fares on the route, I think that we will see real competition for the first time and, as a result, more people will be encouraged to travel—although I suspect there may be more people encouraged to travel on cheap fares from Australia to the United States, rather than vice versa.
I therefore come to the second point, which would be even more important in encouraging US visitors to come to Australia, and that is having more US carriers operating on the route. The reality is that only United Airlines services Australia at the present time, apart from a service by Continental from Guam into Cairns. United Airlines provides fairly ordinary services, only going to Sydney and to Melbourne. If we could have more US carriers on the route, then more US tourists would come to Australia, because US passengers like to fly on American airlines. There is probably a stronger nationalistic tendency in the US than anywhere else.

There have been no restrictions on more US carriers coming to Australia—a number of airlines have tried it in the past but failed—but there has not really been the commitment that is necessary from US carriers to enter this route and to bring the number of Americans there should be to enjoy the tourism experiences of Australia. This agreement will not in fact make any advances in that regard, other than perhaps potentially opening up an option for on-carriage. The on-carriage options are welcome but they are always dependent on a third country also agreeing. For instance, the minister mentioned that airlines will be able to travel through various alternative countries between Australia and the United States. But some countries are unlikely to grant that approval—for instance, Japan, which would be a prime option for routes between Australia and the US. The Japanese are most unlikely, in their current mood, to allow that sort of traffic. So there will still be limitations from that perspective.

We do need to attract a wider range of US carriers to the Australian market. Hopefully, with V Australia and Jetstar entering the market and Hawaiian, Canadian and other airlines having an interest, we will have more North American carriers coming to Australia. I think it is also important that these carriers come not just to Sydney; the Sydney market is well serviced at the present time by United and Qantas. What I would like to see is more direct flights into Melbourne, Brisbane, the Gold Coast and indeed other tourist destinations in Australia, such as Cairns. Those are the places that could benefit from the advent of lower cost carriers bringing tourists from the US to Australia.

This needs to be a commitment from both sides of the Pacific. We want US carriers to take up these opportunities and Australian carriers to recognise the flexibility that this agreement provides so that the flights are there to bring people to Australia for a cost-effective holiday. I welcome this new air services agreement. It is somewhat short of being ‘open skies’, but it is a substantial advance and we need to recognise the opportunity and the example that this provides for other air services agreements between Australia and our aviation partners.
certain joint committees. Copies of the message are on the chamber table and details will be recorded in the Votes and Proceedings.

Membership

Mr ALBANESE (Grayndler—Leader of the House) (4.10 pm)—by leave—I move:

That Members be appointed as members of certain committees in accordance with the schedule which is available to Members in the Chamber.

As the list is a lengthy one, I do not propose to read it to the House. Details will be recorded in the Votes and Proceedings.

Question agreed to.

GOVERNOR-GENERAL’S SPEECH

Address-in-Reply

Debate resumed from 14 February, on motion by Mr Hale:

That the address be agreed to.

Ms LEY (Farrer) (4.10 pm)—The drought has affected my electorate in a savage and awful way. No longer is it just about your farm, your production, even your bank balance; the drought has crept into your soul and become a state of mind. For dryland farmers the current rains hold the promise that things are looking better for this season. But in most cases there have only been one to three good years, in the past seven—depending on where you live. Farmers must now find $1,000 minimum an acre to put in a crop. For a typical 1,500-acre farm, that is $150,000. The sharp trend upwards in the price of fertiliser and other inputs means this is unlikely to get any less.

The current state of irrigated agriculture in the Murray-Darling Basin is not good, but it is not without prospects or promise. There is tremendous anxiety in the communities, not just among the farmers but in the towns as well. Water restrictions in towns may seem a small thing beside zero irrigation allocations but, for older folk who take great pride in their gardens and indeed their parks and public areas, it hurts. They know they are sharing the pain with everyone in the basin, but they need to know that water is being managed wisely and well.

I was in Wentworth last weekend, where the Darling meets the Murray. The brown, muddy water flowing down the Darling merged with the less muddy waters of the Murray, and it was an uplifting sight. It is about four years since the Darling flowed into the Murray and eight or nine since we have had a flood like this one. It gives people hope.

For the western Murray irrigators, the last 12 months have been incredibly hard. There has been so little water. Remember, these farmers have high-security water and it is not supposed to fail. But they have managed to survive. Prices for wine grapes are lower than the cost of production and the table grape season has been disastrous. Citrus has been reasonable, but citrus farmers are desperate to gain access to overseas markets.

I have had good feedback about the previous government’s $20,000 grants for irrigators, which are being used for infrastructure improvements, water savings or to pay fixed water charges. On this point I note that Victoria has provided relief for its water users but New South Wales has not. I ask the present government not to pull the plug on this program, nor on exceptional circumstances drought relief payments of both interest and household payments.

The issue of water trading is a great worry to irrigator communities along the Murray. The small districts of Moira, Pomona, Mourquong, Gol Gol Creek and Corurgan in my electorate, as well as those represented by Murrumbidgee Private Irrigators—also in my electorate—are being treated like big business under the proposed water trading program.
rules. The ACCC is producing an issues paper in connection with the upcoming federal water bill which develops these trading rules. Great care must be taken with this.

I ask the Minister for Climate Change and Water, and the National Water Commission, to remember that these small, private trusts were set up, in many cases, around a particular creek on the river system. They have long histories. They involve a small number of farmers who cooperate with each other in order to use a relatively small resource for the benefit of their families and small communities. They do not employ CEOs or research officers or have a budget for travel or lobbying. They operate from the kitchen table of one of the farms in that narrow window of time between finishing work in the daylight hours and knocking off later in the evening.

We cannot afford a situation where water is traded out of these entities and districts and away. We cannot allow them to fall over. In fact, we cannot allow our larger organisations to disintegrate because of water trading. The government appears to like the line ‘purchase water from willing sellers’. Yes, plenty of water will appear on the market, particularly if governments enter it with their big chequebooks. But these are not willing sellers; they are stressed sellers. They are in the market selling water because financially they have no other choice.

Murray Irrigation, centred in Deniliquin, have 2,500 family farmers. They have been unable to run an irrigation program at all. They managed to get stock and domestic allocation in September last year and this has meant a great deal, especially for dairy farmers. Their allocation has been zero for two years, and they are staring down the barrel of a third shocking year. The feeling is overwhelmingly one of being flattened. People have actually lost confidence that the season is going to break at all. They know that it is the dams in the Snowy storages that must fill before they receive a decent allocation, and that is going to take some time. The recent rains are welcome, and we do hope they signify a new beginning.

For all our farmers and farming communities, I ask the incoming government not to make the mistake of believing that rain brings relief to the bank balance. It doesn’t. There is a cash drought in farming, and it persists for a season or two after the drought-breaking rains arrive. It rains, you spend more, you stress more, and you wait and hope for a positive return. Can I say to the present government: rural Australians feel very remote from you at the moment. It is not your policies they are afraid of; it is your lack of understanding. I am worried about how this new government will respond to two issues that they have nominated as critical: recovering water for the environment, and responding to climate change. Please work with the communities in the Murray-Darling Basin. Seek their advice. Let them show you their river, the part it plays in their lives. Listen to the ideas they have about sustaining their communities. And act in a considered and caring way.

Last week the parliament apologised to the stolen generations. I would like to say something about this because I believe that closing the gap of Aboriginal disadvantage is a crucial issue for this parliament. The apology is part of this. There was a stolen generation. Aboriginal children were taken from their mothers and fathers, as documented in the *Bringing them home* report. It happened as a result of a policy supported by successive governments. Children at risk should always be removed. I believe that in many cases today there are children from Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal families at risk who are not removed soon enough. I would never apologise for removing a child, temporarily
or permanently, who was being neglected or abused. But the question of removal should never be framed in terms of the colour of a child’s skin, race or ethnicity. For the stolen generations, the issue was less to do with the question of alleged abuse and neglect and more to do with colour. Children were forcibly removed because they were black and because they were poor—not because they were unwanted, unloved or in physical harm.

We understand much more now about the psychological development of babies and children. We know that it is not enough for a child to have his or her face washed, to be dressed in clean clothes, to be sent to school and to be fed three meals a day—important though all of these things are. How we love and allow ourselves to be loved, which in turn relates to how we function as human beings, is directly related to psychological patterns developed years before, when we were exposed as helpless infants to the love, care and soothing that stood between us and pain, distress and confusion. The lessons we learn in very early childhood are the lessons we carry with us all our lives. Not having proper parenting very early on, not knowing your family and not knowing who you are are obstacles many find impossible to overcome. The pain of rejection and loss do not go away.

Knowing all of this, some say that it is nevertheless not our fault and we should not apologise. If previous parliaments are no longer around to say sorry, then it is up to us as the present parliament to apologise. This was brought home to me most strongly when I spoke to a Vietnam veteran recently. He described how he had arrived home from his tour of duty in Vietnam. He touched down in Darwin to refuel before flying on to Sydney, with the expectation of, if not being welcomed with open arms, at least having his service acknowledged by the Australian government and the public. Hours passed and the plane stayed put on the tarmac in Darwin. The commanding officer went out to make a call. He returned and said: ‘They don’t know what to do with us. We’re an embarrassment to the government.’ In the end this group of soldiers was flown to Sydney after the curfew, after the airport had closed at 2 am. They were let go on the tarmac outside the airport. The taxis had gone. No-one was there to meet them. They were simply left to make their own way. Hearing this, I was horrified. I wanted very much to apologise, to say sorry. I had nothing to do with this decision. But I was here now, as a representative, hearing the story, and that government was not.

I support the fact that we said sorry and that the parliament did so with good grace. It is now incumbent upon all governments and parliaments—federal, state and territory—to acknowledge that Aboriginal policy in this country has consistently failed Aboriginal people. We should unite in our determination to do better, to give Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians every opportunity to gain a real place in the real economy. May I wish all new members of the House all the very best for their careers as parliamentarians. Finally, may I say that this place is a place where there is a lot of talk. I promise that, as much as I possibly can, I will walk the talk on behalf of the people of Farrer.
me get here, and who I want to thank and acknowledge, and I want to offer some reflections on the work ahead and the contributions I hope I will be able to make.

What we see and do on the way to membership of a legislature must affect how we act as legislators, what we understand to be the role of the elected representative, and what we hope to achieve in our time in parliament. More than that, our experiences on the way here must surely have some effect on what we hope to help others to achieve. Representatives achieve when those they represent thrive. But do representatives in democracies also achieve when sometimes they undertake the difficult task of persuading those they represent that the common good requires the local interest to give way to a larger interest? I think so. Representation, persuasion, unsettling compromise and comforting settlements: all these notions are very familiar to a barrister. They seem to me to be writ large in this place and its work. Today, that is how it seems. Like many in this House, I imagine I will find out soon enough.

First things first in a first speech. I stand here alone, but I got here with much help. I would not be here without the immense support of my family, my friends, and members and supporters of the Australian Labor Party, and I thank all of them. I thank my mother, Phyllis—who is here in the chamber today—and my father, George, for giving me the values that led me here. Most of all, I thank my wife and partner in life, Deborah Chemke, and my wonderful children, Joe, Tom and Laura, for their love and support. I thank all those in the Labor Party and the union movement who supported me in seeking preselection, and I thank the many hundreds of party members and supporters who worked and worked and worked on our campaign throughout the last year. I cannot name all of the many people who have helped me become a member of this House, but let me put some of their names into Hansard, by way of grateful thanks.

I would like to thank Robert Ray, Bob Hawke, Rob Hulls, Michael Danby, Greg Combet, Koula Alexiadis, Roland Lindell, Fiona Richardson and Paul Haseloff for their guidance and support. I thank Roger Connell, Gladys Timson, Melanie Blewett, Russell Cole, Tony Falkingham, Steve Perryman, Graeme Malcolm, Loi Truong, Steve Michelson, Nick Gregory, Kathy Borgas, Tim Lisle-Williams and Youhorn Chea for their hard work and commitment. I thank my campaign manager, Alexandria Hicks, and the members of the Victorian parliament who hold seats overlapping Isaacs: Tim Holding, Jude Perera, Adem Somyurek, Evan Thornley, and particularly Jenny Lindell and Janice Munt.

I have the honour to represent the people of Isaacs—all of the 142,000 people who live in our electorate. Isaacs is in south-east Melbourne, taking in the beachside suburbs along Port Phillip Bay from Mentone and Cheltenham in the north to Carrum in the south. The electorate runs east to Noble Park and Dandenong South, and south to Carrum Downs. These are residential suburbs, but Isaacs also includes two of Australia’s most important centres of manufacturing industry, in Braeside and Dandenong South. These are centres of advanced industry with thousands of manufacturing enterprises making use of world-class technology and the skills of thousands of employees.

It is worth reflecting on the physical changes which have taken place in Isaacs in the last 160 years. These changes show the same pattern of development as in other large cities of Australia. Isaacs is the land of the Bunurong people. They moved with the seasons across the land, which provided all of their needs—particularly the Carrum Car-
rum swamp and the Mordialloc Creek, which were rich sources of food. Early settlement for pastoral and agricultural farming from the 1840s onwards brought large-scale clearing of native vegetation and draining of swamps. This was followed by small townships, at first connected by rough roads. By the late 19th century, railway lines ran along the bay and to Dandenong.

Through the 20th century, subdivisions spread to create the suburbs which cover most of the electorate. We can recognise from the distinct architecture of each area the years from which the suburb dates. There are still some small areas of remnant native vegetation, notably in the Edithvale-Seaford wetlands, and some green wedge areas in the centre of the electorate. But, in the short time since the first non-Indigenous people came to live in the area, much of it has physically changed beyond recognition.

The subdivisions provided housing for waves of immigrants. Many people came from the United Kingdom in the 1960s and 1970s to settle along the bay and in Noble Park. Other immigrants followed, from all over the world. I have seen the joy, the hope and the pride on the faces of new citizens at citizenship ceremonies. The City of Greater Dandenong, which is one of three municipalities in Isaacs, has people from more than 150 countries within its boundaries. More than half the population were born overseas. The communities of Noble Park, Keysborough, Springvale and Dandenong South are richly diverse, from the long-established groups to the recently arrived. New people are still arriving.

The suburbs that comprise Isaacs are a vivid example of Australia’s great success: the absorption of waves of immigrants into our multi-culture. I think this success is made greater by its ordinariness and its repetition. To say this is not to blind ourselves to the difficulties that can occur during the absorption process. A true representative of Isaacs must be alert to those difficulties and strive to ameliorate them. To my mind, the first and best resource for this work is tolerance.

Tolerance lies at the heart of our Australian multiculturalism. It is a vital democratic value. Tolerance of others—tolerance of different cultural and religious values and tolerance of different political positions—produces inclusiveness and not division. It enables harmonious communities and peaceful political debate. By and large, migrants to our country leave behind them old hatreds and prejudices. When they arrive, they acquire Australia’s under-stated style of tolerance of difference.

My own family story is a story of immigration, an ingredient in the story of most people in Isaacs and across our country. My grandmothers were both born in 1904, in places and times when neither would have comprehended the events that would connect their children in marriage, and see one of their grandchildren one day serve as a member of the Australian federal parliament.

My mother’s mother was born in Neerim South, in Gippsland, south-east of Melbourne, one of eight children of a sawmill worker who was the grandson of immigrants from England in 1842. My father’s mother was born in Wuppertal, Germany. Her father was in the clothing trade, prospering sufficiently to educate his daughter to fluency in English and French.

She married and, with the Nazis in power, she and my grandfather sent my father, then aged 11, and his older brother Richard to Australia. They arrived at Station Pier in Melbourne in July 1939. They were cared for in a home for Jewish children and they did not know if they would see their parents again. Their parents, my grandmother and
grandfather, managed to escape from Germany, arriving in Australia as stateless persons in December 1939. They had failed to convince their parents to leave. Three of my German great-grandparents perished in the Holocaust.

Australia provided a refuge to my father and his family, as it has to millions of others. My wife too is an immigrant, having come here from Chile with her family in 1972. There are many Australian stories like mine.

The electorate of Isaacs has been ably represented since 1980 by, in this order, David Charles, Rod Atkinson, Greg Wilton and Ann Corcoran. I hope to continue the tradition of public service that they established. For that work, I can draw from the example of my mother’s father who served Victoria faithfully in its Public Service for 51 years.

It is a source of pride to me to represent the electorate named for Isaac Isaacs, a truly great Australian and the first Australian born Governor-General. Isaacs was Chief Justice of the High Court from April 1930 to January 1931 and, for almost 25 years before that, a justice of the High Court. His biographer, Zelman Cowen—who himself became Governor-General—described him as ‘a master lawyer and one of the greatest judges of our federal history’. He was a member of the first federal parliament and federal Attorney-General, having earlier been a member of the Victorian Legislative Assembly, Attorney-General and Acting Premier of Victoria. He played a large role in the 1897-1898 Federal Convention that drafted our Constitution.

As a parliamentarian and as a judge, Isaacs spoke of the importance of this national parliament, referring to the parliament as ‘the sole interpreter of the national will’. Throughout his career, Isaacs advocated the need for national power, notably in his historic judgement in the 1920 Engineers’ case. And he had a keen sense of looking to the future, which he applied in his work on the nation’s constitutional court. In one decision he spoke of the ‘need to interpret the Constitution as a living instrument capable of fulfilling its high purpose of accompanying and aiding the national growth and progress of the people for whom it has been made’.

From this still unfamiliar seat in this just-beginning phase of life as a parliamentarian, three strands of my experiences on the way here seem likely to be influences on what I do here, both for my own sense of achievement and to facilitate the achievements of others. Those experiences relate to working for and with Indigenous Australians, loving the environment of this fragile and beautiful continent, and puzzling over the planning of our urban environments. Mostly, I became acquainted with these issues and their complexities through the eyes of a barrister, case by case by case. But I have also come to see these aspects of Australian life with a growing sense of the critical importance, to each of them, of the quality of the laws we make, the policy we shape and the administration we provide. I am here to contribute what I can to that.

I have worked in land-use planning for many years. Despite the scale of our continent, most Australians live in urban places. These are man-made environments which are shaped by need, by fashion, by commercial objectives and, most significantly, by governments. They decide on the location and scale of infrastructure and set controls on use, subdivision and built form. We need to work hard on the form of our cities to ensure that housing is kept affordable and that our cities remain pleasant places to live and are sustainable in the long term.

I have worked with and for Aboriginal people, particularly in the Northern Territory. As a young law graduate, I worked for the
then newly formed Northern Land Council in the top end of the Northern Territory. I worked more recently as part of the legal team for the stolen generation case decided in the Federal Court in 2000. It was a particular personal satisfaction to be present as a member of this House on its first business day to hear the motion of apology to Australia’s Indigenous peoples. It was a precise intersection of my professional life as a barrister and my new life as a parliamentarian. This was because one of the members of the stolen generation who I represented as counsel, Lorna Cubillo, was present on the floor of the House to hear the apology the Prime Minister offered last week. I look forward to speaking on the motion of apology.

Aboriginal people have taught me a great deal about the importance of family and, not least, about looking at the land. I wish every Australian could have the experiences I had as a young man of going bush with people who can read the land like a book as they pass through it.

The first time I went to Arnhem Land I was with a man from Oenpelli. He had a name for every place, a story for every place, and he could name every plant and animal. We camped in his country, on the bank of the East Alligator River, and he told me stories of his country. I remember the first rays of the sun warming the early chill of a dry season morning. I remember the glint of a kingfisher swooping over the water. I remember the dense bush all around, overlooked by tall grey-green eucalypts, the same shade as this chamber’s green, the green of a truly Australian parliament. It is in this truly Australian parliament that I hope one day to vote for a bill for an Australian republic.

We all now care about the environment. Environmental issues will be a major part of our political life. I think we can learn here too from Aboriginal people because Aboriginal people are the land and the land is them. Comprehending this asks non-Indigenous Australians to make an imaginative and empathetic leap. Once made, it enriches one’s own life and love of this land. We need to care for the land, to think of the land as our ‘country’, in the Aboriginal sense of the word, as a place to be cherished and nurtured. We need to live in the land in a way that will leave it improved on our passing and not depleted. It can only sustain us short term if we sustain it long term, for our children and our children’s children.

First speeches are full of hopes. I hope that on the day on which I last sit in this place I will be able to re-read this first speech and recognise its themes in what I will, by then, have done here.

Dr JENSEN (Tangney) (4.43 pm)—Now that this parliament has made the symbolic gesture of apologising to the stolen generation, we need to ensure that we do not simply fall back on failed policies and leave so many of our Indigenous community destitute and without hope. I am very concerned with what appears to be this government’s first policy move on this front—more houses. More houses in the wrong areas, particularly in remote communities, will achieve nothing. You will simply end up with abandoned or destroyed homes. The problem with the view of simply handing out necessities is that, for the person receiving these handouts, there is no feeling of ownership or pride or security. We need to find ways in which to move the inhabitants of these degrading, depressing communities to places where they have opportunities and where they are able to contribute to their own wellbeing and security. Ownership of a house, where you have put in effort and made sacrifices to own your own home, brings with it a sense of pride and achievement—a sense of worth and pride that is so often lacking in these remote communities. We have to make sure that we do
not simply move these people to the big smoke and into a situation where they continue to subsist on welfare with no hope for the future. We need to ensure that this movement is to places where there are genuine opportunities, training and acceptance.

A reintroduction of unfair dismissal laws across the board would mean less opportunity for the Aboriginal people who have resettled. I urge the government to cogitate on this and other unintended consequences that would result from abandoning individual workplace agreements and a reintroduction of unfair dismissal. In an era when we have nearly full employment and very strong economic conditions, it would be a travesty if we did not seize the moment to make the very significant, fundamental changes required to turn the tragic history of Aboriginal misfortune on its head.

The Labor government has all the state and territory governments of the same political flavour. There are no excuses for not making the fundamental, extremely challenging policy decisions that are required. I have to say that I am concerned with the government’s stated position of endorsing the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. Although this would once again have a symbolic feelgood aspect to it, it would create very significant problems. If you think that I exaggerate, consider that this document states that ‘Indigenous peoples and individuals have the right to belong to an indigenous community or nation’ and that states must give ‘due recognition to indigenous peoples’ laws’ et cetera. This is political correctness gone mad. What we will end up with is the same situation that we had in South Africa of independent tribal homelands. Does anyone in their right mind think that this would be a good thing? We rightly condemned South Africa for this behaviour, but in this Orwellian dialogue the same policy direction suddenly becomes a good thing.

The only way to move forward is to move forward as one nation, one people made up of many parts. Anything else is madness. The nation expects the government to deliver on improving the conditions and opportunities, and I will be one who watches this very closely.

Defence is an organisation that needs comprehensive reform. There are problems almost everywhere you look. Military justice is almost a contradiction in terms. Defence procurement needs to be comprehensively overhauled. Witness the numerous programs that are in severe trouble. In fact, a common refrain from Defence, when problems are highlighted, is to effectively say, ‘Yes, there was a problem six or 12 months ago or, indeed, two years ago, but that is no longer an issue; we have fixed it.’ Of course, in six or 12 months time you will hear the same argument about the problems of today. This is simply not good enough and, where you have the litany of major Defence acquisitions that have gone wrong, this can no longer be accepted.

Capability requirements and definitions are haphazardly and badly thought out. The fact that there has been no official analysis conducted into the best air combat capability for our future—and remember that this capability will cost about $1,500 for every man, woman and child in Australia—is a dreadful indictment, particularly when you have two analyses, one outside Defence and one unofficially carried out within Defence, both indicating that the current solution is not the optimal one. This issue has now become so politicised that any analyses or reviews must be carried out by organisations completely independent of Defence. A RAND Corporation analysis of this capability, for example, may be what is called for. An internal review would no doubt simply support the status quo, for the simple reason that it would pro-
tect those high-ranking officers associated with the various decisions.

The Defence Science and Technology Organisation, in my view, needs to have its funding independent of Defence for obvious reasons. It will then be able to conduct research that is done without fear or favour and, perhaps more importantly, be seen to be frank and fearless. I believe that the Australian National Audit Office needs to have more resources given to it so that, for major acquisitions, the project can be analysed and reviewed throughout its life, meaning through-life support upgrades and everything else, by people that are integrated with, but independent of, Defence.

The problems within Defence are so great that we need, in my personal view, an Aussie rules version of the Goldwater-Nichols Act that so comprehensively changed the face of the US military in the late 1980s. This was a recognition that the United States defence organisation, at the highest echelons, was broken. We need that recognition here. There is no doubt that Defence will vigorously resist any attempt at reform, just as did the US defence organisation. So this will require a strong will and, in my view, a bipartisan recognition that this is what is required.

The Labor governments in Australia rhetorically state that they are actively introducing policies to reduce greenhouse emissions. Their actions, however, tell another story. In October 2006, the Stern review was released to the acclamation of all of those on the other side who wanted to increase pressure on governments to legislate significant reductions in carbon dioxide emissions. The federal Labor Party quoted the Stern review constantly in attempting to pressure the then Howard government into ratifying Kyoto and setting short-, medium- and long-term targets for greenhouse gas reductions. No-one on the Labor side of politics questioned the Stern review, nor did they question the climate change science in peer-reviewed journals that ran counter to the official Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. Labor’s references to Stern, and the statements regarding the IPCC, were in glowing terms. On the Liberal side of politics there was significant questioning of both the Stern review and the science supporting anthropogenic climate change. This was highlighted in a parliamentary dissenting report that I co-authored last year. The report questioned both the premise of anthropogenic climate change and the Stern review. Some of the peer-reviewed science disagreeing with the IPCC position was quoted. The result of course was wide-ranging criticism in the media.

James Hansen, the main global warming scaremonger, and his group have had to re-vise their data on the US climate record that 2005 was the hottest year on record there. In fact, it was 1934. Four of the hottest 10 years in the US, from 1880 to the present, occurred in the 1930s, while only three of the hottest 10 years occurred in the last 10 years. Additionally, three of the four climate data centres indicate that 2007 is only between the fifth and the eighth hottest on record—Hansen’s group says second—and significantly below what IPCC models indicate should be the case. The fact that there is such a discrepancy in simply measuring the temperature should give cause for concern.

I have no doubt that all the anthropogenic global warming believers have heard about the melting Arctic sea ice, although interestingly we now hear Denmark’s Meteorological Institute state that the ice between Canada and south-west Greenland right now has reached its greatest extent in 15 years. To quote them:

Satellite pictures show that the ice expansion is extended further south this year. In fact, it is a bit past the Nuuk area. We have to go back 15 years to find ice expansion so far south. On the eastern
coast it hasn’t been colder than normal, but there has been a great amount of snow.

It also noted that the Arctic sea ice extent has now completely recovered. But, interestingly, how many have heard that the extent of Antarctic sea ice is the greatest measured since measurements began in 1979? It is very convenient for state governments, who have been utterly delinquent in building the required water infrastructure to support population growth, to blame climate change for water shortages. In fact, long-term Bureau of Meteorology data clearly shows that we have had no reduction in rainfall in Australia. There are obviously localised variations. The fact that the last dam in Sydney was built around 40 years ago shows how irresponsible state governments have been on the issue.

It has now been revealed that the Productivity Commission has cast significant doubts on the Stern review’s economic statements. The commission’s report examines the economic modelling done by Stern and indicates that Stern has exaggerated the cost of anthropogenic climate change action. Other sources, some of which are mentioned by the Productivity Commission, have similarly criticised Stern’s economic assessments and the scientific basis for his economic models.

The Labor government now appear to be committing to a reduction target of 20 per cent, or one-fifth, by 2020. It will be interesting to see how they believe they will be able to reach this target. According to ABARE, energy consumption will grow by 20 per cent compared with 2005-06 levels. About one-third of carbon dioxide emissions come from electricity generation and the other two-thirds from other sources. There is little that can be done about these other emissions, so essentially it all comes down to reduction of emissions from stationary power generation. This means that one-third of our current electricity generation will have to be replaced by completely non-emission-technology electricity generation and an even greater percentage if it is simply replacement of one high-emitting method of power generation with a lower emitting method—in addition to all new power stations being greenhouse emissions free.

Excluding nuclear energy will make the task far more difficult, given that according to ABARE only 8.1 per cent of electricity will be generated by near zero emission technology by 2020. What makes the task impossible is that Labor rhetoric sounds good to the ears of those who desperately want large cuts in greenhouse emissions. But, despite the rhetoric, Labor governments are commissioning new-build coal-fired power stations in New South Wales and Western Australia. This clearly demonstrates the ethical bankruptcy of their arguments.

The Liberal opposition has taken a pragmatic view of policy to deal with this issue. The major point is that maximum benefit can be obtained by supporting international efforts to reduce deforestation. The other issue in the policy is that the implications of any target set need to be comprehensively analysed and assessed before committing to any greenhouse reduction targets. In my view, policy to mitigate against the potential effects of anthropogenic global warming should be based on the simple premise that, in the case of the theory being incorrect, the policy measure adopted should have benefits other than greenhouse gas reductions. Reducing worldwide deforestation clearly fits this premise. Labor’s politically expedient measures do not.

We have asked many of our older constituents, the self-funded retirees, to save for their retirements so that they are not a burden on the taxpayer. It may be an unintended consequence, but the self-funded retirees are now being hit with a double whammy. They
now find that, due to the lack of provision of many entitlements given to pensioners, they are now actually worse off than pensioners. This policy needs to be redressed as a matter of urgency.

On education, there is now a rare opportunity to gain significant improvements in the education system, given this government’s vaunted position of being able to deal with the states in a cooperative manner. We currently have a crisis in education, where the age of teachers is increasing and fewer and fewer young people see teaching as a viable career option. Take my state of WA as a case in point: a teacher qualifies without any guarantee of employment. In the state system, a teacher cannot gain a permanent position until they have done eight consecutive years of teaching. Where does that leave these young teachers in terms of starting a family, buying a house and settling down? Teachers are professionals and we are not treating them as such. Is it any wonder that young people are choosing not to pursue teaching as a career? Worse than this is the fact that these young teachers can be told early in December the previous year where they will be teaching and then a week before commencing they are told they will be teaching somewhere entirely different.

Additionally, not only is teaching badly paid when consideration of qualifications is taken into account but also, in the case of annual contracts, young teachers only get paid from the beginning of the school year to the end of the school year. In other words, they have no Christmas break income. The federal and state governments need to come together to ensure that teachers at public schools are better paid, have continuity and certainty of employment and are treated as professionals. The Labor Party, when in opposition, criticised the Howard government over private schools. Quite frankly, if I were a new teacher I would choose the private system for a whole variety of reasons, including those mentioned. In addition to greater security and recognition as professionals, they also have more wherewithal at their disposal to discipline children.

Cancer is a blight on society and there is a fantastic treatment that has recently received TGA approval. This treatment is known as proton beam therapy and it can be used for prostate cancer, lung cancer, paediatrics and head and neck cancers. This is used as a substitute for radiotherapy. The advantage that this treatment offers is that it very specifically targets the tumour in three dimensions, and the surrounding tissue damage, which can be significant with radiotherapy, is minimised. The next step is to obtain Medicare approval, but there is a fair financial burden associated with this. As such, I am calling on the government to provide some assistance. I also appeal to any people in private industry who are willing to provide funding, as a facility will cost over $100 million to build.

For an advanced nation like Australia to not have such facilities when they are already in use in Europe, Japan and the US is shameful. At present our children need to go overseas to obtain treatment. This is provided under Medicare. Adults who access this technology overseas need to pay tens of thousands of dollars. This situation must be corrected. I urge anyone that can help to contact my office and I can put them in contact with Sue Bleasel, the Director of Proton Therapy Australia.

**The SPEAKER**—Order! Before I call the member for Franklin, I remind the House that this is the honourable member’s first speech. I ask the House to extend to her the usual courtesies.

**Ms COLLINS** (Franklin) (5.03 pm)—Thank you, Mr Speaker. May I begin by adding my congratulations to those of others on your elevation to office. Can I say what a
pleasure it is to be in this place today giving my first speech. I am proud and honoured that the people of the wonderful electorate of Franklin have put their faith in me by giving me the privilege of representing them. Since 1903, the people of Franklin have elected only 12 members to represent them in this place. The members elected have been from both sides of politics. With an average term of almost 9½ years, it shows that the people in Franklin will reward hardworking members. I look forward to their judgement on my performance in three years time. Some of the former members include the late Ray Sherry—the father of current Labor senator and minister Nick Sherry—Bruce Goodluck, who was the member for almost 18 years and who became infamous for wearing that chicken suit; and the retiring member at the last election, Harry Quick. Harry is well known both in Tasmania and nationally for his outspoken views. He is well liked by the people in Franklin and he has worked hard to represent them over many years.

As it has been some time since a new member for Franklin has been elected, I seek the House’s indulgence to talk a little about the electorate. Franklin is a large outer metropolitan electorate in southern Tasmania. It comprises: most of the city of Clarence, colloquially known as Hobart’s ‘eastern shore’, bordering the beautiful Derwent River; the Kingborough and Huon municipalities to the south of Hobart, taking in the fast-growing areas of Kingston and Blackmans Bay, together with the Channel, Huon Valley and Bruny Island; part of the Brighton municipality, to the north of Hobart, with Bridgewater and Gagebrook suburbs.

Franklin also has some amazing wilderness and areas of natural beauty. It boasts Port Davey and Bathurst Harbour within the Southwest National Park, part of the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage area, the Hartz Mountains National Park and Recherche Bay, together with Macquarie Island. The electorate has some extremely diverse demographics. Statistically, it contains Tasmania’s poorest suburb but also the wealthiest. The majority of its population is urban based but it has some very remote communities. Its main industries include fruits—apples, which of course Tasmania has been famous for, pears, cherries and berries—aquaculture, with salmon farms and processing plants, forestry and timber milling, boat building and increasing tourism.

The people of Franklin are proud and strong. They have faced disasters in their recent history that have brought them together as a community. This February saw the 41st year since the 1967 Black Tuesday bushfires which devastated the Kingborough and Huon regions. Many small towns lost many buildings—like Snug, which lost 80 of its 120 buildings. Many families, including that of my own father, lost everything they owned. And I cannot forget that 62 Tasmanians died in those fires. It was a terrible time. Yet the efforts of the firefighters and the many untrained volunteers protected numerous properties and saved many lives. The experience has led to many improvements in emergency preparation and response.

Many residents of the city of Clarence will recall the fatal collapse of the Tasman Bridge on 5 January 1975. Its impact was immediately felt, with Hobart suddenly cut in two. With most hospitals, schools, businesses and government offices located on the western shore, residents on Hobart’s eastern shore were significantly compromised. Within an hour of the bridge collapse, a ferry service was up and running. It ran throughout the night. By the next day, three private ferries and a government vessel were already in operation. A temporary bridge—Bailey bridge, as it was known—was constructed before the end of that year and the Tasman Bridge was repaired and reopened by 1977.
These people showed their resilience, their courage and their determination in those difficult times. These ordinary people were dealing with extraordinary circumstances and they achieved remarkable things. When facing adversity these people prevailed as a community that worked together.

During the election campaign last year, I spoke with many people on doorsteps and in shopping centres. The resounding message I heard was that people no longer trusted the Howard government; that they thought Kevin Rudd and the Labor team had something to offer. People were perplexed that the economic growth and the so-called 'good times' had not really made their lives all that much better. If it was all going so great then why were health and education still underfunded? Why couldn't their aunt, uncle, sister or cousin get the operation that they needed to get better? I am proud that this Labor government has already begun work to cut surgery waiting lists.

Another issue concerning the people in Franklin was the Work Choices legislation. During my visits around the electorate I met people directly affected by Work Choices. There was a man who had been working for a company for 15 years. He was told to sign an AWA or not have a job. He signed the AWA and was then retrenched a couple of months later, with no long service leave or redundancy payment. He was angry and hurt.

Many of those not directly affected by Work Choices held a real fear, not for themselves but for their children and grandchildren. They were worried that it would be more difficult to get a fair go, particularly if you were young and entering the workforce for the first time. The working families in Franklin were concerned about increasing rents and mortgages. Housing affordability is in decline, with Hobart being Australia’s third least affordable city, after Sydney and Perth. The people of Franklin seemed ready for a change of government, and I am so very pleased that they actually did vote for a change of government on polling day.

One of my first tasks, as a member of this government, is to help deliver all of Labor’s commitments to the electorate. During the election campaign, the Labor Party made many significant commitments to Franklin, including $15 million to fund the Kingston bypass on the Channel Highway, in conjunction with the state government; $12 million for the Huon Valley water scheme; $10.5 million for a water recycling and irrigation project on the eastern shore; a GP superclinic in Bellerive; $166,000 for a tourism environmental audit in the Huon Valley; $141,000 for the redevelopment of the Dennes Point Community Centre on Bruny Island; and several minor recreational and sporting facilities grants.

The Kingston bypass has been on the drawing board for many years, and there was a commitment by the state Labor government at the 2006 election to fund half the project. This infrastructure is vital to the local communities south of Hobart. It is a very fast growing area and it has recorded 35 per cent of Tasmania’s population growth in recent years. For the many people living south of Kingston and for the master planning currently underway in Kingston town, it is of the utmost importance that this project be completed as quickly as possible.

The two water infrastructure projects are significant and strategic. Both provide positive economic and environmental outcomes for their communities. In the Huon Valley, the water scheme will provide residents, who live only 40 minutes from Hobart, with tap water they can actually drink. Many of them are currently on ‘boil water’ alerts. There is also a critical time frame on the implementation of this project, as new aquaculture in-
vestments depend heavily on water and cannot proceed without this infrastructure. The project will also assist environmental flows in many small rivulets that are currently being run dry.

The other substantial water project is on Hobart’s eastern shore. It will increase the capacity of the Clarence recycled water scheme, which utilises treated effluent to assist in irrigation within the region. The water that will be reused is currently being released into the Derwent River estuary.

The electors of Franklin are pleased, for the first time in many elections, to have been provided with funding for vital, strategic and economically sustainable projects that will provide opportunities for community development. The reason I make special note of this is that many people in southern Tasmania have told me that they have felt for many years that the majority of infrastructure funding was being directed to the marginal seats of Northern Tasmania. I am looking forward to being able to make some announcements in the Franklin electorate very soon.

Another infrastructure project which will vastly improve services in Franklin is broadband. In the announcement by the Prime Minister and Telstra recently, I was pleased to see that an exchange in my electorate will be receiving an upgrade to ADSL2+. I have already received many calls from people currently not able to access broadband at all, let alone at a reasonable speed. They are all looking forward to Labor’s fast broadband.

These are just a few things which will make a difference in Franklin—things that are or will be different because Australia has a new government, a Labor government. It is a real privilege to be here as a new member of this first federal Labor government in 11 years.

My belief in the values that underpin the Labor Party and my desire to change the way in which the world works stem from my early experiences. My father died in tragic circumstances when I was five months old, leaving my mother a widow at just 19. We moved in with Mum’s parents. My mother, Anne Peters, was from a large family. She is one of 11 children. My nan and pop, Hazel and Fred Peters, lived in their nine-square, three-bedroom weatherboard housing commission home near the railway and the soccer and footy fields.

Pop was a railway worker and vice-president of the local footy club. He was well known and respected in his local community. He certainly fought hard to provide for his family and did all he could for them all his life. Even though he had very little, he sponsored two World Vision children from mum’s earliest memory until he died. He taught me a lot and was, to me, the main male role model in my childhood. I learned from him that life is not always fair; that luck of birth means we are not all equal. He taught me to be generous and compassionate and to see things from other people’s points of view. He was a very forgiving man who always saw the best in people, no matter their faults. He taught me tolerance—to be lenient when assessing others and their actions.

It was not long before my mother remarried, and I was adopted by her husband, Andrew Collins. We moved into the broadacre public housing estate of Bridgewater. While we were relatively poor, both parents worked, commuting into Hobart for their jobs, trying to save money to buy their own home. We were an ordinary working family, like many others in the area. Families like ours were determined to give their children every opportunity for a happy and secure future. They worked hard and forfeited many things to pursue this aim. I recall vividly some neighbours and friends who struggled to put food on the table, to clothe and educate their children and to pay for health
costs. These decent people worked hard and sacrificed so much, and the inequality of it all remains with me today. When I was about 10, my parents purchased a home closer to town. But this was not to last. Within 12 months, difficult circumstances hit us again and the house was sold out from under us. So we moved back in with nan and pop.

My nan and pop, my mum and my adoptive father taught me the value of hard work. Hard work is a way to get ahead, although on its own it is not always enough. Without an education and without the skills to establish relationships, life is still tough. These four people formed my values of love and respect. They provided me with the freedom to make my own decisions, while setting clear boundaries to ensure my protection and security. Within these boundaries, I knew that I could do whatever I wanted and that they would love me, no matter what.

While living with my nan and pop, I attended the nearest high school, Cosgrove High School. It was during these years I got my first job, at 14 years of age, working on Thursday and Friday nights and Saturday mornings at the local supermarket. In this job I joined a union for the first time. I have been a member of a union ever since. After completing year 10 at the age of 15 I enrolled in year 11 at the nearest college. At the orientation day it became obvious that I could not afford to stay at school. It was just going to cost too much. So after much previrication I did what I had to do and reluctantly I gave up my education and went and got a full-time job. Looking back at my experiences I came to realise that access to education and information was just as big a barrier to equality as being poor was. As a member of this place I will work to ensure that all people have access to a quality education—that the barriers are removed and that quality education remains a right and not a privilege. These barriers are more than just economic.

Access to different experiences is also vital, as is providing support services enabling families and children to have choices—real choices—about their own future.

The election of 1987 marked the end of an era in Tasmania. It saw the historic return of a Labor member from Tasmania to this place after a 12-year period of none. I remember it well because it was just after this election that I saw an advertisement from the local ALP seeking a trainee. I applied for the position and was surprised and excited to learn that I had been successful. It was in this job that I met my great friend Carol Brown. Carol and I got along well from the outset. We both came from good working-class stock, we both had empathy for people doing it tough and we quickly learnt that we had similar goals and values. And so began my involvement in the great Australian Labor Party. It has been, and I hope will continue to be, a great avenue by which to pursue the goal of equality. During my whole working life I have pursued this goal. Until recently it was from behind the scenes. I have been very fortunate to have worked with some very talented people, including two former senators, John Coates and Sue Mackay, and two former Premiers of Tasmania, Michael Field and the late Jim Bacon. All of these people have different talents and values. I have learnt a lot from them. I hope I have taken on board the best of their experiences and advice. It was also during this time that I had my three children and returned to part-time study to further my education.

While I have spent more than 20 years working in both the private sector and the public sector, it was when I was approached by the Tasmanian Labor Party to run as a candidate in the 2006 state election that I decided public life and representing people might be a better way by which I could further pursue the goal of equality. I had worked on every state and federal campaign since
1987 and I thought I had seen it all. But it was a very different experience as a candidate and it was during the 2006 state election that my faith in human beings was confirmed. The many conversations I had reinforced my strong belief that most people are inherently good, that they do care about others and that they will make decisions to support and assist others.

I am making history as I stand here today—as the first woman ever to be elected to represent the people of Franklin in federal parliament. And I am proud to be here today as part of a government that has a female Deputy Prime Minister. I congratulate the Deputy Prime Minister on her well-deserved position—as we know, women have traditionally been underrepresented in senior roles in both government and business. The recent election saw 42 new members elected to this place, 11 of whom are women—10 of us from this side of the House. More women are being preselected and elected but there is still some way to go. As an illustration of this, when out doorknocking during the campaign, I had many well-intentioned people ask me how I could possibly do the job as their elected representative while being a mother of three young children. I expect that if I was a man and a father of three then I would not have been asked the question at all. My response was always that I have been a working parent for 14 years and that it would be sad indeed to think that just because I was a parent who also happened to be a woman I could not be a member of federal parliament. I truly believe that parliament should be representative of the people, and it cannot be that without women, including mothers.

I would not be here today without the help and support of so many people. Whilst it is not possible to name them all, I do want to try and acknowledge a few. I want to thank my nan, who turns 93 next week; my mum, who did her best to provide for me in very difficult circumstances; and my brothers, Stewart and Wal, and my sister-in-law, Robyn, who have all helped and supported me. I also want to thank Carol Brown, my dear friend—as I mentioned before—for over 20 years now. I have learnt much from her in our long friendship. I want to thank David Price, the former state secretary of the Tasmanian ALP branch, for his advice and support and for listening to me; Lin Thorp, my campaign manager, who I thank for never losing patience with my ever-worsening case of candidate-itis; my friend Mary Massina for always being there if I needed a friend and also for her great sense of style; my wonderful and successful campaign team, Tom, Maggie, Stu, Julie D, Kacee, Mary Mc, Sharon, and Catryna Bilyk; and the unions and union members who assisted on my campaign. I thank them all most sincerely for their hard work. Their monumental effort of getting a campaign off the ground at breakneck speed was remarkable. I thank the army of door knockers and the volunteers. I also want to acknowledge the contribution of the former candidate for Franklin, Kevin Harkins. Kevin made a very tough and brave decision to stand down as the Labor candidate. As a result, my candidature was quite sudden and unexpected. It was a very big decision in a short space of time that my family and I had to make. It was not taken lightly and I want to thank my husband, Ian, and my children, Georgie, Lochie and Andy, for supporting me throughout. My family have made many sacrifices due to my continuing role in public life. I expect they will make many more and I thank them sincerely for their belief in me and their understanding.

In closing, I want to assure the people of Franklin that I, as part of the Rudd Labor government, will not let them down. I will work hard to put their position to govern-
ment. I will be accessible. I will listen to their concerns, their gripes, their needs and their advice. Men and women of Australia have placed a great trust in us all and we must work together to make life better for them. I want people to think back to 2007 as the year that things changed for the better. I want my children and the next generation to be proud of the role we have played in making this great country greater.

The SPEAKER—Order! Before I call Mr Coulton, I remind honourable members that this is his first speech. I therefore ask that the usual courtesies be extended to him.

Mr COULTON (Parkes) (5.22 pm)—Almost a week has passed since I took my seat in this House, and the learning curve has been steep. So far, the highlight has been the first speeches of my fellow members of the class of 2007. I feel very humble to be part of such a diverse and talented group of people. I am honoured to have been elected as one of Australia’s decision makers but regret that most Australian people are not encouraged to understand our Westminster system of parliament. I believe that the presidential style of today’s politics does this country no favours. There is often greater importance placed on fluffy symbolism and 30-second news grabs than on the hard work of the 150 men and women who sit in this House.

We are all a product of our upbringing, environment and experiences but, regardless of where we sit in this House, we have all come here with the best of intentions. Apart from the six enjoyable years I spent at the Farrer Agricultural High School in Tamworth, I have lived in the Warialda and Gravesend districts all my life. My family have been involved in farming for generations and, for as long as I can remember, I always wanted to be a farmer. Indeed, I was 10 years old when I did my first full day of tractor driving. I was raised to appreciate the value of hard work and the benefits of helping each other not just within our family but within our community.

At this point, I would like to acknowledge my family. My father, Jack, has always been a dominant figure. His fierce determination has seen him succeed in life despite receiving only a few years of formal education. A man of great presence and strength, he is now 86 and battling the demons of old age and ill health. My mother, Nancy, was the most influential person in my early years. She believed that there was goodness in all people and a positive side to every situation. She passed away seven years ago, after an 18-month battle with cancer. It is my one regret that my parents are not here today. To my sisters, Viv and Joy, and my brothers, John and Bob, and their families, thank you for your support and friendship. I am so pleased that some of you, as well as some members of my extended family, could be here today to share in this occasion.

There have been two defining events in my life, and the New South Wales government has been responsible for both of them. The first was when they ignored the request of Robyn Redford, a very pretty young teacher from Western Sydney, to be sent to the South Coast of New South Wales and assigned her instead to the small primary school near my family’s farm at Gravesend. Robyn and I married 26½ years ago. Her intelligence, support, loyalty and tremendous capacity for hard work have been my inspiration. The high standard that she set for herself as a wife, mother, teacher and political campaigner is the main reason I am here today.

We have been blessed with three happy, healthy children. Claire is an English and History teacher, currently working at Newcastle High School. She has a kind and giving nature, is intensely loyal and has a great
enthusiasm for life and a passion for teaching. Sally is in the final year of a degree in medicine at Newcastle University. She has shown a single-minded determination and sacrificed much to achieve her goal. Being both caring and practical, Sally will be a fine doctor and hopefully will become part of the solution to the shortage of doctors in rural Australia. Our son, Matthew, having just completed his Higher School Certificate, is working at an outdoor adventure camp in England for a year before commencing study at university. Robyn and I were very proud to attend Government House in Sydney twice in one week last November. On the first occasion, Matthew was awarded a Duke of Edinburgh Gold Award. On the second occasion, he was awarded an Order of Australia commendation and medal for community service. We know that he has much to give to society in the future.

The second defining moment that changed the course of my life was when the New South Wales government decided to structurally reform local government in 2003. The reform process led to the creation of the Gwydir Shire Council. This council covers nearly 10,000 square kilometres, has a population of 6,000 and includes three former local government areas. Despite having no former experience in local government, I found myself the inaugural Mayor of Gwydir Shire in September 2004. Up until this point in my life, I had believed my future lay in agriculture. My involvement with the Gwydir Shire Council took me in a new direction.

Contrary to the dire predictions of many, Gwydir Shire Council has been an amazing success. In its first year it was awarded the AR Bluett Memorial Award for excellence in local government. In the following year it received the New South Wales Training Initiative Award as a partner in the Gwydir Learning Region. In four years the value of real estate has risen from a very low base to being identified as one of the top performing regions for investment in New South Wales. I would like to recognise my friends from the Gwydir Shire, who are in the gallery today, and thank them for showing me what good government is all about.

In regional areas, local government is under increasing pressure. It has become the primary vehicle for the delivery of services. Councils across regional Australia have risen to the challenge to meet the needs of their communities and are not only providing the traditional services of roads, rates and rubbish but now involved in health, child care, social work, education and aged care. They are doing a magnificent job but are grossly underfunded. I firmly support a more equitable method for funding regional local government.

Although I had been involved with the Nationals for a number of years, my desire to seek election as a political representative intensified in 2006, when the Australian Electoral Commission proposed a redistribution which, if it had gone ahead, would have seen 47 per cent of New South Wales lumped into one electorate. That proposal was ultimately defeated as a result of the protests of people of all political persuasions for whom good representation was vitally important. The new electorate of Parkes was formed. It covers an area of 107,000 square kilometres and stretches from the central west of New South Wales to the Queensland border, moving from the bustling regional city of Dubbo, in the south, to the picturesque village of Toomelah, in the north, and from the unique Lightning Ridge, in the west, to places like Bylong and my home town of Warialda, in the east.

The seat is named after the father of Federation, Sir Henry Parkes, and largely replaces the abolished Federation seat of Gwydir. While it is very much like Gwydir, it also
now contains Dubbo, which is both new to the rest of the electorate and also its largest centre. Following my preselection early in 2007, many people in Dubbo worked tirelessly to boost my profile, quite a challenge given that I lived at the opposite end of the electorate. I would like to express my gratitude to the Hon. John Cobb, the previous member for Parkes and now the member for Calare, for his insight and support. I would also not have been successful without the help of Pauline McAllister and Peter Bartley, among so many others.

In the north of the electorate, Peter Taylor from Moree and Hugh Coulton and many of my friends from Warialda must be recognised for their enthusiastic support and their leadership of others. I cannot thank Parkes Electorate Council Chairman Ruth Strang enough for her help, deep commitment and never-wavering dedication and loyalty. It would be impossible for me to acknowledge here the many campaign workers I was fortunate to have on side, but I cannot let this occasion pass without placing on record my appreciation to Angela, Sarah, Kellie, Felicity and Kerry. To my Nationals colleagues, particularly honourable members Mark Vaile, Kay Hull and Peter McGauran and senators Fiona Nash and Nigel Scullion, as well as the former Treasurer, the Hon. Peter Costello: thank you for the time, assistance and advice you gave me in my electorate during the campaign. It was invaluable.

I would like to pay tribute to my predecessor, the former member for Gwydir, the Hon. John Anderson. John represented the people of Gwydir in this place for over 19 years, rising to be Leader of the Nationals and Deputy Prime Minister. John was a key player in the team that was arguably the most successful government that this country has ever seen. His contribution to his electorate, his country and this chamber is well known and is without parallel. John was inspirational to me, both during his many years as my local member and then recently as my campaign director. I would like to wish John well in his future endeavours. I am sure this country has not heard the last of the former member for Gwydir.

I am here today because I have a deep and unshakable belief in the future of inland Australia. In my electorate of Parkes there are strong and vibrant communities, both large and small. They are fiercely independent and are very proud of their heritage. Despite the effects of years of drought they are optimistic about their future.

Lack of infrastructure is a major impediment to our development. There are two projects that are essential to ensure continued progress in my electorate. They are the construction of an expressway over the Blue Mountains and the Melbourne-to-Brisbane rail line. It is a disgrace that in the 21st century the main connection between Sydney and western New South Wales was built nearly 200 years ago by convicts. A new expressway would not only be an advantage to the people west of the mountains but act as a relief valve for Western Sydney.

The Roads to Recovery program, instigated by my predecessor, the Hon. John Anderson, has been a real boon to regional roads in Australia. However, despite this unprecedented amount of investment, parts of my electorate remain severely hamstrung by a rural road network that has not improved since the days of horse and buggy. I firmly believe that the productivity of an area should be a major consideration when allocating road funding. I intend to drive this concept forward at every opportunity.

The development of rail in general and the construction of the Melbourne-to-Brisbane line in particular must happen. Road transport alone will not be able to cope with the predicted doubling of the freight task by
One double-stacked container train would take 276 trucks off the road, save 100,000 litres of fuel and prevent thousands of tonnes of greenhouse gas from entering the atmosphere on a journey from Brisbane to Melbourne.

The proposed rail line would dissect the Parkes electorate and would place it at the transport crossroads of Australia. I was alarmed to hear last week that the government is intending to delay this worthwhile project. While it may well end up being funded and managed by private enterprise, it will not happen without the will of the government. I will use my position in this House to work tirelessly to advance this project.

The way society reacts to the issue of climate change will impact greatly on regional Australia. As our country grapples with the extent and effects of climate change, we must remember that agriculture is the cure, not the disease. Farmers have been adapting to the variables of the Australian climate for many years. The adoption of advanced farming techniques, such as zero-till methods of crop production, best-practice management in the irrigation industry and advanced pasture management techniques in the livestock industry, have allowed our farmers to maximise production while caring for the environment. This evolution of agricultural practices has greatly increased the level of carbon sequestered in the farming process. Australian farmers are now producing more food and fibre with fewer inputs of fuel and water than ever before.

Ill-considered environmental policy can have a devastating effect on a region. The decision several years ago to lock up 350,000 hectares of forest in the South Brigalow bioregion has turned a vibrant living forest sustaining a population of flora and fauna into a wasteland. The cessation of the logging which had been operating sustainably in the forest for over 100 years decimated several towns in the area. To add insult to injury, the mismanagement of the forest allowed thousands of hectares to be destroyed by fire. So now we have no forest and no community, not to mention the thousands of tonnes of carbon that were spewed into the atmosphere during the fires. Government policy needs to be based on scientific assessment, not emotional or political doctrine.

As I campaigned throughout my electorate last year, the issue of health was—and remains—the major concern. In regional and rural areas the problems in health care are multiplied. I intend to lobby constantly for increased access to adequate health services for all residents, and I firmly believe that this cause will be advanced if we remain positive in the way that we portray and demonstrate the enormous benefits of living in rural Australia.

In order to fulfil its great potential, the electorate of Parkes will need to grow its population. We are desperately short of suitably trained workers, from doctors and nurses to skilled tradespeople. Country people can be notoriously bad at promoting the positives of their region. While it is the role of a local member to be aware of the issues that are of concern to the electorate and to work to overcome them, I also believe that it is the role of elected representatives of all levels of government to be champions for their constituents. The greatest gift a government can give its people is confidence: confidence that they have a future, confidence that the government will support them in their best endeavours and confidence that the government will look after them when times are tough. Fear is a weapon that is used too freely in this place.

The greatest tool of empowerment and builder of confidence is education. My ex-
experience as Chairman of the Gwydir Learning Region opened my eyes to how a community changes when it values education. The provision of educational opportunities that are relevant for individual communities must be a priority. Education is the common denominator in most of the issues that confront my electorate. Whether it is the shortage of health professionals, the lack of skilled tradespeople, the antisocial behaviour of our teenagers or poor nutrition in young children, education can provide a solution. Education should be the basis for restoring dignity within our Aboriginal communities and should be tailored to the needs of individuals. With the cooperation of all providers of education and local communities, real progress can be made to provide opportunities for those who need it most.

It is in the interest of this nation to focus on stimulating growth in regional Australia. The reasons people once had for congregating in cities are largely irrelevant in the 21st century. The improvement in telecommunications in recent years has removed one of the last barriers to doing business in the bush. The availability of land, the affordability of housing and the security of living in a caring community are all compelling reasons to relocate. The supply of abundant natural resources such as coal and natural gas, the emerging importance of alternative fuel supplies like ethanol and solar power and the bullish outlook for agricultural commodities will attract industry to our area and will underpin our region’s economy for years to come.

I come to this place as a proud member of the Nationals. My introduction to parliamentary life has been made much easier by the support and guidance given to me since the election by my leader, the Hon. Warren Truss, and my other Nationals colleagues. The Nationals have a strong history in the Australian parliament and I am determined to play my part in carrying that tradition into the future. I have arrived at this point in my life as a result of my personal beliefs, the influence of my family, my farming business background, my community involvement and my experience in local government. Even though the electorate of Parkes is considered a rural seat, more than 80 per cent of the people are not directly involved in agriculture. The majority of my constituents live in the many towns and villages spread across the electorate. These people have ignored the doomsayers who have predicted the demise of rural Australia and are fighting back. They, like me, believe our best years are ahead.

I would like to thank the people of the Parkes electorate for the confidence they have shown in me. I bring the hopes and dreams of these wonderful people into this House for inspiration and motivation as I commence my work in the Australian parliament.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Hon. BC Scott)—Order! Before I call the honourable member for Blaxland, I remind honourable members that this is his first speech. I therefore ask that the usual courtesies be extended to him.

Mr CLARE (Blaxland) (5.40 pm)—On 27 December 1941, Prime Minister John Curtin issued a clarion call to the nation. In our darkest hour and with the looming threat of invasion, he called on a generation to steel its resolve and make ready the defence of Australia. Curtin’s call reached a young man from Australia Street, Camperdown, Sydney—a young man who had just turned 18. Eight days later he joined the Australian Army. Not old enough to vote in 1941 but old enough to know his country needed him, old enough to be part of the first army to defeat the Japanese at Milne Bay, old enough to be torn open by mortar fire. His name was
Jack Clare and he was my grandfather. On the other side of the world, my other grandfather was a prisoner of war. Athol Neate was captured in the doomed defence of Crete and spent the next 2½ years in Stalag 18A in Wolfsberg, Austria.

I tell their stories because their names deserve a place on the national public record. They were men of courage and fortitude, like their generation and like their Prime Minister. And, while the challenges that face us today are very different, meeting them will require the same determination and national resolve. They require us to harness the skills of the Australian people and their readiness to serve. The noblest thing that we can do is serve our country. Australia knew that in 1941, and Australians know it today.

Whether we are teaching the young or caring for the old, fighting the fires of the Australian bush or fighting for the rights of others, our service matters. This place, this parliament, is also about service. Many outside here do not believe that, but they want to, and so do I.

In June 1966, under the shadow of apartheid, Robert Kennedy left this message with a group of young South African students:

It is from numberless diverse acts of courage and belief that human history is shaped. Each time a man stands up for an ideal, or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against injustice, he sends forth a tiny ripple of hope ... It is a message that is just as relevant today as it was then. People of courage and belief can make a difference. It is this faith that will drive my public service. And it explains what happened to Australia on 24 November last year, when a ripple of hope washed away the politics of division and fear.

Thank you to my new colleagues who carried this message to the Australian people, thank you to those who carried the torch through the darkness of over a decade in opposition and thank you to my friends in this place—the members for Prospect, Watson, Fowler, Banks and Reid—for your wise counsel and advice. To these I add the state members for Toongabbie, Cabramatta, Fairfield, Auburn and East Hills; former Premiers of New South Wales Bob Carr and Neville Wran; Senator-elect Mark Arbib; and New South Wales ALP General Secretary Karl Bitar. I owe a special debt of gratitude to my campaign director, Tony Stewart, the state member for Bankstown; to my campaign team—amongst them, Brian and Elizabeth Langton, John McLaughlin, Jim Bakopanos and Myra Pengilly; to my amazing staff, Ingrid, Chris and Sally; and to my partner, Davina, the sunshine of my life.

An even greater debt is owed to my local branch members. They are the backbone of the Labor Party, and I thank every single one of them. They do not seek glory or recognition. They know that when you change the government you change the country, and they are the change-makers. It is because of them, and people like them across the country, that I stand on this side of the House today. Last week we saw how much we have already changed when a Prime Minister had the courage and the decency to say one simple but important word, to apologise to the stolen generations and to send forth a tiny ripple of hope. Today this country is a little better, and we all stand a little taller because he did. His actions give proof to the words of Robert Kennedy.

Most importantly, I thank the people of Blaxland for the support and trust that they have placed in me. Their faith in the Australian Labor Party has never wavered, and I am determined to be worthy of this precious trust. It is a great responsibility to be elected to the Australian parliament and an even greater privilege to serve the people I grew up with—my friends and neighbours, my old school mates and team mates. Blaxland is
where mum and dad built a home and raised a family. They still live in the same house today. It is where mum works at my old high school, helping generations of Blaxland kids grow up, and it is where dad works with many others in the manufacturing industry. Sitting in the gallery, they are the proudest parents in Australia, and I am a most grateful son. To mum and dad, I bring to this place the values you have taught me: the importance of doing what is right, helping others and getting involved in the local community. On the sporting field and in the classroom, they always encouraged me to do my best, and they taught me the harder you work, the luckier you get. Also in the gallery is my high school history teacher, Peter Valent. Peter brought the stories of John Curtin and Robert Kennedy to life, and he awoke in me the possibility of public service to improve the lives of others. He is now a school principal and is still inspiring young people in Blaxland.

I was the first in my family to go to university. The Australia that existed before Gough Whitlam did not give my parents the same opportunity. I studied law to help people. I quickly realised the best way to do this was not by arguing the law but by changing it. Bob Carr gave me that opportunity, and that is what we did. We changed the criminal law working with police and victims of crime. It was an honour to work for a man with such passion for public service. Each morning he would say to us, ‘What can we do to help someone today?’ He was a leader in the Labor tradition—a tradition and a party that believes in reward for effort, help for the needy and opportunity for all. It is a party whose commitment to a strong economy is matched by its commitment to a fair society.

Australians care about fairness. We argue about it in our pubs and clubs, around the barbecue and here in this chamber. It is in the title of our national anthem. It is the great barometer by which we judge things. It is part of our history. In November 1907, Justice Henry Bournes Higgins handed down the Harvester decision. This infused the concept of fairness into our industrial relations system. That was November 1907. In November 2007—100 years later almost to the day—the Australian people reaffirmed their commitment to fairness and threw out a government that had whittled it away. I am fortunate for many reasons but, above all, I am fortunate to be part of a Labor government, a government that will put fairness back into the lexicon of this parliament, a government that will put fairness back into the workplaces of this nation and a government that will put fairness back into the pay packets of working people—people like those who live in Blaxland.

Blaxland was created in 1949, in the early years of the postwar boom, when men like my grandfather staked their claim in the new housing estates of Western Sydney. Since that time there have been only three members for Blaxland—Eli Harrison, Paul Keating and Michael Hatton. I pay tribute to their contributions and place on record my sincere appreciation to Michael for his support and advice. All served the people of Blaxland with distinction. Paul Keating’s service went well beyond the boundaries of just one seat. He rendered the Australian economy competitive and prepared it for the 21st century. It took courage to float the dollar and vision to introduce reforms like compulsory superannuation. He also had a bold vision of Australia and our place in the world—strong and independent, engaged with Asia and reconciled with Indigenous Australia. It is a vision whose time has come.

Blaxland is an important part of the great Australian story. The traditional custodians of the land are the Dharug, Dharawal and Eora people. Rock paintings dating back
3,000 years can still be found along the Georges River. Matthew Flinders was the first European to explore and chart its waterways. Almost 100 years later Sir Henry Parkes settled on its banks. They are two men whose public service helped shape a nation. One gave Australia its name and the other inspired its Federation.

In the years between Flinders and Parkes, bushrangers plied their trade along Dog Trap Road and convicts built the historic Lansdowne Bridge. When the railway came to town 100 years ago, it brought with it a land boom. Paddocks were subdivided and suburbs were born. After the Second World War, when Australia opened its arms to the people of the world, many settled here. Blaxland is now one of the most culturally diverse places in Australia. Working people from 130 different countries, speaking more than 60 different languages, call it home. It is a place of churches, mosques and temples, where different languages grace our shops and where our homes welcome everyone, no matter where they were born, how they worship or what language they speak. This is where the new Australia is being forged—a courageous, cosmopolitan, cohesive Australia, where being Australian is not about where you come from but about where you are going.

It is a place famous for its sporting heroes, people like Steve Waugh, Jon Konrads, Lenny Pascoe and Jeff Thomson, and a place brimming with unsung heroes, people like Jihad Dib, the Principal of Punchbowl Boys High School—a place that was threatened with closure four years ago because violence and disruption were so bad parents stopped sending their kids there. The school was failing. But, under his leadership, a lot of hard work has turned that around. This year’s year 7 is the biggest in 13 years. Enrolments have sprung up by 35 per cent in the last two years. And literacy improvements are 3½ times the state average.

Another local hero is Mark Newey. Mark is a real estate agent. Last year he helped eight families fend off a bank that wanted to throw them out on the street when the owner of the block of units defaulted on his mortgage. Mark fought for these people and convinced the bank to let them stay in their homes.

Not everyone is fortunate enough to have a Mark Newey on their side. Last year 300 families in Blaxland lost their homes, more than anywhere else in Australia, more than ever before. This is the real and unravelling legacy of the Howard government. Blaxland is the mortgage stress capital of Australia. I was speaking to a real estate agent in Cabramatta last week who told me that he has four repossessed houses on his books. That’s just one agent. Just one month. The sheriff at Bankstown Court told me there are about 30 repossessions about to occur in the next two weeks. Young families who sell up before the sheriff arrives find the value of their home has plummeted. The median house price in Blaxland has fallen by 16 per cent in the last three years. Many now have negative equity in their homes. It means they owe the bank more than the house is worth, making the threat of repossession all the more frightening.

The last housing boom was great for some but it has made life tougher for others. The rate of homeownership is dropping. So is the proportion of first home buyers. I want to make sure the great Australian dream still means something to future generations—where a mortgage is an investment, not a trap.

It is a challenge for any family to build or buy a house. It is just as big a challenge for governments to turn rows of houses into a working city, to build infrastructure. Seventy
per cent of Australians live in our major cities. They are the engine rooms of our economy. Improving the performance of our economy means improving the performance of our cities—making them work.

I have seen firsthand how important good infrastructure really is to our economy. For the last four years I worked for Transurban, the Australian company behind the successful Westlink M7 project. I saw the M7, and its 144 bridges, rise from the ground and the positive impact it has had on local families and businesses. The M7 is not just a road; it is a magnet for economic development. Even before the M7 opened, some of Australia’s biggest companies were flocking to relocate along its corridor. In the last three years it has helped to create 10,000 new jobs and generated almost $3 billion in economic development. It is a good example of what good infrastructure can do: fix the bottlenecks in our cities and the bottlenecks in our economy, improve people’s lives and make business more efficient, which helps us tackle inflation. The Business Council of Australia estimates we have a $90 billion infrastructure deficit. To tackle this task, like many others, we must bring a willingness to work together: working in partnership with state and local governments, with the private sector and with the community to renew our nation-building zeal, to build the infrastructure we need not just for today but for tomorrow.

On 20 January 1830 my great-great-great-great-grandfather arrived in Sydney Cove—in leg-irons. Thomas Clare was transported to Australia from Dublin. His heinous crime: stealing books. We have come a long way since then. He was sent to the other side of the world as punishment for wanting to read; now it is a national priority. It is certainly the top priority at my old primary school, Cabramatta Public. The principal, John Rice, tells me 80 per cent of kids starting kindergarten speak little or no English. Few can spell their name. But give it three years and their literacy and numeracy skills are at or above the state average.

What a powerful message this sends. Our education system is the most powerful cause for good in this country. Run well, it can ensure that every child has the opportunity to reach their potential. It is the great equaliser in an unequal world. If we are serious about equal opportunity for men and women, for rich and poor, for Indigenous and multicultural Australia, then let it begin with the youngest Australians. Let us be the government that again invests in public education. Let us be the government that ensures postcodes do not determine opportunity. Let us be the government that recognises the importance of teachers to learning outcomes. And let us be the government that unleashes the potential of the next generation.

We start by giving every child access to high-quality preschool. The impact across Australia will be profound; the impact in Blaxland will be greater still. In the last few months, I have visited all 52 schools in Blaxland. What I found is a microcosm of our community and a window to its future. The number of children who currently go to preschool in Blaxland is well below the national average. Retention rates are also lower. We need to fix this, not just for their sake but for ours. Our future prosperity rests on their shoulders. If every child in Blaxland has access to preschool, they will have the same chance as other children and they will perform better at school. If they stay longer at school, they will earn more and add billions to our economy. And, if they get a degree or a trade certificate, they will give this country the skills we need to compete in a shrinking and more competitive world. It is for all these reasons that we need an educa-
tion revolution, and places like Blaxland need it most of all.

Mr Speaker, I promise to make the most of this extraordinary opportunity, to be worthy of this place and those who sent me to it, to serve with a fraction of the courage of my grandfathers and with all of their commitment. John Curtin inspired their generation and my grandfathers inspire me: not to defend a nation but to defend the humble hope of a family home; to protect the basic rights of working people and their dignity at work; to turn a new page in the great Labor tradition of nation building; to invest again in our youngest Australians; and to build a better Australia for the grandchildren of tomorrow.

As the poet Alexander Smith said:

A man does not plant a tree for himself; he plants it for posterity.

Our great responsibility is to govern not just for this generation but for the ones that follow. The pace of change and the challenges ahead demand it. Here in this place is where we can meet these challenges. This is where we can turn the Australia of our imagination into something real. Australia needs more people ready to serve and more voices to create ripples of hope. That is why I am here. That is why I am a member of the Australian Labor Party. And that is what I will do on behalf of the people of Blaxland.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Hon. BC Scott)—The question is that the address be agreed to. I call the honourable member for Fisher; my apologies.

Mr SLIPPER (Fisher) (6.00 pm)—Where you holiday, Mr Deputy Speaker, regularly.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER—My apologies to the honourable member for Fisher; I knew it too well.

Mr SLIPPER—Initially, I would like to congratulate the honourable member for Blaxland on what I thought was a very well put together speech. Clearly he had thought through the matters he wanted to raise in his maiden speech to the Australian parliament, and I do wish him well, as I do all other new members—although one could understand if I do not wish those on the other side any sense of political longevity. I do counsel the honourable member for Blaxland, however, that when serving his political masters he ought not to forget the people in Sussex Street—who, I understand, are possibly more of a potential threat to him than would be the electors of Blaxland.

There are few debates in this parliament where one can talk about anything one wants to. I want to use this chance to say how strongly I support a single conservative party in Queensland. Hopefully after that has been achieved there will be a flow-on effect so that we see a single conservative party nationally. Sir Robert Menzies in the 1940s faced a crisis of conservative politics and he managed to bring together 18 disparate non-Labor and conservative forces to form the Liberal Party of Australia. At the present time, the conservative parties throughout Australia are in some disarray. We do not hold government at any state or territory level and we certainly, post 24 November, do not hold the keys to national government. I suppose the one bright spot on our national horizon is the lord mayoralty of Brisbane, where I am hopeful that Campbell Newman as lord mayor will be able to obtain a majority in his own right at the council elections next month.

Lawrence Springborg, the leader of the Queensland opposition, has, in quite a visionary way, been consulting with the people of Queensland with a view to achieving a new conservative party, to grow out of the Liberal Party and the National Party. Alternatively, one could merge the two—and I am not wedded to any particular alternative but I strongly consider that if any rationale ever
existed for there to be a separate Liberal Party and a separate National Party then that rationale evaporated a very long time ago. Honourable members would be aware that I have been privileged to serve in the Australian parliament as both a member of the National Party and a member of the Liberal Party, at different times. The people who were in both of those party rooms were very similar people, but, more importantly, the branch members of the Liberal Party and the National Party were very similar. Indeed, the voting public who support Liberal and National Party members are not specifically National or specifically Liberal; they are broadly conservative voters who want to achieve positive outcomes for the future of our state and nation.

That is why I have written to the Queensland state president of the Liberal Party, Warwick Parer, a distinguished former senator of this parliament, and our state director, Geoff Greene, to urge support for the proposal being put forward by Lawrence Springborg. I greatly regret a recent decision of the Queensland state council of the Liberal Party to defer any consideration of a single conservative party until after the Brisbane City Council and the Gold Coast City Council elections. I hope that the postponement of these discussions is not designed to gain time so that a new party could be put to death at a time when it would be less politically dangerous to do so. I do not think anyone would accept a decision to say no at this stage because, were that to happen, our Brisbane City Council team and our Gold Coast City Council team would be pilloried at the council elections to be held next month.

Had the state council gone ahead with an indication of support for a single conservative party, I consider that this, at the council elections, would have given a very strong momentum towards support for conservative teams running in council elections. But, having said that, all is not lost. I can understand that there was an argument put forward that, were we to be talking about a new party prior to the council elections, that could well divert our attention from the need to win those elections. I accepted the decision of the state council, but I strongly urge that, on the day after the council elections are out of the way, we as a Liberal Party go out and consult our members and seek to attain the support we need to form one conservative party.

I said earlier that the non-Labor forces in Australia are currently in a state of disarray. As we stand, we are somewhere between three and 12 years away from national government. We are probably six years away from state government in Queensland because Anna Bligh leads what is arguably the worst government in Australia of any political party. What we need to do is to indicate to the Australian people and to the voters of Queensland that we have listened. They have sent us powerful messages at successive state elections. They say to us, ‘Get your act together and then come back and seek our support.’

I believe the Howard government was an outstanding government. History will record the achievements of that government. We inherited an economic basket case, yet we reduced unemployment, we had lower interest rates than have historically been the case, and we made Australia respected throughout the world. When history judges the record of that government, history will be very kind because it was a very good government. Having said that, on 24 November, a new Prime Minister from Queensland was elected and the Labor Party, as we have seen in the successive votes today and earlier, clearly holds a very strong majority currently in the Australian parliament. What we need to do is to try to indicate to the Australian people that we have learnt the lesson and that we are prepared to listen to the message being sent...
to us. I believe that it is very, very important to move forward to form this single conservative party. Were this to happen, I believe the electors would look at us in a much more favourable light.

In recent times, the coalition has worked very well together at the state and the federal levels. However, there is this feeling in the community’s psyche that over the years we have had the luxury expended by Liberals and Nationals of taking pot shots at each other. There have been visions of disunity. We have seen headlines in the various papers on occasions indicating that the parties are not working to one purpose. That is why I think we cannot now afford two non-Labor parties—particularly two non-Labor parties which largely have the same policies and which largely represent the same people. The Liberal Party has many more rural members of the Australian parliament than does the National Party. I do not say that in a sense of triumphalism over the National Party. All I am saying is that the rationale for two separate parties has long evaporated.

I want to commend the Leader of the Opposition and the Leader of the Nationals in this place because both of them have indicated that they are not opposed to Queensland moving forward to form one conservative party if that is what the collective wish of the membership of the Liberal Party and the National Party in Queensland happens to be. There are some who say: ‘Let’s not have a merger at state level. Let’s wait until there is some form of national consensus.’ Mr Deputy Speaker, I am sure that you would agree with me in your capacity as the member for Maranoa and as a former president of the National Party that often such a sentiment could in effect be code for putting it off until such time as it will never actually happen.

History records that the only way that the Australian Country Party became the National Party of Australia was when one state—that is, Queensland—grasped the nettle. It unilaterally changed its name and then created the momentum which, over a period of years, saw the Australian Country Party become the National Country Party at the national level and then become the National Party of Australia throughout the nation. Already in the Australian parliament we have Senator Nigel Scullion, who represents the Country Liberal Party, which is a merger of the parties in the Territory. I suppose it is a bit strange in a sense that he is also the deputy leader of the National Party, but that is an issue for another discussion.

If the Liberal Party and the National Party were prepared to be visionary and prepared to emulate what Sir Robert Menzies did in the 1940s and if we were able to achieve a single conservative party in Queensland then one would find that very quickly the other states would fall into line. We would have one conservative party, which, in effect, would indicate that we were ready to inherit the keys of government. The state leadership of the Liberal Party and the National Party in the Queensland parliament have both indicated support for this proposal. As I talk to Liberal Party members in my electorate and elsewhere throughout Queensland, I find that there is a very strong view in favour of ruling off the past and moving forward. In the electorate of Fisher, I was very fortunate because we had a joint campaign committee. The Liberal Party and the National Party campaigned together as equal partners, and we achieved a result which, given the tsunami that engulfed our side of politics, was very pleasing.

The electorate has sent us a very strong and unambiguous message: fix up the mess and make some positive changes. If that happens, of course, we will receive support.
We just cannot go on as we are. We need to try something new. If we do go on as we are, I suspect we will be where we are for a very long period of time. You cannot have a good government in Australia unless you have an effective opposition. I just see a single conservative party as being essential. It really ought to happen. It must happen. If it does not happen, then we are consigned to the wilderness of opposition for possibly a generation.

I would also like to say how pleased I am that next month the three councils on the Sunshine Coast—the Noosa Council, the Maroochy Shire Council and the Caloundra City Council—will merge to form the new Sunshine Coast Regional Council. It would have been better if we were called the Sunshine Coast City Council because, let’s face it, while the member for McPherson at the table would certainly not agree with me—Mrs May—I do not.

Mr SLIPPER—we all know that the Sunshine Coast is a much finer place to live and to bring up a family than the Gold Coast.

The Sunshine Coast Regional Council will be able to emulate the successes of the Gold Coast council. What Gold Coast council members have been able to do is to work together as a body. We all know that the Gold Coast is an entity. When we were in government, Gold Coast representatives, led by the mayor, would come to Canberra and knock on the doors of ministers. Ministers knew that, when dealing with the Gold Coast City Council, they were dealing with a body which represented the whole of the Gold Coast. Ministers like to know who they are dealing with.

The Sunshine Coast, however, has Noosa, Maroochy and Caloundra. While we have had the Sunshine Coast Regional Organisation of Councils and they have sought to work together, at times despite the best of intentions Noosa, Maroochy and Caloundra have worked in different directions. Happily, after the council elections next month we will have a Sunshine Coast council which will be able to speak for all of us on the Sunshine Coast. I think that the process followed by the state government, with its lack of consultation with the community, is something for which the state government ought to be condemned, but the outcome is positive because we will have a new council which will speak up for the Sunshine Coast, which is undoubtedly the best part of the country in which to live and to bring up a family. The opportunities on the Sunshine Coast are absolutely limitless.

This brings me to one of my favourite hobbyhorses. After the Prime Minister was elected, he said he was going to govern for all Australians. In fact, I think the new honourable member for Blaxland said in his speech that we do not want to see government decisions made by postcode. The Sunshine Coast will have its population double over the next 10 to 15 years. I am pleased that Infrastructure Australia will be set up, as we have so many infrastructure requirements. We need to upgrade the Bruce Highway all the way from Brisbane to the Sunshine Coast. The previous government funded the upgrade as far as Caboolture to six lanes, and now we need to extend that upgrade all the way to the Sunshine Coast. As a community, we have so many infrastructure requirements. I have been in touch with the Prime Minister’s office to stress that some of those needs must be met. I will certainly be knocking on the Prime Minister’s door to guarantee we get as much infrastructure as we possibly can.

In the run-up to the election, the Labor Party ran very strong campaigns on the Sunshine Coast. With a Queenslander, Kevin Rudd, being the Leader of the Labor Party, I suppose all conservative candidates in
Queensland had only one opponent, and that was Kevin Rudd; the quality of the specific Labor candidate did not matter. But Labor candidates did promise a lot of spending on the Sunshine Coast. I will certainly be doing what I can to hold the government to those promises, to make sure that, even though the previous government was not successful on the Sunshine Coast, the promises made to Sunshine Coast people are completely delivered.

In the time available to me, I would also like to say how sorry I am that the state government has decided to proceed with the Traveston dam. I am all about there being adequate water supplies for the future, but the Traveston dam will be poorly located, it is not a good dam site, and over a thousand families will be affected. I read in the Sunshine Coast Daily today that apparently some considerable amount of Australian government money is being spent building a new bridge in an area which will be inundated by the Traveston dam. One just has to ask whether that is a sensible use of Australian taxpayers’ money.

On 24 November we had an election. We also know that the government won and we, the opposition, lost. We focus a lot on the outcome, as indeed we should, but, while we might not like the outcome, as Australians we always ought to respect the process. We are singularly fortunate as Australians because we are able, come elections, to put a government in or put a government out. The sort of right that we have is not a right shared by people right around the world. One only has to turn one’s television set on at night to know that people elsewhere do not have the freedom, the stability, the way of life and the tolerance that we have as Australians. While we might be upset over the fact that we did not win the election, as Australians we ought to focus positively on the process because it means that as a country we are able to select the government we want. If there is a feeling that the government ought to move on—as was clearly the case on 24 November last year—so be it. What will happen is that the government opposite will run out of steam and, in the fullness of time—hopefully sooner rather than later, particularly if we form one non-Labor party—we will see a change of government and a return to good and sound government.

In summing up, I again congratulate all honourable members, particularly new members, on both sides of the House on their election. We are a very great privilege to serve in the Australian parliament. Just over a thousand people have served in the Australian parliament since Federation. We are a wonderful country. I know that we will not agree on everything. I respect your motivations for standing and being elected, and I would like to wish you well in your political careers.

The SPEAKER—Order! Before I call the member for Corio, I remind the House that this is the honourable member’s first speech. I therefore ask that the usual courtesies be extended to him.

Mr MARLES (Corio) (6.20 pm)—I start by acknowledging the Ngunawal people, the traditional owners of this land, and also by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land in the electorate of Corio, the Wathaurong people. In acknowledging these people as the traditional owners of their land, I would also like to acknowledge the strength of their identity. Indeed, it is the strength of identity of all of Indigenous Australia which has allowed these people and this ancient culture to survive numerous threats, not the least of which has been European settlement.

We are lucky that Aboriginal Australians are our first Australians. The power of their identity serves to illustrate how important identity is for all peoples. It is the source of
all collective action. It is the source of all public policy. Politics at its grandest is all about identity: searching for it, clarifying it, giving expression to it.

In this, my first speech to this parliament, I would like to talk about the identity of three places which mean everything to me. I grew up and have spent most of my life in the city of Geelong. Since 1849, when Geelong was first incorporated by the New South Wales parliament, it has had many identities. In the 18th century it was a gateway to the goldfields. Later it became the centre of Australia’s wool industry, as our major wool port. In the second half of the 20th century, Geelong has been Victoria’s industrial city in the same way that Newcastle and Wollongong have been in New South Wales.

As the member for Corio, my electorate covers the bulk of Geelong. As we sit here in 2008, Geelong’s identity is on the move once more. Sixteen per cent of the working population of Geelong now works in Melbourne, and that figure is on the rise. Within the next 20 years, if we are not already so, we will be connected to Werribee, Melbourne, Frankston and Sorrento as part of a greater Port Phillip Bay metropolis. And the question is: how will we maintain our identity within that metropolis? Our challenge is to ensure that Geelong does not merely become an outer suburb of Melbourne. Geelong’s identity must lie in becoming an alternative economic centre in the greater Port Phillip Bay metropolis, in the same way that San Jose is, relative to the San Francisco Bay area.

In part, that is about Geelong promoting itself as a lifestyle city. With our north-facing bay, our raised peninsula, our wineries, our historic buildings and our proximity to the Surf Coast, there is no better place to live around Port Phillip Bay. But mainly it is about fully exploiting Geelong’s existing infrastructure. With our own airport, seaport, Highway No. 1 and the national rail gauge all located near each other in the north of Geelong and Geelong itself located on the corner of Australia, there is every reason for Geelong to be not only a regional but a national transport and logistics hub. With a world-class university and TAFE college producing a highly skilled population and with cutting-edge technology coupled with our existing industrial base, there is no reason why Geelong cannot be a global centre of manufacturing excellence. But the critical ingredient in all of this is confidence—knowing that we in Geelong can do things as well as anybody else in the world. That is actually why Geelong’s AFL premiership last year was so important to the town. Just imagine if I had not mentioned that!

For new nations we talk about people engaging in an act of self-determination, which implies that they have something to determine, that there is a confident identity which unites them as a people and which they in turn present to the world. Any nation which does not have that confident identity struggles, and that struggle is being had by our nearest neighbour to the north, Papua New Guinea. People who have seen themselves as highlanders or from Manus, as Trobriand Islanders or Papuans, have been asked to forge a nation combining all of these people and many more. While Australia was a caring and benevolent colonial power, the truth is that we did very little to prepare these people for what has turned out to be a tremendously difficult task. And so in 2008 Papua New Guinea is bleeding. All its social indicators are poor, such that life expectancy in PNG is the shortest of any nation outside of Africa. Port Moresby is now one of the most dangerous cities in the world, and there is an unknown rate of HIV infection which is drawing comparisons with sub-Saharan Africa. As always, it is PNG’s poor who are the worst victims.
And yet, with its abundant resources, PNG could be a wonderful success. Ultimately, of course, it is for PNG to determine its own future but, as PNG tackles its issues, it is very important that Australia is there as a strong partner not only out of affection for a close neighbour but also in our own national interest. Since 1975 I think all levels of Australian society, not just government but corporate Australia and the community sector as well, have failed to maintain the bonds which used to exist with Papua New Guinea prior to independence. It has been my privilege over the last few years to have visited PNG on numerous occasions, mainly on behalf of the ACTU but also as a member of Labor’s International Party Development Committee. It has become a passion of mine to encourage across all Australia a much greater degree of engagement with PNG. This engagement is needed by Papua New Guinea, and Australia must be the very best friend that we can be.

In contemplating national identity, inevitably my thoughts turn to Australia’s own identity. When we allow our finer spirits to soar, Australia has a national ideal which is the very envy of the world. It is described by words like ‘egalitarianism’, ‘fairness’ and the spirit of ‘a fair go’. And all of this is grounded in the idea of mateship. Charles Bean, the famous Australian First World War correspondent, said in relation to the Australian troops both at Gallipoli and on the Western Front:

... the chief article [of their creed] was that a man should at all times and at any cost stand by his mate. That was and is the one law which the good Australian must never break.

Mateship is at the heart of our great military image, which is not Nelson standing on the deck of the Victory peering out at the French fleet as he was about to impose upon them a terrible defeat. Nor is it a group of American marines raising the flag on the heights of Iwo Jima in an emphatic symbol of victory. No, our great military image is of a medic leading a donkey, on the back of which is an injured digger—one Australian helping another, a mate helping a mate.

That spirit of mateship is very much alive in Australia today. We saw it in the opening of the Sydney Olympic Games, which absolutely celebrated the famous aspects of Australian life—the culture of Indigenous Australians, the Great Barrier Reef—but which also celebrated ordinary Australians in that wonderful scene with the men and women wearing their stubbies and workboots, using angle grinders and sending sparks into the night sky. What other nation, what other culture, would put on display to the rest of the world the most ordinary of its people to show that they are extraordinary too?

Mateship has played a role throughout our history. In the early pioneer days, out in the bush, husband and wife became the best of mates in a way which broke down the barriers of traditional gender segregation. As we sit here in 2008, that is really now the norm in Australia, where the vast bulk of couples regard their husband or wife as their best mate. That is particularly Australian. It is very important that when we consider the concept of mateship we do so in its grandest context as being all about men and women being mates.

At our best, mateship has played a role in our immigration policy, as we have welcomed people to Australia from all four corners of the globe as mates. Mateship has been at the heart of the reconciliation process, because Aborigines are mates too. Mateship is an Australian ideal, but it does not seek to define the ideal Australian. Mateship is about all Australians—men and women, black and white, rich and poor—mucking in together and then celebrating that fact. It is fantastic. It is uniquely Australian and with it
we have been and will continue to be simply
great.

But there has been a darkness to the Aus-
tralian character as well, which we cannot
ignore. We have seen it most notably in our
history in the White Australia policy, which
was national policy and bipartisan policy
embraced by every prime minister from Bar-
ton through to Menzies. It was actually the
Curtin government, when negotiating the
arrival of American troops into Australia to
use our continent as the base for the offen-
sive campaign against Japan, that raised con-
cerns about African-American troops coming
here because this was, after all, a white con-
tinent. The Americans, rightly, objected to
that. But, ultimately, a compromise was
reached where those African-American sol-
diers were based in the north of Queensland,
far away from offending the eyes of the
population centres in south-eastern Australia.
That is a terrible story, but it happened, and
we have to acknowledge it. This darkness
has been apparent in the policies which gave
rise to the stolen generation and in a policy
of intentionally brutalising new people on
their arrival to Australia so as to discourage
others from doing the same. We have seen it
at work in the Pacific solution.

How we reconcile these two aspects of the
Australian character is difficult. How do you
reconcile a sense of togetherness with a
sense of exclusion? How do you reconcile
bigotry with mateship? The answer is: you
have a national discussion in the context of
nationhood. Yet here we have another curi-
ous fact about our country. As David Day,
the eminent Australian historian, has put it,
Australia is the reluctant nation. On 1 Janu-
ary 1901, the vast bulk of the Australian
people did not see it as our independence
day. Rather, it was the coming together of six
British colonies to form a new British entity
in the South Seas. From that day, right
through until the rejection of the republic
referendum in 1999, our path to independ-
ence has been drawn out and ambiguous.
With the notable exception of Paul Keating
in the early nineties, that road to independ-
ence has lacked any kind of national discus-
sion such as that which occurred between the
likes of Thomas Jefferson and John Adams at
the outset of the American republic. I actu-
ally think that it is the absence of that na-
tional discussion which has left, at times, our
national character somewhat unreconciled.

And yet we have a need for a strong na-
tional identity now more than ever, because
borders are far more transparent than they
were in 1901 and we no longer sit under the
umbrella of an empire. Who we are and what
we stand for is there for all the world to see.
Whether or not we can confidently assert an
Australian brand into a globalised economy
has everything to do with whether or not
Australia will succeed in the global econ-
omy. But to do that we need to understand
our own brand first.

I think the wonderful side of the Austra-
lian character, mateship, is well known. But
it ought to be enshrined, in my view, in our
national documents. So, personally speaking,
I agree with John Howard that mateship
ought to form part of the preamble to the
Australian Constitution. But the darkness in
the Australian character is less understood.
There are some who say that there is a deep-
seated streak of racism in Australia. I dis-
agree with that because I actually think that
Australians have been incredibly generous to
people from all over the world.

Yet I do believe that non-Indigenous Aus-
tralia, from the very beginning of European
settlement, has been beset by a sense of in-
security. At different times we have felt in-
secure about the distance from the motherland,
England. We have felt fearful of our Indige-
ous population. We have been worried
about the size of our continent and how
small a population we have to occupy it. And we have been anxious about the Asian region in which we live and what designs may be had on our own land. In more recent times there has been a certain economic insecurity. How will we continue to make things? How will we continue to have a manufacturing sector in Australia when our nearest neighbours are able to make things for a fraction of the price? I think it is when we have indulged this sense of insecurity as a nation that public policy in Australia has manifested in doctrines like the White Australia policy, the stolen generation or the Pacific solution. So to me there is no more important issue in a national discussion. There is no more important issue for the future direction of Australia than to face up to these insecurities.

In the 21st century Australia needs a new birth of confidence, because the issues which caused us anxiety in the 20th century frankly are no longer relevant in the 21st century. I do believe that the vision put forward by Kevin Rudd and Labor at the last election captures this new Australian confidence. It is right that we reject an unfair set of industrial laws which, at their worst, allow one Australian to exploit another. There is no mateship in that. It is also right that we base our economy on a highly skilled, well-educated population bringing to bear the best technology so that we can make the best products and deliver the best services in the world. That is not only the smart play for Australia; it is the fair play. With high-skilled jobs come high-paying jobs, and that gives us the financial base for the egalitarian society and the Australian spirit of a fair go.

Whether or not you believe that the policies put forward by Labor at the last election represent the best recipe for fostering mateship as our national ideal, what also matters is that we have a discussion about what our national ideals are. This is an exciting time. The nation’s response to the stolen generation apology last Wednesday absolutely demonstrates that in 2008 Australia is ready to shed the insecurities of the past and to seize the future with a renewed confidence and hope. Mateship is a very powerful ideal with which to do that. It comes from the country as a whole. It is an ideal which has the capacity to endure, but it is an ideal which will only endure—indeed, it will only be a national ideal—if it has bipartisan support.

Now is also a wonderful time to have that discussion, because at the last election 25 per cent of this parliament turned over—one of the largest renewals since Federation. There truly is a new generation in this parliament. I believe that we have a job ahead of us to better understand who we are as a people. We have a job ahead of us to restate the very idea of Australia. And we have a job ahead of us to forge a strong and unshakable national identity which eschews insecurity and fear, which is grounded in confidence and which celebrates mateship and the spirit of a fair go as that which makes us fundamentally Australian.

It is a wonderful privilege for me to be standing here as a part of the fantastic Labor team led by Kevin Rudd. I would like to start my thank yous by thanking Kevin and all the Labor movement for simply giving me the opportunity to be a part of this. I would also like to thank the electors of Corio for putting me here. I stand here as their representative but I also stand here as the representative of many friends and family, without whom I would never have been given the privilege of serving in this parliament. But before acknowledging them, I would like to acknowledge the former member for Corio, Gavan O’Connor, who served in this place for 14 years. He was a tireless advocate for the people of Geelong. He contributed to national public policy, particularly in the area
of agriculture. On behalf of all those in Corio, I would like to thank him.

To this point in my time, my career has largely been spent in the trade union movement—first at the Transport Workers Union, where I worked under John Allan and Steve Hutchins and alongside Glenn Sterle, Tony Sheldon and Andrew Watson; and then at the ACTU, where I worked under Sharan Burrow and Joe de Bruyn. I owe a great deal to each of these people, as I do to the union movement, which will always hold a very special place in my heart.

There are a number of Victorian parliamentarians, who are friends of mine in this place, whom I would also like to acknowledge because they have given me support and guidance for a long period of time: Kelvin Thomson, Nicola Roxon, Michael Danby, Stephen Conroy, Robert Ray and Anthony Byrne. And it is a particular joy for me that I have been elected into this parliament at the same election as David Feeney and Bill Shorten, both of whom have been dear friends of mine for more than 20 years. I would like to acknowledge a group of school friends who have shared my life from childhood: Darren and Jo Fox, Peter Little and Gitte Horn, William Reeves, Ninian Lewis and Clare Lawrence.

In Geelong we have been pursuing a struggle to reinvent the Labor Party after a period in the 1990s when our fortunes were very dim. This has been a most difficult and trying task. I have to thank state MPs John Eren, Lisa Neville, Michael Crutchfield, Jaala Pulford, David Saunderson, Cameron Granger, Lou Brazier, Alex DiNatale, Peter McMullen, Kathleen Pender, Geraldine Eren, Clare McClelland, Ann Clark, Roger Lowrey, Jill Petersen, Gavin Penn, Glen Menzies, Mark Donohue, Jade Butler, John Maroulis and Darren Lamont. You know what each of you means to me and, while it may be me who is standing here, it is your collective spirit which inhabits this chamber.

Saverina Chirumbolo, who has suffered the unusual ordeal of working with me for eight years, needs a special thanks. My productivity is largely dependent upon her, and I thank my lucky stars that she has agreed to join me on this next part of the journey.

I have been very fortunate to grow up in a loving family, many of whom are here tonight: my parents, Fay and Don Marles; my parents-in-law, Vince and Judy Schutze; my brothers and sisters Jenny Green, Liz Marles, Ken Quail, Vic Marles, Geoff Westcott, Jason Schutze, Brendan Stafford, Melissa Schutze and Albert Landman; my uncles and aunts, Robert and Ive Buntine and Richard and Jan Inglis; and some friends who are very much family, Susan and Carlo Bernardini, Leonie Sheedy and Ron Joseph.

Finally, my most heartfelt thanks go to my own family: my children, Sam, Isabella and Harvey—each of whom pays a price for my being here—and my wonderful wife, Rachel Schutze. It is she who makes the wheels of my life turn. It is she who reminds me that in the midst of political adversity it is familial love that really matters. It is she who makes all things possible, and my guiding motivation in this place will always be to make her proud.

Mr HUNT (Flinders) (6.37 pm)—May I start my contribution to this address-in-reply by congratulating the member for Corio. As I look across the chamber I have to say that, in my short time here, I would regard that as the finest contribution for a maiden speech that I have heard. Without seeking to denigrate other fine efforts, I think that was the finest first speech from his side of the chamber. As an alumni of Melbourne university with him and another colleague, I am not surprised.
In speaking in this address-in-reply debate, I recognise that there has been a transition of government. On 24 November, the people of Australia made their decision and, unfortunately, the Liberal-National coalition lost government. I have two roles to carry forward: firstly as the member for Flinders—and today I want to set out a four-part plan for the coming term of office—and secondly, more broadly, as a member of the alternative government of Australia. In that respect, I wish to make some preliminary remarks. I begin with a simple fact. Late last week, the Australian Bureau of Statistics set out the fact that Australian unemployment has fallen to a 35-year low of 4.1 per cent and the participation rate has reached an all-time high of 65 per cent. These two facts spell one simple thing, and that is that more Australians are in work today than at any other time in our history. That means that families have the economic security which comes from work. Families have the ability to make choices, which have not been open to others throughout Australia’s history, about their own futures. More people than ever before are in a position of self-sufficiency. It also means—I think most significantly—that the dignity of work has been extended to more people than ever before. Yes, it is difficult and yes, it is challenging. That is why it is, by its very nature, called ‘work’. It means that the people of Australia, from the north to the south and from the east to the west, are in a position to make choices about their futures. That is, to me, what liberalism is all about—this very notion that we give people choice, we give people the ability to make their own futures, and from that we give them a sense of hope, aspiration and all that is possible in their lives.

How did this come to pass? The narrative from the other side is that this was all an accident, that all that we have today, which is so different from the world of 1990 or 1993, was but simply an accident of geography. This proposition is palpably false. The changes that we have seen in Australia since 1996 have been built on the hard work of five great economic revolutions. Firstly, and most importantly, there was the promotion of budgetary discipline, of turning around a $96 billion deficit, and turning it successively over time into surplus after surplus, which firstly paid off the debt and, secondly, laid the foundations for the Future Fund, for a higher education fund and for a hospitals fund—so investing now for all time for future generations. These activities were opposed at every step by those who now in the government profess support for fiscal rectitude.

The second of these revolutions was in relation to waterfront productivity. The waterfront faced a coronary; it needed a bypass. Perhaps the most bitter battle of the last 12 years was to take the steps needed to clear out the barriers and bottlenecks on our waterfront. We did that, and we did that because it was difficult not because it was easy. That is precisely why we did that. The result has been a dramatic increase in the productivity of our waterfront which in turn has meant that our manufacturers, people working on shop floors, farmers and all of those who seek to export or import have been able to do their work. These changes are real, important and profound, and yet they were opposed—but now they will be kept.

The third of the great revolutions in economic productivity that we have seen in Australia came from the dramatic reform of the tax system—reforms so great that the now Prime Minister referred to it at the time as ‘fundamental injustice day’, as we all know. The reforms were so great that, faced with all Labor state and territory governments and a Labor Commonwealth government, he will still keep those reforms. Nothing would stop him now from making those changes. We
now see that the reforms to the taxation system, in moving from heavy income tax to light income tax and moving from a situation where we had a consumption based tax, have changed the way the alignment of incentives stack up in Australia. That in turn was fundamental, not to injustice but to productivity in Australia.

The fourth of the revolutions was in relation to helping those who had been trapped in a welfare cycle out of that cycle and back to work. That was a great and humane task. What we have seen is that those who were on the fringes of employment, who were outside of the employment scope, have been given the dignity of work as well as the security of work. For that we are profoundly proud. We have nothing to apologise for there. We should acknowledge and be proud of bringing back into the system those who missed out. Finally, we saw a revolution in giving encouragement to small business. This encouragement, which allowed employers to employ, was part of a process which ultimately created two million jobs and created the conditions for 4.1 per cent unemployment and 65 per cent participation in employment across the economy. These things together matter for the current generation, the future generation and the dignity of individuals.

Against that, what are we seeing today? Firstly, we are seeing that the white flag is already up on future tax cuts. The understanding that I have is that there will be no more future tax cuts, now that those which we promised have been implemented. Secondly, we see a worrying trend on foreign investment—sending a message to the rest of the world that we are getting ready to put up the shutters. It is a form of dangerous populism. We do not know the final form of that which will pass, but the message to the rest of the world is that this is a different Australia. Thirdly, we also see signs that there will be a roll-back on tariff cuts. So all of the great elements of economic reform—which do not matter of and in themselves but matter solely as a means of giving people employment, income and a real and long-term future—are being wound back. That is a dangerous sign—and that is the difference between the two sides of this House. At the end of the day, what we focused on and what we created is economic security.

Against that base, I now turn from the strongest economy that Australia has had, arguably since the Korean War boom if not before then, to where we are now in the seat of Flinders. I want to set out a four-part plan for the seat of Flinders: firstly, in relation to health; secondly, in relation to police and security; thirdly, in relation to the environment; and, fourthly, in relation to education. It is not limited to those, but they are the four pillars that I will pursue in the electorate of Flinders over the coming years.

The first of these relates to health. I turn to Warley Hospital. The great disappointment of my time in parliament has been the loss of Warley Hospital for Phillip Island. I am saddened because we committed $2½ million as a federal government, and that has been taken away by the new government. The promise for Warley Hospital on Phillip Island was a simple one: they would be given $2½ million to give them a future; so this not-for-profit, community-owned, bush nursing hospital would have a future for another 84 years. Sadly, the new health minister did not listen to the pleas from the people of Phillip Island. She did not even answer the letter which was sent by the board of the hospital.

The new Prime Minister promised on 29 November that the health buck would stop with him. The Victorian Premier said, ‘Warley Hospital is not our responsibility.’ Unfortunately, the new health minister and the new
Prime Minister said, contrary to the promise that the health buck would stop with them, ‘It’s not our responsibility either.’ The result is that a hospital which had a bright future, a proud past and an important present has closed. On 31 January, 15 employees lost their jobs. They included nurses, administrators and cleaners—people who had been committed to the future of Warley Hospital. But it affected more than just those individuals; an island lost its hospital and it lost its history.

So my commitment now is to work to get this hospital reopened. I do not know whether we will be able to do it, but I do know that I want that fight—and I will have that fight and we will work and work. Only in the last few days the promise that there would be an emergency service to replace Warley Hospital has been broken. Local papers have reported that families have had to travel not just to one nearby hospital—because that was on a bypass—or to two or three but to four hospitals before finding a place where they could stop. These reports are from the most recent Phillip Island Advertiser. That is a profound health crisis, which the new government has precipitated. This hospital had fought for its history, had lived its history, and had been a proud part of Phillip Island—and now it has gone.

I also see that the state owned Koo Wee Rup Hospital, with a wonderful board and a wonderful executive, is fighting to be allowed to have respite care. At the moment we see a catch 22, in which the state says, ‘We will not allow you to apply.’ Because it is a state hospital, the Koo Wee Rup Hospital is not allowed to apply for federal funding without state support, so it is being strangled and held in by the very people who ought to be encouraging its development.

Similarly, we see that the maternity unit of Rosebud Hospital was closed. Mothers were sent to Frankston—sometimes a 40-minute trip away—to give birth, and then, after six hours, newborn babies were put in vehicles and sent back. The disruption for mothers and babies and families was profound. Here are three hospitals and three poor outcomes: Warley Hospital, Koo Wee Rup Hospital and Rosebud Hospital.

Against that, I am proud that we have a new Medicare office in Hastings, because this makes a difference to people’s lives. Now we need more aged care in Hastings and we need to build on the over-600 places that Flinders received over the last six years. We also need something that I think is revolutionary—that is, assisted care for the disabled so that they can live in an assisted situation. There is a proposal for Hastings which I hope will find the support of the new government and of the state.

I now turn to the issue of police and safety. Only last week police on the Mornington Peninsula held a crisis meeting at the Moorooduc coolstores. What they said was very simple. Brave and courageous members of the police force stood up in defiance of the standing orders from their own state authorities and said, ‘We have a crisis in policing on the Mornington Peninsula.’ The answer is simple: more police for Rosebud, more police for Hastings and a police station for Somerville. We need nothing less and we will not rest until we receive a 24-hour police station for Somerville. We were told it was impossible to get a new high school for Somerville and yet we had that battle and, with the community, we were successful. That same commitment applies: to fight, to win, to receive funding and to build a 24-hour police station for Somerville. I cannot say when it will happen but I do know that that fight will be maintained until we succeed.
Sadly, there is another element of security to mention, an issue which I have raised in the Main Committee of the House—that is, the need to ensure that all seven rail crossings on the Mornington Peninsula which do not have boom gates are given them. I mentioned last week that I spoke with Gwen Bates, the mother of Kay Stanley. Kay was tragically killed recently in a level-crossing accident. There were no boom gates, she did not hear the warning for whatever reason and a pregnant mother-to-be was lost. Her mother, Gwen Bates, has asked that I raise this matter in parliament. I do so both for Gwen and also so that we make it absolutely clear that accidents such as this should not be allowed to happen in the future. It is a genuine tragedy in the true meaning of the word when a life has been cut short.

I want to address further things. We need a bypass for Lang Lang and Koo Wee Rup. That is not part of any promise, because it is not my position to give that promise, but it is part of the fight. Bypasses for Lang Lang and Koo Wee Rup will give these towns a future, give people a way through and give them a sense that these towns matter, that they cannot be ignored and that they should not be ignored by the state or by the new federal government.

The third area to which I turn is the environment. The first point here is in relation to the channel-deepening project. Whilst I recognise that the broader project is inevitable—and I have said that on many occasions—it is utterly unacceptable that two million tonnes of toxic waste from the mouth of the Yarra should be dredged and dumped into Port Phillip Bay. Dieldron, DDT, arsenic, mercury, lead, cadmium and up to 270 other chemicals or heavy metals have all been identified as being contained within that toxic sediment. To use Port Phillip Bay as a dump is simply not acceptable. The second point is that Gunnamatta is the site of 150 billion litres of class C, partially treated sewage which is dumped off one of the great surf beaches of Australia every year. This is water which pollutes the coast, which is wasted, which should be recycled and which must be recycled. We have had a proposal on the table. I implore the new state government to reconsider that which they have dropped and to prefer this over desalination, because ultimately they are making a capital decision to guarantee that this dumping will continue for the next decade or the next 30 years, and they are doing so by preferring desalination over recycling for industry and agriculture.

This leads me to the last of the elements in the plan for the seat of Flinders. It is in relation to education and to sport. We hear from the community a call for a new secondary college for the Bass coast. I am willing to work for that end. Whether it is in San Remo or on Phillip Island or in a nearby area, it is something which is necessary. The Bass coast has one of the fastest growing populations in Victoria, in percentage terms, and it needs that support.

On the other hand, I am delighted that we have a new low-fee Christian school in Mount Martha. I am pleased to have been able to play some small role in the creation of the Balcombe Grammar School, which opened only a few short weeks ago. The former government played an important part by giving a significant percentage of the funding. It will be a significant boon to the young families of the Mornington Peninsula and it will be a great addition to the township of Mount Martha. We must now work for a year 11 and 12 facility as part of the Somerville Secondary College, which I mentioned before, and ultimately, on the health front, work to see a Rosebud swimming pool and a Phillip Island pool in place for the aged, the young, the families and the visitors.
All of these things are only possible because we have the healthiest economy in the world. I recognise that government has changed hands but our job as local members, as well as national members, is to set out the conditions for a healthy economy and to fight for those things at the local level which will give people a long-term future. For those reasons I lay out to the House this plan for health, for police, for environment and for education in the seat of Flinders.

Ms RISHWORTH (Kingston) (7.01 pm)—Firstly, may I offer my congratulations to you, Mr Speaker, on your election to that office, and I look forward to your guidance in matters parliamentary. I would also like to congratulate the Prime Minister on attaining the high office to which he has been called. I offer him my truly heartfelt congratulations, since it is under his inspiring leadership that I too have been elected to sit in his government. The office of Prime Minister, though, is one whose duty lies beyond party politics and electioneering. It is an office that requires important decisions in the interests of our country and its citizens. It is an office that also requires vision—vision with regard to not only our nation’s immediate needs but also the needs of its future. I can think of no man better suited to the task of governing for our nation than the honourable member for Griffith. I acknowledge the contribution made to the federal parliament by previous members for Kingston, Mr Kym Richardson, Mr David Cox and the Hon. Gordon Bilney. I especially thank the latter two for the thoughtful advice they have provided to me as I embark on my parliamentary career.

I am honoured and humbled to stand in this symbolic place as the representative of the people of Kingston. To serve in this House is an honour afforded to few, and we owe to ourselves and our constituents the duty to give the best we can in that service. Kingston is an outer metropolitan electorate in Adelaide that very much represents what is so great about our country. The electorate is bound by stunning coastline to the west and the picturesque Adelaide Hills to the east. We have some of the earliest settlements in South Australia, in Willunga, Old Noarlunga and Old Reynella. We have some of the newest housing developments. We have semirural areas and magnificent vineyards, and we have densely populated urban suburbs that many working families call home. It is also the traditional home of the Kaurna people. Together these aspects of the south create a unique community which, although diverse, has a strong sense of identity.

I was born at Flinders Medical Centre, which continues to be a leading hospital in the state and the most significant medical facility serving the people of my electorate. I studied at the Flinders University of South Australia, where I was also a student leader. These facilities were the herald of promise in Adelaide in the sixties, just as so much of my electorate is the locality of promise in a new century. My parents chose to settle in the inner south of Adelaide before I was born. I want to pay my greatest tribute to my parents, Leslie and Judith, who are both here today. They have been a constant support throughout my life and I certainly would not have made it to this place today without their love, help and guidance. I thank also my siblings, Shannon and Julian. The three of us have shared a strong bond growing up and, although we have all chosen different paths, we continue to share a close and supportive friendship in our adult life. My family have a long and proud tradition of service to our
country. Both of my grandfathers served in the Second World War, as did my grandmother. My brother serves today in the Royal Australian Air Force. I hope to emulate their commitment and dedication to our nation, not in uniform but in service of a different kind in the Australian parliament.

I put myself forward for federal parliament because I am passionate about social justice, about opportunity and about a fair go. The fair go is synonymous with the Australian way of life. It is sometimes used as an empty slogan, but for me it is much more than that. It embodies what I believe to be a truly Australian ethos, an ingrained belief that all citizens should be treated fairly, equally and compassionately and that they should be given the opportunity to be their best. This is demonstrated no more clearly than in the work laws that govern our offices, our shops and our factories. The last federal election was absolutely critical in determining that Australians will not tolerate a tearing down of their right to a fair go in the workplace. Australians endorsed the substance of the fair go, not the empty slogan. It is perhaps a cliche to say every election is the most important since the war, since no federal election is unimportant, but I do sincerely believe that the most recent election was a tremendous turning point, a great pivot in our national history. Had the Australian people accepted the previous government’s Work Choices, it would have signalled a sad repudiation of our nation’s egalitarianism and our commitment to a fair go. Industrial relations has been important to me for many years. I felt the hard edge of the 1996 workplace relations legislation when I was offered an AWA while employed by a large American retailer. I refused to sign and was no longer offered work despite my five years of loyal service. I was 19 years old at the time. Hence, industrial reform and the enforcement of AWAs is not merely an abstract concept for me. I know firsthand the pressure, the threats and the consequences a large and thoughtless employer can impose on a young and vulnerable worker. I see it as a fundamental duty for me as a parliamentarian to ensure other workers are not placed in that situation and do not suffer that affront to their rights at work. That is why I am proud to be a part of this government, a government going forward with fairness in the workplace.

At that time I was very grateful for the assistance given by the union I had joined to protect my rights. That union, the Shop Distributive and Allied Employees Association, helped me stand up for myself and demonstrated to me the virtue of sticking together to help each other. I have gone on to have a long association with this union as both an activist and an official. I make no apologies for having been a union official. I am extremely proud of the fact that I have helped thousands of people get a better deal at work and protect their interests in the workplace. Only those who have no genuine conception of real workplaces can think being a unionist is anything less than a fine and admirable preparation for parliamentary service. I am especially grateful that I had the opportunity to represent workers in the southern suburbs of South Australia, the area that I now have the honour to represent here. I take this opportunity to extend my thanks to those in the South Australian branch of the SDA who I had the pleasure to work with over many years, particularly the South Australian secretary, Don Farrell. I would not be standing here today without his support, encouragement, advice and belief in me. I would also like to thank current and former assistant secretaries Peter Malinauskas and the Hon. Bernard Finnigan, who over the years have also provided me with sage advice and words of wisdom.
To me a socially just society is like woven cloth, one in which many threads come together to make a cohesive whole, a unified fabric. I would like to briefly expand upon what I see as some of the key threads that need to be woven together to advance our nation into the 21st century. I am a defender of the role of government in improving the quality of life and opportunity available to all people. Governments cannot solve all problems, nor can governments make all decisions, but governments should, dare I say must, ensure the framework and foundations are there so that our citizens can.

I believe in the social contract, the notion that each individual is part of a society. Citizens pay their taxes and in return are entitled to expect from their government liberty, protection from harm, security and, where necessary, aid to their welfare. This is no more important than in the area of health care. As a qualified clinical psychologist I have had the good fortune to be intimately involved in providing front-line care to the mentally ill and emotionally troubled. We must continue to pay great attention to the needs of those requiring mental health care. Unlike many physical ailments, mental illness is not always visible, but it is no less serious. We must continue to improve our standard of care that promotes psychological wellbeing and mental health in our community.

When it comes to mental health and health care in general, I also believe we must invest in prevention as well as treatment. This is the only way we can advance a healthier, happier and more productive society. I consider it of the utmost importance that Australia enjoys a system of public health care that is the envy of the world. There are many challenges facing our system, such as rapidly changing technology and an ageing population; however, we must meet those challenges and maintain our hospitals and health system at their best. We must protect and defend the principle of universal health care, as it is unacceptable that a person’s financial position should determine whether they might live or die.

Maintaining and building infrastructure remains a priority for my electorate and is a key thread to improving quality of life for the people of Kingston. Just as much work was done in the sixties and seventies to lay the foundations for large-scale settlement in the south, so we must make a renewed effort in this new century. Providing greater rail services and better roads, building high-speed broadband and maintaining a supply of high-quality clean water are all essential infrastructure required not only in my electorate but also across the nation. I am confident the Rudd government, in conjunction with our colleagues at state and local level, can work to lay these much needed foundations for our future.

Intrinsically linked with infrastructure in the south is economic development. The need to focus on economic development in the south of Adelaide has only been emphasised by the announcement that the Mitsubishi plant is set to close at the end of next month. Losing one’s job represents much more than just missing out on a pay packet. For many of these workers their identity has been tied up with the quality cars that they made and the line in which they worked. I want to pay tribute to these workers who provided loyal service but were victims of circumstances beyond their control. Despite this sad circumstance we need to look to the future, the future for these workers and the future of the region. I would like to thank the Prime Minister, the minister for industry and the Premier of South Australia for making a commitment to invest in the south of Adelaide, an investment that I believe should be focused in the area of high-tech, innovative and sustainable industry.
The provision of quality education for all children is another vital thread in the woven cloth of social justice. I want to ensure that all young Australians can reach their potential so they in turn can one day also contribute to our nation’s growth and prosperity. I am particularly committed to working on early childhood education and I am proud that our government has seen fit to identify this area as a priority. My work as a psychologist has highlighted to me the critical need to provide our kids with the best possible start in life, ensuring that they have access to a high standard of education to allow them the best opportunities in those early formative years and to set them up for the future.

I have spoken of my family and former union colleagues. Of course, there are many others I need to thank—people who have played various roles in getting me to this moment. I would firstly like to thank my friend Brer Adams. It was through his enthusiasm that I became active in the political process and embraced politics as an avenue for change. I would like to thank my campaign team, who worked tirelessly over the election period. I especially thank my campaign manager, Chris Picton, whose commitment, drive and attention to detail ensured that we achieved the result we did in Kingston. Thanks go to my deputy campaign manager, Sonia Romeo, whose dedication and organisation ensured that the campaign ran smoothly on the ground. I express thanks also to Senator Dana Wortley for all her help. To Alex Dighton, Xanthe Kleinig, Tom Koutsantonis, the member for Wakefield, the honourable Minister for Youth and Minister for Sport, Senator Annette Hurley, Shane McNeil, Nimfa Farrell, and Chloe Fox: I am extremely grateful for all the moral support and well-considered advice you provided me through the campaign. Thanks also to my staff—Emily, Mary, Suzanne, Emmanuel and Aaron—for their hard work in servicing the constituents in the seat of Kingston.

I would like to express my gratitude to all Labor Party members and supporters in Kingston, who worked so hard on my campaign. I truly could not have won without their tireless help. I also acknowledge the Kingston Your Rights at Work group, who campaigned vigorously to ensure that the industrial relations debate remained in the forefront of voters’ minds during the election.

In closing, I wish to bring to mind the man after whom my electorate is named. Charles Cameron Kingston was a colourful character and a colossal figure in the story of Federation. Kingston was a pioneer who worked long and hard to see Australia become a nation. I often think about the aspirations of those men and women at the beginning of Federation. They had a vision for a strong, united country. They believed in the capacity of the Australian people for democracy, freedom and enterprise. How proud they would be to see us now, a strong and prosperous nation. It is a nation that contributes beyond its size, population or wealth in international affairs, a nation that enjoys tremendous unity and common purpose, and a nation that soon I hope will select its own head of state.

Our challenge, 100 years later, is to ensure that in another century our descendants can look back on the decisions we make now and feel that we too played our part in our nation’s journey, that we built on those early foundations, that we saw both the potential of the present and the challenges for the future and that we lived up to the promise. Just as those who lived in the early settlements in my electorate a century ago sought a better life, so do thousands now seek that better life in newer areas. Their aspiration for a better quality of life and a fair go for their children and their grandchildren is one that is shared.
by all generations. So it will be my task, with all the energy and ability I can muster, to do what I can to make that aspiration a reality, to play that part, to continue weaving that cloth of justice and to commit to those vital threads of fairness, of opportunity, of education and of care for the benefit of those I have the privilege to represent and to the advancement of our great nation.

Mr Pyne (Sturt) (7.19 pm)—Mr Speaker, it is good of you to come into the House to hear the humble member for Sturt make his contribution to the address-in-reply debate tonight. I look forward to feedback on my speech, perhaps at a later occasion when we might be chatting about the parliament over a cup of tea.

There is no doubt that the opening remarks that I would like to make in the address-in-reply debate are to thank the electorate of Sturt for re-electing me for the sixth time to the House of Representatives. In the Howard government, I had the privilege to serve as a minister and as a parliamentary secretary over four years. But it is a truism of politics that service at the electorate level is the most important privilege that is afforded a member of parliament.

If you are not a member of parliament, you cannot have those other opportunities to serve in higher office. Every three years or less, I face the opponents that Labor puts up against me, and every other time and again this time I am grateful that the electors of Sturt have chosen to re-elect me. Perhaps on this occasion it was not quite by the comfortable margin that I have enjoyed in the past. I won by 1,711 votes. Some of the members of this House who are busily congratulating their colleague were active in campaigning against me, which is a great shame. I thought there was a bit of camaraderie in this place but, unfortunately, at election time the Minister for Youth and Minister for Sport and others could not wait to get their talons into my electorate to try to remove me from it. But we fought the good fight and, fortunately for the electors of Sturt and for me, we were re-elected. I am very grateful for their support.

Often when you are a minister or a parliamentary secretary, you get given opportunities to do large things. When I was the Parliamentary Secretary for Health and Ageing, I was responsible for the mental health package, which was one of the more important tasks that I did as a member of the executive of the last government. It was worth about $1.9 billion. I think it is fair to say it has made and will continue to make a great difference to people in Australia who are suffering from a mental illness, not least because we opened up the Medicare safety net to psychologists—I note the member for Kingston, who has just spoken, talked about her role in psychology—and I think that has made a huge difference to those people in Australia who are suffering from a mental illness.

At a more micro level, every task that each person in my electorate asks me to do for them as their local member is critically important. Each one needs to be given the absolute attention that one can bring to it as a member of parliament. Over the last 15 years that I have served in this House, I hope that I have helped many of the constituents in my electorate, and I look forward to continuing to help them over the next three years.

During the election I did lay down a seven-point plan for improving the electorate of Sturt in particular. I wish to touch on that tonight in the address-in-reply debate. For many years one of the hoary chestnuts of politics in South Australia has been the Britannia roundabout. This is not just any kind of roundabout; this is a historic roundabout just outside my electorate but in fact servic-
ing my electorate and which used to be in my electorate. It has been a difficult area for traffic in South Australia and Sturt for a very long time. It is rated the most significant traffic red spot in South Australia by the Royal Automobile Association of South Australia, with in excess of 100 car collisions annually. For a very long time I have been campaigning and calling on the state government in South Australia to take the necessary action to improve the Britannia roundabout. This roundabout is not on the national highway and as a consequence misses out on the funds that the Commonwealth could bring to try and assist in fixing the Britannia roundabout. I have asked on many occasions the state government, circulated petitions, held public meetings and supported the Britannia roundabout action group. I have asked the state government to take the necessary steps to make it a safe place for the commuters, for the drivers of South Australia and Adelaide from my electorate into the city.

Mr Bevis—You had 11 years to list it as a black spot.

Mr PYNE—The member for Brisbane I think is quite rudely placed on the back bench by the new Prime Minister. Certainly if I had had that position I would have been on the front bench of any government that I led—not that he would get this opportunity, I would think. I would not be holding your breath, if I were you, Arch. I think that is highly unlikely. But I think the Prime Minister made a significant error of judgement in not putting the member for Brisbane on the front bench, and I welcome his support for my campaign to do something about the Britannia roundabout.

There are a number of options, but the two that are the most conducive to assisting with the problems of the Britannia roundabout are, first, installing traffic lights around the roundabout at a cost of about $9 million, which the state government could do relatively easily. It would not be the optimal solution, in my view. It would be a short-term solution but it would be at least some step in the right direction. The longer term solution, the better step, would be to start a feasibility study to build an underpass under the Britannia roundabout so that the traffic would be diverted substantially in the direction of Fullarton Road and Dequetteville Terrace. By doing so it would ameliorate substantially the likelihood of danger and damage to the residents of my electorate. That is one of the areas that I intend to continue to campaign on in this term.

Another one is to try to bring funds to the state schools and other schools in my electorate. The Howard government had an excellent record in the Investing in Our Schools Program of providing substantial funding to schools in my and many other electorates right across the country. In fact, only in the last few years the former government committed $2.7 million to Linden Park Primary School for its redevelopment; $132,000 to the Paradise Primary School for the upgrade of its music, drama and information technology facilities; funds for the upgrade of sports amenities at Athelstone Primary School, which cost $150,000; close to $47,000 to the Norwood Morialta High School under the Community Water Grants; and $65,000 for the installation of air-conditioning at Wandel Primary School. The East Marden Primary School received close to $50,000 to create an environmentally friendly play space, and $75,000 was provided to the Charles Campbell Secondary School for an all-weather shelter and an upgrade of the student support area. These are a few examples. Finally, the Gilles Plains Primary School received $75,000 for resurfacing of the playground. So over quite a period of time the Howard government injected millions and millions of dollars into local
schools in my electorate, making a difference to the services and the amenities provided to the students of those schools. I would like to see that continue.

There is tremendous work that could be achieved at the Hillcrest Primary School. That school needs new ovals and new play areas, new buildings and air-conditioning to provide support to one of the more depressed areas of the Adelaide metropolitan area, which is in my electorate. Hillcrest, Gilles Plains Primary School—these schools need continuous support from government. The state government has a direct responsibility, and the new Commonwealth government should not have abandoned the Investing in Our Schools Program, because it did provide a tremendous resource for those kinds of tasks that principals and their school councils thought would be of great value to the local schools. I would like to see that reinstated or, if it is not reinstated, another program which would support primary schools and secondary schools across my electorate, particularly Gilles Plains and Hillcrest. I know the Burnside Primary School, where my own children have been to school, is also in need of an upgrade. I hope it will get support from the new Commonwealth government in providing the kinds of services and amenities that the close to 700 students need at the Burnside Primary School.

One of the other areas that I have raised as one of my plans for Sturt in the next three years is keeping open the Glenside Hospital. The state government have a plan to essentially close the Glenside Hospital, which is the mental health hospital in Adelaide, and turn it into a smaller and in my view downgraded mental facility. They will introduce residential accommodation for the mentally ill, which I think is very important, but they are going to sell off huge parts of the Glenside Hospital campus for housing redevelopment. It is important public land which was willed to the people of South Australia in 1836 by our ancestors to be handed down to future generations. The state government’s plan is for a smaller mental health facility, for the South Australian Film Corporation to be moved to the old hospital, for the selling off of large parts of the public land at the campus, and for retail and commercial tenancies to be built on the site of the campus, which is quite unnecessary given the amount of retail and commercial accommodation that is already available in the Glenside precinct. This will not provide the kinds of services that those people who have a mental illness in South Australia need.

The local community in Glenside are quite rightly up in arms, and they are also up in arms because the state government has treated them with such complete contempt. I have been to three public meetings in my electorate—others have been held; I think there have been four or five—and at none of those has the state minister responsible for this, Gail Gago, been prepared to front up to the local residents of Glenside and explain her position. She has sent public servants. The public servants have come along and manfully—and I guess womanfully—defended the state government’s position. But the reality is, as anybody in this place knows, that public servants are not responsible for policies of governments. Public servants are required to introduce the policies set for them by government. But it is the government which is answerable to the people for those policies. And for the state minister for mental health services to be so cowardly as to be not prepared to front the public meetings, in my electorate, of local residents who are deeply concerned about the changes to Glenside Hospital I think is nothing short of an abject disgrace. Probably the member for Wakefield is a close friend and supporter of Gail Gago, the minister at the local level. They might not be in the same faction of
course—they are a bit split down there in South Australia. But, on the basis that they are all in the Labor Party family, he no doubt supports Gail Gago’s inattention to the constituents who are dead keen to meet with her and ask her questions in a public forum about what exactly she intends to do with the Glenside Hospital campus and to ask her to reconsider. That is an area on which I will continue to fight for my constituents over the next three years.

Another area is the periodic flooding of First Creek. There are four major creeks that run through my electorate from the foothills through to the sea, or to the Torrens. First Creek had a major flood in November 2005. It was not quite the same as the Queensland floods that we have been experiencing in the last few weeks, but it was a very substantial flood that washed out hundreds of homes of people who lived along First Creek in the catchment area and destroyed the roads and made them unusable. The state government has been very slow in repairing the roads adequately for the benefit of the residents who live along First Creek.

We need to have a long-term strategy for the diversion of water or the stopping of the periodic 50-year and 100-year floods that occur on First Creek. The former government initiated a program on this. We put money into the Adelaide and Mount Lofty Ranges Natural Resources Management Board. We allocated them money to start a program or conduct a feasibility study about what to do with the periodic flooding of First to Fifth creeks. The Norwood, Payneham and St Peters Council, an excellent council in my district, have been taking steps within their own area to mitigate the worst excesses of the flooding of First Creek, but it is a bigger responsibility than one council’s.

We started the project, and I call on the federal government and the South Australian members who are present here to continue it. The South Australian members present here have not quite got the same pull in the federal government as had South Australian members in the previous government. We had a number of ministers and cabinet ministers from South Australia. I think there is one cabinet minister in the Rudd Labor government from South Australia. At one stage there were four from South Australia under the previous government. Whatever small pull the present members have on the government, I call on them to use it. I hope that the member for Adelaide, into whose electorate First Creek flows, will take a great interest in the need to stop the periodic flooding of First Creek.

I notice the member for Makin looking quizzical. He has not given his maiden speech yet, I think, so he is not entitled to be rude to me from the government benches, though I will be kind to him. I notice him looking quizzical. But I can assure him that the residents in his area, to whom Fifth Creek would be of importance, are very keen to make sure that these kinds of projects are given maximum attention by the Labor government.

There are a couple of other areas I would like to touch on. One is the Campbelltown City Soccer Club. I was very fortunate to be able to gain a $1 million grant for the Campbelltown City Soccer Club based at Newton in my electorate. That grant is to provide facilities for the 400 families who are regular users of that sports and social club. The club had been allowed to languish for several decades using very substandard facilities. After a great deal of lobbying, the former Minister for the Arts and Sport, George Brandis, very helpfully managed to secure a grant for me of $1 million for that sports and social club.
The club members are very worried because Labor’s razor gang is planning cuts right across the government. It would be an absolute travesty of justice if that grant—which had already been announced and was relied upon by that club, its families and the people who live in that part of Newton in my electorate—were cut. Those people would miss out on their grant and on the change to their facilities, a change that would give state-of-the-art facilities for the children who use that sports club. It would be a travesty if they were to miss out on that because of the razor gang of the Minister for Finance and Deregulation, which is cutting into national security and defence and outrageously targeting projects like the Campbelltown sports and social club redevelopment. And so I am calling on the government to assure me, and through me my constituents in Newton, that the Campbelltown sports and social club grant is safe from the prying hands of the minister for finance and the Treasurer as they seek to try and pretend that somehow they have not been given the best economy in 107 years in the handover between the two governments.

Black spot funding is always an important issue in all electorates across the country. There are, surprisingly, even in metropolitan Adelaide, a number of black spots in my electorate which I think still need to be attended to. On Gorge Road, Athelstone, for example, where there is a valley which crosses to King George Avenue, there is a black spot which pedestrians find very dangerous to cross. It has railings and guard rails and so on, but still it is not adequate, and what they really need is a raised pedestrian crossing—oh, the Speaker is back. It is good to have you back, Mr Speaker. They were moving through the chair pretty quickly in my speech—being knocked over like flies. We need a raised pedestrian crossing in order to protect those pedestrians crossing Gorge Road at Athelstone.

There are two other black spots that I would like to mention of. One is OG Road at Klemzig. There was a very terrible accident involving a school student who was killed at that crossing late last year—a St Ignatius student. St Ignatius is my old school, my alma mater, and the Leader of the Opposition’s old school. OG Road at Klemzig needs attention under the Black Spot Program. There is a similar situation on Gorge Road at Athelstone near St Ignatius College. A lot of complaints and petitions have been raised by me and by local residents about the need to improve the black spot situation at Gorge Road, both at King George Avenue and at St Ignatius College—between the cemetery that exists there and the school.

There are a number of outstanding aspects of black spot funding on which Sturt could well do with support from the Commonwealth government. There are improvements, I am pleased to say, that are occurring at the North East Road and Sudholz Road intersection and the North East Road and Blacks Road junction through the Australian government’s Black Spot Program. We managed to secure funding from the last government to ensure that those issues in the northern part of my electorate are being properly dealt with.

Finally, I would like to touch on the subject of broadband, which has received a lot of airplay under Kevin Rudd. It is one of his many first priorities. He has a lot of first priorities. Education is his first priority. Economic management is his No. 1 priority. Defence and security were his first priority in November 2007. Inflationary pressures were his No. 1 priority in December 2007. Climate change was in November. Cooperative federalism was also his No. 1 priority. He has
six No. 1 priorities; he is quite the Houdini. I would ask him to come through with his promises to do with broadband. The federal government put huge resources into the broadband guarantee. I hope that is not under threat. Families and all Australians who live in the foothills in my electorate—in Campbelltown, in Newton, in Tea Tree Gully and through Hope Valley and Oakden—deserve proper access to broadband supported by the private sector. Whatever the government can do to fulfil its promises on broadband will be welcomed by the residents of my electorate, and it will build on the good work that we did in government with respect to the broadband guarantee. (Time expired)

The SPEAKER—Order! Before I call the member for Lindsay, I remind the House that this is the honourable member’s first speech. I ask the House to extend to him the usual courtesies.

Mr BRADBURY (Lindsay) (7.39 pm)—It is with great honour that I rise to speak for the first time in this House. In doing so, I wish to acknowledge the trust that the people of Lindsay have invested in me. Bounded at the east by Ropes Creek and South Creek, the Lindsay electorate extends across the Cumberland plain and the majestic Nepean River to the foothills of the Blue Mountains. At its northern boundary is Castlereagh, one of the historic Macquarie towns, and at its southern boundary is Mulgoa, named after the local Dharug tribe that once inhabited those parts. Wholly situated within the city of Penrith, the Lindsay electorate is part of a community that I have proudly served as a councillor and a former mayor for almost nine years. In this time, I have come to the clear and unmistakable conclusion that the greatest asset of this community is its people—hard working, generous, passionate and enterprising.

Apart from being the place where my wife and I are raising our four young children, this is the place where my ancestors first settled in this country. Around 170 years ago, my great-grandfather’s grandfather, Walter Bradbury, settled in the Penrith area. He had travelled to the new colony on convict escort duty as a member of the 80th Regiment of Foot, Staffordshire Volunteers. In 1843, Walter came to local prominence when, as a constable posted at Penrith, he was granted a substantial reward from the Governor for apprehending a group of deserters armed with muskets from the 99th Regiment at Parramatta. Acting on a secret tip-off, he apprehended a group of rogue elements who had been threatening the peace and order of the local community by engaging in despicable and clandestine acts. These events bear a striking resemblance to the events that took place in Lindsay in the final days of the 2007 election campaign.

A century after Walter Bradbury’s arrival, my mother and her parents, Anthony and Paola Tedesco, came to these shores from war-torn Malta in search of new opportunities. They were a part of that other great wave of migration that enriched our nation in the years after the Second World War. My family’s story encapsulates only two of the many different threads of that rich tapestry that is the story of the great region that has been my home since birth. As the place that one in 10 Australians call home, Western Sydney is now the third largest regional economy in Australia. It also represents one of the most diverse and cosmopolitan regions in this nation.

But, before becoming all of these things, Western Sydney was home to the first Australians. I pay my respects to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, who I recognise as the traditional owners or custodians of the lands and waters of this country. As the first member for Lindsay to do so, I
add my voice to the apology issued by this parliament and say sorry to our Aboriginal people for past mistreatment, including the stolen generations. Before European settlement, the local Aboriginal tribes called the area that now constitutes Penrith city Muru Marak, which means ‘mountain pathway’. Indeed, it is Penrith’s proximity to the Blue Mountains that provides a central reference point to its history, which is shared by both its Indigenous and its non-Indigenous inhabitants.

After setting out from his South Creek farm in 1813, Gregory Blaxland, along with William Lawson and WC Wentworth, became the first European to cross the Blue Mountains. Where other Europeans had failed, Blaxland’s strategy of following the high ridges proved successful. Apart from marking out Penrith as a place from which great journeys might be launched, the Blue Mountains crossing opened up more land for the young colony, which had been fast running out of grazing land for its cattle. The real historical significance of the Blue Mountains crossing is that it became the expedition that allowed the young colony to overcome the geographical barrier that had stopped it from further expansion and growth.

I passionately believe that, in the same way that the first crossing of the Blue Mountains helped the infant colony scale the heights of one of the natural barriers that had prevented it from reaching its potential, it is the role of government to help all individuals overcome the barriers that prevent them from reaching their potential and fulfilling their destiny. In short, the objective of government action should always be, as former Labor Prime Minister Andrew Fisher once said, to ensure that every Australian is given ‘the fullest opportunity to rise in life’. This is why I believe in the power of government. It is a simple but enduring belief: that governments have the power to change people’s lives and that governments are capable of creating and extending opportunities to all. This is the one conviction that has guided me in my life and the one belief that has led me to this place.

I believe in the relative efficiency of the market but I also believe that our nation and all of our people will only realise their full potential with the carefully targeted intervention of government. Where hope and optimism are shackled by disadvantage and despair, government must intervene. Where ability and promise are restrained by dysfunction and disincentive, government must intervene. Where opportunity and competition are frustrated by market power and privilege, government must intervene. To realise our nation’s potential, we must liberate the talents and abilities of all of our people. Australia will only realise its potential when every person in this country is given the opportunity to bridge the gap between what they are and what they are capable of becoming.

We must rebuild the architecture of the state to align it more closely with the vision we hold for our nation’s future. We must overcome inertia and indifference with investment and incentive. We must entrench reward for economic and social contribution and we must use the instruments of public policy to discourage anything less. Most importantly, we must reach for a future where every person in this country is valued. Every person has a contribution to make and it is the responsibility of government to make sure they can. This is the moral imperative that dictates that government must do all that it can to empower people to realise their potential.

Whilst it is the responsibility of government to provide opportunities, the social compact demands that individuals make the
most of these opportunities. Government must invest in the social infrastructure needed to empower individuals and communities to take advantage of the opportunities that are created. A strong and effective state must be accompanied by a strong society underpinned by resilient communities. Governments can strengthen communities but they cannot do the job on their own. Ultimately, communities are defined by the inter-relationships between the people that comprise them. Family, however described, is at the very heart of this notion of community.

We must promote policies that support and sustain the relationships between people, their families and their communities, because a strong and cohesive society is the only foundation upon which the architecture of the state can be securely built. We must embrace the benefits of investing in our social infrastructure. We must act upon the evidence of the long-term benefits of prevention and early intervention. We must equip our parents and grandparents, our families and our communities with the tools required to build resilience and social cohesion.

We must accept the importance of early childhood education. We know from the work of the Nobel laureate Professor James Heckman that the events of a person’s first 60 months of their life will be more important in their emotional and intellectual development than anything that happens in their next 60 years. Government has a greater role to play in these formative years. Every child must be nurtured and provided with the access to early learning that success in life requires. Where families and communities are denying children these opportunities, government must take some responsibility. Family visits, parental support and education, access to early learning, breakfast clubs, literacy programs and mentoring programs are all essential.

Apart from the moral imperative, there are also powerful economic reasons why government should provide opportunities to all. If we are to compete in a global economy with nations that are 50 times our population, we simply cannot afford to give up on a single person. This is why it is in our national economic interest to provide opportunities to help every person unlock their full potential. If we are to realise our economic potential as a nation, we must create opportunities for lifelong learning and training. We must lift participation in the workforce and the voluntary sector. We must restore incentive to our tax system. We must take greater responsibility for our health and wellbeing. We must invest in the arteries of the modern economy with new and upgraded infrastructure.

In part, this is what Labor’s education revolution is about. It is about providing opportunities to overcome the barriers that prevent us from reaching our economic potential as a nation. It is about recognising the realities of globalisation. With globalisation we are facing a world where our nation’s prospects are inextricably linked to our ability to mobilise the skills and talents of our people. It is about recognising that we cannot compete with the armies of unskilled labour emerging in India and China, nor can we fight the march of automation and technological change. But the opportunities that globalisation presents are already beginning to become available to those who have benefited from the opportunities provided by government over the last 30 years. To the highly skilled, the global economy offers almost unlimited opportunities. Young Australians with highly developed skills are in great demand right across the globe. For many, the global economy has elevated their prospects of social mobility to a new stratosphere. With these people, the challenge is to ensure that their skills, their enterprise and
their creativity are not lost to another country.

That is why Australia must not lose sight of its comparative advantages. We have a reputation for being home to some of the greatest cities in the world, and our lifestyle is second to none. But under the pressures of ad hoc growth and repeated failures to deliver the infrastructure that our cities require, the livability of our cities is under threat. Gridlock on our roads and freeways and inadequate and limited choice of public transport are all combining to have a corrosive impact on social and family life. These transport and infrastructure challenges that threaten the livability of our cities and suburbs must not be seen as peripheral to the great economic challenge of globalisation, because they are at its very heart.

These and other barriers that prevent our nation from reaching its potential require new policy approaches and new leadership. In the same way as the young colony’s expansion required the leadership of the Blue Mountains explorers, our nation needs to embark upon a new expedition, driven by new leadership—leadership that nurtures, cultivates and harvests the talents and abilities of our people, leadership that looks into the eyes of each Australian and sees success as their destiny rather than failure as their fate. It is leadership that expunges the shadow cast by the politics of fear and illuminates our nation with a message of hope.

This is the leadership that Australians have always looked to the Australian Labor Party to provide. As the great custodian of the progressive political tradition in this nation, the Labor Party has always dedicated its energies to the pursuit of social justice, fairness and the creation and extension of opportunities for and to all. As Labor we believe that all Australians, regardless of their circumstances, should have the opportunity to liberate their talents and realise their potential. With hard work, discipline and determination, no Australian should be denied reward in a society that allows them to fully exploit their talents and rise in life. These values constitute our moral and political compass and guide us in the pursuit of our work. We are committed to delivering a strong economy and a fair society in the social democratic tradition, with hard heads and kind hearts.

It is because of these values that we support an education revolution, fairness and decency in our workplaces, universal access to health care and accessible and affordable child care. These are the values that will guide us as we confront the challenges that lie ahead for the nation. These challenges include responding to the nation’s skills crisis, restoring fairness to our workplaces, addressing the balance between work and family, building better cities whilst fighting the housing affordability crisis, and improving transport and other physical infrastructure.

We must close the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. We must rebuild our hospitals and health system. We must confront the pressures of an ageing population and fight the scourge of drug and alcohol abuse. We must secure sustainable solutions to our energy needs and confront the challenges of climate change and water. We must redesign our Federation and improve our confidence in the institutions of governance. We must restore our leadership role in the international community and defend our nation from the threat of terrorism.

These are some of the great challenges to which I dedicate myself on behalf of the people of Lindsay. As I begin my work in this parliament, confronting these challenges as a legislator, I am inspired by the words of Robert F Kennedy, who said:
An honourable profession calls forth the chance for responsibility and the opportunity for achievement; against these measures politics is a truly exciting adventure.

Labor’s victory in Lindsay was the product of the hard work of many people who have contributed to my last three campaigns. I thank all of the party members, the branches, the union members and members of the local community, some of whom are in the gallery this evening. I thank them for having been involved in this victory.

In particular, I wish to thank Senator Steve Hutchins, who has been by my side throughout the last three campaigns. I also wish to thank Mark Arbib, Karl Bitur, Diane Beamer, Chris Bowen, my councillor colleagues, especially Pat Sheehy, Greg Davies and John Thain, Ron Mulock and Faye Lo Po, Prue Guillaume, Justin Koek, Julia Hine, Linda Bourke, Todd Carney, David Latham, Camden Gilchrist, the Allison and McKeown families, Russell Boserio, Steve and Sheryl Vine, Sandra Lyle, Gai and Michael Maskell, Paul and Elaine Talbert, Keven Cross, the Genovese family, Rien and Margaret Koek, Bill Buckley, Brian and Dorothy O’Farrell, Lois and Colin Fisher, Russell Baker, Matt Hazell, Mark Greenhill, Ann Keating, Angela Humphries, New South Wales Young Labor and my many supporters from the local Filipine, Indian, Nepalese and Sri Lankan communities.

I wish to acknowledge the outstanding contribution of the men and women of the Australian trade union movement for their role in ensuring the election of the Rudd Labor government. In particular, I wish to thank Michael Williamson, Gerard Hayes, Mike O’Donnell and the entire team at the HSU, Tony Sheldon and the TWU, Andrew Ferguson and the CFMEU, Geoff Derrick and the FSU, the ETU and Matt Thistlethwaite, Mary Yaager and the Lindsay Your Rights at Work team. Let there be no mistake: our victory represents a clear mandate from the working families of Lindsay to repeal the Howard government’s extreme and unfair Work Choices laws.

I wish to thank my old mates Scott Connolly, Matthew Martyn-Jones, John Degen and Ben Heraghty, my good friend Robert Ishak and his team at William Roberts and my former colleagues at my old law firm, Blake Dawson, especially those in the tax group.

Most importantly, I thank my family, who are in the gallery tonight—some of them behind sound-proof glass. Family has been the greatest inspiration in my life. To my beautiful wife, Kylie, and my four beautiful children, Anna, Helena, Rose and Nicholas: I thank you for giving me this opportunity and I hope that I can honour your selflessness through the quality of the contribution I make to public life.

To my parents, John and Carmen: I hope I make you as proud of me as I am of you. In my successes, I see your sacrifices. To my siblings and their spouses, Natalie and my good friend Troy, two of my greatest supporters, with whom I have learnt so much in politics, Catherine, Trish and Charlie, and Stephen: thank you for your support and for giving me some great political advice around the dinner table. To Michael and Beverley Addison: thank you for your tremendous support. To Babs, Ben and Flo, Michael, Byron, Marcus and Hayley, and Wendell: thank you for your support. I also thank my extended family of uncles, aunts and cousins, many of whom worked hard for me on many election days. All of you have made this day possible. I also acknowledge the assistance provided to me by Lorraine Stacker from Penrith Library.

I acknowledge the two previous members for Lindsay—in particular, my good friend Ross Free, who was also first elected to serve...
in this parliament on his third attempt. I also acknowledge Tony Luchetti and the great Joseph Benedict Chifley, who both served my local community before the seat of Lindsay was created. Like Ben Chifley, I had the great privilege of being educated by the Patrician Brothers, whom I also acknowledge and thank today.

After two earlier unsuccessful attempts to reach this place, I know only too well that I am here to serve the people of Lindsay and will only remain here for as long as I continue to enjoy their trust and confidence. As I stand in this parliament today, I am reminded of the words of Gregory Blaxland, who, upon crossing the Blue Mountains, remarked:

This expedition, which has proved so completely successful, resulted from two previous attempts. Like Blaxland, I know that, after having just overcome the seemingly insurmountable, now the real work begins.

The SPEAKER—Order! Before I call the honourable member for Robertson, I remind the House that, whilst not her first speech in the Australian parliament, this is the honourable member’s first speech in this House. I ask the House to extend to her the usual courtesies.

Ms NEAL (Robertson) (8.02 pm)—I acknowledge your elevation, Mr Speaker, and congratulate you, as is the tradition. I can assure you I will respect your ruling and comply in all things, as you would expect. I rise to speak for the first time as the federal member for Robertson. It has been a long and difficult journey. But it is the fulfilment of a calling I have had all my adult life. Firstly, I must thank the people of Robertson. They have elected me to represent them here in federal parliament and I feel honoured. I am dedicated to living up to the faith that they have shown in me. I feel privileged to be a part of the largest Labor government in Australia’s history, led by an energetic Prime Minister of fresh ideas and with great compassion for those who are disadvantaged in our community. His leadership is a large part of why I chose to seek election at this time and to help end the aridness of the Howard years.

Most of all I am proud of the Australian people, who at this election rejected the exploitation of workers and embraced a fairer relationship between employees and employers, who rejected the politics of division and embraced unity, who rejected self-seeking opportunism and embraced a caring society, who turned their backs on mean-heartedness and embraced generosity of spirit, who rejected the short-term exploitation of our environment and chose to protect our natural beauty and to make plans to deal with the challenges of climate change. This breadth of spirit was vividly illustrated last Wednesday with our national apology to the stolen generation, and I look forward to its continuation. I am ambitious for an enlightened social democracy built on the goodwill of the Australian people and formed on the foundations of a strong and vibrant economy.

The seat of Robertson was one of the only three federal seats named after premiers. It was named after Sir John Robertson, the small landholder’s friend. He had a prodigious career in both length and achievement. Like me, he served in both the upper and lower houses but, unlike me, he served in the New South Wales parliament and was a staunch opponent of Federation. Robertson in 1901 was a large rural seat covering a large chunk of rural New South Wales, stretching from Dubbo to just west of Newcastle. Over time, as the population of the area increased, the seat moved east to outer metropolitan Newcastle and then south to become the Central Coast seat in New South Wales that it is today. Robertson is located on the coast between Sydney and Newcastle.
but has a character all of its own. In the south it is bordered by the Hawkesbury River, in the east by the Pacific Ocean, in the north by Terrigal. It stretches westward to include the hinterlands of Mangrove Mountain and Peats Ridge. The Central Coast is a region of beaches and waterways, with villages and towns scattered between them. In the last two decades that I have lived there, it has become more urbanised but it still retains its unique quality. I know it is a tradition to say that your seat is of unique beauty, but in this case it truly is.

I am the 12th person to hold the seat of Robertson, but it would be accurate to say that the first member to represent Robertson as a Central Coast seat was Barry Cohen. He held the seat for 21 years, from 1969, and was certainly a local champion. His relentless pursuit of local interest is certainly something that I would like to replicate, as I would like to replicate his longevity. I also wish to acknowledge the contribution of Frank Walker, who held the seat from 1990 to 1996 and also had a long and productive career in the New South Wales parliament. I pay tribute to Jim Lloyd, my opponent in the last election, who represented his constituents with genuine concern and ran a strong and vigorous campaign. I wish him and his wife, Kerry, well in retirement and hope they have the opportunity to enjoy the Hawkesbury River that I know they love so well.

I wish to particularly thank the large number of volunteers, both within the Labor Party and outside, who helped me with the enormous task of changing the minds of some 5,000 people. Many thought it could not be achieved, and I would have to say that there were moments when I wondered. I would like to thank my campaign director, Donna Judd, who kept the whole show on the road and sacrificed an enormous amount of time. And of course I have to thank her forever tolerant husband, Graeme, who shared a lot of the burden in terms of time. It is impossible, as many have said, to name all the volunteers and those who helped, but there are some that I must. I would have to say, in naming them, that there are many names that I will spare you, as it would take almost my entire time to do that. I thank Harish Velji, Tom Hollywood, Cathy and Roland Soder, Helen Myers, Paul Collimore and Paul Sullivan, Paul Lister, John Gifford, Chris Calbert, Nick Jacomas, Dave Humphries, Bill Stewart, Jack Woodward, Emma Furness, Kerry Stratford, Mary and Anthony Gooley, Paul Wilson, Andrew Clark, Alison Nolan, Bill Cong, the Sidirooulos family and Jane Stafford. They really are just a few of the many people who helped.

I acknowledge with enthusiasm the assistance of the Your Rights at Work team, led by Mary Yaager and John Robertson from Unions New South Wales. I also have pleasure in thanking the many unions that assisted my campaign: the Transport Workers Union, particularly Bruce Penton and Tony Sheldon; the Australian Workers Union; the NUW; the ETU, particularly Jim Macfadyen, who is also Gosford City Council Mayor; the USU; the Health Services Union—a member of which has joined us in my northern neighbouring seat of Dobell; the SDA; the FSU; the RBTU; the AMWU; the Nurses Federation; and the CFMEU all helped and all contributed to the ultimate result. I would like to thank the New South Wales branch of the ALP, of which I have been a member for 27 years. My particular thanks go to Sam Dastyari. I would also like to thank many of my colleagues for their assistance, in particular Senators Steve Hutchins, Michael Forshaw and Ursula Stephens, who gave me advice and assistance and, of course, have been my very long-term friends. Many of the other members of this House have also been colleagues and friends for a great many
years. I would also like to thank New South Wales minister Tony Kelly and his wife Anne. I immensely enjoyed working with Tony, and already I am missing the rest of the Kelly gang—who worked there also—a great deal.

It is traditional for new members to reflect on their background and to put forth their personal philosophy and the issues on which they will focus in their future years in parliament. I apologise in advance if I am somewhat indulgent, as the opportunity to make such a personal presentation, uninterrupted, does not occur very often. My maternal grandfather, Oliver Hoskin, was born just before the turn of the century. He left, as a 19-year-old telephone mechanic, to fight in Gallipoli, Palestine and Fromelles with many of his generation. He returned home and survived long enough to marry, live through the Great Depression and produce four children before expiring from the effects of mustard gas suffered during the Great War. My grandmother, Georgina Smith, had an iron will and a tendency to be frugal. She supported her children as a nurse and ensured that all her children were well educated—three at university and my mother at teachers college. This high regard for education, and the value of sacrificing to achieve it, is certainly a core principle of my own.

I imagine that my paternal grandfather, Fred Neal, met his wife, my grandmother Grace, an upstairs maid—it is very difficult to imagine that such a short time ago upstairs maids were quite common—while making deliveries as a grocer’s assistant in the Darling Downs of Queensland. He remained a grocer’s assistant all his life. He was a simple and kind man who believed that caring for your family and carrying out your obligations to your community were the only things that really mattered. They lived all their lives in Australia Street, Allora, a town of some 300 people. In fact, by an interesting coincidence, it is the same street where the grandparents of the member for Solomon lived. I do not know what it indicates, but I think it indicates something. My grandmother still lives in Allora at the age of 93.

My grandfather believed that all men should learn to cook, as he said this skill saved his life when, being one of the few men who could, he performed this vital role during the Second World War. My parents, both teachers, met and married in Dalby, Queensland. My father completed a commerce degree while teaching and raising three young children with my mother. During the early 1960s, a policy of recruiting from regional Australia was introduced in the federal Public Service, and the Australian diplomatic service was opened up to those outside Sydney and Melbourne. This led to my father’s selection to join the Department of Overseas Trade.

We moved to Canberra and then commenced a period of travel to a range of places in Europe and Asia. I once calculated that I moved house 13 times before entering high school. Some people on the other side have indicated that this was a matter of some stress for them, but I would have to say that nothing could be further from the truth for me. Every move was an adventure which I learned a great deal from. I learned about the advantages of Australia’s climate, stable democracy, rule of law and a government administration generally free of corruption—despite what the media might say. I learned about the depth of poverty and the impact of lack of access to education and health services on many people in other parts of the world. Most of all, it taught me that change and new ideas are a positive thing and they should be welcomed.

I would like to thank my parents for their care and the opportunities they gave me. My father taught me, by example, that hard work...
is an essential element of all success and that the ‘in’ crowd is not always right. My mother taught me to stand up and be counted. I would also like to thank my twin brother, Chris, and my sister, Catherine, for keeping me down to earth and laughing with me. Sometimes you need that bit of help. I acknowledge my Botticelli cupids, Alexander and Julian, who are in the gallery today. I am sorry for embarrassing them. They have grown up to be extraordinary young men, and I am extremely proud of them. I also thank in particular my husband, to whom I said on the last occasion and I still hold this to be true: as far as I am concerned, he is always on the side of the angels.

My life has certainly been a kaleidoscope. I consider myself blessed to have had such wide-ranging experiences that allow me to balance and reflect on both the harmonies of our Australian community and the sometimes conflicting views and ideals. I was born in 1963, which makes me, I understand, both a baby boomer and generation X. I have been both employer and employee. I have worked as a union officer for the Federated Iron-workers Association of Australia, where I learned about the need for collective bargaining and the unfairness visited on workers by some unscrupulous employers. I have had the opportunity to meet both Laurie Short and Harry Hurrell, both legends of the labour movement. I have also had a career as a lawyer—which, as has been suggested, is a much-maligned profession.

Contrary to the views of many of those on the opposition side, they are not the only ones to sample the highs and lows of small business. I have established two businesses and have mortgaged my home, worked very long hours and received little reward for the first few months of operation. The life is demanding—but of course there are rewards—but that should never be an excuse to exploit your employees. I have lived most of my life in an urban environment but I attended high school in Orange in the central west of New South Wales. There I learned many skills that I am sure will be useful for my political life. I learned to ride a horse, drove cattle, drench sheep, pick apples, milk cows—both by hand and machine—and, from my grandmother, how to kill a chicken using only my hands.

The accumulated knowledge of these experiences has led me to believe that all that is required for evil to triumph is for good men—or, in this case, women—to do nothing. I hope it will be said at the end of my time here in parliament that I did not stand back and let an injustice occur. At the core of everything we do here should be the objectives of social justice, social cohesion and equality of opportunity. Reform is why we are here. During my initial time here I will pursue a number of priorities. My first, of course, is the repeal of the Work Choices legislation and the abolition of AWAAs and the unfairness that flowed from them. This has already commenced, with the introduction of the bill to put this into effect. I have to say that I am thrilled and I am sure my constituents back in Robertson feel the same way. Another of my priorities is infrastructure. I believe that Australia is at a crisis point with a lack of infrastructure, which is strangling our economic growth and limiting the potential of our population. This is due to a failure to invest in the last decade due to a short-term view and myopic outlook that the market will provide.

This crisis is nowhere more evident than on the Central Coast, where a fast-growing population has outstripped our infrastructure and threatened our environment. I have ambitions for the Central Coast and I believe these are shared by the people who reside there. To bring these to fruition we need to invest in our infrastructure, both built and social. I am pleased to see the Infrastructure Australia bill is being given priority. This
will help promote this much-needed investment in infrastructure. I am particularly concerned to see that our broadband infrastructure is brought up to a level comparable with the rest of the developed world and that the regions, like Robertson, have the same access to digital information as the capital cities have.

I am also enthusiastic about being part of the Rudd Labor government’s education revolution and to see the way we educate our young people brought into the 21st century. I am concerned about two aspects in particular. If our children, before they enter school and in the first three years of school, do not develop the basic skills upon which to build the rest of their education, they can carry this deficit for the rest of their lives, being denied the quality of life they deserve and denying the community the quality of contribution they could provide. Labor is committed to providing 15 hours of preschool education to all children before they start school. This will go a long way towards dealing with this problem. I would also like to ensure, when children’s skills are underdeveloped in the first few years of their education, that the underlying causes are identified and remedial action is taken. It is not enough to say that we will look to see whether they have those skills; we have to invest the funds to actually remedy the situation.

I am also particularly concerned with the skills development of those aged between 15 and 25 years. Many in this age group fall between the gaps in their transition from school to work. Those who do not complete school or some other tertiary training are twice as likely as the rest of the population to become unemployed in later life. This is a waste of talent that the nation cannot afford. Any civilized society certainly has a duty to train and educate their young people in the transition from dependence to independence. Surely it is also our ability as a community to provide education and training for our young that is a real test of a civilized society. It is certainly an imperative in terms of our economic policies of maintaining growth and containing inflation. A competitive economy requires a skilled workforce. It is my objective to create a guarantee that every young person may continue in formal education, training or employment when leaving school. We cannot continue to waste our young talent. Finally, I am particularly concerned about the environmental impact on our coastlines, the pressure of development and the need to manage and protect these fragile ecosystems so that we do not lose the beauty that we so much enjoy.

These are my first priorities but there are a number of matters that also fill me with passion. I believe that housing is the fundamental core of a decent life. The failure to ensure access for many people to a home and the increasing number of homeless are a blight on our humanity. I believe that we should assist families to raise and educate their children, particularly at the time that they are born. I believe that Australia should not compete in the world by engaging in a race to the bottom by lowering wages but that we should compete by creating a smarter and more skilled workforce. I believe that our elderly should enjoy a secure and stimulating retirement and should have access to a nursing home when they require it. I believe we have a responsibility to engage in the reduction of poverty worldwide, and I embrace our commitment to increasing foreign aid to 0.5 per cent of GDP. I believe that because it is what is required of a humane society and also because I am convinced that deprivation leads to war, suffering and death. I believe Australia should focus more on our island neighbours in the Pacific region and provide greater assistance in developing democratic governments and the rule of law in that re-
region. I believe that Australia can do better. That is why I am here.

Mr KELVIN THOMSON (Wills) (8.23 pm)—I congratulate the member for Robertson on her fine first speech in this House and I wish her a long, productive and rewarding time here. There are a number of members who are chicken killers and I will pass their names on to her on another occasion!

I want to express my gratitude to the people of the Wills electorate for giving me the honour of representing them in the 42nd Parliament. I had a tough year last year after my resignation as shadow Attorney-General and I want to thank my family, friends and supporters for the way they rallied around me and helped me both personally and in mounting a first-class campaign for my re-election. I will mention just two. First is my brother, Lex, who is referred to by my staff as Superman. He is in charge of the corflute signs, and all I can say is that I am glad he is on my side. Second is Noel Crawley, a tireless and cheerful campaign worker who was recently injured in a car accident. We all wish Noel a full recovery.

I thank the people of Wills who came out to support me so strongly that the electorate of Wills moved from being a 67 per cent two-party preferred Labor seat to now being a 72.5 per cent two-party preferred Labor seat. In other words, not only did everyone who voted for me in 2004 stick with me, but one in six people of those who had voted Liberal in 2004 came across to vote for me on this occasion. It means a lot to me that they returned me with a much increased majority. Wills is now the fourth strongest Labor seat in the country. This is an emphatic vote of confidence and I have no intention of wasting it. I intend to do everything I can to lift and build the community in which I live and to make Wills a better place for all of us who live there.

I also intend to pursue a vigorous agenda for change in this nation. There is great hope and optimism in the air. There is excitement and enthusiasm. This is a wonderful time to be in the parliament. There are both big opportunities and big challenges. People have high expectations of us as a new Labor government, and so they should. People should always have high expectations of their representatives.

One of the things I most want to see in Australia is an active, well-informed, engaged citizenry making demands of their governments. In this regard, I want to single out for praise and commend to the parliament the work of GetUp!, who have sent us a people’s agenda for the new parliament. I have long regretted the decline of public meetings, the declining membership of political parties, the declining membership of progress associations and the general decline in vehicles for civic engagement. It seems to me that the rise of TVs, DVDs and the internet has turned most of us into passive consumers, sitting in front of a screen and waiting to be entertained rather than getting out there and making things happen. Our political culture has suffered. It has become top down rather than bottom up, leadership obsessed, driven by large campaign donations, lobbyists and focus groups, with a conspicuous lack of dialogue and a lack of serious, genuine discussion and discourse about the direction Australia and the world need to take.

Into this quite serious hole in our democratic jacket has stepped GetUp! It is a national, independent political movement of almost 250,000 Australians. It uses the latest online and offline technologies to break down the barriers between the governed and the governing, and its vision is of a progressive Australia, one with social justice, economic fairness and the environment at its core. In December, thousands of Australians
met simultaneously in 327 ‘Vision GetTogethers’—strangers who share simply a postcode and a concern for their country, meeting in almost every electorate in the nation to decide their priorities for the recently elected parliament. In January, the results of their work were compiled and voted on by a staggering 32,500 Australians from every state and territory, Australians of all ages and political persuasions. Three issues stood out as the most important priorities for this parliament. The first is ‘becoming environmentally sustainable’ and combating climate change. Given my background as someone who became interested in politics as a result of my interest in environmental issues, I think that this is not surprising; it is very significant that this has stood out as the most important priority. The second is ‘making high-quality primary, secondary and tertiary public education accessible to all Australians’, and the third is ‘respecting the rights and improving the living standards of Indigenous Australians’. I will say a little more about these in turn.

The first issue is about becoming environmentally sustainable and combating climate change. The Australians who participate in GetUp! want meaningful action to combat climate change and sustainably manage our water, forests and marine habitats. GetUp! are overwhelmingly and urgently concerned about climate change over any other issue facing the nation. They want strong and binding emissions reduction targets by 2020, federal funding for research into renewable and alternative energy, and a robust carbon tax or trading scheme that does not favour large polluters. They are happy to pay more for energy needs to meet this end, although they point to the need for measures to ensure this is equitable. They want Australia to be a world leader in this sphere—leadership that will create the culture change necessary domestically and set the example internationally to avert a climate disaster. They strongly call on the government not just to legislate and fund but to proactively lead the way in creating a culture of sustainability. They finish with a quote:

We have seven years to cap our CO2 emissions. It is an emergency. All hands on deck.

That is exactly right. Global warming is a planetary emergency. It requires all hands on deck and that no stone be left unturned.

**ADJOURNMENT**

The SPEAKER—Order! It being 8.30 pm, I propose the question:

That the House do now adjourn.

Paradise Point Bowls Club

Mr ROBERT (Fadden) (8.30 pm)—I have spoken before in this House about the great electorate of Fadden being the fastest-growing electorate in the nation. Indeed, community groups, volunteer organisations and sporting groups are the backbone of Fadden. They provide the social fabric and the opportunity for families and individuals to get together, which are so important in the local area. I am delighted to have recently been asked to be patron of the Paradise Point Bowls Club, which has serviced its local area since 1974 and has over 800 playing members. It is one of those great community organisations that work tirelessly to bring the community together. At a time when community can be seen to be coming apart at the seams, organisations like the Paradise Point Bowls Club are out there bridging the gap and working to bring the community together, with a great focus on social interaction as well as on competition within their chosen sport. Since 1974 the Paradise Point Bowls Club have raised substantial amounts of money for both CareFlight and the Salvation Army. They endeavour to have older players teach senior students from Coombabah State High School how to bowl. This not only increases the students’ knowledge of a
great sport at which we do very well in the Olympics—and I am looking forward to Beijing in six months—but, more importantly, connects the more established citizens of Paradise Point to the new generation in Coombabah. The Paradise Point Bowls Club also have regular social bowling competitions where members of the community can get together, especially more senior members.

I contend that it is these kinds of organisations that make an area enjoyable to live in, by providing a social outlet for people of the community to gather. I also raise the point that the previous Howard government so recognised the importance of these organisations that it established the volunteer small equipment grant to help support these organisations and their great work. In my electorate of Fadden this scheme has helped support many organisations ranging from the Paradise Point Scout Group to the Labrador and Pacific Pines Junior Australian Football Club. I note that the Labor Party during the election campaign promised to maintain the program, albeit with some changes. However, local sporting and community organisations like the Paradise Point Bowls Club are yet to see any evidence of this changed program.

Before coming in here this evening, I took the liberty of looking at the GrantsLINK website, which is meant to be the public’s best source for finding out about all funding and grant assistance from all levels of government. Looking at the federal funding assistance, I did a search for volunteer grants. You can imagine my surprise when the site directed me to a website dealing with the funding of the last round whilst Mal Brough was the minister. This afternoon my staff called the hotline. The hotline is advertised by the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs. If you call, you will be told that something is coming. They do not know when and they cannot tell you the details. For the likes of the Paradise Point Bowls Club and many other organisations in Fadden—which I remind the House is the fastest-growing electorate in the nation—to go to the GrantsLINK website and receive information from the previous government, to call the hotline and be told, ‘Something is coming; we do not know when and we cannot tell you the details,’ is frankly not good enough. Volunteer organisations form the backbone of this nation and the backbone of the electorate of Fadden. If they are to continue to do the good work that we need them to do in this nation, they need our support and they need the government’s support. Far be it from me to suggest that the government is not listening because the GrantsLINK website sends them into the abyss and the hotline number tells them, ‘Nothing is available; we are still waiting.’ But may I encourage the Rudd government to move expeditiously to put new funding opportunities in place so that worthy organisations can apply and these community organisations can continue to do great work. I salute them all, especially the Paradise Point Bowls Club, for their work in the electorate of Fadden.

National Primary Industry Centre for Science Education

Mr SIDEBOTTOM (Braddon) (8.35 pm)—In September 2006 DEST funded a scoping study entitled A strategy to attract young people into careers in primary industry through tertiary science. It was built on a model funded by the Grains Research and Development Corporation and has been in operation in Tasmania through the University of Tasmania since 1998 and in Western Australia since 2003. The model has been piloted in the Riverland and in Adelaide since 2006 and supported by Riverland Horticultural Council Inc, Flinders University, the University of Tasmania and Horticulture Australia
Lt. This model, which has been dubbed ‘the Russell model’, was delivered by the National Primary Industry Centre for Science Education or PICSE for short. This will provide a pathway to attract young people into science through university and then into science careers in primary industry. This will create future leaders and innovators, will add real value and will provide an essential science skills and knowledge base to rural and regional Australia, as well as maintain Australia’s international competitiveness. This model, the Russell model, was initiated in the electorate of Braddon in 1998, when I had the great privilege of first being elected to this House. Tomorrow I will be meeting with its innovative initiator, Dr Russell, and some of his fellow collaborators to try and advance this very exciting project, which will assist in developing our primary industries.

As you would be well aware, Mr Speaker, with your great interest in science and the environment, student enrolments in science at both secondary and tertiary level are declining, unfortunately, at the same time that industry demand for science professionals is increasing. These facts are responsible for a growing shortfall in science professionals to meet industry, research and postgraduate demand. Given the time lag of at least five years between year 12 and students exiting university, it is imperative that the PICSE program commence in 2008 in order to have an impact on the serious skills shortages in 2012, when DEST anticipates a 35 per cent shortfall of science graduates.

I was very pleased today by the Minister for Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Local Government mentioning his Skills in Australia legislation, which Labor proffered in the election and will bring forward soon in legislation. I think this fits absolutely magnificently into that and also into our education revolution legislation and policies, so well advanced by the Deputy Prime Minister.

PICSE will provide a successful and proven strategy for universities, primary industries, research and development corporations, state government departments, DAFF, DOTARS and DEST to work collaboratively to support a national solution through the delivery of a tested model that integrates science class activities, teachers’ professional development, production of teaching resources, student camps and a student industry placement program with local science based industries.

An investment of $2.48 million is required to establish PICSE in 2008. It is proposed that this will be shared by six activity centres, with local universities and local industries providing $100,000 to $150,000 each to a total of $0.92 million, with an investment from national industry partners of $0.30 million and federal government assistance of $1.25 million. By 2012 this level of investment will lift to $1.84 million from 14 activity centres, with $1.26 million from national industry partners and $1.26 million from the federal government, totalling $4.35 million annually to develop science in our primary industries which are so badly needed both now and into the future. I heartily commend this program, begun in Braddon in 1998, both to this government and to all members in this House because I know that it will certainly aid their regional communities and primary industry in particular. (Time expired)

Cowan Electorate: Blackmore Primary School

Mr SIMPKINS (Cowan) (8.40 pm)—I rise to speak about a travesty of good education in my electorate of Cowan. Specifically, I would today like to talk about the Blackmore Primary School, in the suburb of Girrawheen. Blackmore is one of four primary schools in Girrawheen. It is the third biggest
in student numbers, with over 200 students. It also has more classrooms and a very sound academic record—award winning, in some cases. In August 2007 the school community, a proud and effective community, were informed that following consultation their school was to be closed, the land sold and students integrated into another primary school in Girrawheen, the Girrawheen Primary School. As with any school community with spirit, there was always going to be resistance to the closure. The trouble with this whole situation was that there was no actual consultation with the parent community of Blackmore. Parents were not brought into the discussions, and the announcement of the closure came as a surprise to both the parents and the teachers of not only Blackmore but all the local schools.

In putting this sorry situation into context it is worthy of mentioning why the parents and teachers at Blackmore and the teachers at other local schools were so greatly surprised. That was because everyone believed that phase 1 of this plan of rationalisation with Girrawheen was merely going to involve the closure of Hainsworth Primary School and the integration of the Hainsworth and Montrose primary schools onto the Montrose site, although under a new name. So it was the case that Blackmore Primary School was not intended to be part of phase 1. If phase 1 had been implemented in the original plan, the plan that most people in Girrawheen seemed to know about, it would have left three primary schools—one in the east, Montrose; one in the centre, Girrawheen; and one in the west, Blackmore. However, the announcement by the state Labor government of the closure of Hainsworth and Blackmore came as an unwelcome surprise. There followed a quickly convened meeting of parents with education department representatives and the state Labor MP for the area. This meeting quickly revealed that all the good points for keeping Blackmore had never been considered. Within two weeks over 900 parents and other supporters of Blackmore Primary School signed a petition supporting the school’s retention. However, that fell on deaf ears and the reasoned case we put forward for retaining the school was rejected.

Another question was also asked by the P&C about the necessity for consultation to occur. But what they were told was, ‘The school’s going to be closed now, but we’ll conduct some consultation right now’—even though the decision was made. Unfortunately, there was yet another tragic episode in this betrayal of the good people of Girrawheen. A P&C representative went to the state parliament to plead the case directly with the minister. However, before the minister appeared, the state Labor MP for Girrawheen accused the P&C of disloyalty by their asking for my support, as a Liberal. I understand that the state MP was aghast that the people of Girrawheen did not just roll over, because it was a Labor decision, affecting people in a suburb that traditionally supported Labor. That was the main issue. On 13 September 2007 I worked with parents to hold a public meeting to further highlight the error of the decision. At that meeting the people’s views were heard and they loudly booed the state MP. Later the minister even accused me, under privilege in the state assembly, of using children for political purposes by giving them signs saying, ‘Save Blackmore Primary’. That was not actually the case; that was all done by the parents. They were fighting for a cause, and they refused to be bullied into just accepting it.

The current situation is that the state Labor government is committed to closing the school and selling the land for upwards of $17 million. The closure will take away the only school in the west of Girrawheen. It will require children to walk as far as 1,500 me-
tres to the nearest school. As a parent of children who attend a small local state primary school—it is quite similar to Blackmore—I know how it would feel if the state government tried to close my school. This is why I am actively opposing this decision. Blackmore is not just a place on a map that is worth $17.7 million; it is a future for our children—our greatest asset. This is about making sure that a school is retained in the west of Girrawheen and that it is given the resources it requires. It is an important amenity for the area—(Time expired)

Ms HALL (Shortland) (8.45 pm)—Mr Speaker, as this is the first time I have spoken since you have been in the chair, may I take this opportunity to congratulate you on your election to the position of Speaker.

Last year, the Prime Minister requested that all government MPs visit a homeless people’s refuge. I embraced this suggestion. I had not visited the refuges in my electorate in a year, and I thought it was about time that I went along. In the Shortland electorate, there are two refuges: a youth refuge and a women’s refuge. The Eastlakes women’s and children’s refuge is an organisation that I have had a long association with. When I visited them, they said that they were really encouraged to hear that the Prime Minister had asked MPs to visit a homelessness service in their electorate. They went on to describe how their service supports women and children who are escaping domestic violence by providing them with accommodation. They also highlighted the fact that domestic violence is the most common reason for women and children to access their services.

Some of the services provided by the Eastlakes refuge include case management, advocacy, referrals to other agencies, court support and medium-term support accommodation, for which demand is particularly high. The refuge has four bedrooms, and each one can accommodate a mother with up to four children. During the last year, the refuge had accepted 34 mothers and 62 children; however—and this is the really sad part—they had to turn away 317 mothers and 697 children because they did not have the rooms and beds for them. These women and children are very vulnerable and have no other option.

Over the last couple of years, I have seen a very strong increase in the number of homeless people within the electorate. People are sleeping in cars. There is a very low availability of rental accommodation. The ticker system that exists in New South Wales makes it very difficult for a person to find accommodation if they have ever made a mistake in the past. There are an enormous number of people who are homeless. If you do not have a rental record, that also makes it very difficult for you to find a place to rent.

The other refuge I visited, the Allambi Youth Service, has been operating in the Shortland electorate since January 1981. It is a crisis youth refuge and provides short-term accommodation for up to eight young people—four males and four females. There are two bedrooms within this refuge. The staff there are absolutely dedicated to their job, but demand for accommodation and their services is enormous, and the conditions that they have to work under are less than optimal. They provide an outstanding service and also have a vision for the future: they would like to start a service for younger people between the ages of 12 and 14. Currently these children have to go into the refuge with older children, and this creates some difficulty within the service.

I emphasise to the House that there is a real need for services such as those provided by the Allambi and the Eastlakes refuges. Both services have welcomed the release of
the paper entitled *Homelessness: a new approach*. They are very keen to be involved in the process that will see a green paper tabled in May and a white paper tabled in August this year. Staff who work in these services feel that they are being given a real opportunity to have a say on homelessness and the direction that accommodation services should go in the future. Homelessness is an enormous problem in Australia today. It is an enormous problem in my electorate. Young people and women and children—those who are most disadvantaged—are being badly affected. *(Time expired)*

**Local Grants Scheme**

*Mrs MARKUS* (Greenway) *(8.51 pm)*—I rise this evening to raise my concerns about the Australian government’s failure to renew funding for the Local Grants Scheme as part of the previous coalition government’s Working Together to Manage Emergencies program. The Local Grants Scheme provided communities such as mine access to funds so that emergency service centres could be upgraded or purchase additional equipment. Following a search of the Attorney-General’s website today, I found the following statement:

*The Local Grants Scheme will not be offered.*

This statement concerns me greatly. I find it ironic that the Australian government is offering funding to assist local emergency services with volunteer recruitment and training, while neglecting to fund basic equipment that is necessary to get the job done in the first place. This will impact on the capacity of volunteers to serve local communities effectively. The Hawkesbury Rural Fire Service Operational Centre in my electorate has a phone system which urgently requires upgrading. This phone system is the link between volunteers and residents in the community, especially when homes and lives are at risk during a fire. The Attorney-General said:

The Rudd government recognises that emergency volunteers give so freely of their time to protect the lives and property of others.

What I am saying is that denying these volunteers access to funds to purchase essential equipment is not recognising their value. Basic equipment which was previously funded under the coalition government included equipment for the upgrade of the SES Emergency Operations Centre in the Hawkesbury, emergency generators for Cootamundra Shire Council and upgrading of communication equipment for Shoalhaven’s main and alternate emergency operation centres. All this was funded through the Local Grants Scheme. The current eligibility guidelines under the National Emergency Volunteer Support Fund for such items state that ‘operational equipment will generally not be considered unless it can be demonstrated to have a training use’. While training is critical to all emergency services, organisations and volunteers particularly to maintain occupational health and safety requirements, equipment to do the job and training on such equipment cannot be undertaken without the purchase of such equipment.

I call on the Rudd government to provide rural fire services and the SES in electorates such as mine and in other parts of our country with funding for much-needed equipment, just as the previous coalition government did. In my electorate alone, where the New South Wales government is primarily responsible for the emergency services, Labor have failed to provide these emergency services with basic equipment to help them fight fires, to keep volunteers and the people and communities they seek to protect safe. In the Hawkesbury we have the RAFT—the remote area fire team. The job of the RAFT volunteers is to be dropped, often by helicopter, into remote locations and to fight fires in
the early stages at their source where on-the-ground units cannot reach. It is unacceptable that the members of this unit, which assisted with the Canberra fires, do not have the following as part of their basic firefighting kits: battery packs to ensure power radios remain powered in remote areas—they need 20; a 2,000-watt converter generator to recharge radios—they need one; backpack blowers to clear firebreaks and helipads—they need two; professional chainsaws to clear firebreaks and helipads—again, they need two; and lightweight sleeping bags so that when they sleep out overnight in the bush they have something to sleep in. That is basic. Most importantly, they need eight emergency distress beacons, which are essential in an area with no radio coverage. All this totals just $23,000.

I have many emergency services in my electorate, including Ebenezer RFS and Oakville RFS, to name just two. The group fire captains and the fire control centre of the Hawkesbury Rural Fire Service desperately need equipment. I call on the Rudd Labor government to provide Australian government funding to rural fire services and state emergency services in my state and others, because the state Labor governments have failed to provide these much-needed pieces of equipment so that these volunteers can do their job. With the apparent alteration to guidelines for local grants, an avenue for federal funds is now cut off.

**Ballarat Electorate: Australian Ex-Prisoners of War Memorial**

Ms KING (Ballarat) (8.55 pm)—I am pleased to stand here this evening to welcome the honouring of a very important promise by the Rudd government to my electorate and to the ex-prisoner of war community across Australia. At the fourth anniversary of the commemoration of the Australian Ex-Prisoners of War Memorial in Ballarat, the Minister for Veterans’ Affairs honoured Labor’s longstanding commitment that the memorial be recognised as a national memorial. In outlining the legislative process by which this is to be done, the minister also announced $160,000 to the City of Ballarat over four years for the memorial’s upkeep.

My electorate, and particularly the veteran community, were extremely pleased at the announcement. The funding will ensure that this memorial can be preserved into the future. But, more importantly, the minister’s announcement that later this year he will be introducing legislation that sets out the process by which national memorials outside of Canberra will be recognised, and that the memorial in Ballarat will be the first memorial to be recognised under that legislation once passed, honours our commitment to the ex-POW community.

The memorial, whilst in Ballarat, pays tribute to over 35,000 Australian ex-POWs, 8,000 of whom died overseas while in captivity. The rest of these brave men and women came home bearing the scars of their tragic and traumatic experiences. The names on this memorial provide a tribute to those who were held in captivity during the Boer War, the two World Wars and the Korean War. It is important that the relatives of those who suffered during their imprisonment, or of those who died during their imprisonment, have somewhere to go to pay their respects. It is important that those who have not been touched personally by these traumas also have somewhere to go where they can not only pay their respects but also learn about these 35,000 Australians.

The people of the Ballarat electorate, being strongly supported by people from all over Australia, have long held the view that this memorial in Ballarat is nationally significant. We have never sought to take away from the Changi Chapel here in Canberra as the national memorial for ex-POWs. But for
many Australian ex-POWs it has not represented all wars and people from across all conflicts. We witness that on any weekend in Ballarat when you can see the masses of poppies along the wall against those 35,000 names—poppies put there by friends and relatives who have travelled from all over Australia to pay respect to their loved ones. Anyone who visits this memorial cannot help but be moved by the significance of it—cannot help but be moved by the national significance of it.

It has taken two years and a change of government, but we now have the commitment and the will to make the Ex-POW Memorial in Ballarat one of national significance. This process has begun, and I look forward to speaking on the bill when it is introduced to this place later this year. This has been the culmination of endless hours of work and lobbying from a combined group of people, particularly the tireless efforts of the veteran community not only from Ballarat but from all across Australia. I would like to take this opportunity to acknowledge Peter Blizzard OAM, who developed the concept and the design, and who received his OAM largely for his work on the memorial. Les Kennedy OAM and David Baird OAM, a former POW, have tirelessly campaigned on this issue. The ex-POW community from Victoria and across Australia, many of whom were there on the day of the fourth anniversary to hear the minister’s announcement, have supported this move.

It is an incredibly moving monument with the names of all the known Australian prisoners of war. These names are listed in historical order from the Boer War in 1899 through to the Korean War in 1953. At the end of the granite wall where the pathway ends, visitors face a large stone engraved simply ‘Lest We Forget’. I would like to finish by honouring those who died and those who survived as prisoners of war. In the Boer War there were approximately 200 POWs, four of whom died. In the First World War there were more than 4,000 POWs, with more than 300 who died. In the Second World War there were more than 30,000 POWs, with more than 8,000 who died. In the Korean War there were 29 prisoners of war, with one death. Those deaths are nationally significant. Those 35,000 survivors are nationally significant. And the monument to those 35,000 people, their families and their stories is nationally significant. I am very proud to be part of a government that will formally recognise the memorial in Ballarat dedicated to all men and women who were POWs across all wars as a national memorial.

The SPEAKER—Order! It being 9 pm, the debate is interrupted.

House adjourned at 9.00 pm

NOTICES

The following notices were given:

Ms Hall to move—

That the House:

(1) recognises that epilepsy is the most common serious brain disorder and is the most universal of all medical disorders;
(2) acknowledges that 200,000 people live with epilepsy at any one time in Australia and that up to three times as many Australians will have epilepsy at some time in their lives;
(3) that people living with epilepsy are disadvantaged by lack of research into the disorder and by the lack of a national plan for epilepsy or deeming it a disorder that is a national priority;
(4) acknowledges the impact that epilepsy has on the lives of people living with it;
(5) calls on the Australian Government to fund greater research into epilepsy; and
(6) calls on the Australian Government to establish a nationwide educational strategy on epilepsy modelled on the World Health Organisation’s global campaign.
Mr Kelvin Thomson to move—
That the House:
(1) congratulates the Government for its action taken to date to tackle global warming; and
(2) urges the Government to take action to ensure greenhouse gas emissions are reduced by 60% from year 2000 levels, by 2050.

Mr Hayes to move—
That the House:
(1) affirms its recognition that a combination of special education, speech therapy, occupational therapy and behavioural interventions has proved to be successful in helping people with an autism disorder;
(2) recognises early diagnosis and intervention is also essential to ensure families and carers have access to appropriate services and professional support;
(3) supports the Federal Government policy to establish specialised child care and early intervention services for children with autism; and
(4) calls on the Government to consider a specialised child care centre be established in South West Sydney.

Mr Price to move—
That the House notes:
(1) that the Workplace Relations WorkChoices Bill has had damaging impacts on the livelihoods of working families across Western Sydney;
(2) that Australian Workplace Agreements are unfairly biased against young people seeking employment as it forces them to negotiate with employees without adequate representation; and
(3) that the Fairness Test flooded small businesses with red tape while still not providing an adequate safety net for employees, placing unnecessary pressure on local communities across Australia.

Mr Price to move—
That the House:
(1) recognises:

(a) that the Government has given the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC) formal monitoring powers under the Trade Practices Act on unleaded petrol, across the petrol supply chain;
(b) the importance of ongoing monitoring of the fuel industry with the appointment of a Petrol Commissioner within the ACCC; and
(c) that the Petrol Commissioner will also be informally monitoring the price of Liquefied Petroleum Gas (LPG) and diesel; and
(2) supports further efforts to increase transparency and competition in the fuel industry.

Mr Hartsuyker to move—
That the House condemns the Federal Labor Government for its decision not to proceed with the planned expansions of existing Centrelink call centres in Coffs Harbour, Launceston, and Hobart. (Notice given 18 February 2008.)

Ms Livermore to move—
That the House:
(1) acknowledges those Australians who have selflessly donated their organs, and those who have given consent to do so, so that others may have the gift of life;
(2) recognises, in this Organ Donor Awareness Week, the importance of organ donation;
(3) recognises that although 90% of Australians support organ donation, and while Australia has one of the most successful organ transplantation rates in the world, actual organ donation rates are amongst the lowest in the developed world; and
(4) supports the Government’s initiatives to improve organ donation rates.

Ms Owens to move—
That the House notes:
(1) that Ovarian Cancer Awareness Week will be held from 24 February to 2 March 2008;
(2) that ovarian cancer is the sixth most common cause of cancer death in women, with nearly 1,200 Australian diagnoses each year and
nearly 800 Australian deaths from it each year;

(3) that when ovarian cancer is diagnosed at an early stage, the outlook is very good—as many as 90% of women diagnosed early are cured. However, 75% of women are diagnosed at the advanced stage when it is very difficult to treat;

(4) that it is a devastating disease that is difficult to diagnose early and treat at an advanced stage. A woman dies every 10 hours largely because of the lack of early detection tests and poor knowledge of the disease throughout the community;

(5) that a recent Senate Community Affairs inquiry into gynaecological cancer in Australia (tabled 27 February 2007) identified a need for increased awareness amongst the broader community about gynaecological cancers and symptoms and better educational support for general practitioners;

(6) that a survey commissioned by the National Breast Cancer Centre has revealed that half of all Australian women believe incorrectly that a pap smear will detect ovarian cancer and that 56% of women are unable to correctly name any signs or symptoms of the disease; and

(7) the need for greater focus on education and additional research funding to help Australian scientists to find early detection markers and more effective treatments of this insidious disease.

Mr Lindsay to move—
That the House:

(1) supports the provision of the highest quantity health services to Australians;

(2) notes the continuing advances in medical science, making available new diagnostic tools; and

(3) recognises the need to extend the availability of Positron Emission Tomography (PET) scanning to regional Australia.
APOLOGY TO AUSTRALIA’S INDIGENOUS PEOPLES

That today we honour the Indigenous peoples of this land, the oldest continuing cultures in human history.

We reflect on their past mistreatment.

We reflect in particular on the mistreatment of those who were Stolen Generations—this blemished chapter in our nation’s history.

The time has now come for the nation to turn a new page in Australia’s history by righting the wrongs of the past and so moving forward with confidence to the future.

We apologise for the laws and policies of successive Parliaments and governments that have inflicted profound grief, suffering and loss on these our fellow Australians.

We apologise especially for the removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families, their communities and their country.

For the pain, suffering and hurt of these Stolen Generations, their descendants and for their families left behind, we say sorry.

To the mothers and the fathers, the brothers and the sisters, for the breaking up of families and communities, we say sorry.

And for the indignity and degradation thus inflicted on a proud people and a proud culture, we say sorry.

We the Parliament of Australia respectfully request that this apology be received in the spirit in which it is offered as part of the healing of the nation.

For the future we take heart; resolving that this new page in the history of our great continent can now be written.

We today take this first step by acknowledging the past and laying claim to a future that embraces all Australians.

A future where this Parliament resolves that the injustices of the past must never, never happen again.

A future where we harness the determination of all Australians, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, to close the gap that lies between us in life expectancy, educational achievement and economic opportunity.

A future where we embrace the possibility of new solutions to enduring problems where old approaches have failed.

A future based on mutual respect, mutual resolve and mutual responsibility.

A future where all Australians, whatever their origins, are truly equal partners, with equal opportunities and with an equal stake in shaping the next chapter in the history of this great country, Australia.

Mr RUDDOCK (Berowra) (4.00 pm)—Can I first say that I very much wanted to be associated with this motion of apology to Australia’s Indigenous people. I do so because I strongly support that apology. I make that statement because there are some, it is said, who believe it is politic to support it. In my view, the support of this motion should be given if one believes it is right to do so.
In the time that I have been in public life I have had an association with Indigenous affairs, but, in a sense, elected as I was to a metropolitan constituency in Sydney, I had few Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander constituents. But, interestingly, I did, perhaps unwittingly, know a separated child in my years at primary school. I visited the Lutanda home, run by the very delightful people of the Open Brethren, as distinct from the Exclusive Brethren. That home was at Pennant Hills, and the students from that home, which was close to where I lived, went to Pennant Hills Primary School. One of them was a lass by the name of Joy Williams. I learnt later, as I met with her again, that she was a child of Aboriginal forebears who had been placed in care and who in fact launched legal proceedings in New South Wales against the New South Wales government enjoining the Open Brethren. Her case was not successful, in much the same way as the case of Gunner and Cubillo in the Northern Territory was not successful. But obviously Joy Williams felt a great deal of hurt. I have met many others who have been separated—some who live with those events today, others who have made adjustments and have been able to contribute as very fine Australians. Some have been people whom I have appointed to various government advisory positions; others have been people whom I have looked to for advice and counsel and regarded as friends.

When I spoke on this matter in the party room of the Liberal and National coalition I said there are others who have felt great hurt. I do not equate them; it would be inappropriate to do so. But there are people in the Australian community who have been hurt because they have been separated from parents or not been able to know of their parents. And they are not Indigenous people; they are people in the Australian community who have been adopted, may never have known their parents and want to know something of their genealogy. There are young people who have been separated from a parent when there have been family disputes and have never had the opportunity to know one of their parents, particularly if they have been moved abroad or interstate, as has sometimes happened.

I raise these matters because I think most Australians understand that hurt when it is expressed, and those who have experienced it understand it. I ask myself: how can you not understand the hurt that Indigenous people who were removed from their parents would feel, regardless of whether or not the care or assistance or help that was given to them was of the very best, although in many circumstances that may not have been the case? This happened lawfully. The behaviour of those who supervised and undertook taking the young people into care may not have always been appropriate but one would expect that if there were evidence about that it would be brought forward. I say that deliberately because we hear the term ‘stolen’ used in relation to these matters, as if it connotes that what was happening was in fact unlawful. I note that all the recommendations of the Bringing them home report refer to separated children. Regardless of that, people have assured us that there would be no compensation arising from these matters. I suggest the wording of the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission’s report may have been preferable to some of the other language that has been used. Regardless of that, I am certainly not one who is arguing that the passage of this motion should in the ordinary course of events lead to a compensation claim being more successful than it might otherwise be on its facts.

I want to be associated with this motion because I have spent a great deal of time in public life involved in Indigenous affairs. Again I mention that, not because of the numbers of such people in my own constituency—I think at this stage I have in my constituency 150 people
who claim Aboriginal heritage—but, rather, because when I first joined the parliament I had the great opportunity to be a member of the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal Affairs. I remember serving with some of the great names that the Labor Party would acknowledge within their party who were actively involved in these matters. They were people like the late Gordon Bryant and Les Johnson. On our side of parliament we had William Charles Wentworth. I remember the first inquiries in which I was involved, which took me to northern New South Wales as we on the committee looked at employment opportunities and regional issues and, later, after we were asked to look at alcohol problems in Indigenous communities. I travelled very widely when I later became the Chair of the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal Affairs, visiting most parts of Australia. I had the opportunity to participate in the writing of reports on health circumstances, on the Aboriginal legal services and on the outstation movement.

I mention these matters because I had the opportunity of visiting, for instance, Port Keats, as it was then known—Wadeye, as it is known today. That community is very dysfunctional today but at the time when I first visited it, aided very much by the Catholic Church and the brothers who were there, it appeared to be a very functional community. I was there with the late Professor Stanner, who gave us insights as to what was happening in Port Keats. He said the church believed that it had been able to remove all remnants of Indigenous culture from that community but that in fact, notwithstanding all of the activities of the church in that location, it had not occurred. But we did see fit to deal with places like Port Keats—to sever the relationship, to take out the church and its continuing leadership. If we look at many of these locations today, we see in many cases quite dysfunctional communities. It troubles me greatly when I see that level of dysfunction. Regrettably, it cannot all be related to the issue that we are debating—the separation of Indigenous children from their parents. A lot of the difficulties that we have are ones that have been with us over most of the time that I have been involved in public life. It does not matter whether it has been governments of the present Labor persuasion or coalition governments—shifting that disadvantage that we see has proved extraordinarily difficult. There is a great deal of hurt and anguish, I think, within those communities that plays a part in making the delivery of services and the assistance that we would like to offer less effective than it might otherwise be. I think it is quite clear that many different approaches have been taken, but I want to support this motion of apology today because it is my erstwhile hope that, in the spirit of forgiveness and possibly healing, we see circumstances in which our collective efforts can take root and address the disadvantage that we all very much feel ought not to be there.

I have followed very closely the way in which this apology was brought forward. I think many fail to recognise the involvement of an organisation which a former Leader of the Opposition's father was very much involved in—Moral Rearmament. Its work around the world has been of particular importance in trying to help resolve difficult issues where they impact upon peoples. I have seen some of their work in places like Zimbabwe, where again they tried to play a role in healing between black and white, and in places like Cambodia, where I was first engaged with them, in relation to the Khmer people and the Khmer Rouge. They have been very much involved here. If you go to Colebrook in the Adelaide Hills—the home that Lowitja O'Donoghue, I believe, may well have been at—you will find it a memorial that was very much a project that Moral Rearmament were seeking to see implemented. Of course their rationale, based upon the great religions, is that there is a place for apology. In the words
of the Leader of the Opposition, an apology should be offered; it should not necessarily seek forgiveness but, if forgiveness is a response, there is an opportunity for healing. It is certainly my desire, in the spirit of those whom I have worked with over a long period of time, those who look for a new environment in which our efforts in relation to assisting our Indigenous people might take root, that this apology play a constructive role. It is for that reason I have been an enthusiastic supporter of it, and that is one of the reasons I want to be associated with it in this debate.

**Mr Kelvin Thomson (Wills) (4.15 pm)**—Madam Deputy Speaker Burke, I congratulate you on your election to your important office. I feel proud and privileged to participate in this debate on behalf of the people of Wills, who are overwhelmingly compassionate and have a strong sense of a fair go for all. I apologise to the Indigenous peoples of this land, particularly the Wurundjeri people, for the wrongs which have been done to them. In particular, I say sorry for the mistreatment of the stolen generations. Last Wednesday, 13 February, the day of the parliamentary apology, I went down to the stage set up between the old and new parliament houses. I met up with my parents, Allan and Dorothy, long-time supporters of Aboriginal people and Aboriginal causes. We listened to musicians such as Troy Cassar-Daley who were playing there. I do not think I have ever heard Troy sound better. The atmosphere was quite electric. To stand amongst these people, many of whom have suffered so much just because they were born black, was quite overwhelming. People had tears in their eyes—tears of pain, tears of joy. There is so much unavoidable pain in the world, but to see all this avoidable pain was another matter altogether. For all their lives, Aboriginal people have carried the stigma, the unbearable weight, of being black or half-caste and, therefore, considered inferior by far too many of the rest of us. People talk about symbolic measures and people talk about practical measures, but the thing which has to change is this: being Aboriginal must become a source of pride, not a source of shame. We must learn to see Aboriginal people as our equals and stop thinking of them as lesser people, as second-class citizens, as drunks. It would, in fact, be a fine thing if we learnt to envy Aboriginal people, to envy their long history, to envy the way they learnt to live with this landscape for over 60,000 years, deriving a living from it without destroying it.

Back in June 1997, over 10 years ago, I spoke to the House about *Bringing them home*, the report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families, known at the time as the ‘Stolen children report’. I wanted to bring home to people why there was a need for an apology from this parliament and for people to understand that, although we cannot erase these past wrongs, it is necessary for us to understand them as a precondition for going forward together. I brought to the House the story of William, and I will quote from it again. William said:

… I was about six years old … [when] our mother passed away. My family tried to get the Welfare to keep us here … trying to keep us together … My uncle wanted to keep me and he tried every way possible, apparently, to keep me. He was going to try and adopt me but they wouldn’t allow it. They sent us away.

… … …

When St Francis [orphanage] closed up, they sent us out to different places. My second eldest brother and I went to a Mrs R. And my only recollections of that lady was when we first went there. We were greeted at the door. The welfare officer took us into this house and I can remember going into this room, and I’d never seen a room like it. It was big, and here me and my brother were going to share it. We put

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**MAIN COMMITTEE**
our bags down on the floor. We thought, ‘This is wonderful’. As soon as the welfare officer left, Mrs R took us outside that room and put us in a two bed caravan out the back.

I was sleeping in the caravan. I was only a little boy then. In the middle of the night somebody come to the caravan and raped me. That person raped me and raped me. I could feel the pain going through me. I cried and cried and they stuffed my head in the pillow. And I had nobody to talk to. It wasn’t the only night it happened.

... it seemed like night after night. It seemed like nobody cared. I don’t know how long it went on for, but night after night I’d see the bogeyman. I never saw the person, I don’t know who that person was.

They shifted us again and that was into town again. And then they put us in with this bloke ... They’ve got records of what he did to me. That man abused me. He made us do dirty things that we never wanted to do. Where was the counselling? Where was the help I needed? They knew about it. The guy went to court. He went to court but they did nothing for me, nothing. ... I remember the child psychologist saying, ‘He’s an Aboriginal kid, he’ll never improve.

Let me repeat that:

‘He’s an Aboriginal kid, he’ll never improve.

William said:

I’ve had my secret all my life. I tried to tell but I couldn’t. I can’t even talk to my own brothers. I can’t even talk to my sister. I fear people. I fear ’em ... It’s rarely I’ve got friends.

I wish I was blacker. I wish I had language. I wish I had my culture. I wish my family would accept me as I am. We can’t get together as a family. It’s never worked. We fight, we carry on. I’ve always wanted a family.

That comes from a man removed from Alice Springs to Adelaide in the 1950s. It is because of that and so many other accounts in the report that we as a parliament needed and now need to pass this motion to say to people around Australia that we are sorry. That is a precondition to moving forward. But going forward is about more than acknowledging the stolen generations, important as that is. I am scarcely alone in noting, as I have often done, that we should thank our lucky stars that we get to live in Australia. But there is a hole in the Australian heart. We are incomplete. The reason we are incomplete is that the opportunity and prosperity which we enjoy as a nation do not include Aboriginal Australia. Let me quote two men from the 1830s who give a pretty plain picture at the time of what happened upon European settlement. First, I quote the writer Robert Lyon, who arrived as an English settler in 1829 and who said to his countrymen:

You are the aggressors. The law of nations will bear them out in repelling force by force. They did not go to the British Isles to make war upon you; but you came from the British Isles to make war upon them. You are the invaders of their country—you destroy the natural productions of the soil on which they live—you devour their fish and their game—and you drive them from the abodes of their ancestors.

He went on:

What shall we say to the barbarous practice of firing upon them whenever they are seen.

They may stand to be slaughtered but they must not throw a spear in their own defence or attempt to bring their enemies to a sense of justice by the only means in their power—that of returning like for like. If they do—if they dare to be guilty of an act which in other nations would be eulogised as the
noblest of a patriots’ deeds—they are outlawed; a reward is set upon the heads; and they are ordered to be shot as if they were so many mad dogs! Thus, in a barbarous manner, you practice what in them you condemn, the law of retaliation.

Then in 1838, there was the Reverend John Saunders, who at a sermon in Sydney referred to:

... the sin in which the whole colony has been engaged and for which, therefore, the whole colony is answerable—our injustice to the Aborigines. I do not select individual delinquents, but impeach the nation; for whether in ignorance or with a guilty knowledge, we certainly have been culpable in our neglect and oppression of this despised and degraded tribe of our fellow men.

After that initial period of attack and dispossession came a long period of neglect and cover-up. In 1968 Professor William Stanner gave a Boyer lecture devoted to what he called ‘the great Australian silence’ about Aboriginal people, noting how they scarcely rated a mention from historians and other writers about Australia. He said:

... inattention on such a scale cannot possibly be explained by absentmindedness. It is a structural matter, a view from a window which has been carefully placed to exclude a whole quadrant of the landscape. What may well have begun as a simple forgetting of other possible views turned under habit and over time into something like a cult of forgetfulness practised on a national scale. We have been able for so long to disremember the Aborigines that we are now hard put to keep them in mind even when we most want to do so.

And the first Aboriginal senator, Neville Bonner, made a similar point in his speech to the Senate, saying:

All within me that is Aboriginal yearns to be heard as the voice of the indigenous people of Australia. For far too long we have been crying out and far too few have heard us.

He said, ‘Less than 200 years ago the white man came. I say now in all sincerity that my people were shot, poisoned, hanged and broken in spirit until they became refugees in their own land. Then began to appear the emotional scars, the psychological wounds from which, by and large, we have still not recovered.’ The Aborigines today find themselves drifting between two worlds, accepting some of the white man’s virtues but, alas, also many of his vices.

Neville Bonner was, no doubt, thinking about alcohol. He did not live to see the ravages of internet pornography and child sex abuse. But this period marked the end of the great silence and an awakening—passage of the 1967 referendum counting Aboriginals as people, Senator Bonner’s election and the handing back of land to the Gurindji people in the Northern Territory by the Whitlam government. Pope John Paul II said in Alice Springs in 1986:

Christian people of good will are saddened to realize—many of them only recently—for how long a time Aboriginal people were transported from their homelands into small areas or reserves where families were broken up, tribes split apart, children orphaned and people forced to live like exiles in a foreign country.

He also said:

To call for the acknowledgment of the land rights of people who have never surrendered those rights is not discrimination.

The high-water mark of this modern awakening was Paul Keating’s 1992 speech at Redfern Park. He said in that speech:

... the starting point might be to recognise that the problem starts with us non-Aboriginal Australians. It begins, I think, with the act of recognition. Recognition that it was we who did the dispossession. We took the traditional lands and smashed the traditional way of life. We brought the disasters. The alcohol.
We committed the murders. We took the children from their mothers. We practised discrimination and exclusion.

... We failed to ask—how would I feel if this were done to me?

As a consequence, we failed to see that what we were doing degraded all of us. But Paul Keating said it was not about feeling guilty. He said:

Down the years, there has been no shortage of guilt, but it has not produced the responses we need. Guilt is not a very constructive emotion.

I think what we need to do is open our hearts a bit.

All of us.

Perhaps when we recognise what we have in common we will see the things which must be done—the practical things.

He said we needed:

... to bring the dispossessed out of the shadows, to recognise that they are part of us, and that we cannot give indigenous Australians up without giving up many of our own most deeply held values, much of our own identity—and our own humanity.

It was a sensational, positive, optimistic speech and inspired much hope, but in the 15 years since it was given those hopes have not been realised. I know there are competing views as to whose fault this is and I do not want to make a politically partisan speech, but it needs to be said that measures of Aboriginal disadvantage, life expectancy, education, health, homelessness, alcoholism—all the indicators which make it clear that life for Aboriginals is a world away from life for the rest of us—show no sign of abating.

The Labor government was elected having made commitments to, firstly, eliminate the 17-year gap in life expectancy between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians within a generation; secondly, at least halve the rate of Indigenous infant mortality among babies within a decade; thirdly, at least halve the mortality rate amongst Indigenous children under five within a decade; and, finally, at least halve the difference in the rate of Indigenous students at years 3, 5 and 7 who fail to meet reading, writing and numeracy benchmarks within 10 years. These are worthy goals. To achieve them will require an effort from the whole nation. In particular, we need to go back to and we need to recapture the spirit of Paul Keating’s speech at Redfern—to 'open our hearts a bit'.

I want to congratulate GetUp! on its email campaign concerning this issue. Some people say this is all only symbolism, but I believe it is very powerful symbolism. It is saying to Aboriginal people: you do matter. It does matter that people thought it was okay to take Aboriginal or half-caste children from their parents simply because they were Aboriginal, because that is what happened. And it does matter that their life expectancy is so much lower than that of the rest of us. Aboriginal people do matter. Let us resolve in this place that never again will Aboriginal people be denied the dignity and the respect to which they are entitled as our fellow human beings.

Mr TRUSS (Wide Bay—Leader of the Nationals) (4.30 pm)—The motion before the House seeks to offer closure to those Aboriginal Australians who grieve at being separated from their parents in early childhood. This is the third apology on these issues and follows another, more comprehensive, resolution of this parliament made nine years ago, which included an expression of ‘deep and sincere regret that Indigenous Australians suffered injus-
tices under the practices of past generations and for the hurt and trauma that many Indigenous people continue to feel as a consequence of those practices’. Australia is a prosperous country with opportunity for all. It is a stain on our integrity as a nation that our Indigenous people do not share fully in all the good things other Australians enjoy. It is simply unacceptable to me and all decent Australians that the life expectancy of an Aborigine is 17 years less than that of other Australians. Their health, education, economic, employment and social outcomes are all so much worse than the rest of us expect and take for granted. Aborigines are far more likely to be in jail or in detention and they are more likely to be victims of violence. Aborigines are more likely to be killed in car accidents, and too often they die from avoidable or curable illnesses. So few gain a trade qualification or university degree and even fewer reach the pinnacle of their profession. Many Indigenous communities are locked into a lifestyle that offers no opportunities, no productive jobs and no hope. It is distressing to visit communities where alcohol abuse, violence, filth and hopelessness are a way of life. I am sorry that as a nation we have not done better. With all the effort, all the funding, why couldn’t we have achieved more? If Aboriginal communities were in leafy suburbs or central business districts, would all this be tolerated? Too many communities are locked away by a permit system which hides the reality of what is happening.

Over the past decade the former coalition government allocated more money, devoted more cabinet time and was more innovative than any of its predecessors, but I am sorry and I apologise to the Aboriginal people that we did not achieve more. Our efforts were sometimes frustrated, including by state governments which frequently chose a different course, generally with even poorer results. I am sorry that in government we wasted too much time on initiatives which did little to improve the lot of Indigenous Australians—ideas that may have been politically correct but were of little worth in practice. So much effort was dedicated to delivering European-style land title for Aboriginal land, because we were assured that land rights would create better outcomes by rebuilding the soul of Indigenous people through a spiritual association with the land. Despite millions of hectares of land being transferred, most of which is no longer productive, it is hard to notice any improvement in the spiritual, mental or physical health or economic welfare of any Aborigine. We wasted too much time on the notion of separate development, a nation within a nation, and ATSIC, with all its corruption and mismanagement. We should have acted sooner to stop the ‘welfare without responsibility’ mentality and we were far too late to intervene where we could to stop the violence, the hopelessness and the wasted lives. Had we acted sooner, fewer children would have been raped and abused, and more women and children would have been safe and healthy. Some criticised us for intervening as dramatically as we did, but I say sorry that we did not act years earlier, and I appeal to the new government not to proceed with its planned rollback of this life-saving intervention.

It is not that there has been an absence of goodwill or lack of determination to provide better opportunities for Indigenous Australians. Whilst I may not agree with some of the policies or actions of those opposite or the Labor states, I do not doubt their sincerity and their desire to make a positive difference. I hope that they do not doubt ours. So often over the years, what was thought to be right at that time had perverse effects. Social justice demanded equal pay for Aboriginal workers but, as a result, Aborigines lost their productive jobs and the support and shelter provided by their employers. The churches were asked to leave the mission stations, but with them left the strength of character and the leadership which sustained a stable
community. Welfare benefits flowed to all, but without the skills to manage money much of it bought alcohol and pain. People were made aware of their rights to land and justice but not their responsibilities as custodians and citizens. There has been an almost complete break-down of traditional tribal elder authority, not replaced by any new regime of discipline. These policies destroyed lives, just like those hurt when taken away from their families, and I say sorry.

I acknowledge the valiant efforts of those who have worked so hard and given up their lives to truly help our original inhabitants. Many have forsaken and do forsake the comforts of life to live and work in difficult, dirty and dangerous circumstances because they want to help and to use their skills and resources to benefit the most disadvantaged of Australians. Some of these people may be criticised by the academic elite today, but many did make a real difference in their time: Pastor Carl Strehlow and the missionaries, who brought not just Christianity but also health care and education; John Flynn; Daisy Bates; Fred Hollows; and hundreds of others. Even today, much excellent work is being done, often away from the public gaze, by people who see injustice and want to see it reversed, who see how Aboriginal people can contribute constructively to our society and want to make it happen: men like Dick Estens and the people of Moree, who worked to break down the barriers to socially include the Indigenous community; mines like Argyle and Century Zinc, which are training Aborigines and employing them as valued members of their workforces; men like Noel Pearson, who are crying out for welfare and other reforms to teach responsibility as the key to more self-reliant generations; a man I know working with a group of young boys who were brain damaged at birth because of the alcoholism of their mothers; and the doctors, nurses, teachers, police and welfare officers who work in these communities, sometimes in danger, to build a better future. We need to acknowledge their efforts and recognise the work that they have done.

Today we say sorry to those wrongfully taken from their families and for our failings of the past, and that is important. But the most important emphasis in last week’s motion and the speeches of the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition was the need to look forward. The expression of sorrow has been made before—and with conviction, though with much less show and spectacle. It will mean nothing if it is not accompanied by a deep and sincere commitment by all Australians, both black and white, to do very much better in the future. We must move to end the violence and the degradation, the premature deaths and the social inequity. Aboriginal children, even today, are six times more likely to be taken from their families, and in many communities almost no children live with both their natural mother and father. We on this side of the House pledge ourselves to support policies and initiatives which will make a difference. We will continue to support decisive actions to restore law and order to Aboriginal communities. The communities must remain open to encourage enterprise, industry and pride in citizenship, not locked away by a permit system and policies of exclusion. We will authorise the funds necessary to continue to build houses, hospitals and schools community sporting facilities and to supply the doctors, nurses, teachers, police, car- ers and business managers to create strong and stable communities. We call on the states to also recognise their failings and to make the Aboriginal communities under their control places that are safe and decent for this generation of children.

We will continue to remind the government that this motion, for all its symbolism, is not a sufficient response in itself and will be empty if it is not a catalyst for a renewed commitment
to practical measures to address the profound social disadvantage which continues to be experienced by many Indigenous Australians. I was disappointed that the government spurned the opposition’s offer to work together on an agreed text for this motion. No state Labor government considered it necessary to include the emotive words ‘stolen generation’ in their apologies, but this government insisted. We support the motion, but it should have been so much better. In the end the media were given copies of the motion before the parliament and the opposition. Then the orchestrated partisanship, including by members of the Prime Minister’s staff, took much of the warmth from the day. Labor created division where there should have been unity.

Governments and non-Aboriginal Australians cannot correct Aboriginal disadvantage on their own. An expression of sorrow and regret will not give closure to the past if it is not embraced and accepted. The government can build houses, hospitals and schools, but Indigenous Australians will need to care for them and to use them well for their families. The government can provide land and opportunities for production and business, but the people must grasp them. Governments will provide welfare for those genuinely in need, but the recipients must recognise their obligations to their community and use the money to keep their families safe and healthy. Ultimately, Aboriginals will create their own destinies like all other Australians. They must share a positive willingness to embrace reform and build a better lifestyle for themselves and their children.

To be a turning point, this motion must be about the future—the future we want for our country—more than about the failings of the past. It must bring Australians together in reconciliation so that we can live in peace and confidence together. We are truly sorry when we demonstrate our actions collectively to build a better future for Aboriginal Australians and indeed everyone in our country.

Ms PLIBERSEK (Sydney—Minister for Housing and Minister for the Status of Women) (4.42 pm)—I want to start by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land that we are meeting on today, the Ngunawal people, and say what a great pleasure it was to have the first formal welcome to country before the opening of this parliament. I also want to acknowledge that the land that my electorate covers is the land of the Gadigal people, who are part of the Eora nation. I want to pay particular tribute today to Auntie Joyce Ingram, Auntie Sylvia Scott and Uncle Max Eulo. They are the people who most often do welcome to country in the seat that I represent. Auntie Sylvia has recently retired from doing welcome to country, although she has done it for many years.

On 11 November 1998 during my first speech I said sorry. I thought it was an important thing to say then, as I thought it was an important thing to say last week. I said sorry for the policies of many governments over many years that removed Aboriginal kids from their homes and their country, not because of abuse and neglect but because of the colour of their skin. Families and communities across the nation were destroyed. Many have never had a chance to rebuild. There are many people who have begun the long journey home, but perhaps they will never find the parents, families and communities that they were taken from.

‘Sorry’ is a word we commonly use to express empathy and to acknowledge past wrongs. It has a particularly important meaning for many Indigenous Australians in the context of the stolen generations. When we say sorry, the common response is: ‘Thanks.’ I was so thrilled to see on the day of the apology so many people wearing T-shirts in the gallery that just said,
‘Thanks.’ That simple interaction of sorry and thanks that is so common in ordinary interac-
tions between human beings has been so difficult for us at the national level over the past 11
years. I hope that interaction of sorry and thanks can really begin the healing process that has
to happen in this country.

Former Prime Minister Paul Keating, who initiated the inquiry into the stolen generations,
stated in his famous speech in Redfern why saying sorry was so important. He said:

The message should be that there is nothing to fear or to lose in the recognition of historical truth, or the
extension of social justice, or the deepening of Australian social democracy to include Indigenous Aus-
tralians. There is everything to gain.

The support for the apology in my electorate was extraordinary. We had literally hundreds of
emails and phone calls to the office expressing support for the apology, thanking the Prime
Minister for taking this historic step and saying that people joined with him in this journey.
Thousands of people gathered in Martin Place in my electorate, outside the New South Wales
parliament and inside the New South Wales parliament, watching on the big screens. Glebe
Public School had a smoking ceremony and a welcome to country before watching the deliv-
er of the apology in their school hall. St Brendan’s School in Annandale flew the Indigenous
flag while watching the broadcast. Rozelle Public School watched the apology and heard from
a man who had been taken from his family as a child. Darlington Public School held a special
assembly where children gathered together to form the word ‘sorry’. Alexandria Park Com-
munity School organised a community breakfast followed by a special screening of the apol-
ogy. Students from years 5 and 6 at Mount Carmel School walked to Redfern Community
Centre with banners and posters, and I believe they got a very good response from passing
traffic beeping their horns! Members of the stolen generation and their descendants gathered
at the Redfern Community Centre with local community supporters. Classes at the Sydney
Secondary College at Blackwattle spent the morning talking about the historic significance of
the apology and the issues of history behind it. There was a great deal of acknowledgement of
this important event across my electorate.

Of course, as many members have said, this does not make up for action—it was never in-
tended to. This is a way of acknowledging historical issues that need to be acknowledged and
dealt with, but they are not dealt with simply by making an apology. There is a great deal of
work to be done with the Indigenous community to right some of the wrongs that they have
suffered. We know that the life expectancy of an Indigenous child born today in Australia is
17 years less than that of a non-Indigenous child born today in Australia. It is simply impossi-
ble to accept those sorts of figures. We know that problems like diabetes, kidney disease and
eye diseases including trachoma are much more common in many Indigenous communities
than they are in the non-Indigenous community. We know that Indigenous women are much
more likely to suffer domestic violence than non-Indigenous women. Of course these are all
issues that we have to address. The apology is not a replacement for these things, but nobody
has ever claimed that it is.

All of these are things that we have to acknowledge in order to deal with them, but there is
so much good work being done as well, and I think that we make the mistake sometimes of
forgetting to acknowledge the progress that has been made and the work that fabulous people
and organisations are doing in their communities. Last year I had the opportunity to do a little
bit of research on the teaching of Indigenous languages in New South Wales public schools, for example. I wrote about it in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, saying:

Linguists believe there were about 70 Aboriginal languages spoken in NSW when the First Fleet arrived in 1788. Many of those are almost lost, especially as older Aboriginal people, who learnt the languages as children, die. In 2002 the Australian Bureau of Statistics found there were fewer than 3000 people who spoke an indigenous language in NSW. Last year that figure had dropped to 800.

So even in recent memory the loss of languages has been very speedy. Yet in many New South Wales public schools Indigenous and non-Indigenous children are learning Indigenous languages. The desire to prevent the loss of language is great for its own sake. It is terrific to expand the body of human knowledge rather than to see it shrinking. It has been so great for school attendance and the pride of those Aboriginal kids to learn their own language, in many cases, or another Aboriginal language, in other cases, and for non-Indigenous kids to develop some understanding and knowledge of Indigenous culture in their local area.

There are so many great things happening in my electorate. There is a hospitality training college called Yama Dhiyaan. They teach Aboriginal kids who want a career in hospitality all of the basics. It is run by Auntie Beryl Van-Oploo, who has a career in catering as long as your arm and is a fantastic caterer. She has a terrific young Aboriginal chef working with her, Matthew Cribb, who I can tell you personally makes the best damper that you will ever try and fantastic jam made from all sorts of things including some of the bush tucker berries that you can get.

They have another training college that is co-located called Yama Dhinawan, which is a training college that does pre-apprenticeship courses for Aboriginal kids who want to go into the building industry. This is also a critical area for me because we know that skills shortages in the building industry are contributing to the high cost of building these days. I have been to graduation ceremonies for these young people. What these organisations are doing is terrific; it is terrific what these people are doing who are taking on these courses. Some of them are the first in their family to be doing post secondary school education.

The same is true of the Tribal Warrior Association, which is an organisation that teaches maritime skills to Indigenous young people up and down the east coast of New South Wales. They travel up and down in their boat, the *Tribal Warrior*, doing the work they need to do to get their basic skills up. The last graduation ceremony had 35 people graduating and, most importantly, getting very good jobs—again, right up and down the east coast of Australia, from Sydney Ferries to tourism operators in Cairns, who all use the skills the Aboriginal kids get through the Tribal Warrior Association.

Over very many years, a fabulous organisation called the Redfern Aboriginal Corporation has also been involved in local job creation. They have provided many jobs and excellent services through their business ventures in catering, furniture removal, employment placement, screen printing, garbage removal and lawn mowing. We have the Redfern Aboriginal Housing Company, a not-for-profit charity, which has been involved not just in developing the Block but also in owning over 100 parcels of land. They have very extensive land and housing interests now.

St Saviours Church in Redfern last year was behind the organisation of the Coloured Digger ceremony on Anzac Day that, for the first time in many cases, acknowledged the contribution that many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men, in particular, have made over many
years through our armed services. These are Indigenous Australians who fought and served with non-Indigenous Australians and in many cases lost their lives. Those who returned to Australia were not allowed in the front door of the local pub or inside the local RSL club in some cases.

The St Saviours Church ceremony was for some people the first time that they had their service to this country properly acknowledged. It was an incredibly moving ceremony that was followed up by the RSL, who organised a terrific commemoration, this time at the War Memorial in Hyde Park in Sydney, with very high-ranking Indigenous officers there. Indigenous schoolkids came along to learn a little bit more about their fathers and grandfathers who fought and, as I say, in many cases died for Australia.

The previous speaker mentioned Dick Estens and his involvement in regional New South Wales and employment creation. Of course, Dick and his organisation were also active in my electorate. We have the Aboriginal Medical Centre, Elouera Gym, Aboriginal Legal Service, Murawina Childcare Centre, Koori Radio, Mudgin-Gal Women’s Service, REDwatch, the Settlement, which has provided after-school care in particular, and Wyanga Aboriginal Aged Care. There are so many great organisations which are doing terrific work to close some of those shocking gaps—the 17-year life expectancy gap and the gap in educational outcomes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous children.

I conclude today by saying that what happened here last week—the apology to the stolen generations for the policies of past governments, for taking children away from their families when they should not have been taken away—was an important and historic event. While the response from my electorate and from my constituents has been vastly positive and while it is vital to acknowledge the history behind the apology and why we had to make it, it is also vital that we focus on and support the terrific contributions being made by people in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to ending disadvantage on their own behalf, for themselves, the organisations and individuals who have taken up the challenge and are following the words of Paul Kelly and Kev Carmody ‘From little things, big things grow’ and the people who are doing small things that will change the lives of so many Indigenous Australians.

**Dr STONE (Murray) (4.57 pm)**—I too would like to begin my contribution to this debate by acknowledging the traditional owners of this country, the Ngunawal, and other traditional owners in this area and also the traditional owners of my electorate of Murray, who continue to be a very proud and important part of our local society. On Wednesday last week, I stood in the House of Representatives in this great parliament and joined in honouring the Indigenous peoples of Australia. We recognised them as the oldest continuing culture in human history. We apologised for the laws and policies of successive governments that inflicted grief, suffering and loss on our fellow Australians, in particular those who were the victims of the policies aimed at forcibly removing Aboriginal children from their families, communities and country in order that the children might lose their Aboriginal identity and be assimilated into white society. We recognised and apologised for the pain, suffering and hurt of the stolen generations and of their descendants and the families left behind. We said sorry. We respectfully requested that this policy be received in the spirit in which it was offered as part of the healing of individuals and the nation.

The policies that created Australia’s stolen generations echoed those of similar times in Canada, New Zealand and the USA. Children of mixed descent were permanently removed
from the influence of their mothers, their kin and their culture—those children were of mixed descent, with Indigenous mothers. The children of mixed descent were then institutionalised, adopted or fostered out so that they might assimilate into the white society, having lost their traditional culture. These policies were widely debated and implemented across Australia from the late 19th century through to the late 1960s. They were contemporaneous with our own white Australia immigration policy and were based on the same notions of racial superiority. It is important to understand the different beliefs and values of those times. Only then can we understand what happened and why and the impacts on our Indigenous Australian community. I want to quote from an article in the *Illustrated Sydney News* and *New South Wales Agriculturalist and Grazier*, printed in May 1880. The writer says:

The Aborigines of Australia are a doomed race, found occupying one of the lowest stages of savage life when the shores of NSW became familiar with the presence of white men.

Unfortunately many Australians have only a scant knowledge of Australian history and previous values and beliefs. This is something which the John Howard government tried to remedy. Consequently, some in the community have objected to the apology given by the government on the basis that these policies were, they believe, only rescuing orphaned or neglected Indigenous children. One set of policies continues today and is designed to intervene in families where there are neglected or vulnerable children. These policies are and were not race based. Any at-risk children in need of special protection were and continue to be targeted by these policies. These were welfare policies and continue to be welfare policies today. The other set of policies, which coexisted and affected the same communities, can generally be referred to as our miscegenation or assimilation policies. These policies were race based. In the apology, the generations affected were called 'the stolen children'. The stolen children were those who were the victims of these assimilation or miscegenation policies of Australia. The intent of the miscegenation policies—all listed in the *Bringing them home* report—was the forced assimilation of Aboriginal children of mixed descent through their physical removal from their mother and separation from their mother’s kin and culture. It was hoped that these paler skinned children would then come to take what was called their ‘rightful’ place in the Australian economy and society of the future.

So how did these race based policies evolve in a country now so colourblind, tolerant and free as our great Australian nation? The Charles Darwin theory of the survival of the fittest, framed in the late 1800s, coincided with and informed the observations and experiences of the white settlers, in particular in Tasmania and Victoria. The settlers attributed the huge decline in the Indigenous populations, which was in fact due to disease, malnutrition and frontier violence, to the consequences of immutable scientific laws. William Armit, writing in the 1880s in the journal the *Queenslander*, said:

Nothing that we can do will alter the inscrutable laws and withal immutable laws which direct our progress on the globe. By these laws the native races of Australia were doomed on the advent of the white man and the only possible thing left for us to do is to assist in carrying them out with as little cruelty as possible.

While settlers observed the demise of the clans, they also observed and began to be concerned about the increasing numbers of Aboriginal children of mixed descent who were being born
into the surviving clans. In 1899, Police Inspector Paul Foelsche in South Australia reported to the South Australian government:

... something may be done for the half-caste children by compelling mission stations that have concessions from the government, under certain conditions, to take in such half-castes and civilise them. They would then, when grown up make excellent servants, and thus be raised above the ordinary condition of an aboriginal.

In the South Australian Progress Report of the Royal Commission on the Aborigines in 1913, Mr EC Stirling, a contemporary expert, gives his considered opinion about the best remedy ‘to solve the problem of existence of the half-castes’. The chairman said:

Is there anything else you would like to bring to our notice?

Mr Stirling answered:

I would like to refer to the half-caste children. My opinion is that the more of those half-caste children you can get away from the parents and place under the care of the state the better. I think you should take them at an early age. Supposing they were taken charge of by the State Children’s Department it would be easier to deal with them if they were taken when they have the attractiveness of infancy. There is always something attractive in the infants of all races, whatever their colour. You would get people to take those children young who might be disinclined to take them when they were older. I think that is the best way to save the half-caste children—take them away from their surroundings. When they are caught young they are far less inclined to revert to their old state. There is a strong tendency among the half-castes when they are grown to go back to the ways of the natives. They are far less likely to do that after they have had a long contact with civilisation.

The Hon. J Jelly:

What would be a suitable age to remove them?

The answer:

I think when they are about 2 or 3 years of age.

The chairman:

You would not recommend that they be taken away when they are absolute infants?

The answer:

No, because then you would have the burden of them that all children are at such a young age. When they are a couple of years of age they do not require so much attention and they are young enough to be attractive.

Then there is the question:

Do you think that their experience of two years with the black mother would seriously interfere with them?

The answer:

No. There would not be time for them to establish habits and customs. I am quite aware that you are depriving the mothers of their children, and the mothers are very fond of their children; but I think it must be the rising generation who have to be considered. They are people who are going to live on.

That was the thinking and the value system of the day. In 1913 Professor Baldwin Spencer MA, CMG prepared the preliminary report *Aboriginals of the Northern Territory: Bulletin No. 7* for the Department of External Affairs. Professor Baldwin Spencer wrote:

The children must be withdrawn from the native camps at an early age. This will undoubtedly be a difficult matter to accomplish and will involve some amount of hardship, so far as the parents are con-
cerned, but if once the children are allowed to reach a certain age and have become accustomed to camp life, with its degrading environment and endless roaming about the bush, it is almost impossible to try to reclaim them. On the other hand, if they are at once brought at an early age into a station and become accustomed, as they soon do to station life—provided this be made attractive—then they will gradually lose the longing for a normal nomad life and will, in fact, become incapable of securing their living in the bush.

And so police, missionaries, public servants and government agencies were charged through government legislation, regulations and ordinances with the task of taking young Aboriginal children of mixed race from their mothers ideally at about two or three years of age. They were taken to a range of institutions, adopted or fostered out to white families; mothers were denied access to their children—if they could find them in the different locations. Aboriginal language speaking was banned, as was any contact with the parents or families. It was reported that the mothers who tried to hold the hands of their children through the wire at Alice Springs were driven away.

I want to read from a 1940 book called *The Great Australian Loneliness*. It was written by Ernestine Hills, a very much favoured author of the time. The book was reprinted many, many times. She writes about the actual living, breathing experience of this policy on human beings as it affected Indigenous Australians. She writes:

> It was in the Gulf of Carpentaria that I was approached by a beach-comber with a poignant little problem of his own. He was the father of four children. Their mother was a black woman.

> According to Government decree, these children were now to be taken from him, and placed in an institution in Central Australia for their upbringing and education. The protector had sent a policeman on a pack-horse. Must he let these children go, or could he claim the rights of fatherhood?

> ‘They’re well fed and happy enough,’ he said. ‘They have no clothes, but they don’t want them out here. This is their country. They don’t want to leave it, and I know they won’t be happy. I don’t suppose either I or their mother will see them again.

> ‘They tell me you write for the papers, so you ought to know. Can I keep them with me? We’ve always been together, whatever else we’ve been, and the old woman will break her heart.’

> Sadly enough, the answer was no. The father of a half-caste has no paternal rights in North Australia, and as for the half-castes themselves, they must learn to live white.

> Is there a throw-back to the Australian black?

> Dr. Cecil Cook, anthropologist, biologist, bacteriologist, Chief Medical Officer and Chief Protector of Aborigines in North Australia, after ten years’ closest observance and research among the half-castes, quadroons and octoroons of the North, says no.

> ‘The Mendelian theory does not apply,’ Dr. Cook told me. ‘There is no atavistic tendency as in the case of the Asiatic and, the negro. Generally by the fifth and invariably by the sixth generation, all native characteristics of the Australian are eradicated. The problem of these half-castes can quickly be eliminated by the complete disappearance of the black race, and the swift submergence of its progeny in the white.’

> ... ... ... ...

> ‘The Australian is the most easily assimilated race on earth,’ said Dr. Cook. ‘A blending with the Asiatic, though tending to increased intelligence and virility, is not desirable. The quickest way out is to breed him white.’

This is the race based policy of miscegenation which we acknowledged and apologised for last Wednesday when the Prime Minister addressed the nation and the Australian stolen chil-
I cannot imagine how profound and how deep the trauma, sadness and psychological and developmental damage must have been to many individuals who were subject to that policy—the parents, the mothers, the children, the sisters and brothers, the kin.

The surviving direct victims of these policies, the mothers and their children and grandchildren, want the nation to acknowledge their history and their hurt. Of course we must. We must acknowledge their loss, and I am so pleased to have been amongst those in the House on Wednesday who said we were sorry. Let us hope our bipartisan apology, sincerely expressed, helps with the healing. And, by acknowledging our past, may it also help to ensure our great society continues to evolve towards having an even more fair and tolerant future for all.

Mr HAYES (Werriwa) (5.10 pm)—Today I join with the Prime Minister, the government and members of the Australian parliament in apologising to the Aboriginal people of this country for the pain and suffering caused by previous administrations, past practices and laws of successive governments in removing Aboriginal children from their families. Apart from the unjust feeling on reflection of what occurred, I would like to approach this from the perspective of being a parent. If my children were removed for reasons I did not understand, I think it would be pretty easy to put in perspective the torment, anger and hurt that I would carry with me until the end of my days. Simply: that is what occurred. People did not understand. As a matter of fact, there were not any great reasons. Nevertheless, their children, their kin, were forcibly removed at a stage when they could do nothing about it. It was the law. The word ‘stolen’ does not indicate a criminal or illegal act; this was a highly legal and sanctioned position. That is why it is appropriate that we do apologise to the stolen generations.

The apology to the stolen generations is the first necessary step to move forward to a new stage of Indigenous and non-Indigenous relations. It is very much the next genuine step in terms of reconciliation. The apology is made on behalf of the government and the Australian parliament—it is made on behalf of all Australians, as a consequence. The apology signifies the beginning of this new relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. It will act, in my opinion, as a bridge to build respect and will be a powerful healing symbol. It is an opportunity to formally recognise past injustices and an opportunity to commit to changes for the future. Quite frankly, it is a chance to move forward.

I know that the apology to the stolen generations will bring special meaning to the people involved and their families. To use a modern colloquialism: I hope it allows a measure of closure for the people and their families. The intention to have a new relationship with Indigenous Australia was exemplified through the national welcome to country this week when we opened the parliament. The national welcome to country from the Ngunawal people was the first that has occurred in this place. I trust that it was not missed by many. This was not only a genuine invitation from Ngunawal people to be at this place but also, from our perspective, the first national ceremony for this parliament.

For members of the parliament, the Prime Minister’s speech last Wednesday was very much an emotional occasion, as it was a reasonably emotional occasion for all Australians who abhor injustice and believe in a fair go. However, the emotional impact of the Prime Minister’s speech was Unmistakable when you looked into the faces of the many Indigenous Australians who were in attendance that day. I assure you that it was not just members of parliament with tears in their eyes and serious lumps in their throats. We took the opportunity to
meet with many people after the Prime Minister’s speech. To simply see their faces and to hear what they had to say I think was very significant.

The overwhelming comment that was made to me by people I met was ‘Thank you’. They were actually thanking us simply for making that apology. They were thanking us not for the past injustices but for acknowledging that those injustices had taken place, and we were mature enough as a nation to admit to the wrongdoings that had occurred and to apologise. The impact on the stolen generations themselves, especially those who attended here in this chamber, as well as their families and their communities, was nothing other than enormous. It was genuinely a historic occasion, one which was well overdue and, speaking for myself—and I am sure it is a view echoed by most—an occasion that will stay with me forever.

It must be said that Labor made it very clear that not only would we apologise to the stolen generations, should we win government, but we would make it the first order of business. To that extent, we have honoured that commitment—the commitment that we made in public but also the commitment we made to the Indigenous people of this nation. This commitment was not about furthering any political agenda but, rather, it was about doing what has long been considered to be the right and decent thing to do. The opposition, on the other hand, opted to support the decision to say sorry last week—and I respect the words that were spoken by the Leader of the Opposition—but it would seem to me from some of the speeches that have been made, particularly in this chamber, that a number of members of the opposition are still hedging their bets. While, as I say, the words of the Leader of the Opposition in supporting the Prime Minister were appreciated, I note that members such as the member for Tangney not only hedged their bets but went on to oppose the general concept of any apology to the stolen generations. To those of us who might have been a little aggrieved by his speech, let me remind them that this was the same Liberal member of parliament who asserted that the actions of mankind had little, if anything, to do with climate change. So at least those who feel aggrieved can be consoled by the fact that he is obviously a little removed from mainstream thinking on a range of subjects.

In terms of where we are in the reconciliation process, particularly for the Indigenous Australians in my electorate, it is clear that the time for denial has come to an end and it is time to advance a proper relationship with Indigenous Australia. During the course of the last couple of weeks, in the lead-up to the opening of parliament and particularly the well-publicised event in which the Prime Minister made an apology to the stolen generations, I took the opportunity—as, no doubt, most members of parliament did—to sit down with various members of my local Indigenous community regarding what the apology meant to them. For instance, I spoke to Jack Johnson, Nancy Davis and Rae Stewart from the Gandangara Local Aboriginal Land Council, which is based in Liverpool, in the heart of my electorate; Glenda Chalker and Cliff Foley, of the Dharawal people; and Auntie Norma Shelley, who always stays in contact with me. The apology meant a range of things to these people, but one of the things that they consistently said was thank you—thank you for realising the indifference there was towards Indigenous Australia in the past, and thank you for realising and acknowledging the injustices that occurred and the hurt and suffering that have been borne by their families. It was not a thank you based on the fact that it was about time, although clearly that was the case. They put to me that it was a genuine thank you for us acknowledging those wrongs of the past, and for
the maturity of an Australian nation, with a view to putting forward a new compact for Aus-
tralian Indigenous and non-Indigenous relations.

I also took the opportunity to speak with a number of agencies and individuals who work
tirelessly with the Indigenous community in my electorate. One of those was Sister Kerry
McDermott. She is a Catholic nun from the Wollongong diocese who not only works with but
lives amongst the Aboriginal community in and about Minto. I know from listening to her
comments and those of the people she has introduced me to that the government now saying
sorry, however long it has taken, is something that is genuinely appreciated throughout the
community. They are hoping for something better to come in the future.

One woman I spoke with—and I have been asked to suppress her surname, so I will use
only her first name, Jenny—is an elder in Minto. She was with Sister Kerry and actually
broke down when asked what the apology meant to her. She took some time to speak, sighed
deeply with tears falling gently down her face and said, ‘I think it is absolutely great that the
government is going to apologise, for every Aboriginal family has been affected and it is so
emotional for us all.’ Jenny was only four years old when she and her sister Rita, who was
two years old, were both taken away from their family. They were both innocently playing
with their cousins near their home in Bourke when they were removed and driven away. Their
cousins were warned not to say anything because otherwise the welfare men would come
back and take them too. This was 45 years ago. They were taken from their mother, their fam-
ily and their community. Their mother thought they had been murdered. I understand from my
discussion with her that their mother searched for their bodies on a daily basis. She was
clearly in pain and cried every day, as would any parent if, without knowing why, their kids
suddenly disappeared. The cousins watched all of this, by the way. They saw the pain in the
eyes of the old lady and the rest of the family. They saw what the family was going through
but said nothing. They were just too afraid. After all, they were kids too.

Late last year, after a family tragedy, for the first time the cousins spoke out about what
they had experienced. They begged Jenny and her sister Rita for forgiveness. Jenny was hon-
est enough to say, ‘There is so much pain still in our hearts and anger too that we were taken
from our family.’ Jenny welcomes the apology and told me how important it was for her and
her mother. She said her mother had been waiting for this day. Jenny said: ‘My poor old
mother has carried so much pain and anguish and sorrow. It is still with her and the hurt will
never heal, but the apology and sorrow expressed by the government is a start.’ Despite what
happened to Jenny, she still has hope. The most striking thing I observed while Jenny graphi-
cally told her story was that she did not even have to use words. Her expression, her sad eyes,
told the story of a lifetime of sorrow. She said that there is hope.

Another prominent Aboriginal woman in my area is Auntie Christina Craig. She is from
Macquarie Fields. Unfortunately, she is in Liverpool Hospital at the moment, and I send my
regards to her. She is in a very serious condition with kidney failure. Christina said to us, ‘I
am so very happy and just wanted to live long enough for an apology to be made.’

Like many here, we have all heard heartfelt stories from Indigenous Australians and no
doubt there will be many more to come. Comments like these from Indigenous members of
our communities show how important the apology is and how important it is to move to do
something so that Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians work and live better together. It
is time that we make the commitment to move forward and to look at those issues that we

MAIN COMMITTEE
need to address, particularly life expectancy, mortality rates and education, so that Indigenous children have the appropriate opportunity to participate along with every other child in this country at the same level.

Mr SLIPPER (Fisher) (5.25 pm)—I would be hypocritical if I were a person who said that, in the last parliament, he had supported an apology to Australia’s Indigenous people. I do not believe in the concept of intergenerational guilt. I do believe that we ought to judge the actions of those people who took children away from their Indigenous families by the values of those times and not by the values of today. Most of those people were well intentioned and it is a little bit unfortunate when we impose today’s standards on yesterday’s actions.

I have to also say that I do applaud the fact that the government has, as an election promise, as a first item of business brought this apology before the parliament. For a long time I was undecided on the position that I would take on this apology, but I believe very strongly that governments ought to deliver on their promises and I was pleased to see the Prime Minister and the government deliver so promptly on this particular promise. That was one of the reasons that I supported the motion through the House—because I believe that elected governments ought to deliver on what, prior to an election, they say they will do for the Australian people.

When one looks at the actions that were taken so many years ago, one has to ask oneself whether the Australian parliament is the appropriate vehicle for an apology, given the fact that most of the laws that were used to remove Indigenous children from their families would have been laws from other levels of government, more particularly the colonial governments before statehood was achieved at Federation. No-one is proud of the fact that Indigenous children were removed from their families and I think all of us sincerely regret that such things occurred.

When you look even at today, however, you do have situations where children are removed, regardless of race, from their families where their families are not perceived to be providing a suitable environment in which to bring up those children. In fact, many of those children are actually removed for their own benefit and their own welfare. I would think that all levels of government and members of parliament, regardless of political party, would continue to support a situation where children on occasion are removed from their parents in circumstances where such an action is in the interests of the child. I do, however, recognise the difference between what happens today and what happened to those people who have been designated as the ‘stolen generation’.

I will not be detaining the House for long but I want to say that I personally get offended when the well-intentioned motives of many of those churches and those people who looked after Indigenous children removed from their families are impugned. Those people, although their actions would not be acceptable today, were in many cases acting in what they perceived to be the interests of the children and, in many respects, the people who fostered and looked after those children in fact did so making substantial financial sacrifices to enable them to give children an upbringing. There have also been circumstances where Indigenous children have been brought up by foster families, have been given a good education and, in some cases, have become Indigenous leaders and role models for Indigenous Australians. I think some of them even recognise the fact that their removal, while certainly regrettable, did give them an education and opportunities in life which would not otherwise have been achievable.
We can also become too involved in tokenism. While, as a nation, we certainly regret the past treatment of Indigenous people, it is more important to look forward—and the practical reconciliation policies of the former government are what this government should be embracing. In fact, quite a long time ago, when I was Chairman of the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Family and Community Affairs, I sought a reference from then Minister Wooldridge into areas of Indigenous health. Personally, I believe it is an absolute scandal that, on average, Indigenous men live for 17 years less than non-Indigenous men. I think the current extent of infant mortality among Indigenous children is outrageous. What we ought to be seeking is a situation where health outcomes for Indigenous people, including Indigenous children, are the same as for those in the general community. I think it is appalling that we have so few Indigenous people in tertiary institutions. What we really want is to give Indigenous people a leg-up so that they are able to take their place, along with their fellow Australians, as equal partners in Australian society.

I do not want my speech to be misinterpreted as criticising the intent of the apology given by the parliament, but we have to look at these things in perspective. Firstly, we have to recognise that the people who took those actions, however unacceptable those actions are today, were largely well motivated. It is important to recognise that our Indigenous Australians have a whole lot of needs, and what we ought to be doing is facilitating the improvement of the lot of those Indigenous Australians up to the standard of the general community. I was pleased to be able to support the government on its delivery of its election promise. Now that we have that particular matter out of the way, it is important that we focus on the genuine and real needs of Indigenous Australians. It is important that we look at what their needs are and at what the Australian parliament can do to improve the situation of Australia’s first people. This debate has been healthy because we have been able to talk about a whole lot of issues in relation to Indigenous people. We have been able to highlight the needs of Indigenous members of Australian society. Hopefully, having made the apology, the government will get on with the real nitty-gritty of improving the lot of Indigenous Australians.

I also have a concern about the issue of compensation. I accept what the Prime Minister says—that compensation will not flow as a result of this apology—but my understanding is that certain claims have been lodged, and they could ultimately be matters to be determined by the courts of this nation. I would hate for this whole issue to become bogged down in the courts because, let’s face it, the Prime Minister said the apology was to be a symbol of the nation’s collective regret, not the vehicle for payouts of huge amounts of money by way of compensation.

We have sought to salve our nation’s collective guilt for too long by throwing money at Indigenous people without looking at the outcomes achieved as a result of the payment of those funds. On occasion, we have become too focused on process and self-determination, not outcomes. It is completely appalling that in 2008 we have a situation where the health prognosis for so many Indigenous Australians is so much worse than for the general community. I welcome the opportunity of participating in this debate and I hope that the result will be an improvement in outcomes for Indigenous Australians.

Mr GIBBONS (Bendigo) (5.35 pm)—Mr Deputy Speaker Sidebottom, it is great to see you back in the chamber. Wednesday, 13 February was a momentous day in the history of this nation. It was a day when this federal parliament, on behalf of all Australians, finally ac-
knowledged that the laws and policies of previous parliaments inflicted profound grief, suffering and loss on Indigenous Australians, and offered an apology to members of the stolen generations. I must remind the House that the apology to our Indigenous Australians has been Labor philosophy and, indeed, policy for a decade. In fact, former Labor leader Kim Beazley stated the word ‘sorry’ on behalf of the Australian Labor Party a decade ago. I was particularly pleased that Auntie Lyn Warren, who is Chairwoman of the Bendigo and District Aboriginal Cooperative, was able to represent the members of the stolen generations from my electorate of Bendigo. The fact that Auntie Lyn sat on the floor of the chamber in the distinguished company of former Prime Ministers Gough Whitlam, Malcolm Fraser, Bob Hawke and Paul Keating and former Governor-General Sir William Deane was in many ways symbolic of what Wednesday’s events were all about. It was a day to remember and to reflect upon our history, especially the history of relations between original inhabitants of this ancient land and the white newcomers from across the seas.

Fifteen years ago, former Labor Prime Minister Paul Keating launched Australia’s celebration of the International Year of the World’s Indigenous People at Sydney’s Redfern Park. He reminded us then that finding solutions to the challenges of Indigenous Australia starts with non-Indigenous Australians. He reminded us that it was we Europeans who did the dispossession, who took the native lands and who destroyed the traditional ways of life. We also brought the diseases and the alcohol. We excluded and discriminated against Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders, and we took the children from their mothers through our ignorance and prejudice—even if some of those removals were well intentioned. It is now apparent that thousands of Indigenous children were forcibly removed from loving and caring families simply because of the colour of their skin. Mr Keating also reminded us that we cannot ignore these past injustices.

How we resolve Indigenous issues affects our standing in the world today. Our Indigenous inheritance is as much a part of who we are today as Australians as other experiences that we regularly like to commemorate. But we cannot be selective about the things in our past that we choose to acknowledge and claim as our heritage. We rightly acknowledge and pay respect to the men and women of Australia’s armed forces who have given their lives for their country. We commemorate their past deeds on battlefields, on the sea and in the air in theatres of war around the globe. We celebrate the past successes of our sportsmen and sportswomen. We celebrate the past achievements of Australians in the arts and the sciences, but what we are today as a nation is a result of the past actions of our forebears, both good and bad. If we want to remember the highlights in our history, including those with which our generation has no direct connection, we must also take responsibility for the darkest episodes and for righting the wrongs of the past as far as we can. To do otherwise is simply hypocritical.

Last Wednesday, the Prime Minister invited us to reflect on one such blemish in our society—the mistreatment of those who were the stolen generations. We who have never been taken away from our families will never be able to truly understand the hurt, pain and suffering involved. What we can do, however, is reflect on the scale of the removals and listen again to the stories of some of those who were removed. The stolen generations inquiry concluded that, from 1910 to 1970, between one in every 10 and one in every three Indigenous children were taken from their families. Up to 50,000 kids across Australia were forcibly re-
moved from their loved ones. They include a Victorian man who was adopted into a non-Indigenous family at the age of three months. He told the inquiry:

I’ve got everything that could be reasonably expected: a good home environment, education, stuff like that, but that’s all material stuff. It’s all the non-material stuff that I didn’t have—the lineage. It’s like you’re the first human being at times. You know, you’ve just come out of nowhere; there you are. In terms of having a direction in life, how do you know where you’re going if you don’t know where you’ve come from?

Whether they were adopted or placed in institutions or church missions, the children were at risk of physical or sexual abuse, in many cases by their non-Indigenous protectors. One girl who was removed as a baby could not tell her sister that she had been raped when she was 15 years old. She told the inquiry:

And I never told anyone for years and years. And I’ve had this all inside me for years and years and years. I’ve been sexually abused, harassed, and then finally raped, y’know, and I’ve never had anyone to talk to about it ... nobody, no father, no mother, no-one. I felt so isolated, alienated. And I just had no-one. None of that family bonding, nurturing—nothing. We had nothing. That’s why I hit the booze.

Indigenous children were expected to work from a young age, but many were never paid for their labour. One Northern Territory man was 11 when he was sent to work on a pastoral station. He said:

I worked there for seven and a half years. Hardly any food or anything, put out in a remote area on me own, drawing water and that, looking after cattle ... no holiday, no pay. I never received one pay that seven and a half years I was there.

Some of those who have opposed this parliament apologising to the stolen generations have argued that we are not responsible for the well-intentioned policies and legislation of previous parliaments. But, as the Prime Minister reminded the House, the practice of removal was not confined to the dim and distant past. The forced removal of Aboriginal children was happening as late as the early 1970s. Many members of this parliament were adults in the 1970s and, if not members of this or other parliaments, were actively involved in politics or government. One man from New South Wales removed during that era was just eight years old. He told the inquiry:

There’s still a lot of unresolved issues within me. One of the biggest ones is I cannot really love anyone no more. I’m sick of being hurt. Every time I used to get close to anyone they were just taken away from me. If I did meet someone, I don’t want to have children, cos I’m frightened the welfare system would come back and take my children.

That man, if he is still alive, is today in his 40s or 50s. He is of our generation, not some distant ancestor. However uncomfortable and inconvenient it may be to acknowledge, the mistreatment of the stolen generations was still taking place in many of our lifetimes. Even while we may have moved on from the mistaken practices of the past, we must acknowledge that the consequences of those actions live on today.

How can we call ourselves a civilised country when so many of our citizens continue to live in appalling, Third World conditions? This is a national disgrace of which we should all be ashamed. We, and especially those of us who are privileged to serve in this place, are responsible for the present-day wellbeing of all Australians, including Aboriginal citizens. There is no room for buck-passing between the federal and state governments over this. For decades we, as the political leaders of this nation, have collectively failed in our responsibility.
In 2000, the Council of Australian Governments adopted its Reconciliation Framework, which recognised the 'unique status of Indigenous Australians and the need for recognition, respect and understanding in the wider community'. That acknowledgement might be commendable, but the fact that seven years later we were still receiving harrowing accounts like last year’s *Little children are sacred* report is a reflection of our failure.

The time has come when we in this place have to take responsibility. We can no longer put the blame on past generations. We cannot continue the mean-spirited prevarication of the Howard government, which, for all its emphasis on practical reconciliation, did practically nothing to improve the life expectancy, educational standards or economic prospects of Indigenous Australians. Last year’s intervention in the Northern Territory now has to be seen in the light of Mr Howard’s admission that during his decade in office he failed to deliver reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. The intervention was a knee-jerk, election driven reaction to a report made to the Northern Territory government whose conclusions differ little from others during the Howard administration.

In 2003, the Australian National University’s Professor Mick Dodson, in a powerful and emotional address to the National Press Club in Canberra, outlined precisely the same awful incidences of abuse in Aboriginal communities. Speeches last year by the Chairman of the Productivity Commission, Gary Banks, to an OECD forum and by the Secretary to the Treasury, Ken Henry, to a Cape York Institute conference highlighted similar issues and advocated similar remedies to the *Little children are sacred* report.

The reasons for the sickening treatment of many Aboriginal children are complex and often related to the wider breakdown of society in Aboriginal communities. To quote from the *Little children are sacred* report:

... the cumulative effects of poor health, alcohol, drug abuse, gambling, pornography, unemployment, poor education and housing and general disempowerment lead inexorably to family and other violence and then on to sexual abuse of men and women and, finally, of children. It will be impossible to set our communities on a strong path to recovery in terms of sexual abuse of children without dealing with all these basic services and social evils.

Complex problems often require complex solutions, and the report suggests that it may take 15 years to address these issues. But, although the answers may be complex, a former Liberal Minister for Aboriginal Affairs and now Director of Reconciliation Australia, Fred Chaney, pointed out in a National Press Club address last year that they are well known. The authors of the *Little children are sacred* report, like many others, recognise that, although the causes may take many years to address, a start needs to be made now. But it must be the right start, on the right basis and in accordance with the right long-term plan. The most important of these is the need to engage in a partnership with Indigenous communities. Social Justice Commissioner Tom Calma, in last year’s report to this parliament, said the previous government’s lack of capacity for engagement and participation with Indigenous peoples was a significant problem. And Mr Chaney told the National Press Club there is ‘really no contest about the fundamental importance of Indigenous engagement as a prerequisite for success’. He went on to say:

Let’s be upfront and learn from our mistakes. Centralised, imposed programs delivered from Canberra or state and territory capitals have not delivered the success we must now expect.
The Prime Minister has led the way with an apology that will form the basis of a new approach to the challenges facing Indigenous Australians. As well as aiming to right the past wrongs, this apology is aimed at building a bridge between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians—a partnership based on mutual respect. This new partnership has firm targets for closing the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians on life expectancy, educational achievements, adequate health care and employment opportunities. Within 10 years we must aim to halve the gap in literacy, numeracy and employment opportunities for Indigenous Australians. Within 10 years we must aim to halve the appalling gap in infant mortality rates between Indigenous and non-Indigenous children, and within a generation we must aim to close the 17-year gap in life expectancy between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.

As this parliament has finally found the courage—under a Labor government—to say sorry to the stolen generations, I would like to add my own apology, an apology to all Australians—Indigenous and non-Indigenous—for the length of time that this unfinished business has languished in this parliament. I am sorry it has taken so long for the highest parliament in the land to take this historic step. But I am proud that we are now taking it and that last Wednesday’s apology has resonated right around the communities—Indigenous and non-Indigenous—of our whole nation. Consigning poverty, prejudice and injustice to the history books must now be one of our highest priorities over the next 10 years or 20 years or however long it takes to remove this stain from our nation. I note a recent statement by the shadow minister for Indigenous affairs—the member for Warringah, Mr Abbott—who said he had been on a journey of rediscovery in attempting to forge a deeper understanding of the history of the stolen generations tragedy. I sincerely hope that his journey leads to the same destination that I believe most Australians have arrived at, as outlined in the Prime Minister’s speech last Wednesday, because if that is the case then we have a far stronger chance of righting the wrongs of the past and making a stronger bipartisan beginning for the future. I commend the motion to the chamber as a start to that process.

Mr HUNT (Flinders) (5.48 pm)—I support this motion of apology to those who were taken from their parents and to those who were the victims of that process or affected in some way. I do so as a member of this parliament, as the member for Flinders and as a father. I speak on the basis of having spent much time over the last three years in many Indigenous communities across Northern Australia. I have been fortunate to have had time in places such as Anindilyakwa, Dhimurru, Yirrkala, Mutitjulu—at the base of Uluru—and in many other townships, communities and Indigenous protected areas across Northern Australia. In that time, I saw both the best and worst of modern living for Indigenous Australia. The Yolngu of Yirrkala on Cape Arnhem have made a proud transition into the 21st century. They have developed a culture which is strong. They have developed a process of profiting from and caring for their land in a way which links with their history, which gives their people a current way forward and which gives their children a proud future. They are a fine example of how a community can prosper. I have also spent time in Mutitjulu, at the base of Uluru. This community is sadly emblematic of the very worst conditions faced by modern Indigenous Australia. I have seen and met with those who are victims of petrol sniffing, abuse and so many other wrongs in such a community. I cannot say with absolute clarity what all the causes are, but I know that that is wrong.
I do know one thing. I do know that the history which has led to this includes the taking of children from their parents. It is, in my opinion, a wrong both in and of itself, one which should never be allowed to occur again, and a wrong which has led to a long-term blight and harm upon Australian society. That is my view. Others may not choose to agree with it, and I respect that, but that is the view that I present today before this parliament and so it is on the record for as long as I stand.

Beyond that, the reason that I believe this is wrong and was wrong stands on two great grounds. First, this was a policy which was widespread, prolonged and systematic. That is, I think, the worst element. It was systematic, based on race. There are other examples of people of good intention, but have no doubt—let there be no question—that it was widespread, it was prolonged and it was systematic on the basis of race. I only wish to quote one example as part of that, which is from page 47 of the Report of the national inquiry into the separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families, better known as the Bringing them home report. To me the short quote says it all:

I still can't see why we were taken away from our home. We were not neglected, we wore nice clothes, we were not starving. Our father worked hard and provided for us and we came from a very close and loving family.

I feel our childhood has been taken away from us and it has left a big hole in our lives.

That is enough for me because that story is the story of many others. I am a father and, if I see that that occurred on the basis of government policy related to race, not in relation to the immediate protection of a child, that is wrong and this parliament should recognise that fact. I make this apology on my behalf and as the member for Flinders.

The second point that I want to make is about the legacy of this. There is an enormous immediate human toll on all of those who were affected, but beyond that there can be no doubt that this past practice has contributed in a significant way to the sort of example I outlined at Mutitjulu. I do not know whether this act will right the current wrongs, but if it in any small way helps then it is valuable. It is owed as and of itself for that which was wrong in the past, but I also believe that it has the potential to free up a way forward, and for that I am doubly happy to support this motion.

I note that in the present, which is where I want to turn to now, there are great difficulties and wrongs which need to be corrected. My position is very clear. We must keep up the work, which began many years ago and which was perhaps most profoundly carried forward by the former minister for Indigenous affairs Mal Brough in bringing into the light some of the obscene and improper activities which occur today. If this parliament is not the place to do that, then where will that light be found? So there is a great task now.

As we go forward, one of the things I think we need to do—beyond the policing, beyond the education, beyond the support—is provide a vital way forward for Indigenous employment that is tied to Indigenous culture and Indigenous land management. One of the programs with which I am pleased to have been involved is the Indigenous rangers program. This is not the answer to everything, but I believe that that form of employment, of land management twinned with significant funding—a program to which we allocated $47 million, which was an almost tenfold increase in the budget—provides a profound way forward for communities. That is why places such as Laynhapuy, Dhimurru and Anindilyakwa all practise the process of Indigenous rangers managing the land. They have created a great sense of pride. I offer this
program to the new government. I say in the nicest way that we hope you will bring this forward and continue it and expand because, in all the communities in which I have seen it, it provides a way out of victimhood, it provides a way forward for self-management, it gives a connection to the land and it gives a sense of pride, as well as being an extremely positive way of achieving land management. That, I believe, is one contribution to the way forward.

As I said at the outset, of and in itself what occurred was wrong. Moreover, it contributed, I believe, in some way to the disadvantage we see today. On both of these grounds I believe this apology should be supported. I offer my sincere apology for what occurred in the past, but I also believe we should never lose sight of, nor lose the courage to acknowledge, the wrongs of great magnitude which continue today. We should have the courage to shed light on them and to deal with them going forward. I commend the motion and I thank all of those who have been part of bringing it before this chamber.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr S Sidebottom)—I thank the member for his contribution, and I have pleasure in calling the Minister for Resources and Energy and Minister for Tourism.

Mr MARTIN FERGUSON (Batman—Minister for Resources and Energy and Minister for Tourism) (5.57 pm)—Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker Sidebottom. I appreciate that warm welcome and congratulate you on your election to high office as one of the deputy speakers. It is a pleasure to have the opportunity to address this motion—an apology by the Australian government to Australia’s Indigenous people. For the great majority of us who are fortunate to be in this parliament, 13 February was a proud day for Australia. I think the truth of the matter is that we all, collectively and individually, failed to estimate and appreciate how important this event was, not just in Parliament House but right across the broad spectrum of the Australia community. We had an especially important opportunity to actually meet with the people in the lead-up to the apology on 13 February and join with them, after the apology by the Prime Minister, to celebrate the event. It was not until late that evening, when I had a look at the late news, that I appreciated how many people were on the lawns of Parliament House. They were out the front, watching the big screen and gratefully saying thanks for this momentous achievement by the Australian parliament.

We should remind ourselves that similar events occurred all around Australia. In Federation Square, Melbourne, in Martin Place, Sydney, in regional communities and in workplaces, people were glued to televisions because they knew this event was historically important for Australia and for where we will go in the 21st century. In that context, I have a special responsibility to build on the symbolic nature of the apology. As a new minister, I have been doing a lot of reflecting about the weight of responsibility my position carries and how I can contribute personally, through my work as a minister, to build on the apology of 13 February. All ministers are very conscious of their personal obligation to create a legacy in their portfolio area that advances the Australian community and the nation generally but also in particular creates special opportunities for Indigenous Australians, who have been left behind far too long.

That is important to me because I first went to the Northern Territory in March 1977 and had an opportunity to meet a lot of significant Indigenous people who have made a major contribution to the Northern Territory. People I have worked with over the years include the Clarke brothers, Jim and Bingy Clarke; Ella Ahmat, a long-time worker at Darwin Hospital;
Lenny Cole, who worked on the Darwin council; and Denise Ahsan, a key representative of my old union in the Northern Territory and a hospital worker. Then we have got those more in the public domain such as Tracker Tilmouth, David Ross, Galarrwuy Yunupingu and Norman Fry, just to name a few, who basically saw this apology as creating a foundation for the future.

I think we have now got to move on and turn the page to actually create a process of practical reconciliation in Australia. That has got to build on the symbolic reconciliation of the apology moved and passed in parliament by acclamation, which is now in the record of the Australian parliament and the Australian community forever. It also has to be a legacy that makes sure Indigenous Australians share in the benefits of Australia’s great economic opportunities, especially those brought forward by the current resources boom. They should share not only in the growing wealth and prosperity as a result of that but also in other areas of my portfolio such as tourism, which is very strong in rural, remote and regional Australia. Across all industries in Australia, there are opportunities that have to be grasped and driven home in terms of guaranteeing a better future for our Indigenous community.

I simply say that in terms of the facts—and I want to put some of these on the record—we have all got something to answer for. No side of politics can actually say that they have done the best in the past. We have all got to learn from our mistakes. I also say that the private sector has got a very important role to play in delivering these better outcomes because they are out there investing the money and they are the ones who largely employ people in Australia. We have got to create the environment and the programs that facilitate these economic opportunities for our Indigenous community.

We are also only going to make progress when we think about some of the educational and health indicators. I think it is shameful that the life expectancy of Indigenous people is around 17 years lower than that for the total Australian population, that kidney disease is 10 times as high in Indigenous people and that diabetes is three times as common. It is also shameful that one in five 15-year-old Indigenous teenagers are not in school and that half as many Indigenous kids as non-Indigenous kids continue on to year 12 and post secondary qualifications. Achievement rates for those at school are also far below the national average. More than 20 per cent of year 3 Indigenous children do not achieve the national benchmark compared to less than 10 per cent of non-Indigenous year 3 children. These figures clearly deteriorate as our children advance to the higher years of school because of a lack of foundational opportunities on the literacy and numeracy front.

Then we go to issues of employment. The labour force participation rate for Indigenous people stands at just 58.5 per cent, about three-quarters of that for non-Indigenous people. At a time when the country is at almost full employment and crying out for workers, the unemployment rate is three times higher for Indigenous people than for non-Indigenous Australians. We have clearly failed Indigenous people in health, education, employment and housing over many years.

I therefore suggest to the chamber that it is imperative for us, as a community, to address the low employment participation rate for Indigenous Australians. We are not going to resolve these problems in Indigenous communities until we accept that we need to make progress on that front. Just like Australians in general, Indigenous people define themselves, not only as individuals but as families and communities, by their capacity to work. To make progress on the employment front, you have also got to make progress on the educational front. Education
and skills are the keys to employability. If you do not have confidence in your ability to work and deliver for your family then that creates major problems in local communities. So education is clearly critical. I believe it is the foundation that creates the opportunities to overcome some of the other problems being faced today in Indigenous communities. That requires leadership at a local community level and a state government level and also the federal government working in a cooperative way with all tiers of government and the private sector to actually make progress on this front.

That is why the Prime Minister has correctly promised an education revolution, and nowhere is it more important than in our Indigenous communities—communities that, in some instances, have known little else other than intergenerational unemployment, the welfare cycle and social dysfunction, despite the best endeavours and well-meaning intentions of successive governments. At this point in time let us seize the opportunity; we have never had a better time to do something about this.

As a result of the apology delivered by the Prime Minister last week on 13 February there was a great sense of goodwill in the Australian community to now seize hold of this problem and create real momentum for real change in Australia. We have the economic circumstances to create opportunity for Indigenous Australians to share in our vast wealth and in doing so overcome some of the major social problems that confront those communities. It is known in the Indigenous community that we as a community have now finally come together to recognise the urgency of improving Indigenous outcomes. The apology lays the platform for us to now make real progress and move beyond that symbolic gesture that was outstanding for far too long. In essence they are saying that they accept that the blame game is over, that they want a better future and that they want to be part of the prosperity that exists in Australia and that is being shared by their brothers and sisters and Australians at large.

It is also now acknowledged in the Indigenous community that it is not just about leadership at a government and private sector level; it is also about leadership at a community level. It is also accepted that a lot of that leadership is going to come from the women. A lot of those women, especially the more senior women, now understand. In some instances we have lost a generation of Indigenous people in Australia, and they do not want to see the same occur with respect to their grandchildren. They are prepared to work with government at every level and with the private sector to do the best thing by their grandchildren and to try to create those opportunities to get it right in the future.

The resources, energy and tourism sectors, where my ministerial responsibilities lie, clearly create some of those opportunities. When you just think about it, it is in rural, remote and regional Australia that a lot of the Indigenous communities live. That is where we can get meaningful improvements in education and health and increases in workforce participation so as to lay down the path to a better future for all Indigenous communities and families over the next generations, a path that is so important to Australia at large. Let us try to make sure that we actually do something about this. When you think about it, we have underestimated the importance of the Indigenous community as a key part of the Australian economy. It is not well known that by 2020 every second Australian living north of the Tropic of Capricorn, or above Port Augusta in South Australia, will be of Aboriginal descent. Just think about that. Think about the importance of that to workforce participation in companies in the mining, tourism, pastoral and forestry sectors, to name just a few. More importantly, those companies are pre-
pared to share the burden of assisting government in a new partnership to deliver real outcomes in education and training, health, housing and business.

As I go about my work I regularly sit down with companies and remind them of their responsibilities. But I am pleased to say that a lot of these companies not only know about it but also want to actively do something about it. We have 40 per cent Indigenous employment in places such as Argyle in the north of Western Australia. Clearly, it has been recognised that working together is a good investment in the future of the private sector and it is a good investment in working with government to overcome these key challenges. That is why as a member of the government I will continue to work with the Minerals Council of Australia to build on the memorandum of understanding that was previously signed by the last government to make real progress on this front. This is not about blaming one another; this is about grasping the opportunities, recognising our mistakes and now working as one community to make practical progress on this front.

I simply say this: yes, it is a major challenge but it is one that Australia is equal to. In the same way that we kick goals on the sporting field we have to kick goals at home in a very sustainable way to get real improvements in the lifetime opportunities for our Indigenous communities all around Australia, be they living in capital cities or in rural, remote and regional Australia. Working in partnership programs and with memorandums of understanding with different sectors of the Australian industry is so important because that also means we are using a best practice model and we can teach other businesses about what they can do as stakeholders and how Indigenous people can learn about industry jobs in the mining sector and the forestry sector. It was no different in the past when we used this best practice model to build improvements in productivity and workforce change by creating successful models and then spreading the word throughout the whole Australian community. Stakeholders are part of that, be they government or the private sector.

In conclusion, I actually thought that the apology was exceptionally important. It was delivered with grace and received by the Australian community with open hands. It is now acknowledged that we have to go forward because this is so important not only to our feeling as a community of what is right and decent but also to overcoming what was real challenge to Australia in the 20th century and is now in the 21st century. That is why the Prime Minister was so right when he said at the conclusion of the apology:

Let us turn this page together, Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, government and opposition, Commonwealth and state, and write this new chapter in our nation’s story together. First Australians, First Fleeters and those who first took the oath of allegiance just a few weeks ago—let us grasp this opportunity to craft a new future for this great land, Australia. Mr Speaker, I commend the motion to the House.

The Prime Minister is right. It is a responsibility that we all have to share in, to actually use this historic apology to Australia’s Indigenous people in the past, to say, ‘Yes, we got it wrong in the past.’ We have apologised. Let us walk now hand in hand to do something about the real social and economic problems that exist for our Indigenous community. They will be better for it and so will the Australian community. We will again walk tall in the international community, a community of respect because we have worked out our wrongs and we are now committed to doing something about it. I commend the motion to the House.
Mr KEENAN (Stirling) (6.11 pm)—I want to use this debate on the apology motion to place on record some thoughts about Sorry Day in the House last week. Before I get to the crux of the motion, I just want to say a few words about the state of Aboriginal affairs in Australia. It is worth while reflecting on not only how difficult this problem of the stolen generation is but how there is a group of people in Australia which has a substantially lesser life expectancy, a high infant mortality and crime statistics which, quite frankly, boggle the mind. Why is it that there is a group of people in Australia whose children are not as well protected by the law as we would expect all our children to be protected? We should not underestimate the challenge of Indigenous affairs, neither should we think we are the first people to try to address this challenge. I think there has been a lot of goodwill to try and attack these areas of entrenched disadvantage.

I was initially relatively sceptical about the idea of providing an apology to the stolen generation, but I think it is important. In this place I think we can often stake out our positions and never move from them. All we do is just fight to defend the ground that we have already staked out and it makes it very difficult for us to move. But certainly on this issue I feel as though I did move some distance, and I was very happy to wholeheartedly support the apology, as given by the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition last week.

Former senator Reg Withers, a very great Western Australian senator, said that consistency is a sign of a feeble mind. In this instance I was glad that, in listening to some of the contributions to this debate, I was able to change my thoughts on this motion. I was particularly taken on the day after the apology was given by the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition. I took the opportunity to talk to some of the people who had come to listen to the apology. I did not think symbols were necessarily going to help them in their situation and that was why I was initially sceptical. But certainly I was quite moved to see the emotion that they felt about coming down here and hearing the parliament apologise to them. It is important that, even if we do not necessarily understand it all ourselves, we acknowledge that if people are feeling like this then, as I do think, what the parliament did was extraordinarily worth while.

So I congratulate the Prime Minister and the new government on doing this. I was also extraordinarily proud of the contribution made by the Leader of the Opposition on the day. It was a difficult issue for the coalition parties; let us not beat about the bush on that. There was a diversity of views within our party room. There is also a diversity of views in the community. We should not just think that everyone in Australia supports us 100 per cent on this motion, because the reality is that there is a diversity of views. There certainly is in my electorate and people have put different views to me about the motion.

Symbolism can only take us so far and, whilst I do think this is an important step, we really need to use this apology to create a new agenda for action to attack this entrenched disadvantage. I firmly believe that the Northern Territory intervention by the Howard government—and I am not making a partisan comment here—was an extraordinarily good start to tackling some of this entrenched disadvantage. Members in this place for the past four decades have tried to do something to change the situation of Aboriginal Australians within our society and, quite frankly—let us be honest—the different approaches have not met with great success. Because that is the case, we need to think long and hard about how we do things. I do believe that the intervention was extremely important. If you cannot provide basic services and law
and order to a community—all the things which everyone in the suburbs of Stirling expects and which we would expect to find in our electorates—then it is very difficult to see how you can build on these other issues.

That is why, in listening to some of the contributions in the debate, I have been concerned to hear the Northern Territory intervention being criticised. We should not doubt each other’s sincerity to address these issues; we may have different approaches to it. But I am very happy to put aside any scepticism about the government’s approach to this issue, and I would ask that the Labor Party do the same when they are evaluating the opposition’s approach and the former government’s approach to these issues, because I do believe that everybody in this place wants to see an improvement. I genuinely believe that.

I urge the government to continue with the intervention in the Northern Territory. I think it was a retrograde step to wind back the steps that the previous government were taking on the permit system. Again, whilst I do not doubt the sincerity of the new Minister for Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, I am not sure why we would want to go back to a system that has so obviously failed Indigenous people.

I want to just reflect on the challenge that is ahead of us because, as I said, we are not the first people to discover how difficult this problem is. Members in this place in the past have tried to address it but, sadly, we have not met with the success that we would like. But we should not be so arrogant as to assume that, suddenly, we have just discovered there is a whole group of Australians who are not enjoying the prosperity that Australia seems to offer everybody else and therefore feel that we are vastly superior to our forebears who have come before us in this chamber. A lot of effort has gone into Indigenous affairs, but the reality is that we have not seen the progress that everybody would like.

In a former life I worked for the then Minister for Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs. The Howard government had a program that I thought was a very good initiative to address some of these issues. They made a minister and also their department head specifically responsible for progress in a particular community. I was working for Amanda Vanstone at the time and she was given responsibility for the community at Wadeye, which used to be called Port Keats, which is in the Northern Territory and quite close to the Western Australian border. It is not an easy place to get to.

I went up there with her—it must have been in 2002—and that was my first experience of going to an outlying Indigenous community. You really could not help but be shocked by seeing how this community was so incredibly dysfunctional. Any property that could have been moved or was capable of being stolen was behind barbed wire. From talking to the people there, you got an understanding that at night things descended into a state of lawlessness. It was extraordinarily difficult to get people from the Northern Territory government to go out there and provide services because it was not considered to be a particularly good place for them to go and take their own families. I was pretty shocked by that experience, and it was my first experience. We visited Wadeye on a number of occasions and a sincere effort was made by the former government to try to improve conditions there.

We need to use this apology to commit to providing Aboriginal Australia with the same services and life chances that are available to every other Australian. I think Australians are very happy to give people a fair go. Most of the groups that have come into Australia have
been very successful. Why has this one group not been able to share in the broad success that the rest of the community is enjoying?

Of course, speeches in parliament will not achieve this progress. We need to back up our noble words—and they were good words—with actions. We cannot accept lesser standards of law and order in Aboriginal communities and, sadly, this is not just happening in the Northern Territory where the federal government is intervening; the reality is that it is happening in Western Australia, Queensland and other parts of Australia. I despair that the state government of Western Australia, instead of trying to take ownership of the problem, seem determined to try to downplay the problem. I think they see the fact that this problem is continuing as some-how an indictment of the policies that they have put in place. They have clearly failed. The problems in Western Australia are equal to those that are occurring in some of the communities in the Northern Territory.

I just want to move quickly to the issue of compensation. I do not believe that it is appropriate that this generation of Australians compensate the stolen generation for the obvious hardship that they endured. I do believe that that would be a very divisive thing for the government to do and I do think that that is not the way forward for the nation.

I will conclude my remarks by saying that I am very happy to support this motion. If you had asked me a month ago, I would not have said that but, as I have said, I have moved greatly on this issue. So I do wholeheartedly support this motion. I was moved by the proceedings in the chamber last week, but I would like everyone in this place to understand that we have not just discovered this problem; people have been trying to address it for decades. We do need a new approach, and the apology is only very much the first step along that road.

Mr COMBET (Charlton—Parliamentary Secretary for Defence Procurement) (6.22 pm)—I have been a passionate and long-time supporter of an apology to the stolen generations and therefore I was very pleased to be a supporter and part of that motion in the House last week. I believe it has provided a very important symbolic step forward for reconciliation with Indigenous Australians. I also believe that it was only a Labor government that would have delivered an apology to the stolen generations and I am very proud to be part of the Rudd Labor government which did so because I think it moves this country towards a greater position of national unity.

I would like to say a few things in my remarks today about this week’s motion, the Bringing them home report and my electorate and some of its constituents. Firstly, on the apology itself, I was very proud to have been a member of parliament during the apology to the stolen generations, and to finally hear the Prime Minister and government of this country say the simple yet powerful word ‘sorry’ was a truly wonderful moment. Even more wonderful were the reactions of the Australian public—both Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians—who in the majority wholeheartedly and overwhelmingly supported the apology. A mountain of grief seems finally to have been released, leaving optimism and hope for the future.

The Prime Minister’s motion delivered on behalf of the parliament addressed the past, present and future. Firstly, it was a motion about the past. We apologised on behalf of the parliament for the laws and policies of successive parliaments and governments that without question inflicted profound grief, suffering and loss on fellow Australians. We focused particularly on the removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families, their communities and their country. We said sorry for the pain, suffering and hurt of the stolen
generations, their descendants and their families left behind. And we said sorry for the indignity and degradation that was inflicted on a proud people with a proud culture.

Secondly, the motion was about the present. The motion called on us to reflect on the past and to honour the Indigenous peoples of this land, who have of course the oldest continuing cultures in human history. It offered us a chance and an opportunity to turn a new page in Australia’s history by righting the wrongs of the past and allowing us to move forward with confidence into the future.

The motion, importantly, was also about the future, and I was pleased to hear the Prime Minister, on behalf of the parliament, outline a very positive future program. The motion spoke of a future where we harness the determination of all Australians, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, to close the gap that lies between us in life expectancy, educational achievement and economic opportunity. It is a future where we embrace the possibility of new solutions to enduring problems where old approaches have demonstrably failed; a future that is based upon mutual respect, mutual resolve and mutual responsibility; and a future where all Australians, whatever their origins, are truly equal partners with equal opportunities and an equal stake in shaping the next chapter in the history of this great country. It was a motion to be proud of, and today I again reiterate my heartfelt support for the motion and the apology.

I want to make a few remarks about why and how we reached the point where our parliament was able to say sorry and why it was necessary to the stolen generations. It was not really until the 1980s that Australians began to turn their minds to, learn about and realise what had happened in the past and what had happened to the stolen generations. There was early research by the academics Coral Edwards and Peter Read that started to draw people’s attention to this part of our history. Then in 1995, under the Keating government, the then Attorney-General, the Hon. Michael Lavarch, announced an inquiry to examine the past and the continuing effects of separation and to identify what could be done in response. Two years later, on 26 May 1997, the report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families, entitled Bringing them home, was tabled in parliament.

I think some of the key findings of that inquiry are worth recalling. They included that, nationally, between one in three and one in 10 Indigenous children were forcibly removed from their families and communities between 1910 and 1970. That is an extraordinary statistic: between one in three and one in 10 Indigenous children were separated from their families. Indigenous children were placed in institutions, in church missions, adopted or fostered and were at risk, as we have heard in many instances, of physical and sexual abuse. Having been placed in work, such as in domestic labour, many never received any wages for the work that they performed for many years.

We also saw in the Bringing them home report that welfare officials failed in their duty to protect many Aboriginal wards from abuse. The report recommended, amongst other things, that all Australian parliaments issue an acknowledgement of responsibility and apology. The federal parliament, until the Prime Minister’s motion on Wednesday, was the only parliament in this country not to have done so. All state and territory parliaments, under the leadership of both sides of politics, had previously offered an apology. The former Howard government refused to do so. The wait for an apology has therefore been a long one and the actions of our parliament were overdue.
Within my electorate of Charlton, I have a significant population of Aboriginal people—quite a large community. I also, of course, have many non-Indigenous Australians who feel very passionately about the importance of saying sorry, and they have expressed this to me in the last week. I have received many letters and emails, every single one of them expressing their support for the motion and offering their congratulations to the Rudd government. I would like to thank those who have offered their support and specifically those who have kindly shared their stories and experiences with me. I would like to relate a couple of those stories that have been brought to me in the last week. They come from two people actually affected as part of the stolen generations.

One of the residents of my electorate came to Canberra last week for the occasion of the apology and, when I saw her in my office, she told me an extremely saddening history of her mother’s life and of her own experience. Unfortunately, it is an all too familiar story. Her mother had been taken as a child and placed in so-called care and thereafter subjected to appalling trauma and abuse. This apparently included a practice, in circumstances where a person resisted the systematic abuse, of brutally shaving women’s heads and, in the process, taking pieces of scalp, leaving permanent scarring. My constituent’s mother was placed in early adulthood in domestic service, like many other Aboriginal women. She never received any wages for her work and in this work she suffered sexual abuse and bore children. Her children were then removed, and my constituent was one of them. She related to me an appalling story about her own experience, which I would prefer not to repeat, but it is nonetheless very distressing. She has spent much of her life trying to understand who she is, to understand the system which so alienated her from her family and prevented her seeking out her siblings. She is a lovely person and I can only hope that the government’s apology has given her some comfort.

Another of my constituents wrote to me about her experiences. I was particularly taken with the hope and positive feeling of her words when she spoke of the future and her capacity to forgive. She wrote this:

I am just one of the many stolen children from the 1950s. I have learnt that we all do things that are not in the best interest of others, both great and small things, at some time in our lives. The best thing about this is that it can always be remedied with a heartfelt apology and made into a whole new beginning, and new beginnings can be wonderful. The next step after that and the one after that into that new beginning is equally as important as the sorry. What I mean by this is the follow-up of care and recognition for the original people of this land Australia, health, education, guidance, respect and support to enable them to live in a healthy and happy environment and to enable them to hold their heads up with dignity. We as a nation have much to say sorry for—two centuries of being downtrodden, robbed, raped and murdered. It is with much excitement and anticipation that I wait for the future of Aboriginal people to no longer be destructive but positive and constructive.

That is from one of the constituents in my electorate, and that message was conveyed in a wonderfully positive vein.

The accounts I have heard of people’s experiences of the stolen generations have been very disturbing and confronting. However, I am also pleased, of course, to say that I have sensed a great feeling of hope amongst the Aboriginal population of my electorate. The apology was more than just words to many of them; it was an important and symbolic act that helped signify a healing of old wounds. It was a great moment but it was also a first step. We must now make sure that we continue to offer practical solutions to the challenges that our Indigenous
population faces. We must look forward to an improvement in health, education and economic opportunities. Old solutions to the problem have clearly failed and I hope that the apology will allow us now to move together towards a real and meaningful set of reforms. I am hopeful about this future and look forward to working with my colleague and close friend the Minister for Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, Jenny Macklin, on achieving a better future for the original inhabitants of this country.

I will just conclude with a few remarks about some of the people involved in implementing the policy of removal. It is true to say, I think, from many of the accounts that have been heard, that some of the people involved in the removal of the stolen generations committed wrongful and horrible acts. Generally, however, I think what we are looking at is a systemic failure, a system which was at fault. The predication that decisions of this magnitude could be taken due to a person’s race was and is wrong and offensive. There is no doubt that the system imparted a great deal of hurt and damage to those involved.

I have been taken aback by the level of forgiveness shown by many of the stolen generations towards those who implemented this system, and this is surely remarkable, given what many of them experienced. But I have also read, as others have, I am sure, of a number of instances in which the public servants implementing the system themselves have apologised and also recognised the inherent wrongs of what they were being asked to do. It is these kind acts of apology and forgiveness from both sides that have given me hope in these circumstances in our grand project of reconciliation. I was proud to be associated with the apology given by this parliament, and I truly believe that it was an important and necessary gesture that will help heal some of the wounds of the past and help us move towards an agenda for the future.

Mr CIOBO (Moncrieff) (6.35 pm)—I came into this parliament as the product of a Far North Queensland upbringing. I grew up in a small country town that is just west of Cairns called Mareeba, with a population of about 10,000 people. It was a relatively unique upbringing, I suppose, in a number of respects. The first is in my experience. Whilst it is certainly not the case that I am unique in this parliament in my upbringing, I think it would be fair to say that some of the experiences and exposure I had as a child are perhaps a little different to what a large proportion of those who are in this chamber and, indeed, in the parliament would have experienced.

In particular, I think about the fact that as a young boy growing up in Mareeba, a country town that had a very large Aboriginal population, it was not unusual for me to be at school with a large number of Aboriginal children and to count among my friends some Aboriginal children. My experiences as a young boy growing up in Far North Queensland—including regular travels out to the very western parts of Queensland, including Aboriginal communities such as Kowanyama and Weipa—were times I look back on with a certain degree of fondness. Having said that, it is also realistic for me to acknowledge that, in looking back at my experiences as a young boy, it was very evident, even from an early age, that a great gulf existed between Aboriginal Australia and a white person’s Australia.

In that respect, for me this debate has had a certain amount of poignancy. It has been particularly poignant because in a number of respects I have drawn on some of the experiences I had as a young child. But I have also sought to lay a fabric of evaluation across it and evaluate it through my more recent experiences and through the experiences and the feedback that I
have received from members of my party and of other parties, as well as from the general
community. I have got to say that I certainly understand the reasons for the apology that was
made in the parliament and I certainly wholeheartedly support it. I support the apology be-
cause something that really crystallised in my mind in the past week or so—and it was largely
from a document that Reconciliation Australia put forward, which was an objective and un-
emotional analysis of what an apology is about for Aboriginal Australia—was the fact that in
part of this debate and in the tumult and divisiveness that this debate has in the past caused,
we have lost sight of the fact that there are, in fact, several elements to what has taken place in
Australia’s history. There is the element that deals with young Aboriginal children or teenag-
ers who were removed and separated from their families for no reason other than the fact that
they were black. And then there are also those young Aboriginal children and teenagers who
were separated from their families on genuine grounds of welfare.

I do not intend to be an expert, nor do I believe, perhaps, that anybody should be an expert
at raking through the coals of history and determining who was removed and for what pur-
pose they were removed, but there can be no doubt—and history has made this clear—that
there were a large number of Aboriginal children forcibly separated from their families for no
other reason than the fact that they were black. To those Aboriginal children, many of whom
are now adults, I think it is appropriate and fitting that the parliament, on behalf of all Austra-
lians, issued an apology.

But in the same way it would be intellectually dishonest to not acknowledge that there were
also Aboriginal children who were taken with the best of intentions. In that respect, it has
been my observation in attempting to be objective about this that there are many Australians
who feel that in some way, when the apology washes from being an apology merely about one
category of the community and then becomes an apology that is issued to all Aboriginal Aus-
tralians, it erodes the bona fides of those children that were removed on true welfare grounds.
I think it is important to put on the record the very clear delineation between these two acts.
One act has at its core a malfeasance about it; the other act has at its core the very best of in-
tentions. The reason I deliberate between these two is that the divisiveness of this debate in
my view is principally drawn from which side of the camp you stand on with respect to those
two experiences.

A number of speakers in this debate have spoken about those two elements and have de-
cided to draw on experiences they thought were appropriate to suit their arguments in this
debate. From my perspective, the most important aspect is that the Australian people in no
small way came together last week through this national parliament to issue an apology. That
apology—and I guess the fact that we were able to transcend politics on that particular day—
truly was an uplifting experience. It truly was, I believe, cathartic to those Aborigines that had
been removed from their families for the wrong reasons. Hopefully, as well for those that
were removed with the best of intentions, it might also provide some peace.

Historically, the coalition has been against the symbolism of an apology, preferring instead
to focus on the phrase that is often used, ‘practical reconciliation’. It seems to me now that the
symbolic act of an apology has been carried through that we can start to move forward and
again refocus on where the debate has been for so long—that is, on practical reconciliation. I
have heard from a number of Indigenous leaders who have turned around and stated that fol-
lowing the apology there is forgiveness and there is opportunity for all Australians to move
forward in a reconciled way and that is truly tremendous. The fact is—and it is a very sad fact—that we still have many concerns with respect to practical reconciliation.

I have to say that one area I am profoundly apologetic about and personally, as a member of this parliament, would take very deliberately on my shoulders is the issue of an apology to those Aborigines living in Australia today who are forced to endure the most horrific of circumstances. It seems to me that in many respects on the heady day that was last Wednesday, there were too many instances of and almost a blindness to the problems that exist in Aboriginal communities. I am sorry—and I say ‘sorry’—that this government and previous governments have not done enough to improve the lot of Aboriginals, especially those in remote communities.

It is worth putting on the record articles like one written in the Sydney Morning Herald on 1 December last year entitled, ‘Where children run from playtime’, which said:

It is late morning in Alice Edward Village, a sparse, windswept Aboriginal settlement behind Bourke, and already residents are gathering to drink, smoke marijuana or inject speed. For many of their children, it’s the start of a daily battle. The adults become aggressive as the day wears on. By nightfall, some have become sexual predators. Children, terrified, hide in ceiling cavities or wedge their bedroom doors shut.

‘I haven’t spoken to an eight-year-old and above that hasn’t been molested,’ said Ron Pagett, a small business owner whose family has lived in the state’s north-west since the area was settled by Europeans.

Pagett says he has visited homes where children have taken the knobs off their bedroom doors to protect themselves. ‘Most of the doors have been kicked in.’

He has heard of 12-year-olds giving birth, and of even younger girls having backyard abortions. Once he found two young girls who had been camping near the school for weeks. ‘We’re not going home any more,’ they said, ‘we’re sick of being dooried’ ...

an Aboriginal word which means raped. I talk about these things because we must recognise our responsibility on both sides of the chamber to do what we can to improve the law and order aspects, to improve the health aspects and to improve the childhood of young Aborigines in Australia today. It is not good enough if we now, having said the symbolic sorry, simply turn around and think that our work is done. In that spirit, I welcome the bipartisan committee that has been established in this parliament because, frankly, this issue must transcend partisan politics.

The fact is that if the kinds of rapes, gang rapes and child abuse that for some reason are accepted in Aboriginal communities—largely because they are off the front pages of newspapers—were occurring in white communities, there would be such an uproar that it would be unparalleled. Yet this has been going on for decades. I think back to when I grew up in that small country town when, I have no doubt, these same events were taking place and no-one said anything.

So it is a symbolic act of sorry, but a very sincere sorry now issued. It is important that we use this apology to now take practical reconciliation forward strongly. Certainly, we must make sure that young Aboriginal children, who in the past have been in harm’s way and who in the future might be in harm’s way, have the opportunity to actually enjoy being a child, have the opportunity to embrace some unique aspects of Aboriginal culture that they are exposed to, and have the opportunity provided to other Australian kids who are not in the same situations.
In every respect it is important that we do not think, because there has been one simple word of sorry put forward, that our work is finished. Each of us must absolutely steel ourselves to make sure that we take concrete steps forward to improve conditions, life expectancy and general educational experiences for young people in existing Aboriginal communities. So I am pleased to support the apology motion. I was pleased to see the parliament come together. It is now time though to truly feel sorry for all of those people who we in this chamber have stood by watching while so many negative things were happening. And we have not done anywhere near enough to improve the lives of children who are subjected to so many nefarious acts.

Mr MELHAM (Banks) (6.48 pm)—I begin by acknowledging the Ngunawal people, the traditional owners of the land where we meet today, and by paying my respects to them and their elders. The apology the parliament made to the stolen generations last week, on 13 February 2008, was a seminal moment in Australian history. At the outset, I wish to congratulate the Prime Minister and the Minister for Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs on their leadership in this matter.

The Australian Labor Party can be proud of the leadership shown by the Prime Minister and Minister Macklin in the past few months, as we can be proud of the respective contributions of previous Labor prime ministers. Gough Whitlam, during an emotional ceremony in 1975, poured sand into Vincent Lingiari’s hands and handed the Wave Hill station back to the Gurindji people. The Hawke government took steps towards reconciliation with Indigenous Australians by establishing the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation in September 1991. I was proud to be a member of that council for a number of years.

In May 1995, the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families was established by the Keating government. During the period from December 1995 to October 1996, the inquiry heard evidence across the country in cities, towns and regions. According to the Parliamentary Library, the inquiry received 777 submissions, including 535 from Indigenous individuals and organisations, 49 from church organisations and seven from government. On 26 May 1997 the inquiry’s report Bringing them home was tabled in the national parliament. On 28 May 1997, as shadow minister for Aboriginal affairs, I seconded a motion by the then Leader of the Opposition, the member for Brand, Kim Beazley, and I want to read parts of that motion:

... this House—

(1) affirms that the tabling of “Bringing them Home”, the Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families, presents the nation with an unprecedented historical opportunity to render justice and restitution to Indigenous Australians, for the good of all Australians;

(2) acknowledges the immense trauma inflicted upon the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples of Australia as a result of the separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families under past government policies in place from before the time of Federation until the early 1970s;

(3) affirms that these racially discriminatory policies and their continuing consequences are a matter of national shame;

(4) affirms that current future and Federal and State governments are responsible for assisting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to rectify the ongoing effects of those policies;

MAIN COMMITTEE
(5) affirms its commitment to a just and proper settlement of the grievances of people adversely affected by those policies; and

on behalf of the nation—

(6) unreservedly apologises to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians for the separation policies;

(7) calls upon Federal and State governments to establish, in consultation with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community, appropriate processes to provide compensation and restitution, including assistance for the reunification of families and counselling services ...

There are other parts to the motion. I clearly recall the vote on that day. There were 46 ayes and 83 noes; that is what Hansard records. Eighteen of those ayes who were present when Labor first proposed an apology in May 1997 were actually present on the floor of the chamber last week to finally hear that apology.

In seconding the motion I commented that the nation was watching—indeed, the world was watching—for leadership from the then Prime Minister. This is what I had to say:

Normally, prime ministers grow in office, they do not diminish in office. What is required in response to this report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families is generosity of spirit, not mean-spiritedness.

And further on I said of the Prime Minister:

He not only diminishes his office but also diminishes the nation. The nation is watching. The world is watching—for leadership from the highest office. You shame your office by your conduct. You shame the nation by your conduct. In 1967 this parliament was given the power to protect Aboriginal people, to act to their benefit, not to continue the discrimination against them. They are entitled to equality before the law, to respect before the law and to respect in all matters that others are entitled to.

That was part of what I had to say then. We as a nation entered a period of almost 12 years of profound shame. However, times change and leaders change. I would like to note the contribution made by Malcolm Fraser. It was his government that introduced the land rights act giving land rights to Northern Territory Aboriginal people. Mr Fraser has continued to support the issue of reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians as well as actively pursue an apology.

One of the most satisfying aspects of the recent process of moving towards a formal apology has been the bipartisan demonstration between government and opposition, and I congratulate the Leader of the Opposition on his work in bringing his party to the table. The Leader of the Opposition established a position and, given the divisions within the conservative side of politics, he did quite well. It is obvious that there are some who did not agree, but there was no formal vote against the apology, and for that the Leader of the Opposition deserves congratulations. He was in a difficult position. I did not agree with parts of the contents of his speech, but what he did from his point of view and from the conservative point of view was enormous. That should be acknowledged; it should be recognised by people on all sides of the parliament. It is very hard to bring some people along, but he did bring his party along, as well the National Party. The National Party, in many respects, has a lot of knowledge and understanding of Indigenous people. I know one of the former leaders, John Anderson, had an understanding in relation to Indigenous people and an empathy with them.
What I have learnt over my years of contact with Aboriginal communities and Aboriginal people is that at the most fundamental level we must work with the communities in question and not impose solutions. My mate Tracker Tilmouth always tells me, ‘We don’t want to be saved by you, Mels.’ What they want are people to sit down with and work with them and have them as part of the solution. I would object to outsiders coming in and telling me what was best for my community. Why would it be any different for Indigenous communities? I know that members on all sides of the House would object to having solutions imposed on them by others.

I congratulate the minister for Indigenous affairs on her work with Indigenous communities from their many perspectives to achieve this result, which has been delivered in the form of an apology. The thing I like about her approach is that she actually goes out and consults with Indigenous people. She does not go out and lecture and hector them or in effect try and take a missionary approach, which is to impose whitefella solutions on them. I think we all need to understand that. One of the reasons that mistakes have been made in the past is that people have wanted to do the right thing and good things, but Indigenous people are not like us. The way to solutions in those communities is to give them ownership and to help train the children. You can give them houses but if you do not train them in how to fix the problems with those houses and maintain them and a whole lot of other things then all that stuff is going to go to waste over time. That would be true of our communities as well.

There needs to be a stepping back in terms of the approach, and I want to see Indigenous people involved in their own solutions. It is self-determination. That self-determination comes from helping them—not from haranguing them, not from harassing them and not from saying, ‘This is the way you are going to do it.’ I have had some quite vigorous discussions and arguments with my friends who are well-intentioned, but the thing that I learnt in the 4½ years I enjoyed being the shadow minister for Aboriginal affairs—and it was a pretty momentous time when I was there—was never to go in there to save them from themselves. I was their advocate. I actually listened to them. That is what I also did when I was practising as a solicitor and barrister. You took instructions. You were the advocate; you used your professional expertise to help people. You did not in effect substitute your views for their views and say, ‘That is the way it is going to happen.’

Tom Calma, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, in responding to the apology, said of the role of the Prime Minister:

Prime Minister, can I thank you for your leadership on this issue ...

It is far more difficult to try and unite people than to divide them.

Your efforts should be praised universally for attempting to create a bridge between the many diverse elements of our society.

I applaud the leadership of the Prime Minister on this matter and the respect he has so rightly earned from both Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities. People would know of my relationship with this Prime Minister over the years in relation to these matters. We have not necessarily seen eye to eye but I believe he has grown in the job, firstly as Leader of the Opposition and now as Prime Minister. I have seen the change in him and his advocacy, especially in relation to this matter—and I have to say I am surprised but I am overjoyed. I am joyous because in terms of Indigenous issues it is the leader of the government, the Prime
Minister, who needs to be there driving it—hopefully with the support of the Leader of the Opposition.

Ministers have no chance in selling this stuff to the community. We need to use the office, as Bill Deane has done. It was wonderful to see him there the other day. I had an opportunity to talk to him and spend a little time with him before the apology. As Governor-General he was inspirational and showed leadership at a time when there was much misinformation in the community. I think it was significant that this was the parliament’s first item of business.

My worry is that, over the last 11½ years, I do not believe there has necessarily been progress. I think there has been regression—not necessarily intentional regression, but it goes very much to the heart of attitudes. I think it would not have been appropriate for the previous Prime Minister, Mr Howard, to be present last week. His heart was not in it; his soul was not in it. He is entitled to his view—I know that his view is honestly held—but I think his presence in the chamber on that day would have cast a pall over the joy and tears that we all experienced, and I think he was right not to attend. I think it meant that imagery that would otherwise have occurred but would have not been sincere did not occur. I am not critical of him for that. I know he holds his view honestly; I just have a different view.

Many of my colleagues have already articulated their emotions. I am not ashamed to say that I was moved to tears several times over those historic two days—on 12 February, with the welcome to country, and on the 13th, which was the apology. On Tuesday, 12 February we experienced a welcome to country for the first time since the inception of the Commonwealth parliament. For the first time in over 80 years the land on which we meet as a parliament resonated with the voice and the dance of the people whose ancestors have lived here for at least 40,000 years—and how joyous it was! For me it was actually the highlight of the opening of the parliament. It added; it enriched us. It is the first time, in fact, that the name of this place, Canberra, has fully justified its European name, believed to mean ‘a meeting place’. The word ‘Canberra’ seems to have been derived from the Anglicisation of the name of one of the local Indigenous groups, the Ngambri, into ‘Canberry’ as the geographical area where the group met. The name of the tribe became the European reference to the physical place. The welcome to country should now become a permanent feature of the opening of parliament.

I have said all along, and I do not resile from it, that there should be reparations or what you would call compensation. This has happened in Canada and in other places. It was a recommendation in the Bringing them home report; it was part of the motion that Kim Beazley moved and I seconded back in May 1997—and I do not apologise for that. As I said, it was recommendation 3 of the Bringing them home report. That is something we should get to gradually. What does the reparation involve? It does not necessarily involve money. What we need is a non-litigious process. In the civil law—in other parts of the law in this country—we have non-adversarial options which people can pursue and there is a ceiling on the amount of money that is paid. It is done by mediation and conciliation. Why should Indigenous people have to go to court to necessarily prove their case when for other Australians that is not necessarily a requirement? That is something that I think we can evolve over time.

This is a source of pride that I have. Basically, the reason I recontested my seat was Indigenous people—to see this happen. (Time expired)

Mr BRUCE SCOTT (Maranoa) (7.03 pm)—I rise here in the Main Committee this afternoon to make my contribution in response to the formal apology that was moved by the Prime
Minister in the main chamber at the opening of parliament. I want to comment on that and also on the Leader of the Opposition and his response on that day. I went to witness the welcoming ceremony to the parliament in the Members Hall. I guess for many of us, or probably anyone who saw it, it was a first, and it was very interesting from my point of view. It was a historic moment and I have to say the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures are many and quite unique, as I could witness in those dance routines. I only wish we had a bit of an explanation of them. Probably it is a bit like going to the ballet—you have to interpret what they are dancing—and I am not a great one for having been to have been to many ballets! But I thought if we had had an interpretation of that it would certainly have helped us as well. I certainly went along. I made sure that I was in a good position to watch. It was interesting and I think it was a reflection also of the many cultures that make up the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

I do support the Prime Minister and his right to bring forward the apology. After all, he did campaign on it during the election and the Labor Party has for many, many years campaigned on that issue. The Prime Minister has the absolute right to bring forward that motion at the time of his choosing, albeit in this case the opening of the 42nd Parliament. I commend the Prime Minister on his speech to the parliament. Likewise, I commend the Leader of the Opposition on his speech. Whilst there are some who said in commentary around this place that they did not believe all that the Leader of the Opposition said, I have to say that I did. I guess that is why our nation is so great. We believe in democracy. We also believe in freedom of speech and the right of people to express things in a different manner, and I thought Brendan Nelson’s speech was appropriate. At the end of the day, I think he had a responsibility to reflect some other views in the community that I believe would be more supportive of our side of the House than of the government’s side. I think that in a sense he was trying to balance both the support for the motion put by the Prime Minister in the apology and his own experiences throughout his life.

Certainly, while listening to the stories from both leaders, the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition, no-one could deny that children were forcibly removed and that, having heard the stories relayed and put on the public record, that could not be right in our day and age. It was not right. I have to say that at that time people, governments and government authorities believed that they were doing the right thing. We reflect on it from our time in history. I know there are many church organisations, missionaries—nuns and others—and government agencies who believed that they were doing the right thing. I think they were well-meaning people. But once you listen to the stories of those that were forcibly removed and of the impact of that removal on those children—and it was not universal that they were all forcibly removed—you note there is certainly a need for us to acknowledge that that was wrong. That is what we are doing in this parliament, in this place, at this time.

I was disappointed that the Leader of The Nationals was not given an opportunity at that moment in the House to make a contribution. I say that because the opposition is made up of two political parties.

Mr Albanese—Brendan asked for two speakers.

Mr BRUCE SCOTT—I acknowledge that. I just say that we are made up of two political parties, not one, and I think it would have been great if the Leader of The Nationals, Warren Truss, who is the member for Wide Bay, had been afforded an opportunity to stand and sup-
port the motion put forward by the Prime Minister and supported by Brendan Nelson. I say this because the National Party in Queensland has for a very long time acknowledged the contribution that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders have made to our community, their place in history and their place in communities. In fact, the National Party, back in 1974, endorsed the first Aboriginal member of the Queensland parliament, Eric Deeral. So we come to this debate with a commitment to the wellbeing and the advancement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders. That is why I would have liked to have seen our political leader, Warren Truss, being afforded the opportunity in the main chamber at that very historic moment.

This formal apology is important. It is a landmark and it has received overwhelming support across the nation. I think I could say quite safely, as I think Noel Pearson has said as well, that, if the apology leads to a raft of compensation claims, there will not be that same level of support within the Australian community that there has been and that I have witnessed and that we have all witnessed through the media reports that have come forward in relation to the offering of an apology.

It is important that we move on. I was interested in the Prime Minister’s offer to have a war cabinet, a bipartisan approach, to address the substantive issues that have been with us for decades and decades in relation to the situation in which many Aboriginal communities find themselves in remote parts of Australia. Our side of the House will support that, as we saw prior to the election the then opposition, the now government, supporting the coalition’s approach in the Northern Territory, where we had a constitutional power to intervene. It is absolutely vital that that program continues. If we are to do something that is more than just symbolic, albeit important, we must marshal all our resources and, with bipartisan support, address the other substantive issues of health, wellbeing, the opportunity for economic advancement and jobs, and life expectancy in Aboriginal communities, particularly in the remote parts of Australia.

I was interested to see the comments of Dr Bill Glasson, who is chairing the Northern Territory health task force. He is a very highly respected doctor. He does a lot of work in remote communities as an ophthalmologist. He said of the 8,000 children who have been given health checks so far that they are riddled with worms, scabies and dental decay. He said some of the skin infections caused by the scabies are so bad that they have caused renal disease, and many of the children have severe hearing problems. That health situation will be with these young children for life. We have to ask ourselves how on earth the children will be able to make the most of educational opportunities at a young age if they cannot hear a teacher and start to learn. That is why we have to work together to make sure that we give these children and their communities an opportunity for greater life expectancy and opportunity in life.

Having said that, this has taken more than a generation to manifest itself and I believe it will possibly take more than a generation to come out the other side, where we will see greater life expectancy, greater job opportunities and these communities being more a part of mainstream Australia. I can think of examples of so many Indigenous Australians who have been given that opportunity. I can think of one person in my own town who I grew up with who had the opportunity. That is Artie Beetson. He had an opportunity. As an Aboriginal growing up in Roma he found rugby league was where he could excel. He went on to be captain of Australia and led our rugby league team overseas. He is a great Australian, a great person. He is an example, and in many ways a role model, that I think we ought to use in this
debate to bring awareness to the Aboriginal people of what can happen when Aboriginal children and communities are given an opportunity.

There would not be an Australian who was not proud of Cathy Freeman at the Sydney Olympics, when she won the 400 metres for Australia. There were tears of joy. I was in Sydney at the time. That is another example of where an opportunity was given. I know that Cathy went to a Presbyterian girls school in Toowoomba—possibly on a scholarship—and that gave her an opportunity. It did not separate her from her family and her culture, which are both important to Cathy. I have to commend her on the work she is doing now. Weren’t we as a nation all so proud to see her win that 400 metres? She beat the best in the world, and she is the best in the world. So we know that when Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are given this opportunity in life they can rise to be the best—not all of them, of course, but many can become the best at what they do in life.

I have many Indigenous communities in my electorate. In fact, I have them from the Northern Territory border and the remote community of Cunnamulla to the border between New South Wales and Queensland to my main office in Dalby. I have quite a lot of contact with the Aboriginal community. Prior to coming to this place—in fact, prior to getting married—I spent time on cattle mustering camps. We had many Aboriginal stockmen in those camps and I learned a great deal from them. Their natural instincts about the land and the signs of nature made it just fascinating to talk to them. Often riding behind a mob of cattle when you were moving them along, I would ride over to one of the Aboriginal stockmen and quiz them, because you had to tease the information out. Some of these things were second nature to them; it was not second nature to me or to many of the other stockmen. But it was fascinating just listening to them; we can learn much from the Aboriginal people.

I have worked with Aboriginal people. I have them in my electorate. I went to school with Arthur Beetson in my home town of Roma. I admire the contribution that they have made. I admire the skills that they have. If we as a nation, at a state and Commonwealth level, can all work together to really do something out there in those communities where we have absolutely appalling conditions of life expectancy, health outcomes and opportunities in life then we just have to do it. I would like to think that, in relation to job opportunities, we might get some of our large corporations looking at how they could work with Aboriginal communities. We have seen in some parts of my electorate and over the border in Moree large corporations and industries start to work with the Aboriginal communities and bring them into the job opportunities that are in their community and to demonstrate—at least in the case of the agricultural sector—how we work the land and consider the agronomy before crops are planted. We have seen corporations bring them into our mainstream communities and work with them. I know that they will rise and be equal to anyone else in our community if we can give them that opportunity.

Madam Deputy Speaker Burke, I think we all—perhaps more my generation than yours—remember Bruce Woodley from the Seekers and Dobe Newton from the Bushwackers. They penned the words of that great song that has become so famous:

We are one, but we are many
And from all the lands on earth we come
We share a dream and sing with one voice:
I am, you are, we are Australian.
At the end of the day we have to reflect on those words as we try to work together to ensure we do the right thing to make a better life for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and address those appalling situations and circumstances that many of them find themselves in. The apology that the Prime Minister had every right to bring forward is the first step on that road. I know that the majority of Australians will be on that road with him, as well as the Leader of the Opposition, Brendan Nelson, and the National Party.

Mr ALBANESE (Grayndler—Minister for Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Local Government) (7.18 pm)—I would like to begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land on which this House stands, the Ngunawal people. The Indigenous people of the land in which my electorate of Grayndler is now located bore the brunt of the European colonisation of this country. The Cadigal and Wangal clans have lived in what is now inner western Sydney for thousands of years. Within a few years of the First Fleet’s arrival at Port Jackson many had died from diseases to which they had no immunity or from starvation as European farming practices encroached on their traditional lands. Others were killed resisting the invasion of their country. This tragic story was repeated throughout Australia over the subsequent 150 years. But of course many Indigenous Australians survived. They found ways of accommodating white settlement. They worked as unpaid labour on pastoral stations or lived on missions, for example. With varying degrees of consent, the two populations became intermingled. To the eternal shame of this nation, past governments saw the persistence of Indigenous Australia, its refusal to peacefully die out, not as a triumph to be embraced but as a problem to be overcome.

The removal of children from their families purely on the basis of their race occurred over much of the 20th century and is well within living memory for many Australians. Child removal continues to have devastating repercussions in the appalling levels of family dysfunction, violence, alcoholism, abuse and social disadvantage suffered by many Indigenous people and communities. To those who still think that stolen children were given a better start in life by being removed from their families, look at the facts in the Bringing them home report. I have no doubt that many of Grayndler’s 1,500 Indigenous constituents are members and descendants of the stolen generations. I would like to express how sorry I am for the terrible wrongs that were perpetrated on them by past governments and to pledge to work with my colleagues to overcome the inequality and suffering that they endure.

I would also like to pay tribute to the capacity of Indigenous Australians and their cultures to survive in spite of the history of child removal. On Wednesday in this parliament, I was pleased to see many of my constituents and friends: Linda Burney, the first Indigenous state MP, elected as the member for Canterbury and now a minister in the Iemma Labor government; Shelley Reys, one of the conveners of Reconciliation Australia; Leah Purcell, a great actor and artist; and the footballers and friends of mine through the South Sydney connection, David Peachey and Dean Widders. They were so overwhelmed and pleased to be here on Wednesday. Whether it was the people who were here, the people watching in Martin Place or the people at my son’s school, Dulwich Hill Public School, who watched that magnificent moment in Australian history, I think it was indeed a time unsurpassed, and I was proud to be a member of the House of Representatives.

I was also proud that on Tuesday we had the first welcome to country to open the parliament. As Leader of the House, I saw what this parliament can be. I would like for there to be
discussion about ways in which we can give an appropriate formal recognition to the first peoples of this land in the opening of parliament, not just a recognition of our Westminster traditions, which are also very important to us. The parliament can be a place for all Australians, but it can only be that if we acknowledge our true history.

The apology showed an understanding that is grasped by most Australians. It is unfortunate that it was not done at the time of the Bringing them home report. If anyone wanted to find an example of the change that has descended on this place, they need only listen to the words of the Prime Minister and look at the expressions on the faces of those who attended the galleries last Wednesday.

As for the Prime Minister’s announcement of a joint policy commission to deal with the challenges we face in a bipartisan fashion, I welcome it. Those of us on the Labor side of the House felt no part in the refusal of the previous government to apologise, or in many aspects of its Indigenous policy. We did not agree. If there remains a simmering tension between the direction the government takes and the views of the opposition, real progress will be difficult and easily reversed. Real progress on the issues of infant mortality, of the life expectancy gap and of our coming together as a nation must transcend the changing of government and, as the Prime Minister says, move beyond our mindlessly partisan politics. A very positive step was the fact that the motion before the parliament last week was seconded by the Leader of the Opposition and that, with a few exceptions, it was greeted with goodwill and spirit across both sides of the chamber.

The new government is intent on focusing now on the priority of closing the 17-year life expectancy gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. We will do this by halving the gap in mortality rates for children under five within a decade and halving the gap in literacy and numeracy achievements for Indigenous children within a decade. The government will honour its election commitment with an extra $261 million for child health and early development to help achieve this goal. The government will also ensure that remedial initiatives such as Link-Up, family history programs and Bringing Them Home counsellors are adequately resourced to meet demand, committing $15 million to support this work.

I firmly believe that last week saw this parliament at our best. It saw the people of my electorate certainly and, I believe, the nation embrace the leadership that the new Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, has brought to the nation. I certainly know, because I saw him crafting the last draft of that speech, that we now have a Prime Minister whose gut instincts, compassion and preparedness to show leadership to the nation and to appeal to our better instincts were on full display in the speech that he delivered so eloquently on the floor of the House of Representatives last Wednesday.

Mrs HULL (Riverina) (7.27 pm)—Today I come into this chamber and I have not written a speech because I feel that there are perhaps not the words in written form to determine and correctly articulate how I feel about the whole process of reconciliation and the sorry motion.

I guess it is with confusion because I grew up in a small rural community and many, many times I have to stop and think about this because I have to wonder whether it was ignorance or just what took place. But we had a camp called the one-mile camp; obviously, it was one mile outside of our local town boundary. Then in the early sixties—I was just a young child—the council and the state government decided to repatriate or rehouse many of those Indigenous people to the street that I lived in. It was very early in my life; five houses were built next
door to us. My father was a wonderful man. He had this value that if you cannot say anything good about anybody then simply do not say it. My father thought everybody was a good bloke. It did not matter what their shortcomings were, everyone was a good bloke.

I remember as a very small child perhaps some people being concerned—and there were only a few houses in our street; it was a very small rural community—about the building of these houses and the moving, but my father warmly welcomed the new arrivals to the street. As such, we did. So we grew up as playmates, as neighbours, sharing your house, sharing my house, sharing our sporting escapades at school. Charlotte Irving was a great friend of mine and ours. I think of Percy Strong who was the same age and went on to be a schoolteacher. I think of Carmen Brown. I think of Vincent and Andy Blair and all the Blair boys who were great footballers; we absolutely adored them and we did not seem to see anything amiss. There did not seem to be any differences.

Yes, there were white men who would get drunk on a Saturday night at the hotel and there would be a black man who would get drunk on Saturday night at the hotel. There did not seem to be any difference. On Sunday we all attended the football and we were all part of the same community. We all wore our school clothes and attended school. There was no issue of having to force people to attend school because we all just walked to school together. So when I think about the way in which some of our people across Australia have been confused, I understand that confusion, because to many of us it was normal life and we did not know there was an issue in the way in which the Aboriginal men were paid differently. We did not know that, if that was the case. We did not know that there were issues and, because all of these children were with their mums and dads, we were not aware of what was happening in the Northern Territory or Western Australia. We were not aware of that kind of action that was taking place.

We were confused, ignorant and perhaps just not living in reality, but it was different. The media now brings things into our lounge rooms on our TVs and radios that expose us to things that we were not exposed to. There were not even TVs in our houses. So we only knew the community in which we lived and we seemed to know how that community operated. It is with such shock and utter dismay that years later, as the TV screens zoom information into our homes and the radios come on all day every day, we are exposed to movies like *Rabbit-Proof Fence* and those sorts of things. We feel like we were in the dark about what was happening in many of our communities, because we were not in remote areas and we just did not see this happening. When we hear about these things, we find it almost impossible to imagine how they were allowed to happen. Of course, there is sincere sadness and depth of despair at the forcible removal of children from adults and that many of these children then went on not to have great lives but to be abused. We learn more about this every day, and I still get amazed when I read about it.

I was on the inquiry into capacity building in Indigenous communities and I am still surprised at the level of need in Indigenous communities. Because of my past, it has just been a normal thing for me to have the same relationship with Indigenous people as non-Indigenous people across my electorate and in my community. It is just not something that is different. But I stand here today knowing that in 1999 I was becoming very well aware of what was happening in Indigenous communities, in territories that were far-flung from the land I grew up in. I became aware of that. I was sorry about that and I am regretful about that. I am regretful for any pain inflicted upon innocent people—children or parents. In 1999, when the mo-
tion of regret was put forward by the then Prime Minister, I felt it deeply because there was sincere regret in my heart and I felt that it was the right thing to do.

As we progress down the path of reconciliation, I wonder why people have been so incredibly damning of the last government when there have been so many governments—we are told this happened up until 1970 and probably a little later—that have not moved to do anything to say sorry or to express regret and a sincere apology for what many Australians did not know was happening. It is true that the general public are very ignorant about what governments do. They are very ignorant about local government, they are very ignorant about state government and they are very ignorant about the Commonwealth government. Many do not know the differences in how each level of government acts and represents them. In those days there was little media and little opportunity to learn what was happening. Many of us, in our lifetimes, travelled no further than the next town and it was a very difficult thing for people to come to terms with.

Having said that, I believe the Australian people have come to terms with the fact that what happened to families, parents and children under these extraordinary conditions was wrong and should not have happened. I am pleased to be a part of saying to the communities—those that are with us now and those who went before us—that I am sorry their lives were turned upside down. Whether it was done with the best intentions by well-meaning people, or whether it was evil, the fact of the matter is that things happened. I believe the anger and confusion being felt at the moment by people across my electorate simply comes down to the way they have been raised, the lives they have lived and, perhaps, their lack of understanding of exactly how bad things were for many of our Indigenous communities.

I would like to think that the communities that now need assistance will receive very clear direction and very clear guidelines and principles to enable that capacity building in the communities. I wonder how it got to the point that many of the Indigenous children in my electorate are not attending school, as they did in past years. I wonder how we can instil pride back into the Indigenous community and hold up the incredible role models that were just the norm when I was growing up—just the normal kid on the block.

When I go to my home town I see that the weatherboard house I once lived in and the three other houses in the street are still there and in great condition, yet the Indigenous housing there has been rebuilt for a third time in that period. I hear speakers on both sides of the House saying that the tools and the guidance have to be provided in order that pride can then be a major factor in the lives of our Indigenous Australians. I stand here today to indicate that, in supporting our apology—the ‘sorry’—I also would like to support the Leader of the Opposition in a speech that I believe came from the heart and a speech that moved me to sincere tears. I know of no other man in this place who has genuinely always fostered the interests of Indigenous people. I know of no other man in this place who should have had some respect paid. I was so pleased to hear the member for Banks make that statement in this place today. I was proud of Kevin Rudd, the Prime Minister, but I was equally as proud of Brendan Nelson, the Leader of the Opposition, for that speech that drew from his heart and from his very being. I am very proud to be a part of the opposition which supported him that day.

Ms GEORGE (Throsby) (7.41 pm)—I think it would be appropriate if I begin my comments in support of my personal apology to acknowledge the Ngunawal people on whose land the parliament is located and pay my respects to elders past and present. Last Wednesday, 13
February, was a memorable day for me, probably the most memorable day in my time as a representative in this federal parliament. The Prime Minister’s apology to Australia’s Indigenous peoples, and specifically to the stolen generations, was heard in gatherings across the nation, including at many meeting places in my region of the Illawarra. Here at Parliament House, and on the lawns outside, the PM’s apology was greeted with a mix of emotions and many of these I witnessed. There were tears and there was joy, there was pain and there was happiness, there was grief and there was pride. Certainly, there was relief and release. I think people felt that, finally, it had happened. There was indeed a collective sigh of relief that the long awaited moment had finally arrived—just like the day before when the moment had also finally arrived. It had only taken 41 Australian parliaments to be sworn in before we collectively came around to accepting that a ‘welcome to country’ from the local Indigenous community would be very appropriate. But it did happen, and I am pleased to see a bipartisan commitment to ensure that we continue this tradition into the future. As the member for Grayndler commented, it was a very unique blend of our Westminster tradition with the traditions of one of the world’s oldest living cultures.

For me, the content and the power of the Prime Minister’s apology ranks his speech alongside Prime Minister Keating’s Redfern speech of 10 December 1992 as being among the most significant in our nation’s history. The speech accompanying the formal apology helped lift our spirits by appealing to the better side of our natures, and tonight I want to add my personal apology to that given by our Prime Minister on behalf of the parliament and the Australian people. I think the PM’s apology has helped in transforming our national consciousness about the relationship with our Indigenous communities. Importantly for me, it acknowledged historical wrongs and injustices and it put an end to a decade of stubborn intransigence and political mean-spiritedness about this issue and, very importantly, foreshadowed an ambitious agenda for further reform, which I hope can be conducted on a bipartisan basis.

As the Prime Minister indicated, that agenda will feature very much our government’s commitment to do all in our power to reduce the very unacceptable 17-year gap in life expectancy between the Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. I want to quote a small section of the Prime Minister’s speech when he said:

For us, symbolism is important but, unless the great symbolism of reconciliation is accompanied by an even greater substance, it is little more than a clanging gong. It is not sentiment that makes history; it is our actions that make history.

Saying sorry is a very important further step in the long journey for genuine and lasting reconciliation. As we all know, there is much unfinished business. I was delighted to see Sir William Deane, a distinguished former Governor-General, present at the ceremony in Parliament House on the day of the formal apology. I want to quote his wise words:

True reconciliation between the Australian nation and its Indigenous peoples is not achievable in the absence of acknowledgment by the nation of the wrongfulness of the past dispossession, oppression and degradation of the Aboriginal peoples...

I listened to my colleague the member for Riverina speak. I went to school in about the same period of time as she did and it is true to say that for many non-Indigenous people our understanding of and contact with Indigenous communities and people was very scant indeed. Like the member for Riverina, my understanding of these issues and the history of that tortured relationship of the past has really developed in more recent times. But now that we know
what occurred I think it is even more incumbent on us to address some of that dark part of an otherwise very inspiring history of Australia's nationhood. There were certainly dark chapters of our history, ones that we believe should never be repeated in the future, that need to be understood and apologised for.

As we know, the term 'stolen generations' refers to up to about 50,000 Indigenous children who were forcibly removed from their families and communities from about the mid-1800s right through to the 1970s. We have to understand that these forcible removals occurred as the result of official laws, statutes and policies aimed at assimilating these children into the wider non-Indigenous community. It was clearly the case that these removals were instigated predominantly on racial grounds.

The publication of the Bringing them home report 10 years ago revealed to all of us the rather cold, confronting and uncomfortable truth about the stolen generations, a truth that we can no longer ignore. That report contained evidence of case studies and evidence of past practices and policies and recounted many studies pertaining to the members of the stolen generations. It told of cases of children ending up in situations of deprivation and at times physical, sexual and psychological abuse. Even those who were taken in by well-meaning foster families and well-meaning institutions had to deal with life-long and profoundly disabling consequences: losing connection to the land, losing connection to their culture and losing connection to their language. But, most significantly of all, losing connection to their family has caused the children of the stolen generations and their families immeasurable grief.

One child wrote of her experience:

As a child, I had no mother’s arms to hold me, no father to lead me into the world. All of us damaged and too young to know what to do. Many of us grew up hard and tough. Others were explosive and angry. A lot grew up just struggling to cope at all. Everyone and everything we loved was taken away from us as kids.

In the local paper, Sonny Simms, CEO of the South Coast Aboriginal Lands Council, recalled on the day how thousands of Aboriginal children were told they were going on a train ride but one that took them only one way: to the Bomaderry Children’s Home located in my neighbouring electorate of Gilmore—I see the member for Gilmore here tonight. Mr Simms recounted that there were no official records of the children, but he estimates their number would be in the thousands. He said:

They came to us as babies ... and some were here for more than 10 years. When they left at 14, they were sent to work on farms around NSW.

We know the experience, too, of young Aboriginal men and women in other homes, most notably the Cootamundra Aboriginal Girls Home and the Kinchela Boys Home near Kempsey. We know that their stories are based on a fact—a fact that has to be recognised and dealt with as part of the process of atonement and apology.

The first step in healing for the Aboriginal community is the acknowledgement of the truth. And as I say, that truth has been there now in official publications for all of us to read, to empathise with and to understand. On reflection, I think that refusal to apologise over the last decade has amounted to a denial of the life experiences of many children and indeed their identity and how it was framed and forged. The apology which has now been given allows those who were forcibly removed to feel that their pain and suffering has finally been acknowledged.
In 1992 in that memorable Redfern speech, which I referred to earlier, Prime Minister Keating asked us to imagine the perspective and view of Aboriginal people of the injustices of our nation’s past. There were some memorable lines in that speech. Among other things, he said:

... we took the children from their mothers. We practised discrimination and exclusion. It was our ignorance and our prejudice. And our failure to imagine these things being done to us. With some noble exceptions, we failed to make the most basic human response and enter into their hearts and minds. We failed to ask how would I feel if this were done to me?

As a politician, it is always a salutary experience to walk in the shoes of others to truly understand. The Catholic Bishop of Wollongong said on the day:

May this apology be a genuine step that will free us to look objectively at the issues that we must address if all Australians are to be able to live in peace and unity with dignity and mutual respect.

I hope this apology will be a preface to a new chapter in our nation’s history, a chapter based on mutual respect and resolve between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, as together we find the ways of dealing with enduring problems, challenges and disadvantage. At a gathering in Wollongong on the day of the apology, Kellie Evans, whose mother was taken from her family at the age of six, had this to say:

I feel relieved because I was so nervous about what was going to be said and I am so glad that Rudd did it in such a respectful way and I’m glad that its over and we can move on to the next stage. It is healing, we are here for our people and it’s a good day, a good memory and I’m glad I was alive for this.

Following the apology, I looked around the chamber, engulfed in spontaneous applause. I paid my quick and silent respects to members of the stolen generation and later spoke with a number of my colleagues from the former days of the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation, including Patrick Dodson, Linda Burnie and Lowitja O’Donoghue, from whom I have learnt so much. And I shared these precious moments with Col Markham, a former member of state parliament and a great friend to many Indigenous peoples across New South Wales.

Ms Hall—In fact, Aboriginal minister.

Ms GEORGE—That is right. I thought about those who were involved in the first day of protest by Aboriginal people back in 1938, the first day of mourning, including my friend Faith Bandler, who worked so hard in the successful referendum campaign. I thought of the groundswell of support for the reconciliation movement and most importantly that walk across the bridge with the word ‘Sorry’ in the blue sky. I thought about the significance of the Mabo and Wik decisions. I thought too of my Indigenous friends and elders in the Illawarra and felt so sad that Auntie Mary Davis had not lived to see the day and hear the apology.

The day was a memorable and significant step in the long journey to achieve lasting reconciliation and to right the wrongs of the past. The memory of Wednesday, 13 February 2008, will live with me forever. I was indeed privileged to be part of history.

Mr MORRISON (Cook) (7.55 pm)—I rise once again to support this motion. Like most Australians, I have had very little direct experience or contact with this issue. I do, however, come here with a sense of what I believe is the right thing to do. My first real contact with our first Australians took place almost 30 years ago on a property called Greenwood, which is around 30 kilometres east of Cloncurry in Central Queensland near a place called Oorindii. This was the family property of my Uncle Bill, the grandson of Australia’s grand old lady of
letters, Dame Mary Gilmore, whom I know as Great-Aunt Mary. There is much that Aunt Mary and I would probably disagree on today and I am sure, based on my father’s reports of his regular visits to her little flat in Kings Cross when he was a young policeman on the beat, she would be more than up for the discussion. However, one thing I know we would not disagree on is the need to address the disadvantage of our Indigenous communities.

Aunt Mary was an undisputed champion of Indigenous rights in this country, long before it attracted the attention it does today. In speaking on this motion today, I wish to pay tribute to her efforts on behalf of the Indigenous people of this country by reading from one of her most moving verses, The Waradgery Tribe:

Harried we were, and spent,  
Broken and falling,  
Ere as the cranes we went,  
Crying and calling.

Summer shall see the bird  
Backward returning;  
Never shall there be heard,  
Those, who went yearning.

Emptied of us the land;  
Ghostly our going;  
Fallen, like spears the hand  
Dropped in the throwing.

We are the lost who went,  
Like the birds, crying;  
Hunted, lonely, and spent  
Broken and dying.

When I was 12 I travelled to Greenwood with my older brother Alan to visit my Uncle Bill and his family. It was our first real trip to the bush, and I recall being completely in awe of the landscape of this great country. Growing up on Sydney’s beaches, I was very used to seeing a horizon on water; I had never seen one on land. There was a large Aboriginal family who lived in the area and worked on the Greenwood station. They were skilled stockmen who understood the land and were indispensable to the workings of that property. They were beautiful, kind and generous people but certainly different from any I had ever known. When encountering such difference, it is often a natural human reaction to withdraw—particularly when you are only 12 years old. Uncle Bill sensed my unease. He approached me to provide reassurance and said that, above all, I must treat my new friends with the utmost of respect and that, while in so many of our ways we were different, we were in fact the same. He may have chosen different words at the time—I do not recall—but I do recall his meaning. Any relationship must be based on respect, and that is why I believe this motion is so important. It is out of respect that we make this apology and do so without reservation—out of respect for our shared humanity and out of respect for our shared future in this country.

In 1998 my wife and I moved to New Zealand, where I was working for the then National government in the area of tourism and sport. In New Zealand I was struck by the majesty and
strength of Maori culture, and it caused me to reflect more seriously on the Indigenous culture of my own nation. The history of the relationship between the Maori and Europeans in what they call Aotearoa is different from our history in Australia. Our beginnings are different and so too are the Maori and Indigenous Australian cultures. However, what is common is the special standing of Maori stories and the tradition in binding their communities together to provide a source of strength, support and identity, as is the Maori association with the land they call the ‘tanga te whenua’, people of the land, and the primacy of family, of ‘whanau’ as it is known. What is also common is a story of conflict and survival, despite the odds. Whilst in New Zealand I witnessed the ongoing treaty settlement process that had begun back in 1975. My witness of this process brought home to me the very real impact of European settlement on Indigenous communities, not just in New Zealand but in Australia and many other lands.

I was particularly struck by a story in the build-up to the millennium celebrations, in which I had an involvement. There is a tribe called Ngati Porou in Gisborne, which is the site of the first place where blood was shed between Europeans—Captain Cook, or Lieutenant Cook, as he was then known—and the Maori people. In the lead-up to the millennium celebrations, the elders of Ngati Porou provided what I thought was a remarkable gesture of forgiveness to the Queen. This is something I want to return to in a few minutes.

The fact that Indigenous Australians represent the oldest living culture on the planet is an achievement of staggering proportions, and in just so many ways, most often unwittingly, we have made this journey more difficult. Whether it is the failed policies of previous administrations, in particular the forcible and illegal removal of children from their families, or fostering a culture of welfare dependence or the evil influence of alcohol, substance abuse and violence—for all of these and for their devastating impact on Indigenous communities, both yesterday and today, I am profoundly sorry.

I do not seek to say sorry on behalf of our past generations. I have no right to do that, nor do I, or any of us, have the right to judge previous generations. The world we confront today is different from that confronted by policymakers 50 years ago, let alone 200 years ago. We have the benefit of hindsight; let us use this facility wisely. The business of being able to confront our past without a sense of judgement was brought home to me in the outstanding novel by Kate Grenville, *The Secret River*. I am sure Dame Mary would have been very proud of this effort by another great female Australian writer. In this work, the author is able to capture the sense of ignorance and fear that gave rise, wittingly or otherwise, to the many abuses and conflicts that comprise our past, particularly in the early years of our nation. It also captures how these events can haunt us if we fail to deal with them. This was a particular theme of Andrew McGahan’s novel, *The White Earth*, in which he also raised these issues.

Our apology in this place is not only important to our Indigenous brothers and sisters. It is important for the rest of us to lay to rest the demons of the past, the errors and the omissions, and allow non-Indigenous Australia to also move forward. But while this motion rightly deals with the disadvantage of Indigenous Australia, the reason for the motion principally deals with the policy to remove children from their parents on the basis of race. I must admit that I could not understand, for many years, why such a motion would be brought only for this matter of failed policy. As many have said, there are so many more contributing factors. There is so much to be sorry for. Equally, my hesitation stemmed from my knowledge of the many fine
Christian men and women who have selflessly worked in Indigenous communities trying to relieve the disadvantage of which we speak. As I said at the outset of this speech, I do not know these things firsthand. These Christian men and women went there well before I was in this place and selflessly served for that purpose, and I pay tribute to them and thank them for their service. However, at Christmas time, in the knowledge that I would be called upon here in this place to address such a motion, I spoke to another member of my family, Barbara Goldberg, and her husband, David. Both have had significant interaction and fellowship with our Indigenous community, particularly in the areas of education and health. My Uncle David has served the Wreck Bay community near Jervis Bay for many years. When I posed this question to Barbara, her answer was simple and penetrating: ‘Because it is so important to them.’ In short, it is about them, not us. While an apology is important to those providing it—and I have said why—it is most significantly about those to whom it is addressed. This apology is deeply important to our Indigenous communities, and we have seen the impact in recent days of just how important it is to them. For that reason alone it is worth while, and for that reason I support it strongly also.

The final influence came for me on the day of the apology itself as I listened to the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition recount the stories of children being removed from their parents. As a recent father, and now a firsthand witness of the bond between a mother and her child, I was deeply moved by these accounts. This connection between a mother and her child is a divine and mysterious one that should never be broken, excepting only to protect a child from serious harm. As others thought of those they have known while this apology was taking place, Indigenous people and their communities, I could not get the image out of my mind of my own wife and child and what I would have thought had this happened in my own family. So it is a very simple thing for me to stand here today and share the views of others in supporting this apology. When the time came, I could proudly stand with my colleagues in this place to support the motion.

An apology is an act of grace. It involves putting aside your own issues and reservations, however justified you may think they are, and standing in the middle ground exposed, vulnerable and seeking forgiveness. The apology is not given on the guarantee of such forgiveness but rather is provided without reservation. This is what this parliament has done. This parliament has crossed the Rubicon on this matter and I want to pay tribute, as others have in this place, to the Leader of the Opposition and the Prime Minister, but particularly to the Leader of the Opposition, for bringing the coalition to the table on this issue. The challenge now is what the member for Berowra spoke of earlier in this debate when making reference to the moral rearmament movement of postwar Europe.

If our Indigenous communities wish to move forward from this point then forgiveness is the only way. The forgiveness does not need to take the form of a national ceremony or even a public statement. It must take place in the hearts and minds of Indigenous people in their own communities. It is the same process that Desmond Tutu championed through the truth and reconciliation commission in South Africa and that was then subsequently adopted in Rwanda where eight million Rwandans had to deal with the brutal massacre of some 900,000 of their own citizens in just 100 days.

Grief, sadness and regret are part of every national story. How we deal with those defines our national character. Forgiveness is difficult, far more so than saying sorry. It requires a lay-
ing down of grievance and picking up the cause of reconciliation. It is my hope that this motion will lead a path for forgiveness, that our actions by this motion will empower Indigenous communities. That is when we will be able to make progress on this issue. This is when we will really be able to equip Indigenous communities to confront and deal with the problems they face, whether they be economic, social or even moral.

Several weeks ago, I attended a very similar ceremony to that which took place in this House today—the welcoming of the World Youth Day cross. The ceremony was conducted at Kurnell in my electorate of Cook. The focus of the ceremony was an acknowledgement that this was the site of Cook’s landing where the Gweigal people first came in contact with European culture. I think it is highly relevant that this cross, being a symbol of forgiveness, was taken to this place because it is the same forgiveness that we must now seek and pray for. Our focus is now clear: to address the many issues of disadvantage in Indigenous communities.

In conclusion, it is my hope that, as a consequence of this motion, our debate in this place will no longer be about the past but what we do in the present and will do in the future to address this disadvantage. Whether the solution is in the liberating programs of microfinance—where a good friend of mine has been involved for many years providing small business loans to assist Indigenous communities get ahead, start businesses, employ people, take control of the events that surround them and provide a future for themselves—in the intervention in the Northern Territory or in the prayers and generosity of everyday Australians, let this be our focus. These are topics for another day; today I rise to support the motion.

Ms GRIERSON (Newcastle) (8.09 pm)—In rising to speak on the motion offering an apology to Australia’s Indigenous peoples, I would like to show my respect to and acknowledge the Ngunawal people—the traditional owners and custodians of the land on which this parliament meets. I would also like to pay my respects to the Awabakal and Worimi people, the traditional owners and custodians of the lands in my electorate of Newcastle.

I join the Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, in honouring the Indigenous peoples of this wonderful land, the oldest continuing cultures in human history, and I too apologise for the removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families, their communities and their country. For the pain, suffering and hurt of the stolen generations, their descendants and their families left behind I am truly sorry.

Like the Prime Minister, I hope this apology will be received in the spirit in which it is offered, as part of the healing of this nation. This apology is delivered to our fellow Australians in a spirit of human compassion and given in the same generous spirit as the welcome to country which was extended to us on the day preceding the apology motion, the first formal sitting day of this new parliament. For those who were not here, I have to say what a great privilege it was to be part of the first ever welcome to country in the Parliament of Australia. It was a most joyous ceremony which set the tone for last week. It was also very revealing for all of us—and we were enjoying it too—to see the diversity of culture of our different Indigenous peoples from all around Australia. It was an absolute treat and I congratulate everyone involved in the welcome to country ceremony. It was something that lifted us all to a much higher level, enabling us to better respond to each other’s needs. Certainly, the parliament demonstrated that the next day. For those who could not be so generous, I apologise for them and I am sorry for them.
Last Wednesday this parliament made history when our Prime Minister apologised to Australia’s Indigenous peoples. Our parliament resolved that the injustices of the past must never happen again. We committed ourselves to a future in which all Australians, whatever their origin, are truly equal partners with equal opportunities and an equal stake in shaping the next chapter in the history of this nation. It seems to all of us who are now sitting on the government benches that this will be a chapter of great decency, of great passion and of genuine discourse where we can talk to each other, look each other in the eye and try to understand, and set those ideals together and be part of the journey of achieving those ideals. We do so as friends and as fellow countrymen and women. It has been too long coming.

For all those people who watched the apology on television around the country, the atmosphere in the chamber that day was something that none of us could imagine and all of us will never forget. It was amazing to walk in and see the past prime ministers from both sides of the House, with one very notable exception—or not very notable exception—and in particular Sir William Deane, a former Governor-General, who will always be remembered as a very special moral guide for this nation during his time as Governor-General. He was always a man of the people. He was always a friend to people in this country, particularly the Indigenous Australians.

The atmosphere in the gallery and the joy of the people who were specifically invited to represent the stolen generations, and the tears that flowed so freely, were things which all of us were moved by, and we were proud to be Australians on that day. It seemed that we were holding our very own ‘national tear fest’, and it does seem to have started some wonderful healing. I suppose that, sitting in the chamber, we did not know that, all around Australia, those feelings were being echoed and those experiences were being shared, particularly by Indigenous communities.

I am proud to say that, in Newcastle, Indigenous and non-Indigenous people gathered at the city hall. I am told it was a very moving experience. Richard McGuinness, the chair of the Guraki Committee, rang me afterwards and fessed up to being very moved. I think that was something we all happily fessed up to on that day. I thank the Guraki Committee and the Newcastle City Council for allowing the people of Newcastle to share in this important occasion via a big screen in the Newcastle City Hall. I also want to acknowledge and thank the Indigenous people from Newcastle who travelled to Canberra to witness this historic occasion. I know that Laurel Williams and Mrs Kelly—Ray Kelly’s mother—were here in the chamber as guests of the Prime Minister. I know that, out on the lawn, Yarnteen, a very successful Indigenous enterprise, was represented by its CEO, Leah Armstrong, as well as board members and participants. I also know that Donna Meehan was there that day celebrating the wonderful occasion. Donna Meehan is someone I will be eternally grateful to. When I was a principal in public schools in Newcastle, Donna was an Indigenous liaison officer. To me personally and to all my staff during those many years, and to the many Indigenous students and families, Donna was an absolute pleasure to work with and always a friend.

Donna has made her own very special contribution as an Indigenous person of the stolen generations. In 2000 she published her book, *It Is No Secret: The Story of a Stolen Child*. I quote from the publishers notes:

At the age of five, Donna Meehan was taken away from her large and loving Aboriginal family at Coonamble NSW and sent to be the only child of a white family in distant Newcastle. Tiny and vulner-
able, she had to try and make sense of her strange new world and the loss of everything she had known and loved. Despite the true and enduring love of her adoptive parents, and of her husband, her loss of her sense of belonging brought Donna close to suicide. Only when she traced her birth parents could the healing begin.

Donna recalls the day she was taken from her family, describing the patterns on her mother’s dress, which she can remember so vividly. The brothers who were to be separated from her for such a long time were there too. She describes her mother, saying: ‘Mum in her good blue dress, tears rolling down her cheeks too fast to wipe away.’

For people like Donna it was a very special day. For that I am very grateful, because it is nice to be able to pay back those people who have so generously assisted the Indigenous people and the education communities in Newcastle.

I also want to acknowledge and thank the Indigenous people who joined me in my room during that day. I was very honoured to meet with Stephanie Gilbert, Bev Shipp, Megan Kirby and Laurel Williams here in Parliament House. When I asked these Aboriginal women what they thought would be important to include in this speech, they said, ‘Make sure people understand that we have survived despite everything and that we have a proud culture.’ They wanted me to remind people that the removal of Aboriginal children was not something from the distant past and that they were still dealing with the consequences. Many, they said, are still meeting previously unknown brothers and sisters. I am told by Charlotte Connell, a Novocastrian journalist, that that was happening right here in Canberra at the tent embassy on that day. She witnessed the reunion of two brothers who had not seen each other for 40 years. But they also asked me to remind people that every reunion is a renegotiation of familial relations; it is not easy. ‘And just as mothers are important,’ they said, ‘please also acknowledge the pain and suffering of fathers.’

I have been contacted since that day by many, many Novocastrians, including Rick Griffiths, a former ATSIC commissioner. Thank you, Rick, for your contact and for expressing the way that day made you feel proud. Your contribution to Indigenous Australians in the Hunter and Newcastle has always been very much valued.

I am also told that this event was watched around the world via podcast. I received an email from a very good friend, Helen Williams, who is the daughter of Joy Cummings, the first female lord mayor in Australia. Joy was the first lord mayor to raise the Indigenous flag over a town or city hall—that was Newcastle’s—and to hold a civic reception in honour of our Indigenous people. Helen’s daughter is the actress Sarah Wynter. Sarah and her mother, Helen, watched the apology in New York. Helen commented that in the many times she has visited America and read the Fairfax press and the New York Times, including throughout the Iraq war, she has never seen mention of Australia. But on that day in the New York Times there were headlines, a beautiful photograph of four Aboriginal elders and a story that read: ‘Formal apology to Aborigines by Australia’s new leader. Prime Minister Kevin Rudd pledged to Australian lawmakers on Wednesday “to remove a great stain from the nation’s soul”.’ It meant a great deal to expat Australians to know that such an important occasion was held here and that they were part of it as well.

Greg Heys, a former Lord Mayor of Newcastle, was the first lord mayor in Australia to honour a partnership between a local government council and the region’s Aboriginal community. He signed a very special document at that time, a commitment to reconciliation. The
ceremony was held in 1998, at which Councillor Heys said that the document recognised the community’s efforts to see the past clearly. He said:

I do not find it hard to say sorry for particular sins perpetrated by my culture, including the stolen generation issue. We have a clear responsibility as a nation to see the past clearly, such that we can see our way clearly ahead, and this is what this commitment is about.

I know that those two Labor lord mayors would be very proud of this Labor government having put the wrongs of the past right, finally.

I would also like to say that so many Novocastrians sent text messages and emails saying they were proud to be Australians. They were Indigenous and non-Indigenous, but they were proud to be Australians. They also said that, finally, we have a Prime Minister who can inspire us and who can appeal to our better angels and make this country truly great. Yes, we have, and I am very proud to be a member of that government.

I think that it is only right that we also acknowledge the work of the media. I know that, in Newcastle, ABC 1233 in particular provided the opportunity for so many Novocastrians to express their feelings on talkback radio on that day.

I also acknowledge the work of previous prime ministers in this place. I particularly mention the inquiry that Paul Keating commissioned into the separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families. I acknowledge the *Bringing them home* report, which resulted from this inquiry. I was not a member of this House at the time, but I can remember watching Kim Beazley in tears in the chamber, detailing some of that report. I knew why when I read it, because it certainly was the most moving report. For it to have sat on the parliament’s table for 11 years with no action was a great shame.

But now, of course, our challenge is action. As the Prime Minister has said, we have made this heartfelt apology but we must face the challenge ahead and deliver, with Indigenous Australians, real outcomes that provide dignity, justice and equity. It is the actions, not just the symbols, that will be important. In mentioning the targets that Labor has set for Indigenous affairs, I would like to acknowledge the great work of Minister Macklin. The apology was a great achievement. The wording was beautiful. The negotiations were respectful and certainly were detailed and long. I think they have created a much closer bond between Labor and Indigenous Australia.

In speaking about the targets we have set for Indigenous Australians, I would like to acknowledge my staff member Sharon Claydon. She spent many years at Fitzroy Crossing. She is an auntie to many people at Fitzroy Crossing. I have watched her pain as she has lost many friends through deaths and suicides in that area. I would like to acknowledge the wonderful work she has done on the ALP New South Wales Indigenous Policy Committee that I know developed similar targets and set a model for us to follow.

I applaud the Prime Minister’s commitment to improving Indigenous housing as a first priority. I am pleased to see that will have bipartisan support. A landmark study published today reinforced how important that is. I remember being shocked, when I went to Yuendumu, at the very poor design of Indigenous housing. It is appalling. Housing is vital to closing the gap. You cannot improve Indigenous people’s health or give Indigenous kids a good education or expect them to thrive and be part of the future of this country if they do not have at least decent shelter.
There is much to do, but I am very proud to be part of this parliament and to have supported the motion of apology. I hope it will be the hallmark of a compassionate government, a government that does actually achieve its outcomes and does so with great respect for, and consultation and collaboration with, the stakeholders involved. Thank you to my Labor government and to the parliament for allowing me to be part of this. To the people of Newcastle: I am very proud to have represented you on this great occasion and to have been part of the national apology. (Time expired)

Mr PYNE (Sturt) (8.24 pm)—It is a pleasure to be speaking in the Main Committee tonight, for the first time in this parliament. I look forward to many other contributions. I am very pleased to be speaking, quite impromptu, as you can imagine, on the issue of an apology to the stolen generations. I am one of those people in the coalition who are glad that the parliament has finally said sorry to Indigenous people, not just for the policy of the stolen generations but also for the injustices the Indigenous people have suffered at the hands of colonisers since 1770 or 1788—depending on which date you wish to take in history. That is not to say that we should have any kind of black armband view of Australian history; we are a fantastic country and we have a magnificent history. But there is one deep stain on our nation’s psyche and history and that is the appalling treatment that we have meted out to Indigenous people over 200 years. We are probably one of the worst countries in the Western world, in the Anglo-Saxon group of countries, in the way we have handled our Indigenous people. The Inuit are better off in Canada, the Red Indian in America and the Maori in New Zealand. In Australia the health, housing, education and life expectancy outcomes of Indigenous Australians are worse than any of those peoples. Yet we are an incredibly wealthy, powerful country that should have done a lot better.

So when the Bringing them home report was handed down in 1997, recommending there be a national apology, my view was that that should have been done then. I think it is disappointing that it is 10 years later that the parliament has united and apologised for the treatment of those people who were forcibly removed from their families and for a 200-year history of not handling Indigenous policies or politics well. Certainly, there was ignorance on both sides but we should have been able to handle the situation with which we were presented much better than we did.

Today Australian Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islanders still have reason to feel that successive Australian governments have not succeeded in addressing their issues. Certainly health, welfare, education, employment and life expectancy outcomes are the critical things that Indigenous families want to have successfully addressed. Governments have failed to understand Indigenous Australia—and I am no expert on Indigenous Australia and I do not hold myself out as one. They have failed to understand, respect and recognise the culture and the connection with the land that Indigenous people feel is quite different from the feeling of a Celt like me, whose family came to this country in 1858. Symbolism therefore is important. To be able to draw a line under this ledger, to say we are sorry for what has gone before, that we are prepared to begin again and that we look forward to you forgiving us for the mistakes we have made is very important and I am very pleased that I was in the parliament last Wednesday to be part of what I regard as a historic moment. I am disappointed that it got to the point where it was such an historic moment. If there had been an apology in 1997, the building up of what seemed to be disappointment in so many people’s hearts over a long pe-
period of time would not have made it as significant as it was last Wednesday. But it has been done and I am delighted it has been done.

My father was a royal flying doctor in Alice Springs in the 1950s, and he had a deep connection with the Indigenous people. That is what made him become an ophthalmologist—because of the glaucoma and trachoma problems that Indigenous people suffered then. He returned to Adelaide and decided to become an ophthalmologist. He filled me with stories about respecting and understanding the culture of Indigenous people that I still hold very dear. I am delighted, so many years after his death in 1988, to be able to be here and to be part of a healing process.

Main Committee adjourned at 8.30 pm