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SITTING DAYS—2008

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- **Adelaide** 972 AM
- **Perth** 585 AM
- **Hobart** 747 AM
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- **Darwin** 102.5 FM
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
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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
Deputy Prime Minister,
Minister for Education and
Minister for Employment and Workplace Relations and
Minister for Social Inclusion
Treasurer
Minister for Immigration and Citizenship and Leader of the
Government in the Senate
Special Minister of State,
Cabinet Secretary and
Vice President of the Executive Council
Minister for Trade
Minister for Foreign Affairs
Minister for Defence
Minister for Health and Ageing
Minister for Families, Housing, Community Services and
Indigenous Affairs
Minister for Finance and Deregulation
Minister for Infrastructure, Transport and Regional Develop-
ment and Local Government and Leader of the House
Minister for Broadband, Communications and the Digital
Economy and Deputy Leader of the Government in the
Senate
Minister for Innovation, Industry, Science and Research
Minister for Climate Change and Water
Minister for Environment, Heritage and the Arts
Attorney-General
Minister for Human Services and Manager of Government
Business in the Senate
Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry
Minister for Resources and Energy and
Minister for Tourism

Hon. Kevin Rudd, MP
Hon. Julia Gillard, MP
Hon. Wayne Swan MP
Senator Hon. Chris Evans
Senator Hon. John Faulkner
Hon. Simon Crean MP
Hon. Stephen Smith MP
Hon. Joel Fitzgibbon MP
Hon. Nicola Roxon MP
Hon. Jenny Macklin MP
Hon. Lindsay Tanner MP
Hon. Anthony Albanese MP
Senator Hon. Stephen Conroy
Senator Hon. Kim Carr
Senator Hon. Penny Wong
Hon. Peter Garrett AM, MP
Hon. Robert McClelland MP
Senator Hon. Joe Ludwig
Hon. Tony Burke MP
Hon. Martin Ferguson MP
RUDD MINISTRY—continued

Minister for Home Affairs
Assistant Treasurer and
Minister for Competition Policy and Consumer Affairs
Ministers for Veterans’ Affairs
Minister for Housing and
Minister for the Status of Women
Minister for Employment Participation
Minister for Defence Science and Personnel
Minister for Small Business, Independent Contractors and the Service Economy and
Minister Assisting the Finance Minister on Deregulation
Minister for Superannuation and Corporate Governance
Minister for Ageing
Minister for Youth and
Minister for Sport
Parliamentary Secretary for Early Childhood Education and Childcare
Parliamentary Secretary for Defence Procurement
Parliamentary Secretary for Defence Support
Parliamentary Secretary for Regional Development and Northern Australia
Parliamentary Secretary for Disabilities and Children’s Services
Parliamentary Secretary for International Development Assistance
Parliamentary Secretary for Pacific Island Affairs
Parliamentary Secretary to the Prime Minister
Parliamentary Secretary for Social Inclusion and the Voluntary Sector and Parliamentary Secretary Assisting the Prime Minister for Social Inclusion
Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Trade
Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Health and Ageing
Parliamentary Secretary for Multicultural Affairs and Settlement Services

Hon. Bob Debus
Hon. Chris Bowen MP
Hon. Alan Griffin MP
Hon. Tanya Plibersek MP
Hon. Brendan O’Connor MP
Hon. Warren Snowdon MP
Hon. Craig Emerson MP
Senator Hon. Nick Sherry
Hon. Justine Elliot MP
Hon. Kate Ellis MP
Hon. Maxine McKew MP
Hon. Greg Combet MP
Hon. Mike Kelly MP
Hon. Gary Gray MP
Hon. Bill Shorten MP
Hon. Bob McMullan MP
Hon. Duncan Kerr MP
Hon. Anthony Byrne MP
Senator Hon. Ursula Stephens
Hon. John Murphy MP
Senator Hon. Jan McLucas
Hon. Laurie Ferguson MP
SHADOW MINISTRY

Leader of the Opposition
Hon. Brendan Nelson MP

Deputy Leader of the Opposition, Shadow Minister for Employment, Business and Workplace Relations
Hon. Julie Bishop MP

Leader of the Nationals; Shadow Minister for Infrastructure and Transport and Local Government
Hon. Warren Truss MP

Leader of the Opposition in the Senate and Shadow Minister for Defence
Senator Hon. Nick Minchin

Deputy Leader of the Opposition in the Senate and Shadow Minister for Innovation, Industry, Science and Research
Senator Hon. Eric Abetz

Shadow Treasurer
Hon. Malcolm Turnbull MP

Shadow Minister for Health and Ageing and Leader of Opposition Business in the House
Hon. Joe Hockey MP

Shadow Minister for Foreign Affairs
Hon. Andrew Robb MP

Shadow Minister for Trade
Hon. Ian Macfarlane MP

Shadow Minister for Families, Community Services, Indigenous Affairs and the Voluntary Sector
Hon. Tony Abbott MP

Shadow Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry
Senator Hon. Nigel Scullion

Shadow Minister for Human Services
Senator Hon. Helen Coonan

Shadow Minister for Education, Apprenticeships and Training
Hon. Tony Smith MP

Shadow Minister for Climate Change, Environment and Urban Water
Hon. Greg Hunt MP

Shadow Minister for Finance, Competition Policy and De-regulation
Hon. Peter Dutton MP

Shadow Minister for Immigration and Citizenship and Manager of Opposition Business in the Senate
Senator Hon. Chris Ellison

Shadow Minister for Broadband, Communications and the Digital Economy
Hon. Bruce Billson MP

Shadow Attorney-General
Senator Hon. George Brandis

Shadow Minister for Resources and Energy, Tourism
Senator Hon. David Johnston

Shadow Minister for Regional Development, Water Security
Hon. John Cobb MP

Shadow Minister for Justice, Border Protection and Assisting Shadow Minister for Immigration and Citizenship
Hon. Chris Pyne, MP

Shadow Special Minister of State
Senator Hon. Michael Ronaldson

Shadow Minister for Small Business, the Service Economy and Tourism
Steven Ciobo MP

Shadow Minister for Environment, Heritage, the Arts and Indigenous Affairs
Hon. Sharman Stone MP

Shadow Assistant Treasurer, Shadow Minister for Superannuation and Corporate Governance
Michael Keenan MP

Shadow Minister for Ageing
Margaret May MP

Shadow Minister for Defence Science, Personnel and Assisting Shadow Minister for Defence
Hon. Bob Baldwin MP

Shadow Minister for Business Development, Independent Contractors and Consumer Affairs, Deputy Leader of Opposition Business in the House
Luke Hartsuyker MP

Shadow Minister for Veterans’ Affairs
Hon. Bronwyn Bishop MP

Shadow Minister for Employment Participation and Apprenticeships and Training
Andrew Southcott MP
SHADOW MINISTRY—continued

Shadow Minister for Housing, Shadow Minister for Status of Women
Shadow Minister for Youth, and Shadow Minister for Sport

Hon. Sussan Ley MP
Hon. Pat Farmer MP

Shadow Parliamentary Secretary Assisting the Leader of the Opposition and Shadow Cabinet Secretary
Shadow Parliamentary Secretary Assisting the Leader of the Opposition, Northern Australia
Shadow Parliamentary Secretary for Health
Shadow Parliamentary Secretary for Education
Shadow Parliamentary Secretary for Defence
Shadow Parliamentary Secretary for Infrastructure, Roads and Transport
Shadow Parliamentary Secretary for Trade
Shadow Parliamentary Secretary for Immigration and Citizenship
Shadow Parliamentary Secretary for Local Government
Shadow Parliamentary Secretary for Tourism
Shadow Parliamentary Secretary for Ageing and the Voluntary Sector
Shadow Parliamentary Secretary for Foreign Affairs
Shadow Parliamentary Secretary for Families, Community Services

Don Randall MP
Senator Hon. Ian Macdonald
Senator Hon. Richard Colbeck
Senator Hon. Brett Mason
Hon. Peter Lindsay MP
Barry Haase MP
John Forrest MP
Louise Markus MP
Sophie Mirabella MP
Jo Gash MP
Mark Coulton MP
Senator Marise Payne
Senator Cory Bernardi
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Thursday, 21 February 2008

The SPEAKER (Mr Harry Jenkins) took the chair at 9 am and read prayers.

RUDD GOVERNMENT
Suspension of Standing and Sessional Orders

Mr PYNE (Sturt) (9.00 am)—I seek leave of the House to move a motion to suspend standing orders to enable me to move a motion forthwith.

Leave not granted.

Mr Albanese interjecting—

Mr Hockey interjecting—

The SPEAKER—Order! The Leader of the House and the member for North Sydney will cease having a quarrel across the table.

Mr Albanese—Mr Speaker, I rise on a point of order. I would ask that leave be given for 10 minutes for the member for Sturt to address the House on the issue of standing orders and 10 minutes for the member for Grayndler to respond. Do you want that, if you want a debate?

Mr Hockey interjecting—

The SPEAKER—Order! The chair is in the difficulty that all that was was a negotiation across the dispatch box. I think that we can agree that leave has not been granted.

Mr PYNE—In which case, Mr Speaker, I move:

That so much of the standing orders be suspended as would prevent the Honourable Member for Sturt from moving the following motion forthwith:

That this House:

(1) condemns the Government for its contemptible treatment of the Parliament in refusing to release legal advice it has that pertains to the operations of this House;
(2) condemns the Government for its hypocrisy, in that it claimed a new era of “disclosure and transparency” in the Governor-General’s speech to the Parliament at its opening, while covering up legal advice that has a direct bearing on the protections for members of this place afforded by parliamentary privilege;
(3) condemns the Leader of the House for his reckless indifference to the impact the Government’s changes to the standing orders may have in relation to parliamentary privilege by suspending quorum requirements, and urges the Government to proceed with an abundance of caution;
(4) insists that the suspension of quorum requirements for Monday, Tuesday and Friday sittings be abandoned until the Government and the Parliament can be convinced that there is no ambiguity surrounding the Government’s proposal; and
(5) in the alternative to (4), proposes a moratorium on Friday sittings, until the legal status is unambiguous.

The Leader of the House is unfortunately drunk with power, acting like an Ottoman potentate when it comes to the standing order changes being proposed for Fridays, Mondays and Tuesdays. Unfortunately, the government’s changes show that it is acting with reckless indifference to the doubts that still exist over the suspension of quorum on a Friday. It is indicative of a government already out of touch after less than three months in office.

This is a very important debate. Members of the House should be aware that for them it has a direct bearing on how they operate as members of parliament in this place. They are putting all their trust in the member for Grayndler to have gotten this right. They have not seen the legal advice. We have not seen the legal advice either. The Speaker, who is responsible for the parliament, has not seen the legal advice. It is a disgraceful display on behalf of the government. If members of parliament on both sides of the House—and Labor should be particularly
interested in this—were aware of the danger to them on a Friday sitting, or even on a Monday or a Tuesday between 6.30 and 8 pm, in speaking in this parliament without parliamentary privilege, they might well have a different view about the standing orders being implemented by the government.

My view, after the last two weeks of studying this change to the standing orders, is that there is a serious ambiguity about whether the Constitution of Australia at section 39 allows for quorum to be suspended. I will get to that in a moment but, first, the culture of disclosure and transparency. The Governor-General was given a speech, as he is by the government at the opening of a new parliament, in which he said:

Laws relating to government information will be enhanced by promoting a culture of disclosure and transparency.

On two occasions in the last two weeks, the opposition has—I think quite sensibly—asked for legal advice to be given to it, and to the Speaker in one case, about two issues. One of course was the issue of compensation for stolen generations. That is not the subject of debate today. The subject of debate today is parliamentary privilege attaching to the House when a quorum is not present and when there is a suspension of quorum requirements.

We sought that legal advice in this new culture of disclosure and transparency, and it was denied to us by the government. I asked on behalf of members whether the legal advice would be provided to the Speaker, who has a responsibility to the parliament and also, being a sensible Speaker, wants to know exactly how the parliament is operating. He was denied that legal advice. In his statement to the House yesterday morning, he made it clear that he had sought advice from the clerks, who are excellent, but had not been able to obtain legal advice from outside the parliament, nor would the government give him the legal advice.

So how does that fit with the new culture of disclosure and transparency? Tragically, for the House it is yet another one of Kevin Rudd’s smoke and mirrors. He puts out a statement but he never intends to back it up, and the danger for Labor members in their great new confidence in government, having just won seats with 42 new members on that side of the House, is that they are putting all their trust in people who operate only on the basis of smoke and mirrors.

But to go the substance of this debate, section 39 of the Constitution says:

Until the Parliament otherwise provides, the presence of at least one-third of the whole number of the members of the House of Representatives shall be necessary to constitute a meeting of the House for the exercise of its powers.

Section 39 conceives of a quorum having to be present or there being quorum requirements. Certainly it says there should be one-third, but the parliament can change that number, and the parliament has acted to do so. But the Constitution does not conceive at all of a suspension of quorum requirements in their entirety. The danger is that, if the parliament sits in breach of section 39 of the Constitution, if one of the members of the House comes into this place and talks about a constituent, a business or an opponent of some kind or whatever and says something that would be actionable outside the parliament, it might not be protected by parliamentary privilege. This goes very much to the core of how members of parliament operate.

The father of the House, the member for Berowra, spoke on this issue yesterday and members should listen to what he says. There is in this area a need to proceed with an abundance of caution, but the Leader of the House is instead proceeding with reckless indifference to the way the House is man-
aged and to our protection. So I guess I am acting like the shop steward of the parliament in trying to protect—the first time, I admit—the members of parliament from themselves in so many ways. I am sure the new member in Newcastle would appreciate that at least somebody in this House is looking after the interests of the parliament.

I go to the Speaker’s statement yesterday to the parliament, which of course was an excellent statement—and I congratulate the Speaker on the effort that he put into making sure that he is at least across the dangers. Unfortunately, in that statement there are a number of ambiguities left open for us. For example, the Speaker said:

The Clerk is not aware of any case concerning parliamentary privilege in respect of either house, which has been decided on the basis of whether a quorum had been present when words were spoken or actions taken.

Later on he said:

Certainly no relevant cases in which privilege has been an issue have arisen since those provisions have been operative.

That is, the provisions to do with quorum. So we are in uncharted waters. The Speaker himself has admitted it. There is no precedent for what the government has proposed and passed in this House. The danger is somebody will take a case to discover a precedent, and the government will be found wanting. Why would we proceed on the basis of an ambiguity? Why wouldn’t we want to have clear advice about the actions being taken? Why won’t the government release the legal advice? Surely, if it is watertight they would have absolutely no doubt in doing so. Every member of this House should want to see that legal advice so they can convince themselves that they will not be the subject of a defamation case for what they say in this place. The fact that you are proceeding as blind sheep—or lemmings, as some would say—is a danger to the parliament and to your electorates.

The Speaker also said:

... it may be held that words spoken and actions taken from the commencement of a sitting until the adjournment of the House form part of ‘proceedings in parliament’.

The statement says ‘it may be held’. I am sure the new member for Isaacs would know that the word ‘may’ means that there is a doubt. It may not be held. Why isn’t it ‘will be held’? It is not ‘will be held’ because the Speaker does not have the legal advice. He could not seek any legal advice. The government would not give him any legal advice, so he had to say ‘it may be held’, in which case there is a doubt. There are a number of lawyers in this place—it is true—and I am sure every one of those lawyers will be thinking to themselves right now: why doesn’t it say ‘will’? It does not say ‘will’, because there is an ambiguity, and the act to suspend standing orders today would put on the record that that side of the House was aware of the dangers in uncharted waters and that that side of the House acted with reckless indifference.

The Speaker went on to say:

... it is not easy to see that words spoken by members or actions taken by them during such proceedings would be found not to be covered ...

It is not easy to see—I am sure the Speaker meant the best when he put those words in his statement, but it creates an immediate ambiguity. What does it mean: ‘it is not easy to see’? I know it is an Australian colloquialism, but it does not give me any hope that the government knows what it is doing, and hope is no antidote to legal ambiguity. Section 39 of the Constitution makes this very clear.

I know that the Leader of the House wants to be the ‘Big Joe’ of parliament. The ‘Big Joe’ is actually over this side of the House.
He follows in a long line of leaders of opposition business since 1996: the member for Hotham, the member for Fraser, the member for Lilley, the member for Werriwa, the member for Lalor and then the member for Grayndler—each one burnt on the pyre of this parliament. Unfortunately, the member for Grayndler was burnt on the pyre of this parliament over— (Time expired)

The SPEAKER—Is the motion seconded?

Mr HOCKEY (North Sydney) (9.13 am)—Yes, it is. This cuts to the very heart of the Westminster system. The reason why this cuts to the very heart of the Westminster system is that there is a fundamental question that is before the House: do the standing orders of this House breach the Constitution? That is the fundamental question. Section 39 of the Constitution is explicit in relation to quorum, and we know on this side of the House, much to the embarrassment of the government, that the government are urgently drafting a bill to go before this parliament to change the quorum arrangements of this parliament because they screwed up on the standing orders.

We know it on this side of the House. They have made a mess, a hash, and they can point directly at the member for Chifley, the Chief Government Whip, who came up with this grand plan. Holier than thou, imbued with hubris, the Chief Government Whip came forward and said, ‘Let’s sit the extra days.’ ‘Great idea,’ says a naive Leader of the House. The Prime Minister says: ‘What a wonderful idea. I can pretend that we’re going to work five days a week. I am going to pretend. I’ll be a part-time Prime Minister. We’ll run a part-time parliament but we’ll pretend, in a sham to the Australian people, that somehow there is increased accountability and transparency. And we’ll do it by changing the standing orders. Forget that it’s a breach of the Constitution; that’s irrelevant! The Constitution is irrelevant! I’m Kevin Rudd. I run the place.’

Mr Shorten—He does.

Mr HOCKEY—Do you know what this means? It means—best illustrated by the words of the member for Maribyrnong—that the Labor Party, imbued with hubris, carried away with its own self-importance, is so arrogant today that it will not have question time on Fridays. Even the parliament of India specifies that you have to have question time on every day that the parliament sits. Even the Indian parliament, which came some years after the birth of the Australian parliament, specifies that. The Australian parliament is one of the oldest continuing Westminster parliaments in the history of the Commonwealth. Even the comparatively latter-day Indian parliament, set up in 1947, now says that you have to have question time every day.

I tell you what: we will not let this matter rest. We on this side of the House believe in accountability. We on this side of the House believe in transparency. We do not accept cover-ups. You know what? When it comes to the Leader of the House and his spurious arguments about accountability and transparency, I want to give him this pledge: we will pursue that legal advice and we will pursue the case of whether the standing orders of this parliament are a breach of the Constitution and the Australian people, because we believe, at the end of the day, that this parliament can only operate with a properly constituted quorum and that this parliament can only operate with full-time ministers and a full-time Prime Minister. We will not accept a part-time Prime Minister at the beginning of his term.

The Labor Party has a grand history of part-time prime ministers. We know it; the Australian people know it. Paul Keating set
up a roster system for question time. He did not want any proper accountability. He was the Prime Minister: he did not want to have to answer questions in question time. And now we have a new Prime Minister, Prime Minister Rudd, playing cricket in the prime ministerial courtyard whilst Australians are struggling to pay grocery prices, interest rates, higher petrol prices. What is the Prime Minister doing? He is fiddling in the courtyard. His bowling action is a disgrace, let alone the fact that he is not subjecting himself to the questions of this parliament. How ironic it is: not two weeks of this parliament have passed and the Prime Minister has got time to go and play cricket in his courtyard, but he has not got time to come into this place and answer questions from members of parliament about how the country is being run. We stand for accountability. We stand for transparency. The Labor Party stand condemned for their cover-ups, their inaction and the fact that their standing orders are clearly a breach of the Constitution.

Mr ALBANESE (Grayndler—Leader of the House) (9.18 am)—What a sad day it is when the opposition is reduced to this. The opposition, after just two weeks of parliament, has completely run out of puff. I offered the opposition two speakers each on this debate; we would have granted leave. The condition was, of course, that the opposition speak on this just once today, because we have a big agenda for the nation. We have legislation to put through this House so it is in the Senate when we return. A decent Manager of Opposition Business would know that. A decent Manager of Opposition Business would recognise that, whatever the differences between us in this House, issues such as the response to the equine crisis, the emergency response consolidation bill for the Northern Territory and the formation of Infrastructure Australia are worthy of debate, yet we have this bizarre concentration.

Let us have a look at what is actually happening here. We used to sit four days a week; now we will sit for five days a week. We used to have question time four times a week; now we will have question time four times a week. We used to have three matters of public importance debates; now we will have three matters of public importance debates. Question time over the life of the Howard government averaged around 18 or 19 questions every question time. Under the new government, we are averaging more than 20 questions. In the past 10 years, under the government of this now discredited opposition, we only had more than 20 questions once in 10 years. Under the Rudd government, that has happened twice in two weeks. Why is that the case?

Mr Anthony Smith—Because you cannot count! That’s why!

Mr ALBANESE—Because we are not frightened of getting questions. Indeed, one of the clowns opposite says that we cannot count. Well, we had to have two questions in a row because they did not have a question ready. Malcolm sat there on the chair and refused to stand up.

Mrs Bronwyn Bishop—Mr Speaker, I rise on a point of order. You are frequently reminding people they must refer to people by their proper titles, not as clowns. I ask he withdraw.

Mr ALBANESE—I withdraw. The fact is that the opposition are divided. The Leader of the Opposition is not here. I wonder what he thinks of this. The person who wants to be the Leader of the Opposition has come in to this debate. The fact is they are spending all their time plotting against each other. It is extraordinary that the Manager of Opposition Business talks about responsibility in this House but could not get up to move the motion. He had to get the member for Sturt to do it. Do your job, Manager of Opposition Business.
Business. The fact is that this is an opposition with nothing to say about the future of the nation. I say to the chamber that yesterday we had an insight about why the opposition have a problem with parliament sitting five days a week, why they do not want to be here Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday and Friday: yesterday the member for Mayo could not make it to Wednesday. He was out having lunch rather than being in here in question time.

Mr Hockey—Mr Speaker, I rise on a point of order. You have specifically made reference to the use of props. I ask that you ask the Leader of the House not to use props.

The SPEAKER—The use of props is not encouraged but it is tolerated.

Mr Johnson interjecting—

The SPEAKER—The member for Ryan will leave the chamber for one hour.

The member for Ryan then left the chamber.

The SPEAKER—that is the reason that it is not encouraged. I call the Leader of the House.

Mr ALBANESE—The fact is that some of them are struggling to get here four days a week, let alone five. That is the fact, and it was exposed yesterday.

Opposition members interjecting—

Mr ALBANESE—I encourage the opposition to go to the next election with the slogan ‘Kevin Rudd doesn’t work hard’ or ‘Kevin Rudd is a part-time Prime Minister’! That shows that they are in touch with what our agenda was for the first 100 days. We are about achieving that agenda. This mob have absolutely nothing to say. It is extraordinary. Can you imagine them sitting around in their tactics groups? ‘Will we talk about climate change?’ ‘No. We can’t talk about that because, remember, we denied it existed.’ ‘Will we talk about Work Choices?’ ‘No. That’s the policy that dare not speak its name.’ ‘Will we talk about housing?’ ‘No. We didn’t have a housing minister.’ ‘Will we talk about infrastructure?’ ‘No. We can’t talk about that because we didn’t have an infrastructure minister or an infrastructure plan.’ ‘What actually can we talk about?’ ‘Maybe education?’ ‘No, because we trashed education because we reduced funding for higher education because we had an ideological obsession and became more and more extreme.’

I wonder why they object to this. You do not have to take my word for it; take their word for it. They were all out there on Four Corners on Monday night—the member for North Sydney, the member for Mayo, the member for Higgins—talking about how they got it so wrong. We know that in the lead-up to the election on 24 November last year they actually were not talking about how they could defeat Kevin Rudd because they had conceded that they could not; they were talking about how they could get rid of John Howard. And they did not have the ticker to actually do that.

Mr Hockey—Where’s the legal advice?

Mr ALBANESE—Read the Speaker’s advice.

Mr Hockey—No, the legal advice.

Mr ALBANESE—Read the Speaker’s advice from the clerks. Might I say, Mr Speaker, that you have begun in your job extremely well. There is recognition from the Australian public of the role that you are playing in restoring the dignity of the parliament to where they expect it to be. That is out there from the public. You tabled your advice. We know that the basis of the quorum changes and the division changes is exactly the same as what occurred under the previous government on Mondays and Tuesdays between 6.30 and eight.
Mr Hockey—That doesn’t mean it was constitutional.

Mr ALBANESE—‘That doesn’t mean it was constitutional,’ says the member for North Sydney!

Mr Hockey interjecting—

The SPEAKER—Order! The member for North Sydney will cease interjecting. The Leader of the House will ignore the interjections.

Mr ALBANESE—The same standing orders operate in the Senate and have operated in the Senate on Thursday nights over many years. It is the same way that the Main Committee operates day after day—no quorums, no divisions. It is a common-sense approach. We know how bad the opposition’s frontbench are; no wonder they do not want their backbench to have an option of coming into the parliament and putting forward views.

I say to the opposition: if you think tomorrow is not real parliament, do not come. Stay home. We will fill the void. We have a backbench full of ideas about the future of the nation, and they will take up every speaking spot tomorrow from nine to two. Just do not come if you do not think it is such a good idea. The fact is that this is an opposition that has completely lost its way. This is an opposition that does not have confidence in its own backbench. This is an opposition that thinks it is going to get back on these benches by railing about standing orders and being disruptive of the parliament because it has got absolutely nothing else to say to the Australian public.

The SPEAKER—Order! The time allotted for the debate has expired.

Question put:
That the motion (Mr Pyne’s) be agreed to.

The House divided. [9.32 am]
HORSE DISEASE RESPONSE LEVY BILL 2008

First Reading

Bill and explanatory memorandum presented by Mr Burke.

Bill read a first time.

Second Reading

Mr BURKE (Watson—Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry) (9.40 am)—I move:

That this bill be now read a second time.

The Horse Disease Response Levy Bill 2008 will help the horse industry fund its obligations under the provisions of the Emergency Animal Disease Response Agreement, the EADRA. It will impose a once-off statutory levy on the registration of horses to meet the industry’s commitment to share funding of responses to emergency disease outbreaks that affect horses.

With the current outbreak of equine influenza in Australia, nationally agreed emergency response arrangements were tested for the first time by a major animal disease outbreak in multiple jurisdictions. The EADRA, which commenced in 2002, is an important part of our national emergency animal disease preparedness and response infrastructure. The Australian government and all state and territory governments are signatories to the EADRA, as are a number of livestock industries, but not the horse industry. Similar arrangements apply to plant industries.

Under the EADRA, the costs of responding to emergency animal diseases are shared by the affected parties. It provides certainty in funding for emergency animal disease threats and certainty in providing a rapid and effective response.

Recognising that most industry bodies do not have the reserves or the required capital backing to arrange commercial loans to draw on in the event of an emergency animal diseases outbreak, the Australian government agreed to underwrite industry contributions under the EADRA. Without ready access to financial underwriting for affected industries, an EAD response could be delayed and the overall response severely prejudiced.

Conditions for underwriting industry contributions to an EAD response are set out in the EADRA. These include the condition that there will be no government underwriting without an agreed repayment scheme, such as a statutory levy, and that repayments must be within a reasonable period of time, generally no more than 10 years.

All major livestock industries are signatories to the EADRA, including cattle, sheep, wool, pigs, dairy, poultry, goat and honeybee. All have arrangements in place to meet
their obligations under the EADRA in the event of an animal disease emergency. In most cases this is a levy set at a zero rate by regulation. Other industries have accumulated reserves or have an existing positive levy in place. Where a levy mechanism is in place, collection is at a point of transaction, such as when cattle are sold at saleyards.

Ratification of the EADRA by the horse industry was delayed because of difficulties in obtaining industry agreement to an appropriate levy mechanism. Unlike production industries, it was difficult to easily establish a levy collection point that was equitable to all. However, after extensive consultation the industry has agreed that it was best to impose it at the point of horse registration.

The Australian Horse Industry Council made a submission to the former government in late 2006 on behalf of the three peak national representative industry bodies—the AHIC, the Australian Harness Racing Council and the Australian Racing Board—supporting the introduction of a statutory levy to be applied to the initial registration of horses with recognised breed societies and performance organisations. This levy would be payable only once, on the initial registration of a horse. It would not be retrospective.

Since equine influenza was first detected in August 2007, up to the time of the last confirmed case in late December 2007, 6,627 properties had been infected in New South Wales and 3,569 in Queensland. All of these cases now appear to have been resolved. It is expected that eradication may be achieved by mid-March and that it will be possible to demonstrate in a few months time provisional proof of freedom from the disease. This has been an excellent effort by all parties, government and industry.

By then, the costs of the national response will be known and the extent of each party’s liability ascertained. Regulations will then be drafted under the provisions of this new legislation to set an operative horse disease response levy rate to enable the industry to repay the Australian government for funds advanced on its behalf.

I commend the bill to the House.

Debate (on motion by Mrs Markus) adjourned.

HORSE DISEASE RESPONSE LEVY COLLECTION BILL 2008

First Reading

Bill and explanatory memorandum presented by Mr Burke.

Bill read a first time.

Second Reading

Mr BURKE (Watson—Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry) (9.45 am)—I move:

That this bill be now read a second time.

The Horse Disease Response Levy Collection Bill 2008 provides for arrangements to collect and administer the horse disease response levy imposed under the proposed Horse Disease Response Levy Act 2008. The Constitution requires that provisions dealing with the collection and administration of a levy must be in legislation separate from that which imposes the levy itself.

This new legislation will require horse registration bodies to pay the Commonwealth the amounts they receive from horse owners in the form of horse disease levy payments.

Registration bodies will be allowed to refuse to register a horse where the owner has failed to provide the necessary funds to pay the levy, and they will be required to issue a receipt as evidence that the levy has been paid.

The legislation will also provide regulations to determine when a levy is due. Provision will be included for imposing penalties
for unpaid levies, and also for the remission of any penalties resulting from late payments. The legislation will also allow the Commonwealth to recover levies that are due, and to make refunds.

It is proposed that powers for the collection of information and documents will include a strict liability offence provision for where a person fails or refuses to comply with a request for information. This is necessary to ensure that the levy collection requirements are adhered to.

There is also provision to allow an authorised person to release information relating to the amount of levies received by the Commonwealth to a horse industry body, the Australian Animal Health Council or other authorised persons. However, this information will not identify an individual or provide other contact details.

These arrangements help give effect to the Australian Horse Industry Council’s submission to the former government in late 2006. This submission was on behalf of three peak national representative industry bodies—the Australian Horse Industry Council, the Australian Harness Racing Council and the Australian Racing Board—supporting the introduction of a statutory levy on the initial registration of horses including with recognised breed societies and performance organisations.

The new bill will help the horse industry fund its share of the costs of responding to outbreaks of animal disease such as equine influenza. It recognises that most industry bodies do not have the reserves or the required capital backing to arrange for commercial loans to draw on in the event of such an emergency.

It will also help the horse industry have the confidence to become a formal signatory to the Emergency Animal Disease Response Agreement (EADRA)—an important part of Australia’s emergency animal disease preparedness and response infrastructure—and join other major livestock industries as parties to it.

The proposed arrangements set out in this new legislation are similar to those applying to other industries that are party to the EADRA.

I commend the bill to the House.

Debate (on motion by Mrs Markus) adjourned.

HORSE DISEASE RESPONSE LEVY (CONSEQUENTIAL AMENDMENTS) BILL 2008

First Reading

Bill and explanatory memorandum presented by Mr Burke.

Bill read a first time.

Second Reading

Mr BURKE (Watson—Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry) (9.49 am)—I move:

That this bill be now read a second time.

The Horse Disease Response Levy (Consequential Amendments) Bill 2008 amends the Australian Animal Health Council (Livestock Industries) Funding Act 1996 and provides for the appropriation and application of the horse disease response levy under the proposed Horse Disease Response Levy Act 2008.

The proposed amendments provide a mechanism to help the horse industry fund its liabilities under the Emergency Animal Disease Response Agreement (EADRA). The EADRA, which began in 2002, is an important part of Australia’s animal disease emergency preparedness and response infrastructure. It provides funding certainty in the event of emergency animal disease threats to Australia and certainty in providing rapid and effective responses. The Australian gov-
government and all state and territory governments are signatories to the EADRA, as are a number of livestock industries—but not the horse industry.

Under the terms of the EADRA, the government may be required to underwrite an industry’s share of the costs in a response to an animal disease emergency. The agreement provides for this on the proviso that the industry will agree to an appropriate repayment scheme, including through statutory levy arrangements.

While the horse industry is currently not a party to the EADRA, the amendments will help it to become a party by establishing secure funding arrangements to meet its obligations.

The amendment bill provides for amounts equal to the horse disease levy imposed under the provisions of the proposed Horse Disease Response Levy Act 2008 to be paid to the Australian Animal Health Council from the Consolidated Revenue Fund through the normal appropriation process.

The amendment bill authorises the Australian Animal Health Council to hold and manage these funds on behalf of the horse industry. The Australian Animal Health Council is to use the funds to discharge any obligations that the industry may incur under the EADRA. However, if the horse industry has not become a party to the EADRA at the time that the horse disease levy is imposed, the Australian Animal Health Council must use the funds to repay the Commonwealth for any liabilities incurred responding to emergency animal disease outbreaks such as equine influenza.

If at any time the horse industry has no obligations under the EADRA, it may ask the Australian Animal Health Council to apply the funds in the event of other horse disease related emergencies. However, it is not proposed that funds directed for research and development be matched by the government.

These amendments help give effect to the Australian Horse Industry Council’s submission to government supporting the introduction of a statutory levy for the initial registration of horses. It helps establish arrangements for the long-term funding of emergency animal disease outbreaks such as equine influenza and so assists in providing certainty in responding to such outbreaks.

The amendments set out in this new legislation are similar to those applied to other industry parties to the EADRA.

I commend the bill to the House.

Debate (on motion by Mrs Markus) adjourned.

FAMILIES, HOUSING, COMMUNITY SERVICES AND INDIGENOUS AFFAIRS AND OTHER LEGISLATION AMENDMENT (EMERGENCY RESPONSE CONSOLIDATION) BILL 2008

First Reading

Bill and explanatory memorandum presented by Ms Plibersek.

Bill read a first time.

Second Reading

Ms PLIBERSEK (Sydney—Minister for Housing and Minister for the Status of Women) (9.53 am)—I move:

That this bill be now read a second time.

This bill introduces amendments to consolidate the special measures protecting Aboriginal children in the Northern Territory, which were enacted in the Northern Territory National Emergency Response Act 2007 and the Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs and Other Legislation Amendment (Northern Territory National Emergency Response and Other Measures) Act 2007.
The previous government included provisions in the legislation, abolishing the requirement for people to obtain permits prior to visiting Aboriginal communities. The current government does not believe that these provisions contribute to the emergency response and has given undertakings to reinstate the permit system. This bill does that. Separately, by means of a ministerial determination, the government will ensure that journalists can access communities for the purpose of reporting on events in communities.

The 2007 legislation included prohibitions on the possession, control and supply in prescribed areas of pornographic material. This bill addresses a further area of concern expressed by Aboriginal people in the *Little children are sacred* report about R-rated material available through pay television subscription.

This bill amends the Broadcasting Services Act 1992 and the Northern Territory National Emergency Response Act 2007 to establish a new class licence condition that prevents subscription television narrowcasting service licensees from providing subscribers in a community declared by the Indigenous affairs minister with access to a subscription television narrowcasting service declared by the communications minister. Services cannot be declared unless they transmit more than 35 per cent of R18+ program hours over a seven-day period. Communities cannot have their access to the television service restricted unless they are in prescribed areas under the Northern Territory National Emergency Response Act 2007, and the Indigenous affairs minister is satisfied that the community concerned wants the service restricted (following proper consultation) and it is appropriate to do so. Consistent with the pornography amendments already made to the Classification (Publications, Films and Computer Games) Act 1995, this arrangement will include a sunset provision.

To ensure greater consistency with the alcohol bans, this bill will amend the Classification (Publications, Films and Computer Games) Act 1995 to permit the transportation of prohibited material through a prescribed area to a destination outside the prescribed area. The amendments are intended to allow industry members to transport goods lawfully, in the conduct of their business, to areas that are not prescribed. Under the amendments, an offence for possession or supply would not apply if the person proves that the material was brought into the prescribed area for the sole purpose of transporting it to a place outside the prescribed area.

Consequential amendments are also made to the seizure provisions so that prohibited material will not be seized if the material is only being transported through a prescribed area. However, if the material is seized, it can be returned to the owner if the material is not prohibited material or is only being transported through a prescribed area.

A further measure in the bill will make sure that, if a roadhouse effectively takes the place of a community store in a remote area, it can be properly treated as a community store in having to meet the new licensing standards. Assuming the community substantially relies on the roadhouse for grocery items and drinks, the roadhouse should be able to be part of the scheme applying to community stores. Otherwise, roadhouses will continue not to be regarded as community stores.

The 2007 legislation requires the Commonwealth to pay a reasonable amount of compensation where action under the legislation results in an acquisition of property. Concerns have been raised that the term ‘reasonable’ does not provide just terms as referred to in the Constitution. The government
would also be concerned if that were the situation. However, the government has received legal advice that a requirement to pay a reasonable amount of compensation gives effect to the requirement for the payment of just terms under the Constitution. The term ‘reasonable compensation’ has been commonly used in legislation for this purpose and appears in many other acts.

The package of legislation for the Northern Territory emergency response contains provisions for welfare reform, changes to land and housing arrangements, improving law and order and improving the safety and wellbeing of children and their families. The legislation also contains provisions which deem the measures to be special measures and exclude them from the operation of part II of the Racial Discrimination Act 1975. The government did not support the racial discrimination provisions whilst in opposition. The government is keen to work in partnership with Indigenous communities and the Northern Territory government to tackle the problems of child abuse and improve the prospects of Indigenous children and their families.

As we have made clear—most recently by the Prime Minister last week in parliament—the government is committed to closing the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians on life expectancy, educational achievement and employment opportunities.

We are also committed to evidence based policy. We have announced our intention to commission an independent review of the Northern Territory emergency response for completion in the latter part of 2008 to determine whether the response is improving education, health and employment outcomes. We will give further consideration to the racial discrimination provisions in the legislation enacted by the previous government following our proposed review later this year.

Given our commitment to maintaining the overall direction of the emergency response until the completion of the review, and to focus on effective implementation, the bill contains some amendments to existing measures which continue to be covered by the operation of the racial discrimination provisions in the legislation for the Northern Territory emergency response. Importantly, the bill contains no new provisions which exclude the operation of the Racial Discrimination Act. The new R18+ measures have been designed as special measures and do not have a provision excluding the operation of part II of the Racial Discrimination Act. This bill also gives effect to our election commitment to revoke the public access permit changes legislated by the previous government.

Debate (on motion by Mrs Markus) adjourned.

**INFRASTRUCTURE AUSTRALIA BILL 2008**

First Reading

Bill and explanatory memorandum presented by Mr Albanese.

Bill read a first time.

Second Reading

Mr ALBANESE (Grayndler—Minister for Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Local Government) (10.00 am)—I move:

That this bill be now read a second time.

Lifting investment in new physical infrastructure while at the same time making better use of the nation’s existing infrastructure is a key element of the Rudd Labor government’s plan to raise productivity, fight inflation and maintain economic growth.
Well-planned infrastructure is the arteries of a successful, modern economy and essential to:

- making our cities liveable and improving public health;
- bringing economic opportunities to regional and rural communities;
- delivering products to markets;
- reducing business costs;
- connecting local companies to the global knowledge economy; and
- reducing pollution and greenhouse gas emissions.

In the case of a country like Australia, with its vast distances and highly urbanised population, the delivery of good, reliable infrastructure takes on even greater economic and social importance.

By contrast, a failure to fix infrastructure shortfalls, supply chain bottlenecks and urban congestion puts a brake on economic and productivity growth, creates inflationary pressures and, over the longer term, will leave us ill-equipped to respond to the challenges of climate change, an ageing population and globalisation.

What is more, in modern, industrialised countries such as Australia, the various infrastructure systems are interacting ever more closely, creating interdependencies that heighten the risk of problems in one flowing onto another.

For example, capacity constraints on railways can affect the functioning of ports; water shortages can impede industrial production; and improvements to an arterial road can simply distribute the traffic snarls elsewhere.

In 2004, the Australian Council for Infrastructure Development estimated that the lack of investment in the nation’s infrastructure over many years cost the economy around $6.4 billion a year in lost production.

In addition to slowing economic growth, poor and inadequate infrastructure has a direct impact on family budgets and the bottom line of businesses.

The cost of urban congestion in our major cities alone was estimated by the Bureau of Infrastructure, Transport and Regional Economics at $9.4 billion in 2005, and in the absence of reform will climb to more than $20 billion by 2020, with the total length of congested roads likely to treble.

But the costs cannot simply be measured in economic terms. For many families urban congestion means parents spending more time commuting in their cars than at home with their children.

When it comes to ‘keeping the lights on’ here too we have much work to do, with an estimated $30 billion to $35 billion worth of investment required in the nation’s energy sector by 2020.

Australia’s international gateways—our ports and airports—will also need to modernise and expand in response to growing and changing demand. For example, international container trade will almost triple by 2020 and air travel is set to jump by 160 per cent over the first quarter of this century.

And with many of our infrastructure challenges I am not just talking about the need for ‘big things’.

In this regard, I would like to quote Sir Rod Eddington, a director of many companies and author of the Eddington Transport Study for the British government:

This does not always have to entail large-scale projects. Some of the best projects are small scale—tackling bottlenecks in the existing network—such as rail platform lengthening and roads linking to ports ...

The infrastructure challenges inherited by this government, some of which I have just outlined, are the result of poor planning and underinvestment. In fact, the OECD ranks
Australia 20th out of 25 countries when it comes to investment in public infrastructure as a proportion of national income.

This government is determined to bring a fresh approach to developing and modernising the nation’s physical infrastructure—replacing neglect, buck-passing and pork-barrelling with long-term planning where governments predict and anticipate infrastructure needs and demands, not merely react to them.

In short, the Commonwealth government is back in the business of nation-building.

Nation-building requires the cooperation of all Australian governments—particularly in a federal political system like ours, with its divided responsibilities—as well as the involvement of all sectors of the economy, both public and private.

Put simply, nation-building requires coordinated solutions.

Unfortunately up until now, the provision of nationally significant infrastructure has been considered separately, within different levels of government and in isolation from each other.

Access to ports, for example, can involve the three levels of government, the rail and road transport industry, the port owners and stevedores.

And, as the recent capacity constraints in the Queensland and Hunter Valley coal chains have shown, a lack of coordination between governments and the private sector inevitably results in a loss of national income and reduced opportunities for our export industries.

At the same time governments, industry and the investment community need the certainty in planning and evaluation that guarantees good returns, both in profits and the benefits delivered to the community.

Infrastructure investment needs to be determined objectively and according to long-term need, not short-term political interests, thereby creating an environment conducive to greater private investment in public infrastructure.

So nation-building requires not only foresight, but a more nationally coordinated approach to infrastructure reform and investment, something the business community has long championed.

The Business Council of Australia, in its Infrastructure Action Plan for Future Prosperity report, called for:

… an integrated long-term planning framework across jurisdictions for the coordinated provision of infrastructure … to underpin sustained strong economic growth.

We need a mechanism that will achieve both these ends and in so doing lock in Australia’s future prosperity and higher productivity. Today we do not have one.

Since coming to office last November, the Rudd Labor government has moved quickly to respond to the nation’s growing infrastructure challenges, restoring infrastructure planning to the heart of national economic management.

For the first time since Federation the Commonwealth government now has an infrastructure minister and an infrastructure department.

Today I am tabling legislation which once approved by the parliament will establish Infrastructure Australia. This fulfils our pledge to create this new national body within our first 100 days.

This legislation marks a new approach to the provision of public infrastructure, creating a new body charged with developing a truly national, long-term approach to this task.
Mr Peter Taylor, the Chief Executive of Engineers Australia, has said: 

For more than a decade, Engineers Australia has maintained that infrastructure throughout Australia needed better coordination and long-term integrated planning. The federal government’s inclusive approach, through Infrastructure Australia and its close ties to COAG, is the long needed link for Australia’s future.

Infrastructure Australia is all about lifting investment in the nation’s physical infrastructure while at the same time getting the most out of our existing assets.

**An Action Plan**

The legislation I have moved today establishes Infrastructure Australia as a statutory advisory council to develop a strategic blueprint for the nation’s future infrastructure needs. In partnership with the states and territories and in consultation with the private sector and local government, we will oversee the blueprint’s implementation.

Infrastructure Australia will provide advice about infrastructure gaps and bottlenecks that hinder economic growth and prosperity.

The Infrastructure Australia council will have 12 experienced members drawn from industry and all levels of government.

The new office of Infrastructure Coor- dinator will be a statutory office within the Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Local Government, supported by a small but dedicated team of professionals.

Infrastructure Australia’s immediate task will be to undertake a national infrastructure audit to determine the capacity and condition of nationally significant infrastructure, including in the areas of water, energy, transport and communications, and in so doing it will consult widely, including with the owners and operators of existing infrastructure assets.

The audit will identify gaps, deficiencies, impediments and bottlenecks across these important sectors of the national economy as well as take into account expected future demand. This information will inform the development of the infrastructure priority list to guide future investment decisions.

Infrastructure Australia’s first priority list will be completed within 12 months and presented to the Council of Australian Governments in March 2009.

This work will allow us to better match investment dollars with the nation’s infrastructure priorities.

In addition, Infrastructure Australia will be expected to provide advice on regulatory reforms that can improve the utilisation of existing infrastructure and streamline new proposals. It will propose ways to harmonise legislation and regulation across jurisdictions.

For instance, it will have the capacity to examine the potential for standardising tender processes and contract documentation between Commonwealth and state jurisdictions, improve procurement processes and expedite decision making.

It will make recommendations to achieve consistent guidelines of public-private partnerships.

**Conclusion**

As I have indicated, Australia’s physical infrastructure, including strategic energy, transport, communication and water assets, provides an essential input to virtually all economic activities and contributes directly to community wellbeing.

The Infrastructure Australia legislation is a continuation of a century-long Labor tradition.

Labor has always been the party of nation building. It is in our DNA and when it comes
to delivering major infrastructure projects we have the historic runs on the board.

Let us not forget it was Ben Chifley who courageously started the Snowy hydro scheme and initiated postwar reconstruction; it was Gough Whitlam who fixed the sewerage systems of our major cities; and it was the Hawke-Keating governments that invested in urban renewal and built social infrastructure such as Medicare and compulsory superannuation.

Each of these governments demonstrated what is possible with national leadership. I can assure the House the Rudd Labor government will be a government which adapts the strong Labor tradition to the needs and challenges of the new century.

Infrastructure Australia is the right innovation for today’s infrastructure challenges.

Or, to take the words used by Ben Chifley when announcing work would start on one of this country’s greatest infrastructure projects, the Snowy hydro scheme:

It is a plan for the whole nation, belonging to no one State nor to any group or section ... This is a plan for the nation and it needs the nation to back it.

Debate (on motion by Mr Randall) adjourned.

TRADEX SCHEME AMENDMENT BILL 2008

First Reading

Bill and explanatory memorandum presented by Dr Emerson.

Bill read a first time.

Second Reading

Dr Emerson (Rankin)—Minister for Small Business, Independent Contractors and the Service Economy and Minister Assisting the Finance Minister on Deregulation (10.13 am)—I move:

That this bill be now read a second time.

This bill will decouple the Tradex Scheme from the requirements of the customs drawback provisions and will simplify the administration of the scheme.

The Tradex Scheme was introduced as a streamlined program for providing relief to businesses paying customs duty and GST. The scheme applies to imported products that are to be re-exported or incorporated into other goods that are to be exported.

Decoupling the Tradex and drawback programs will enable the Tradex Scheme to remain consistent with the customs drawback provisions without being dependent on them. Both programs are designed to ensure customs tariffs are not paid on goods that are imported and subsequently exported and that are not inappropriately used or consumed while in Australia. This is consistent with the international taxation principle that duty should apply in the country of consumption.

The essential difference between the two programs is that under the drawback provisions duty is paid on importation and then is subsequently returned on exportation. Under the Tradex Scheme, duty exemption is provided up-front and only becomes payable if the goods are not exported or are used or consumed inappropriately while in Australia.

The separation of the legislation for the two programs should enable both programs to be better tailored to meet the particular demands of their customer base. Wherever possible, the elements of the drawback provisions will be adapted for incorporation into the Tradex regulations.

The other amendments contained in this bill are aimed at enhancing the administration of the Tradex Scheme and will further reduce the regulatory burden on industry. The Tradex Scheme will continue to provide real benefits to Australian industry and improve our international competitiveness as a
trading nation. I commend this bill to the House.

Debate (on motion by Mr Randall) adjourned.

GOVERNOR-GENERAL'S SPEECH
Address-in-Reply

Debate resumed from 20 February, on motion by Mr Hale:

That the Address be agreed to.

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

Mr NEUMANN (Blair) (10.15 am)—Mr Speaker, it is an honour to stand here today and speak in this chamber as the first ever Labor member for Blair. I am keenly aware of the trust, duty and obligation bestowed upon me by the people of Blair. They voted decisively for change on 24 November, delivering a 10.2 per cent swing to Labor. With emphatic purpose they chose a better way. They voted not for fear and pessimism but for hope and optimism. They voted not for the past but for the future.

All of us elected to this parliament have brought with us our own stories. We have been influenced by genetics, geography and our life experiences—some that we have enjoyed and some that we have had to endure. My story begins in the heart of Blair, as a young boy growing up in Ipswich. As a boy I went to Ipswich East State Primary School and completed my high schooling at Bundamba State Secondary College. This was a pretty big achievement in my family because high school was an educational opportunity denied to both of my parents and their parents before them.

I started my working life as a part-time cleaner at Dinmore Meatworks. I studied arts and law at the University of Queensland, an opportunity afforded me by a Labor government—the Whitlam government—for which I will always be grateful.

My father was a meatworker and my mother was a shop assistant. On my father’s side my ancestors were farmers from the Lockyer Valley and on my mother’s side railway workers from Ipswich. I was born and raised in Ipswich and, as far as Ipswich is concerned, I am a local through and through, having lived there all my life. In my childhood, I was exposed to the twin evils of addiction to alcohol and gambling. I lived through the poverty caused thereby and the pain of the divorce which followed.

After university, at the age of 26, I entered the business world, practising law as a partner in my own firm. Along with my business partner, Matthew Turnour, the brother of the new Labor member for Leichhardt, we built Neumann and Turnour Lawyers, a small to medium-sized law firm in the heart of the Brisbane CBD. I thank Matthew for his support over many years and the friendship we have shared since university.

Having practised in most areas of law, I became an accredited family law specialist in 1996. I have conducted thousands of cases, many of them involving complex property settlement disputes, and matters involving dreadful domestic violence and shocking child abuse. This has led me to hold a deep belief that the rights of children should be protected and that the law should allow women to control their lives and destinies both physically and financially.

I bring to my new elected role 24 years as a practising lawyer, 21 years of business experience, towards a decade as a health community councillor and 14 years as a Queensland Baptist Care board member—an organisation associated with three aged-care facilities, a drop-in centre and a community centre, all in the Blair electorate.
Twelve years ago I was an ordinary branch member of the ALP in Ipswich. The catalyst for my increased political involvement, both organisationally and in campaigning, was the election of Pauline Hanson as my federal member in March 1996. I lived in Oxley at the time, Blair having not yet been created. For some, Pauline Hanson’s One Nation Party was something to be sneered at from afar. For me it was local and it was personal. I witnessed firsthand the destructive impact of One Nation, with its intolerance, bigotry and economic irresponsibility. I witnessed families and friends torn apart by the rise of Hansonism. I saw former Prime Minister John Howard dog-whistling and engaging in wedge politics for his own political advantage.

That’s why I resolved to do something about it. I became the Labor Party’s campaign director in the state seat of Ipswich and, along with many others, we turned the tide locally. In the late 1990s in Ipswich and the Lockyer Valley, Labor’s main political opponent was One Nation. In fact, my predecessor in Blair was first elected on Labor preferences to prevent Pauline Hanson winning Blair. Today, in a curious twist of fate, I am now Pauline Hanson’s federal member of parliament.

On 1 March 1962, in his maiden speech, Bill Hayden, whose then Oxley electorate bears a striking resemblance to Blair today, said of his election to represent Ipswich and its surrounding rural areas:

This is truly a great privilege, but the greatest of all honours is to be here as a member of the Australian Labor Party. The Australian Labor Party is the only political party in Australia today which can claim to be truly national in character and outlook.

As always, I concur with Bill.

I thank former Ipswich mayor Des Freeman and his wife, Colleen, the former Ipswich state MP and Queensland Treasurer David Hamill, and former opposition leader, federal Treasurer and Governor-General Bill Hayden for the influence they had upon, and their support for, this working-class boy from Ipswich. As a child, I learnt that the union made us strong and that Labor gave us hope. I am proud to have gone into two election campaigns as a candidate with a Labor Party membership card in one hand and a union ticket in the other. I am proud to be a member of the Australian Services Union.

I am a Christian. To paraphrase the Prime Minister: my faith is the compass which grounds my life. I have been deeply affected by leaders whose concerns were not just for the spiritual wellbeing but for the material improvement of humankind. I reject utterly the notion that God is a card-carrying member of the Liberal Party. Having said all this, I respect those who hold views which may differ from my own, and I hold firmly—in a good Baptist tradition—to the separation of church and state.

What do I believe? I believe in reconciliation with our Indigenous peoples. I believe in a republic with an Australian head of state. I believe in multiculturalism. I believe in equal rights for women. I believe in civil liberties. I believe that the rights of the Australian people should be protected by a bill of rights. I believe the law must be utilitarian. I believe the law must help, not hurt. I believe that law and justice must not meet furtively, illicitly and occasionally. They must be married. They must be one and they must be never rendered asunder. I believe there must be better access to justice in Australia. Access to justice must not depend upon one’s economic resources. The real decline in legal aid funding in this country is a national disgrace. As a lawyer, I have witnessed many people compelled to settle cases or not pursue their rights for reasons of cost alone.
In this country we have too much law and not enough justice. Many acts of parliament could be measured by weight not words. Exhibit 1: the Family Law Act and its rules and regulations. Exhibit 2: the legislation governing child support, its assessment and collection. These acts need overhaul and simplification. The acts governing these areas now resemble the Income Tax Assessment Act in all its complexity. And these are the laws which, more than any, affect hundreds of thousands of Australian adults and the children who find themselves in the difficult circumstances of separation.

We need greater transparency in the appointment of those who deliberate in these jurisdictions. Judges and federal magistrates are all too often appointed with little transparency, sometimes without proper consultation, occasionally without possessing the necessary qualifications and legal experience, and every now and again without the sympathy required to deal with people at their most vulnerable. I am pleased with the federal Attorney-General’s recent announcements that the Rudd Labor government will appoint an independent selection panel to improve transparency in judicial appointments.

I believe society needs a strong safety net. I believe that how we treat the poor, the aged, the weak and the disadvantaged says much about us as a nation. I believe that the market can and does create wealth, but it does not have all the answers. I believe the Australian experience shows that economic development, social progress and equality of opportunity come not just from the liberty of the individual but by the active participation of government also.

I believe in a pragmatic, progressive Labor Party dedicated to practical policies to help people and not longing for some utopian New Jerusalem. I believe in a Labor Party that brings both labour and capital together. A Labor Party which unites, not divides. At the last election, many people voted Labor for the first time in their lives. Placing their trust in Kevin Rudd and Labor, they chose a better way—and we did here, just over a week ago, when we faced our past, apologised for what was done and looked to the future.

I acknowledge and pay my respects to the traditional owners of the land upon which we meet and of the lands of Blair—the Jagera, Yuggera and Ugarapul peoples—and I thank them for their care of the land, for the pride of their culture and for the enduring strength of their people. I hope and pray that the apology tendered by this parliament and the historic Indigenous Land Use Agreement signed with the Ipswich City Council on 30 January 2008 will assist to heal the hurt and build a common future in Blair.

Blair is a regional seat, taking in the shires of Gatton, Laidley and Boonah and about two-thirds of the city of Ipswich. It is named after local Aboriginal singer and one-time Labor candidate Harold Blair. Since its creation in 1998, the electorate of Blair has moved further across Ipswich. In the last redistribution, the AEC excised the rural areas north-west of Ipswich and included to the south rural Boonah, stretching down to the New South Wales border.

Boonah’s main industries are beef cattle, farming and tourism. I am proud to have sponsored the very popular arts festival run by the Boonah Arts Collective, and I will do so in the future. The Lockyer Valley adds $450 million per annum to the Queensland economy through its horticultural industry. With future railway electrification, the building of a new prison, the expansion of the University of Queensland campus at Gatton, the delivery of the western corridor recycled water pipeline to the Lockyer, and new hous-
ing estates, this is a fast-growing region. I am pleased that the Rudd Labor government will inject $408 million into the delivery of the water grid and pipeline by the Queensland government.

My home town of Ipswich could and should have been the capital of Queensland. Ipswich is one of the oldest yet fastest-growing cities in Queensland. ‘Big enough to make a difference but small enough to care’ is the oft used local slogan. Ipswich is growing. It has taken Ipswich 150 years to reach a population of 150,000, but in the next 15 years it is projected that another 150,000 will be added. The Ipswich of yesteryear struggled as its traditional industries of coalmining, railway workshops and woollen mills declined. But Ipswich has fought back. It now boasts two universities, a thriving high-tech aerospace industry, an ever-expanding RAAF base at Amberley and many industrial parks. It has a world-class water treatment plant at Bundamba and a gas-fired power station at Swanbank. Its railway museum in North Ipswich is legendary, and its art gallery is the most visited regional art gallery in Australia. Three days after the election, on 27 November, Ipswich was awarded the international title of ‘the world’s most liveable city’ for its size—although I do not think that had much to do with me being elected three days before.

Nevertheless, for many years now, the missing link for Ipswich and its surrounds has been federal funding. The most obvious example of the financial neglect by the previous coalition government has been the Ipswich Motorway, linking Ipswich with Brisbane. This four-lane national highway is at its capacity, with up to 100,000 vehicles using it per day. For 11 years, the coalition government steadfastly refused to fully upgrade the road. The Ipswich Motorway is not just congested; it is unsafe, and it has held back the economic development of the region.

People talk of ‘parking’ on the Ipswich Motorway—they put stickers on their cars about having parked there. It is the bane of their lives. It is the source of frustration for tens of thousands of Ipswichians who commute every day to jobs in Brisbane—and I was one of them. Inexplicably, my Liberal predecessor opposed the full upgrade of the motorway from Ipswich to Brisbane, instead wasting years by running interference on this vital issue. We will fix the Ipswich Motorway. We will fully upgrade the Ipswich Motorway to six lanes and build a network of service roads to take intersuburban traffic off the motorway.

I wish to pay tribute to the member for Oxley, Bernie Ripoll, for his years of campaigning on this issue and for his support in the Blair campaign. I look forward to working with him in the years ahead as a neighbour. For me, fixing the Ipswich Motorway and achieving much needed improvements to other federal roads in Blair are high priorities. Locally, I am enthusiastic about the Rudd government’s promises, including the redevelopment of the Ipswich CBD, the redevelopment of the Ipswich Tennis Centre and Ipswich Basketball Stadium, the Cabanda Aged Care project in Rosewood, the Ipswich Business Enterprise Centre, a GP super clinic, a Defence Families Health Care Clinic, and three years of ongoing funding for the Ipswich After Hours Clinic. These last three commitments concerning health are particularly important for Ipswich, as our area has a ratio of one GP for every 1,609 people.

I welcome the Rudd government’s ‘education revolution’, the determination to tackle the challenges of climate change, the efforts to confront the cost of living pressures experienced by Blair families and the will to
tackle the problem of homelessness. Since the election I have visited numerous homes and services provided by dedicated local people seeking to help dispossessed individuals and families. This has had a profound effect upon me. Talking to people such as staff at Hannah’s House, which provides short- and medium-term accommodation for young girls in difficult circumstances, and Booval Community Centre, which provides practical assistance and accommodation at numerous locations in the Ipswich area for families who have fallen on hard times, it is hard not to feel emotional about the plight of these fellow Australians and anger at the failure of the previous government to acknowledge the crisis and do something about it.

Undoubtedly, the biggest issue in Blair in the recent election was Work Choices. This unfair, extremist agenda was rejected by the people of Blair comprehensively. No matter how long I am in this place, my proudest day will be the day I finally see the back of Work Choices and have it replaced by Labor’s simple, fair and flexible system. Never again must one group of Australians be placed in a position to exploit another group just because a government pursues its ideological obsessions. It demeans us as a nation and it is offensive to our belief in a fair go for all.

I would now like to thank the many people who helped me in the campaign—although, regrettably, time does not permit me to name every one. I would like to thank Jim Nilon, the Coordinator for Blair of the Your Rights At Work campaign; Local Convener, Gordon Abbott; and all the local activists who worked so hard. I express my appreciation to the unions in the broader labour movement for their support, including the ASU, NUW and BLF. Thanks to Dave Smith, Senator elect Mark Furner and Dave Hanna for their many years of personal support. I thank my ALP organiser, Dani Shanahan, whose political skills were so evident. I express my gratitude to all local elected ALP politicians, including the Mayor of Ipswich, Paul Pisasale, and state MPs Wayne Wendt and Jo-Ann Miller. I thank my good friend Senator Claire Moore for her help, particularly in the country areas of Blair.

To the hundreds of party and union members and supporters who worked on the campaign and who stood at polling booths, many all day in the pouring rain, on election day, I say thanks. I am here because of you. I thank my Campaign Director, Ipswich state MP Rachel Nolan, for her guidance in the campaign and the partnership we have shared. It has been my privilege to have served as Campaign Director for her on three occasions and for her to reciprocate for me this time. I thank my friend Lyn Saunders and her husband, David, for their tireless efforts, friendship and support over so many years. To my mate John Staines, who drove with me the length and breadth of Blair on so many occasions, across two campaigns, and all the blokes who put up and pulled down signs, I say thanks. To the fabulous Labor women of Blair who staffed the campaign office and helped out with the postal vote campaign: thanks. I had the curious experience of having women as all the key personnel in the Blair campaign. Many was there a time when I was the only male in campaign committee meetings. The Blair campaign was fraternal, feminine and familial.

Thanks to my family, many of whom are here in the gallery. Thanks to my father, Al Neumann, my mother, Joy Butler, and her husband Rob, for their love, loyalty and commitment towards me and in the campaign. I thank my parents for instilling in me what I consider to be true Labor values of social justice, equality of opportunity and compassion for others. I have always believed Labor values are family values. To my
best mates, my brothers Regan and Darrin, thanks for your encouragement, dedication and help over so many years. To my wife, Carolyn, who has shared more than half of my life, I say thanks for your love, faith and hope in me. To my dearest daughters—Alex, 18 years, and Jacqui, 16 years—thanks for your love and tolerance for my many absences. And, Alex—thanks for your vote.

Finally, I wish to say I do not know how long I am going to be in this place, whether it will be three years or many more, but I know this: I have not come here merely to make up the numbers. That is not my style, as anyone from Queensland knows. Nor have I come here for a sabbatical from legal practice. I have come here to work. I have come here to make a difference. I have come here to make change. I have come here to advocate for the causes in which I believe. I have come here to represent my local community. I have come here to deliver for the people of Blair. I have come here to serve and honour the greatest political institution in this land: the Australian Labor Party.

Mr Pearce (Aston) (10.36 am)—I begin my remarks by congratulating the member for Blair on his maiden speech and also, on indulgence, I take the opportunity to welcome to Parliament House the children of Park Ridge Primary School, who will be in the public gallery this morning, and the parents and teachers of Park Ridge Primary School, a wonderful primary school within the wonderful electorate of Aston.

I rise in the House today to make my contribution to the address-in-reply debate. In doing so, I will start by congratulating you, Mr Speaker, on your election to your high office in our parliament and wish you well throughout the 42nd Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia. I want to remark today on the recent federal election, governments past and present, and, most importantly, put forward an agenda for reform of our representational system.

On 24 November last year the people of Aston, who are the cornerstone of Australia, re-elected me to be their representative in this place for the next three years. To all the people of Aston, I say thank you for granting me a mandate. I take this opportunity to place on record my firm commitment to serve and strongly advocate for them not just in this place but in whatever forum I can to assist them in their daily lives. Further, I take this opportunity to sincerely thank the many people who supported my campaign for re-election last year. To my dear family, I say thank you. To my dedicated and hardworking staff, I say thank you. I say thank you, of course, to all of the Liberal supporters in Aston. Your combined efforts were obviously instrumental in the election success we achieved in Aston.

On 24 November last year the people of Australia elected a new government. As a result, our nation has now entered a period of great uncertainty. Mr Speaker, on indulgence, I welcome the parents from Aston who have just entered the public gallery here this morning. This new government has already benefited from a situation that we in the coalition could not enjoy when we came to office in 1996. When we won office in 1996, Australia was in a devastating economic mess. Government net debt was out of control, unemployment high, fiscal policy in a shambles and inflation skyrocketing—just to mention a few key economic variables. This newly elected Labor government has inherited a nation and an economy that is envied by all for its resilience, its success over the past decade and the potential it promises into the future.

Our economic success over the past 11 years has centred primarily on macroeconomic performance and fiscal strategy, mi-
croeconomic reform, streamlining the tax system and developing our international engagement capabilities. Since 1996, our nation’s strong economic growth, our low inflation and huge decline in unemployment have contributed to a significant and meaningful increase in the living standards of all Australians.

Since 1996, real GDP has grown at an annual average rate of 3½ per cent and market sector productivity has grown at an average annual rate of around 2¼ per cent. Inflation has averaged 2½ per cent since 1996 and over two million jobs have been created. Importantly, for Australians, real wages have increased by over 20 per cent and the unemployment rate has been halved from 8.2 per cent to around 4.1 per cent. It is fascinating to note that, as a result of the coalition government’s strong economic management, the proportion of the working age population with a job is at an all-time high—that is, of those people who can work, more do so now than at any other time in our history.

One of the greatest achievements of the coalition government, of course, was the repayment of Labor’s $96 billion of debt, which they left to the Australian people as an unwelcome legacy. It is staggering that the previous Labor government was so economically incompetent that they racked up $96 billion of debt, costing Australians in excess of $8 billion per year in interest costs alone. That $8 billion per annum is now directed to the benefit of the people of Australia. Mr Speaker, on indulgence again, I see the children of Park Ridge Primary School have now entered the public gallery. As I mentioned earlier, it is a wonderful and fantastic primary school in my electorate of Aston.

As a result of the recent election, much of the success and significant improvements made by the previous coalition government is now at risk. It is at risk because you cannot trust Labor with managing the economy. I have said in this place previously that the past is an important indicator of the future. Labor’s economic track record at the federal level is an ominous warning. I think, of the damage that could be inflicted on Australians under this new government. For my part, I will do all I can to minimise the negative impacts that could flow from their policies over the time ahead and ensure this new government is held accountable for their action and inaction.

Regardless of our political differences, once an election is over Australians move forward in the style and spirit that makes this nation such a great place to be part of. The drive to continually improve oneself and the nation is constantly with us. There will always be much work to do across the entire country and it falls to each individual to contribute to the positive development and prosperity of Australia. With this in mind, there are many issues that I have observed in my time in this place which I believe are in need of review. I want to stress that my observations are in no way a reflection on the good work of past or present parliamentarians; rather, these observations are about the future.

We are elected not only to represent but to lead. It is in that vein that we are able to better serve the people of this great nation. In this debate, I have decided to focus on the way in which we represent our respective constituents. I have chosen to do this because it is through this forum that the voices of our communities are heard and acknowledged. There are constitutional changes that I believe would significantly improve our system of parliamentary democracy. It is my view that the term for the federal parliament should be extended from three to four years. My view is based on two key observations. Firstly, given the electoral cycle and the way governments typically operate within this
cycle, I believe that a three-year term induces an opportunistic approach in the government of the day. Rather than taking a more long-term and mature view to policy decisions and implementation, the current term of three years does not provide sufficient time for consideration or execution of policy decisions.

Secondly, the current three-year term flies in the face of reason when compared with the four-year terms that are mandated in state parliaments. Over many years the scope of the federal parliament has broadened to be more encompassing than at any other time in our history—perhaps even beyond the intent of our founding fathers. As such, over the past century state parliaments have been gradually constricted with regard to their role and responsibilities. It is absurd that the federal parliament has assumed more responsibilities over the years but has less time to discharge those responsibilities with due diligence.

Under our current system, which we have slavishly followed from the Westminster tradition, a person can hold the office of Prime Minister indefinitely so long as the majority of the members of this place support that person. Whilst this system obviously has its benefits, one might ask: is it truly the best option available? In consideration of this question, my attention is drawn to other democratic nations who have prospered and the manner in which executive power is held in those countries. Nations who limit the tenure of a head of state or government include the United States of America and the Russian Federation. Countries that have been blighted by dictatorial regimes, such as those in Latin America, have introduced a limited tenure to prevent dictatorships forming again. The evidence to support a limited tenure approach is impressive and provides a compelling argument for its implementation in those countries.

I believe that in our case, if this approach were adopted, there would be many benefits for Australia. The most prevalent of those are the mandated renewal of executive leadership, the diffusion of power from one individual to several over a period of time and the consideration of and the ability to implement new ideas for the benefit of the nation. Therefore, I submit that the future lies with a maximum set period of three parliamentary terms for any individual Prime Minister. This would mean that under a four-year term a Prime Minister could serve a maximum of 12 years. My approach to this matter is not jaded by a partisan view. Rather, it is motivated to ensure the high office of Prime Minister is enhanced and strengthened.

As I have suggested previously, innovative concepts and fresh ideas spring from constant renewal and regeneration combined with experience of what has and has not been effective. Like any important organisation or institution, I believe best performance can be derived from those who accumulate diverse experience over a period of time. Traditionally the practice has been that cabinet ministers are appointed to a portfolio at the discretion of the Prime Minister and are infrequently removed or changed from that portfolio. Whilst this traditional practice has served the nation well—and I am not reflecting on any former or, indeed, any present cabinet minister in any way—I ask the question: is this the best form of governance? One alternative procedure could be that a minister in the cabinet could only hold the same portfolio for a maximum of two consecutive parliamentary terms. After this, the Prime Minister of the day would be required to allocate a new cabinet portfolio to the minister or the individual would be required to leave the cabinet. This approach would ensure that the cabinet over time would be significantly strengthened due to the depth,
breadth and practical experience of cabinet members.

Our current system provides the Prime Minister of the day with total and complete discretion for the calling of a general election at any time. In keeping with the train of logic I have outlined, I believe the people of Australia would be better served with a set term of three years and a final 12-month tail end that offers flexibility for the Prime Minister to call the general election in that period. This approach effectively enlists the best elements of the fixed term argument, in that it provides greater certainty, with the best elements of the current approach, which provides flexibility to the incumbent.

Compared to many of my colleagues from both sides of this chamber, I have served in this place for only a moderate period. However, in this comparatively short period of time I have drawn the conclusion that reform is possible to rejuvenate the operations of this place. I believe that it is necessary to strengthen the independence of the office of the Speaker so that it is not only above reproach but seen to be above reproach. Mr Speaker, I say this without any reflection on you or on any person who has ever occupied the chair. My proposal is straightforward. Upon the election of the Speaker and the Deputy Speaker, the incumbents would be required to immediately suspend their political party membership and would be prohibited from actively participating in any party political activities throughout their respective speakerships. Upon the calling of a general election, the Speaker and the Deputy Speaker may seek the endorsement of any political party and stand for a seat in this place. This proposal is aimed at ensuring and protecting the integrity of these high offices within our parliamentary democracy.

As exemplified in the title of the Speaker, I believe that names and titles can carry profound importance in our society. When one hears a name of an office or title, one immediately conjures up varied impressions as to the role, the responsibilities and the real meaning of what that person or group seeks to achieve. In our system the alternative government has always been referred to as the opposition. According to the Australian Concise Oxford Dictionary, the word ‘opposition’ means ‘resistance, antagonism or the state of being hostile or in conflict or disagreement’. From a purely logical perspective, this suggests that the party in opposition will oppose for the sake of opposing. I ask: is this truly serving the best interests of the Australian people? One might argue: what is in a name? I respond by pointing out the importance we attach to names and titles, their subsequent impact and the unconscious effect they have on people. I put to members of this place that renaming the pejorative title of ‘opposition’ to a more aspirational title, such as ‘the minority party’, might profoundly alter the expectations of the Australian people. The Australian people could be encouraged to expect positive alternative policies to be generated with greater frequency than is traditionally expected from the opposition. Further, the opposition would not be automatically expected to rally against every endeavour of the government of the day. It is hoped this approach would generate a more constructive environment in which policy and action are honed for the benefit of Australia.

I believe we have reached a crossroad. The Australian people expect us to reach beyond our party political positions to achieve the best outcomes for the national good. To that end, I propose that a bipartisan eminent persons advisory group be established. This group could be under the auspices of the Speaker of this place and the President of the other place. The group could undertake nationwide consultations and re-
port to the parliament on recommendations for visionary and invigorating reforms to our system of representation.

I should point out that I greatly admire and respect all those who have been elected at any time to serve and represent their constituents in this and the other place. My intent is simple: these proposals are about improving the process of our representational system for the benefit of Australia now and into the future. I offer all these observations in good faith. I hope that my suggestions strike a chord of resonance with honourable members who may share my will for achieving reform to benefit succeeding generations.

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

Mr SULLIVAN (Longman) (10.53 am)—In rising to address this chamber for the first time in this address-in-reply, I pay my respects to the traditional owners of the land where the parliament building stands, the Ngunawal people; I congratulate you, Mr Speaker, on your election to the office of Speaker; I acknowledge the service of my predecessor, Mal Brough, who held the trust of our community for four elections; and I indicate my support for the motion moved by the member for Solomon.

Exceptional population growth in south-east Queensland has ensured that the Longman of today is quite different to the Long-
man of 1996. The divisional boundaries have contracted greatly, with virtually all of the rural areas once included in Longman now part of other electorates. Successive redistributions have seen substantial areas of the Lockyer and Brisbane valleys and Sunshine Coast hinterland excised from Longman in the wake of rapid residential development in areas like Moreton Downs, Narangba, Burpengary and North Lakes. Wrapped around Pumicestone Passage and Deception Bay, Longman now covers an area from Caboolture and Bribie Island in the north to Kallangur and Mango Hill in the south. The people there are wonderful; I believe there are none better anywhere, and I am so proud to represent each and every one of them.

My wife, Carryn, and I moved from North Queensland to Bribie Island, in the Longman electorate, nearly a quarter of a century ago. We love it there. It is where we raised our daughters, Casey and Tai, and they attended local schools. It is an area I represented proudly in the Queensland Legislative Assembly from 1989 to 1998. It is also well understood that Carryn has been a member of that same parliament since 2001 and had previously been a councillor on Caboolture Shire Council. We do not think it is unusual that people with a shared interest in politics should marry. We do accept that it is unusual that we should be serving as elected representatives simultaneously, in our case for a second time. It is unusual, but study will show that it is not unique.

Family is everything in any walk of life, and in this profession it is especially so. Carryn and our daughters provide me with a great well of love, encouragement and support, for which I thank them from the bottom of my heart. Our daughters endured a great deal as the children of politicians throughout their childhood and teenage years. They have sacrificed much more than most people could imagine while their parents engaged in this demanding occupation, and despite those trials they have each grown to be wonderful young women of whom we are both very proud. I am delighted that Carryn and Casey are here in the gallery today and I am sorry that Tai’s lecture schedule prevents her from being here also—but I am pleased that she is studying anyway!

Carryn’s mother, Ivy Lill, passed away in 1990 but was always there to help us both as our political involvement intensified in the early years. My parents, Keith and Patricia, are both deceased, but it is from them that I learned that public service is an honourable profession. My sisters, Jan and Penelope, and I grew up in a home where politicians were respected no matter which party they represented. As it turns out, that was just as well because the Sullivan household of our childhood was a conservative household. Dad, a bank officer, stood twice for the Country Party in rural seats in New South Wales state elections, beaten by the ALP both times, firstly in Castlereagh in 1953, and then narrowly losing in Dubbo in 1956. Unfortunately he had passed away before I was elected to the Queensland parliament, but my mother was a tremendous sounding board for me the whole time I served in that parliament. I know she was proud of me then, and I know she would be doubly proud of me today.

There are so many people who need to be acknowledged for their part in the campaign to wrest Longman from the former government. I owe a great deal to the candidates who preceded me as Labor candidate in the electorate in earlier campaigns—Pat Bonnice in 1996, Ian Burgett in 1998 and Stephen Beckett in 2001 and 2004—and those who helped and supported them.

Today I want to particularly acknowledge Ian Burgett. Ian had contested the seat of Fisher in 1993, and in 1998 went within a
whisker of winning Longman for the ALP. Ian died suddenly last April and his passing has been a great loss to his wife, Michelle, daughters, Ruth and Jane, and their families, for whom he was a loving father, father-in-law and ‘Pappa’. He is missed too by his colleagues at the Liquor, Hospitality and Miscellaneous Workers Union and by the union members he served so diligently. He is missed by his colleagues in the ALP, who looked to him for guidance in all local campaigns. He is missed by his community, where he volunteered his time so generously, and who will, in a little over two weeks time, dedicate a park to his memory. And he is missed by me. I would have enjoyed having him along on this journey and I know he would have taken great satisfaction in the election outcome.

This week is Organ Donor Awareness Week, a time when we particularly urge people to sign up as organ donors and to discuss this important issue with their families so that their wishes are clear. Ian’s family was one that had had those conversations and, as a consequence, organs and tissues donated by Ian have assisted many others in need. As his daughter told those gathered at Ian’s funeral, at the height of our own grief as family members there are those who wait for us to save their lives.

More than 300 local ALP branch members, supporters and friends contributed to my campaign for Longman in one or more ways. Clearly it is impossible, as many other speakers have already indicated, to name them all, and I know that not a single one of them contributed a single minute in the hope that they would get a mention in *Hansard*. Nevertheless, it would be unforgivable if I did not mention one or two. My sister Jan, who is also in the gallery, has always been one of my heroes, and in 2007 she came through for her brother, big time. For 10 weeks Jan managed my campaign office, juggling, as capable women seem to be able to do with ease, the responsibilities of the campaign office and another major project simultaneously. Without Jan’s input we would not have sailed as smoothly through the final weeks as we did. Carolyn Duncan and Brenton Higgins too spent long hours ensuring that every activity had as many campaign workers as was needed and that they were briefed.

Everybody associated with our Longman campaign was saddened by the passing on 9 February of Richard Swallow. Every campaign has someone like Richard, the bloke who will happily walk many kilometres ensuring election material is delivered, who will spend hours on street stalls, who will ensure that election signs are in place and any vandalism rectified. Despite his previous work as an adviser to the Tasmanian Labor government, Richard nevertheless understood the necessity of these less appealing tasks and was happy to be the one to see that they were done—by doing them himself.

Richard complained of stomach pains shortly after Christmas last year and was diagnosed with an asbestos related illness as a consequence of ingesting the bloody stuff. He died only a matter of weeks after first becoming aware that he was ill. However, in his final weeks he expressed his admiration for Bernie Banton and the countless number of campaigners who over 30 years stood up for what was fair and just for the victims of the asbestos industry, and fought to ensure that it was forthcoming. In Richard’s case, that was within a fortnight of the lodgement of his application. We will miss him and our thoughts are with his wife, Lesley, and their children.

I am full of admiration for the community based, ACTU coordinated Your Rights At Work campaign conducted in Longman, and I understand that more than 150 people con-
tributed to that campaign. Although it was clear that I would be the candidate most likely to benefit from their activities, I have to admit that it felt strange in the beginning that this was a campaign into which I had no input and which I could not direct. I want to pay tribute to the indefatigable Wendy Turner, their Longman organiser. Despite suffering bouts of illness herself, Wendy made sure that there was regular activity so that the voters of Longman would never forget that the Howard government’s WorkChoices legislation was aimed at them, at their ability to provide for their families, at their aspirations for a better life, and for that reason the Howard government simply had to go.

Individual trade unions were also active in the electorate beyond their Your Rights At Work commitments. I am grateful for the support of them all and would like to mention particularly the Australian Workers Union; the Queensland Nurses Union; the Liquor, Hospitality and Miscellaneous Workers Union; and the Australasian Meat Industry Employees Union. The party of which I am a proud member provided assistance and support from both the national and state offices, as well as visits from then opposition leader, now, thankfully, Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd and numerous shadow ministers.

Longman covers four state electorates and boasts four Labor state members of parliament, all of them generous with their guidance, advice and background information. I want to thank those MPs: Ken Hayward; Dean Wells, himself a former member of this parliament; Carolyn Male; and Carryn Sullivan. A good friend, and also a Queensland state MP, Ronan Lee is an invaluable advisor, as is Senator Claire Moore.

Three people have been constant in mentoring my political career since the late 1980s and it would be remiss of me not to place on record my deep gratitude to them for having faith in me initially and continuing to hold that faith today. Treasurer Wayne Swan, AWU Queensland Secretary Bill Ludwig and Senator John Hogg have been major influences in my political career. With people of their calibre in your corner, you know you can take on the world, and win.

For the last nine years I have kept myself busy with involvement in a number of community organisations. Until I was preselected to contest the seat of Longman I had been the Chairman of the Caboolture Business Enterprise Centre, established by the Goss government when I was the state MP. CBEC provides business advice and consultancy services, operates an employment agency, operates a training organisation, provides contract services to government delivering business and employment programs, and operates a small-business incubator. It has been one of the success stories of the introduction of enterprise centres into Queensland in the early 1990s but it has not always been easy. The program of recurrent funding for enterprise centres announced by Minister Emerson during the election campaign will ensure that CBEC is able to expand its services to benefit the local business community.

I have had a longstanding involvement too with the Woodford Folk Festival, involvement which intensified in 1998 when I took on a senior role in the organisation. The festival is among the very best anywhere in the world, achieving all of its original goals and much more. I commend all members to visit it. From small beginnings in 1987 at its original location in Maleny to the internationally acclaimed event it is today, the festival stands as a testament to the leadership of Bill Hauritz, Amanda Jackes and Des Ritchie. It has been a privilege to work with them and the many hundreds of volunteers who make the festival possible. I will con-
continue to watch it grow and will assist where I can.

My third passion has been for sport and in particular the sport of softball, in which my daughters excelled, representing Queensland at age level. Since 2002 I have administered a junior players development organisation, Sunstate Wanderers, which we formed to provide young women athletes with extra tournament opportunities in New Zealand, Sydney and Melbourne, where they have competed with great success. Many have gone on to represent Queensland with distinction, one has represented Australia and seven have taken up college scholarships in the United States.

I listened with great interest to the contribution of the member for Bennelong earlier and in particular her comments regarding the inequalities endured by women in the workforce. This is nowhere more evident than in the area of women’s team sport. Former Australian netball captain Liz Ellis, when giving evidence before the Senate committee that produced the report entitled About time! Women in sport and recreation in Australia, made the point that there are about 3½ thousand full-time equivalent jobs for male athletes in team sports in Australia while there are none for women. This needs to change. Australia’s Lauren Jackson is acknowledged as the best woman basketball player in the world, but in Australia her earning capacity is probably below that of the lowest paid of the contracted male cricketers. To take full advantage of her talent she is forced to play overseas, in America, in Korea and currently I believe in Moscow. Last year the Queensland Firebirds netball team’s already inadequate player payments were further cut, a sure sign that there needs to be some form of intervention into, and assistance for, women’s sport.

Women’s team sport is easily equal as a spectacle to male team sport. I vividly recall sitting amongst a crowd of 10,000 watching softball during the Sydney Olympics. Many were, like me, fans of the sport. Others were there because of the occasion—because it was, after all, the Olympics. But each and every one of them was enthralled by the quality of the contests shown. We already recognise and give support to individual women athletes. Who did not have a tear in their eye watching Raelene Boyle triumph in the 400 metres at the Brisbane Commonwealth Games or watching Cathy Freeman do the same at the Sydney Olympics? We know the names of women golfers, tennis players, track and field athletes, swimmers, cyclists and tri-athletes whose successes, near misses and even failures are deemed newsworthy and who by comparison to their team sport sisters are well paid but still lag way behind their male counterparts. It is time that changed and I hope I am able to help bring about that change through whatever influence I now have as a member of this parliament.

Census data electorate rankings released last year did not flatter Longman. We rated poorly by comparison on virtually every measure. In particular, I am concerned by the extremely low level of postsecondary education qualifications of those in the electorate aged over 15 years. This is at a time when our country is in the grip of a debilitating skills shortage. I intend to make it a priority of my time in parliament to work with all of the stakeholders to overcome this measure of disadvantage. Left unchecked, our community’s future will indeed be bleak, with our young people in particular affected. Trade training in high schools will be a great start and, as a result of the election commitments of the Rudd government, will soon be a fact.

While universities also cater for mature age students, it is the predicament of our
school leavers that is bordering on tragedy. A young person living in my area is confronted by a number of impediments in seeking a university education. Because their parents have not undertaken postsecondary studies, many young people grow up in households where there is no expectation that they will pursue university studies. Our location relative to Brisbane, where major campuses with extensive course offerings are located, means that students are generally unable to obtain living-away-from-home payments on their youth allowance. Access to most of those campuses is difficult, expensive and very time consuming for those reliant on public transport and not much better for those lucky enough to have their own vehicle. As a consequence, far too many of our young people simply decline university opportunities or leave home, as my daughters did, in order to make university attendance possible.

The time has come now to give serious consideration to the need for a comprehensive university campus for our area. The existing small campus of the Queensland University of Technology at Caboolture is great for those seeking qualifications for a career in nursing, primary school teaching or two strands of business, because they can complete their studies locally. The University of the Sunshine Coast has a much wider range of course opportunities, but it too is difficult to access unless students have their own transport. Under Vice-Chancellor Coaldrake the QUT campus at Carseldine appears to be dying a death of a thousand cuts and is widely believed to be destined for residential subdivision. This is simply not good enough. If QUT is to abandon the North Brisbane-Pine Rivers-Caboolture corridor then we must find an alternative—either a start-up, as occurred on the Sunshine Coast, or an existing university prepared to come in and provide the educational opportunities our young people deserve. This will be no easy task, but it is one to which I am committed and which begins in earnest today.

I spoke of the extensive residential development occurring in the Longman electorate and the rapid population growth that goes with it. I am concerned to ensure that health services, in particular those delivered by hospitals, keep pace with that growing population. The $7 million, 12-chair dialysis unit to be funded by the Rudd government as part of Queensland Health’s new North Lakes facility will help, as will the new GP super-clinic at Redcliffe in the neighbouring Petrie electorate.

The people of Longman are served by two public and three private hospitals. The sites of the public hospitals at Caboolture and Redcliffe are very nearly at the stage where little more can be added by way of new buildings. In the foreseeable future, population growth will certainly outstrip the capacity of those hospitals to expand to meet the healthcare needs of our community. This is particularly so given that residential development is occurring in areas increasingly more distant from those hospitals. In my view it would be a wise precaution to begin now the work of identifying potential sites for a new hospital to serve our community in the future.

I want to acknowledge the other members of my extended family who are here for this occasion and who have not already been mentioned and those who have been unable to join us today because of work and study commitments, particularly my sister Pene-lope and my daughter Tai. I want to conclude today by thanking honourable members for their attention and by reiterating my pledge to the people of Longman, who have hon-oured me so, that I will always be putting their interests first.

Mr BALDWIN (Paterson) (11.15 am)—Mr Speaker, may I start by congratulating
you on your election to the esteemed position you hold. I would ask you to convey my congratulations to the Deputy Speaker, Anna Burke, and the Second Deputy Speaker, Bruce Scott. It is indeed an honour and a privilege to stand here in parliament and once again represent my electorate of Paterson in New South Wales. This is the fourth time I have stood here on the dawn of a new parliament and, as such, I appreciate and understand the challenges that lie ahead. I embrace the challenge willingly, as my affection for my electorate remains unchanged and I have, if at all possible, an increased desire to serve my constituents, and serve them well I will.

I came into politics on the urging of a friend, who had derided me for merely complaining about the state of the country and the uncertainty of the future of my then young children, challenging me to take up the gauntlet and make a difference. When I first came to parliament as a member of the Howard government in 1996, Labor had left the country with unemployment levels over eight per cent, over one million Australians unemployed and $96 billion in government debt. I was confronted with the reality of young Australians in my electorate without direction, without hope and feeling deserted. In 1996, in my maiden speech, I said:

"... at the end of the day if I can be remembered for one contribution to this House I would want it to be that I was part of the team that helped turn the ship around; to steer a new course towards the nation’s salvation.

Under the prime ministership of John Howard I believe that that objective has been achieved. Today, we now stand in opposition, and reluctantly hand over to Labor a renewed nation compared to 1996. Through the strong financial stewardship of Peter Costello, the coalition has paid off Labor’s $96 billion debt while at the same time cutting taxes. We have handed Labor balanced books, no debt, $28 billion in assets and a history of 10 out of 11 budget surpluses.

During the Hawke-Keating Labor government era, we endured an average inflation rate of 5.2 per cent, while under the coalition it averaged 2.5 per cent. During the Hawke-Keating Labor government period, the maximum standard variable home loan rate rose to 17 per cent, while under the coalition it dropped to 6.05 per cent. The recent slight increases in interest rates under the Howard government were a direct result of the success of the economy over the past 11 years, not its failure. They were caused by giving excessive tax revenues back to the taxpayers who in turn elected to spend rather than save, fuelling an increase in demand and therefore putting upward pressure on interest rates. It is Peter Costello not Paul Keating who has proven to be the world’s greatest treasurer.

The coalition has left the new government with unemployment at the lowest level since 1974. More young Australians are taking up apprenticeships than ever before. That has come about not only because of the demand for skills but also because the coalition removed Labor’s long-held stigma towards being a tradie—a highly skilled person without a university degree. Full employment requires a broad range of skills to satisfy the market’s demands. However, high levels of skill take time to instil into those hungry for training. The mould has been set for the future. Let us hope that Labor does not break it again.

So I truly believe that I have assisted the coalition to achieve my initial objective of helping turn the country around, but I believe there is still more to be done. With an economic crisis evolving in various parts of the world, let me say that managing a trillion-dollar economy is not a game. We need to keep vigilant. In unsteady and inexperienced hands, with outside interference from the
unions, all that we have achieved as a nation could be in jeopardy. This great nation could be set back 20 years in terms of both the economy and employment. The proof of the pudding is in the eating. Each of the state Labor governments is rapidly increasing debt. They have a proven inability to manage the public purse and have squandered the taxpayers’ money, spending well beyond their means, without increasing services vital to the community. For example, in New South Wales the state Labor government is selling off its electricity retail arm to cover debts. What next?

I have retained the same passion I first came into politics with—the passion to make a difference. It is this passion which will see me continue to stand up for my community, to ensure the issues the community think are important are heard and that their needs are addressed. Election promises on both sides of politics were made during the campaign, and the importance of each is that they were promises on issues that are important to the very heart of the people of Paterson. I will be holding the Labor government to account to deliver on the promises they made during the election. Furthermore, I will be urging the government to fund the promises the coalition made, as my community not only needs but deserves these projects. As always, I will fight for my electorate of Paterson.

Access to GPs remains one of the most fundamental needs for all Australians and so, too, for those in my electorate of Paterson. I was proud to be involved in helping secure initial and ongoing funding for the successful GP after-hours access clinics in the area. Labor has promised $5 million in funding to establish GP superclinics in Port Stephens and Lake Macquarie. It is well documented that we have doctor shortages in our area, and I find it hard to fathom how the government believes that these superclinics will attract young graduates to the area when they have failed to be lured to our beautiful area so far. With such a large portion of the RAAF Base Williamtown defence personnel families now living in my electorate, I welcome Labor’s promise to establish defence family health clinics to service the Singleton Army base and RAAF Base Williamtown. But, again, I question where the GPs and other medical professionals will come from to staff these centres.

Much was made in the local media of the need for a positron emission topography, or PET, scanner Medicare licence at the Mater hospital. PET is an emerging technology that uses radiation to project images to assess the development of diseases that may not be detectable by other imaging. While PET is not a treatment, it is a vital tool for doctors to use to help understand the location or stage of a disease, whether the cancer is still active after treatment or whether or not surgery is likely to be useful. The Mater is the major oncology hospital for the Newcastle and Hunter region and, even though the hospital is not in my electorate, I was called on to secure the funding because the Labor member for Newcastle had failed to adequately represent her community. I fought and lobbied for the funding from the coalition government and secured $2 million as a priority, which was signed off prior to the election. During the election, Labor promised $1.5 million in funding for the PET scanner for the Mater. Does this mean that the Mater funding will be cut back? For the sake of those who need this service, I sincerely hope not.

Labor also committed to fund the Nabiac and district pool committee to the amount of $135,000; the Smiths Lakes sports field to the amount of $200,000; the extensions to the Nelson Bay PCYC gym; and the skate park at Tea Gardens. They committed to provide $15,000 to repair the Mallabula Panthers clubhouse, which was damaged by
vandals setting fire to it. I think that they left at least one zero off the end of the reconstruction costs, as it will cost a lot more than $15,000. Make no bones about it: I will be holding the government to account to deliver on these promises. The coalition made election commitments after taking into account the needs of the community and I will put the case to the new government for funding, as these too are important community projects.

Roads are undeniably one of the issues most frequently talked about by people in my electorate. We all need them; we all travel on them. Most importantly, they need to be safe. The Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, said repeatedly before the election that he would end the blame game between the state and federal governments and that the buck stops with him. Well, Prime Minister, you can start in my electorate with roads and community safety. Funding for roadwork is a fundamental mainstay that all levels of government must supply. The councils and the community have told me they want the Fingal Bay link road built. The coalition promised $5 million to add to the $2 million that Port Stephens Council has, and there is an expectation that the New South Wales government will contribute $2 million to the works. This 4.2 kilometre section of road will connect Government Road at Shoal Bay to the corner of Gan Gan Road and Nelson Bay Road. It will provide a main thoroughfare to the Nelson Bay CBD, significantly reducing traffic in Nelson Bay and travel time to Fingal and Shoal bays.

Further north, the Bucketts Way is one of the most significant roads in the Hunter region, as it connects towns such as Gloucester and Stroud, as well as the tourist location of the Barrington Tops, with the Pacific Highway. The coalition provided over $24 million for road upgrades to the Bucketts Way during the past five years. The next phase is for passing lanes to be established on this 158 kilometre stretch of road. A re-elected coalition government would have committed $12 million to introduce passing lanes on the Bucketts Way, which are so desperately needed to improve safety.

Since 1996, the coalition has provided Great Lakes Council with over $9 million in funding to improve The Lakes Way, a road that stretches from Bulahdelah in the south to Forster in the north. Further upgrading work is needed and the coalition promised a further $3 million to upgrade two sections of The Lakes Way: $2.5 million was for the upgrade of 2.5 kilometres of The Lakes Way southbound on Tahiti Avenue and $500,000 was to be allocated to improve the intersection of The Lakes Way and Green Point Drive. These projects are not wants; they are desperate community needs. I urge the government to accede to the people’s needs on this issue and provide the funding. Excuses like ‘it’s a state issue’ or ‘it’s a local government issue’ do not cut it anymore. Remember, Prime Minister: you said that this is the end of the blame game and that the buck stops with you.

Crime, and its effects, is the overriding fear for all Australians. I regularly receive letters from my constituents, pensioners too scared to venture out of their homes at night. They are scared and feel they cannot walk down the streets of towns they have lived in for dozens of years, sleepy towns they have raised their families in. I, too, am sick and tired of the hoons and vandals roaming seemingly unchecked in our streets, wantonly creating havoc, senselessly destroying property and committing crime. The community demands more police and greater security. The men and women in blue of the New South Wales Police Force are some of the best in the world, but they are drastically underresourced in my area. The number of them on the streets is simply not enough to make people feel safe.
The coalition government promised, if re-elected, to help make communities feel safer by providing funding for closed-circuit television cameras. These cameras have been shown to reduce the incidence of senseless vandalism and can result in the prosecution of the perpetrators. The coalition had committed $400,000 to the project, which would involve cooperation between all three levels of government and the community to deliver CCTV in known hot spots. Cameras were to be installed in Forster, Tuncurry, Tilligerry, Raymond Terrace, Dungog and Gloucester. That being said, nothing impacts on crime more than a police presence amongst the community. I know that the problem will be fixed, because Prime Minister Rudd said that the buck stops with him and that he would end the blame game. Well, we will wait and see.

Tourism is a major employer and economic driver in the electorate of Paterson. The beautiful areas of Forster and Tuncurry attract an increasing number of tourists each year, who flock to be a part of these relaxed coastal towns. Great Lakes Council is to be commended on its approach to beautifying and increasing accessibility to the waterways. The coalition government pledged, if re-elected, to commit $1 million for works to extend the foreshore boardwalk and other improvements on the Forster side of the lake, fronting Little Street. I strongly urge the government to continue with this work because of the economic and environmental benefits.

Whether it is protecting whales and dolphins off my electorate’s coastline, the restoration or protection of sensitive habitat or the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions, the care of our environment is of vital concern to all in our community. Over the past 18 months, I have been working with Gerry McGowan, CEO of CBD Energy, a Sydney based company that is a pioneer in renewable energies and the storage of energy. CBD proposed the construction of a 30 megawatt renewable energy farm utilising state-of-the-art, thin-film photovoltaic panels in the Hunter Water buffer-zone land around the Grahamstown Dam.

The additional benefit to our region is that thin-film solar panels are to be manufactured in a new facility to be established in the Hunter. This project will create 100 jobs over the next four years and generate $400 million in annual export income. This is a major step forward for renewable technology development in the Hunter and works hand in hand with clean coal technologies such as those being developed by Corky’s Carbon Technology and the wind power generation farms at Vacy and that proposed for Scone. I would strongly urge the government to support the $20 million commitment made by the coalition government for this CBD Energy project as the benefits to the environment, the benefit of the local jobs created in the community and the additional $400 million bottom-line trade figures for our nation are only good news.

Although the election was held in November last year, this is the first time I have had the opportunity in parliament to thank those committed people who helped me in the campaign for Paterson. The success of this campaign owed itself to a magnificent team effort all the way from my dedicated staff, the campaign team and the over 700 local supporters and volunteers who worked tirelessly on 24 November for a return of the Howard government and retention of the seat of Paterson. I wish to personally thank my staff, Michelle Moffat, Jaimie Abbott, Shelley Mexon, Ben Gibson, Nicola Steiner, Simon Ryan and Gary Hoson, for their tireless efforts, their loyalty and for both their public and private support. The team worked incredibly hard to support me and more importantly the Paterson community. They rose
commendably to the challenge of even longer days and harder work over a very long campaign.

I owe a tremendous debt of gratitude to my enthusiastic campaign team of Bob Geoghegan, Sally Dover, Allan Ray, Len Roberts and Deslie Shakespeare, whose advice and counsel was invaluable. To my mentor Hilton Grugeon and his wife Bev, thank you for your friendship and support. The mobile office logistics team of Lloyd Moffat, Sonny Morris, Steve Mudd, Colin Haddow, Rod Smith, Pam and Allan Walker worked incredibly hard to regularly cover the 9,632 square kilometres of the Paterson electorate. Their efforts were truly admirable and I am immensely grateful for their passion and their energy. On polling day in particular over 700 local volunteers and supporters turned out to man our booths and show support from the early hours of the morning setting up the booths all the way through to close.

I am unable to name all of those who rallied on the day; however, I wish to thank each and every one of them here today and I most sincerely express my appreciation for their help. I wish to particularly mention the community leaders who have stood with and supported me, namely: Peter Blackmore, Mayor of Maitland; Ron Swan, Mayor of Port Stephens; John Chadban, Mayor of Great Lakes; Glen Wall, Mayor of Dungog; and Barry Ryan, former Mayor of Gloucester council. It has been an honour and pleasure to work with you all on the projects that matter to our constituents.

I am also very grateful for the contribution made by Doreen Bradley, Bill King, Peter Fidden, Patricia Michell, Ross Presgrave, Bob Russell, Keith McNeil, Ted Tisdell, Karen Patane, Matt Revel, Maree Pollard, Debbie Sutie, Shane Bailey, Matt Bailey, George Manning, Matt Bliss and my long time friend Chris Scott, who sadly passed away just days after the election.

To the rising stars of the Young Liberals, who made an energetic and valuable contribution to the campaign: I wish to acknowledge your efforts here today. The team had a dynamic attitude and were inspirational in their commitment.

Words cannot adequately express the deep appreciation I have for the support I received from my immediate family—my wife, Cynthia, and teenage children, David, Robbie and Samantha. The sacrifices made by family members of politicians can never be understated. I acknowledge the outstanding job Cynthia has done in raising our family almost single-handedly; all this whilst holding an important community leadership role and recently finalising a masters degree in special education. I know that her sacrifice has enabled me to represent the people of Paterson unfettered and make what I believe to be a significant contribution in building a better Australia for all families.

Finally, I must say that, despite being in opposition, I am more determined than ever to represent the people of Paterson, to put forward their concerns and achieve outcomes for our community. I relish the challenge ahead and I thank the people of Paterson for the honour and privilege they have bestowed upon me to again be their representative in this House.

Debate (on motion by Ms Roxon) adjourned.

TAX LAWS AMENDMENT (2008 MEASURES No. 1) BILL 2008 Second Reading
Debate resumed from 20 February, on motion by Mr Bowen:
That this bill be now read a second time.

Mr TURNBULL (Wentworth) (11.35 am)—As I was saying yesterday before the
debate was adjourned, the Tax Laws Amendment (2008 Measures No. 1) Bill 2008 represents an assault by the Australian Labor Party on democracy itself. It is designed to tilt the playing field of political contention, already tilted heavily in favour of the Labor Party, for the reasons I set out yesterday, even further in the direction of the ALP. The rest of the bill, which deals with carbon sink forests, superannuation and other matters, all being continued from the previous parliament, are areas that will have support from all members of the House, and certainly should be assured a swift passage. But to include this poison pill, poisonous to democracy itself, shows the cynicism of the government. No sooner has the Labor Party moved onto the government benches than it is seeking to rort the electoral system so its extraordinary advantage, in financial terms, is made even greater.

I believe Australia needs thoroughgoing campaign finance reform. We need to look at campaign finance issues thoroughly, and that is why the shadow Assistant Treasurer will be moving a second reading amendment to refer the material relating to tax deductibility of political donations to the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters. It is vital that we look at this properly because we are all concerned with questions of political influence from donors, be they from either side. That is always going to be a legitimate issue. But what is at stake here is democracy itself. What price democracy if one side of politics is able to spend four, five or six times as much money as the other side on advertising in a political campaign? How can our political system be genuinely contestable if that advantage is entrenched?

I mentioned yesterday one practical proposal, which I have canvassed for many years, long before I was a member of this House, and that is that we recognise the principal that political participation is limited to individuals—people, natural persons—who are on the electoral roll. They are the only ones who can vote; they are the only ones who can stand for parliament. If we take that logic through to the issue of campaign finance, we would be saying that political donations can come only from individuals, natural persons, who are on the electoral roll—not from unions, not from corporations, only from natural persons on the electoral roll—who certify that the donation or contribution is from their own funds. We can have a discussion about whether there should be an annual cap—speaking for myself, I think there should be—and what that level should be. If we do that, we will restore integrity into the situation of our campaign finances, which at present is the subject of so much criticism, and we will also go some way towards ensuring that our political system remains truly contestable.

We support this bill with the exception of the provisions relating to the deductibility of political contributions. I warmly support the amendment I have foreshadowed that my colleague will be moving when he speaks.

Mr HAYES (Werriwa) (11.40 am)—The Tax Laws Amendment (2008 Measures No. 1) Bill 2008 makes a number of welcome improvements to Australia’s superannuation and tax laws. Firstly, the government committed, in the lead-up to the last election, to remove the tax deductibility for donations made to political parties, candidates and members—although not quite in the way that the member for Wentworth was just foreshadowing. We very clearly put our position upfront—it was made in the course of the campaign—and we indicated that what we were proposing would have a significant impact. No wonder the opposition would want to interrupt this debate when we are talking about limiting the tax deductibility on campaign donations. As I indicated, we did take this position to the last
election. This measure is about transparency and will have a significant impact on national revenues.

Prior to 2006, the deduction limit was $100. The previous government—the Howard government—increased that threshold to $1,500, expanding the deduction to donations to independent candidates and members and donations made by businesses. These measures also ensure that business taxpayers cannot now claim a general deduction for contributions and gifts to political parties, members and candidates. This ensures that there are no loopholes for business to access a deduction for political donations.

The previous government’s policy cost Australian taxpayers effectively $10 million per annum and removing that loophole is an overall efficiency gain to the Commonwealth. I would have thought anyone in this House would have seen that as a responsible course of action to take—anyone who was not out there overtly trying to protect the interests of businesses in their private donations to political parties, which we are not. Therefore I commend that provision of this bill to the House.

Secondly, this bill ensures that superannuation lump sums will be tax free where they are paid to persons diagnosed with a terminal medical condition. Under the existing super lump sum tax provisions, for example, a lump sum paid from a taxed fund to a person below age 55 is taxed at a maximum rate of 21.5 per cent, which includes the Medicare levy.

You may recall, Mr Deputy Speaker, that back in 2007 there was some media coverage of a particularly sad case concerning Ms Christina Finnimore. Ms Finnimore was diagnosed at the age of 43 with terminal breast cancer. She wanted to be able to access her superannuation and put in place various arrangements. Under the tax system presently, that is not possible without incurring a 21.5 per cent tax on the lump sum that is paid out. This provision was noted in the parliament last year. The Howard government did announce in September of last year that it would amend the tax laws to give effective relief on lump-sum payments out of superannuation where people have been diagnosed as being terminally ill and that that would be retrospective to September last year.

I have no doubt that these changes, which I am sure are going to be agreed to by the other side, will have a significant impact and benefit for people who are diagnosed as being terminally ill and, more importantly, their families; how a person is going to set about in those tragic circumstances putting in place proper arrangements for themselves and for their families. At a minimum, it is an exercise in ensuring that as far as possible we can relieve the financial stress for people in that very tragic situation. What constitutes a terminal medical condition will, as I understand it, be left to be provided in the regulations that will follow the passing of this bill.

These amendments, as opposed to being backdated to the date that the former government had indicated when they made the announcement, to September last year, under this bill will apply retrospectively to payments made on or after 1 July 2007. This is certainly going to be one of those provisions that will occur from time to time when we make tax relief for people in the most devastating of situations. I am sure it will make a significant difference for families and people caring for a person who is terminally ill. I also commend that part of the bill.

Thirdly, this bill deals with the Equine Workers Hardship Wage Supplement Payment and eligibility for a beneficial tax offset. You will recall, Mr Deputy Speaker, that the outbreak of equine flu caused enormous disruption in the horseracing industry and in
those activities directly related to horseracing. In my former life I had the honour of representing strappers, stablehands and trackwork riders and I know these occupations are generally occupied by young people and they are also generally low-paid jobs. Unfortunately, the equine flu meant that many of the activities of horseracing stopped or slowed down so considerably that trainers and horse owners had to put staff off. The staff who were ordinarily being put off were those trackwork riders, stablehands and the like. It also applied to people who ran organisations associated with horse transport and their workers. This provision seeks to give some relief to workers and businesses in the horseracing industry who have suffered financially as a result of the equine influenza outbreak. Those individuals who have lost jobs or most of their income, and particularly those who are sole traders, whose income has effectively ceased, will pay no tax on their payment if the only income received by the recipient is the Newstart payment.

The final three schedules of this bill were introduced by the former government in the Tax Laws Amendment (2007 Measures No. 6) Bill 2007, which lapsed when the election was called. The first of these three deals with carbon sink forests. It will be an important contribution to the establishment of carbon sequestration and the delivery of natural resource management benefits by encouraging the establishment of carbon sink forests. The establishment costs of these carbon sink forests will be immediately deductible in the income years from 2007-08 through to 2011-12 inclusive. After that period, establishment costs will be deductible over 14 years and 105 days at the rate of seven per cent per annum. To be eligible to claim these deductions, taxpayers must be carrying on a business and the carbon sink forest must meet the environmental and natural resource management guidelines. As I said, this is something that was put forward by the last government. It is something that I think is very important. In terms of afforestation and our environmental needs, carbon sink forests play a very significant role.

Unfortunately, the former government refused to take a very practical step in the environmental fight. I point out that it took the election of the Rudd Labor government for the Kyoto protocol to be signed. Having done so, we will use a number of weapons to address environmental degradation, and one of those will be the provision of carbon sink forests. It is just regrettable that, whilst the former government was prepared to go with that proposition last year, in the whole 11 years of its government it could not see itself as having a place at the table on something that was going to be of a much higher order than that in looking at our world responsibilities, which flow from being a signatory to Kyoto.

There are a number of other provisions of this bill which deal with pieces of legislation that were proposed by the former government but did not make it into the parliament, having regard to the fact that the election had been called. I support the bill in its totality. I oppose the proposition advanced by the member for Wentworth about further relief to be given to supporters of the Liberal Party. It will not occur in this bill. This is a responsible piece of legislation and one which will have great benefits for taxation and, in particular, for superannuation recipients who have been diagnosed as being terminally ill.

Mr KEENAN (Stirling) (11.55 am)—I rise to talk about the Tax Laws Amendment (2008 Measures No. 1) Bill 2008. If this is an indication of how the government are going to move forward then it shows that, as opposed to improving transparency—and they are making all these noises about improving the operations of this House—they have
been pretty tricky in this bill. It is their first tax bill. They put five very sensible measures into the bill and then one measure that they knew the Liberal Party would oppose because it is an attack on participation in our democracy. They then rolled it all up into one bill and presented it to the House. This foreshadows the way that the government will operate.

I thought I might initially address the five of the six schedules of this bill that the opposition will be supporting. We are supporting them for very good reason; four of the five are measures that were introduced by the opposition when we were in government and the fifth of those measures was part of our policy when we were in government.

The first of these is the exemption for superannuation payments to the terminally ill. This is schedule 2 of the bill. It concerns the taxation treatment of lump sum superannuation payments to people who have a terminal illness. This measure was announced by the Howard government in September 2007, by my good friend the shadow minister for finance. When he announced the measure, he outlined that we were doing it because we believe that we need to remove as many of the stresses as possible for people who find themselves in this terrible situation. I could not have said it better myself, and I completely agree with the intent of this measure. It will make superannuation payments tax free in the case of a superannuation lump sum payment made to somebody who suffers from a terminal medical condition. The exemption will apply whether the payment is made from a taxed or an untaxed source. The definition of a terminal medical condition is to be set out in the regulations that will be prescribed. We the opposition would expect that the government would consult widely with the medical profession and support groups when they draft these regulations.

Schedule 3 of this bill establishes a deduction for the capital costs of establishing trees in certain carbon sink forests. Again, this is a measure that was introduced by the coalition parties when we were in government. It was part of the Tax Laws Amendment (2007 Measures No. 6) Bill, which, sadly, lapsed on the calling of the election. The measure in this bill does not differ in any material respects from the measures that we introduced—with, I think, the slight exception of some changes in the names of portfolios and departments. We strongly support this measure. Encouraging the early establishment of carbon sink forests through providing immediate deductability for costs incurred in establishing a qualifying carbon sink forest during a five-year period is a very much needed measure. It was raised just yesterday with me by some businessmen in Western Australia, and they are very keen to see it passed. Significantly, the measure in the bill will not allow deductions to carbon sink forests established through managed investment schemes.

Schedule 4 of the bill provides for the extension of the beneficiary tax offset to equine workers who are suffering hardship as a result of the equine influenza outbreak. Again, this was part of a package of measures that was announced by the Howard government in September 2007 in response to the equine influenza outbreak. This measure will mean that low-paid workers and sole traders who have lost their jobs or have lost substantial income will be eligible for a wage supplement. This supplement will be received in the 2007-08 income year. Following years will also be eligible for the beneficiary tax offset. The intent of this measure is to extend the tax offset to the supplement to ensure the taxation treatment is consistent with that which we already give to recipients of Newstart allowance.
Schedule 5 of the bill provides that grants received under the Tobacco Growers Adjustment Assistance Program will be tax free where the tobacco grower undertakes to exit all agricultural enterprises for five years. Eligible grants will be up to $150,000. Again, this is a measure that was introduced by the former government, but it lapsed on the calling of an election.

The final schedule, schedule 6, amends the Farm Management Deposits Scheme to align tax law with the guidelines for declaring either all primary producers in a geographical area or specified classes of primary producers within a geographical area to be in exceptional circumstances. This measure is exactly the same as that which was introduced by the Howard government. The opposition supports schedules 2 through to 6 of this bill.

I return now to why we so vehemently oppose schedule 1 of this bill. It is an example of the trickiness of the way this new government intend to conduct business in this chamber. For them to take what is obviously a controversial measure that relates to our electoral system and put it in with these benign and much-needed taxation measures shows the hollowness of the government and the hollowness of their promises to increase transparency and improve the operations of parliament. Schedule 1 of the bill winds back tax deductability for political donations from the current level of $1,500 to nil. What it fails to do, of course, is to wind back the tax deductability for many of the things that traditionally fund the political campaigning of the Australian Labor Party. This is really nothing more than a naked political device to attack the funding base of the coalition parties whilst leaving Labor’s funding base intact.

I will give you an example of what will happen if this measure is to actually pass. A small business man wants to donate to the Liberal Party because he is worried about the return of unfair dismissal laws, for instance. That donation would lose its tax-deductable status. Yet union memberships, money that will directly fund ALP election campaigning, will still be tax deductible. Levies paid by parliamentary members of the Australian Labor Party to the Labor Party—and this is something that I understand Labor Party members are still encouraged to do—will still be tax deductible.

We have had the Special Minister of State rather sanctimoniously dressing up this measure as something to improve accountability within our democracy. But of course we all know what this is actually about. It is about maximising the power now at the disposal of the new government to unfairly disadvantage their political opponents and to advantage themselves. This is a measure that will directly affect participation in our democracy. It deals with the deductability of donations made to political parties as well as to candidates for election to any Australian legislature, local government body or members of such bodies. This is a measure that is intrinsically connected to our electoral process. So it is worthy that this House ask why the government sees the need to address this measure within a tax bill. I note that the Deputy Leader of the Government in the Senate has already put this question to the other place. Speaking yesterday in the other place he stated that the issue of tax deductability of political contributions is not a policy matter for the Treasurer but instead falls within the portfolio responsibilities of the Special Minister of State. So why would the new government then include this measure within a tax bill? There is only one answer to that question, and that is that they are being tricky and that they are doing it as a device to try and get the opposition to pass this
measure along with the other needed measures that the opposition does support.

I observe at this point that the new government have made a real song and dance about claims that they would like to increase transparency and accountability, but of course within this tax bill we see that all they really want to do is play politics. What I would like to do and what the opposition would like to do is amend this bill to refer schedule 1 to the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters, which is the appropriate place where, after every election, changes to our electoral system should be scrutinised. This has always been the practice in the past: changes to the electoral system after any given election will be referred to the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters. The history of that committee is that the ALP have repeatedly supported tax deductability of political donations. Indeed, the initial bill that granted tax deductability to political donations was introduced during the time of the Hawke government. In submissions to the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters in both 1987 and 1989 the Australian Labor Party claimed that the additional funds raised by political parties with tax deductability advantage would alleviate any pressure for increased levels of public funding, would encourage political parties to continue to seek direct support from the public and—very importantly, because this is the Australian Labor Party talking—would help them more adequately fulfil their social functions.

On 19 December 1991, under the Hawke government, the House of Representatives voted along party lines to introduce tax deductability for political donations. In 1991 that level was set at $100. The Political Broadcasts and Political Disclosures Bill 1991, assented to on 19 December, gave effect to the introduction of this tax deductability. That bill was introduced by the then Minister for Transport and Communications, Kim Beazley. So when the Australian Labor Party were in government—and this is a time when they obviously made up the majority within the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters—they had nothing to say about the tax deductability of contributions to political parties. In reports after the 1990 election and the 1993 election, they were completely silent on their apparent beliefs about tax deductability for contributions to political parties.

The 1996 report of the joint standing committee included a recommendation to make donations of up to $1,500 annually to a political party tax deductible, which, of course, is what was introduced by the Howard government and what the current government is now trying to wind back. In the committee’s report on the conduct of the 1996 election, it was the Australian Labor Party that nominated $1,500 as the maximum level for tax deductability. This report was unanimously supported by members of that committee and it said specifically that donations to a political party of up to $1,500 annually, whether from an individual or a corporation, would be tax deductible. Membership of the 1997 joint standing committee again unanimously recommended tax deductability for donations from both individuals and corporations up to the threshold of $1,500.

On that committee were—and this is quite extraordinary—the now Deputy Leader of the Government in the Senate, the current Attorney-General and the now Parliamentary Secretary for Multicultural Affairs and Settlement Services. So those three members of the Labor Party have apparently had a substantial change of heart on this issue—two cabinet ministers and one parliamentary secretary of the current government.

The party system is an integral part of our democracy. It is a dangerous act to attack the
role that political parties play within our system. The ALP is trying to entrench its incumbency, and that is obvious to everyone who takes a look at this measure. It is the act of a very conceited government. It is the act of a government that is putting its narrow interests ahead of the interests of our great Australian democracy. The savings from this bill will be about $10 million. Quite frankly, I believe that that is a price worth paying to enhance our democratic processes, of which political parties are an integral part.

There can be no doubting that this measure will entrench funding for the Australian Labor Party and will entrench funding of the Australian Labor Party from the union movement. That is the clear intent of it. This measure will keep tax deductability for the things that fund Labor’s election campaigns—which is funding from the union movement, by and large—but it comprehensively attacks the funding base of the Liberal and National parties, who are supported by donations from small business, from large business and from individuals within the community who would like to see a continuation of good governance in Australia. This is really nothing short of absolute egregious hypocrisy from the government. The coalition parties demand a level playing field when it comes to the funding of the two major political parties in Australia.

As I have stated, the opposition support schedules 2 to 6 of this bill but we will be moving to amend it to defend the integrity of our electoral system. It is completely appropriate that, at the conclusion of any election, changes to the electoral system be scrutinised by the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters. There is absolutely no reason why the measures contained in schedule 1 of this bill are included with the other urgent matters that are included in this bill; as we know, the only reason for it is political trickery. I therefore move:

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

“the House is of the opinion that the provisions of Schedule 1 of this bill should be referred to the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters for consideration and report”.

I urge all members of the House to support this amendment in the interests of Australian democracy.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Hon. Peter Slipper)—Is the amendment seconded?

Mr DUTTON (Dickson) (12.12 pm)—I second the amendment. I support the coalition’s second reading amendment and endorse the words from my colleague the shadow Assistant Treasurer on the Tax Laws Amendment (2008 Measures No. 1) Bill 2008. I want to confine my brief comments in this debate today to a very courageous and gutsy woman, Christina Fiddimore. As the Assistant Treasurer in the last government, I was very moved by the story of Christina Fiddimore. Schedule 2 within this bill really has come about because of her courage, her determination and the way in which she conveyed herself in this debate. At the moment Christina Fiddimore’s family is going through a terrible loss—the terrible loss of a mother, the terrible loss of a wife and the terrible loss of a daughter and loved one. I want to take the opportunity today, on behalf of all in this House, to extend our deepest condolences to the Fiddimore family—to her husband, Lee, and her daughter, Amelia, and to her extended family and friends.

Mrs Fiddimore’s case was brought to my attention in September last year when she wrote a moving letter to the Financial Review describing the circumstances surrounding her fight against breast cancer and the terminal prognosis that she had received. The basis of her concern was that she was not able to receive tax free the superannuation moneys that she had accumulated over her
working life. She wanted to access those funds to provide financial security for her husband and daughter after her passing, which goes well and truly to the nature of the woman.

I spoke to Christina by telephone on Tuesday, 11 September. That was reported in the Financial Review on 13 September. Jill Margo, a journalist who had followed this case and who had reported on the case again, wrote a story on Thursday, 13 September. Jill should be congratulated for the way in which she has reported this case, and she should take great credit as well for the changes that are before the parliament today. In that article Jill wrote:

Christina Fiddimore is joyous. On Tuesday evening she was at her parents’ house when the phone rang. Peter Dutton, the Federal Minister for Revenue and Assistant Treasurer, was on the line wanting to talk to her.

“I was astonished,” she says. “The minister was calling me—personally! He said that both he and Peter Costello had received my letters, were very touched and wanted to make changes to the superannuation law immediately. In fact, he told me the changes would be effective by morning.”

Fiddimore thanked him on behalf of all terminally ill people, put the phone down and repeated what she had just heard to her mother. Then she burst into tears.

“They were tears of joy, relief and amazement. I haven’t experienced happiness like this for a long time,” she said.

When I spoke to her on the phone I got a sense that she clearly was moved by the decision that we had taken. It was not an easy decision for the government to take because, on the advice that we had received, it is always hard to provide for those who are most in need whilst not exploiting those in lesser need.

Treasury officials should be commended for quickly acting to provide the advice and ultimately the bill that was introduced today.

I also acknowledge the work of Phil Lindsay, Daniel Caruso and my staff and, importantly, Anthony Albanese, Ms Fiddimore’s local member. Credit also goes to the now Assistant Treasurer and former shadow Assistant Treasurer, Chris Bowen, and Senator Sherry for their bipartisan approach which enabled this matter to be dealt with quickly. I know I speak also on behalf of the current shadow Treasurer when I say that the opposition will provide support to the government in the consultation process and the discussions about the formulation of regulations.

I also pay tribute to the Breast Cancer Action Group, which provided great support to Christina and her family. They deserve great credit for the way they professionally conducted themselves in what is certainly a very important debate. I will read a piece from this morning’s Australian Financial Review, again by Jill Margo. It read as follows:

Christina Fiddimore, who spent the last precious months of her life fighting for fairness in Australia’s superannuation laws, died on Sunday.

Just three days earlier, the government took the necessary steps to formalise the changes she had been campaigning for.

Last year, from her hospital bed where she was receiving treatment for metastatic breast cancer, Fiddimore wrote to the federal government explaining why terminally ill people should be given early access to their superannuation without having to pay a tax penalty.

Eventually, the government was moved by her plight and agreed to change the tax laws.

She was overjoyed and after using her payout to put the family’s finances in order, she booked a holiday to Egypt.

Since her schooldays she had dreamed of seeing the Valley of the Kings and last month, with her husband Lee and young daughter Amelia, she finally saw it in a wheelchair.

For her 44th birthday present, her parents paid for six nights at the Hilton Hotel in Cairo and some readers of the Australian Financial Review, who were touched by her story, chipped in too.
Can I again pay my respects to Christina’s family. Our thoughts and prayers are with them at an incredibly difficult time. I hope in some way they are comforted by the fact that Christina was a person they should be very proud of. She was courageous and determined in her fight. She leaves a wonderful legacy to other people suffering terminal illnesses. She is to be commended, remembered and respected by the House. I have great pleasure in being part of paying that tribute to her today.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Hon. Peter Slipper)—I am sure all honourable members would associate themselves with the sentiments expressed by the honourable member for Dickson.

Mr BRADBURY (Lindsay) (12.19 pm)—I certainly endorse the sentiments of the member for Dickson, and I am sure I speak on behalf of all of those on this side of the House when I say that this amendment in many ways demonstrates the ability of individuals to shape and influence the institutions and the decisions of government. It is important that we support that.

I rise to speak in support of each of the measures proposed in this bill, whilst I echo the comments of the member for Dickson, and I am sure I speak on behalf of all of those on this side of the House when I say that this amendment in many ways demonstrates the ability of individuals to shape and influence the institutions and the decisions of government. It is important that we support that.

I support the other measures, but I would like to comment more specifically on the only measure in this bill that seems to be in contention—that is, the provisions of schedule 1. Can I begin by saying that one very simple fact that has been ignored by mem-
bers opposite is that this measure reflects an election commitment. I have heard members on the other side suggest that this is a rather odd place to find a measure such as this. I suggest to them, through you, Mr Deputy Speaker Slipper, that this is not an odd place to find a revenue measure—and that is precisely what this is.

This measure, which was announced in a media statement entitled ‘Labor’s $3 billion Savings Plan’ on 2 March 2007, was designed to achieve one thing principally, and that was to contribute to overall savings for the Labor Party, when it was in opposition, in terms of how it would not only present a platform for the election but also be able to deliver and pay for that. This is something that we put before the Australian people, and it forms part of our platform, part of our agenda. So members on the other side should not be surprised to see that, with such haste, we have brought this matter before the parliament—as we have done with other matters that form part of our legislative agenda. I think it is a little bit cute to be suggesting that this is not an appropriate place for this measure to be found.

One of the other measures that was contained within the $3 billion worth of savings was the measure that related to reversing an increase in MPs’ printing allowances. That reversal related to changes that had been made under the former government which had dramatically increased the printing allowance available to MPs. There is something that I find just a little hypocritical here. I do not want to fall into the same trap that the member for Stirling fell into with the exaggerations and the hyperbole that characterised his contribution to the House—I think at one point he said that there was ‘absolute egregious hypocrisy’ on the part of the government, and I will come back to ‘absolute egregious hypocrisy’ in a moment—but I would say that, in respect of the savings measure related to the increase in printing allowances, those members of the former government, now members of the current opposition, have remained rather silent on this issue.

I see from a review of the Hansard of yesterday’s proceedings in the House that the member for Wentworth had some interesting comments to make on the issue of incumbency. (Quorum formed) Yesterday the member for Wentworth said in this House:

And he went on to suggest that this particular measure was about nothing more than entrenching the power of the incumbency that the government currently enjoys. I have to say that I find this rather curious, given the many measures employed by the former government—many of them at great expense to the taxpayer—in order to boost and entrench the incumbency of the then government.

I have already referred to the increase in the printing allowance. We could go into a very detailed discussion about the benefits to our great democracy of the $2 billion worth of political advertising that our community was subjected to over the 11 years of the former government. Unfortunately, I did not hear the member for Wentworth, the member for Stirling or any member from the other side suggest that to entrench the power of incumbents would in some way go to the very heart of breaking up our democracy. In fact, I think that the words of the member for Wentworth this morning were that this proposal was a ‘poison pill’—poisonous to our democracy. It defies explanation, it defies justification on his part to suggest that, and I intend to go through some aspects of how that is simply not the case. Before doing so,
can I say that I welcome the member for Wentworth’s preparedness to engage in a discussion about campaign finance reform. But what I find just a little bit rich is to see the member for Wentworth, of all the people in this House, coming forward to talk about the evils of political donations and how this is a great scourge that this parliament has to stamp out. Of all people, I would not have expected the member for Wentworth to be leading the charge.

One of the things that I noted in the 2004 electoral returns was that the member for Wentworth himself submitted a return—as this great democracy requires—and in that return there are a number of expenditure and campaign items which come to the rather modest total of $609,000. That is how much money was raised and expended in the campaign for the member for Wentworth in the 2004 election. That is some serious political fundraising. The member for Wentworth is, of course, a former federal Treasurer of the Liberal Party.

Mr Morrison interjecting—

Mr BRADBURY—I hear an interjection across the chamber from the member for Cook, who, if memory serves me correctly, was also the state director around the same time. What you had back in those days was the member for Wentworth knocking on the doors and the member for Cook following him around with his cap, collecting all the shekels of those willing to make a contribution to the Liberal Party.

Such is the prolific reputation of the member for Wentworth’s contribution to fundraising in our great democracy that an article in the Daily Telegraph on 1 August 2007 detailed some of his fundraising exploits. In fact, to join the Wentworth Forum—the principal fundraising arm for the member for Wentworth and his re-election to the seat and, no doubt, many other aspirations that he holds—the meagre amount of $55,000 would get a seat at the table for one of the poor individuals that the member for Wentworth seems to think are being deprived of their democratic rights through the expression of this bill.

I find it extraordinary to hear the member for Wentworth come forward and try to teach us, with such eloquence, a great lesson about the need to curb donations from the big end of town. In my view, that is akin to being taught a lesson in good manners by Wayne Carey. It is not something that anyone would rightfully expect or be prepared to accept, given the sheer hypocrisy of it. To quote the words of the member for Stirling, I would say that it is ‘absolute egregious hypocrisy’.

If I can turn to the specific tax deductability issues of this bill, I want to quote from a submission by some experts to a previous Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters inquiry into these matters. Mr Orr and Mr Tham indicated in a submission that, in relation to tax deductions for donations—and, in particular, donations by companies—‘Such deductions by companies would also, in effect, generate a public subsidy towards the payment.’ Earlier in the footnote from which I read, it says, ‘This would be clearly against public policy,’ and it indicates that it would not be appropriate to extend deductability of contributions to corporations—which, I might add, is something that the former government did.

In relation to the tax deductability issue, it is a simple proposition that those on higher marginal tax rates get a greater benefit from the contribution that they make, so there is not a lot of assistance for a pensioner who wishes to make a contribution. In response to the member for Stirling, why should members of a collective organisation be denied the opportunity to contribute, any more so than an individual? It is an interesting point
that the member for Wentworth made in relation to the so-called preserved and privileged position of unions within this system. The interesting point that he failed to make—and he would appreciate this, because I know of his great love of the minutiae of tax legislation—is in the specifics of the legislation, and in particular in section 50-15 of the Income Tax Assessment Act 1997, where it says that the tax exempt status that is afforded to trade unions is also extended to employer associations. So for anyone to come into this place and suggest that this is a one-sided tax exemption that exists for those trade unions is mere folly. Go and have a look at section 50; and, in looking at section 50, all members will be able to see that that is clearly not the case.

In relation to some of the peak bodies such as the Business Council of Australia et cetera, some of those bodies would also no doubt benefit from the taxation principle of mutuality, in which case they would obtain at least limited benefits from the taxation law in terms of contributions that they make. So please do not come into this House and suggest for one moment that trade unions in some way enjoy privileged status. The member for Wentworth made the startling observation that the trade unions contributed to the Australian Labor Party’s campaign at the last election. I cannot, for the life of me, figure out why they did not contribute to the Liberal Party’s campaign! They were determined to get rid of the former government’s unfair and extreme Work Choices laws. Don’t ever forget that, while those opposite failed to put their Work Choices laws before the Australian people, this very schedule that we are now debating was one of the measures that we did put before the Australian people. We have a mandate for it. We do not need to send it off to a committee in order to see whether or not a commitment we made needs to be delivered on. Unlike those opposite, we do not distinguish between core and non-core promises. It was a promise and we intend to deliver on it.

Can I also say that the member for Stirling I thought made some rather pertinent comments in one of his previous contributions to the House. He suggested that the most appropriate place for referring matters relating to the conduct of elections, specifically the conduct of elections that have just occurred, was to the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters. I understand that the member for Casey, who is in the chamber, previously chaired one of those committees. I think that that is entirely appropriate. I would call upon the member for Stirling, the member for Casey and the member for Cook—in their zeal and great eagerness to see this matter referred to that committee—to reflect upon the previous comments of the member for Stirling in this place. He said the way in which elections are conducted are matters that should be referred to the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters. I would call on them to support the referral to that committee of the actions of some of their fellow Liberal Party members in the seat of Lindsay in the last election campaign. I would call on them to refer those matters to that committee for its specific attention. In doing so I would also ask that the committee consider the role of the member for Warringah, because he is on the record saying that the Warringah federal electorate conference, which I assume is some fundraising arm of his, contributed—and, in fact, if I can use the terminology—bankrolled the campaign in Lindsay. If he bankrolled the campaign in Lindsay I think it is incumbent upon this place and the committees that report to this place and to the other chamber to investigate these matters and to see specifically what role the member for Warringah and the electoral funds that he has collected had in the activities that occurred in Lindsay. I support
the proposals that are contained within this bill and I am sure that the opposition will acknowledge the mandate that the government has in respect of these items.

Mr Morrison (Cook) (12.39 pm)—In speaking on the Tax Laws Amendment (2008 Measures No. 1) Bill 2008 can I first go to schedule 2 and also add my support for the work that has been done in bringing schedule 2 of this bill to this House and for the bipartisan way in which this has been done. It is an incredibly important matter that has been brought through this bill under schedule 2. I am a new member of parliament and only in the first few weeks of my time as a member of parliament a very similar issue was brought to my attention by a constituent. It is very pleasing that, on this first trip to Canberra as a member of parliament and the first time sitting in this place, that matter is being dealt with so swiftly and I commend those on both sides for their compassion on this issue and for their promptness in bringing it to the attention of this place.

My intention today is really to address the matters relating to schedule 1. My colleague the member for Stirling has moved an amendment which relates to schedule 1 and deals with the tax deductability of political gifts and contributions being referred to the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters. That is an amendment that I strongly support, and I strongly support it for a number of reasons. The modest deductions to taxpayers that have been provided for political donations were the subject of extensive and vigorous reviews by the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters over the course of several parliaments. Over the course of those reviews, as the member for Stirling was saying, there was consistent support from those opposite for those measures. But I am puzzled because, within months of the election, in one of the first items of business, the new government has sought to overturn this commitment. The question must be asked: why? What is the reason for the change of heart? What has changed in the minds of those who sit opposite about tax deductability for political donations? Are they doing it because there is a profound problem with people providing donations of up to $1,500? If that is the case I am not aware of any record of that evidence ever being brought forward. I am not aware of any of the work that has been done by those who sit opposite demonstrating the mischief that has occurred for those people paying their $50 or their $100 or even their $1,000 supporting their local candidate at local activities and whatnot. If there is such evidence of these things then it should be brought to the attention of the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters. I think that is one of the important reasons why the bill should be referred there—to take this evidence and to have a look at these issues—that is, if that is in fact the problem, which I suspect it is not. Is it to save money?

They stand here in this place and say this will save $10 million as part of that massive raft of budget cuts which the Minister for Finance and Deregulation has been bringing before this House. He has been talking about these massive cuts, which really amount to little more than Captain Feathersword when it comes to cutting budgets. When it comes to getting the nation’s finances in order they should look back to the work of the member for Higgins in 1996, when the government of that time inherited a two per cent deficit of GDP and that had to be turned around. That is what serious economic management and fiscal management is all about.

Ten million dollars, if my maths is right, is the cost of 10 part-time sitting days on a Friday in this place. This government is happy to have a part-time parliament sitting on a Friday and to spend $10 million on just 10 part-time Fridays, but it is happy to deny out
of hand extending the opportunity and encouraging people who are seeking to support and get involved in the political process. Those opposite actually have an argument on this. They say that they have a mandate. In his speech on this matter, the minister says:

This commitment was made as part of ‘Labor’s $3 Billion Savings Plan’, which was announced by then shadow minister for finance on 2 March 2007.

I cannot actually recall what I was doing on 2 March 2007, but I am unaware of any subsequent references by those opposite to this great longstanding election commitment of theirs. I do not recall it featuring in the $30 million of ads and various programs sponsored by the union movement. I do not remember that being the core plank of their argument that they went to the people with.

The true mandate comes from a very different place, which has not spoken its name in the course of this debate. The true mandate was revealed by the minister’s colleagues who sat on the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters. In their last report—a dissenting report—the Labor members of the committee made it clear when they said:

In stark contrast, the ALP Platform, as amended at the January 2004 National Conference is that ‘Labor will abolish the tax-deductibility of political donations.’

That is where the change took place. The change took place not through any sort of radical change in Labor thinking, not by those who sit opposite in this place. The change in policy that is now being put before this place came at the national conference of the ALP in 2004. So it was not from the Australian people but from the ‘bruvvers’ at the national conference. We remember that conference. It was the ‘new sensation’ conference. I remember the music. I remember the excitement of the members opposite as their new champion came strolling into the Sydney Convention and Exhibition Centre with INXS blaring across the speaker system.

Mr Keenan—Who was that?

Mr MORRISON—I will come to that, Member for Stirling, because it is interesting who the champion was, who the new sensation was. That was the conference where those opposite thought the best person to lead Australia and our economy was—that is right—the former member for Werriwa, Mark Latham. And who was his chief champion? Who was the chief champion of the member for Werriwa to be the new sensation? It was, of course, the now Treasurer, who we know as the weakest link. You cannot have a government where the weakest link is the Treasurer.

Who was at the ‘new sensation’ conference? Who was in attendance at that wonderful conference down in Sydney? Let me look at what the member for Menzies had to say. The member for Menzies at the time issued a very informative statement. He said:

In total, at least 85 per cent of delegates are union members and officials, former and current members of parliament, Labor councillors and party apparatchiks, leaving at best 15 per cent of delegates representing the broader community.

Eighty-three per cent of Labor’s frontbench, at that time at that conference, was comprised of former and current unionists. There seems to have been a bit of a cull of that figure. It is now back somewhere near the low level of 70 per cent, but I am sure there are some members opposite who will be seeking to push that rate up again in the near future. More specifically, the member for Menzies observed that 58 per cent of the people who attended that conference were union members. So this is where the mandate comes from—not from the Australian people; the mandate came from the ‘new sensation’ ALP national conference of 2004.
Labor state secretaries—and I have known a few of them in my time—were quick to get on the front foot. Those opposite need to be careful about defying the all-powerful Labor state secretaries. Some have tried to do that in the past and they have paid the price—they are no longer in this place. In fact, some leaders of the then opposition at the time tried to defy some state Labor secretaries. They also paid the price. The Labor state secretaries have clearly got their tentacles all over this place. They have a big red hotline to this place, just like they have to every other parliament controlled by the Labor Party in this country. What is their intention? Let us come to that. Their intention is quite clear. I must commend the minister, because he does make it quite clear in his speech. He says:

To ensure that there is no loophole for business to access a deduction for political donations, these amendments also remove general deductions for business taxpayers for contributions and gifts to political parties, members and candidates.

We know who that means. It means small business. Labor do not want to hear from small business in this place. They want to make it harder for the voice of small business to be heard. That is why they are putting up this bill. Small business in this country does not fit into the definition of ‘working families’ as adopted by those opposite. They are not part of that definition and, as a result, they are being left out in the cold.

I can tell those opposite that you will find no harder-working families than small business owners. They take risks for their own future and provide a future for others. Who are the others that they are providing that future for? It is those who are non-working families. Non-working families do not get talked about too much by those opposite in this place, non-working families who need jobs—there are still some. We want to make sure that small business continue to have jobs, as the previous government did for 11½ years with two million jobs.

The bill also goes further. It does not just deny small business the opportunity to get more involved in the political process, to have the right to be encouraged to be part of that political process. The bill actually goes a lot further than that. It denies individual taxpayers—mums and dads, working families, self-funded retirees and students working casual jobs—that opportunity. These are the people who are not signing the big cheques; they sign the little ones. Labor’s message to them is that they are not welcome at the table of political inclusion in this country on Labor’s watch. They will have to sit out their turn as long as this government is in place. But there is one exception for those mums and dads; there is an exception for self-funded retirees, I suppose, if they could possibly gain access to it; there is an exception for the students who work casual jobs—that is, if they want to give a tax-deductable donation and make sure it finds its way to the Labor Party; they can do that through their union, as the member for Stirling pointed out earlier.

These are the people that Labor believes are the dark hand of undue influence on our political system—mums and dads bidding for toaster ovens in RSL clubs, who ask for nothing in return but to support their local candidate and a cause they believe in. The Brian Burkes and their mates are not the problem. The unions who sold Currawong in Pittwater to back up their ‘bruvvers’ in Canberra and who funnelled millions through their books to support Labor at the last election are not the problem—and I look forward to reading about the return of the member for Lindsay on that front. Those sitting down to $100,000 dinners with Morris Iemma and Michael Costa are not looking for a tax deduction; they are looking for a lot more than that, and the Premier of New South Wales
and his ministers know how to give it to them. Those sitting around tables with Frank Sartor to do business are not the problem. It is the mums and dads bidding on toaster ovens in RSL clubs. They are the ones we have to deal with. These are the ‘great problems’ that have to be addressed.

This bill is about protecting the entrenched advantages of unions and, I might say also, big business and denying those same opportunities to mainstream Australians. The union movement already receives shelter from the Australian taxation system to bankroll the Labor Party at elections, as they did recently to the tune of $30 million. Dues and levies are deductable and unions do not pay tax on their political activities. The new measures extend the franchise for political inclusion for mainstream Australians. It is being done to balance up Labor’s ‘big money club’ of unions and big business.

Labor and the unions know that you can buy an election in this country. They have proven it twice in New South Wales and again, through the efforts of the ACTU and their union friends, at the last federal election.

In 1999, Labor and the coalition spent approximately $6.9 million, according to the Election Funding Authority of New South Wales, on the state election. In 2003, Labor changed the nature of political campaigns in this country forever and spent $13.9 million—from $6.9 million to $13.9 million—with $6.3 million spent on television advertising alone. That was four times more than the coalition on that occasion. In 2007—if you thought that was big—$16.9 million was spent, trebling the coalition spend. This type of imbalance undermines our most sacred democratic institution: our elections. And you do not raise $16.9 million in $1,500 licks. You do not do that by auctioning off toaster ovens at RSL clubs. You do it through the union movement and you do it by putting the bite on big business.

There is no bigger set of teeth than those of the New South Wales general secretaries, present and past, in putting the bite on big business when it comes to dealing with the state government in New South Wales. That is the heart and soul of Labor’s ‘big money club’, which is now running the Rudd Government. The same people who put Morris Iemma and Bob Carr into government in New South Wales put this government in place here in our nation’s capital. The Labor ‘money club’ has nothing at all to fear from this bill. This is not something that will keep them up at night worrying about how they may continue to have the squeeze put on them by Labor general secretaries and about how unions may continue unencumbered in doing exactly what they have done at several recent elections in this country.

The other offence of this bill is its pretension. Labor are once again parading around as pillars of virtue, the champions of election finance reform. That is who sit opposite: the champions, if you believe them, of election finance reform. But it is a con. It is a con like so many of these pillars of virtue that parade around. If Labor are serious about this issue, then let the self-proclaimed new father of Federation, the Prime Minister, pull the states into line on this issue and consider some genuine options for reform, which are about providing a fairer, more inclusive and more transparent system. Let him ask the ACTU—let him ask them and all the unions today—to detail the lists and level of support they received from their donors and supporters at the last election. Let him do that today if he is serious.

The second reading amendment the opposition has put forward requests that schedule 1 be referred to the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters. Let the joint standing committee consider these and other options. Let them look at how we could harmonise the laws between the states and the
Commonwealth through the Australian Electoral Commission. I remember in New South Wales, when I put this up to colleagues on the other side, they would say, ‘Oh, that has to be dealt with at a federal level.’ Now is the chance for the new father of Federation to bring that into being.

Let us consider some other serious options. The Leader of the Opposition in New South Wales also recently put forward a very good idea, which is very worthy of the attention of the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters, and that is the issue of expenditure caps—a cap on election expenditure, within a given time frame, in the lead-up to an election that applies at the candidate, party and third party and associated entity levels. The public would welcome, I am sure, some relief from the TV, radio and mail barrage they received, particularly from those opposite, during the last election. We should take a good look at whether that could work in this country. These are the matters that should be addressed by the joint standing committee and is why the amendment should be supported.

Free speech is important, but it would be hard to argue that the law of the jungle, as currently applies and as most vividly seen in recent New South Wales state elections, should be allowed to continue. We could hardly say it has produced a more edifying political contest. The cap proposal addresses a number of issues. I do not have time to go into them now, but I would be very happy to go into them when the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters has the opportunity, which it should, to review these issues. We need to get the balance right on these things and that is something the committee can look at.

This is a very serious issue. It has been shuffled off into the corner of a bill which contains some extremely worthy measures; it has been shuffled off into the corner on the pretence of an election commitment. You would have to be quicker than Andrew Ettingshausen to catch it in time—you would have to be a lot quicker than ET to catch this one as it went through. There has been this big, grand statement that it was an election commitment; but, no, the election commitment was a direct function of the change of heart imposed on those opposite by the ‘new sensation’ conference in 2004.

Recent elections in New South Wales and elsewhere show that this matter is getting completely out of hand. The smell in New South Wales is getting stronger every day. Politics in this country should not be about how much money you have to put behind your argument; it should be about the merit of that argument. The charade that has been put before this House should be put to an end and exposed for what it is: a cheap use of numbers to press the political advantage of the Labor Party. *(Time expired)*

Mr BOWEN (Prospect—Minister for Competition Policy and Consumer Affairs, and Assistant Treasurer) *(12.59 pm)*—I thank all honourable members who have contributed to this debate on the Tax Laws Amendment (2008 Measures No. 1) Bill 2008. I particularly thank the honourable member for Werriwa, who is a very regular contributor to tax laws amendment bills and always makes a very worthwhile contribution. We heard a lot in the last election campaign about the make-up of the Labor Party’s team. We saw advertisements saying 70 per cent were union officials and how the Labor Party was inexperienced and did not have the necessary skills. The Australian people passed judgement on that particular line of argument. I am particularly pleased that the member for Lindsay,
who has a great deal of expertise in taxation matters as a former tax lawyer, is in the House and I look forward to his contributions on these matters, and look forward to using him as a sounding board from time to time on particular policy options.

Firstly, I will deal with schedule 2. This is a schedule which meets with bipartisan support. It is a schedule which was originally introduced in a slightly different form by the previous government by the member for Dickson, who is at the table on the other side. It met with Labor Party support at that time. I appreciate the comments of the member for Dickson in his contribution. I join with him in extending my condolences to the Fiddimore family. I acknowledge the member for Dickson’s efforts when he held the role that I now hold in introducing this measure into the House. I also acknowledge the tireless efforts of the member for Grayndler, who campaigned on this, and knew Christina Fiddimore through his work as her local member. I know he joins with the House in extending our condolences. She was a mother, and I am sure she is very sorely missed. But she leaves a legacy in public policy terms, and that is something her family can take some pride in that in her dying days she campaigned for a change in the law, which this House will enact today. I note that Ms Fiddimore was roughly my age when she passed away and I think roughly the age of the member for Dickson and the member for Stirling—a particularly tragic death. I am sure the House all join with the member for Dickson and me in extending our commiserations and in supporting this change to the law, which is very important.

Perhaps, unsurprisingly, the majority of comments referred to schedule 1 of the bill—and I note and thank the members for Wentworth, Stirling, Dickson and Cook for their contributions. I cannot say I found them particularly enlightening but I thank them for their contributions. I will deal firstly with the remarks of the member for Wentworth. He pointed out that—as I wrote it down—democracy itself was at stake in this particular bill. I thought perhaps I would coin a phrase that the member for Wentworth once coined himself on his way into the chamber: ‘That was just a touch overdramatised.’ Perhaps it was just a little bit overblown because this is a very sensible measure.

It is a measure which the Labor Party campaigned on clearly. It was a clear part of the Labor Party’s election campaign. The previous government tried three times to increase the threshold on tax deductibility. They tried in 1998, and that particular measure lapsed when the 1998 election was called. They tried after the 1998 election and the Senate, which was then not in Liberal Party control, rejected that measure. And of course they tried again in 2006 and on that occasion, with control of the Senate, they succeeded. The Labor Party opposed those measures and campaigned at this last election with a clear policy of removing the tax deductibility of election donations.

The 2006 changes were part of a wider series of changes—I would not use the word ‘reforms’, because that has a positive connotation—which increased the disclosure threshold, for example, from $1,500 to $10,000, which meant effectively you could donate $10,000 to each state and territory entity as well as the federal entity, and you could donate $90,000 to a particularly party of your choosing in secret.

The member for Wentworth says, ‘Democracy is at stake.’ I did not hear him coming in here saying democracy was at stake when the previous government put that legislation through. I did not hear him saying: ‘That’s outrageous. We shouldn’t be giving one side an advantage over the other,’ when they put that little trick through. I did not
hear that sort of argument then. Now, in opposition: ‘We’re as pure as the white, driven snow. We are concerned about Western civilisation and democracy as we know it.’ That is somewhat of a disingenuous argument, and I think the Australian people will see it for what it is. The previous government also disenfranchised thousands of Australians when they changed the enrolment procedures for the election and in a very cynical way, which will be dealt with in due course by this government.

The Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters considered those changes. There was significant discussion about those changes and the issues were put on the public record. Accordingly, the government will not be accepting the opposition’s proposed amendment, but I will say this: when this measure goes to the other house, we will be referring it to the Senate Standing Committee on Economics for consideration. That is what happens: tax bills go to the Senate economics committee. The member for Stirling can refer it or I can refer it—I will refer it. The member for Stirling might not realise that that is where tax bills go: tax bills go to the economics committee. Tax laws amendment bills, as the member for Dickson would know very well, cover a wide range of issues, as this one does—lots of different schedules, a wide range of issues. The Senate economics committee always does a very thorough job in checking all the elements of the particular tax laws amendment bill under consideration, and that is what will happen this time.

I am not prepared to have this measure delayed while the opposition decides to have a talkfest on a matter that was clearly the Labor Party’s policy and which the Labor Party went to this election on, which the Labor Party has a mandate to do and which was discussed by the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters quite a bit the last term.

I note the member for Stirling indicated that the government was somehow being tricky by including this measure in line with other measures. The member for Stirling will come to learn that tax laws amendment bills cover a very wide range of matters all the time—some of which are controversial; some of which are non-controversial. Not once in my time as the shadow Assistant Treasurer did I come in and criticise the member for Dickson and say, ‘This shouldn’t be included. This is too controversial.’ Not once did I do that, because I knew it was within my power as a member of this House to move an amendment to take it out. It is within the power of any senator to move an amendment to take it out and to deal with it separately, if either house so chooses. That is not what we will be doing. I never once criticised the previous government for doing that and I am surprised that on his first bill the shadow Assistant Treasurer chooses to criticise us.

I note that the member for Stirling said that this measure fundamentally attacks the funding base of the Liberal-National Party. I think that is what we call a Freudian slip. This is why they are concerned—because they feel it is an attack on their fundraising base. The Labor Party clearly said that we do not believe that it is appropriate that the Australian taxpayers subsidise donations to political parties. The Australian taxpayers already subsidise political parties through the electoral funding procedures. They already provide money to political parties. Why should they provide more through tax deductions? The Labor Party came to that view and campaigned strongly on it. The opposition has a different view. I accept that and respect it, but let us not have members coming in here, like the member for Wentworth, saying this fundamentally undermines democracy, when the member for Stirling belled the cat...
and said this fundamentally attacks the Liberal Party-National Party funding base.

The member for Stirling also referred to ‘egregious hypocrisy’. There was a bit of egregious hypocrisy during this debate, but it was not what the member for Stirling was referring to. We heard about unions and how much they advertised during the last election campaign. The opposition did not quite get there but they got very close to saying tax deductibility of union fees should not continue, that union fees should not be tax deductible. That would be a very interesting debate, to hear the Liberal Party argue that what is a fundamental principle of tax law in this country and has been for a long time—that expenses relating to your employment are deductible—should cease. They did not quite get there. They got very close to doing it in estimates yesterday in the other place, and some honourable members on the other side got very close to doing it today. If they want to go down that road, I am more than happy to have that debate.

But this is where we get to egregious hypocrisy. We had all these complaints about union advertising and how much that gave the Labor Party an advantage in the recent election campaign. We did not hear any mention of government advertising. Maybe I missed something. I was working in my office during the debate—I had some meetings; I was not concentrating—but I do not think I heard a member on the other side talk about the $2 billion over 11 years in government advertising that this mob gave the Australian people. Talk about an unfair advantage for a political party! Talk about undermining the fundamental principles of democracy! Talk about giving one side an advantage over the other with taxpayers’ funds! Give me a break. If you are going to talk about egregious hypocrisy, look in the mirror. If you are going to talk about undermining democracy, look in the mirror. If you are going to talk about undermining the fundamental principle on which the Australian political system is based—a level playing field for both parties—look in the mirror.

This is what they did over 11 years: they took Australian taxpayers’ funds and pillaged them for their own political purposes. Let us not have this hypocrisy from the member for Wentworth, the member for Stirling and others about the undermining of democracy by this bill, because the Australian people know what they did with taxpayers’ funds—they were reminded every night on the television. Just before an election was called, you could not get through an ad break without two or three advertisements from the other side that were paid for by the Australian people—

Mr Kerr—By us.

Mr Bowen—by us, by every taxpayer in Australia. If they really want to be taken seriously on the matter of protecting democracy, if they really want to be taken seriously on the matter of providing a level playing field for both parties, then that is fine—the Liberal Party can write a cheque and repay the money. Give the money back that you took from the Australian people to fund your own election campaign. Egregious hypocrisy, thy name is the Liberal Party. They took taxpayers’ money and used it for their own political purposes. In most countries we would call that corruption. That is what it is called.

This is a very sensible measure. All the measures contained in this bill are sensible. I will refer schedule 1 to the Senate Standing Committee on Economics. They will hold hearings; people can make submissions. The Senate economics committee will do a thorough job, as they always do. I have no doubt that during this term, as the Labor Party fixes the legacy of the seriously lopsided electoral arrangements that the previous government left, there will be an opportunity for the Joint
Standing Committee on Electoral Matters to look at all these matters in some holistic manner, but there is no way that I am going to allow the opposition to delay this very important measure. By the way, this is a savings measure, so that is test No. 1 failed—they are opposing a savings measure. That is test No. 1. There will be a lot more to come over the next few months. The opposition do not support a $10 million savings measure. Let us see how they go with the many more savings measures which will be put before the House, particularly when the budget is brought down. I commend the bill to the House.

Question put:

That the words proposed to be omitted (Mr Keenan's amendment) stand part of the question.

The House divided. [1.18 pm]

(The Deputy Speaker—Mr S Sidebottom)

Ayes.............. 81

Noes.............. 61

Majority......... 20

AYES

Adams, D.G.H. Albanese, A.N.
Bevis, A.R. Bidgood, J.
Bird, S. Bowen, C.
Bradbury, D.J. Burke, A.E.
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.

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.
Downer, A.J.G. Dutton, P.C.
Farmer, P.F. Forrest, J.A.
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, L.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.
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.

Katter, R.C.
Kerr, D.J.C.
Livermore, K.F.
Marles, R.D.
McKew, M.
Melham, D.
Neal, B.J.
O’Connor, B.P.
Parke, M.
Plibersek, T.
Rague, B.B.
Ripoll, B.F.
Roxon, N.L.
Shorten, W.R.
Snowdon, W.E.
Swan, W.M.
Tanner, L.
Thomson, K.J.
Turnour, J.P.
Windsor, A.H.C.
Question agreed to.
Original question agreed to.
Bill read a second time.
Message from the Governor-General recommending appropriation announced.

Third Reading
Mr Bowen (Prospect—Minister for Competition Policy and Consumer Affairs, and Assistant Treasurer) (1.25 pm)—by leave—I move:
That this bill be now read a third time.
Question agreed to.
Bill read a third time.

INDIGENOUS EDUCATION (TARGETED ASSISTANCE) AMENDMENT (2008 MEASURES NO. 1) BILL 2008
Second Reading
Debate resumed from 14 February, on motion by Ms Gillard:
That this bill be now read a second time.

Dr Stone (Murray) (1.26 pm)—I rise to support the Indigenous Education (Targeted Assistance) Amendment (2008 Measures No. 1) Bill 2008. The government will bring forward through this bill the funding and recruitment of 50 of their promised 200 extra teachers to staff schools in the Northern Territory emergency response communities. Elementary education—in particular, in literacy, numeracy, English language and computer skills—is a critical requirement for any individual wanting to fully participate in Australian society and in our economy. For generations now many Indigenous Australians have not had that elementary education. Compared to other Australians, Indigenous Australians too often had lower school attendance and retention rates, and poorer quality education when they do go. Few Indigenous students have been able to access higher education and training compared to non-Indigenous Australians.

It is estimated that as many as 7½ thousand Indigenous school aged children in the Northern Territory do not go to school or preschool. But, ironically, in most communities the teachers, classrooms, chairs and desks would not be there to accommodate the children if they showed up tomorrow and started to attend regularly. Obviously this is not acceptable, and the Northern Territory government must do better.

Obviously any increase in teacher numbers to work in Indigenous communities is welcomed by the opposition. When in government, we did a great deal to improve Indigenous education, access and support, and we saw some improvements in outcomes. But we did not expect that the staffing problems in the emergency response communities would be solved with just 200 extra teachers over the next four years.

A recent Australian Education Union report called Education is the key: an education future for Indigenous communities in the Northern Territory estimated that with full attendance in schools, which was of course the aim of the intervention measures introduced by the John Howard government, the following additional staff would be required: 1,360 teachers, at a cost of $204 million per annum; 300 assistant teachers; 85 teacher assistants for preschool programs; 100 home liaison officers; and 100 Aboriginal and Islander education workers. The total operational cost for this additional staffing was estimated to be some $264 million per annum.

The opposition is concerned that what is proposed in this initiative is only a drop in the ocean and does not take into considera-
tion the additional resources for the incentives that will need to be offered to attract and retain qualified staff in the next four years. Even more significantly, this bill does not recognise the importance of building the Indigenous communities’ own professionally qualified teaching and related school workforce. The John Howard government saw this as a priority and designed and resourced programs to ensure more Indigenous teachers could step into the classroom and not only offer excellent professional service but also act as role models for up-and-coming future teachers amongst their young Indigenous pupils.

As I have said, we applaud the new government for joining us in acknowledging the importance of, and indeed the very urgent need for, improving educational opportunities and standards for Indigenous children in the Northern Territory—indeed, throughout Australia. But, as I say, we question both the adequacy of their response at this stage and their piecemeal approach. As the nation knows, the John Howard government responded to the shocking conditions affecting the lives of Indigenous Australians in the Northern Territory by declaring and resourcing the emergency response. A key element of this response was our determination to ensure the Northern Territory began to meet its responsibilities in providing adequate school infrastructure and teaching staff to accommodate all children of school age in these prescribed communities.

But we were also particularly concerned that members of the regional Indigenous communities had the opportunity to train and become qualified professional teachers, or assistant teachers or school student mentors, themselves. We wanted to end the long-established practice whereby the Northern Territory government was staffing—or, rather, understaffing—their schools on the cheap, exploiting the work of teachers aides, for example, who were not paid or supported as a part of the Northern Territory’s normal teaching or school support service. Instead, these Indigenous teachers aides were only paid a CDEP allowance, sometimes with a top-up, even when the individuals had been continuously working in the schools for years.

As part of the emergency response, we asked the Northern Territory government to transfer these teachers aides—and they were mostly Indigenous women—onto real salaries with genuine professional development opportunities and career paths. We gave the Northern Territory government some $30 million to help meet half the cost of transitioning these workers to real jobs and real salaries. I would like to know what has happened to these funds and this initiative under the new Labor government. This was an excellent initiative. I want to know: is it continuing—given that Minister Macklin has apparently changed her mind about the need to replace CDEP, the Indigenous work for the dole scheme, which sadly saw so many Indigenous Australians on sit-down money, with no prospect of a job, no training and no sense of purpose for the future? We aimed to replace CDEP with real job opportunities, real training, career prospects and, in particular, we targeted teachers aides in schools in the Northern Territory and saw that they needed special recognition. I note that the member for Lingiari is now sitting across the table from me, and he in particular would understand the very real needs of these Indigenous teachers aides who were exploited year after year while they were simply paid a CDEP allowance. I ask him to make sure that the Northern Territory government is doing what it promised the John Howard government under the emergency response.

We also had a number of other incentives in place to encourage and support the training of Indigenous teachers throughout Aus-
tralia. These programs included the National Indigenous Cadetship Project, which assisted Indigenous people to complete a degree to become qualified teachers. There was also the Indigenous Fellowship program, which provided financial and study support to assist Indigenous DEET employees to complete teaching degrees. And there was the Indigenous scholarship program which offered similar support for Indigenous teachers.

I hope these programs have not also been slashed by the razor gang, like so many programs aimed at rural and regional communities throughout Australia. I refer, of course, to things like apprenticeships in agriculture and horticulture, and the living away from home allowances, the cutting of which will disadvantage not only non-Indigenous rural and regional Australians but also, and particularly, those in Indigenous communities, who have great career prospects in the local pastoral industries and who need living away from home allowances because of the remoteness of many of their homes from training institutions. This government has slashed the funding for those programs, and I think it is sheer hypocrisy then to talk about any real concern for Indigenous Australians when such cuts have been made.

Our emergency response recognised the need for a comprehensive approach to the problems associated with school non-attendance and poor outcomes for Indigenous children. This included health checks for all children, to detect and treat, amongst other things, any hearing or sight problems which were holding back those young students. And we recognised that many Indigenous students, or those not attending school at all, were going hungry. So an important part of our comprehensive approach was the funding of the provision of hearty school breakfasts and lunches, to be prepared and supervised by community women, who were also being trained in nutrition and safe food handling. I would like to know what has happened to those programs. We have not heard much about them in the 90-odd days since Labor became the government.

So we in the opposition applaud the government’s recognition of this critical issue of ensuring that our young Indigenous Australians living in the Northern Territory emergency response communities have a better chance of a decent education. We ask, however, that the minister study all the elements of our response, including: the need for literacy and English language training for parents, and the need for them to become competent with computer use; the provision of adequate meals to students; follow-up health checks; decent accommodation for all teaching staff; and adequate classrooms. Most importantly, we ask that this government explore, and make sure we have, the creation of real opportunities for people in the Indigenous communities to become the qualified staff, as well as the support staff, in these and other schools in the future.

Finally, I strongly urge the Minister for Education and Minister for Employment and Workplace Relations to hold the Northern Territory government to account, and to monitor and measure their spending and their performance as they are given federal funds to do the job—a job that they have had responsibility for for a very long time and a job they should have been doing much better. Aboriginal Australians in the Northern Territory have always deserved a better chance in life, and I am pleased that this government is recognising our emergency response initiatives. But I ask them to adopt a comprehensive approach and to look a little harder at how limiting this bill appears to be.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr S Sidebottom)—I thank the member for Murray for her contribution and for her patience ear-
lier. I have pleasure in calling on the Minister for Defence Science and Personnel.

Mr SNOWDON (Lingiari—Minister for Defence Science and Personnel) (1.37 pm)—I congratulate you, Deputy Speaker Sidebot- 

The DEPUTY SPEAKER—Thank you.

Mr SNOWDON—I welcome the oppor-

tunity to speak on the Indigenous Education (Targeted Assistance) Amendment (2008 Measures No. 1) Bill 2008, which amends 

the Indigenous Education (Targeted Assistance) Act 2000 by appropriating $7.162 million of additional funding over the 2008 school year for the recruitment of 50 additional teachers as part of the Rudd Labor government’s commitment to provide $56.8 million of funding over the next four years for an additional 200 teachers in the Northern Territory. As the Minister for Education said in her second reading speech, there are an estimated 10,000 school aged children in communities affected by the Northern Terri-
tory emergency response. Of these, best es-

It may come as a surprise to the opposition, but, if they care to check Hansard, they will see that I have been talking about this issue for some years and saying that there are thousands of young Territorians who have no access to any educational opportunities to speak of. I estimated that there were around 5,000 of them over the age of 13 who had no access to any educational opportunity, including vocational education, nor any opportuni-

They will be able to tell my colleague about
the nature of events that have occurred in and around these communities and the need for investment to address disadvantage. Blame is not the way to deal with these issues; we have to deal in partnership with people and understand that treating people as objects will not get us the result we are after. The people who we are concerned about must be part of the solution; they must be partners in developing and agreeing upon the solution. We will not get improvements unless there is ownership at a local level. This goes for education as it goes for housing, health or any of the other indices that are used to portray the parlous state of Indigenous welfare and poverty in remote parts of Australia.

Frankly, that approach is important wherever people might be, whether they live in the bush at Ramingining or in Melbourne, Sydney or anywhere else in Australia—even in your own electorate, Mr Deputy Speaker. Things will not work unless there is ownership. We have to appreciate, as I have said on many occasions, that the notion that a one-size-fits-all approach will actually accomplish an outcome across the breadth of this nation is a folly. We need to be working with people at the local level. We need to understand that. Even a place like the Northern Territory has a great deal of diversity within it, and understanding that diversity is as important as making the money available.

It is about not only understanding the diversity but also understanding that, when we are talking about diversity in this context, we are talking about cultural difference. It is about understanding that, in the context of these communities in the Northern Territory, we are talking about people who by and large—and I said this with the greatest of respect to those who have had educational opportunities in the past—will have left school by the time they are in grade 8. By and large, they will have English as a second, third or even fourth language. English is not their first language and nor is it a priority for many; they converse with one another in their own languages. When we want to provide people with new educational opportunities, we have to appreciate cultural difference. We have to understand how to cross that cultural divide. We have to understand the cultural priorities that people might have. We have to understand the difficulties that come with teaching people concepts of which they have no knowledge or experience.

Just because we have a national curriculum, for example, that says we must have certain outcomes by year 3, year 5 or year 10, does not mean it is easy to achieve—in fact, in these communities it is very difficult. We have to appreciate in the first instance that what we are talking about is communities that are at the least bilingual and in most cases multilingual. The transfer of knowledge, giving people the capacity to understand what we are in fact wanting to do, is sometimes quite difficult. It is easy for us to stand here in this place and make pronouncements about what we want to achieve, but unless we go down and talk to those communities at the local level and understand their priorities, and understand the conditions in which they live, they will not get a positive outcome. That is a message that I think many governments have failed to appreciate.

But in this particular instance what we are talking about is the funding of 200 new teachers. As I said to my friend the member for Bonner, I worked as a school teacher in the Northern Territory for some years. I was involved in the Northern Territory Teachers Federation for some years. Indeed, I was fortunate enough to be engaged by the Australian National University to work with a great Australian, Herbert Cole ‘Nugget’ Coombs, to do an analysis of the impact of
government programs on traditional Aboriginal socialisation in the Northern Territory and in Central Australia in the late 1970s and early 1980s. So I have had a real opportunity to acquire some knowledge and get some depth of understanding of what might be required.

As I said earlier, schooling for the vast majority of Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory is a bilingual or multilingual environment. Literacy learning and formal schooling in many remote communities often, sadly, has a short history. In some cases this current generation may be only the first to have any experience of schooling. That sounds far-fetched but unfortunately it is true. So seeking parity, as I have explained, with mainstream English language national literacy and numeracy benchmarking is a real challenge. And the people who are going to confront that challenge are these 200 teachers and all the other teachers involved in providing educational services in these schools. It is a challenge. They will see that the environment in which they work will in most cases be extremely difficult. It will be unknown to many of them and they will be challenged by it. They will be charged with developing techniques for generating greater community participation and engagement in an affirmation of, an ownership of, the value of education. In these environments they will be trying to increase parental engagement and involvement with the school system and the education of children, because, as we know, Mr Deputy Speaker, the role of parents is vital—not only parents but, in the context of Indigenous communities, certainly in the Northern Territory, extended families, kin relations.

Everyone must accept the importance of this focus that we are placing upon these communities. But it goes hand in glove with other developments and investments that need to be made, because you will not get a successful educational outcome, regardless of how good, committed and professional the teaching staff might be—or even how committed the parents might be—if when the children go home they have 25 or 26 other people living in the same house. It is a critical issue. We need to engage and understand that, while we say we want an educational outcome, we have to go back and look at the other elements. We have to understand not only the need for the provision of the educational service itself—the provision of the classrooms, the provision of the housing—but also the connection between health, housing, education and indeed life. Unless we see those connections, and match those connections, and deal with those connections in an appropriate way, then as surely as I am standing here we will not get a successful outcome.

The really challenging part for many of the teachers who will go into these communities, and something that is unbelievably terrific in many respects, and really a great honour and a great privilege, is the opportunity to live amongst and with Aboriginal people and try to understand their language, storytelling and cultural programs—their world, their view of the world. It is difficult. But it is something that needs to be done. And as difficult as it might be for these teachers, whether they live in the Northern Territory, or indeed in the electorate of the member for Kalgoorlie, who is in the chamber, it is a great privilege. Invariably they will be taken into a community and they will be amongst people who are generous, who are abiding, who are caring and who by and large, despite all the bad press, are well motivated towards their families and particularly their children. They will appreciate that, in many of the places they will locate in, they will not have the rewards that exist in places like Canberra, Sydney or Melbourne, or indeed Orange, Bathurst, Townsville—or
any other major urban centre or even small town across Australia. They will be without the amenities that we see, if we live in this town for example, as just a fact of life. They might, if they are lucky, have access to ABC Radio. They might have access to a couple of television stations. They surely as not will not have access to a newspaper. They will often find it difficult to get internet connections. This of course goes to broader issues of government policy. They might find that the local police station is 100 kilometres or even more away. Unfortunately, as the intervention in the Northern Territory has highlighted, and as I know my friend from Kalgoorlie will confirm, they will find that in some places there is violence, there is alcohol abuse—and these sorts of things have to be dealt with.

When we think about these sorts of things, it is very easy for us to sit here and say we are going to provide the resources to put in place 200 more teachers. But the reality is very different. Unfortunately there are too few of us who have any really decent understanding or knowledge of the conditions and environments within which we are going to put these people and ask them to work. I think the events of last week have exposed us to the possibility that now we have a process which hopefully will lead both sides of this parliament, each of us individually and indeed collectively, to getting a greater and deeper appreciation and understanding of the issues involved so that we do not run off and make glib political statements or try and score political points off one another, because that will not produce the outcome that we are after. What we need to do is work in concert with one another.

For anyone who lives in a remote community, there will also be the bureaucratic challenges. We know—for those who are isolated and who live away from the centre—that decisions are made in Darwin or indeed in Canberra without any decent and proper understanding of what might be happening on the ground at the time. History is replete with examples of well-intentioned policies that had no applicability on the ground. We need to inform the centre from outside. When we are talking about policy development or policy implementation we go back to what I said at the outset and learn what is happening locally, understand the issues at a local level and be flexible about the application and development of policy.

There is a difficult challenge for these teachers, whether they are in the Northern Territory or in remote communities in South Australia, Queensland or Western Australia. I note the previous speaker talked about Indigenous staff. One of the ways in which we can get a better understanding of how to work with these communities is, of course, to engage locally and try and support the development of teachers at a local level. Engage people in those communities so they can acquire those skills, be remunerated properly and provide the assistance that we know they can provide within the classroom context. As well as providing for these Indigenous education workers, we must ensure that the additional teachers that we are referring to have the support to teach English oracy to the increased numbers of children who have languages other than English, and who are second- and third- and fourth-language speakers, and to help teachers cope with the high proportion of students in these communities with special needs such as hearing problems and behavioural issues.

We have to see this, as I said earlier, as a part of the whole problem and not just segmented. We need to combine all the elements of it if we are to get a balanced outcome. Importantly, also, the recruitment of these 200 teachers is a relevant issue. Whilst I have great admiration of first-year-out teachers, they do not have the experience that is
required in many of these communities. We need to provide the capacity and the resources for a balanced recruitment of mature teachers who can be expected to set stronger classroom management rules and styles and mentor less experienced ones. I have great pleasure in endorsing this legislation. There is great merit in us providing these 200 additional teachers for schools in the Northern Territory, but I fear it is just the start.

Mr HAASE (Kalgoorlie) (1.57 pm)—I realise that time is extremely limited. I rise to support the Indigenous Education (Targeted Assistance) Amendment (2008 Measures No. 1) Bill 2008. But, in supporting the bill, I wish to make a number of comments in relation to the motivation behind this initiative. Of course, it is a glorious initiative that we are all interested in and concerned with—that is, the improvement of the educational outcomes for populations of Indigenous communities. We need to close the gap that exists today between the educational standards of Indigenous children when they leave school, often at too early an age, and mainstream achievements in education. We value education as a part of our culture. The problem that exists and the justification for this particular initiative is that there is a huge gap. We justify our interest on the basis of value for education. But what I cannot say is that this value for education is shared across all sectors of the community.

So long as the education of Indigenous people is not appreciated by Indigenous parents, that gap will continue to exist. So we need, in the long term, to address this discrepancy. We need to engender in Aboriginal parents in remote communities a value of education and the outcomes that can be achieved with that education. Too often, parents in remote communities today do not value education because they see no worth for it. They see that it is a diversion for their children whilst they are within the community. They do not see children leaving education institutions and gaining jobs. They see them in the main today going onto CDEP. They do not value CDEP either because it is simply a substitute for other forms of welfare. There is no motivation for these children to go and get a job because there is very little experience of persons with employment within the communities. Too many times I go to remote communities, ask children that are doing secondary courses what they aspire to do with their lives and they tell me they are going to be just like dad and get on the CDEP.

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

QUESTIONS WITHOUT NOTICE

Economy

Dr NELSON (2.00 pm)—My question is to the Prime Minister. I refer the Prime Minister to reports that 50 Victorians every week are being hit by repossession notices because they cannot pay their mortgages. Considering that business confidence has slumped to its lowest level since the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, I ask the Prime Minister how Australian families can be confident that he and his Treasurer will keep our economy strong.

Mr RUDD—I thank the Leader of the Opposition for his question. I have seen those figures and they are disturbing for all of us. They are disturbing to working families right across Australia, who are under financial pressure. They are disturbing because of the burden which those working families have had to bear as a result of 11 interest rate rises in a row. As a result of that, when you combine it with the cost pressures on the family budget—the cost of groceries,
the cost of petrol, the cost of all those other things which everyone has to reconcile each week to make sure that they can pay the bills—it is getting increasingly tough out there.

The challenge for us lies at two levels. What are we going to do in terms of ensuring that we keep maximum downward pressure on inflation in order to ensure that we therefore have maximum downward pressure on interest rates? That, as I said at the beginning of this year, is the core challenge which the government faces—the fight against inflation. That is why every element of the government’s policy arsenal is deployed in that direction. It goes to what we do in terms of public demand through the budget; it goes to how we encourage private savings; it goes to what we do on the supply side of the economy, too, in skills and infrastructure and workforce participation.

Then you go specifically to housing itself. What can we as the government of Australia do to assist those who are out there in the housing market or wanting to be in the housing market in these difficult circumstances in which Australian families find themselves? The first measure we have embraced is to establish a federal department of housing which has its own minister.

Mr Hockey interjecting—

Mr Rudd—To take the interjection from the Manager of Opposition Business, it is important, and it is in direct response to the representations made to us by practically every peak industry body in this sector, including the Housing Industry Association, with whom we have consulted closely on this and related housing policy matters.

The second thing you can do, apart from bringing direct government ministerial focus on the housing challenge, is this: when it comes to our young people trying to enter the housing market for the first time, what can we do in practical terms to assist? That is why the Treasurer, together with the housing minister, has brought forward the submission for First Home Saver Accounts, and we are proud and pleased as a government to have that as an early measure being put forward by the government into the community to assist those young working families who have no ability to get into the market or to do so with any degree of financial comfort at this stage.

We have other elements of housing policy which we put out prior to the election and we will be honouring each element of those housing policy commitments. We want to ensure that the great Australian dream of young people having access to their own home remains alive and well. Hence why we have implemented these measures.

Dr Nelson—Mr Speaker, I raise a point of order. The question is about families who have mortgages today who are losing their homes. Isn’t the truth of it that the Prime Minister has no solution for increases in interest rates?

The Speaker—I suggest to the Leader of the Opposition that the first part of the point of order was within standing orders but he cannot then digress into a discussion of other matters.

Climate Change

Mr Cheeseman (2.04 pm)—My question is to the Prime Minister. Will the Prime Minister outline the threat that climate change poses to Australia’s future and what the government is doing in response?

Mr Rudd—I thank the member for Corangamite for his question. If we are looking out to the big economic challenges facing Australia, fighting the fight against inflation is one; second, making sure that we are doing whatever we can to boost long-term productivity growth in the economy; and, third, to do what we can also embrace on the over-
all, overarching challenge of climate change. Climate change is as much an economic threat as it is an environmental threat as it is long term a national security threat as well, unless we are capable of acting on it.

The government accepts the scientific evidence. The government accepts that the scientific evidence is in that climate change is real, it is happening, and no longer can this nation afford to be in any state of denial on something as fundamental as this. It does go to our long-term interests across the spectrum: economic, environmental and national security. And overall our view has long been, put in simple terms, that the costs of inaction on climate change are much greater than the costs of action.

If you look at some of the data, the Bureau of Meteorology reported that 2007 was the sixth warmest year on record in Australia. Furthermore, 16 of the last 18 years have been warmer than the long-term average in Australia. Again, the CSIRO recently projected that temperatures will rise another one to five degrees by 2070 depending on the level of carbon emissions in the coming decades. This means that we in this country and the world at large are facing the requirement for a global economic transformation to a low carbon economy of an order of magnitude that we have not seen since the great economic transformation of the Industrial Revolution.

This is a deep challenge not just for our country, Australia, but for the entire world. Failure to act is in fact consigning the future for our children to a very dismal destiny indeed. Without decisive action on climate change, we in this country will also be in the front line of the victims of climate change. Australia is the driest continent on the planet. As weather patterns change, this leaves us more vulnerable to impacts of climate change than other advanced economies.

Great national assets such as the Barrier Reef and Kakadu are affected. There are also the risks to our farming communities, who are already exposed, as well as water shortages which could in the future make vast tracts of Australia uninhabitable.

Australia must therefore seize the opportunity now to become a leader globally. In the transformation to a low-carbon energy economy, a low-carbon energy revolution is what is necessary. We have an opportunity to become world leaders when it comes to clean coal technologies. We have an opportunity to become world leaders when it comes to the proper deployment and use of renewable energies—what we do in the future with solar, wind, ocean tidal flows and other energy renewables. We have an opportunity to become world leaders when it comes to energy efficiency in our homes and our businesses, as well as in our factories and our mines. This is where we need to position Australia, not in a state of denial but out there ahead of the pack, because it is in our deep economic interest, our deep national interest, to do so.

This government took steps very early in its term to become not just a part of the global climate change problem but a part of the global climate change solution. On our first day, we ratified the Kyoto protocol. Within our first week or two, we delivered that instrument of ratification of the Kyoto protocol to the Secretary-General of the United Nations. And, within that conference at Bali, within that first week, we had the Australian Minister for Climate Change and Water there, not skulking at the edge of the conference, as has happened in previous times. The Australian Minister for Climate Change and Water, within two weeks of this government taking office, was there acting as a co-chair of the important final negotiating sessions of the conference—part of the action, part of the solution; not just a carping part of the problem. And, if there was an op-
opportunity for action on this, I simply pose this question to those opposite: why did it take 12 long years for those opposite to finally harness themselves into action? I ask them this question: do you support ratification of Kyoto now? Will you embrace the possibility of deratifying Kyoto? You do not have any clarity on that either. We in this government therefore are embracing a range of policy measures.

The SPEAKER—Order! The Prime Minister will resume his seat. Before giving the call to the member for Flinders, I hope it is not a point of order—or that he thinks he has been provoked—to make a statement. If he makes a statement—

Honourable members interjecting—

The SPEAKER—Order! As you know, there is no provision for the opposition to be asked questions. The Prime Minister was being given a little bit of slack, as leaders are, but that was out of order. So I call the member for Flinders on a point of order.

Mr Hunt—I come in peace, Mr Speaker!

The SPEAKER—We will be the judges of that.

Mr Hunt—Mr Speaker, on a point of order: I wish to raise two things. We are happy to respond to the Prime Minister with the simple answer of yes if he is—

The SPEAKER—Order! The honourable member will not resume his place; he will leave the chamber for one hour.

Mr Hockey—Mr Speaker, I raise a point of order. On previous occasions, when a minister at the dispatch box has asked of the opposition a question, the Speaker has provided some leniency to the opposition in addressing the question that has been asked. I just ask whether this is a policy change from the chair or—

The SPEAKER—The member for North Sydney will resume his seat. At some stage perhaps the member for North Sydney might bring his edition of *Practice* around to share, because I think that he is starting to stretch it a little bit. He knows that there is no provision for the opposition to be asked questions, and, quite frankly, I do not think that there is a need for slack at all, because that is an abuse of question time.

Mr Randall—Well, he abused it.

The SPEAKER—I acknowledge that, member for Canning, and it is not something that I encourage. The member for Flinders will leave the chamber for one hour under standing order 94(a).

The member for Flinders then left the chamber.

Mr Rudd—Climate change therefore warrants a whole-of-government response. We need to be acting globally, as we are doing through our Kyoto ratification process, having embarked on the Bali road map, which will conclude with the Copenhagen conference at the end of 2009. Another element of our comprehensive approach is the development of a national emissions trading scheme. Another element of our approach is to introduce a new, much more ambitious and nationally consistent renewable energy target—and, on top of that, to ensure that we have proper energy efficiency measures across the economy, encouraging people in their homes and elsewhere to do their bit when it comes to dealing with the challenge of climate change. And then there is mitigating those unavoidable impacts of climate change, including for the farming community. That is why we have a $130 million climate change in agriculture program out there at the moment.

Later today, Professor Garnaut will be delivering an interim report on his investigation into climate change. This goes directly to how we deal with the overall challenge of climate change into the future. Professor
Garnaut was commissioned because the previous government refused to commission any such report in order to assess properly the economic impacts of climate change. Together with my state colleagues, we commissioned this review last year, asking Professor Garnaut to look at the costs of climate change and to recommend medium- to long-term policy options for Australia, and that interim report will be produced today. The Garnaut review will be a valuable source of advice to the government.

Professor Garnaut has acknowledged the complexity of the economic impacts of climate change, and he has made clear that the release of his report is intended to encourage further debate across the Australian community. That is as it should be. We as the government encourage such debate, because climate change affects all of us. It affects our kids. It affects our farms. It affects our businesses. It affects the future of the country and the economy itself.

Mr Pyne—Mr Speaker, I raise a point of order. Under standing order 100, about questions, and the standing order with respect to relevance, standing order 104, I know that answers only need to be relevant to the question. But previous Speakers have ruled that they should also be timely and, if they go on for an extended period of time—and this one is now nine minutes long—the Speaker does indicate that they think that is too long and they try and get them to come back to the question or sit down. I ask you as Speaker what your policy will be with respect to the extended length of answers to questions, as this one has become.

The SPEAKER—Order! I will not be adding any further comments to those that I made earlier this week. The length of the answers perhaps is a problem to the chamber, but the chamber should be using the committee system, when it gets up and running, to deal with that. The question was in order; the answer is relevant to the question.

Mr Rudd—So the government looks forward to the release of Professor Garnaut’s interim report. It will inform the public debate. We encourage the nation to engage in that debate. The government, by the time the final version of the Garnaut report is produced later this year, will be taking advice from other sources as well—the Treasury and other agencies within government. It is important we get our long-term policy settings on climate change right—critical for the economy, critical for families, critical for the environment and critical for national security. After 12 years of inaction on the whole question of climate change, it is time that Australia led the international community on this question. It is time we had a government in this country which led the national debate on this question. That is what needs to be done now; that is what this government is now engaged in.

Economy

Mr Turnbull (2.15 pm)—My question is addressed to the Treasurer. I refer to the Treasurer’s warm endorsement of state governments’ financial management generally and their business enterprises in particular, and his assertion that their borrowings were being incurred to ‘invest in capital projects, not to fund recurrent outlays’. I also refer to the fact that over the last three years the New South Wales Labor government has ripped out of Sydney Water as tax and dividends 91 per cent of its entire profit before tax. Given the urgent need to invest in water infrastructure, does the Treasurer seriously contend that the management of Australia’s largest water utility as a cash cow is a model of sound financial management?

Mr Swan—I thank the member for his question. The member is continuing with this assertion that somehow the borrowings of
state government business enterprises are having an impact on inflation and therefore let them off the hook when it comes to seven interest rate rises in the last three years. Well, they are not going to get off the hook when it comes to their responsibility for high inflation—the highest elevated inflation in 16 years; seven interest rate rises in three years. It is absolutely essential that state governments invest in critical economic infrastructure—critical economic infrastructure such as water; critical economic infrastructure such as transport and ports. The previous government was simply—

Mr Hockey—Mr Speaker, I rise on a point of order. It was a very specific question about whether Sydney Water was borrowing money to pay a dividend to the New South Wales government rather than spending the money on infrastructure and whether the Treasurer agreed with it—a simple question. I draw attention to relevance.

The SPEAKER—Drawing on precedent, as I have been invited to do on other occasions, I believe that the Treasurer has been relevant, whether he is specific or not.

Mr SWAN—This government is determined to end the blame game when it comes to federal-state relations—absolutely determined to work to reform federal-state relations so we can put in place First World infrastructure that will put downward pressure on inflation and downward pressure on interest rates.

Climate Change

Mr NEUMANN (2.18 pm)—My question is to the Treasurer. Will the Treasurer outline for the House the reasons it is in Australia’s national economic interest for us to tackle climate change?

Mr SWAN—I thank the member for his question. As the Prime Minister was saying earlier, the costs of inaction on climate change are far greater than the costs of action. The previous government put this problem in the too-hard basket. Now they cannot even answer the simple question as to whether they will ratify Kyoto. What is the answer?

Opposition members interjecting—

The SPEAKER—Order! The Treasurer will resume his seat; the House will come to order! I think that the asking of questions across the chamber leads to this uproar. It does not justify the uproar, but it would assist if ministers desisted from that tactic.

Mr SWAN—Addressing climate change is a long-term growth strategy. It is very important that we put in place the policy settings to address climate change. From an economic perspective, climate change is a market failure. Emitters do not bear the full cost of their emissions, so we need a range of policies to reduce emissions. That is why the Treasury is engaging in climate change modelling. That is why there is independent academic analysis out there at the moment from Mr Garnaut. That is why there is other analysis here and abroad. Treasury’s climate change modelling is expected to be completed by mid-June and will be informed by a range of international and domestic experts. Finally this country has a government that is determined to address climate change.

Mr Pearce—Mr Speaker, could I ask the Treasurer to please table the document from which he was reading.

The SPEAKER—Was the Treasurer reading from a document?

Mr Swan—Yes, I was.

The SPEAKER—Is the document confidential?

Mr Swan—Yes, it is.

Superannuation

Mr KEENAN (2.21 pm)—My question is addressed to the Treasurer. Will the Treasurer rule out making any changes to the taxation
treatment of superannuation, as Labor promised prior to the last election?

Mr SWAN—Mr Speaker, we will keep all of our election commitments. We are the authors of superannuation in this country. We built the system. We are proud of it. And when it is affordable, we will build on it and improve it.

Climate Change

Mr SULLIVAN (2.22 pm)—My question is to the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and the Arts. Will the minister inform the House about actions the government is taking to help Australian schools tackle climate change?

Mr GARRETT—I thank the member for Longman for his question. The Australian government is committed to helping our schools take practical, concrete action to tackle climate change and to conserve precious water supplies. I am pleased to inform the House that from 1 July this year the government will roll out its commitments to make every one of Australia’s schools, public and private, a solar school. Under the Australian government’s $489 million National Solar Schools Program, every school in Australia will be eligible to apply for grants of up to $50,000 to install skylights, shade awnings and solar panels, in addition to rainwater tanks and solar hot water systems. This new program represents an additional $153 million on top of the existing green vouchers program. I have to say that it is far more flexible than the previous government’s program.

Under Labor’s plan, schools can choose the most effective way to meet their energy and water efficiency goals, but we are giving schools the option to participate in the existing green vouchers program or wait until Solar Schools is rolled out on 1 July this year. It is clear that many schools are choosing to wait for the more flexible and comprehensive National Solar Schools Program. I note that the member for Flinders, who regrettably is now absent from the chamber—a practice that other members, including the member for Mayo, seem to have undertaken—has been getting quite excited about the transition to Solar Schools. He accused the government of all manner of sins, of wasting water and electricity. He was quoted in the Melbourne Age on 28 December saying, ‘Potentially thousands of projects are now on hold.’ I want to assure the House, in the absence of the member for Flinders, that no projects are now on hold. The government has set a very clear transition timetable for the National Solar Schools Program.

Given the claim of the member for Flinders about projects being potentially on hold, I want to update the House briefly on the progress of the previous government’s program. There was a time last year when one of the most common sights in Australian schools was the member for Wentworth brandishing novelty green vouchers left, right and centre. You can find the paper trail on the member’s own website—a $50,000 voucher at a Far North Queensland school on 3 August, another voucher for a Brisbane school on 23 August, schools in Randwick, schools in Bondi, Rose Bay and Double Bay.

Mr Hockey—Mr Speaker, I rise on a point of order. We listened very carefully to the question. It did not ask for alternative policies. Therefore, I ask that you bring the minister back to the original question.

The SPEAKER—The question asked for the government’s actions to assist schools to tackle climate change. The minister will answer that question relevantly.

Mr GARRETT—Mr Speaker, there is no doubt that what I am about to say is relevant to that question. Naturally the government was keen to see how payments under the former government’s program were actually
delivered. Remember, this was a program that was put in place on 17 July last year. It turns out when we look at it that, between 17 July last year and the federal election in November, not one payment was delivered to a school under the green vouchers program. We had the member for Wentworth visiting schools throughout the country, issuing press release after press release, and how much money did schools actually receive?

The SPEAKER—The minister will not widen the answer into a debate about other matters from history. The question was about what the government is doing to tackle climate change.

Mr GARRETT—Not a single cent. The Rudd Labor government is actually delivering commitments. We will not be flying around Australia delivering novelty cheques to schools. We have a comprehensive program to deal with climate change, and Solar Schools is part of that comprehensive program. We want to enable Australian families to reduce their costs, reduce greenhouse gas emissions and be fair dinkum in their efforts to tackle climate change—efforts that this government profoundly supports.

Murray-Darling River System

Dr STONE (2.27 pm)—My question is also to the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and the Arts. Will the minister guarantee that no funds from the National Water Initiative will be diverted to a pipeline taking water from the Murray-Darling Basin to Melbourne?

Mr GARRETT—I thank the member for her question. I want to make it clear to the member that the government are not standing here making guarantees in response to speculative questions that the member puts to us in the House. I also want to make it clear—

Opposition members interjecting—

The SPEAKER—Order! The question has been asked. The minister is answering.

Mr GARRETT—I also want to make it clear that the government has a concrete policy position in place to deal with the issue of delivery of water: the National Water Initiative, which is bringing forward $400 million in terms of water delivery. Furthermore, the government is recognising something that the former government was unable to—that is, the profound connections between climate change, water and drought in the Australian community.

Australia-United States Alliance

Ms NEAL (2.28 pm)—My question is to the Minister for Foreign Affairs. Will the minister advise the House of the strength of Australia’s alliance with the United States?

Mr STEPHEN SMITH—I thank the member for Robertson for that question. It gives me the opportunity to again underline the fundamental importance and the long-term, enduring nature of the alliance relationship between Australia and the United States. This is an alliance which has served both nation-states well, an alliance forged by Labor Prime Minister John Curtin at a time of our greatest peril. It is an alliance which has lasted for over 50 years and is now part of Australia’s indispensable strategic, security and defence arrangements. The alliance transcends either governments in this nation or administrations in the United States, whether it is Labor or Liberal here or Democrat or Republican in the United States.

In January of this year I visited the United States. I met with Secretary of State Rice, my counterpart; Vice-President Cheney; and also the Secretary of Defense, Robert Gates. Both in our private exchanges and publicly, the Secretary of State and I underlined both Australia’s and the United States’s long-term, enduring commitment to the fundamental
and indispensable nature of our alliance relationship.

I also took the opportunity of informing the United States administration of our election commitment to withdraw our combat troops from Iraq by the middle of this year. That is now being done in close consultation with the United States and also with the United Kingdom. I have made the point, which is clear for all to see, that this carrying out of our election commitment in no way disturbs the fundamental nature of our alliance relationship. I also took the opportunity while I was in Washington to invite the Secretary of State to visit Perth and I was very pleased to be able to announce that she had indicated she would so do.

In terms of the ongoing business of the alliance, I am pleased to inform the House that in Canberra on Saturday, 23 February, Australia will formally host this year’s Australia-US Ministerial consultations, or the AUSMIN consultations as they are known. My colleague the Minister for Defence, Mr Fitzgibbon, and I will formally host the consultations on behalf of Australia and the Secretary of Defense, Mr Gates, and the Deputy Secretary of State, Mr Negroponte, will formally represent the United States. This is the first occasion since December 2006 that we have had the AUSMIN consultations. The December 2006 consultations were held in Washington and in November 2005 the last consultations were conducted in Australia.

The AUSMIN consultations are the primary vehicle for pursuing the ongoing strategic arrangements so far as our alliance is concerned. We exchange insights on regional and global strategic matters and on security challenges. We discuss furthering our security and defence cooperation arrangements. It also gives us the opportunity to discuss matters of interest, including our own area, the Asia-Pacific.

I also indicate that in the course of the AUSMIN consultations I will take the opportunity of reporting to Secretary of Defense Gates and Deputy Secretary of State Negroponte of my trip tomorrow to the Solomon Islands to have consultations with the Solomon Islands government, with Prime Minister Sikua and his ministers, and also to take part in the first ministerial forum review of the RAMSI operation, the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands, an important responsibility which Australia is only too happy to discharge in our area of the world.

Hospitals

Mr HOCKEY (2.32 pm)—My question is to the Minister for Health and Ageing: given the Prime Minister’s so-called commitment to greater transparency and accountability, will the minister release the full methodology for the distribution of health funds to the states to fix hospital waiting lists?

Ms ROXON—I thank the member for his question and I am pleased that I finally have one from the shadow minister for health. I was a bit fearful—when he was on holidays for months on end, did not issue a press release, did not do anything—that maybe I would not get a question on health at all.

Dr Nelson—Mr Speaker, I rise on a point of order. The minister is being quite inappropriate and could she please answer the question.

The SPEAKER—The minister has the call. She will answer the question.

Ms ROXON—I thank the member for his question. As he well knows, we are in a negotiation phase with the states over the healthcare agreements. We are having intensive negotiations over a range of extensive reforms—something that the shadow minister’s predecessor refused to do. I have no intention at all of flagging in this place or publicly the sort of funding that we
might in our negotiations be discussing with the states.

I can assure the member opposite that the one thing we will not be doing in our negotiations with the states is pulling a billion dollars out of public hospital funding. I have to wonder, particularly with this shadow minister, who spent so much of the last term in government doing over working people with Work Choices, whether he did not bother to take any time or pay any—

Mr Hartsuyker—Mr Speaker, I rise on a point of order on relevance. This is a question about the distribution of funds for health.

The SPEAKER—The minister will answer the question.

Ms ROXON—The point is the shadow minister—if he is not aware already, he will no doubt be aware soon—sat around a cabinet table that pulled a billion dollars out of public hospital funding and did not do anything about it, and we intend to fix that problem.

The SPEAKER—The member for North Sydney on a point of order.

Mr Hockey—No, Mr Speaker: I refer to section 101(b) of the standing orders and ask a supplementary question: when will the minister release the methodology on the money that is already being sent to the states?

The SPEAKER—I will not allow the supplementary question, consistent with guidelines set down by previous Speakers.

Mr Hockey—Mr Speaker, I rise on a point of order. I refer you to the practice of Speaker Halverson, which was based on—

Government members interjecting—

Mr Hockey—before they start laughing—a Labor Party controlled Privileges Committee recommendation in 1994 that there be supplementary questions after each question; the capacity for that to be held. That was the Labor Party’s policy in 1994. I ask whether you are in fact changing that policy as new Speaker—and it was Labor Party policy.

The SPEAKER—I thank the member for North Sydney for his lifeline in his last statement. I am not here to promote any party’s position on anything to do with the Speakership. If he is serious about the matter of supplementary questions, he will not enter into a contest in comedy with the chair. If he is harking back to something that Speaker Halverson attempted to do, he is aware of what happened after that. At this point in time, I am adopting the precedents of recent Speakers, but I lay down yet another challenge to the House: when the Procedure Committee gets underway, if the member for North Sydney believes that this is something on which those to my right have an attitude that now he can agree with, perhaps through that committee they might come up with an agreed position that will allow supplementary questions.

Mr Hockey—Mr Speaker, I rise on a point of order which refers to what you just said. Section 101(b) of the standing orders explicitly states that the Speaker, not the parliament, determines whether supplementary questions are allowed.

The SPEAKER—And the Speaker has on this occasion determined it. What I am suggesting is that, if that causes the membership of the House concern, the membership
of the House should deal with it through the processes of the parliament that are available.

**Economy**

Ms JACKSON (2.38 pm)—My question is to the Minister for Education, for Employment and Workplace Relations and for Social Inclusion. Will the Deputy Prime Minister inform the House of the steps the government is taking to respond to the skills challenge and reduce inflationary pressures in the economy?

Ms GILLARD—I thank the member for Hasluck for her question. Of course, she is a Western Australian in this place, and the first set of data I want to go to relates to Western Australia. The ABS data released yesterday shows that in Western Australia the wage price index for the private sector rose by 6.4 per cent for the year to December, well above the national average of 4.2 per cent. By industry, Australia-wide, the highest rates of increase in the wage price index over the year to the December quarter 2007 were in mining, an increase of 5.1 per cent, whereas wholesale trade saw the lowest increase, of 3.2 per cent. ABS average weekly earnings data released today tells the same story. There is continued strong growth in adult ordinary time earnings, by 4.7 per cent, in the year to November 2007, with large rises of 7.4 per cent in mining and 11.6 per cent in construction for the year to November 2007, and also large increases in property and business services and cultural and recreational services. Wage growth in full-time adult ordinary time earnings is highest in WA for the quarter.

All of these increases, of course, happened under the Liberal Party’s workplace relations system, Work Choices. It is no mystery, when we look at these figures, that wages growth is strongest in those industries and those parts of the country where skilled labour shortages are at their most acute. The Rudd Labor government knows that managing wage inflation is not about using Work Choices or Australian workplace agreements or individual statutory employment agreements of any nature to cut the pay and conditions for Australians who are most at risk at work. Rather, containing wage inflation is about having an enterprise based, decentralised workplace relations system, one of course that Labor is committed to. But it is also about tackling the underlying cause of this wage inflation, which is skills shortages and capacity constraints.

Unfortunately the Liberal Party engaged in 12 years of neglect of the skills agenda and allowed these skills shortages to become a critical problem. The lazy attitude of the Liberal Party was probably best summarised by the member for Goldstein, who was then the Minister for Vocational and Further Education, when he told an industry group last year:

… we’ve got a problem with skill shortage.

… … …

I mean we knew it was coming but it has arrived with a force.

… … …

And you know, it’s only going to get worse.

On tackling skills shortages in this country, the Liberal Party, like the member for Mayo, were out to lunch—not much verve being shown there, not much verve at all. Apparently it is okay for the Liberal Party to be out to lunch and for the member for Mayo to be out to lunch—

Mr HARTSUYKER—Mr Speaker, I rise on a point of order on relevance. The question clearly asked what the government is doing to meet the skills challenge and reduce inflationary pressures.

The SPEAKER—The Deputy Prime Minister will address the question.
Ms GILLARD—In order to describe what the government is doing, it is important to understand the dimension of the problem, and the problem has only become so acute because of 12 years of inaction, 12 years of being out to lunch on dealing with skills in this country. It is of no surprise to me that the member for Canning defends such conduct, defends everybody’s right to be out to lunch, with quotes like:

He’s—

the member for Mayo is—

exercising his right to lunch … with the time difference between Adelaide his ruminations might be a little bit out of clock.

Mr Speaker, I can tell you what is out of clock here. What is out of clock here is the out-of-touch, out-to-lunch Liberal Party. At least the member for Higgins comes to question time, even if he looks at seek.com.au for the entire duration!

Ms Julie Bishop—Mr Speaker, I rise on a point of order on relevance. You had already asked the Deputy Prime Minister to come back to the point, and she did not. I would ask you to direct her to come to the question.

The SPEAKER—The Deputy Prime Minister should not overly emphasise just one job but jobs in general.

Ms GILLARD—On the question of jobs in general, the Rudd Labor government is getting on with the job and we are getting on with the job of tackling the skills crisis in this country. We will do that by investing in 450,000 training places, with the first 20,000 of these training places to be delivered in April this year. Members in the House who have attended for question time, including the member for Mayo, might like to note that the choices about where these places go will be in those qualifications that are critical for our economy. We are of course going to be investing in a range of options for those who are seeking to upgrade their skills in order to change career. In that regard, people might want to note that, for those without a business background who are looking for a career change, the Mount Barker Campus of TAFE in Mayo offers an Advanced Diploma of Accounting, and, for those who seek to understand corporate governance, there is a Certificate IV in Business (Frontline Management).

The SPEAKER—Order! The Deputy Prime Minister will bring her answer to a close.

Ms GILLARD—I am just trying to help in terms of overcoming that AWB scandal. I am just trying to assist. Whilst just trying to assist on the question of investment in skills, can I say it is—

Honourable members interjecting—

The SPEAKER—Order! The Deputy Leader has the call. Conclude the answer.

Ms GILLARD—Thank you, Mr Speaker. It was a concerning look. It is never too late for anybody to upgrade their skills. It is not too late for this national government to be investing in skills. It is going to take time to overcome the skills crisis, but it is a vital part of our strategy to fight inflation and to build economic prosperity for this nation’s future.

Ms Julie Bishop—Mr Speaker, I rise on a point of order. The Deputy Prime Minister read every single word, including the ad libs, and I ask that she table the document from which she read every single word.

The SPEAKER—Was the Deputy Prime Minister reading from a document?

Ms GILLARD—From time to time. Certainly the ABS wages statistics—yes, I did read those.

The SPEAKER—Was the document confidential? If it is not confidential, the ABS data would have to be tabled.
Ms GILLARD—The document from which I was reading has confidential material, of course. I did read the ABS statistics.

Vocational Education and Training

Dr SOUTHCOTT (2.47 pm)—My question is addressed to the Prime Minister. Can the Prime Minister confirm that the government’s 2007 training policy, Skilling Australia for the Future, stated specifically on apprentices:

All subsidies and payments to employers and apprentices will be retained.

Why has the government broken this promise by removing the $800 from apprentices for their tool kits and the $1,000 from apprentices to assist with their fees?

Mr RUDD—I thank the honourable member for his question. Firstly, when it comes to the government’s pre-election commitments on skills, we will honour that commitment to the letter. Secondly, when it comes to a government which takes seriously the challenges of vocational education and training and apprenticeships across the country, that is core business for the new Australian government—not marginal business, as it was for the government which preceded us. If you had travelled as much as we have across the country and dealt with people suffering from shortages of skills and shortages of apprenticeships, and the state of trades training in our schools, you would reach the conclusion that policy is deficient. We will honour our commitments.

Regional Partnerships Program

Mr MARLES (2.48 pm)—My question is to the Minister for Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Local Government. Will the minister update the House on the government’s commitments to regional Australia in light of the Australian National Audit Office report on Regional Partnerships released last year?

Mr ALBANESE—I thank the member for Corio for his question. Indeed, the Australian National Audit Office report which came out last year, three volumes of it, has page after page indicating the failure of the National Party, in particular, to conduct its regional programs in an appropriate manner. What this documents, according to the Audit Office, is:

The manner in which the program has been administered over the three-year period to 30 June 2006 examined by ANAO had fallen short of an acceptable standard of public administration. That is an underestimation, because what this report showed was that in 2004, in a 51-minute spending spree just before they went into caretaker mode, the former parliamentary secretary, the former member for Dawson, approved 16 projects worth $3.3 million—16 projects in 51 minutes. But you would think maybe that the government of the time might have learnt something from that process. Upon coming to this job, I have been asking questions of my department about these processes, and what happened in the week before the 2007 election was called? They approved 32 Regional Partnerships projects—32 worth $5½ million. Not surprisingly, consistent with the way that they confused taxpayers’ funds with National Party funds, 28 of these projects were in National and Liberal Party seats.

In November 2007, the member for Lyons, the then minister, admitted that there was room for improvement, but he had already approved some $650,000 for projects in his own electorate that year. One-third of taxpayer funds went to projects in only 10 coalition electorates. The Audit Office found that they approved projects where no funding application was received. They fast-tracked projects, they fast-tracked assessments, when it suited them. No wonder that I am calling the Audit Office the ‘Nationals Audit Office’, because for report after report what
we find is an outrageous abuse of taxpayers’ funds. And what’s more, they wasted taxpayers’ funds on red tape. It cost 20¢ in every dollar just on administering this program.

We know that the community youth outreach centre in Wide Bay was funded in 2005 within one day of an application being lodged. In 2004 a health complex in Maranoa was funded within one day of an application being lodged. Then there is the Keith Seeds grant of $571,000. This was a grant paid to a commercial company for installing equipment. Even though the department recommended against funding this project not once but twice, the minister intervened to overturn that, and it was only later on that we found out that the local MP, the member for Barker, who wrote a letter of support for the application, was actually a shareholder in the company that got the grant.

Mr Hartsuyker—Mr Speaker, a point of order on relevance: the question referred to the ANAO report, not this long diatribe.

The SPEAKER—The minister is relevant.

Mr ALBANESE—It is all in the ‘National’s Audit Office’ report. There was $1.05 million—this is a beauty—paid to the Gunnedah ethanol plant. As regional development minister, I might want to go and have a look at this plant, but it is pretty hard because, although $1.05 million of the $1.2 million grant which was agreed in August 2004 has been paid, nothing has happened. There is no plant there. Over $1 million of taxpayers’ funds have been paid—and an application supported by the chief of staff to the then Leader of the National Party, even though he was not the relevant minister at the time. It goes on. There is example after example. In the interests of brevity we might roll them out two or three at a time, because this is very interesting reading and I recommend it to every member on both sides of the parliament. A Rudd Labor government is committed to proper funding for regional development programs—proper funding on the basis of proper consideration, not on the basis of short-term partisan political fixes by the National Party.

Mr Brian Burke

Mr PYNE (2.55 pm)—My question is to the Prime Minister. I refer the Prime Minister to his answer yesterday in relation to the release of emails between himself and Julian Grill concerning his relationship with Brian Burke. Will he ensure that, as his office checks his email records for correspondence of any nature with Brian Burke, Graham Edwards or Julian Grill in relation to the ‘journalists’ dinner’ on 12 December 2005 or other meetings with Brian Burke, he also makes available correspondence sent from his personal computer or other email accounts that he may have? Will he ensure that correspondence with Sarah Burke is also included in his email search?

Mr RUDD—I thank the honourable member for his question. I am advised that the office has conducted a comprehensive search and cannot find any such correspondence.

Economy

Mrs IRWIN (2.56 pm)—My question is to the Minister for Finance and Deregulation. Will the minister explain why it is necessary for government spending to be reduced? What steps is the government taking to ensure that government spending is reduced in the long term?

Mr TANNER—Yes, it is very definitely necessary to reduce government spending, because the former government left Australia with a serious inflation problem arising from years of neglect of Australia’s skills and infrastructure. As a result of facing this challenge, the Rudd government is committed to
delivering a budget surplus of at least 1½ per cent of GDP in the forthcoming financial year, and this will require major surgery. It will require major spending cuts to the budget. It means eliminating wasteful, inefficient and lower priority spending in order to ensure that we can get the inflation threat under control.

It is important to emphasise that that is only an immediate objective. Important though it is, it is only the initial objective for the government, because we are also very strongly committed to ensuring that we put in place longer term structural reforms to ensure that government spending can be reduced in the longer term also and, in particular, that taxpayers, that citizens, can get better value for money from their taxes into the future. We want to ensure that there will be much stricter processes applying to government spending in the future, and that is why we have put in place a strategic budget committee and that is why we will have the Expenditure Review Committee of Cabinet meeting all year round, not just in the pre-budget period. Significant spending decisions will have to go to the ERC, irrespective of the time of year. That is also why we will ensure that all spending decisions are considered either in the budget process or with genuine savings attached to those decisions.

These processes are being put in place to ensure that all government spending is subject to very tight, very rigorous scrutiny and that the waste and the slackness of recent years is not repeated. We are also putting in place a second stage of the razor gang exercise that will ensure that a more systemic examination, a more structural scrutiny, of government spending and government processes and service delivery will occur. That will report to the government towards the end of this year and will deliver further savings that will have significant long-term benefits to the budget. They include things like greater coordination of procurement, much greater rigour in IT spending and much greater rigour in the purchase of IT hardware and services. The total government spend on IT is roughly $6 billion per year. That is an awful lot of money. There are considerable problems in a number of areas with that because it has been so decentralised and there has been so little rigour and application of due process to it. The immediate job is to get government spending under control to ensure that we are putting downward pressure on inflation. The longer term task is to set Australia and the Australian economy up for the next 15 or 20 years to ensure that we get better value for money, lower taxes and better government services and that spending is directed to the highest priorities.

That means that spending discipline is not just going to be an occasional outburst in a sea of waste and profligacy. That means that we intend to make spending discipline a way of life for this government. We live in hope that the former government, the now opposition, will express a view on some of these questions. We would like to know: does the former government believe that we have an inflation problem in this country? Does the opposition believe that it is necessary to cut government spending? Does it agree with the proposition that we—

The SPEAKER—Order! The minister will not ask these questions across the table.

Mr TANNER—Mr Speaker, I point out that I was not asking a question. I was stating something I would like to know. I would like to know what the opposition thinks.

The SPEAKER—Minister, the direct construct does not matter. It is something that is verging well and truly on debating the question and is not actually aiding the control of the chamber.

Mr TANNER—The former government were only interested in the short term: next
week, next month, where they would be on
election night. That was the focus of gov-
ernment spending as far as they were con-
cerned. They were not prepared to set Aus-
tralia up—

Mr Hartsuyker—Mr Speaker, I rise on a
point of order: relevance. I ask you to draw
the minister back to the question.

The SPEAKER—The question asked
‘why’ and ‘what’, and I think that the minis-
ter is probably answering the ‘why’ part.

Mr Hartsuyker—Mr Speaker, I rise on a
point of order: relevance. I ask you to draw
the minister back to the question.

The SPEAKER—The question asked
‘why’ and ‘what’, and I think that the minis-
ter is probably answering the ‘why’ part.

The SPEAKER—The member for Hin-
kler cannot ask questions by interjecting.

Mr TANNER—The Rudd government
aims to address the long-term economic
challenge that this country faces, and a criti-
cal part of addressing that challenge is to set
a firm foundation for government spending
that delivers the maximum efficiency and the
maximum quality service to people who deal
with government departments—particularly
bodies like the Department of Human Ser-
vices, Centrelink and Medicare—and the
maximum quality output for government
spending on things like IT and wider pro-
curement. That is critical to ensuring that we
get longer term value for money, that we get
the best possible outcomes from government
spending and that it creates the space to do
the kind of investing in skills and infrastruc-
ture that our country so desperately needs to
put longer term downward pressure on infla-
tion. We are committed to the short-term task
of cutting government spending to put
downward pressure on inflation and tackle
the problem that the former government, the
now opposition, has left us. And we are
committed to the longer term task of building
the Australian economy for the working
families of this country so that their taxes
provide good value for money and we get
good economic outcomes in the longer term.

Australian Labor Party

Mr MORRISON (3.02 pm)—My ques-
tion is to the Prime Minister. Will the Prime
Minister provide all details to the House on
relationships between the Prime Minister,
ministers and parliamentary secretaries and
the person at the centre of the latest New
South Wales Labor Party corruption scandal,
Mr Joe Scimone?

Mr RUDD—I thank the honourable
member for his question. I have nothing fur-
ther to add to today’s newspaper reports.

Fuel Prices

Mr GIBBONS (3.03 pm)—I have a ques-
tion for the Assistant Treasurer. I ask: will
the minister outline to the House the impact
that high world oil prices are having on
working families and what measures the
government is taking to introduce more
transparency into the petrol industry?

Mr BOWEN—I do thank the honourable
member for Bendigo for his question. I can
report to the House that overnight the price
of the benchmark West Texas Intermediate
crude oil rose to a new high of $100.83 a
barrel. The price of the benchmark used for
Australian petrol purposes, the Singapore
Mogas 95, rose to $108.04 a barrel. The ba-
sis of this increase was speculation that
OPEC, at their meeting on 5 March, will cut
production. This development underlines the
importance of the government’s approach.

We have always said, in opposition and in
government, that when world oil prices are
so high it is important that there are extra
efforts to ensure transparency and competi-
tion in the Australian petrol market, to ensure
Australian motorists are not paying one cent
more than they need to at the bowser.

These increases have an effect on Aus-
tralian working families. As CommSec has
pointed out, the average Australian house-
hold is forking out $189.50 a month on pet-
rol, which is up $27 a month on the past
year. Just as concerning is the flow-on effect. Every good for sale in an Australian shop has transport as a component of its price. When petrol prices go up the transport component of those prices also goes up. So this has an inflationary effect. It is because of these impacts on working families and because of the impact on inflation that the government have taken the action that we have since the election: the issue of formal monitoring powers to the ACCC and the appointment of Australia’s first petrol commissioner. And that is why we recognise and say very clearly that there is more to do. We will continue to work with the ACCC and the petrol commissioner on the range of measures that the ACCC recommended for further consideration in their petrol report handed to the government in December.

When oil prices are so high it is particularly important that we ensure that there is no undue divergence between the price of oil in Singapore and the price of petrol in Australia. In other words, there will always be a difference between the price of oil in Singapore and the price of petrol in Australia because of production costs, refining costs, transport costs and profit margin. But it is important that the ACCC continues to monitor that divergence and ensures that it is no greater than could be justified by the market. This divergence, the ACCC tells me, is normally in the order of 60c a litre. From time to time they see this creeping up. This happened twice in the last two years.

Mr Dutton—Mr Speaker, I rise on a point of order. It is on relevance. The question really was going to: when and by how much will the petrol price come down in this country?

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

Mr Bowen—The ACCC advise me that normally the divergence is around 60c a litre but from time to time they see this creep up. They advise me that they have seen it rise to as much as 67c a litre. Under the previous government, the ACCC had one policy option to deal with this—begging. They would beg the petrol companies to give the Australian motorists a fair go. Honourable members might recall the newspaper article on the front page of the Daily Telegraph on 16 January 2007 in which the Chairman of the ACCC was reduced to begging the Australian oil companies to reduce their prices and give Australian motorists a fair go.

Under our government there is a different approach. The Chairman of the ACCC and the petrol commissioner actually have some powers. They are not reduced to asking, requesting and begging the petrol companies to explain. On 18 December, less than two weeks after the Rudd government were sworn in, we issued the ACCC with formal monitoring powers, as, during the election campaign, we had committed to do. I can report to the House that the ACCC has used those formal monitoring powers. Recently, when noticing an increase in the divergence between the price of oil in Singapore and the price of petrol in Australia, the commission utilised the powers given to it by the government under part 7A of the Trade Practices Act and wrote to the oil companies under its formal monitoring powers. The ACCC advises me that, after those formal monitoring powers were used, it found that the divergence disappeared and that the difference between the price of oil in Singapore and the price of petrol in Australia returned to usual and normal measures. This is the advice to me from Graeme Samuel, the Chairman of the ACCC.

The government has always said that there are no easy answers to this question. There are no magic bullets and no simple solutions. That is what we said in opposition and that is what we say in government. We also say that
we will do everything in our power to ensure there is transparency and competition in the Australian petrol market. We also say that we will not do what they did and ignore the problem. We also say that we will do what they never had the wit to do: we will use every measure in our power to ensure Australian working families get a fair go, that there is competition in the Australian petrol market and that it is not the comfortable oligopoly they let run for 11 years.

Australian Labor Party

Mr HOCKEY (3.10 pm)—My question is to the Prime Minister. Again, will the Prime Minister provide all details to the House on the relationship between the Prime Minister, his ministers—including the Minister for Trade—and parliamentary secretaries, and the person at the centre of the New South Wales Labor Party corruption scandal, Mr Joe Scimone?

Mr RUDD—I thank the Manager of Opposition Business for his question. I have nothing further to add to my previous answer.

Mr Hockey—Mr Speaker, to assist the Prime Minister, I seek leave to table the photo in today’s paper of the now Minister for Trade with Mr Scimone.

Leave not granted.

Indigenous Affairs

Mr HALE (3.11 pm)—My question is to the Prime Minister. Will the Prime Minister inform the House what steps the government is taking to close the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians?

Mr Tuckey interjecting—

The SPEAKER—Order! Has the member for O’Connor finished?

Mr Tuckey—Thank you, Mr Speaker.

The SPEAKER—The member for O’Connor should be very careful.

Mr RUDD—I thank the honourable member for his question. Last week’s apology here in this parliament to Indigenous people, to the stolen generation, was an important turning point in our nation’s history. I take this opportunity to personally thank the Leader of the Opposition for supporting that motion. In this parliament we used a solemn occasion to do something about setting to right some of the wrongs of the past. It provides us all, as the parliament of this country and as the government and the opposition, a way to carve out a new future for Indigenous Australians.

The future, from our side of the House, lies in the question: how do we now close the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians? How do we close the gap in terms of life expectancy? How do we close the gap in terms of infant and child mortality? How do we close the gap in education outcomes and employment outcomes? These are the critical benchmarks which will be applied to us as a government in the future, as to whether our policy settings succeeded or failed. It is important that we, therefore, as a government embrace every practical measure available to us to achieve those targets within the time frames that we have put clearly on the public record.

My colleagues in the cabinet and the ministry have been hard at work putting forward measures which are aimed explicitly at helping Indigenous communities in education and in other areas. For example, the Deputy Prime Minister and the Minister for Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs announced jointly last week funding for an extra 200 teachers for the Northern Territory. In my travels to the Northern Territory in recent months, we ran into teachers who had come to Darwin from remote communities. You cannot get past a single conversation without one of them raising with you: ‘We do not have enough teach-
ers in this community,’ or, ‘We do not have enough physical resources to ensure that kids are being taught in the school in our community, or enough housing for our teachers.’ It is time we began to act in these areas.

On top of that, the Minister for Health and Ageing announced funding of $50 million to reduce alcohol and substance abuse, given its impact on Indigenous families in particular. Furthermore, we have a commitment of $48 million to support welfare reform trials in Cape York communities.

Last week in the parliament I also announced my intention to establish a new joint policy commission on Indigenous housing, to be co-chaired by me and the Leader of the Opposition. I have had the opportunity now of sitting down on a couple of occasions with the Leader of the Opposition to begin discussing this through, and I look forward to those discussions, as I hope they will continue next week and the week after.

Together with the minister for Indigenous affairs, I will be visiting an Indigenous community tomorrow in New South Wales to begin looking at specific needs for Indigenous housing in those communities, as well as related questions concerning health, education and physical safety and security. I would also hope that, if discussions between the Leader of the Opposition and me come to a successful conclusion on the joint policy commission, into the future and the weeks ahead we will have an opportunity jointly to visit Indigenous communities around the country and to examine first-hand their particular housing needs.

This is simply a start to what will be an ambitious program of work on behalf of the government. We know that the aspirations of the nation and Indigenous people, which were raised as a consequence of the events in the parliament last week, now have to be met through a program of practical action. Targets have been set and time lines have been established. We now have to roll up our sleeves and do it. Tomorrow, the minister and I will begin that process. We hope in due season, if it is possible to reach conclusion and agreement between us on the shape, architecture, composition and precise operating arrangements for this joint policy commission on Indigenous housing, we will be able to do it conjointly into the future as well.

**Housing Affordability**

**Ms Ley** (3.15 pm)—My question is to the Minister for Housing, and it concerns the recently announced First Home Saver account. Can the minister explain to the House why a person earning $180,000 a year is entitled to a government co-contribution of $1,500 and a young single apprentice earning $10,000 a year is entitled to a government co-contribution of only $750?

**Ms Plibersek**—Thank you so much for the question. I think it is terrific that we have finally got a shadow minister for housing, given there was no minister for housing for 10 long years. The Rudd Labor government is the first government for more than a decade to pay any attention to the issues of affordability. We have committed to a national rental affordability scheme that will build 50,000 new, affordable rental properties.

**Mr Hartsuyker**—Mr Speaker, I rise on a point of order that goes to relevance. The question was about the differential eligibility of a person on $180,000 as opposed to an apprentice on $10,000.

**The Speaker**—We are 30 seconds into the answer. If the House will keep quiet, we will get to the answer.

**Mr Price**—Mr Speaker, I rise on a point of order. You invite members to take the points of order straightaway. Surely this House is setting world’s best practice in terms of the number of points of order raised...
on relevance. At what point do these points of order become frivolous?

The SPEAKER—Order! The minister has the call.

Ms PLIBERSEK—Our National Rental Affordability Scheme, our Housing Affordability Fund and, more recently, our First Home Saver account provide the best opportunity that young Australians have had to save for their first home. We have seen a declining proportion of young Australians becoming first home owners, because they simply cannot afford a deposit.

Mr Randall interjecting—

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

Ms PLIBERSEK—What happens when they cannot afford a deposit is that they borrow 95 per cent, 100 per cent, 105 per cent of the value of their homes. The first question today was about defaulting. In many circumstances, the reason that people are defaulting is that they have been forced to borrow too great a proportion of the value of their home.

Dr Nelson—Mr Speaker, I rise on a point of order that goes to relevance. The question was: why does a person on $180,000 a year get twice the benefit of a person on $10,000 a year?

The SPEAKER—Order! The Leader of the Opposition will resume his seat. The minister will continue with her response.

Ms PLIBERSEK—The benefits of the First Home Saver account reflect the same benefits that relate to superannuation. People on higher incomes benefit more from putting extra money into superannuation. The reason that we have introduced the First Home Saver account is that your government when in power did nothing for first home buyers. We saw a smaller proportion of young Australians buying their first homes than ever before, because you did nothing for housing affordability.

Mr Dutton—That is what happens when you listen to Swannie: you give stupid answers like that!

The SPEAKER—The member for Dickson is warned!

Aged Care

Ms ANNETTE ELLIS (3.20 pm)—My question is to the Minister for Ageing. I ask the minister: what is the latest information on police checks for people who are working in nursing homes?

Mrs ELLIOT—I thank the honourable member for Canberra for her question. The care and protection of Australia’s elderly is my main concern and my main focus as the Minister for Ageing. Can I remind the House that in Australia there are more than 2,870 accredited nursing homes and more than 116,000 people are employed as nurses, personal care workers and allied health workers. These people are the backbone of the aged care sector. They are indeed a very dedicated and committed workforce. However, the reality is that there is a tiny section of the community who prey upon the vulnerable and the frail. That is why I have instructed my department to look into the area of police checks for workers within the aged care sector.

On 1 March 2007, the previous government introduced a scheme in this regard; however, the guidelines need to be improved. This must happen. Currently staff in aged care facilities are required to have police checks if they have unsupervised access to residents. I want to toughen up these requirements. Police checks should apply to all staff in nursing homes—that is, people who have supervised or unsupervised access to the frail and aged. I have instructed the Department of Health and Ageing to review the guidelines for staff working with residents.
and to write to all the nursing homes to inform them of our intention to review the guidelines and to seek their views. We will also consult with relevant peak body organisations and relevant unions. Protecting our older Australians within nursing homes is a serious issue, and I hope to have the guidelines in place later this year. I know that there will be some people in the community who will oppose these stricter police checks, but I make no apologies to anybody for protecting older Australians.

**Aged Care**

**Mrs MAY** (3.22 pm)—My question is also addressed to the Minister for Ageing and is in relation to the Murwillumbah Nursing Home, which is in her electorate. Minister, given the fact that this home has failed so many accreditation standards that there is concern it should be closed down, why will you not release the inspection report to the residents and their families? Further, why does your department say Murwillumbah Nursing Home has three months to meet standards, yet the home itself says it has six months?

**Mrs ELLIOT**—I thank the member for McPherson for her question. This certainly is a major concern of mine when it comes to nursing homes right throughout our nation. The member highlighted issues in relation to the Murwillumbah Nursing Home. I am advised that from 14 to 18 January this year, the Aged Care Standards and Accreditation Agency conducted a review audit of the Murwillumbah Nursing Home and the agency found the home to be noncompliant with 14 of the 44 accreditation outcomes. I am committed to releasing those details to the residents, because my primary concern is for the welfare of older Australians. Whilst I am here, can I just say that what we saw for 11 years under the Howard government was a decline in investment in aged care—

**Ms Julie Bishop**—Mr Speaker, I rise on a point of order going to relevance.

**Mr Pyne**—When we took over it was a disgrace!

**The SPEAKER**—Order! The member for Sturt will stop interjecting. The Deputy Leader of the Opposition has the call.

**Ms Julie Bishop**—Mr Speaker, this was a specific question about the release of a report and the difference between a six-month accreditation period and a three-month accreditation period, and I ask you to direct the minister back to the question.

**The SPEAKER**—Orderly conduct of question time is not assisted by the ongoing interjections from the frontbench on my left. The minister will respond to the question.

**Mrs ELLIOT**—I thank the Deputy Leader of the Opposition for bringing up that point in relation to compliance and the time period, because it was under the Howard government that these procedures were put in place, when we saw a decline in investment in aged care and we saw massive workforce shortages. That is what we saw when they were in office.

**Government members interjecting**—

**The SPEAKER**—Order! It is a serious question and members will come to order.

**Mrs ELLIOT**—Thank you, Mr Speaker. Returning to the Murwillumbah Nursing Home, as I said, the situation there is simply not good enough. That is why I am pleased to tell the House that I will be releasing that information. But, as I was saying before, the legacy of previous Howard government ministers for ageing is a disgrace—a massive underinvestment, aged care bed shortages and one scandal after another.

**New South Wales and Queensland Floods**

**Mr BIDGOOD** (3.26 pm)—My question is to the Attorney-General. Will the Attorney-General update the House on the measures
that the government is taking to assist victims of the Queensland and New South Wales floods in their hour of need?

Mr McCLELLAND—I thank the member for his question and I note that this week he has been in his electorate inspecting the flood damage and assisting the people of his electorate. I also acknowledge the work of members from both sides of the House from northern New South Wales and Queensland, who have been great advocates for their local communities in this time of need. Responding to natural disasters requires a whole-of-government response and a whole-of-community response. I can assure members that the Commonwealth government is playing its part. For instance, on 18 January this year Emergency Management Australia arranged for our defence forces to transport portable flood barriers from New South Wales to Charleville and, on 27 January this year, Emergency Management Australia requested Defence Force assistance in the drop of fodder for stranded and starving cattle around Emerald. With the assistance of the Minister for Defence, two Black Hawk helicopters were engaged to undertake the task of dropping the fodder.

In terms of financial assistance, under the natural disaster relief and recovery arrangements, the Australian government is providing financial assistance to the governments of Queensland and New South Wales to assist them in coping with the disaster. That assistance includes measures such as alleviating personal hardship and distress, the provision of low-interest loans and assisting to restore public infrastructure damaged by floods. In terms of assistance to business, after the Prime Minister inspected flood areas, he announced a package for business. Under those arrangements, small business and primary producers will be entitled to grants of up to $5,000 and $25,000 respectively. As to tourism, again as a result of representations from local members from the affected areas, the Australian government has announced another $300,000, which is being matched by the government of New South Wales, for a tourism recovery package to assist the North Coast region of New South Wales. In addition, the government has provided over $3.3 million in flood mitigation measures in Charleville and Emerald.

As mentioned this week by the Prime Minister, in conjunction with my colleague the Minister for Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, the Australian government has activated the Australian Government Disaster Recovery Payment Scheme to assist flood-affected families by providing payments of $1,000 to adults and $400 for children. As the Prime Minister has said in remarks supported by the Leader of the Opposition, the Commonwealth government remains committed to working with local communities to respond to the immediate impact of the floods and to assist in their recovery from the longer term consequences.

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

QUESTIONS WITHOUT NOTICE: ADDITIONAL ANSWERS

Murray-Darling River System

Mr GARRETT (Kingsford Smith—Minister for the Environment, Heritage and the Arts) (3.30 pm)—Mr Speaker, I seek the indulgence of the chair to add to an answer.

The SPEAKER—The minister may proceed.

Mr GARRETT—I want to add to an answer provided earlier to a question from the member for Murray. The member sought a guarantee that no funds from the National Water Initiative would be diverted to a pipeline taking water from the Murray-Darling Basin to Melbourne—but the National Water
Initiative is not a funding program, as the member for Murray suggests. The Sugarloaf pipeline is fully funded by the Victorian government and, as such, the Commonwealth will not be contributing funds for the project.

QUESTIONS TO THE SPEAKER
Parliamentary Committees
Mr DANBY (3.31 pm)—Mr Speaker, I believe you share the appreciation of many members of this House for the work of parliamentary committees. The Notice Paper lists government members for these committees but not opposition members. Is there a problem at the Table Office or have the opposition failed to make any nominations for parliamentary committees?

The SPEAKER—The matter is in hand.

Days and Hours of Meeting
Mr ABBOTT (3.31 pm)—Mr Speaker, given that tomorrow is a parliamentary sitting day, has the Prime Minister sought leave of the House for his absence?

The SPEAKER—That is not a question for me and the record of the House is known to all.

Speaker’s Ruling
Mr BROADBENT (3.31 pm)—In reference to the member for Flinders, earlier in question time, I would like you to check the tape of the proceedings, because we were confused as to your instruction. It seemed to me that you clearly said—

The SPEAKER—The outcome was as I intended. If I misled the member for Flinders, I apologise. But he had stretched my tolerance, and I had given him an hour under 94(a).

PERSONAL EXPLANATIONS
Mr KATTER (Kennedy) (3.32 pm)—Mr Speaker, I wish to make a personal explanation.

Mr Speaker, claim to have been misrepresented?

Mr KATTER—Yes.

The SPEAKER—Please proceed.

Mr KATTER—The member for Wide Bay, in a speech to the House, claimed that it was factually wrong that he allowed grapes in from California. The member attended a meeting—

The SPEAKER—Order! The member must show where he has been personally misrepresented.

Mr KATTER—I am explaining, Mr Speaker, with all due respect. The Bulletin magazine is available for him to have a look at, and it actually said that at that time.

The SPEAKER—The member must explain where he has been misrepresented.

Mr KATTER—He said I was factually wrong. What I am saying is that the Bulletin magazine will prove that I am factually correct. Next, he claimed that I said that it was the High Court when it was the Federal Court. I refer him to the High Court of Australia, transcript No. 959, 18 November 2005—which is a High Court document. He further said that the High Court did not say that and that the Federal Court did not say that. I must read the actual extract from the transcript of the case.

Opposition members interjecting—

The SPEAKER—Order!

Mr KATTER—Mr Speaker, with all due respect, there are serious issues being raised.

The SPEAKER—The member may continue and should not debate but explain where he has been personally misrepresented.

Mr KATTER—that is correct, because he said I was incorrect in saying that the pork decision backed him up. This is an actual extract from the judgement in the case: ‘The
primary judge erred in applying a requirement for hard scientific data.' In other words, there was no requirement for hard scientific data.

The SPEAKER—The member cannot debate the issue.

Mr KATTER—There is no debate, Mr Speaker. I am simply pointing out that that was said, and there are the facts in the document.

The SPEAKER—Are there any further misrepresentations?

Mr KATTER—Yes, there are another two. He said there was no connection between himself and the citrus canker—I quote from the *Australian* newspaper. The headline is ‘Citrus bug firm ‘link’ to minister’, and I quote from the *Courier-Mail* newspaper—

The SPEAKER—The member for Kennedy will resume his seat. I call the Leader of the Nationals.

Mr Truss—Mr Speaker, this is an appalling abuse of personal explanations. The member spent his entire speech time criticising me. I responded in a speech to the chamber. I think that would be a more appropriate way for him to respond if he is determined to go on like this.

The SPEAKER—The member for Kennedy is, I hope, winding up his statement.

Mr KATTER—The member can take it up with the *Australian* newspaper and the *Courier-Mail*. I was quoting them. Finally, he claimed that I was incorrect on the suicide statistics. With all due respect, I did not think that this issue would be, or should have been, questioned in this place—

The SPEAKER—You will not debate the issue—

Mr KATTER—but since it has been, I must assert for everybody in this parliament—this is a quote from the CEO of beyondblue, Leonie Young—the most recent figures from beyondblue. The most recent figures show that ‘in Australia approximately one male farmer dies from suicide every four days’. I am not going to go into more depth about it. I am simply going to put that into the House record again.

The SPEAKER—The member will resume his seat.

Mr SECKER (Barker) (3.36 pm)—Mr Speaker, I wish to make a personal explanation.

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

Mr SECKER—Most grievously.

The SPEAKER—Please continue.

Mr SECKER—Today the Minister for Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Local Government claimed in parliament that I was a shareholder in Keith Seeds. My letter to the previous minister—and the public record—clearly shows that I was informing him that I had previously sold those shares to avoid any possible conflict of interest. Since being a member of parliament, I have never attended a shareholder meeting of that company or sent a representative or, indeed, received a dividend, because they are not those types of shares. Is this the grubby sort of behaviour—

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

Mr Hockey—Mr Speaker, I rise on a point of order. There was considerable latitude given to the member for Kennedy on a personal explanation and in that situation the member for Barker was giving a very direct response to a serious allegation—

The SPEAKER—Order! The member for North Sydney will resume his seat. I am not going to give latitude to members who, after making their personal explanation, then start to use terminology like ‘grubby government’. I really do not think you can compare
that with trying to control the member for Kennedy. They are two different matters. Quite frankly, I am appalled that that point of order was made.

Mr Albanese—Mr Speaker, on the point of order: the member for Barker made a slur across the chamber at something that is in an Australian National Audit Office report.

The SPEAKER—Order! The Leader of the House will resume his seat. I think we have dealt with it by the member for Barker cooperating by sitting down when he was extending his indulgence a bit too far.

Mr Hunt (Flinders) (3.39 pm)—Mr Speaker, I wish to make a personal explanation.

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

Mr Hunt—I do.

The SPEAKER—Please proceed.

Mr Hunt—Yesterday in question time the Prime Minister held up a letter from the Emerald Shire Council. I will quote the Hansard. He said it was ‘addressed to you know who: it is the member for Flinders’, so he clearly stated that it was addressed to me. A little investigation has revealed no such letter was addressed to me. The letter he held in his hand, which he had before him at the time, was clearly addressed to the minister for the environment. The statement was false, given that he had the very letter in his hand.

Mr Albanese—You were the parliamentary secretary!

Mr Hunt—No, no. This was the letter from this week which he had in his hands.

The SPEAKER—Order! The member for Flinders has the call. Ignore the interjections, Member for Flinders.

Mr Hunt—He also made a statement that there had been no correspondence in relation to the issue over the last three years.

I seek to table a letter from 29 January 2007 precisely in relation to this issue from me to the member for Maranoa, Bruce Scott.

The SPEAKER—Is leave granted? Leave is not granted.

Ms Grierson (Newcastle) (3.40 pm)—Mr Speaker, I wish to make a personal explanation.

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

Ms Grierson—Yes.

The SPEAKER—Please proceed.

Ms Grierson—In the chamber today the member for Paterson claimed, and I am referring to his green, that he was called on to secure the funding for the PET scanner Medicare licence at the Mater Hospital ‘because the Labor member for Newcastle had failed to adequately represent her community’. He claims he ‘fought and lobbied for the funding from the coalition government and secured $2 million as a priority’. The facts are that it was not until Labor’s commitment of 7 September last year to fund the Medicare licence for the PET scanner that Mr Baldwin and his government were shamed into a similar pledge on 21 September. The reality is that—

The SPEAKER—The honourable member has explained where she has been misrepresented. She will resume—

Ms Grierson—Mr Speaker, there is an important point. The Rudd government has actually put in $3½ million—

The SPEAKER—Order! The honourable member is debating the point. The honourable member will resume her seat.

QUESTIONS TO THE SPEAKER

Private Emails

Mr Lindsay (3.41 pm)—Mr Speaker, I seek your indulgence to ask you a question, because a matter has just come to my notice
which I believe requires your investigation. While the last procedures have been going on, I have just received two emails. I have two private, hidden email addresses on the parliamentary system that are not available to anybody publicly. I have received two emails, one in each inbox, from the office of the member for Jagajaga and I ask you: does the parliamentary system provide members’ hidden email addresses to the government?

The SPEAKER—I will investigate the matter raised by the honourable member for Herbert and give him a response as soon as I am able.

AUDITOR-GENERAL’S REPORTS
Report No. 23 of 2007-08

The SPEAKER (3.43 pm)—I present the Auditor-General’s Audit report No. 23 of 2007-08 entitled Performance audit: the management of cost recovery by selected regulators.

Ordered that the report be made a parliamentary paper.

DOCUMENTS

Mr ALBANESE (Grayndler—Leader of the House) (3.43 pm)—Documents are presented as listed in the schedule circulated to honourable members. Details of the documents will be recorded in the Votes and Proceedings and I move:

That the House take note of the following documents:

- Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet—Expenditure on travel by former Governors-General paid by the department for the period 1 January to 30 June 2007.

Debate (on motion by Mr Hockey) adjourned.

MINISTERIAL STATEMENTS

Review of Export Policies and Programs

Mr CREAN (Hotham—Minister for Trade) (3.45 pm)—by leave—I remind the House that during the election campaign Labor made a commitment that if elected to govern we would undertake a comprehensive review of all existing trade policies and programs, a review that would be aimed at positioning exporters and the nation to take maximum advantage of the ongoing resources boom but, more importantly, to develop the full export potential of all sectors of the economy, including agriculture, industrial goods and services.

I am pleased to announce to the parliament today the details of that review.
The review is essential because the previous government squandered the opportunity provided by the resources boom to position Australia for a sustainable economic future.

I remind the House also that under the last Labor government we got the trade and economic policy mix right.

We opened up the economy, we floated the Australian dollar, we cut tariffs, we deregulated the financial sector, we introduced wage restraint through the accord and we also locked in, through that accord mechanism, the low inflation and low interest rate environment that until recently has been experienced in this country. We introduced national superannuation, the greatest intergenerational policy reform of this country in retirement income reform, we developed national competition policy, significant cuts to company and personal tax and greater independence of the Reserve Bank.

All of those measures, which are integrated components aimed at improving our export performance amongst other things, achieved strong productivity growth in the 1980s and 1990s. In fact, as a result of the deregulated wages system and enterprise bargaining that we introduced under the accord, this country experienced the greatest step-up in productivity in the history of this country. What we did through that mechanism by linking wages to productivity, linking it to enterprise and linking it to our export sector contributed much to the double-digit growth in Australia's exports and to lowering inflation.

In contrast—because this is the whole point of those opposite who say that they presided over good export growth under their watch—under the last six years of the Howard government, despite a resources boom, total export revenues grew at an annual average rate of only 5.8 per cent compared with 10.7 per cent in the 18 years following the float of the dollar in 1983. Goods exports grew at an average annual rate of 6.4 per cent compared with an average growth of 10.3 per cent since 1983. Service exports grew at about a third of the long-term average, and manufacturing exports collapsed under the government in the last six years, growing only three per cent compared with 13 per cent since 1983.

What did all this result in? It resulted in a trade deficit for more than five consecutive years and a trade deficit for the December quarter 2007—their parting gift as they went out of office, rejected by the Australian public—of $6.9 billion, which is the worst quarterly trade deficit on record. It resulted in 69 consecutive months of goods and services trade deficits; a current account deficit at record levels, around six per cent of GDP; soaring foreign debt of $554 billion in 2006-07; and net exports making a positive contribution to Australia's economic growth in only two of the 11 years that that government was in office.

Contrast that with when Labor was in office for 13 years. Net exports made a positive contribution to growth in 10 of those 13 years without the resources boom compared with the Howard government's failure with a resources boom. Despite the strongest growth in the world economy in more than 20 years, the value of Australian exports actually slowed under the Howard government, particularly in recent years. Export values grew by four per cent in 2007 compared with 18 per cent in 2006 and 15 per cent in 2005.

That is the appalling trade performance that we inherited—the trade performance bequeathed by the Howard government to this nation.

The former government believed that it could coast along on a resources wave. It squandered the opportunity presented by that resources boom. It failed to invest in the
drivers of economic growth, in particular in skills, innovation and infrastructure.

It failed to develop an integrated trade and economic policy to secure our future beyond the resources boom.

It is a sorry story and, like so much of the Howard legacy, a squandered opportunity.

It is time to take action to restore Australia’s trade performance to ensure it once again becomes a contributor to economic growth and sustains us beyond the resources boom.

The Rudd government is committed to a new trade policy to restore Australia’s level of productivity, international competitiveness and export growth. This will be achieved in the context of the twin pillars approach for sustainable economic growth—that is, trade liberalisation at the border to be complemented by economic reform behind the border to maximise opportunities for our export sector.

In this House on Monday in response to a question I outlined why the first pillar is so important—that is the pursuit of trade liberalisation at the border via the WTO Doha development round.

It is because over the past five years—and without a Doha conclusion—world trade has grown at twice the rate of growth in world output.

The message is clear: if we can get growth in world markets through the trade liberalisation agenda we will create the environment for sustained economic growth.

That is important not only for Australia but for the international economy.

We are at a time when there is considerable uncertainty about the direction of the global economy.

However, a successful outcome to the Doha development round—and I repeat what I said on Monday that it will be terribly difficult but, in my judgement, it is doable—will provide a much needed confidence boost and help to restore some certainty to the current uncertain outlook.

Labor will seek to complement trade liberalisation gains derived from the multilateral process at the regional level via APEC, ASEAN Plus Six and other fora that may arise—that we refer to as WTO Plus.

At the bilateral level comprehensive FTAs can then enhance the liberalisation measures further—that is, WTO Plus Plus.

So the Rudd Labor government has recalibrated Australia’s trade liberalisation policy back to where it should be for this middle sized country.

The Howard government, when it was in office, reversed the order. It put its eggs in the basket of free trade agreements. It put all its eggs in the basket of the FTAs, squandering the opportunity to achieve substantial gains for Australian industry by making a real commitment to the Doha round. By way of interpolation, I hear that the Leader of the National Party involved sold out his constituency by agreeing to sugar being excluded from the US-Australia Free Trade Agreement. What sort of negotiating ineptness was that! The previous government also squandered the opportunity provided by Australia’s unique position, as chair of the Cairns Group, to be front and centre in the world trade talks. Instead, it was prepared to take a back seat and let others squeeze Australia out.

So this government will make the Doha negotiations our central trade priority—as they should be—but complemented at the regional and bilateral level by the other liberalisation fora.

It will be through this framework that we will achieve the best commercial outcomes for Australia’s agriculture, industrial goods sector and services sectors.
The second pillar to which I refer is trade liberalisation behind the border.

There is no point in getting market access if you are not competitive and productive enough to take advantage of it.

This is where the trade policy review will play such an important role.

The review represents the government’s determination to develop an integrated approach to trade policy and ensure it is part of the broader economic policy settings.

That is education, skills training, industry, innovation infrastructure and IT policy are all critical in complementing our trade policy to ensure that behind our border we are maximising the gains from trade liberalisation and taking full advantage of the access at the border.

We must aim for all arms of policy to work together to drive productivity growth, enhance our level of international competitiveness and improve our export performance.

This is vital to ensure our trade performance once again becomes a strong contributor to Australia’s economic performance—a positive contributor also to sustaining our economic growth beyond the resources boom.

The government wants the review to assess the challenges and develop a strategic, whole-of-government approach to advancing Australia’s international economic and commercial interests.

The review will bear in mind the government’s desire to optimise the overall economic performance of the Australian economy through productivity gains and deeper integration of the Australian economy and business with the global economy.

I am delighted that Mr David Mortimer AO, Chair of Leighton Holdings and Australia Post, has agreed to chair the review.

Mr Mortimer has a strong record of achievement in business and is ideally suited to lead the review.

I am also delighted that Dr John Edwards, Chief Economist of HSBC Australia, will work with David Mortimer on the review.

Dr Edwards has worked and written extensively on economic and trade policy issues including on ways and measures required to improve.

The review will examine export policy and programs across all government portfolios and agencies and their linkages to state and territory programs. It will cover goods, services and investment.

The review will make an assessment of the challenges and opportunities currently facing Australian exporters and international business. In making this assessment, the review will examine:

(a) Australia’s export performance over the past two decades, identifying factors that are inhibiting export performance, domestic productivity, productive investment flows and international competitiveness;
(b) the extent to which Australia’s trade policies adequately reflect Australia’s interests in the contemporary global economy; and
(c) the coverage, coherence and effectiveness of current trade development services and programs, and the extent to which they adequately address the needs of exporters, importers and investors.

The review will make recommendations on any of the issues identified, including:

(a) measures required to improve export performance, including the relationship with domestic policy settings and productivity-enhancing policies;

(b) measures which will improve the capacity of new and existing exporters to expand their export base and take optimal advantage of the expansion and evolution in international trade and investment;
(c) measures to encourage more small businesses to begin exporting or to expand their export operations;
(d) measures to promote an improved services export performance, including financial services;
(e) policies and programs that will promote high value added exports, enhanced levels of productivity and improved international competitiveness;
(f) measures to expand market access opportunities for Australian exporters of goods and services; and
(g) measures to promote a more concerted and coordinated national approach to lifting export performance.

Under existing legislation, the government is required to initiate a review of the Export Market Development Grants (EMDG) Scheme by 2010.

Given the integral role of the EMDG scheme in the current mix of export policies and programs, I am proposing that the EMDG review be brought forward and be undertaken as part of this broader review.

The overall review will consult widely with stakeholders and will be calling for public submissions.

The secretariat supporting the review panel will be based in the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade.

Given the whole-of-government approach that the review will be taking, the secretariat will draw on expertise from other government departments.

The review will be completed by 31 August 2008 as outlined in the terms of reference.

A separate research project on Australia’s approach to free trade agreements will be undertaken in parallel with the export policies and programs review, and its results will be incorporated in the review’s final report.

This research will analyse Australia’s most recent free trade agreements (FTAs) to assess their net benefits and include a comparative analysis of Australia’s FTAs with those concluded by other countries.

The research will ensure that any future FTAs strengthen the WTO multilateral trade system, including through the development of benchmarks for any future agreements Australia may negotiate, and will provide greater benefits for Australian exporters.

The research on FTAs will be conducted under the leadership of a reference group of experts, specifically:
- Professor Kym Anderson, Professor of Economics at the University of Adelaide;
- Dr Andrew Stoler, Executive Director of the Institute for International Trade;
- Peter Gallagher, Managing Director of Inquit, and formerly CEO of the Australian Dairy Council; and
- Dr Nicholas Gruen, CEO of Lateral Economics.

I said at the outset that the previous government bequeathed to Australia what may well be Australia’s worst trade performance ever recorded for an Australian government, a trading performance where net exports detracted from economic growth for nine of their 11½ years.

And that was at a time of historically high levels of global economic growth and a resources boom driven in large part by China and India.

It is a sad indictment of the Howard years that despite some of the most propitious times in recent history they were not able to get our trading performance onto a more sustainable footing.

Once again, it takes a Labor government to provide the strategic injection and frame-
work to maximise the global opportunities for Australian business.

The review will build on the twin-pillars approach to sustainable economic growth.

And it will provide advice on the development of a comprehensive, integrated approach to trade and economic policy that Australia now needs for the 21st century. I commend the statement to the House. I seek leave to move a motion in relation to the statement.

Leave granted.

Mr CREAN—I move:

That so much of the standing orders be suspended as would prevent the Member for Groom speaking for a period not exceeding 19 minutes.

Question agreed to.

Mr IAN MACFARLANE (Groom) (4.04 pm)—I shall not take all the 19 minutes generously allocated by the trade minister, for there is other business which this House needs to deal with this afternoon, bearing in mind that tomorrow is an RDO for the ministers on the other side.

It is obvious from the diatribe delivered by the minister for trade that he has spent little time both as shadow Treasurer and as shadow trade minister actually getting an understanding of the economy and of how economic investment and return cycles actually work. I am also alarmed that, as the minister for trade, he continues to talk down, as does his leader, the role of the resources sector in the long term in underpinning Australia’s economy and ensuring our export growth. The thing that disappoints me the most, though, is that after 19 minutes we are none the wiser as to what Labor in government will do for trade policy.

After three months in government, we have at long last an announcement today by the trade minister. Australian exporters of agricultural, industrial and service products, along with the coalition, have been waiting to see the detail of the trade minister’s review of export policies and programs—essentially what he terms his trade review. He banged on about this trade review in opposition, he banged on about it during the election campaign and yet today, instead of a bang, we have an announcement that can only be described as a dull thud.

Why are we not surprised? Since last year, the Minister for Trade has been talking down the performance of Australia’s exporters, warning of the need for a review to determine their future. That is what Labor and the Minister for Trade do best: talk down industries, talk down companies and talk down achievement, because that is what they know best, in the same way that the Treasurer and the Minister for Foreign Affairs talk down the investment opportunities in Australia when they are overseas. Far from the future direction that will provide impetus and leverage for Australian exporters and lead to more jobs for Australian working families, all we have from the trade minister and the government he represents is a back-to-the-future approach to trade policy that will only serve to create a sense of uncertainty amongst Australian exporters as to what they can expect next from this smoke and mirrors government.

Let us look more closely at exactly what the trade minister has announced today. Surprise, surprise! He has announced yet another review—not a plan for Australia’s exporters to harness, not a policy to enable Australian businesses to leverage global trade opportunities, but merely a review. It will be a review to consult and tell him the knowledge which he should have harnessed in his two years as shadow minister for trade. The truth is that the last couple of years were spent by the now trade minister taking his eyes off trade policy while he was all consumed in defending his own political sur-
vival and fighting tooth and nail for preselection. As a result, instead of a forward-looking agenda we have a backward-looking analysis.

The trade minister’s press release today says that the review will examine Australia’s trade performance over the past two decades for factors that affected export growth. This is all well and good for a historical wrap-up of Australia’s trade performance, but where does it leave exporters looking to navigate the exporting terrain of the future? The Labor Party and the trade minister should be looking forward to building exports for the coming two decades, not spending the next six months looking back at the past. Nostalgic navel gazing and historical revisionism, which they involve themselves in on virtually every issue, will not help Australian exporters.

The trade minister has played down, then up and then around the role of bilateral and multilateral agreements in Australia’s international trade relationships, taking one up at the expense of another, depending on the audience, on where he was at the time or on the mood he was in. It should be remembered that, while he has found new enthusiasm for Doha, the now Prime Minister in 2006 took a disturbingly defeatist attitude, proclaiming that the Doha Round of the World Trade Organisation talks was as dead as a dodo. How can Australians trust the Labor Party to successfully negotiate multilateral agreements, given that during their 13 years in government they could not even successfully complete a bilateral agreement? Nonetheless, today we see multilateral agreements are in favour, and with terms of reference indicating that the recommendations made must be mindful of the government’s support for the multilateral trade system.

So where does this leave Australia’s successful bilateral free trade agreements negotiated under the coalition government? Under our government, free trade agreements were successfully negotiated with Thailand, the United States and Singapore. Negotiations to include two of our biggest trading partners, China and Japan, were also begun. These agreements have already delivered real benefits to Australian exporters, opening up new markets and opportunities. FTAs offer the prospect of quicker and more extensive gains in our trading relationships with individual countries or groups of countries. The proliferation of FTAs around the world means that to secure and protect Australia’s competitiveness in our key export markets we need to negotiate FTAs as well. We must, in fact, continue those negotiations now—not after August; not after a six-month hiatus. At the same time, we need to remember that of the 151 members of the WTO only one, Mongolia, a country I visited as a minister, is not engaged in an FTA.

What the coalition asks today on behalf of Australian exporters is whether the trade minister can guarantee that the gains made under FTAs will not be thrown away. Can he guarantee that the hard fought gains in bilateral FTAs will not be chipped away and watered down to appease minority interests of left-wing cabinet colleagues or unions? We have already seen the trade minister cut down to size as the Minister for Finance and Deregulation’s razor gang slashed funding for negotiations on both the Australia-Japan and Australia-China free trade agreements. Furthermore, the trade minister presided over the axing, in his own department, of the senior agricultural negotiator position and replaced it with a much more junior position—just another sign that the trade minister and the Labor government are prepared to cut Australian farmers adrift. Labor has shown that it has very little understanding of the
enormous value of bilateral arrangements and what they have brought to Australia, and it is continuing to gamble with the fortunes of local exporters.

Can I just correct the record and say that, contrary to the trade minister’s attempt to talk down our government’s trade performance, in the manufacturing sector under the Labor government only eight per cent of locally produced motor vehicles were exported, and yet under our government that figure jumped to 40 per cent.

At least one in five Australian jobs is now generated by exports. In regional and rural Australia, one in four jobs is now directly or indirectly linked to exports. Over the past decade, Australian export industries have created more than 400,000 jobs. Real wages have increased by 20 per cent and unemployment has fallen to a little over four per cent. Trade is clearly too important to our economy to become an ideological toy for the Labor Party, and now the Labor Party, in government, is forcing Australian traders and exporters to wait under a cloud of uncertainty as the Minister for Trade forces them to wait until the end of August so he can learn what he should have known after 11½ years in opposition.

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

Mrs BRONWYN BISHOP (Mackellar) (4.15 pm)—I thank the honourable member who spoke previously, the shadow minister for trade, for making his pertinent and succinct comments on the attempted filibuster we had from the Minister for Trade. It was yet another example of the lack of accountability this government is prepared to submit itself to. In the filibuster that we had this afternoon from the Minister for Trade, he took 19½ minutes to tell us that we are going to have another inquiry—whoopity do—and once again got rid of the third MPI that was supposed to take place this week, and that means that Mr Rudd does not have to come in here and defend himself.

Mr Ian Macfarlane—We can have one tomorrow!

Mrs BRONWYN BISHOP—Of course!

The bottom line is that Mr Rudd stood up and said—

Mr Price—Madam Deputy Speaker, I rise on a point of order. The member should refer to people by their title or their electorate.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Ms AE Burke)—I call the member for Mackellar.

Mrs BRONWYN BISHOP—Therefore the Prime Minister does not have to come into this chamber and defend himself. The Prime Minister has indeed set accountability as something he is not prepared to wear both at the public level of his government as a whole and at his private level, and I will deal with both of these issues. Let us start from the moment he was elected. He said the first thing he would do would be to recall parliament before Christmas and that the only holidays that his ministers would have would be Christmas Day and Boxing Day. So what did we get? He moved straight into Kirribilli

MATTERS OF PUBLIC IMPORTANCE

Government Accountability

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Ms AE Burke)—Mr Speaker has received a letter from the honourable member for Mackellar proposing that a definite matter of public importance be submitted to the House for discussion, namely:

The Government’s failure to meet their election commitment to provide more Government accountability.

I call upon those members who approve of the proposed discussion to rise in their places.
House, had a lovely holiday and appointed a new cook.

That brings us to his second promise—that is, he was going to live in the Lodge. He was not going to live in Kirribilli House but, as I said, he moved in there straight away, had a lovely party for former prime ministers—and then what does he do? He appoints himself a new cook for Kirribilli House. He promised to stop the killing of whales. He did not even send the boat out early enough to take the photographs, and the whales are still being slaughtered. ‘Fail’ on the first three counts!

He then promised, on 11 July, that he would reduce grocery bills, he would reduce the cost of petrol, he would reduce interest rates—and on all three counts ‘fail’, ‘fail’, ‘fail’. Interest rates continue to go up, petrol prices go up and grocery prices go up. On the fourth, he said he would relieve pressure from childcare expenses. Well, guess what: the only childcare relief that was afforded was to him and his personal household at the expense of the taxpayer. A public servant was designated to be a childcarer for his own child. Our multimillionaire Prime Minister, worth $20 million at least, has got a public servant taxpayer funded person so he can have his child care. So when this is brought out in estimates, what has he got to say about that? He said, ‘Well, I’ll pay for the proportion of the time that this designated person spends minding my child.’ This is called apportionment. This is exactly what Phillip Smiles did when he was pursued by the Commissioner of Taxation on a political witch-hunt and prosecuted under the fraud provisions of the tax act, for saying that he was having an apportionment of some child care and some office work.

Where is the accountability for this new arrangement? Where is the accountability that shows what proportion of time is being used to care for the Prime Minister’s child and where is the job description of the work that this designated childcare person is doing which is not child care? Where is the contract that has been entered into? Where is the accountability at a personal level for this rich, clever Prime Minister? He is very clever in that he thought he could even be a little bit greedy by having this additional perk!

Mrs BRONWYN BISHOP—As for you poor fellows over there, I don’t think there are many of you who took the wage cut; most of you got a wage rise.

At the same time as he is doing that, he has got a new perk for himself. Where is the accountability? This whole question of accountability brings me to the debate we had earlier in the chamber today, and that is the question of funding of political parties. This is the question of reform of the funding of political parties. And it just happens that I was reading some very interesting material dealing with a fund that was established by
the now Prime Minister and the now Treasurer, a fund that they established in Queensland which is estimated to be worth about $100 million. It is within this fund that you will find there is about $20 million worth of shares in banks, about $2 million worth of shares in the Commonwealth Bank and $1.18 million worth of Suncorp shares. You will find that they have a conflict of interest.

When the Commonwealth Bank put its home loan interest rate up by more than the interest rate rise the Reserve Bank announced, the Treasurer said that the fund controlled by the Labor Party, which funds their election campaigns, benefited. They benefited as a result of government policy. The Treasurer went on to say: ‘You can change banks. I’ll make it easier for people to change where their home loan is.’ He made no mention of the fact that the ALP also had a margin loan with CommSec for $10 million. He made no mention of the fact that, every time there is a rise in interest rates, the ALP’s fund to get itself re-elected benefits. There was no mention of this at all.

In fact, if you go through the rather poor reporting requirements, you can do an estimate that shows the Labor Party is now the richest political party in any democratic country—if you put together the holdings of unions like the CFMEU and the Labor Party itself. Bear in mind that Labor Holdings, this fund established by the Prime Minister and the Treasurer, donated $8 million to the campaign funds—as disclosed; we do not know how much else was paid. That is $8 million out of the $15 million they spent—as opposed to the $9 million the Liberal Party spent. There is an enormously rich fund which was established by the Treasurer and the Prime Minister. There is a conflict of interest. If there is to be true reform of electoral funding then this fund must be sold down.

Mr Price—Madam Deputy Speaker, on a point of order: I think the member for Mackellar is reflecting on the Treasurer and the Prime Minister. If she wants to make allegations of improper conduct then she needs to move a substantive motion.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER—The member for Mackellar is straying. I draw her back to the MPI before us.

Mrs BRONWYN BISHOP—I am in fact talking about accountability. Accountability is fundamental to our system. The Prime Minister went to the election saying he was going to be better than everybody else. He was going to have higher transparency and higher accountability. But what we are getting is less accountability and less transparency, and we are seeing self-interest playing a major part as always.

We are debating the question of accountability in the context of what is in the Sydney papers today, and that is the utter corruption of the Labor Party and the New South Wales government. We are seeing this in the context of corruption, sex, bribery, ICAC and jobs for the boys—all the usual Labor Party practices that we got used to in previous governments. We heard from the Prime Minister today that he was going to be above this—that he was going to be better than them. What do we get? We get no transparency and, of course, we get the truncated sittings of the parliament. We get the Clayton’s Friday.

I can make this speech today knowing that the privilege of parliament will apply and that those people who might want to report on it will be covered by that privilege as well. If I had made this speech tomorrow, there may be no such privilege. Indeed, by curtailing what can be said in the parliament, you are curtailing the amount of accountability the government is prepared to present itself to face up to. The fact of the matter is
that, when we come in here tomorrow, we can perhaps make speeches as benign and useless as the Minister for Trade made in 19½ minutes. He told us in 19½ minutes that he was going to establish another inquiry.

What should be happening tomorrow, as we have said, is that there should be a question time and there should be quorums called, established and verified. I would be most interested to hear the Chief Government Whip’s opinion on what happens when a quorum is called and the chair says, ‘I can’t hear you.’ Having had it drawn to their attention that there is no quorum, are we then disbanded—are we then in breach of the Constitution? We will see, won’t we? It is one of those policies that can best be called ‘the streaker’s defence’—it seemed like a good idea at the time.

The fact is that we are now seeing a parliament where, because of the filibuster technique—and I guess we can expect to see that every Thursday—proper matters of public importance will not be able to be debated. I go back to what I said right at the beginning. This important point of accountability is fundamental to our Westminster system. We have a Prime Minister who says that he is going to be better—better, certainly, than what is happening in New South Wales. But the Labor Party, together with its trade union movement, is now worth $1 billion, and there is no way in the world that that amount of money can be accumulated by any other political party.

Once again, on all 10 points that I have rated today, the Prime Minister has failed. He gets nought out of 10 on every issue that he promised he would deliver on. His first 100 days were going to be magnificent. They have about two days to go, I think, and the fact of the matter is that they have failed on every promise that was made—on the fundamental promises. The people believed that the government, by being elected, would bring down interest rates, bring down grocery prices, bring down petrol prices and provide relief for child care—all the things that matter to working families. In fact, the real policy that you are pursuing in your fight against inflation is to make working families welfare families. The unemployment pool is the only tool you have in your toolbox to fight the inflation about which you complain.

We discussed the NAIRU, didn’t we? The Treasurer, Mr Swan, did not know what that was. In fact, it was through the Howard government’s structural reforms to our economy that that came down. On the figures admitted to by Treasury, it came down from seven per cent, to 5.1 per cent and then to 4.7 per cent. With more reforms of the sort that we had planned, we could have gone past the 4.1 per cent at which unemployment rests today.

But your argument in favour of fighting inflation first means your only tool is to make working families, for whom you said you were concerned on all those other counts, welfare families. No wonder inflation was at an all-time low 16 years ago: we were coming off the back of the Paul Keating engineered recession. One million unemployed—you bet it forced inflation down! And you can copy it again. With a million unemployed again, you will have low inflation.

Debate interrupted.

QUESTIONS TO THE SPEAKER

Private Emails

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Ms AE Burke) (4.30 pm)—Before I call the first speaker in the adjournment debate, I can now advise the House that, in relation to the matter raised by the member for Herbert at the end of question time, following further investigation by the member for Herbert the matter has been satisfactorily resolved.
ADJOURNMENT

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Ms AE Burke)—Order! It being 4.30 pm, I propose the question:

That the House do now adjourn.

Days and Hours of Meeting

Mr TUCKEY (O’Connor) (4.30 pm)—As the clocks remind us, it is 4.30 pm on Thursday of a sitting week. At 4.30 pm the adjournment is called on for the purpose of the House being vacated, in past times, at 5 pm. That was to allow members to return to their homes. It has now occurred that we are discussing an adjournment when in fact the House will reconvene at nine o’clock tomorrow morning. As such, this House is wasting the time available to it this evening to carry on with government business. I note the Leader of the House was at pains to tell us today that they were the government that wanted to get on with government business, that they wanted to get their business up to the Senate with the greatest amount of speed and alacrity. Yet we are now sitting here getting ready to go home—but only to our motels, because we must return here tomorrow. That does not apply to everyone. As I entered the House this morning at eight o’clock, I noted a backbencher well known to me, with his suit pack in his hand, instructing a new member as to how you did not have to take your suit pack back up to your office to leave and do a scoot tonight; you just had to put it in those shelves on the side of the lobby as we enter, and of course that made your scooting a lot more convenient.

I come from a family with a long work ethic. There might be some on the other side surprised to know that I was once a member of the Transport Workers Union, until the high echelon found out, and they had a real worry about that. I have a real work ethic. I have no reason, having been given the night off last night, to go to my motel tonight or go out on the town. I want to work. Consequently, I seek leave to move a motion to suspend standing orders and sessional orders so as to permit the House to continue with its consideration of government business until 8.30 pm.

Leave not granted.

Mr TUCKEY—If leave is not granted, I move:

That so much of standing orders be suspended as would prevent:

(1) the putting forthwith and negativing of the question—That the House to now adjourn;
(2) the continuation of consideration of government business until 8.30 p.m. today;
(3) the question for the automatic adjournment of the House being proposed at this sitting at 8.30 p.m.; and
(4) if the question—That the House do now adjourn—is before the House at 9 pm today, the Speaker to interrupt debate and adjourn the House until 9 a.m. tomorrow.

I have a signed copy of that motion, which is signed by a seconder.

Mr GRAY (Brand—Parliamentary Secretary for Regional Development and Northern Australia) (4.34 pm)—I move:

That the member be no longer heard.

Question put.

The House divided. [4.38 pm]

(The Speaker—Mr Harry Jenkins)

Ayes........... 73
Noes........... 58
Majority........ 15

AYES

Adams, D.G.H. Albanese, A.N.
Bevis, A.R. Bidgood, J.
Bird, S. Bowen, C.
Bradbury, D.J. Burke, A.E.
Burke, A.S. Butler, M.C.
Champion, N. Cheeseman, D.L.
Clare, J.D. Collins, J.M.
Combet, G. Crean, S.F.
Thursday, 21 February 2008

The motion was:

That the member be no longer heard.

Question put.

The House divided. [4.46 pm]

(Ayes: 73; Noes: 59; Majority: 14)

AYES

Adams, D.G.H.  
Albanese, A.N.  
Bevis, A.R.  
Bidgood, J.  
Bird, S.  
Bowen, C.  
Bradbury, D.J.  
Burke, A.E.  
Burke, A.S.  
Butler, M.C.  
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.  
Emerson, C.A.  
Ferguson, M.J.  
Fitzy Fitzgerald, J.A.  
Garrett, P.  
George, J.  
Gillard, J.E.  
Grierson, S.J.  
Hale, D.F.  
Hayes, C.P.  *  
Jackson, S.M.  
Kelly, M.J.  
Kerr, D.J.C.  
Livermore, K.F.  
Marles, R.D.  
Mckew, M.  
Melham, D.  
Neal, B.J.  
Owens, J.  
Perrett, G.D.  
Price, L.R.S.  
Rea, K.M.  
Rishworth, A.L.  
Saffin, J.A.  
Sidebottom, S.  
Snowdon, W.E.  
Swan, W.M.  
Thomson, C.  
Trevor, C.  
Zappia, A.  

NOES

Abbott, A.J.  
Bailey, F.E.  
Billson, B.F.  
Bishop, J.J.  
Ciobo, S.M.  
Costello, P.H.  
Farmer, P.F.  
Gash, J.  
Haase, B.W.  
Hawke, A.  
Hockey, J.B.  
Hunt, G.A.  
Jensen, D.  
Keenan, M.  
Ley, S.P.  
Macfarlane, I.E.  
Markus, L.E.  
McGuigan, P.J.  
Morrison, S.J.  
Nelson, B.J.  
Ramsey, R.  
Robert, S.R.  
Schultz, A.  
Secker, P.D.  
Simpkins, L.  
Slipper, P.N.  
Smith, A.D.H.  
Sonlyay, A.M.  *  
Stone, S.N.  
Truss, W.E.  
Tuckey, C.W.  
Turnbull, M.  
Washer, M.J.  
Wood, J.  

* denotes teller

Question agreed to.

The SPEAKER—Is the motion seconded?

Mr JOHNSON (Ryan) (4.45 pm)—This move by the Labor Party—

The SPEAKER—Order! The member for Ryan will resume his seat.

Mr ALBANESE (Grayndler—Leader of the House) (4.45 pm)—I move:

That the member be no longer heard.

Question put.

The House divided. [4.46 pm]

(The Speaker—Mr Harry Jenkins)

Ayes: 73  
Noes: 59  
Majority: 14
The SPEAKER—The question now is that the motion moved by the member for O’Connor for the suspension of standing orders be agreed to.

Question put.

The House divided. [4.49 pm]

(The Speaker—Mr Harry Jenkins)

Ayes........... 58

Noes............ 74

Majority........ 16

AYES

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.
Dutton, P.C.           Farmer, P.F.
Forrest, J.A.          Gash, J.
Georgiou, P.           Haase, B.W.
Hawker, D.P.M.         Hawke, A.
Hull, K.E. *           Hunt, G.A.
Irons, S.J.            Johnson, M.A.
Johnson, A.            Laming, A.
Lindsay, P.J.          Macfarlane, I.E.
Marino, N.B.           Markus, L.E.
May, M.A.              McGauran, P.J.
Mirabella, S.          Morrison, S.J.
Moylan, J.E.           Nelson, B.J.
Neville, P.C.          Pearce, C.J.
Ramsay, R.             Randall, D.J.
Robb, A.               Robert, S.R.
Schultz, A.            Scott, B.C.
Secker, P.D.           Simpkins, L.
Slipper, P.N.          Smith, A.D.H.
Somlyay, A.M. *        Stone, S.N.
Truss, W.E.            Tucker, C.W.
Turnbull, M.           Vale, D.S.
Washer, M.J.

NOES

Adams, D.G.H.          Albanese, A.N.
Bevis, A.R.            Bidgood, J.
Bird, S.               Bowen, C.
Bradbury, D.J.         Burke, A.E.
Burke, A.S.            Butler, M.C.
Champion, N.
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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.
Emerson, C.A.  Ferguson, M.J.
Fitzgibbon, J.A.  Garrett, P.
Georganas, S.  Gillard, J.E.
Gibbons, S.W.  Grierson, S.J.
Gray, G.  Hale, D.F.
Griffin, A.P.  Hayes, C.P. *
Hall, J.G. *  Jackson, S.M.
Irwin, J.  Kerr, D.J.C.
Kelly, M.J.  Livermore, K.F.
King, C.F.  Marles, R.D.
Macklin, J.L.  McKew, M.
McClelland, R.B.  Melham, D.
McMullan, R.F.  Neal, B.J.
Murphy, J.  Owens, J.
Neumann, S.K.  Perrett, G.D.
Parke, M.  Price, L.R.S.
Plibersek, T.  Rea, K.M.
Raguse, B.B.  Rishworth, A.L.
Ripoll, B.F.  Saffin, J.A.
Roxon, N.L.  Sidebottom, S.
Shorten, W.R.  Snowdon, W.E.
Smith, S.F.  Swan, W.M.
Sullivan, J.  Thomson, C.
Symon, M.  Trevor, C.
Thomson, K.J.  Zappia, A.

* denotes teller

Question negatived.

The SPEAKER—Order! The question is that the House do now adjourn.

Central Coast Mariners

Ms NEAL (Robertson) (4.56 pm)—I rise to speak in the adjournment debate and to do something that really does give me a great deal of pleasure, and that is to congratulate the Central Coast Mariners on their success as minor premiers in the Hyundai A-League Australian football competition. This team is the only professional sports team on the Central Coast—something that we have had ambitions for for some time. This is the third season of the Hyundai A-League, and the Central Coast has had another great season.

In the previous two seasons, they achieved great things from a base of only 300,000 fans on the Central Coast, compared with the fan base of the capital cities and of Newcastle. They won the first pre-season cup in 2005-06 and narrowly lost the grand final in the A-League competition in its inaugural year, 2006, losing 1-0 to the Sydney silvertails, Sydney FC. Season 2 saw another productive start, with a second successive finals appearance in the pre-season cup, but it was to finish in disappointment, losing to Adelaide on penalties. In the second season they finished out of the finals. This year, at the end of the round robin competition, the Central Coast Mariners led the table and won the Hyundai A-League competition, making them the minor premiers and also entitling them to entry into the Asian Football League, something that we are very much looking forward to.

As a Central Coast resident and as a parliamentary representative of the Central Coast, I am extraordinarily proud of their achievements in such a short time. When the Hyundai A-League first started, it was a real gamble. The Mariners were based in a regional area, the Central Coast, and no-one was sure whether it would really work. The reason for the Central Coast Mariners’ success is their commitment to the area and their integration with the local community. The players live on the coast, train on the coast and have provided endless time to local football teams, helping kids and doing training sessions, and attending local schools to talk about important issues like road safety. The Mariners have certainly added a lot of colour to a broad range of community events, and we have also had the particular talents of their coach Lawrie McKinna—who I understand is almost learning English at the moment! The Mariners have a warm and humble approach to the whole issue. They are family orientated and they make us very
proud and pleased that they are Central Coast ambassadors.

I want to take the opportunity now to mention the players, because they are not always mentioned by name. I will mention the whole squad, though of course not everyone will play on Sunday. Our goalies are Danny Vukovic, Matthew Trott and Andrew Redmayne. In the midfield we have Nigel Boogaard, Paul O’Grady, Tony Vidmar—unfortunately, now retiring—and our captain, Alex Wilkinson.

The SPEAKER—Order! With apologies to the rest of the squad, it being 5 pm, the debate is interrupted.

House adjourned at 5.00 pm

NOTICES

The following notices were given:

Mrs Gash to move—
That the House:
(1) calls on the Australian Parliament to adopt a bipartisan approach to improving the provision and delivery of disability support and care to Australians living with severe and permanent disability, their families and/or their carers;
(2) considers that for too long the ball of responsibility for the funding and delivery of disability support and care has been kicked between Federal and State governments and that game has to end; and
(3) considers that the Federal Parliament must address the need for improved disability funding, support and services to see progress is continued beyond the individual terms of governments and is coordinated at such a level that inter-governmental disability service provision is clear, concise and indisputable. (Notice given 21 February 2008.)

Mr Clare to move—
That the House:
(1) notes:
   (a) the pain being felt by Australian families struggling to pay off mortgages due to rising interest rates;
   (b) the failure of the previous government to heed the warnings of the Reserve Bank; and
   (c) the need for low cost home ownership and reduced entry costs for home buyers as well as a range of rental options for moderate to low income households;
(2) supports the Government’s commitment to tackling this problem by appointing a Minister for Housing and by making it a key priority for COAG in 2008; and
(3) welcomes the Government’s plan to help first homebuyers break into the housing market with the first-home saver account scheme. (Notice given 21 February 2008.)
Thursday, 21 February 2008

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Ms AE Burke) took the chair at 9.43 am.

STATEMENTS BY MEMBERS

Sturt Electorate: Glenside Hospital

Mr PYNE (Sturt) (9.43 am)—It gives me pleasure to rise in the Main Committee today to raise an issue of great importance in my electorate, which is the changes to the Glenside Hospital. The state government has decided to introduce changes to the Glenside Hospital, which is the mental health hospital in Adelaide. The Glenside campus has been in the hands of the public, as a public space, since 1836, when our city was founded and laid out. In all that time, every generation has maintained the Glenside campus for public activity—for the mental health institution that used to be there, which is now a proper hospital. It used to be an asylum many, many years ago, tragically, when we did not know better.

The state government’s Minister for Mental Health and Substance Abuse, Gail Gago, has decided to cut up the public land at Glenside Hospital. She is proposing changes to the mental health facilities and the introduction of housing for those people who have mental illnesses, and we welcome the fact that there is finally a focus by the South Australian state Labor government on issues to do with mental health. It is a smoke and mirrors trick, however, because the number of beds that will be available for patients in the newly developed hospital will actually be less than what is available now. One of the objectives of the state government was to put more services out on the ground for those people with mental illnesses. The effect of their changes is actually to have fewer services.

At the same time, they are selling off a huge percentage of the Glenside campus for housing development and for commercial and retail tenancies. In Glenside, an area very well served at the moment—

Mr Slipper—By its local member.

Mr PYNE—Yes, very well served by the local member. I thank the member for Fisher. They are served well on Glen Osmond Road and Fullarton Road, by the Burnside Village and by other retail and commercial tenancies in that area. There is a great debate locally as to whether this is a necessary change. There will be destruction of historic trees and of other flora and fauna during the development that is being proposed by the state government. There have been a number of public meetings about this issue, which the minister has refused to attend. She sends her public servants—and I have nothing against public servants—but it is not their role to publicly defend the policies of the government they serve. That is the job of the minister or the member of parliament.

Mr Slipper—Is she frightened?

Mr PYNE—She is obviously frightened to face the electors of Glenside. I have demanded that she do so. I asked again today that the state minister, Gail Gago, agree to a public meeting in Glenside with the local residents to hear their concerns and to act on their concerns rather than hiding behind her public servants. (Time expired)
Sustainable Living Challenge

Ms OWENS (Parramatta) (9.46 am)—I rise to inform the House that students from Catherine McAuley in Westmead have been named ‘Sustainable Living Champions’ for their environmental work at their school. The Sustainable Living Challenge is run by the United Nations Environment Program and the University of New South Wales. It is the largest environmental program of its kind, involving over 20,000 students nationwide. At Catherine McAuley, 29 students from years 7 to 12 worked to regenerate the wetlands behind the school and establish the school’s composting system, worm farm and vegetable gardens. They have been identifying and removing weeds, replanting native species, and composting and gardening.

A remarkable number of the schools in my electorate are based beside creeks. It seems sometimes that there is a creek down the back of every school, oval and community centre. Most are overgrown and ignored, but, bit by bit, sections are rejuvenated thanks to the work of community volunteers and our local schools. Several schools have their own environmental programs to clean up and revegetate their own little bit of the waterways.

I visited the creek behind the Catherine McAuley school two years ago when their environmental work in the creek was in its infancy. I have to say, we got very muddy removing rubbish from the creek, which was in a sad state at the time. The main culprit was a very old lounge chair, which literally came apart as we tried to move it. In the end, we removed the disgusting mud-soaked foam rubber handful by handful. By the end you could not tell what colour our clothes were underneath all the mud, and I thank the school—two years late—for the loan of a tracksuit to get home in.

More important than the state of our clothes that day is that you would no longer recognise the creek from those early days. All the students, staff and parents who participated are to be congratulated. The school plans to continue the project next year with further planting and water conservation.

Congratulations also to the Sustainable Living Challenge, which encourages young people to explore sustainable living issues as part of their school experience. Twenty-nine students at Catherine McAuley and another 20,000 around the country have been doing just that: enhancing local biodiversity, reducing waste and enhancing soil and water quality—a genuine contribution to our current and future wellbeing and way of life. Once again, I thank the students of Catherine McAuley.

Economy

Dr JENSEN (Tangney) (9.48 am)—I have been noticing of late that the Labor government are attempting to rewrite history. We have a situation where we have an economy that is basically the best in Australian history, and what are the Labor Party trying to do about it? They are trying to say that the economic indicators and conditions are terrible. In fact, they are trying to indicate an emergency situation to such an extent that they believe they should be freezing politicians’ wages. When you think about it, this is a very dangerous stunt because it removes the independence of the Remuneration Tribunal. The Remuneration Tribunal should be able to independently set the wages of politicians and other senior public servants.

Mr Slipper—Wasn’t that why it was set up—

Dr JENSEN—It was exactly why it was set up.
Mr Slipper— to remove politicians from the decision-making process?

Dr JENSEN— Exactly. The whole problem is that now you have politicians setting their own wages. When the public complain about our wages in future, how can we defend them by saying they have been set by an independent authority?

Let us have a look at the economic indicators. We have got inflation, which is being painted as a great bogeyman and as an emergency that we have got to face, that is below the OECD average. In December 2007 inflation was at three per cent. For the OECD the average was 3.3 per cent. What have we got? We have got high growth, very low unemployment, the participation rate at record levels and a net government surplus. This is not to talk about what is happening with the state governments, of course, who are going into deficit, further pushing up inflation which the Labor Party purports to be so—

Mr Slipper— A sound economic position because of the Howard government.

Dr JENSEN— Absolutely. We have a Treasurer who looks like a bunny in the headlights. He stands there at question time and he looks panicked: ‘What am I going to do? The economy is terrible.’

Mr Slipper— Like a bunny with myxomatosis.

Dr JENSEN— Absolutely. If we have a Treasurer who is performing like this when we have excellent economic conditions, how is this Treasurer going to perform when we actually do have economic hard times? The last Treasurer that I saw with the same ‘bunny in the headlights’ look as our current Treasurer was John Kerin in 1991. There was a Treasurer who had every right to look like a bunny in the headlights, because the Labor government under Hawke and Keating had a terrible economy. Here we have got an excellent economy and we have got a Treasurer who is panicked. When is the Prime Minister going to get rid of this incompetent Treasurer and when is the Prime Minister going to start telling the truth about the actual statistics in our economy? (Time expired)

Climate Change

Mr PERRETT (Moreton) (9.51 am)— There is no doubt that climate change is one of the biggest challenges we as a nation face. We are told by the experts that as the earth’s average temperature rises we will see some more dramatic changes to our weather, unfortunately— unfortunately for the people of Queensland, especially. Extreme events such as droughts, heatwaves, floods and storms will become more regular and more intense. This is caused by increased greenhouse gases, which are a by-product of our modern world. Activities like logging and burning of fossil fuels such as coal, oil and gas produce greenhouse gases. The greenhouse effect is the cause of climate change or global warming and, obviously, this affects us all.

That is why I am proud to stand here as part of a government that is taking the challenge of greenhouse gases seriously. Literally, the first order of business for the Rudd Labor government was to ratify the Kyoto protocol, as the Prime Minister informed the House on Monday—not within 11 years but within 11 minutes of taking office. So, importantly, Australia can hold her head up high now and be part of the global solution to climate change rather than part of the problem. The Rudd Labor government has committed to reduce Australia’s greenhouse gas emissions by 60 per cent on 2000 levels by 2050. This will be achieved through a
comprehensive emissions trading scheme by 2010. We will also adopt renewable energies such as wind and solar—

Mr Hunt—What about a clean energy tax?

Mr PERRETT—Just wait and I will get to it, mate. This will also ensure that by 2020 our national electricity supply will be 20 per cent renewable energy. We can all do our bit to reduce our carbon footprint, like the Chelmer-Graceville Kindergarten in my electorate. They used an Australian government grant to install a 14,000-litre water tank to improve their irrigation system and to upgrade to dual-flush toilets and water efficient taps. It was a great honour for me to be the very first plaque that I unveiled as a federal member. The Chelmer-Graceville Kindergarten has become an example to all of us of just how precious our water resources are and how we can all make a difference to our environment. Unfortunately, the previous government did not offer enough of this kind of assistance or enough incentives to households and businesses to be water and energy efficient. The Rudd government will not make the same mistake. The Rudd government will not be found wanting when it comes to climate change, unlike previous governments. They should hang their heads in shame.

Incentives for Australian households and businesses include $10,000 low-interest loans for households to implement energy and water savings, $8,000 rebates for rooftop solar panels, $1,000 rebates for solar power hot water service systems, improved energy and water efficiency standards for new homes and appliances and the making of every school a ‘solar school’ within eight years. These measures, along with our international obligations, will help all Australians play a part in the fight against climate change. (Time expired)

Parliamentarians’ Entitlements

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Ms AE Burke)—I call the honourable member for Slipper.

Mr SLIPPER (Fisher) (9.55 am)—I thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for stating that an electorate should be named after me.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER—The member for Fisher; my apologies.

Mr SLIPPER—Historically, one does not have an electorate named after one until one is deceased.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER—I did, but it got abolished.

Mr SLIPPER—There is no issue that is more contentious in our community than the remuneration of elected members of parliament. Over the years, as was indicated by the honourable member for Tangney, we as elected representatives have removed ourselves from the decision-making process. This means that our remuneration is determined by the independent umpire, who is able to take into account relevant matters on what is an appropriate level of remuneration.

The Prime Minister has announced a freeze on politicians’ salaries for a period of 12 months or thereabouts. The opposition is certainly not opposing this particular action by the government. I do, however, believe that it is dangerous when politicians start to involve themselves in the setting of their own salaries because it, therefore, becomes a precedent and next time the Remuneration Tribunal decides to increase remuneration for elected members it becomes extraordinarily difficult to say, ‘We have no part in this particular process.’
The figures I have seen, however, indicate that this action by the Prime Minister and the government is tokenistic at best. The amount of money that will be saved for the Australian community is only $1½ million or thereabouts.

Mr Perrett interjecting—

Mr SLIPPER—I thank the honourable member for what he says. The point I am making is that the government should have gone beyond tokenism and should have brought in a freeze on all Public Service salaries for the same period. That would have shown real leadership and real restraint and would have given a message to the Australian community. To freeze politicians’ salaries alone in effect does not achieve what the government goes out to achieve. Freezing politicians’ salaries as part of a freeze on Public Service salaries would have been a much more appropriate way to go.

I believe that, for instance, our Prime Minister is not paid anywhere near enough. I am told that the Prime Minister of Singapore gets about $3 million and our Prime Minister gets about one-tenth of that. I believe that as a community we do not pay our senior ministers anywhere near enough but, having said that, if we are going to have a freeze, it would have been appropriate to have a freeze on all Public Service salaries, including the salaries of members of parliament. The government has set a dangerous precedent when you have politicians fiddling with their own remuneration.

Lunar New Year

Mr DREYFUS (Isaacs) (9.58 am)—Today I wish all Australians who have recently celebrated the lunar new year a happy and prosperous Year of the Rat. On 9 February I celebrated the Tet festival with the Vietnamese community at the Sandown Racecourse in Springvale as the guest of the Victorian chapter of the Vietnamese Community in Australia. Many people at the festival told me that the Year of the Rat is a good year to begin a new job, being the first year of the 12-year cycle, and that it is an auspicious year for the first year of the new Rudd Labor government.

I congratulate Bon Nguyen, the event organiser, who organised this large, important and very enjoyable display of Vietnamese traditions and culture. The festival was attended by thousands of Vietnamese from across Victoria. I would also like to pay tribute to Mr Phong Nguyen, the President of the Vietnamese Community in Australia—Victorian chapter, who does a wonderful job leading that organisation.

On a more sombre note, the official proceedings for the festival commenced with the theme song commemorating the victims of the 1968 Tet offensive sung by Ms Son Ca. It is appropriate this year, on the 40th anniversary, to remember those who lost their lives during the Tet offensive. As many in this chamber would be aware, the Tet offensive was a turning point in the conflict in Vietnam. More than 100,000 people died during this offensive and very many of them were civilians. In particular, we should remember those who died as a result of the massacre of civilians and prisoners of war during the Battle of Hue.

A range of awards were presented at the opening ceremony, including awards to Mr Nguyen Khac Nhan, the 2008 Senior Australian Vietnamese of the Year, and to Ms Lisa Nguyen Thuy Duong, the 2008 Australian Vietnamese of the Year. They have made wonderful contributions to the Vietnamese and the wider community. Indeed, the Vietnamese community in Australia has made a remarkable contribution to the life of this country in a very short pe-
period. There is a significant Vietnamese community in Isaacs, with over 4,000 people claiming Vietnamese ancestry. I would like to say to the Vietnamese community of Isaacs, and of Australia: Chúc mừng năm mới. I am looking forward to an even bigger celebration of the lunar new year in 2009 because, as we have been reminded by the member for Parramatta, next year it falls on Australia Day, 26 January.

Climate Change

Mr HUNT (Flinders) (10.00 am)—I rise to speak on the release of the interim report of the review by Professor Garnaut on climate change. My position, and the position of the opposition, is very clear: we welcome this review, we welcome this release; climate change is real; it is important; it is significant; it has a degree of urgency, which is potent and powerful; and it is one of the great challenges which we face. The problem is a global one. It is a problem of 40 billion tonnes of CO2, of which Australia contributes about 1.4 per cent, or 560 million tonnes. Alone, we can do nothing. As part of a broader global solution we have an important role.

I want to make three points as to how, despite the symbolism of the new government, they are currently failing, in the first 100 days of government, to take practical, real and effective steps. In essence, they have dropped the ball on real and practical steps to clean up our air, to clean up our environment and to work on this front. The first of those is what is known as the Green Vouchers for Schools Program. This program is in chaos. There are no schools, or very few schools, which are currently applying because, immediately after the election, the program was axed. Then it was put on hold and now it has been reinstated, whilst the new Minister for the Environment, Heritage and the Arts struggles to put in place the replacement program.

However, the government’s website sets out that, even though the program has been reinstated, schools should reconsider whether or not they wish to sign up to it. So we have gone into this position of hiatus, where the program was axed, put on hold, then reinstated but schools are told: ‘Reconsider whether you actually want to apply, whilst we put together the program that we want to replace it with.’ On the government’s own analysis the potential for 27,000 tonnes of CO2 per year to be saved is being lost. That is their own analysis.

The second great failing is that they have dropped the ball on the great challenge of global rainforest protection. The single biggest area right now for global savings over the next five years is the halting and decrease of deforestation. We have the potential for savings of up to eight billion tonnes a year and, since the opposition put forward a program on this, we have seen silence, we have seen inaction, we have seen a failure to adopt our approach for a global rainforest recovery program. It is on the table, we offer our bipartisan support and I will have more to say at a later date about their failure to pick up clean energy targets and to clean up coal and gas in Australia and globally.

Dental Health

Aged Care

Ms HALL (Shortland) (10.03 am)—Two issues have been of great concern to me over a long period of time. One is the shortage of aged-care beds and the other is the number of people on dental waiting lists. I thought I would share with the House some of the figures from
the Hunter region, which takes in part of the Shortland electorate. As we all know, there are 650,000 people currently on dental waiting lists, which will be rectified by the Rudd government.

In 1996, when the Howard government closed the Commonwealth Dental Health Program, I was the state member for Swansea and I was able to see firsthand how that impacted on all those people who were on the dental waiting list. Prior to the removal of that program, no-one came to see me, in my capacity as the state minister, to complain that they could not get dental treatment. But overnight people moved from being able to get the dental care they needed to having to wait. That list of 650,000 was the legacy that was left to the people of Australia.

In the Hunter currently there are a number of people who are waiting for dental treatment. Under code 3c, which is quite a high level of need and deals with people in extreme pain who need to be seen immediately, there are currently 75 people waiting. There are 108 people waiting under code 4. There are nearly 2,000 people—1,739—waiting under code 5. There are 1,348 people waiting under code 6. Under code D there are 11 waiting and under code E there are 3,838. I might seek to table a copy of that.

In addition to that, looking at aged care, there are 32 people who are waiting for aged-care beds in the Hunter region at the moment. Of those, 12 are taking up acute care beds. I welcome the fact that Labor will deal with this with its 2,000 transitional beds—$158 million over five years—and the 2,500 permanent beds that will be created by the $300 million loan that will be given to residential care providers at a zero real interest rate. (Time expired)

Hervey Bay

Mr NEVILLE (Hinkler) (10.06 am)—It is proper in times of restraint that governments should look carefully at various sectors of the budget, but that should be done with equanimity not with biased selectivity. It is bad enough that regional Australia, more than any other area, has been targeted by Labor’s razor gang. What is worse is the way that a project in my electorate, the Fisherman’s Hall of Fame and the Fraser Coast Heritage Centre, has not only been targeted but sneered at as if it were some negative indulgence.

The Commonwealth made $3 million available for this and the Hervey Bay City Council made $1 million available, but state Labor made sure that the project was stymied by its dilatory and mean-fisted actions. State Labor made the project vulnerable and an easy target and is 100 per cent responsible for this project falling over. The centre was to be an iconic attraction, highlighting not only the Fraser Coast’s fishing industry but also the marine environment and its history, including the wonder of whales migrating to Hervey Bay, Fraser Island and the Great Sandy Strait—a pristine area.

It is ironic that a new marina has been approved for Urangan and ostensibly land has been put aside for this reason. It is doubly ironic that the same state Labor government is building the Traveston dam on the Mary River, against public opinion, with likely downstream environmental effects on the lower Mary River and the Great Sandy Strait. It is a double whammy for the environment. Cities like Hervey Bay rely heavily on tourism and small business. It is important that tourists have a fully rounded tourist experience. Visitors come to experience the unique local environment, and that should be reinforced by the attractions that exist in an area. I deplore the uninformed comments and ugly sneers directed at these projects and I hold
the government accountable for the downstream consequences of its Scrooge-like funding withdrawal.

**New South Wales Health**

Mr HAYES (Werriwa) (10.09 am)—Today I would like to refer to comments that were made only recently by the member for Macarthur, the shadow minister for sport and ‘Mayor of Mosman’.

Mr Slipper—He’s probably the fittest man in parliament.

Mr HAYES—I’ll come to that. Only recently the member for Macarthur decided to take it upon himself to announce policy. His latest policy announcement was that bicycle users should pay either a registration fee or a bicycle levy. I recently took the opportunity to meet with the Macarthur Triathlon Club and its president, Glenn Schwarzel, to discuss what the member for Macarthur was proposing. As this club put to me—and bear in mind that they take people from kids right through to elite athletes—they see themselves having a role in our community but, more than that, they see themselves having a role in encouraging active sport to be adopted by young people. The idea that was advanced by the shadow minister for sport was that we should tax those who decide to go cycling.

If you have a look at the health statistics out there, particularly in the electorate he comes from, as I have done, you will find that New South Wales Health indicates in their report that one in every two people over the age of 16 in the Macarthur region is obese. Regrettably, when they did a weigh-in, they found that it was the second fattest population in Sydney, behind Hawkesbury, with almost 56 per cent of adults tipping in at the higher end of the scale. So, Madam Deputy Speaker, I did get up and exercise this morning, just in case you were inquiring.

The latest attempted policy announcement by the member for Macarthur comes at a very interesting time. He has taken it upon himself to do this after taking what was a very safe Liberal seat with a margin of 11.1 per cent and, with all the effort he has put in it for the last three years, reducing that margin to 0.7 per cent. The first notable thing he did for his electorate was to move some 65 kilometres away from it. He has now been referred to—these are not my words, but I do like them—as the Mayor of Mosman. He seems to think that what is good for the silvertails of the North Shore should be imposed upon the working people of Macarthur. What a shame that is, but this does show the level of commitment he has to the people in his electorate when it comes to kids and sport. *(Time expired)*

Ms Hall—I seek leave to table a letter with the details from the Hunter area health service, as I mentioned in my contribution.

Mr Slipper interjecting—

Ms Hall—You’re welcome to come and have a look at it.

Leave granted.

Mr Slipper—On indulgence, Madam Deputy Speaker. I did not intend any discourtesy to the honourable member. It is just that, as I understood it, in the usual process it would be shown to us. It is very difficult to give leave to something when you do not know what it is.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Ms AE Burke)—I understand. Thank you.
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THERAPEUTIC GOODS AMENDMENT (POISONS STANDARD) BILL 2008
Second Reading
Debate resumed from 14 February, on motion by Ms Roxon:
That this bill be now read a second time.
Question agreed to.
Bill read a second time.

Consideration in Detail
Bill—by leave—taken as a whole.
Ms ROXON (Gellibrand—Minister for Health and Ageing) (10.13 am)—I present a supplementary explanatory memorandum to the bill.
Mr Slipper—Smile!
Ms ROXON—You guys! I don’t normally have a cheer squad on the other side. I ask leave of the Main Committee to move government amendments (1) and (2) as circulated together.
Leave granted.
Ms ROXON—I move government amendments (1) and (2) as circulated together:
(1) Schedule 1, item 3, page 4 (line 9), omit “that Division”, substitute “that Act”.
(2) Schedule 1, item 3, page 4 (line 22), omit “that Division”, substitute “that Act”.
The amendments that I am moving today relate to the Therapeutic Goods Amendment (Poissons Standard) Bill 2008, which I introduced on 14 February. The changes proposed to that bill are of a technical nature. The changes will correct a technical oversight and make it clear that all requirements, and not just the registration requirements, of the Legislative Instruments Act 2003 are deemed to have been met by the poisons standard and amendments made to it. I commend the bill and the amendments to the House.
Question agreed to.
Bill, as amended, agreed to.
Ordered that the bill be reported to the House with amendments.

TRADE PRACTICES AMENDMENT (ACCESS DECLARATIONS) BILL 2008
Second Reading
Debate resumed from 13 February, on motion by Mr Albanese:
That this bill be now read a second time.
Mr BILLSON (Dunkley) (10.15 am)—I am here on my own, regrettably, and I do not have those chiselled good looks used as the backdrop for the minister’s photo. I speak today to support this bill. The Trade Practices Amendment (Access Declarations) Bill 2008 comes at a time when the telecommunications sector is looking for greater certainty in relation to the regulatory regime. It is a time when, sadly, the competition framework embraces ‘negotiate’, ‘arbitrate’ and ‘litigate’. We seem to go very quickly over the ‘n’ and the ‘a’ to ‘l’ for litigate. It is a sad process because that ready pathway to litigation does of itself have quite an impact on competition in the telecommunications sector. You could say that competition delayed is competition denied.
Honourable member interjecting—

MAIN COMMITTEE
Mr BILLSON—Thank you very much. I am reminded that I have got 29 minutes left, and I am grateful for that wise counsel. You saw recently—and I am picking up the theme of competition delayed is competition denied—a determination in favour of Primus. I remember reading Ravi Bhatia’s comments that that outcome to his favour and to Primus’s favour, as welcome as it was, had been delayed to such a degree. Whilst the question of fees and access charges, those fiscal issues, could be remedied, he was pointing to the disadvantage his company had in actually competing in the marketplace while these issues were to be resolved. So it is an interesting time in terms of regulation. I would say this particular bill is another renovation of the regime. You have seen a number of renovations through the former government—steps in the right direction, I believe, as this one is, but it does raise questions that I will come to later about the broader framework in general.

The Trade Practices Amendment (Access Declarations) Bill 2008 amends the Trade Practices Act to provide clarity and certainty for the telecommunications sector by confirming that access declarations made by the ACCC are not and have never been legislative instruments. The reason for this needing to be made clear—and the bill goes to great lengths not only to make it clear but to reiterate that point over and over again, in fact—is very important. That clarity must be there because, as I mentioned earlier, there is this environment in which litigation seems to be a favoured tool of some as they sort through the commercial argy-bargy of access and pricing. A recent case does give rise to what might even be another avenue of litigation, and this bill seeks to cut off that avenue by making it clear that the works of the ACCC, its access declarations, are not legislative instruments and therefore cannot be challenged on the basis that they have not been lodged and recorded on the Federal Register of Legislative Instruments or tabled in parliament. The point here is that if they were legislative instruments and they were not registered or tabled in parliament, then that would be an avenue by which to challenge, to attack, the validity of them and therefore there would be another avenue of litigation to be argued. What this bill is saying is that they have never been, are not now and are not going to be in the future legislative instruments. Therefore to the players that might think there is some commercial advantage in saying the process was wrong because they were not tabled or registered it says: ‘Don’t waste your time. Get on with the business of providing a competitive telecommunications framework and focus on business priorities and commercial avenues by which to push your case, not litigation.’

I am pleased that my parliamentary colleague and friend Mr Dutton has joined us. As the member for Dickson he carries the opposition’s role in the area of competition policy. It is always a pleasure and an honour to work with him. This bill reflects on a Federal Court decision involving Roche Products Pty Ltd and the National Drugs and Poisons Schedule Committee. There was some concern that the determinations of the National Drugs and Poisons Schedule Committee actually amounted to a legislative instrument. Even though the determinations were addressed and analysed, and their work was seen as a proper administrative decision in that case, that administrative decision was challenged. It was argued that it was legislative in its character, that it should have been a legislative instrument and that it was therefore open to legal challenge. Whilst that is not directly related to the telco space, the thinking was that if that was a challenge that was tried on in the drugs area it may be something that the lawyers would have salivated over and picked up in the telecommunications space. They could then have argued that the ACCC declarations were of a similar kind—that is, legislative
in their character—and therefore the declarations were invalid because they were not registered or tabled before parliament.

This bill makes it clear that this is not the case. Access declarations are administrative determinations and do not need to end up in this parliament or be registered to take effect. This is aiming to cut off some of the litigious activity that seems to dog many of these issues in the telecommunications sector. It is an area that causes great upheaval, disruption and combative-ness. It focuses some of the brightest minds and sharpest intellects in the telco sector on litigious avenues and legal argument rather than on the business case and on consumers, to which we hope they would apply all of that horsepower and capability. So there should be no doubt about the validity of those access declarations, and the bill reinforces that point. It is an appropriate renovation of the competition framework at a time when it is going to come under increasing stress. I would like to touch briefly on that.

The ACCC has a difficult job. Telcos are not shy. They are happy to run their argument, run their case and invest heavily in it, seeing some opportunity for commercial advantage to themselves or disadvantage to their competitors. So the ACCC is caught in an atmosphere of world championship wrestling and has to referee some of these issues. The ACCC’s work at the moment is quite encouraging, in that some of its energy is being focused on understanding where competition itself will provide proper remedy, safeguard and long-term interest for the consumer. I welcome and encourage the participation of all in the telco sector in the current work of the ACCC: a stocktake of the telecommunications infrastructure. That work is crucial in identifying a view that where you have three potential providers of service and access the ACCC need not be involved in issues of access and pricing determinations. Trying to identify where competition will meet the market need is good work. The ACCC need not concern itself overtly with questions of access and pricing to those pieces of infrastructure.

I call it the ‘tribuy’ opportunity, where service providers and the consumers have an opportunity to choose between three potential infrastructure providers, and therefore the competitive pressure looks after the consumer interest. The work that is going on to establish which parts of the network offer the tribuy is very different from the try-ons which you see in the litigation space. I encourage wholeheartedly the work that the ACCC is investing—and the effort and time that the telecommunications providers are also investing—in that audit, in that evaluation. I do not think it should be viewed as a regulatory red tape imposition. I assure the ACCC and the telco committee that I will not argue that it is. It is a very wise investment of energy to see where the competition framework does not need the mentoring and pastoral care of the ACCC and where the consumer interest is being reflected in the competition framework.

Contrast that with some of the debate that is going on around the Rudd government’s confused, foggy, contradictory, ever-moving feast around the fibre-to-the-node network. I suppose with $4.7 billion of taxpayer money being waved out there in a tantalising way in front of telecommunications providers you could imagine how excited they all are. The thing that troubles me is the complete lack of clarity about what the plan is, how this proposition is going to work within a competitive framework that has the consumer interest at heart, and also the extent to which the Rudd government involves itself in a market where we are trying to encourage and foster competition—how it is going to involve itself in what would appear to be a renationalisation of some of our telecommunications infrastructure. It is very unclear,
troubling and deeply concerning. I can understand, by the frantic activity that is going on among those involved in the sector, that it is another opportunity for positioning.

Let me run through some of the challenges. In this parliament in the coming days you will see the Rudd government raiding the Communications Fund. In a nutshell, they are pinching the resources set aside to respond to identified disadvantage and inadequate service provision in the telecommunications sector for regional, rural and remote communities. I will not go into the detail of it, other than to say how ironic it is that the Glasson review—the independent review into regional communications, services and infrastructure—is being encouraged. In fact, I saw a press release from Minister Conroy encouraging its work. I notice he did not mention that there is legislation before the House to pinch the very resources needed to implement that work. That work is about making sure that where there is competition and a commercial case for delivery of adequate services those services are available to people in remote and rural areas. That is perfectly relevant and sound. In a public policy sense, it is a very wise application of taxpayer resources—where the market is not able to address those needs and we as a nation have a public policy ambition to address that shortcoming.

Contrast that with the fibre-to-the-node proposal. The commercial sector have said they are happy to do it, as long as they get the outcomes they want under the competition framework—outcomes around an access regime and pricing. It is a very interesting plan. The market are saying they are ready to invest and the government are saying, ‘No, we want to bump out your investment and use taxpayer resources.’ That is novel. It is difficult to imagine what the public policy motivation is, other than juicy headlines for the government—a government that has form chasing juicy headlines. Look at the recent conversation held in the media about Telstra’s decision to turn on ADSL2+. That capability, widely known to have been available for 18 months, was only activated when a competitor came into the area offering faster speed services. Telstra said, ‘We’ll turn it on where there is a competitor, but where there is no competitor, even though it is resident in our exchanges, able to be activated and will improve a service that consumers have access to, we will not turn it on because there is some concern or confusion about access declarations and the application of the competition regime.’ How ironic that precisely nothing had changed in that regime—the regime argued as being the impediment to turning it on. Yet those ADSL2+ services have been turned on. Here the competition framework was being used as some kind of Trojan Horse which was hiding a telco provider’s commercial decision about when to make a service available that was ready and able to be turned on.

The Rudd government claims some credit for that. In fact, the Prime Minister stood up in parliament and said how great it was that the decision the minister took facilitated that outcome. How ironic that just days earlier on Inside Business on the ABC the minister was asked about that very point. Speaking in the third person, he said there was no decision for Stephen Conroy to make. ‘There was not a decision that I could make.’ So we see the Prime Minister taking great credit for something that could have been done by Telstra 18 months earlier, claiming that some intervention by the government had brought about change. Then we see the minister, to his credit, being quite open, frank and honest in his account—in vivid contrast to the claims being made by the Prime Minister. And then we see services coming on. Again, the competition framework was being used as some kind of Trojan Horse to make other arguments to position commercially when there was no impediment.
Then we read where Telstra say some regulatory forbearance had been brought into play and that that was what promoted their decision. The question the Rudd government has to ask, the question the telecommunications industry wants answered and the issue which must be of great concern to consumers is: just what was this regulatory forbearance? Was this some kind of sweetheart deal about fibre to the node? The Labor proposal is based on a Telstra proposition. Labor’s opposition to wireless has been long established. Yet for a continent as vast as ours, surely wireless needs to be part of the equation.

Then you see the next issue: how is it that Labor is promising to invest $4.7 billion in a broadband network when the commercial sector is saying, ‘We’re happy to do it’? So we are putting taxpayers’ money into something which the private sector is happy to fund. We then have issues about who is going to own the infrastructure the taxpayer is paying for. We have Labor claiming that it would go forward on an equity share model and get a commercial rate of return so as not to distort the market and in more recent times, in that very same interview, Senator Conroy was saying, ‘Well of course, that would be nice, but we’re not hung up on it.’ To Alan Kohler’s credit, he said, ‘You’re just going to give cash away?’ Senator Conroy said, ‘No—maybe, but we’re not hung up on needing an equity share model.’ In the background, we remember Telstra’s comments about kumbaya and how they weren’t in the business of embracing a taxpayer, a man of money, to see the government as a shared owner of some network. They would rather the freedom and liberty to run their own networks the way they should. So was that the regulatory forbearance or was it really policy forbearance—the ALP’s decision to junk its pre-election commitment of an equity share model with a commercial rate of return for $4.7 billion of taxpayers’ money and the private sector saying, ‘No, we can do much of this ourselves’? Is that really what was being talked about?

These questions are live issues for all Australians who are interested in telecommunications. These questions go to what kind of pressure the Rudd-Conroy, yet-to-be-described model will bring to bear on a competition framework that is being renovated today to take account of new emerging pressures, which is constantly under duress and litigation. Then are we going to throw in a renationalisation of a part of the telecommunications network? It was extraordinary watching estimates the other night as the minister was asked, ‘What’s this $4.7 billion going to buy?’ He could not answer that question. Australian taxpayers must wonder—$4.7 billion is being waved around as some kind of honey pot for a yet-to-be-defined project, with a yet-to-be-clarified basis for people even accessing that money, where the public policy interests do not seem to crack it much for a mention.

How is that $4.7 billion going to be spent? If it is not an equity model, what is it going to be? If it is not renationalising part of the network, what is it going to be? If it is not a direct attack on the ambitions of a communications industry policy of open access, which has been fairly consistent for some time, with encouraging investment in competition being the core basis of public policy making, what is it going to be? It is hard to know. Would you put the $4.7 billion into the inert part of this network and then allow telcos to bolt on their appliances, making use of the fibre—having some dangly end bits around the different places and you could bolt on whatever applies? Who knows? Is it to own the distribution point at the end of the fibre? Is it to say that some companies are going to think all their Christmases have come at once? They will get $4.7 billion for a venture which they say they will finance themselves. Is this like a silent equity or a shareholder not looking for a return? Is it just to get a spot on an
annual report of a private sector company, saying, ‘Here’s $4.7 billion of taxpayers’ money,’ just so we can pat ourselves on the back and say, ‘Hey, we’re involved in something that was going to happen anyway.’ These are really compelling public policy issues. I invite the Australian public to turn their minds to them, because many in the telco sector have turned their minds to them. They are wondering how they get a piece of this love and what is required of them in return.

How will this concept, yet to be defined, bolt into our competition framework? Will it make our renovations of the competition framework largely redundant and in one project wipe that out to the point where we may as well rebuild from scratch? Who knows? These are important issues that need to be addressed. These go to the heart of the competition framework. These also go to the heart of what the consumer wants and it is extraordinary how little voice the consumer has in this debate. I am told that there are nearly a million customers using the internet via dial-up services today. They have got other options but they have not exercised them. I am told there are other customers who would love to have ADSL2 but while the technology has been in place some commercial decision has been made not to turn it on so they have not been able to access it. I have got others who are talking about this holy vision to just keep chasing more and more speed—but no-one asks: at what price?

You will see a new pressure come into play—the three Rs. People will want to have the right speed for their applications. Not everybody needs to have crisp, pay TV quality moving images on their screen and therefore the bandwidth to support it. People say, ‘No, I want this speed for my particular applications.’ They are told that they can have a much faster speed but they answer, ‘Yes, but it is four times the price that I want to pay.’ So there will be this ‘right speed, right price’ debate. Then there will be the issue of what it costs for you to download material. If you have Boeing 747 speed to suck down material and then you realise you blow your download limits within five minutes and you are up for more cash, you will think about that. Then the issue of reliability will come forward, where people want to make sure that they have got services that are there all the time. Some of my friends tell me that for their businesses they actually need to have two broadband providers because usually neither them is up all the time. These are pressures on the competition framework. These are the new challenges that are emerging. These are a sign of some of the work still ahead of us at a time when we have got this renovation of the competition regime that we have today. It is a welcome renovation to try and at least take a little bit of the ‘l’ out of litigation. We hope that there will be negotiation and arbitration and then that litigation will be the last stop, not just the known destination with other steps on the pathway.

I commend the bill to the House. But I invite the House, the government, the telecommunications industry and the consumers to reflect on the journey—yet to be defined—that we are about to take. All I know is the ticket for that journey is being waved around at $4.7 billion—taxpayers’ dollars—but nobody can tell you quite what the destination is. This is a time for great reflection to see whether renovation, again, will be enough or whether the government through its lack of clarity is creating some extraordinary regulatory and competition policy challenges it is yet to turn its mind to. I think that is where the real work will be in the coming years. I look forward to being a constructive contributor in that process but I also look forward to holding the government to account for what is a poorly defined policy with enormous resourcing implications. But what sits behind that is that it could be a fundamental and poten-
ially terminal strike on the competition framework for telecommunications in this country if the government gets it wrong. At this time, sadly, there is not a lot of confidence in what the government’s plans are because no-one knows what they are. There is therefore even less confidence that our regulatory framework has the consumer interest protected, embraced and nourished or if we are just going to set up another set of extensive renovations to paper over the errors that may be made with this fibre-to-the-node concept. It is ill-defined and some would say ill-conceived. It is certainly something that people are looking for more clarity on.

Mr DUTTON (Dickson) (10.39 am)—The Trade Practices Amendment (Access Declarations) Bill 2008 seeks to amend the Trade Practices Act 1974 to clarify that access declarations are not legislative instruments for the purposes of the Legislative Instruments Act 2003. This bill removes uncertainty for the telecommunications sector following a recent Federal Court decision which has made possible legal implications regarding access declarations. By way of background, the telecommunications sector needs clarity in regard to access declarations made by the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission. Access declarations provide a right of access to declared telecommunications services. They aim to prevent those owning and controlling networks from taking advantage of their position in the market by only providing access on unreasonable terms or conditions. Their purpose is to encourage competition in the telecommunications sector. As we have heard, the recent Federal Court decision Roche Products Pty Ltd v National Drugs and Poison Schedule Committee may have implications relating to access declarations. This decision has created uncertainty as to whether access declarations made by the ACCC may be open to legal challenge on the basis that they are legislative instruments and are invalid as they have not been tabled. The bill provides certainty to the telecommunications sector by clarifying that access declarations are not, and are taken never to have been, legislative instruments for the purposes of the Legislative Instruments Act 2003, and it is for those reasons that the opposition now supports this bill.

It is important at the moment to place some facts on the table in relation to some of these debates, because what has taken place in the Australian community is a rewrite of recent history by the current government. It is important as part of this debate to note some facts in relation to competition in the telecommunications sector. In 1997 the Howard government decided to open up telecommunications to full competition. Back then there were just three telecommunications carriers; by May 2007 there were 167 carriers. From 1997 to 2007 the overall average price of telecommunications service had fallen by over 30 per cent. The flow-on effect to consumers and businesses of cheaper communications services is estimated to have been responsible for adding billions of dollars to the size of our national economy. In fact, from 1996 the coalition government made available for $4.1 billion for broadband and telecommunications funding. As a result, over a million businesses and households have access to broadband. Broadband is a consistently and constantly evolving technology, and the coalition’s programs have evolved with the technology.

When last in government, it is important to recognise, Labor presided over a cosy Telstra-Optus duopoly, which failed to deliver substantial price reductions and left most of the cost savings from technological improvements in the pockets of the carriers and not Australian consumers. The increased competition and other microeconomic reforms—that is, reforms that drive efficiency in the economy—have delivered significant benefits to Australians. In 2005, the Productivity Commission estimated Australia’s GDP as 2.5 per cent higher and Aus-
Australian households’ annual incomes are on average around $7,000 higher as a result of competition policy. Notable examples of the coalition’s push for greater competition include the airlines, where the coalition liberalised air travel both to and within our country; a landmark open skies agreement that was concluded with New Zealand in 1996; and the fact that greater competition with Qantas has been permitted by carriers such as Singapore Airlines and Emirates and now many others. We also concluded an open skies agreement with Singapore in 2003, which gives unlimited rights to carriers from both countries to operate services between Australia and Singapore. We reformed domestic aviation policy by removing the restriction preventing foreign owned but locally based airlines from operating domestic services in Australia. As a result, we have now seen airlines like Virgin Blue operating here to the undoubted benefit of the travelling public. In fact, between 1996 and 2006, international airline passenger numbers have increased from 13.3 million to 21.5 million, a staggering increase of 62 per cent. Domestic air passengers increased from 27.8 million to 44.2 million, an increase of 63 per cent.

There is a similar story in the energy sector, where the coalition overhauled the national energy market with an eye to generating greater investment in the generation and transmission of electricity and gas. Following the Parer review, the coalition worked with the states to create the Australian Energy Regulator and the Australian Energy Market Commission, national bodies that replaced some 13 state based authorities. And reform continues as more gas and electricity responsibilities are brought under the umbrella of these new national bodies.

In June 2007, the coalition put forward Australia Connected, a nationwide broadband solution that would have revolutionised communications in Australia. The centrepiece of Australia Connected was the immediate rollout of a new competitive state-of-the-art wireless broadband network that would extend high-speed broadband to 99 per cent of the population and provide speeds of 12 megabytes per second by 2009. By 2009, 99 per cent of Australian households and small businesses would have been able to access a high-speed broadband service which would have had the capacity for live video streaming, five-second CD downloads and multichannel television. Importantly, fast speeds would have been delivered to rural and regional customers at prices comparable to what is being charged in metropolitan areas today.

Labor’s plan to spend $4.7 billion of taxpayers’ money on a network that industry is prepared to fund itself is economically irresponsible, and it is the kind of irresponsible behaviour that we have come to know of Labor governments at a state level over the last decade as well. Most importantly, the point that needs to be made is that it does pose another risk to the Australian economy. By unleashing the skill and expertise of the private sector, the coalition would have, in contrast to Labor, delivered universal high-speed broadband to all Australians, regardless of where they live, within two years and at a fraction of the cost of Labor’s plan. Labor’s broadband network will not be completed until 2013 and is likely, at best, to reach only 75 per cent of the population. The fibre-to-the-node technology proposed by Labor is not practical for rural Australia. It will outdate quickly and will likely be already outdated by the time it is completed in 2013.

When I started my comments I made reference to the rewrite of recent history by the Labor government during this honeymoon period of their first few months in government when few are questioning the propositions put forward by members of the government, and there has been no greater rewrite of history in recent weeks and months by the Labor Party than in rela-
tion to the state of the Australian economy. It is important to remember as part of these debates that when the previous government came to power in 1996 we inherited a $96 billion debt from the Labor Party, who were also running a $10 billion deficit at that time. It is important as part of this debate to put on the record the reality now faced by the Australian Labor Party. Over the course of 11½ years of the coalition government we repaid all of that $96 billion of debt, saving over $8 billion a year in interest repayment moneys that were then applied to other sectors, including health and education. In addition to paying down that debt, whilst in government we were able to set aside $60 billion into funds in perpetuity to provide support to the Australian economy over the coming decades. We put money into the Future Fund and into funds like the Communications Fund. Through the $2 billion Communications Fund, the coalition provided future-proofing for the bush and ensured its future telecommunication needs would have been met. This perpetual fund was an investment in the future to provide an ongoing source of funding to continually improve services like mobile phone coverage in regional, rural and remote Australia.

Labor is proposing to raid the fund which was set up for Australia’s future and to waste it today. Last week Labor introduced the Telecommunications Legislation Amendment (Communications Fund) Bill 2008, which is set for rigorous debate in the parliament. Labor’s proposal aims to make the fund fair game for any broadband related expenditure considered politically expedient. The bill also aims to open the door for Labor to spend not only the interest earned on investment by the fund but also the $2 billion principal. In fact, last September the parliament passed legislation introduced by the former government to ensure the principal of the Communications Fund did not fall below $2 billion and to protect the fund from misuse. The government’s proposed amendments will remove that safeguard.

We have seen, by way of demonstration when Labor were in government up until 1996 and by the way in which they have managed the states and territories over the last 10 or so years, a complete lack of capacity to provide for the future and to future-proof some of these situations to safeguard the Australian economy against downturns. It is a concern—quite alarming, in fact—that we see in the early days of this government a raiding already of some of those funds.

Labor continues to claim that the coalition has made no plans to invest in our future, but, as I say, that is a hollow claim and, again, part of the rewrite of history when you consider that we have set aside, through the Future Fund, all of those unfunded superannuation liabilities and that we have addressed some of those concerns also in relation to public servant superannuation by closing the PSS and creating the Future Fund to meet those liabilities. We have created not just the Future Fund and the Communications Fund but also the Higher Education Endowment Fund and we have made plans to establish the Health and Medical Investment Fund, among others.

I want to make the point that when Labor came to government on 24 November they inherited an incredibly strong economy. They inherited an economy with unemployment at record lows. They inherited an economy not as we did in 1996 with that massive government debt but an economy with no debt. They inherited an economy which this year will easily deliver a surplus of over 1.5 per cent of GDP. They are running around the country at the moment making great claims that they will achieve a 1.5 per cent surplus in the May budget. If the Labor Party, even with their lack of experience and ability in economic management, do not deliver...
a surplus of 1.5 per cent or approaching two per cent, then really it will be a startling achievement even by their own low standards. But it is important that all Australians understand that, as we go forward with uncertainty in the US, Europe and Asia, we as a coalition government over the last 11½ years have provided an economy that can withstand many of those shocks. One of the shocks, though, that the Australian economy can never withstand is management by the Labor Party in government. That is something that nobody will ever be able to protect the Australian economy against, because Labor love to spend, they love to tax and they love to drive confidence down. That is what the incompetent Treasurer, Mr Swan, has been doing over recent months—a man who already has been identified not just by those in his own party and ours but by commentators in the financial world, both here and internationally, as somebody who is completely and utterly out of his depth.

It is important, I suppose, as part of this debate to recognise that Mr Tanner, the Minister for Finance and Deregulation, is waiting anxiously although as patiently as he can in the wings for Mr Rudd to cut the political throat of Mr Swan. Mr Rudd, of course, is driven by polling and he will see the polling on Mr Swan—the uncertainty of Australians in relation to Mr Swan, who is seen as a negative to the Australian people. Mr Swan is somebody who the Australian people know does not have a plan for the future. Mr Swan is a person who people really do recognise as being a great threat to the Australian economy. If we see that confidence going out of business, and small business in particular, we will see unemployment rise and bad outcomes for the Australian economy.

It is important to also note that there has been a lot made of the issue of inflation in recent weeks. The issue of inflation has been with us as a nation for many years.

Ms Hall—Mr Deputy President, I rise on a point of order regarding relevance. The member is not speaking to the substance of the bill, rather he is waffling on about anything that comes to his mind.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Dr MJ Washer)—The member for Dickson is relevant and I invite him to continue.

Mr DUTTON—This important point needs to be made about economic management because it relates specifically to the bill and to the issue of competition policy—of creating competition in the economy and creating circumstances in which businesses can compete against each other. The point that I make is that, when the coalition was in government, we dealt with the issue of inflation; we dealt with the United States recession; we dealt with the Asian economic crisis. That was the reality of all of those economic threats posed to us when we were in government.

Ms Hall—Mr Deputy Speaker, I raise the same point of order. This legislation is about telecommunications; it is not about the economy as such.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER—I call on the member for Dickson to sum up on the economy and to continue on the bill.

Mr DUTTON—Thank you very much, Mr Deputy Speaker. Of course, whenever the issue of the economy comes up, those opposite get very touchy because they know that, above all else, the Australian people will judge the Labor Party on their performance as to the economy, particularly in relation to issues like the trade practices and competition policy that will be administered over the next three years. The point I make is that their rewrite of recent his-
tory—particularly in relation to issues covered directly and indirectly by this bill—fails to recognise that, when we were in government, we were able to stave off the impact that the US recession had on our economy and to deal with the ongoing issue of inflation in a high-growth, low-employment economy. That reality, for the Labor Party, is lost.

Ms Hall—Mr Deputy Speaker, the legislation that we are debating is not about inflation. I ask you to bring the member back to the legislation before the House.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER—I am listening very carefully to what the member is saying. Perhaps he can address the bill.

Mr DUTTON—Thank you very much, Mr Deputy Speaker. I had hoped to finish a little early, but now I will take the opportunity to speak for the next three minutes to cover those points that I have not had a chance to cover because of interjections by economically illiterate members opposite. The reality is that, if this government is going to continue to provide a competitive environment in which business can prosper and Australians can be employed, it needs to take note of some of the concerns that economic and financial commentators have at the moment. The point that I make is this: the coalition, when in government, was able to deal with all of these issues that faced the economy.

Ms Hall—Mr Deputy Speaker, on the point of order: I am a very, very patient woman, but what the member is putting to the Committee today is in no shape or form related to this bill and he has more than tested my patience. I actually think he is absolutely abusing the forms of the Committee with what he is doing here. He is in no way addressing this legislation. I understand that it may be above his ability to talk on the legislation.

Mrs Mirabella—Mr Deputy Speaker, this is totally out of order. You have already ruled on this issue. The member opposite is making comments on the ability of the speaker on this side; she is not speaking to the point of order. You have ruled and she is defying your ruling.

Ms Hall—Further to the point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker: I am not defying your ruling. It is the member before the Committee who is defying your ruling; he is not talking to the substance of the bill. The standing orders of this Committee say that, when speaking to legislation, members must speak to the substance of the legislation. I am afraid that the member is not speaking to the substance of the legislation and I ask you to rule in that way.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER—Member for Dickson, would you please sum up in your final comments.

Mr DUTTON—Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. To be lectured on competence by the member for Shortland is nothing short of ironic. In closing, I just say that this bill, the Trade Practices Amendment (Access Declarations) Bill 2008, covers issues which are foreign to the member for Shortland. They go indirectly to issues relating to the economy—a concept which passes her by regularly. The reality is that the government, in its rewrite of history, has tried to fool the Australian people. But over the next three years, if the economy suffers, if Labor runs interest rates up close to their 17 per cent highs, as it did when it was last in government, the Australian people will hold it to account in three years time.

Mr ALBANESE (Grayndler—Minister for Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Local Government) (10.59 am)—I thank honourable members for their contributions to the debate and for their support for the Trade Practices Amendment (Access Declarations) Bill 2008. This bill promotes certainty and stability in the telecommunications sector by
preventing disruption to wholesale access arrangements that would result if a court were to hold that access declarations are legislative instruments. Such disruption also would be likely to have an adverse impact on the availability or price of telecommunication services used by consumers. In effect, the bill preserves the status quo under which access providers and access seekers have been operating since the commencement of the current telecommunications access regime, which occurred in 1997. I commend the bill to the Committee.

Question agreed to.

Bill read a second time.

Ordered that the bill reported to the House without amendment.

CONDOLENCES

Mr Peter James Andren

Debate resumed from 20 February, on motion by Mr Rudd:

That the House record its deep regret at the death on 3 November 2007 of Peter James Andren, former Independent Member for Calare, and place on record its appreciation of his long and meritorious service, and tender its profound sympathy to his family in their bereavement.

Mr MELHAM (Banks) (11.02 am)—I rise to remember a genuine and independent man who contributed much to this place and the electorate he represented. He was a man who, in the words of the member for New England, was ‘the conscience of the parliament’. Peter Andren was born in Gulargambone in 1946 and spent his early life moving around the countryside with his family. He eventually moved to Sydney, where he studied at Macquarie University and Alexander Mackie Teachers College. Peter taught for three years and then changed careers to move into journalism. It was during the time of his next career change that I came to know and admire Peter.

Peter was elected to the federal parliament in 1996 as an Independent. At that election he received 29 per cent of the primary vote, while the ALP received 28 per cent, the Nationals 22 per cent and the Liberals 15 per cent. After preferences, he received 67 per cent of the two-party preferred vote against the Nationals candidate—a remarkable victory in what people have described as a conservative electorate. What is even more remarkable is that Peter continued to increase his primary vote in every subsequent election such that there was no need to go to preferences by the 2001 election. The seat was described as ‘safe Independent’.

In his first speech, on 9 May 1996, Peter laid down his marker—as do many people entering this place, as we have seen in the past two weeks. In Peter’s case, there was no doubt as to his commitment and honesty and his intention to well and truly represent the people of Calare. He stated in part:

In a world that is becoming more confusing, more threatening, far more violent and less personal by the day, people need leadership from politicians who will hear their calls regardless of the political implications.

Peter Andren provided that leadership not only to the people of Calare, to whom he was staunch in his representation, but also to the broader community.

The seat of Calare, while Peter was its representative, was in the central west of New South Wales and included the towns of Bathurst, Orange, Lithgow, Oberon and Blayney. As the member for Calare, Peter did not always share the views of his electorate; he considered each
issue on its merits and then made his position known. The electorate obviously respected him, even when they did not necessarily agree with him, and his polling results bear testament to that. One of his staff, Tim Mahoney, described him in an interview with the *Western Advocate* as:

... a man of great integrity, a principled human being. More often than not he was referred to as a parliamentarian because he was above being a politician. He avoided politics. He dealt with issues on their merits.

Like Peter, his staff focused on resolving issues for the constituents of Calare. That was the heart and soul of his role as a local member. His first speech focused almost exclusively on the needs of his electorate and of regional Australia more generally.

On the broader political stage, Peter took great pains to think matters through so that he could arrive at the right decision. In recent years we witnessed his stand against the previous government on the war in Iraq, its treatment of asylum seekers and the sale of Telstra. Peter continued a campaign against what he saw as politicians’ perks, arguing against salary increases, and he felt that they were out of line with community standards. He felt that incumbents were unfairly advantaged in election campaigns because of this—and I think he would have been pleased with the government’s decision last week. In his obituary in the *Sydney Morning Herald* on 5 November 2007, a story was told about a cartoon Peter had on the window of his office in Parliament House. It is worth recounting because it is indicative of the man. The cartoon depicted:

... a man being kicked out of Parliament with a speech balloon coming from inside the building declaring: “The cheek of him! Coming in here representing the mob.”

Peter Andren brought with him to this place a rare dignity, honesty and integrity. I offer my personal condolences to his family: his first wife, Jenny; his partner, Valerie; and his sons, Greg and Josh. I also offer my commiserations to his staff, who were as committed as Peter to the work that he did. It is appropriate, as I head to the end of my contribution today, to use Peter’s own words—a worthy epitaph for any member in this place. These were his words a few weeks after he announced his decision to retire from the House of Representatives:

I look back on the past 11½ years with great pride, having forever silenced the sceptics who say an Independent is a wasted space in the political system.

Peter did prove his sceptics wrong. I, for one, favour the two-party system. I am not necessarily a great fan of Independents because I believe stability is brought to government if one side or the other is in control. I do not like the idea of Independents holding the balance of power. Peter Andren, however, was a rare exception because you knew that he could not be bought. If he was to decide that a government was to fall or survive on his vote, it would be on the merits of the vote and not on what was in it for him or what was in it for his electorate. I think those of us who had dealings with him saw that integrity shine through. That integrity is there in other members of the House; it is not unique to Peter.

I went to Peter’s funeral, together with the federal member for Reid, Laurie Ferguson. The member for Calare, Mr Cobb, and the former member for Macquarie, Kerry Bartlett, were also there. So both sides of the parliament were represented. I think the Independent member Tony Windsor was there as well, and Senator Bob Brown gave a eulogy at the funeral. So the parliament was well represented in the middle of an election campaign, as it should have been.
Another of my experiences with Peter was when he opposed the preamble to the Constitution that was proposed by the then government in 1999. He opposed it at the time because of the lack of consultation. Whilst the Labor Party supported it in the end in the referendum, it was Peter, because he voted against it in the House, who was able to, in effect, help write the ‘no’ case for the preamble in that constitutional referendum. I had some discussions with him in relation to that, and during that campaign I spoke out against that preamble because of its lack of consultation, which I was entitled to do as an individual member of this place. In the end, less than 40 per cent of the people voted for that preamble, as against 46 per cent for the republic, which was the second question in the referendum. Peter got it right there as well. Even though the major political parties were supporting the preamble—and the Labor Party at a federal level did support the preamble—less than 40 per cent of the people supported it, and it failed. I think that is an indication of how Peter generally had a knack for where the people were.

Peter Andren retired from this place as an Independent. He was not defeated, so he picked his own manner of leaving. That, again, is testament to an Independent because the truth is that, as much as most of us might think we represent our constituents and are popular or whatever, very few people can get elected to this place as genuine Independents and not as refugees from a major political party. Peter was one of those people. He kept getting re-elected with bigger majorities. I salute him. I will miss him and his contributions to this place. I was very pleased to see the cross-party support, the cross-party attendance, at his funeral during an election period. That says a lot as to how we in this place felt about him.

Mr JOHN COBB (Calare) (11.10 am)—Like the member for Banks, I rise to speak about Peter Andren. For somebody without a political power base he was extraordinarily well known not just in his own electorate of Calare but throughout Australian politics and far beyond his ability to influence things—although he certainly exerted that whenever he could.

The electorate of Calare, which I am very proud to represent, is today a very different electorate. Instead of being one of the smallest rural electorates in New South Wales it is now the largest. The Calare that Peter represented had a little more than half the constituency of the new electorate of Calare that I represent, even though, funnily enough, it had only about five per cent of the total area.

Peter Andren was generally well known and very popular among the people of Calare—I am not worrying about the people in this place for the moment—probably because he dedicated himself to the individual rather than to the big picture. He certainly did that. He was very popular. He certainly took up the cause of individuals from the central west in a very strong fashion with whichever minister or organisation they had issues which needed addressing. As to the big picture of politics, Peter and I quite often disagreed. The one thing we certainly did agree on was dedication to the people at a local level. As the member for Banks just mentioned, Peter was born at Gulargambone and lived at Molong before he became the member for Calare. Funnily enough, while Peter and I are obviously from very different ends of the political spectrum, as it were, I too grew up at Gulargambone and lived at Molong prior to becoming the member for Calare—even though it was only a few months before.

Peter Andren entered parliament in 1993. He served four full terms in the 38th, 39th, 40th and 41st Australian parliaments. He had chosen to stand for the Senate in the 2007 election but he resigned from that ambition once his medical condition became known to him. As I
think the member for Banks also said, as an Independent he could do those things whereas the rest of us are probably a little more constrained by the organisations we represent on a wider basis.

Peter Andren represented the Calare electorate, which then included Bathurst, Lithgow and areas right up to the Blue Mountains. I think it is a measure of your sincerity when those who support you do so in a fanatical way. Peter’s close friends and supporters did that. Even into the last election and after he had died, Peter’s partner, Valerie, tried to carry on where he had left off. All those involved with him were very close to him and thought the world of him. They were people from very different walks of life. There were people from all over the old electorate of Calare at his funeral, and they were from all walks of life.

As I moved around the area prior to the election I found that, whether or not people actually voted for Peter, they were very supportive of Peter and felt that he had their best interests at heart. As a politician, you cannot ask for much more than to have people who do not support you in the ballot box still think you are a good person. You cannot beat that.

I speak today not so much as a political colleague but as somebody who now has the honour to represent the same seat and more than 50 per cent of the people whom Peter had represented. It is an electorate that, I believe, still needs to be represented in this forum today. On behalf of the people of the new and old Calare electorates I offer the sympathies of the people of this House to Valerie and the rest of Peter’s family. Without doubt, he will be remembered for a long time in that region.

Mr GARRETT (Kingsford Smith—Minister for the Environment, Heritage and the Arts) (11.16 am)—I too rise to speak to the condolence motion marking the passing of Peter Andren, an outstanding Independent politician who served in the House of Representatives with such distinction. I strongly endorse the comments made by other members, particularly the member for Banks, who spoke very clearly on the role that Peter Andren fulfilled not only in the parliament but in the wider community and identified the quite significant political achievements that Peter was able to deliver in his career as a working politician.

I want to convey my sympathy and condolences to Peter’s partner, Valerie, and his sons Josh and Greg. I know Valerie and I knew Peter well before I came into the parliament. He was always engaged in a genuine way with the political process. He had a great concern for the welfare of what are sometimes described as the ordinary people but are really the community of Australia. He was a grassroots politician par excellence. When he eventually wrested the seat of Calare, he did so with a significant vote in his favour. It was the most outstanding example of a true Independent politician gaining the necessary support from a community to represent them in the House of Representatives—which is effectively still a two-party system. That achievement, in and of itself, marked him as a person of considerable ability and a politician of distinction.

As well as that, he was able to marry what I think are two of the most necessary attributes in political life and in public life but which quite often run into one another, particularly once you are in the parliament—that is, matters of conscience and matters of policy. You have to reflect those in your own actions, decisions, views and positions on issues and also maintain that connection with your community, which gives you the legitimacy to speak on their behalf in the House. As a consequence, while representing what is essentially still a rural seat, Peter Andren recognised the importance of issues to do with the delivery of telecommunications
services and rural infrastructure and spoke strongly and constantly and represented his electorate very effectively on those issues. At the same time, he was a man of highly developed conscience. As a consequence, he spoke on issues such as the war in Iraq and our treatment of Indigenous people. Clearly, in the past he was a strong voice concerned about the treatment by the previous government of asylum seekers in the region. He brought into this House the twin capacities of someone of conscience and an effective representative on the issues in his electorate. He operated very effectively and was liked and respected by members on both sides of the House.

Peter argued for greater accountability for politicians’ entitlements. That is something which I think, broadly, all of us support. I do not think he did any disservice to the parliament by raising that issue. Additionally, he was a great exponent of the future prospects and causes of Independent politicians, and it is there that he and I probably parted ways more than on any other issue. I think that, whilst there will be on occasions some rare and distinctive personalities who have a basket of gifts such as Peter Andren had that enables them to gain the necessary support to come into the House and to represent as an Independent, they are the exception, not the rule, not only because of the way in which our political system effectively operates but also because it is uncommon to find that match of capacities within one person.

Tony Windsor, his colleague here in the House, said that Peter Andren served as the conscience of the parliament. I think that is true. On more than one occasion I would find myself listening closely to his speeches. They were always given in a deliberate and well-considered way. He clearly not only felt strongly about issues but thought deeply about them. I think that is the mark of a true conviction politician. Peter will be sadly missed. It is entirely appropriate that the parliament should mark his passing with this condolence motion. Again, I offer my sympathies to his family, his extended family, his office staff and friends. I want to put on record my appreciation of the great service that he gave not only to the people of Calare but to Australia.

Mr Griffin (Bruce—Minister for Veterans’ Affairs) (11.21 am)—This is an occasion where I felt that I really should try and say a few words with respect to the passing of Peter Andren. Peter was a good bloke. I knew him in the time that he was here. I was elected in 1993; he was elected in 1996. We had cause to deal with each other on a number of issues over the years. In fact, over the last few years in this place I sat on the opposition front bench, around near the horseshoe, and Peter sat behind me, and we would often engage on the issues of the day.

I felt that it was important to acknowledge his time here and him as a man and a politician. He was very much a good bloke and a man of strong convictions. I have read his book, *The Andren Report: an Independent Way in Australian Politics*, which I have with me today. For those who would like to learn more about what it is like as an Independent in this place and in the electorate and also something more about a man whose life has been in its own way quite extraordinary, it is quite a reasonable read. It is very much a stream of consciousness book in some respects, but it does give you an inkling of what motivated him, what put him on the road to this place and how he saw this place and how it operated.

Peter and I would disagree on things on occasions. On some of the issues and some of the stands that he took, I would have to say we parted ways to a degree. The one thing you always knew with Peter was that he genuinely believed what he said. He genuinely held the views
that he held. He was forthright about stating them in a manner which was always articulate and strongly held, and with a good deal of passion. He backed that up in his dealings with his electorate and in his public dealings generally. The public rewarded him for that. His results were quite phenomenal.

In the context of Peter’s life in this place, much has been said about Independents in the parliament. I think it is recognised and acknowledged that his achievement in being elected in the first place and being re-elected was in itself quite significant. It is particularly significant when you look at the history of Independents in the House of Representatives. There have only been 10 members elected to the House of Representatives as Independents since 1950. Five of those were originally elected as major party candidates and later switched to being Independents as incumbents. They were Paul Filing and Allan Rocher, who were ex-Liberals; and Bob Katter, the current member for Kennedy. Then there were a couple of ex-ALP guys: Graeme Campbell, a former member for Kalgoorlie; and Sam Benson, back in the sixties, who was a former member for Batman.

One was originally elected at a by-election, being Phil Cleary, who was elected to the seat of Wills after a former Prime Minister at that time, Bob Hawke, resigned from parliament. Phil was elected firstly at a by-election and subsequently at a general election. One Independent had been a major party candidate and was expelled, leaving no official Liberal candidate. That was, of course, Pauline Hanson. There have been two who were existing state MPs who then went federal: Ted Mack and Tony Windsor, the current member for New England. Only Peter Andren was elected as, as I call it, a cleanskin candidate; everyone else had a significant base to work off, one that they had developed through their involvement in parliament—the New South Wales parliament in the case of Ted Mack and Tony Windsor—or there were particular circumstances regarding the focus of a by-election, as in Phil Cleary’s case. So the rest actually came out of the major parties.

So Peter’s achievement in being elected in the first place—and being elected subsequently, but I refer in particular to being elected in the first place—was in fact quite phenomenal. That does highlight the difficulty that faces Independent candidates in federal seats in being able to campaign across large population areas or, as in this case, large geographic areas, and actually be successful. He is the only one in modern political times to have really done it—having done it in the situation of having been completely outside the system. It is true that he had, through his role as a newsreader, a significant local profile in the area in which he stood. Nonetheless, his was a real achievement that ought to be taken into consideration in terms of his success and popularity in the electorate. After Peter got here he stuck to his guns. He held to his views and stood up for those views day in and day out all of the way through his time here.

The parliament is the poorer for his passing. The public debate in this country will also be the poorer for his passing. I know that he was a man who had strong links to his family and I pass on to its members my condolences on their loss. Although having known Peter for just a bit of time, I do understand that their loss has in fact been very great—and with that I wish them all the very best.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Dr MJ Washer)—I understand it is the wish of honourable members to signify at this stage their respect and sympathy by rising in their places.

Honourable members having stood in their places—
The DEPUTY SPEAKER—I thank the Committee.

Ms OWENS (Parramatta) (11.27 am)—I move:
That further proceedings be conducted in the House.

Question agreed to.

Special Forces Sergeant Matthew Locke
Trooper David Pearce
Special Forces Commando Luke Worsley

Debate resumed from 12 February, on motion by Mr Rudd:

That the House record its deep regret at the deaths in late 2007 of Sergeant Matthew Locke, Trooper David Pearce and Private Luke Worsley while on combat operations in Afghanistan and place on record its appreciation of their service to their country and tender its profound sympathy to their families in their bereavement.

Mrs MARKUS (Greenway) (11.28 am)—I rise to speak to the condolence motion for the late Trooper David Pearce, Special Forces Sergeant Matthew Locke and Australian Special Forces Commando Luke Worsley. Today I want to particularly pay tribute to Luke Worsley, of the 4th Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment, who was killed during an attack on the Taliban in Afghanistan on 23 November 2007. I wish to express my condolences to Luke’s mother and father, Marjorie and John Worsley, his brother and three sisters, their spouses, his nephews and his nieces. I had not had the privilege of meeting or knowing personally Luke or his family. I understand, from a public statement by Luke’s father, that the family wishes their privacy to be respected and desires people to think of Luke in the way he was known by those who knew and loved him.

Luke’s parents live in the electorate of Greenway. Today I would like to record some reflections to honour his life. The commanding officer of 4RAR, Lieutenant-Colonel Mark Smethurst, described Luke’s actions during the attack on a Taliban bomb-making compound in Oruzgan province this way:

Luke was the first man of the team through the door and was met by enemy forces that opened fire at close range … Luke’s actions upon entering the room, warning of the enemy threat, almost certainly saved the lives of other members of his team.

On the Department of Defence website there are some biographical notes about Luke, and I would like to refer to them now:

Private Luke Worsley enlisted into the Australian Regular Army on the 23rd of October 2001. After completing his Recruit Training he was allocated to the Royal Australian Infantry Corps and commenced his Initial Employment Training at Singleton, NSW on the 15th of April 2002. At the completion of his Initial Employment Training, Luke was posted to the 1st Battalion, The Royal Australian Regiment. During his service with 1RAR, Luke deployed to East Timor as part of Operation Citadel, providing security to the people of East Timor.

After two years of service with the 1st Battalion, and looking for more of a challenge, Luke applied for selection with the 4th Battalion (Commando), The Royal Australian Regiment. He was successful in his attempt, and Luke went on to complete the Commando suite of courses, becoming ‘beret’ qualified in 2004.

For his service in East Timor and Afghanistan, Luke was awarded the Australian Defence Medal, the Australian Active Service Medal with clasp East Timor, the United Nations Medal with the United Nations Transitional Authority East Timor Ribbon, the International Coalition Against Terrorism Clasp, the Afghanistan Campaign Medal, the Infantry Combat Badge and the Return from Active Service Badge. Luke was also awarded the Unit Citation for Gallantry for his service with the Special Operations Task Group in 2006.

The Chief of the Defence Force, Air Chief Marshal Angus Houston, said of Luke:

He was a greatly respected soldier and will be dearly missed. He was one of our finest. I am told his dedication and enthusiasm for soldiering was an inspiration to all those around him.

Luke has been described by his family, his colleagues and his comrades as: ’an inspiration to his fellow soldiers’, ‘greatly respected’, ‘one of our finest’, ‘an outstanding soldier’, ‘loving’, ‘compassionate’, ‘someone whose qualities set him above almost all other commandos’, ‘talented’, ‘modest and unassuming’, ‘tolerant’, ‘humorous’ and ‘a reflection of his upbringing’. In the words of Private Worsley’s brother-in-law:

Luke’s bear hugs were legendary among the family. He was soft, gentle and loving. We’re going to miss that affection so much. It’s something he gave so readily and something so many men are afraid of. He was a son, a brother, an uncle, a mate, an Australian hero. I am reminded of the words, ‘Greater love hath no man except he lay down his life for his friends.’ He was a man of courage and compassion, love and light-heartedness. I wish to honour his parents and pay respect to his family. We are proud of your boy. We thank you. I acknowledge the price that you, your son and your family have paid.

Mr Griffin (Bruce—Minister for Veterans’ Affairs) (11.34 am)—I will not be speaking for long on this motion. But I think it is important that we acknowledge the passing of three soldiers who were killed in action doing their duty to this nation, as their passing shows, in a very dangerous place where there is much to be done.

Much was said by earlier speakers regarding Sergeant Matthew Locke and his bravery. Sergeant Locke was an absolute credit to his unit. I think it was best put by the Chief of Army, Lieutenant General Leahy. He said Sergeant Locke was:

One of those inspirational leaders, who knew his duty and knew his task and it’s a very sad day that the nation has lost a man of this calibre.

At the time he was killed, with complete disregard for his own safety Sergeant Locke broke heavy enemy fire to neutralise Taliban advancing on an Australian position. In doing so, he saved the lives of his mates.

Trooper David Pearce was serving with the Reconstruction Task Force in Oruzgan province when he died on 8 October last year. He had previously served in the Solomon Islands. He was the driver of a patrol returning from reconnaissance when his vehicle was attacked with an improvised explosive device. He was killed in action.

Private Luke Worsley, of whom much was said earlier, was serving with the Special Operations Task Group in Oruzgan province when he died on 23 November 2007 as part of his second tour of duty in Afghanistan. He had also served in East Timor. Private Worsley was killed by small-arms fire while participating in a planned attack on Taliban supporters.
I would like to join with the Prime Minister, the Minister for Defence and other members of the House in expressing my sorrow at their passing and extending my condolences to their families and loved ones. It is a very difficult job being part of the defence forces and serving in locations like Afghanistan, facing enemies and putting your life on the line. These guys put their lives on the line and, unfortunately, their lives were taken. To be killed in action while serving in a location such as Afghanistan, you can pay no greater price than that. It is an incredibly sad thing for their families, but they need to know and understand that, as they knew them to be great people, they were certainly great servants of this country and we respect what they have done and their passing.

Mr HARTSUYKER (Cowper) (11.38 am)—I rise today in support of this motion of condolence. I can but offer my deepest sympathies to the families of Trooper David Pearce, Special Forces Sergeant Matthew Locke and Special Forces Commando Luke Worsley. Men of this high calibre are not common. These three men, and the men and women of the Australian Army, deserve a special place in our hearts. As soldiers, each of these men knew that they were involved in a dangerous, often deadly profession, yet they chose to serve the people of Australia and to defend our freedom and liberty from those determined to alter our way of life.

In delivering the condolence motion in the House, it was clear in the contribution from the Minister for Defence that his words were spoken with a heavy heart, bearing the weight of the office he now holds. In my contribution, I would like to reflect in particular on the life and service of Sergeant Matthew Locke. Sergeant Locke was from the town of Bellingen in my electorate of Cowper and his passing has had a profound impact on our area. From a small town of around 3,000 people, approximately 1,000 people turned out to pay their respects to Sergeant Locke at a memorial service. Sergeant Locke—or ‘Grub’, as he was known as a youngster—enlisted in the regular army in 1991. He served with the Royal Australian Regiment until 1997, when he successfully completed a Special Air Service selection course. Over the following two years he completed another 15 specialist courses, including ones in demolitions, diving and parachuting.

Sergeant Locke was posted to serve in the 3rd SAS Squadron. During his service in the Australian Defence Force, Sergeant Locke served with distinction in East Timor, Iraq and Afghanistan. While deployed in Afghanistan in December 2006 he was awarded the Medal for Gallantry for twice fighting off militia patrols attempting to overrun his patrol’s isolated position, directing air support against militia forces. The following excerpt from Sergeant Locke’s medal citation provides an insight into his character and bravery:

… a patrol, with Sergeant Locke as second-in-command, were tasked with establishing an Observation Post in extremely rugged terrain over looking an Anti-Coalition Militia sanctuary. After an arduous ten hour foot infiltration up the side of the mountain, the patrol was called into action to support elements of the Combined Task Force Special Forces patrol that were in contact with the Anti-Coalition Militia in the valley floor to their north …

During the afternoon, the Observation Post became the focus of the Anti-Coalition Militia who made repeated attempts by day and night to overrun and surround the position. In one such incident the Anti-Coalition Militia attempted to outflank the Observation Post and Sergeant Locke without regard for his own personal safety, led a two man team to locate and successfully neutralise the Anti-Coalition Militia in order to regain the initiative and protect his patrol from being overrun.
This particular incident was followed by another Anti-Coalition Militia attempt to manoeuvre to attack the patrol Observation Post from another flank. Sergeant Locke, again with little regard for his personal safety, adopted a fire position that was exposed on high ground which dominated the planned Anti-Coalition Militia assault. Whilst deliberately exposing himself to intense rifle and machine gun fire from the Anti-Coalition Militia, he again neutralised the lead assaulting elements whilst suppressing other Militia until the arrival of offensive air support. Whilst still under sustained fire, Sergeant Locke then directed indirect fire to effectively neutralise another Anti-Coalition Militia advance on his patrol’s position.

In this age, society holds up actors, athletes and musicians as role models and heroes, but in my mind Sergeant Locke and the other two Defence Force personnel I mentioned are true heroes. Yet Sergeant Locke did not see himself as a hero. When he was asked about the events that led to him receiving the Medal for Gallantry, Sergeant Locke said:

What’s going through your mind is actually doing your job at the time and looking after the blokes with you—and that’s essentially what we spend our whole career training to do. There’s a heap more blokes that deserve the award as much as I deserve the award.

Australia has indeed lost one of her finest sons, and I extend my deepest sympathies to Sergeant Locke’s parents, Norm and Jan, his wife, Leigh, and son, Keegan.

In commemoration of our military history, which has so defined our growth as a nation, there has been a focus on the sacrifice of our service men and women. The sacrifice of the family at home is all too little acknowledged—the endless months of separation, not knowing if loved ones are safe, not knowing if a knock on the door might come with the worst possible news. We should be mindful of the sacrifice which is made by Defence Force families—the long weeks and months of separation from mum or dad, the fishing trips that do not happen, the endless moves from base to base.

I would like to conclude my remarks by reflecting on the words of Padre Dr Graham Wheelan, who observed on Remembrance Day 2007:

It is our service men and women, not the reporters who have given us the freedom of the press … and … It is the service men and women not the politicians who have given us the right to life and the freedoms we now enjoy.

Trooper David Pearce, Special Forces Sergeant Matthew Locke and Special Forces Commando Luke Worsley were fine Australians who upheld the values of this nation and were men of which Australia can be rightly proud.

Mr ROBERT (Fadden) (11.44 am)—I rise to speak on the condolence motion for Trooper David Pearce and to pass on my sympathy and support to his wife, Nicole, and daughters, Stephanie and Hannah. Trooper Pearce was born in Liverpool, New South Wales. He enlisted in the Australian Army Reserve in 2002 and served until 2005. Following a period of reserve service, he transferred to the Australian Regular Army in July 2006. He was deployed to the Solomon Islands with the 9th Battalion of the Royal Queensland Regiment in 2005-06. He was subsequently posted to the Brisbane based 2nd/14th Light Horse Regiment in October 2006. He had been deployed just a few weeks prior and was serving with the reconstruction force.

Trooper Pearce was 41 when he was tragically killed during a roadside bomb attack on the light armoured vehicle he was driving, only six kilometres from the Australian base of Tarin Kowt in the southern province of Oruzgan. Trooper Pearce was one of the great modern
zac who knew service above self and demonstrated so ably that, ‘Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.’ His death has touched the heart of the nation and has united people from all walks of life who have paid personal homage to this brave soldier.

Trooper Pearce’s life experiences and outgoing personality made him a very popular soldier. His ability to communicate with people of all ages was highly regarded and he was well respected by his peers. As a former army officer with operational service overseas, I understand the hardships for families who keep the home fires burning whilst their partners serve us overseas.

Trooper Pearce was a great family man. He was a dedicated father of two beautiful girls, Stephanie and Hannah, and a dedicated husband to Nicole, his wife and life partner of 18 years. It is attributed to George Orwell that:

We sleep safe in our beds because rough men stand ready in the night to visit violence on those who would do us harm.

Trooper Pearce’s sacrifice was not in vain. He is a beacon of inspiration to other peacekeepers to provide a better future for the people they serve—in Trooper Pearce’s account, those of Afghanistan. He stands tall as a man who believed that all people, wherever they may live, should have the opportunity to live in a better world, free from violence, intimidation and repression. Though it can only ever be a small comfort to his family, Trooper Pearce sacrificed his life doing what he loved—serving his country.

A highly professional, skilled and dedicated soldier, he knew the great dangers, the great sacrifices, but also served in that great tradition of our noble country, knowing that the only way evil prospers is if good men do nothing. Trooper Pearce will never share a place with those cold, miserable souls who stand by in ambivalence. His place will be forever known as one of honour, of the man who did not shrink or shirk from danger but fulfilled his duty in the great tradition of our nation. He is universally saluted. Let me finish with some fitting words by Rudyard Kipling:

If you can keep your head when all about you
Are losing theirs and blaming it on you,
If you can trust yourself when all men doubt you
But make allowance for their doubting too,
If you can wait and not be tired by waiting,
Or being lied about, don’t deal in lies,
Or being hated, don’t give way to hating,
And yet don’t look too good, nor talk too wise:
If you can dream—and not make dreams your master,
If you can think—and not make thoughts your aim;
If you can meet with Triumph and Disaster
And treat those two imposters just the same;
If you can bear to hear the truth you’ve spoken
Twisted by knaves to make a trap for fools,
Or watch the things you gave your life to, broken,
And stoop and build ‘em up with worn-out tools:
If you can make one heap of all your winnings
And risk it all on one turn of pitch-and-toss,
And lose, and start again at your beginnings
And never breathe a word about your loss;
If you can force your heart and nerve and sinew
To serve your turn long after they are gone,
And so hold on when there is nothing in you
Except the Will which says to them: ‘Hold on!’
If you can talk with crowds and keep your virtue,
Or walk with kings—or lose the common touch,
If neither foes nor loving friends can hurt you;
If all men count with you, but none too much,
If you can fill the unforgiving minute
With sixty seconds’ worth of distance run,
Yours is the Earth and everything that’s in it,
And—which is more—you’ll be a Man, my son!

This parliament is tremendously proud of Trooper David Pearce. As his federal member and a former fellow serving soldier, I am incredibly proud of his service and his sacrifice. I know his wife, Nicole, daughters Stephanie and Hannah, and extended family are very, very proud of their hero, father and husband.

**The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Ms S Bird)**—I understand it is the wish of honourable members to signify at this stage their respect and sympathy by rising in their places.

*Honourable members having stood in their places—*

**The DEPUTY SPEAKER**—I thank the Committee.

**Ms OWENS (Parramatta) (11.50 am)**—I move:
That further proceedings be conducted in the House.
Question agreed to.

**Mr Leonard Joseph Keogh**
**Dr Kenneth Lionel Fry**
**Ms Helen Mayer**
**Hon. Robert Lindsay Collins AO**
**Mr Matt Price**
**Mr Bernard Douglas (Bernie) Banton AM**
**Hon. Sir Charles Walter Michael Court AK, KCMG, OBE**
**Sir Edmund Percival Hillary KG, ONZ, KBE**

Debate resumed from 12 February, on the Speaker’s announcement.

**Mr PYNE (Sturt) (11.51 am)**—I rise today in the Main Committee to associate myself with the remarks made in the main chamber in a condolence for Matt Price. I endorse the
words of the Prime Minister, the Leader of the Opposition and the Deputy Prime Minister about Matt Price. I send the condolences of my wife and I to the family of Matt Price, to his wife, Susie, and his children, Jack, Matilda and Harry.

My wife and I travelled to Perth for the funeral of Matt Price. My wife does not travel a great deal. She is now 37 weeks pregnant and back in November-early December travel was not a high priority for her. She also has three other children. Obviously she tends to travel much less than when we were first married and before we had children. But she was absolutely determined that we should travel to Perth for Matt Price’s funeral. I image Matt Price was the only person in politics—or in the press gallery, should I say—that she would feel so overwhelmed by in the sadness that she felt about his death. I felt the same way and was very happy to go to the funeral to support his family, to show how much we cared about him as a person and to pay our respects.

In this job—and I have been a member of parliament for 15 years—there are few relationships that one builds with the press gallery, for obvious reasons. We are like a small bird and a hippopotamus in Africa; we have a symbiotic relationship as journalists and politicians. We need to get our messages out to the public and journalists need to get the stories and dig deep—not to deliberately embarrass us but to make sure that the public knows what is going on. That is their job and they do it very well. So you do not tend to have good friendships with people in the press gallery, for that very reason.

I can say with absolute confidence that I did not feel that way about Matt Price. Matt Price had an amazing ability, as a person and as a journalist, to encourage trust and faith with the people who should not have been trusting him. He was such a larrikin. He was so engaging and had a marvellous turn of phrase. His column ‘The Sketch’, as well as his stories—but particularly ‘The Sketch’—was something that almost had the essence of the Henry Lawsons and the Banjo Patersons about it. He had the great capacity that Australians have to poke fun at other people, to rib politicians and other political, business or even union figures in a way that no-one can take offence. Other countries find our sense of humour hard to understand. The Americans often take offence at things that we say when we are just ribbing each other. Matt Price used to do the same thing through his column.

I was sometimes the butt of his jokes, but I really enjoyed that. I did not mind at all sometimes the way he characterised me—I think I can say it now—as the Treasurer’s closest friend and supporter. I was not always pleased to be characterised in that way in the previous government, but I did not mind because Matt Price had such a marvellous turn of phrase. Who could take offence? It is a particularly Australian trait to be able to poke fun without sarcasm and to be able to raise humour and a wry smile without actually hurting anybody’s feelings. Matt Price had that great gift. We are all the poorer without Matt Price.

Often I knew I should not have taken Matt Price’s calls, but he drew people to him like a magnet. I certainly had many times of laughter and great meals with Matt Price. We were all utterly shocked at how quickly he was taken from us, how quickly he died. I had dinner with him about two weeks before the rising of parliament before we had the election called and did not come back at all. Gosh, he was in great health and heart. For him to die as quickly as he did was a terrible shock to us all. It certainly brought home to me the great mortality that we all exist with every day. While sometimes in politics we think that nothing can hurt us, the
fact that such a marvellous person as Matt Price could lose his life as quickly as he did and be taken so young was really a great tragedy for us all.

His family at the funeral were absolutely extraordinary. His children were extraordinarily courageous and were a great credit to him. I would like to place on record my strong feelings for Matt Price and wish his family all the best. I know they will have the remarkable resilience and good sense of humour that Matt Price had throughout his life. I thank the House for the opportunity to comment on this condolence.

Mr COMBET (Charlton—Parliamentary Secretary for Defence Procurement) (11.57 am)—I wish to speak on the condolence for Mr Bernie Banton. Bernie Banton was a personal friend of mine and I knew him as a passionate fighter for justice. He was a hero to many people. We first met in the emotion-charged campaign against James Hardie in 2004 when I was then the ACTU Secretary. I have spent a fair degree of my working life over the last 25 years campaigning on behalf of asbestos victims and so had Bernie Banton, but it was not until 2004 that we met.

James Hardie, as many people would appreciate, had for many years knowingly manufactured and marketed asbestos products that were harmful to people’s health. The evidence that has been produced over a number of years now in compensation proceedings is that the company knew that asbestos caused the crippling lung disease asbestosis, and they knew that as far back as the 1930s. They also knew, certainly from the 1950s and 1960s, that asbestos could cause the fatal cancer mesothelioma. Nonetheless, in that knowledge James Hardie continued to produce asbestos based products right up until 1986.

Bernie and his brothers had worked in James Hardie’s Camellia operations in an inner western area of Sydney in the 1970s. Evidence in Bernie’s compensation case late last year showed that the company had in fact screened him for asbestos damage in the 1970s when he was working for the company. In an action that was typical of how James Hardie treated not only their employees but many other members of the community, James Hardie found the early indicators of lung damage in Bernie Banton in the 1970s, yet they did nothing to prevent further harm and they did not even advise him that the asbestos was already affecting his health. They covered up the damage to the health of their employees. Many employees of the company and consumers within the wider community were treated in this way, and essentially that was with contempt.

As a result of this, and as evidence came to light over the years, the company faced a mounting compensation liability from former employees, current employees and members of the community who had derived asbestos diseases as a result of exposure to James Hardie asbestos products. In the late 1990s, faced with this mounting liability for compensation, the company restructured and re-registered in the Netherlands. I am convinced from my experience in this area that this was clearly an attempt to place its assets beyond the reach of victims of its asbestos products in Australia. I believe the Netherlands was selected as a place for the company to register because of the legal difficulty claimants in Australia would have in pursuing their compensation against the company in that jurisdiction.

This legal construct, as it were, was put together by a company in Sydney known as Allens, and it truly disgusted many of us when we came to appreciate exactly what had been concocted. At the end of the day, the company had left behind $300 million to meet a compensation liability which it later agreed in negotiations with us was in the order of $1.5 billion in
In nominal terms, that liability over the next 40 to 50 years is approximately $3½ billion to $4 billion. I emphasise that the company left behind less than $300 million to meet that liability, and that was a liability which they agreed in negotiations would obtain.

Within a short time of the company conducting the restructuring, that dramatic shortfall in funding became apparent. People who had been left to suffer the loss of their health, their livelihoods and possibly their lives faced the prospect of no compensation at all. Like many throughout the community, I was appalled by this development. In my experience, compensation in these circumstances is important not just for the financial security of a victim’s family but also to obtain a sense of justice. In my own experience of more than 20 years campaigning on behalf of asbestos victims, I have found that justice and peace of mind are crucial for sufferers of asbestos diseases. It is a terrible thing to prematurely have your health, your livelihood and possibly your life taken away through corporate negligence and malfeasance.

People like to see justice done. This is what motivated Bernie Banton. His own experience and the experience of others in his family—his brothers, who had also worked at the James Hardie plant—made him extremely angry, but it made him determined to bring the company to justice. It also motivated his concern for other people, but it certainly never conquered his spirit. I met him during the Jackson commission of inquiry established by the Carr government in New South Wales in 2004 to investigate the company’s restructuring. Bernie, even at that time, had a vastly reduced lung capacity as a result of asbestosis, yet he attended every single day of a rather lengthy commission of inquiry and listened to every piece of evidence.

When I met Bernie, I knew immediately he would be the best possible advocate for the campaign to bring the company to account. He was not only passionate, he also had a great sense of humour. He had a natural gift—a rare gift in public life—which enabled him to communicate through the electronic media with the community as a whole and get the message through. At the start of the campaign to unravel the James Hardie restructuring, I would have to say that the odds were not good. The corporate manoeuvring had been very well planned by a prominent law firm in Sydney. It placed the company in a strong legal position—from our point of view, potentially beyond the reach of any action within an Australian jurisdiction. And that of course is precisely what it was intended to do.

It was clear that our best chance in campaigning against this to secure the compensation funding from the company was to bring immense moral pressure on the directors and the executives of James Hardie to do the right thing. We needed to win the overwhelming support of the Australian community to achieve justice, and that is what we set out to do. The ACTU and the union movement throughout the country mobilised in partnership with asbestos victims groups in each state and territory and many other community organisations and churches to achieve that aim. Bernie Banton was an extremely important person in the leadership of that campaign and he did achieve the overwhelming support of the Australian community for justice. He was the standard-bearer in the campaign by the labour movement. People were inspired and motivated by his passion, and the pressure of community opinion ultimately brought the company to the negotiating table. That alone was an immense achievement. It is a tremendous thing in the cause of justice in our society that that was done and Bernie’s role in it was simply wonderful.
The fact is—and I was close to all of these events—that without Bernie Banton’s advocacy we may not have brought the company to account. That is the fact of the matter. Therefore, without his contribution there may well be people with asbestos diseases today who would not have access to compensation. In that campaign, despite his crippling lung disability, Bernie worked feverishly. We travelled around the country, we spoke at workplace meetings, we spoke at rallies, we did many media interviews and we campaigned very hard. Bernie contributed enormously. But when we got into the negotiating rooms his contribution was none the less important. The negotiations with James Hardie were very difficult, very complex and quite draining. The initial negotiation of an in-principle agreement took place in the last couple of months of 2004. Issues of corporate law had to be considered which were relevant to the Australian, Netherlands and US jurisdictions. The asbestos compensation systems in each state needed to be considered, as James Hardie attempted to use the negotiations to diminish the rights of compensation claimants. Additionally, we had to ensure the future commercial viability of the company in order to secure a stream of funding for the next 40 to 50 years to fund the compensation of Australian asbestos victims. This required us, of course, to develop an informed view about the commercial circumstances of the company and the market in which, by that time, it was principally operating in—that is, the United States.

We, at the end of the day as you have to in many negotiations, balanced the legitimate interests of the people that we were representing with the legitimate interests of those on the other side of the table. They were complex negotiations, but throughout them Bernie struggled with his own deteriorating health. His lung capacity was diminishing and it was not easy to get there. We started sometimes at seven in the morning and we finished after midnight, day after day after day. But he never missed a session and he humanised what were otherwise extremely dry commercial and legal arguments in the negotiations, often with a sharp retort to an insensitive remark by one of our opponents and often with the use of his dry wit. I suppose it has become a bit notorious that, in response to the payment that the former CEO of James Hardie took at one point in time, Bernie said that when he heard the news it ‘took his breath away’. That is a bit better known, but he certainly had a lot of other quips that really did humanise the negotiations. The fact is, though, that on a number of occasions I was extremely concerned about his wellbeing because he had, of course, to take a tank of compressed air around with him to assist him with breathing and there were a number of occasions when that was running out and we were quite anxious about his health.

He richly deserved any recognition he received, and I know how much he valued becoming a Member of the Order of Australia. The friendship we developed extended well beyond the James Hardie campaign and we enjoyed each other’s company. My wife, Petra, and I particularly enjoyed any time we had with Bernie and his wife, Karen. Not that long back, as he was ill in hospital, I was visiting him and Dean—Bernie and Karen’s son—had his year 12 dinner function on at the King’s School. Bernie was terribly upset about not being able to attend and he asked me to stand in on his behalf. It was a great pleasure to do so.

The thing that really nourished Bernie, though, aside from his family and his love for his family, was being on the campaign trail. Over the last few years he contributed greatly to the campaign by the unions against the Howard government’s unfair industrial relations laws—the ‘Your Rights at Work’ campaign. Bernie Banton had an important role in that campaign. He spoke on behalf of the campaign in two major mobilisations that we had. One, in Novem-
ber 2005, mobilised people all around the country and I think is generally accepted to have
been the largest mobilisation of people in protests since the Vietnam War. He spoke at Federa-
tion Square and the speeches were broadcast across the country by the Sky network. His
speech assisted and congealed people’s sense of and confidence in the campaign. They had
confidence in him and his sense of justice and, as a consequence, it built the preparedness of
people to support the campaign against the unfair industrial relations laws. He spoke again in
a broadcast we did from the Melbourne Cricket Ground in November 2006. They were not
easy to do, because his health was continuing to deteriorate.

Bernie had a keen sense that, at the end of the day, it was the unions that really stood up for
the rights of working people. When his health was failing in November last year, he insisted
that at every opportunity I had I make the point that without the unions there would be no just-
tice for James Hardie asbestos victims. Even with failing health, he was campaigning for
other mesothelioma victims to have access to a chemotherapy treatment, called Alimta, denied
to people because it was not on the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme. That was an injustice
that was corrected by the former government following Bernie’s campaigning, and it was an-
other important achievement on behalf of others at a time when he could barely muster the
strength that the campaign took. That takes a pretty special person with extraordinary strength
and spirit. The truth is, of course, as in all of these circumstances, that it is the collective effort
of a great many people that makes the difference. Bernie has a very special place in the col-
lective effort on behalf of asbestos sufferers, and I think he has a special place in many Aus-
tralians' hearts. He was a decent and compassionate person. He enriched my life, and I miss
him. I extend my condolences to his wife, Karen, their five children, their grandchildren and
all members of his extended family.

Ms BURKE (Chisholm) (12.12 pm)—Whilst I want to be associated with all the condo-
lences, I want to pay tribute to the life of Helen Mayer, the former member for Chisholm dur-
during the Hawke years from 1983 to 1987, who passed away—sadly, too soon—very recently. I
knew Helen very well and I had the great joy of working on her unsuccessful campaign in
1989, when she tried to re-enter parliament. The last time I saw her was at a dinner held for
me in Box Hill last year prior to the election, where she attended and brought along a table of
her former staff to listen to another past Labor candidate for Chisholm, and former Chief Jus-
tice of the Family Court, Alastair Nicholson.

Helen was a remarkable woman—tenacious, committed, hardworking, idealistic and self-
less. She was a positive, energetic woman, well respected as an MP for her work in parliament
and in the local community and described by many as a dignified role model. Helen actively
pursued her ideas in parliament, because she was passionate about them. She was motivated
by her belief in ‘the light on the hill’—that is, the duty and responsibility of the community,
and particularly those who are in a more fortunate place, to look after our less fortunate fellow
citizens. To her, good government meant governing for all and creating a better world for all
citizens to live in. She was a passionate supporter of women’s rights and a strong and active
role model for women in public life. Indeed, in her maiden speech Helen says how proud she
is to be the first woman and the first Labor member to be elected to represent Chisholm,
which bears the name of Caroline Chisholm, the social worker who helped new women mi-
grants settle into this country. She was also passionate about poverty, the environment, recon-
ciliation and education.

MAIN COMMITTEE
Helen Mayer was born in Kaniva between Nhill and Bordertown on the Wimmera-Mallee border on 7 September 1932. Her family later moved to Echuca, where she had the great fortune of being able to ride a Clydesdale horse to school, she notes. She was brought up in a lower-middle-class Presbyterian family where ‘the greatest sin in our household was pride or any overt expression of self-esteem.’ She and her siblings were brought up to think only of others and not of themselves. Her mother stipulated that at birthday parties guests had to bring presents for charity rather than for Helen or her siblings. This was to teach the children about sharing and not having something in preference to somebody else having something.

Helen began a diploma in applied science in Melbourne, but after only a year she had to return to Echuca to nurse her ill mother. Two years later she returned to Melbourne to Toorak Teachers College. She then taught in primary schools at Williamstown and Ivanhoe where she encountered huge classes of up to 70 students. At Williamstown she encountered a large number of non-English speakers who were not catered for in schools at that time. At Ivanhoe, she came face to face with a large proportion of students from poor families who had been moved into the former Olympic village.

She then taught at Mount Scopus Memorial College where classes numbered fewer than 30. All these experiences no doubt added to Helen’s growing political consciousness. Helen transferred into the TAFE sector when she became a mother. Although she has been described as someone who was not really a joiner, Helen was so outraged by the sacking of the Whitlam government that she joined the ALP in 1975. In Helen’s words: ‘It was the feeling that we were not Australia anymore. Gough made people proud to be Australians. Suddenly, it was as if the place where my feet were and always had been, had been chopped out from under me for no reason …’

She described her anger at the dismissal as a ‘deep, slow-burning rage’ that galvanised her into action. It was an anger that would fuel Helen’s six-year campaign for the seat of Chisholm which began in 1977 when she ran against the sitting Liberal member, Tony Staley. In 1980 she ran again against the Liberal Graham Harris but was unsuccessful. Undeterred and, despite the fact that three Labor men—Frank Costigan, John Button and Alastair Nicholson—had previously contested Chisholm before her and failed, Helen stood for the seat again in 1983 and won. I should add for the record that the boundaries of Chisholm back then were very different from the ones I now enjoy. It was a fair contest to win it as a Labor member. As a former staff member, Nora Sparrow, said: ‘Helen was never one to shy away from a hard contest.’

What was all the more remarkable was that Helen ran this six-year campaign while teaching full time and completing a Bachelor of Arts degree at Swinburne College of Technology and the University of Melbourne. On being elected to parliament, Helen was immediately appointed to the then Joint Committee of Public Accounts. She worked long hours trying to master the paperwork and admitted to what many a member has probably thought when they first entered parliament:

I woke up at 3 am one morning after I’d been in the job for three months and thought, “I can’t do this job. I’ve got too much to learn. I don’t know how to manage it.” Then I thought, what happens if I resign? There’ll be a by-election. We could lose the seat. I can’t resign. So I began thinking out a way to manage. I decided I had to tolerate a whole lot of disorder and within that, to have a method.
The public accounts committee involved a huge amount of work and entailed many hours preparing for public hearings. Helen relished her widespread responsibilities with the PAC and worked tirelessly on them. The workload invigorated her thinking. She was involved in many highly confidential Department of Defence inquiries.

Helen was also a member of the Joint Standing Committee on the New Parliament House from 1983 to 1984. She pushed very strongly for adequate childcare facilities to be provided in the new Parliament House but, unfortunately, was unsuccessful in her quest.

One of the highlights of Helen’s parliamentary career was the leading role she played in the PAC inquiry into the provision of educational facilities for the children of defence department personnel. Her teaching background and passion for education meant that she was able to achieve positive outcomes in this inquiry. Her former staff member, Nora Sparrow, remembers: ‘Helen loved this work and was good at it.’

Helen had some great women colleagues in parliament: Susan Ryan, Rosemary Crowley, Wendy Fatin and Joan Child, to name a few. She worked with them on a number of issues relating to the status of women, including the anti-discrimination act in 1984, an important and groundbreaking piece of legislation.

But one of the greatest achievements of Helen’s political career was the important work she did in the local community. Helen was a hardworking and enthusiastic MP who was very active in her electorate. Her six-year campaign for Chisholm gave her a very good understanding of the needs and aspirations of the local community. Nora Sparrow recalls of Helen: ‘Helen loved her electorate and its constituents and treated them with the greatest of respect.’

According to Nora:
Helen was never happier than when she was able to cut through the red tape and gain a positive outcome for a constituent. She did much work for the local Vietnamese community by making representations on their behalf under the family reunion scheme. She had an abiding interest in health care, worked assiduously for older people and was a constant visitor to the elderly citizens and various aged care facilities in the electorate. With her teaching background and a lifelong interest in education she worked closely with primary and secondary schools and had strong ties with the local Box Hill TAFE.

Her approach to constituent work was to teach people how to empower themselves. Helen once told a journalist:
I’ve been trying to make myself nothing more than a pipeline, a conduit between the people and the power. I tell a constituent who to contact and what the outcome should be. If it’s not that outcome, we go back and go through the process again. What I say is: ‘I’ll show you how—but you do it. Or we’ll do it together.’ I see my role as not trying to make people comfortable, secure and happy, but making them competent.

Helen was a highly intelligent, generous person who promoted tolerance and social justice. She has been described as ‘well read, an ideas person and full of vision’. She was gracious and charming. There was also a fun-loving side to her, accompanied often by a timely wit, which I was on the end of on a couple of occasions and which was very helpful in carrying out the demands of public life. Despite all her hard work and unstinting dedication to her electorate, unfortunately Helen Mayer’s parliamentary career came to an end in 1987. Sitting on a margin of only 0.2 per cent after the 1984 election, the swing against the Hawke government was on and Helen suffered the consequences. However, Helen remained very active in the local community and even tried to win back the seat from Michael Wooldridge in 1989. I
worked on Helen’s campaign in 1989 and watched her throw herself in at it full tilt. Unfortunately, she was unsuccessful.

Helen was greatly heartened by the election of the Rudd government in November last year, and there is no doubt that she would have ardently embraced the Prime Minister’s apology last week. I send my condolences to Helen’s husband, Hendrick, and her son, Jason, and her granddaughter, Zoe. I would also like to thank her good friends Howard and Marie Hodgens and Nora Sparrow for their unstinting support of Helen and for all their help with this speech. Helen’s life after parliament was also very full and she contributed much to the community. She will be sadly missed.

Mr LAMING (Bowman) (12.21 pm)—We remember also a colleague of Helen Mayer, that being Leonard Joseph Keogh. He is a predecessor of mine in the seat of Bowman. Over an 18-year period Len was the classic, traditional local member. I was lucky enough to meet him during the last two or three years, in my first term. Unfortunately, Len passed away in October last year. He was remembered at a very large congregation and service at the Star of the Sea Catholic Church at Cleveland on 17 October last year. Former members from both sides of the political divide gathered there. I quote substantially from a speech delivered by his son Michael. Len received the classic Brisbane Catholic education at St Laurence’s from the Christian Brothers. He gained his junior certificate in 1947 and became a structural draftsman at the Evans Deakin shipyard. He completed a certificate in structural engineering drafting in 1950 and worked for several firms before starting his own, a concrete firm, which he retained up until he entered parliament for the first time.

Len had an extraordinary history of service to the ALP. Obviously, it began with his joining in 1949. A decade and a half later, like so many first-time politicians, he was given the almost impossible task of running against a formidable opponent from the other side of politics—in this case Jim Killen, in 1966, in the seat of Moreton. That was a very difficult election given the Vietnam War was a major issue that year. But, like so many determined individuals, Len stood again, this time in Bowman, and was successful. He was the member for Bowman for six years, from 1969 to 1975, and then for a second stretch from 1983 to 1987. In that time Len saw an extraordinary series of changes in Australian politics federally and also the hegemony of the National Party in Queensland. Len returned after politics to a life in local government as the then Chairman of the Redland Shire Council from 1991 to 1994, prior to that job shifting over to become that of mayor. He was also the Chairman of the South West Queensland Electricity Board.

It is worth remembering that Len in fact came from a political family. His father, John, of Irish background was the Mayor of South Brisbane prior to 1927, when the two Brisbane councils were amalgamated. John ran unsuccessfully against William Jolley of the bridge fame. It was a great passion of Len’s to one day also be a mayor of his southern Brisbane area. He was chairman but the term ‘mayor’ was not created until after he had left public office.

He was born in the Great Depression. His son Michael gave, in the eulogy delivered by him, a fantastic description of life for a young boy in the 1930s. I would like to read that into Hansard:

Weekends—
for the Keogh family—

were spent going to Grandma’s at Sandgate, and-the Broadway picture theatre at Woolloongabba. He was in the Church Youth Club and played tennis. He was also a keen fan of the cricket. Family holidays were spent at Margate. He joined the school cadet corps and watched his older brothers go to war whilst the girls worried at home.

Len’s first job was as a cadet draughtsman at a shipping yard ...

A very earthy beginning. As we would later see in his maiden speech, he had a real focus on some of the big picture issues of infrastructure and of hospitals and universities, which we realise now not only involved important forethought but were very important developments for Queensland given the rate of population growth.

Len met his lovely wife, Joan—who lives today in the suburb of Ormiston—at the famed Cloudland, where, according to reports, he literally swept her off her feet. What better story can there be of this couple than that they already had six children under the age of nine when Len first ran for politics. He was to go on to run 11 times for public office. That can only speak as an extraordinary tribute to his wife and his children. As I said, Len was not successful the first time, but that defeat did not deter him, and that quality became very characteristic of Len Keogh.

Throughout his career he noted the difficulties faced by talented members of the community who aspire to public representation but who, despite their qualities and hard work, lack the backing of large organisations or, as we refer to them now, factions. He wanted parliament to be truly representative of the wider cross-sections of the community, and I think Len Keogh represented just that. He knew that healthy democracy requires the voices of ordinary people to be heard and acted upon. When we think about our parliamentarians, that debate about diversity continues to this day.

Len was the traditional politician, taking calls late at night like a family GP. He had the understanding of the needs of people. I would like to read into Hansard the names of a number of groups of which he was patron: the Yurara Redland art group; the Redland Indians baseball club; the Redlands cricket club; the junior rugby league club; the Redland and Capalaba soccer clubs; the ‘Muddies’ cricket and rugby union clubs; the Alexandra Hills Australian Rules football club; the Capalaba, Cleveland, Birkdale and Wynnum scouts associations; and the Cleveland Guides. You do not see too many free nights there to spend at home with family.

There was a plaque on the wall of Len Keogh’s office with the quote: ‘Press on. Nothing in the world can take the place of persistence.’ It reflected on the fact that there are many unsuccessful men with talent, that unrewarded genius is almost a proverb and that there are many educated failures, but that persistence and determination alone are omnipotent. As his son Michael recalls, Len’s persistence and determination were abundantly evident in his battle against prostate cancer. He never gave up trying every possible treatment, with his family at his side to provide loving support and encouragement. He was a gentle and amiable man. He has a record of a lifetime of dedicated and diligent service to the Redlands. He will be missed by everyone who lives in our area.

Debate (on motion by Ms Grierson) adjourned.
Ms GRIERSON (Newcastle) (12.28 pm)—I move:

That the Main Committee do now adjourn.

Cowan Electorate: Education

Mr SIMPKINS (Cowan) (12.28 pm)—Today I would like to inform this place of yet another attack on the good education within my electorate of Cowan. Specifically, I would like to speak on the circumstances of the Allenswood Primary School site in the suburb of Greenwood and how the state Labor government is threatening to sell some of the land on the site. I would like to speak about the implications of this sorry matter.

In August 2007, the parents at the school were informed that they were to receive a new school, a school to be built on the current site. That announcement was received with great acclaim because the school is not a very attractive place; it is old and run-down. As part of the proposal, the school populations of Allenswood and East Greenwood primary schools would be amalgamated on the Allenswood site and the school would be renamed Greenwood Primary School.

I repeat that that was good news for most residents and parents. I say ‘most’ because the plan involved the sale of the site of East Greenwood Primary School and, while the sale was the subject of some local concern, it appeared that the majority of residents felt the sale of those four hectares of land at a resale value of around $16 million would reasonably cover the cost of building the new school at the Allenswood site. That cost was estimated to be around $13 million, and the majority thought that that was fair enough.

Parents and residents looked forward to seeing the new plans for the school and then were horrified to see that the original set of plans involved the loss of the school oval and the creation of a through road between two sets of streets. The plan would radically change traffic flows within the area. It would mean that traffic would flow right past the school, and there are issues with that. Also, according to this plan, there was inadequate car parking, the key point being that more than one hectare of land from this site also was to be sold off for residential development, leaving a bit less than three hectares, as I understand it.

Parents and local residents raised their concerns. I am informed that some parents were told by a state representative, ‘If you want a new school, you should stop complaining, otherwise you’ll get nothing.’ The loss of that extra land would greatly reduce the functionality of the site, the trade-off being that the state government and the City of Joondalup would enter into a shared use agreement with the local government oval located next door. To get to that oval, kids from the new school would have to leave the school site and travel down the hill and through a few trees. They would then be out there, on the local government oval. From my perspective, as a parent of primary-school-age children at a local Cowan primary school, I agree with parents who worry about the safety aspects of sharing a facility—this oval—rather than having sole on-site use of one.

At this point, I would pay tribute to the actions of the Kingsley and Greenwood Residents Association for their outstanding efforts to get the right result in this matter—which, unfortunately, is yet to come. I will name just a few of these members: Ed Burton, Sue Hart, Monique Moon, Peter Billington and David and Robyn Bertolini. They are all working hard on this problem. After agitation and sustained pressure by the residents association, the next set of
state government plans remedied the parking and the through road problems, but the proposal to sell the one hectare of land was still there in black and white. The residents association then organised a petition of 759 signatures.

The voice of the people sadly fell on deaf ears, apart from those of the state Labor MP, who finally saw that representation was required. She was a bit slow on the uptake—possibly because she does not live in the electorate or because she was dutifully toeing the Labor government line—but, in any case, the land is still to be sold. No doubt, the extra proceeds from the sale are planned to go towards some other state Labor government project that will not benefit the people of Greenwood. With regard to representation on this issue, I think the state MP has been ineffectual, because the only thing the residents of Greenwood have in writing is a line in the local newspaper from that MP saying that she was heartened that the state minister did not rule out keeping the Allenswood site intact.

I say enough is enough. I call on the state education minister to listen to the people and to give a cast-iron guarantee that the whole site will be retained, and I ask the minister to do the right thing immediately.

**Mersey Police and Community Youth Club**

*Mr SIDEBOTTOM (Braddon) (12.33 pm)—Madam Deputy Speaker Burke, congratulations on your appointment. Congratulations to all new members in this chamber and to returning members; it is nice to see you again.*

I would very much like to talk about a very active group in my electorate: the Mersey Police and Community Youth Club movement. This movement began seven years ago. Effectively, its aim is to reduce crime by providing positive relationships between young people and the police. Some of the activities that they have been involved in are blue light discos, circus workshops, Mack trailer visits and Police in Schools activities.

The Mersey Police and Community Youth Club movement’s mission is to provide low-cost, positive sporting, recreational, social and cultural programs in a safe environment and primarily for at-risk youth. It has come together and created a really innovative program, which the Commonwealth is contributing to, along with Tasmania Police, the National Community Crime Prevention Program, the Devonport Council, the Kentish Municipal Council, the Tasmanian Community Fund and the Lighthouse project. It is called ‘operation rewind’. Its aim is to engage local youth at risk to modify their behaviour and challenge their thinking and values by using mentoring to expose participants to positive and constructive role models.

The target group are 12- to 17-year-old youths at risk, male and female, from the north-west and west coast of Tasmania. Over a 10-week delivery of projects, participants will be attending a four-hour workshop per week on automotive mechanics. I saw them setting this up the other day, and it looks really interesting and will be highly attractive. These are hands-on activities, and booklets which are designed to give a basic introduction to the mechanical trade will be used by the participants. I am sure I should attend some of these workshops and learn a thing or two.

On top of that, outdoor educational activities will be delivered on another day of the week for a two-hour contact period. This will allow the participants to partake in some low and high ropes courses—goodness gracious! They will also be learning how to kayak. I am threatening
to buy a kayak myself, but one with greater buoyancy than I have seen recently. They will also be enjoying team-motivating activities, which we could all benefit from, no doubt.

‘Operation rewind’ will then culminate in a camp over three days. The camp will be conducted utilising the facilities at Paton Park, a beautiful facility in North Motton in my electorate, south of Ulverstone. Activities on-site will be structured to utilise and reinforce the skills, knowledge and attributes developed over the period of the program, with a view to building resilience and self-reliance, improving decision making and working effectively in a team environment. That sounds terrific, and I know they are all geared up and ready to go. They are inviting participants to apply for these workshops.

Like any program, it relies on the people taking the program, as we know and as we are all happy to represent in our electorates. I would like to mention, if I may, a number of the activity facilitators. There is Constable Steve Orme, who will look after outdoor education. He has been in the Tasmania Police force for eight years and he founded a very important youth community project called Sentinel. He has all the attributes and skills to assist these applicants in their outdoor education. Then there is Constable David Quinn, who is going to look after the mechanical education. Like many in our police forces and emergency services, they are multiskilled. They come from a variety of backgrounds, as we do in this place. David has also been in the Tasmania Police force for eight years and has a whole heap of qualifications to do with mechanical education. Then there is Richard Douglas, who will also assist with outdoor education. He has been 12 years in the police force and, again, has a large range of skills that will be utilised. Finally, Stuart Clayton will be doing the kayaking and the martial sports. He has had 20 years in this area, with eight years particularly in the martial arts.

So the participants are going to be well trained. These are highly motivated people and this is an excellent program to be offered to young people at risk. I thank them for ‘operation rewind’ and I look forward to it happening in the future. (Time expired)

Fadden Electorate: Schools

Mr ROBERT (Fadden) (12.38 pm)—It is nice to be able to stay in the House to speak this afternoon. I rise to commend the new student leaders of the northern Gold Coast schools within the electorate of Fadden. It is no small achievement to be appointed a student leader in today’s schools. These leaders have been selected because of their potential and because of their identified abilities to make a contribution to their schools and to society going forward. Australia needs great leaders, and I am especially pleased to name some of Fadden’s up-and-coming leaders this afternoon. These leaders are 100 per cent of Australia’s future, and I look forward to hearing of their leadership journeys and future successes.

At AB Paterson College, the school captain is Carolyn Tully and the vice-captain is Robert Dickfos. At Arundel State School, the 2008 school representatives are Michelle Broadbent, Mitchell Stanbrook, Achuthan Kamalarasa, Tracie Cheng, Laura Goodall and Hannah Palmer. At Coomera Anglican College, the college captains are Caitlin Bishop and Joshua Griffiths, the student council representative is Julia Baker, the house captains are Kate Ross, Christopher Gilmore, Lexie Wykamp, Lachlan Price, Suzannah Wood, Mitchell McNamara, Peta-Jessie Kirkpatrick and Vishal Naidoo, the junior secondary captains are Jenna Richardson and Jazz McCallum, and the primary captains are Darcey Campbell and Ben Senden. At Helensvale State High School, the school captains are Hollie James and Ben Bourke, the vice captains are Georgia Lamb and Patrick Doyle. At Labrador State School, the girls school captain

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is Abbey Williams, the boys school captain is Daniel Vanderpeet, the girls school vice-captain is Jenaya Sherriff and the boys school vice-captain is Luke Payne.

At Pacific Pines State High School the school captains are Gabby Clark, Danielle Bailey and Stevie Adams, the cultural captain is Mercedes Carrington and the sports captain is Sheena Clark. At Pacific Pines State School the school captains are Jamie Taylor and Molly Penso and the vice captains are Bianca Alexander and Jo McPhail. At Pimpama State School the school captains are Nicole Metcalf and Liam Coghlan and the environmental leaders are Claire Greer and Lydia Robinson. At St Stephen’s College the college captains are Dan Grady and Kate Byster-Bowles and the vice captains are James Ellison and Donay Meijer. At St Xavier’s Catholic Primary School the student leaders are Jack Conti, Mitchell Carter, Jack Baker, Christopher Andres, Sabrina Woodworth, Jacinta Faasoo and Emma Todd and the sport leaders are Bradley Lamont, Daniel Vella, Joseph Arthur, Kira Jarman, Shae Mastroinanni, Sam Ryan, Alexa Dolan and Sam Maindonald. At Upper Coomera State College the senior school captains are Kyle McCallion and Emma Warwick and the senior vice captains are Fioretti Sazali and Kaitlyn Cork. Finally, at Woongoolba State School the captain is Ryan Russell.

It is a tremendous pleasure to name these new student leaders of the high schools and primary schools of Fadden for 2008. I wish them the very best in their capacity as leaders for the school year, and I look forward to following their progression in later life.

Workplace Relations

Ms VAMVAKINOU (Calwell) (12.41 pm)—Madam Deputy Speaker Burke, I am not looking for brownie points but I do take this opportunity to congratulate you on your elevation to such high office. Today I would like to bring to the attention of the House a workers’ dispute at Qantas Valet Parking, which is located in my electorate of Calwell. It is a dispute that goes to the very heart of the many debates we have had in this place on industrial relations and the unfairness of the previous government’s extreme Work Choices laws. Qantas Valet Parking currently employs around 70 people as customer service staff, drivers and car washers. Many have worked there for a number of years and have shown both loyalty and dedication in their work. Many are also local residents who live in my electorate of Calwell and some of them have written to me over the last week outlining their opposition to a new Australian workplace agreement that they have been asked to sign at work.

As of 1 March this year the contract for Qantas Valet Parking will be taken over by Equity Valet Parking, after the previous contractor, Hertz Australia, decided not to re-tender for the job. According to the letters I have received from local residents, Equity Valet Parking last week offered Qantas Valet Parking employees new Australian workplace agreements that strip away many of the basic award conditions contained in their current collective agreement with Hertz Australia. Among other things, the AWA sought to cut shift penalties, allowances, breaks, classifications and overtime provisions. Faced with mounting opposition from valet parking staff, the company withdrew the AWA some two days after having offered it. I have since been informed that a second AWA has been issued to Qantas Valet Parking employees this week—though the advice I have received from the workers is that this second AWA offers few if any improvements on the first. As it stands, employees at Qantas Valet Parking are now faced with an impossible decision as the deadline to sign the AWA looms even closer.

If we are to ensure that Australia has a fair and balanced industrial relations system then our obligation in this place is to uphold the basic rights and protections for the millions of
workers across Australia, including the men and women who work at Qantas Valet Parking. That is a commitment I made to the electorate of Calwell in the lead-up to the last election to which the Rudd Labor government remains committed today. The previous government’s unfair Work Choices laws have proved to be one of the greatest attacks on the basic rights and protections of Australian workers, and AWAs are synonymous with these laws. Work Choices was essentially about ripping away the basic rights and protections that Australian workers fought so hard to secure. This dispute at Qantas Valet Parking again highlights the destructive legacy of these laws. Whilst AWAs are still permissible under current Work Choices laws, this dispute at Qantas Valet Parking comes at a time when, only last week, the Rudd Labor government introduced legislation in this place to put an end to new AWAs.

In keeping with federal Labor’s pre-election promise to introduce a fairer, simpler and more balanced workplace relations system, the Workplace Relations Amendment (Transition to Forward with Fairness) Bill 2008 provides that, from its commencement date, no-one will be able to make a new Australian workplace agreement. Given the government’s intention to abolish AWAs and the Australian people’s overwhelming rejection of Work Choices at the last election, I believe the staff at Qantas Valet Parking have a strong moral argument to make in their opposition to this AWA. I want to make clear my strong and continuing support for them during what is obviously a very difficult time for them and their families.

Moving from what is a difficult issue for some constituents in my own electorate, I want to take some time to briefly recognise the outstanding academic achievements of 16 local students from secondary schools in my electorate who topped year 12 VCE classes last year. Last week I had the privilege of hosting the students in my office. Can I say how impressed I was. I would like to name each and every one of them. I think they deserve that sort of honour. I begin by congratulating Steven Angus, Kerry Hoang, Faye Pableo, Damian Sipetic, Loay Yousif, Antonio Prae, Grace Foo, Abdurrahman Turker, Iman Zayegh, Paul Samuel Calara, Mathew Komiti, Jessica Rosla, Candace Kovacevic, Grace Lambert, Robert Graf and Morgan Ryan. I wish them every success in their future endeavours and again congratulate them for their outstanding VCE results. They are young people who are well placed to be future leaders in our community.

Mr Don Aldous

Mr SLIPPER (Fisher) (12.46 pm)—I would like to pay tribute today to the many years of sterling service given by the now resigned Mayor of the City of Caloundra, Councillor Don Aldous. We will have an amalgamation of the three councils on the Sunshine Coast to form the Sunshine Coast Regional Council as from the council elections to be held next month. While the Labor Party’s approach to forcing these mergers without public consultation should be condemned, in the case of the Sunshine Coast it is a very positive outcome that we will have a Sunshine Coast council to speak on behalf of all local people. The Sunshine Coast, for a long time, has not had the same sense of identity as the Gold Coast. Now that we will have a Sunshine Coast council, that is a very important step forward because it means we will speak with one voice in approaching governments at all levels—governments, ministers and departments like to know with whom they are dealing. The Sunshine Coast is the most wonderful part of Australia in which to live. It is one of the fastest growing areas in our country and the Sunshine Coast Regional Council will epitomise our community. It will work on behalf of our community and help to bring Caloundra, Maroochy and Noosa together.
Having said that, it was a very great surprise that the Mayor of Caloundra, on medical advice and for personal reasons, saw it necessary to resign yesterday as the mayor, just a few weeks before the council is amalgamated to form part of the Sunshine Coast Regional Council. Councillor Don Aldous is very much a coast identity. He and his wife, Heather, have been very well-known faces at functions right throughout the city of Caloundra, both during the time Councillor Aldous served previously as mayor and during the period he has served as mayor up until yesterday. Both of them will be greatly missed. They are people who are highly respected, people who are very strongly of the Christian faith, people of incredible integrity and people who have worked extraordinarily hard on behalf of the people of the City of Caloundra during the time of Don’s public service.

It is quite sad that Don, on medical advice, had to retire just a few weeks before the council is to disappear into the new Sunshine Coast Regional Council. Having said that, the fact that this is necessary, while regrettable, gives us the opportunity to say thanks publicly to Don and Heather for the way in which they have given service in their respective roles as Mayor and Mayoress of Caloundra.

Don was born and raised in the city of Caloundra. He was a successful businessman before being elected to council; he owned four butcher shops, an abattoir and a wholesale meat distributorship. He was originally elected in 1982 to the former Landsborough Shire Council. In 1988 he was elected as the second Mayor of Caloundra City and he has held a number of positions on the Sunshine Coast more widely such as Chairman of the Sunshine Coast Regional Organisation of Councils, Chairman of the Sunshine Coast Local Transition Committee overseeing the amalgamation, President of Aquagen Water and Renewable Energy Board, Director of Caloundra City Enterprises and Chairman of the Caloundra Futures Forum.

Don and Heather Aldous will leave huge shoes to fill. We have two contenders to become the Mayor of the Sunshine Coast: the Mayor of Maroochy, Councillor Natoli, and the Mayor of Noosa, Councillor Bob Abbot. These two gentlemen will be going head to head, and we have about 50 people seeking election to the Sunshine Coast Regional Council. Some are new candidates and some are councillors on the Noosa, Maroochy and Caloundra councils. It is really important with the new council becoming an entity from March that we as a community get behind that new council and that new council get behind the community so that we are able to speak as a strong single voice when we are dealing with the state and Commonwealth governments.

I do wish Don and Heather Aldous a long and happy retirement. They richly deserve their retirement. On behalf of the community I salute their many years of sterling service.

**Workplace Relations**

**Mr NEUMANN** (Blair) (12.51 pm)—I rise today to speak on the most important issue as far as the people of Blair are concerned. Wherever I was campaigning, whether it was in Boonah, Booval, Withcott, West Ipswich, Karalee or Kalbar, they all talked to me about Work Choices and the fact that it had gone too far. At the markets in Boonah I recall a woman who had voted coalition all her life coming up to me and telling me that she could not understand why John Howard had done this to her. I remember a woman who spoke to me at the Yamanto shopping centre in Ipswich who was forced to sign an AWA or lose her job after 30 years of service to a local company. I recall a man at Gatton who was given an AWA in disguise which stated that he would not get a pay increase for five years, and it was given to him two days
before Christmas. I recall a single mother who left her job to accept a job with a multinational company and who at the end of the training weekend was given an AWA which said that she could be sacked if she was five minutes late for work. These are just some of the many stories that I heard as I campaigned around Blair.

There are more than 13,000 union members in Blair and they are decent, hardworking Australians who care for their families. They want a fair and flexible system. It is that emphasis on fairness which caused them to vote the way they did. They told me they did not accept an illusory fairness test. They told me they wanted to build on the hard-won conditions they had had for many years. I want to pay tribute to the many unions who fought the campaign so hard to scrap Work Choices in Blair. Particularly I want to thank the ASU, the NUW, the BLF, the ETU, the AMWU, the QPSU, the AMIEU and the QTU. I want to thank particularly the local convener of the Your Rights at Work campaign, Gordon Abbott, and his wonderful family; Jim Nilon, the coordinator; Jo Blackmore and her husband, Mark; Steve Franklin—and I wish him well in division 10 on the Ipswich City Council on 15 March; and Paul Williams.

The rights of working families in Blair were under attack, and they told me so. If only they had taken a leaf out of the Ipswich City Council’s book on their attitude towards Work Choices. I commend Mayor Paul Pisasale and Deputy Mayor Victor Attwood, who vowed and declared that they would never put the employees of the Ipswich City Council on AWAs. We have elections in Queensland on 15 March. Blair will see the formation of the Lockyer Valley Regional Council and the Scenic Rim Regional Council. I call on the new mayor on each of these councils, whomever he or she may be, and the councils generally, to treat the workers in the councils, their employees, with fairness and equity, because that is what they want. We never want to see the situation we saw in the Boonah Shire Council, where workers were forced to go on AWAs and in response they unionised. They objected and there was a lot of disputation in the local area.

I call upon these councils to do the right thing by their workers. Also, I have been asked by many people locally to call on the opposition, on behalf of the people of Blair, to give an unequivocal and irrevocable commitment to never again attempt to reintroduce Work Choices in any way, shape or form. I am pleased that the coalition have seen some sense and will not oppose the Rudd Labor government’s Workplace Relations Amendment (Transition to Forward with Fairness) Bill 2008. It is not about recentralising workplaces; it is not about union control. It is about fairness and equity in the workplace.

The people of Blair spoke on 24 November. They gave the Labor Party a 10.2 per cent swing. They worked hard. All across the area I met people who found it tough meeting the pressures of life. They found it tough when it came to interest rate payments. They found it tough when it came to petrol price increases. They found it tough when it came to their grocery basket. They told me one message, and that message was simple. It was about looking after their best interests. I commend the new Rudd Labor government on what they have done. I thank Kevin Rudd and Labor for their support in Blair. I pledge to the people of Blair my commitment to get rid of Work Choices and to bring in a simple, fair and flexible arrangement for all the people of Blair.

**Alcohol Abuse**

Ms GRIERSON (Newcastle) (12.56 pm)—I will take this opportunity to raise an issue that is particularly important to my electorate, and that is the antisocial behaviour attached to
binge and extreme drinking, particularly by young people. In our city we have been trying to tackle that problem. I am delighted to see the Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, raising that as an issue of concern for him and for this government.

This morning I received a very moving email from a young university student responding to Kevin Rudd’s interest. I think that is the wonderful thing about our new Prime Minister: he does inspire young people to be active and to participate in the processes of government. This young person admitted to his own problems occasionally with binge drinking. He described it as escapism. What he was escaping from, as a university student with two part-time jobs, was the pressures of work, the pressures of study and the pressures of trying to make ends meet to sustain himself. I thought it was a most honest appraisal. But he was saying, in a way, that young people do need help and that it is not just the binge drinking; it is the social reasons and the causes of this problem that are important.

His email today to me, plus our youth summit coming up, prompts me to announce that I will be setting up a youth forum, a youth advisory group, in the city of Newcastle to work with me on this particular issue. The hoteliers and the business community have been very organised. The police, Newcastle City Council and state agencies are making an effort in this regard, but I think that the young people of Newcastle perhaps need to have their voice organised in a constructive way in order to participate in what is, to them, such an important debate.

It is the reasons for this antisocial drinking that we have to tackle. The pressures on young people seem to be extreme. My own children in the city of Newcastle describe the spiking of drinks as a nightly occurrence. They describe the availability of drugs in almost every hotel in the inner city. This shocks and alarms me as a mother, but as the federal member for Newcastle I believe that they are issues that need to be dealt with. Young people must be part of the solutions.

Main Committee adjourned at 1.00 pm