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FORTY-SECOND PARLIAMENT
FIRST SESSION—THIRD PERIOD

Governor-General
Her Excellency Ms Quentin Bryce, Companion of the Order of Australia

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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, Mr Peter Sid Sidebottom MP, Hon. Peter Neil Slipper MP, Mr Kelvin John Thomson MP, Hon. Danna Sue Vale MP and Dr Malcolm James Washer MP

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

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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. Malcolm Bligh Turnbull 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

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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—IC Harris AO
Secretary, Department of Parliamentary Services—A Thompson
RUDD MINISTRY

Prime Minister Hon. Kevin Rudd, MP
Deputy Prime Minister, Minister for Education, Minister for Employment and Workplace Relations and Minister for Social Inclusion Hon. Julia Gillard, MP
Treasurer Hon. Wayne Swan MP
Minister for Immigration and Citizenship and Leader of the Government in the Senate Senator Hon. Chris Evans
Special Minister of State, Cabinet Secretary and Vice President of the Executive Council Senator Hon. John Faulkner
Minister for Finance and Deregulation Hon. Lindsay Tanner MP
Minister for Trade Hon. Simon Crean MP
Minister for Foreign Affairs Hon. Stephen Smith MP
Minister for Defence Hon. Joel Fitzgibbon MP
Minister for Health and Ageing Hon. Nicola Roxon MP
Minister for Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs Hon. Jenny Macklin MP
Minister for Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Local Government and Leader of the House Hon. Anthony Albanese MP
Minister for Broadband, Communications and the Digital Economy and Deputy Leader of the Government in the Senate Senator Hon. Stephen Conroy
Minister for Innovation, Industry, Science and Research Senator Hon. Kim Carr
Minister for Climate Change and Water Senator Hon. Penny Wong
Minister for the Environment, Heritage and the Arts Hon. Peter Garrett AM, MP
Attorney-General Hon. Robert McClelland MP
Minister for Human Services and Manager of Government Business in the Senate Senator Hon. Joe Ludwig
Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry Hon. Tony Burke MP
Minister for Resources and Energy and Minister for Tourism Hon. Martin Ferguson AM, MP

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<td>Hon. Alan Griffin MP</td>
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<td>Minister for Housing and Minister for the Status of Women</td>
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SHADOW MINISTRY

Leader of the Opposition
Deputy Leader of the Opposition and Shadow Treasurer
Leader of the Nationals and Shadow Minister for Trade, Transport, Regional Development and Local Government
Shadow Minister for Broadband, Communications and the Digital Economy and Leader of the Opposition in the Senate
Shadow Minister for Innovation, Industry, Science and Research and Deputy Leader of the Opposition in the Senate
Shadow Minister for Infrastructure and COAG and Shadow Minister Assisting the Leader on Emissions Trading Design
Shadow Minister for Foreign Affairs and Manager of Opposition Business in the Senate
Shadow Minister for Finance, Competition Policy and De-regulation and Manager of Opposition Business in the House
Shadow Minister for Energy and Resources
Shadow Minister for Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs
Shadow Special Minister of State and Shadow Cabinet Secretary
Shadow Minister for Human Services and Deputy Leader of The Nationals
Shadow Minister for Climate Change, Environment and Water
Shadow Minister for Health and Ageing
Shadow Minister for Defence
Shadow Minister for Education, Apprenticeships and Training
Shadow Attorney-General
Shadow Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry
Shadow Minister for Employment and Workplace Relations
Shadow Minister for Immigration and Citizenship
Shadow Minister for Small Business, Independent Contractors, Tourism and the Arts

Hon. Malcolm Turnbull MP
Hon. Julie Bishop MP
Hon. Warren Truss MP
Senator Hon. Nick Minchin
Senator Hon. Eric Abetz
Hon. Andrew Robb MP
Senator Hon. Helen Coonan
Hon. Joe Hockey MP
Hon. Ian Macfarlane MP
Hon. Tony Abbott MP
Senator Hon. Michael Ronaldson
Senator Hon. Nigel Scullion
Hon. Greg Hunt MP
Hon. Peter Dutton MP
Senator Hon. David Johnston
Hon. Christopher Pyne MP
Senator Hon. George Brandis SC
Hon. John Cobb MP
Mr Michael Keenan MP
Hon. Dr Sharron Stone MP
Mr Steven Ciobo MP

[The above constitute the shadow cabinet]
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The Speaker (Mr Harry Jenkins) took the chair at 2 pm, and read prayers.

Ministerial Arrangements

Ms Gillard (Lalor—Acting Prime Minister) (2.01 pm)—I inform the House that the Prime Minister will be absent from question time for the remainder of this week as he is attending the United Nations General Assembly in New York. I will answer questions on his behalf.

Questions Without Notice

Age Pension

Mr Turnbull (2.01 pm)—My question is addressed to the Acting Prime Minister. Does the Acting Prime Minister stand by her statement that it is impossible to live on the single age pension?

Ms Gillard—I thank the Leader of the Opposition for his question. On the question of pensions, which have been the subject of so much discussion in this House, let me make the following things perfectly clear. The government acted in the budget to make some moves to lift some of the pressure on people who receive the age pension and other forms of pensions and benefits. In particular, the opposition leader might like to note that we increased the utilities allowance to $500—$128 of that amount will be paid to pensioners this week. We provided a cash bonus of $500.

Of course, I acknowledge and the government acknowledges that it is tough for pensioners. We understand that. We speak to pensioners. We understand how much pressure is on them. What the government has determined to do, above the budget measures which have already made a difference for pensioners, with $128 being received by them as part of the utilities allowance this week, is have the question the subject of a thorough investigation so we can look at the pension base rate—

Mr Turnbull—Mr Speaker, I rise on a point of order. The question related to her statement that it was impossible to live on the single age pension, not that it was tough. Is it impossible? Do you stand by that?

Mr Hockey interjecting—

The Speaker—Order! The Acting Prime Minister will respond to the question.

Ms Gillard—I note the member for North Sydney plays the fool as usual. On the question of pressure on pensioners, we have said that this will be the subject of examination because, of course, the age pension is the bedrock of our pensions and benefits system. Its rate relates to a number of other measures, and consequently we want to work through all the issues.

Can I conclude with these remarks. There is always a stench about hypocrisy and it is in this room right now, because the Leader of the Opposition, who asked this question, was a member of a government and at the cabinet table that did nothing for 12 years on the basic rate of the pension. Indeed, he sat at a cabinet table where the then responsible minister suggested increasing the base rate of the pension. He must have said ‘no’ because certainly the government said ‘no’. Then, earlier this year, when the shadow minister for ageing had the temerity to suggest that there should be an increase in the pension—

Mr Randall—Mr Speaker, I rise on a point of order. We want to know what the Acting Prime Minister said herself.

The Speaker—Order! The Acting Prime Minister has indicated that she is concluding her answer.

Ms Gillard—The Leader of the Opposition earlier this year in his capacity as shadow Treasurer slapped down any suggestion that there be an increase in the base rate.
of the pension. The hypocrisy of the opposition on this is manifest. Whilst they continue with their hypocrisy, with their cobbled together measures—measures that leave out more than two million Australians who receive a form of pension—the government will get on with the business of delivering practical measures, like the $128 this week, like the $500 utilities allowance, like the $500 bonus, and we will address the question methodically and comprehensively in a thorough-going review, and we will not be listening to those who had 12 years to act. Let us line them up: the Leader of the Opposition, the Deputy Leader of the Opposition, the Manager of Opposition Business, the new spokesman on the ETS—and the list goes on. None of them did anything in government to make a difference on this question, and that is how they will be judged.

Economy

Mr HALE (2.05 pm)—My question is to the Acting Prime Minister. Why is a strong budget surplus critical for Australia during this period of global economic uncertainty?

Ms GILLARD—I thank the member for Solomon for his question. Of course the challenges this nation faces are great. We face, with the rest of the world, the challenge of tackling climate change. We face the issue of raising our rate of productivity growth. We know that this nation is languishing when it comes to productivity growth—and today’s productivity growth is tomorrow’s prosperity. We need to be investing in education. We need to be ensuring we have more productive workplaces. Not only is today’s productivity growth tomorrow’s prosperity, but of course the challenges for tomorrow’s prosperity are major with the ageing of the population and with the forecasted changes in the dependency ratio that that implies.

When the election was held in November 2007, the government went to the people with a practical program of action about these great challenges. In climate change, it included re-engaging with the rest of the world by ratifying Kyoto and introducing the Carbon Pollution Reduction Scheme as well as measures to enhance the development of new technology—renewable technology and solar technology. We went to the Australian people to seek a mandate for our productivity-enhancing measures. Those measures include our education revolution—investing in education from the education of our youngest children through schools, through addressing the skills crisis and through our universities. Our productivity-lifting measures include our fair and balanced workplaces.

Since the government was elected, circumstances on global financial markets have caused anxiety right around the world. We know that those circumstances are reshaping the international economic landscape. We know that in the last very short period of time we have seen major measures that have caused huge problems in global financial markets. We have seen some of the world’s largest—

Mr Tuckey—Mr Speaker, I rise on a point of order. The fact that the Acting Prime Minister is reading a speech means it should be a ministerial statement. It is costing us a fortune—

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

Ms GILLARD—I fear that my intervention yesterday has moved the member for O’Connor back into the main chamber, and for that I apologise to the House. That was most certainly not my intention.

Events are being reshaped by the global credit crisis. We have seen some of the world’s leading financial institutions face either the end of their business or a land-
scape of dramatic change. We have seen the US government invest $700 billion in mortgage related assets for these companies in a buy-up plan. We have seen financial regulators around the world move to address the problem of short selling, which would increase volatility in financial markets in this very difficult period. And we have seen central banks around the world move to address the liquidity crisis and to inject more liquidity into financial markets.

In these uncertain times around the globe, the last thing we can afford in this country is uncertainty around the delivery of the government’s budget. The budget was designed for the times. It was designed with a surplus to give us the buffer we need in difficult circumstances. The fact that it was so designed and provides such a buffer is endorsed by the IMF in its recent report, which stated that prudent fiscal policies and flexible exchange rates provide Australia with ‘important buffers against any substantial weakening in the external environment’. In these uncertain global economic times we need budget certainty, and that is why the actions of the Liberal Party in the Senate are so damaging. They would be damaging in ordinary times. They would be economic vandalism in ordinary times. But in these times of uncertainty they are the height of irresponsibility.

We understand that the Senate plays a role as a house of review, where they look at and scrutinise legislation. That is the proper role of the Senate and we understand that. But what is happening in the Senate, courtesy of the Liberal Party, is not that proper role of review; it is obstruction pure and simple, designed to take $6.2 billion out of the budget surplus and to create uncertainty in these uncertain times.

I say to the newly elected Leader of the Opposition that he has an opportunity to create a break with the past. Instead of endorsing the irresponsibility adopted by the Liberal Party immediately after the May budget, he has an opportunity to actually engage in a responsible economic strategy and to make sure the budget can be delivered. We continue to call upon him to do so. He can prove that he is not an economic vandal by responding to those calls.

Mr Pyne—Mr Speaker, I would ask the Acting Prime Minister to table the five-page copious document from which she has been quoting.

The SPEAKER—Was the Acting Prime Minister quoting from a document?

Ms GILLARD—Yes.

The SPEAKER—Was the document confidential?

Ms GILLARD—Yes.

Pensions and Benefits

Mrs MARKUS (2.12 pm)—My question is to the Minister for Veterans’ Affairs. Does the minister stand by his statement that increasing the entitlement for more than 70,000 veterans by $30 a week is a stunt?

Mr GRIFFIN—What I stand by very clearly is the fact that what you have proposed misses out on a large section of veteran pensioners. You miss out on those on disability service pensions. You miss out on those on partner service pensions. You also miss out on those who are on partner service pensions who are now single because of the death of their partner. You miss out on significant numbers of veterans right across the board in this area. It is inconsistent, it does not deal with the real issues and therefore it is not dealing with the real problem.

Economy

Mr SYMON (2.14 pm)—My question is to the Treasurer. Will the Treasurer outline why it is so important, when framing economic policy, to be in touch with the daily lives of Australian families?
Mr SWAN—I thank the member for his question. It is critical that the government achieves the right balance in framing economic policy. In framing the budget, we struck the right balance between getting rid of the reckless spending of those opposite and delivering a substantial $55 billion Working Families Support Package. We delivered tax cuts. We delivered an increase in the childcare tax rebate and we delivered an education tax refund. We also delivered an additional $500 bonus for age pensioners. That is very important—something that was not funded or provided by those opposite. We also boosted the utilities allowance by $400. We also put in place the Henry review, which will report no later than next February. We delivered a strong surplus because it is important at a time of international economic uncertainty to have a strong surplus.

Framing economic policy does demand responsibility with the nation’s finances as much as it requires compassion, and it requires empathy with those that are under financial pressure. Of course you can only have that compassion and empathy if you understand the everyday lives of the Australian people. Those opposite, the Liberals, have demonstrated no understanding of the financial pressures facing Australian families.

In the Treasury portfolio there are lots of facts and figures, and I would be the first to say that you cannot possibly know every single one, but there are some facts and figures which are very, very important. This morning the member for Curtin was full steam on radio; last evening the member for Curtin was full steam on radio. What we found was that she had no idea of one of the central facts that go to the heart of the financial pressures on Australian families and to the heart of the economic debate in this country. She did not know the official RBA cash rate. She got it wrong. No wonder those opposite found it so difficult to actually welcome the rate cut a couple of weeks ago. She did not understand that essential figure. It really says something about the Liberal Party when the Treasury spokesman does not know the official RBA cash rate. That is really something and it demonstrates how out of touch those opposite are with the financial pressures on Australian families.

It does not stop there. We have this ploy on pensions in the House today—a ploy from those opposite which leaves out two million pensioners. How could they do that? They say they understand—

Mr Tuckey—Mr Speaker, I rise on a point of order. I draw your attention to standing order 150 entitled ‘Amendments to bills during consideration in detail’. If the Treasurer is worried about someone being left out, let him amend our legislation; we will not mind.

The SPEAKER—I believe there was not a point of order.

Mr SWAN—It is not just that they left out two million pensioners; it just demonstrates they do not understand the financial pressures around the kitchen table. How could they possibly leave out disability support pensioners or carers? Shame on you—if you understand this problem, you have demonstrated that you cannot actually fix it. Those opposite do not understand the need for a long-term sustainable solution to this particular problem because they do not understand the everyday lives of Australian families. They are that far out of touch.

If you ever needed any evidence of how out of touch the Leader of the Opposition is from the everyday lives of Australian families, we heard it on Radio National this morning when the Leader of the Opposition was being interviewed by Fran Kelly. Fran Kelly asked him this question: Malcolm Turnbull, the country needs to know which footy team you barrack for.
MALCOLM TURNBULL: Well, I, I, I have to confess I vote for, I vote for, I, um, support, um, Australian Rules, the Roosters.

Mr Hockey—Mr Speaker, I rise on a point of order to do with relevance. There is only one rooster in this chamber that we are aware of.

The SPEAKER—The member for North Sydney will resume his seat. Order! I would hope that the House has had its humour for the day. The Treasurer will bring his answer to a conclusion.

Mr Swan—There are no roosters in the AFL Grand Final—there have been plenty of swans and there have been plenty of hawks, but there are no roosters. I would not be surprised if he was out there next congratulating Ricky Ponting on winning the Brownlow Medal.

The SPEAKER—Order! The Treasurer will conclude his answer quickly.

Mr Swan—It is hard to imagine anyone more out of touch than the merchant of Venice over there.

Mr Turnbull—Mr Speaker, a point of order on relevance: I hate to interrupt Bob Ellis’s material, but really this has got nothing to do with economic management and it demeans the House.

The SPEAKER—The Leader of the Opposition will resume his seat. I would implore the Treasurer to conclude his answer.

Mr Swan—The question was about being in touch with the needs of Australian families. It is a very serious question. If you have no appreciation of the daily lives of Australian families, how can you frame economic policy to look after those families? If you do not understand what the official RBA cash rate is, how can you understand the financial pressures on Australian families? If you leave two million pensioners out of a proposal before the parliament, how can you claim to understand the financial pressures on pensioners? I am really saying here that, when the Leader of the Opposition goes out there pretending to be in touch with the people, what he demonstrated this morning is that he is a phoney when it comes to all of that—he is pretending to be something he is not.

DISTINGUISHED VISITORS

The SPEAKER—I inform the House that we have present in the gallery this afternoon members of the Defence and Security Committee of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly. On behalf of the House I extend a very warm welcome to our visitors.

Honourable members—Hear, hear!

An incident having occurred in the gallery—

The SPEAKER—I say to our visitors that the House appreciated the NATO wave. Thank you very much.

QUESTIONS WITHOUT NOTICE

Age Pension

Mrs Hull (2.24 pm)—My question is to the Minister for Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs. If it is good enough for the Prime Minister to go overseas and announce $35 million for a hybrid car that was already going to be built here, what would prevent the Prime Minister from making an announcement in New York to increase the single pension by $30 a week?

Ms Macklin—I thank the member for Riverina for her question. This is a very important issue and one which the government takes seriously. What we are not doing is playing the sort of low-rent politics that we have seen from the other side. What the Treasurer actually announced in the budget was a significant increase in the utilities allowance. Under the previous government the utilities allowance was only $107. The Treas-
urer increased the utilities allowance in his first budget to $500, and he decided that it would be paid quarterly. So, in this fortnight, pensioners are going to receive their third quarterly installment of the utilities allowance—$128 will go into their bank accounts in this fortnight. The second thing the Treasurer decided to do in relation to the utilities allowance was to extend it to carers and people on the disability support pension. This was never done in 12 years by those opposite but has been done by this Treasurer in his first budget. The third thing the Treasurer did in his first budget was extend the bonus. A bonus of $500 was paid to age pensioners in this federal budget. All of this actually cost the federal budget $7.2 billion. That is what we are doing.

Medicare Levy Surcharge

Ms SAFFIN (2.27 pm)—My question is to the Minister for Health and Ageing. Will the minister please explain why changes to the Medicare levy surcharge thresholds are necessary?

Ms ROXON—I thank the member for her question. This is an important issue for us on this side of the House. In the Senate very soon we are going to see a vote on the Tax Laws Amendment (Medicare Levy Surcharge Thresholds) Bill 2008. As many people would be aware, this is a bill designed to deliver relief to working families, particularly those who are struggling with their household budgets. The purpose of this budget measure was to provide relief to working families and to adjust a threshold which had not been changed or 10 years. The tax, as the member for Higgins would know, was originally meant to apply to high-income earners but now slugs many hundreds of thousands of working families earning less than the average wage. We remain determined to deliver relief to working families. It is true that there has been some opposition to this measure. We have listened to what has been said and we have consulted extensively. I would like to share with the House some comments made in the other place. Here is what Liberal Senator Colbeck said about this measure:

If they are talking about indexation … then indexation of this measure would have put the threshold at about $75,000 or $76,000.

Then Western Australian Liberal Senator Mathias Cormann, the Leader of the Opposition’s new shadow parliamentary secretary for health administration and, I might note, the former head of a private health insurance fund, said—

Mr Pyne—He actually knows what he is talking about!

The SPEAKER—Order! The member for Sturt!

Ms ROXON—It is interesting that he knows what he is talking about, because I think the member will be very interested when he hears the rest of this answer. It may be that the Leader of the Opposition might like to take the advice of the rest of the frontbench. But let me read the quote first—we will get to that:

… would it be more appropriate, instead of doubling it and probably overshooting the mark, to look at what the figure would be if it had been indexed? I am talking about approximately $75,000 per annum.

The Private Hospitals Association said it would be more equitable to use thresholds of $76,000 and $152,000 to be indexed thereafter. Access Economics, in a report for the AMA, said the thresholds of $70,000 and $140,000 would have restored the system to previous real levels if that was the goal. Even Terry Barnes, former senior adviser to the former Minister for Health and Ageing, Tony Abbott, suggested that the new thresholds might be more appropriate at, for example, $80,000 or $160,000. Senator Xenophon has

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suggested that the threshold should be lower than we originally proposed, while the Greens have asked for indexation. Having consulted and having listened, we are prepared to take a sensible approach to this matter and to the wishes of the Senate, because we are determined to provide much-needed tax relief for working families.

In the other place this afternoon we will propose new thresholds of $75,000 for singles, while retaining our original proposal for couples at $150,000. If I take the interjections earlier to be any indication, I would ask the Leader of the Opposition to stand up and affirm that the Liberals will now support these new thresholds. This measure will deliver immediate tax relief to 330,000 Australians—a significant number of working families who need this break. True, it is not as many as we would have liked to have delivered relief to, but the position of the Liberals and of the Senate means that, if this proposal were accepted, 330,000 families would nevertheless be beneficiaries of this measure. It is a pragmatic response following a Senate inquiry and much consultation. For two average income earners, each earning about $60,000, this will deliver an immediate saving of $1,200 to those families in the first year. Just as importantly, we propose that this threshold be indexed each year to reflect wages growth. This will ensure that it will remain relevant into the future rather than ever threatening to become the tax trap that was delivered courtesy of the previous government.

There has been a lot of talk, as I have said, in the last few days about the Leader of the Opposition wanting a bipartisan approach to economic responsibility. This is his first test, or his first opportunity. If the opposition truly want to pursue a bipartisan approach to economic responsibility, then this is their chance. The Leader of the Opposition should stand up now or after question time and indicate that he will support this new proposal, which has widespread support, particularly within his own party. He says he is a real leader and he wants a bipartisan approach. This is his chance to stand up and say so.

**Mr Pyne**—Mr Speaker, I rise on a point of order. Under standing order 98, ministers are actually not allowed to announce government policy in question time. I would ask you, therefore, to ask the minister to draw to a close her answer, which we have put up with for the last five minutes, even though she should not have been asked in the first place.

**The SPEAKER**—The minister has concluded. But, on the point of order by the member for Sturt, if the question had actually asked for the announcement of policy, it would have been out of order.

**Age Pension**

Ms MARINO (2.32 pm)—My question is to the Treasurer. If it is good enough for the Prime Minister to go overseas and announce an international commission on nuclear disarmament, what would prevent the Prime Minister from making an announcement in New York to increase the single pension by $30 a week?

Mr SWAN—I thank the member for her question. This side of the House believe that there is a need for very substantial action when it comes to the base rate of the pension. We have said that repeatedly. But it has to be done in a measured way, it has to be done in a proper way, it has to be done in a financially responsible way and it has to be done in a way which does not leave behind two million Australian pensioners. That is what those opposite are proposing—to leave behind two million Australian pensioners.

We have not had, on any occasion in the last nine months, one funded alternative proposal from those in the opposition; not one. What we have had is act of economic irre-
responsibility after act of economic irresponsibility. We on this side of the House will do the right thing by Australian pensioners and the right thing by the nation in the long term. And the right thing by the nation is the right thing by Australian pensioners. To get a sustainable, funded costing into the base rate of the pension is, indeed, very complex. It has to be done properly. It has to be done in such a way that we do not leave two million Australian pensioners behind. And it has to be done in a financially responsible way. That is why, in the budget, we put forward the $500 bonus for age pensioners. I wish we could have done more. We also increased the utilities allowance by $400 for all pensioners.

Some of us have been around the House a while and some of us have a long memory about the new-found interest in pensioners by those opposite. I can well recall for year after year ministers in the previous government coming into this House and denigrating disability support pensioners. I can remember it very well. Disability support pensioners, along with the carers, are deserving of justice in this review, just as everyone else is deserving of justice in this review, just as everyone else is deserving of justice in this review. And justice will be delivered by those on this side of the House. We have had a 100-year history in defending the rights of people on low and fixed incomes. We will do the right thing. You can do the short-term thing. We will do the right thing in the long term, and we will do the right thing by the nation and the pensioners of Australia.

**Economy**

**Mr ADAMS** (2.36 pm)—My question is to the Minister for Finance and Deregulation. Will the minister outline the importance of fiscal policy in responding to the challenging global economic circumstances? Are there any threats to the government’s fiscal policy settings?

**Mr TANNER**—The government is committed to long-term sustainable growth in the Australian economy. The primary mechanism for delivering that growth is responsible economic management. That means, in the current economic circumstances, a very substantial budget surplus; reining in government spending, which was running at over five per cent real growth when we took office, and getting it down to one per cent; reducing tax as a proportion of GDP over the forward estimates; and setting aside very substantial sums from the surplus to invest in the three major infrastructure funds, which will invest in big, long-term nation-building infrastructure such as the national broadband network. The budget strategy is absolutely central to responsible economic management.

Unfortunately, the opposition has been acting in a grossly irresponsible way in its approach to dealing with the budget legislation in the Senate—blocking measures in the Senate at every opportunity and threatening to blow a huge hole worth billions of dollars in the budget surplus. When the Leader of the Opposition was shadow Treasurer he tried to distance himself from the irresponsible populist approach taken by the former Leader of the Opposition, the member for Bradfield. He tried to portray himself as the responsible, calm person and the responsible economic manager. Unfortunately, in his first week in office, if anything, I would have to say that the new Leader of the Opposition has been even worse than the member for Bradfield was on the responsible economic management front. He has continued the blocking tactics in the Senate and he has re-committed to the member for Bradfield’s huge unfunded spending promises. And since the current Leader of the Opposition took over, we see a pattern of deliberate undermining of confidence in the Australian economy by doing things such as raising ques-
tions in this place, with not a skerrick of evidence, about the health of the finances of Medibank Private and other private health insurance organisations; by doing things like suggesting that the government should invest in toxic subprime mortgages such as the United States has been forced to do—even though the Australian economy does not have anything like the same problem; and by doing things like contradicting the Reserve Bank governor’s assessment of the differences between the circumstances in Australia and in the United States.

It is notable that the stand-alone investment banking model appears to be dying, and perhaps it is about time the ‘merchant of Venice’, the investment banker representing the opposition, actually reviewed his model for approaching economic management, because he has been grossly irresponsible over the first week—even more irresponsible than the member for Bradfield. I doubt whether the new shadow Treasurer is going to be able to offer any great assistance in the role that the former shadow Treasurer played because she does not even know what the Reserve Bank official interest rate is. When asked on radio she said: ‘I am just trying to think. I will have to go and check that one out.’ To be fair, she did get closer than Barnaby Joyce. She did better than the National Party. You know you are in trouble if you are even less accurate than the National Party on economic matters. But I doubt whether we are going to get much assistance from the new shadow Treasurer.

I am feeling nostalgic for the member for Bradfield already! I know that that is a terrible thing to admit, but I am feeling nostalgic. He may have been an irresponsible populist but he knew a good statistic when he saw one. In fact, he knew several thousand personally and intimately. I’ll tell you what: he would know what the Reserve Bank cash rate is. He would definitely know. In fact, I am prepared to bet that he would know what the cash rate is in Uzbekistan as well—and probably the bond rate and the growth rate and various other things. He did not have much else other than this supply of endless statistics, but he did know one thing well.

A word of advice to the opposition: irresponsible economic populism does not pay. Tearing down the budget surplus, making huge unfunded promises and undermining confidence in the Australian economy and in investment decisions in Australia may score you a few cheap points now but you will get a very different response from the Australian people when they think long and hard about whether you are qualified to manage the Australian economy in turbulent times over the next couple of years.

Age Pension

Mr TURNBULL (2.41 pm)—My question is addressed to the Acting Prime Minister. If the Prime Minister can cook up a grand Asia-Pacific union on a few hours notice, why do the single age pensioners of Australia have to wait until the end of next year to get an increase in a pension the Acting Prime Minister herself has said is impossible to live on?

Ms GILLARD—I thank the Leader of the Opposition for his question. Even as he asked the question, the Leader of the Opposition looked uncomfortable because he knows how hypocritical his and the Liberal Party’s performance is on this question. He understands that Australians would look at the record of the Howard government and ask themselves why the arguments put by the Leader of the Opposition did not persuade the Howard government to act in 1996, 1997 or 1998, and so on and so forth up to last year, when he sat round a cabinet table and the then responsible minister, Mal Brough, said to him in cabinet that we should put the rate of the base pension up—and the Howard
cabinet said ‘No’. There is no walking away from that fact. There is no pretending that that fact does not exist. At least when they sat over here, the Leader of the Opposition and the former members of the Howard ministry were honest enough to say to the Australian people, ‘No. 1, we love Work Choices and, No. 2, we are going to do nothing about the pension’. That is what you said to the Australian people over 12 long years.

Well, this government has acted with practical measures in the recent budget, practical measures that will mean pensioners will have more money—$128 received this week—in the form of the utilities payment that we increased to $500. Pensioners had the $500 cash bonus out of the budget. We understand that these measures will make some difference but that there will still be pressure on pensioners, which is why we are engaged in looking at the question of the pension, comprehensively, through a review.

Can I contrast that with the approach of the Leader of the Opposition, who has cobbled together a measure that he was amending on the run over the weekend—‘Oops, I forgot veterans’ was his approach, and there was a quick cobbled together, an amendment of the motion. And, as the Minister for Veterans’ Affairs has indicated in the House, yesterday and today, even with those changes there are veterans left behind. As the minister responsible, Minister Macklin, has indicated in the House today, there are two million pensioners left behind.

The Leader of the Opposition knows that this is an exercise in politics. It is not delivering a solution. The government is working on a solution to take pressure off Australian pensioners. We have delivered the budget measures. The one thing the Leader of the Opposition does not explain, whether he is here in Canberra or overseas in Venice, is why he did nothing about the base rate of the pension when he was in a position to make a difference, around the cabinet table. Why did he do nothing about it? Until he provides an explanation of that point, everything else that he says will be viewed in its shadow. Until he answers the question: ‘Why did he do nothing?’ then the things that are being said in question time today will be weighed for what they are worth by members of the Australian community.

The SPEAKER—The member for Chis—

Mr Turnbull—Mr Speaker, I move that so much of—

The SPEAKER—Order! I was going to give the member for Chisholm the call.

Mr Hockey—Come off it!

The SPEAKER—I was looking—the member for Chisholm was on her feet.

Mr Turnbull—You gave me the call, Mr Speaker.

The SPEAKER—No, I never gave anybody the call. You would have only been given the call to make a point of order.

Mr Turnbull—I move that so much of the standing and sessional orders be suspended—

The SPEAKER—The Leader of the Opposition will resume his seat.

Opposition member interjecting—

The SPEAKER—Only if he got the call. I have not given anyone—

Opposition member interjecting—

The SPEAKER—Exactly. The member for Chisholm.

Mr Hockey—Mr Speaker, on a point of order: the Leader of the Opposition asked a question. There is always an entitlement for the person who asks the question to stand up, to make a point of order, perhaps to even get the minister to table a document. The Leader of the Opposition was on his feet and seek-
ing the call to move a suspension of standing orders. I ask that you reconsider your decision.

The SPEAKER—I think that the member for North Sydney is stretching Practice a little—

Opposition member interjecting—

The SPEAKER—No. He is stretching it a little bit to suggest that, when the person answering the question has resumed their seat, we do not go to the next question.

Mr Hockey—Mr Speaker, on a further point of order: you had not called the member for Chisholm. You said you were looking at her, but the call actually went to the Leader of the Opposition.

The SPEAKER—If I recall, I gave nobody the call. I looked at the member—

Mr Turnbull—Mr Speaker, I am seeking the call.

The SPEAKER—The member for Chisholm has the call.

Mr Turnbull—Mr Speaker, I thought you just said you had not given anyone the call.

The SPEAKER—At the time.

Opposition member interjecting—

The SPEAKER—No, it is not. You can make all the comments under your breath you like, but I believe what will now happen is the member for Chisholm will ask her question, the answerer will answer it and then the call will go to your side and I can predict what might happen at that point.

Economy

Ms Burke (2.49 pm)—My question is to the Treasurer. Will the Treasurer update the House on recent developments in financial markets and their implications for Australia?

Mr Turnbull—Mr Speaker, I rise on a point of order. How is it possible to move a suspension of standing orders if I cannot get the call?

The SPEAKER—The Treasurer has the call. I would only be giving people the call for a point of order. I have indicated what I am going to do and you will get there.

Mr Swan—I was asked to update the House on recent developments in financial markets and their implications for Australia. We have continued to see volatility on global financial markets overnight, with Wall Street falling 3½ per cent. US authorities are continuing to work on a solution to the bad debts in the US that are at the heart of the problem, which is of course the US subprime problem. The action by US authorities will build on recent coordinated action by central banks and regulators worldwide, including our own, to increase liquidity and to crack down on short selling. These global difficulties will continue to impact on confidence in share markets around the world and they are most certainly slowing the global economy.

Honourable members would be aware that the largest developed economies are all struggling to grow. The UK, Japan, Germany, France and Italy all recorded zero or negative growth in the three months to June this year. So we should not be surprised that these global problems, together with something like 10 interest rate rises in a row under the Liberals, are slowing our economy.

Of course, we have been upfront about all of these things from the very beginning. In our May budget we recognised that the combination of slower global growth, tighter credit conditions and high interest rates would slow growth and that this slower growth would have flow-on effects on the labour market. The turbulence in global financial markets is also impacting on our share market and superannuation returns. We understand that this is creating considerable anxiety in our community, particularly for
retirees reliant on super as their primary income.

So we are not immune from these global difficulties, but we are certainly better placed than most countries to weather the storm. This is one of the reasons why we do need a significant budget surplus—to act as a buffer against the global uncertainty. The new shadow Treasurer has a chance to turn over a new leaf, understand the importance of the surplus in these circumstances and get her party to change their tune in the Senate so that we can protect the surplus and have it there as a buffer against these uncertain conditions. But I somehow get the impression from the behaviour of the Leader of the Opposition and others that this is not going to happen. It has been a pretty bad 24 hours for the shadow Treasurer. It is a tough job, being a shadow Treasurer—particularly now she is on the front bench with a leader who is pretending to have economic credibility.

We have had a lot of criticism from those opposite about economic management. Yesterday, I listened quite intently to the member for Curtin’s response to my ministerial statement. One part of that statement stood out. This is what she said in her response to my ministerial statement yesterday:

The proposal would give the Treasury secretary significant leeway in buying, selling and holding residential or commercial mortgages, as well as “any securities, obligations or other instruments that are based on or related to such mortgages.”

And, earlier in the same piece:

Among the things the government is asking for is the authority to hire asset managers to oversee the buying of assets.

Now, I have taken advice from many quarters, but I have never stolen something directly from the *Wall Street Journal* and I have never passed it off as my own wisdom! I think following this that the member for Curtin will be forever known as the shadow minister for plagiarism—the Helen Demidenko of Australian politics! Two gaffes in 24 hours—that is quite a start from people who are lecturing others about competence and standing in the community. This comes from people who are strutting around, not caring about interest rates and showing all sorts of pretences instead of understanding what is going on in the economy and the community. I think the Leader of the Opposition might now be regretting his decision to exclude the member for Goldstein from the position of shadow Treasurer. He certainly could not do any worse.

**URGENT RELIEF FOR SINGLE AGE PENSIONERS LEGISLATION**

**Suspension of Standing and Sessional Orders**

*Government members interjecting—*

**The SPEAKER**—Order!

Mr TURNBULL (Wentworth—Leader of the Opposition) (2.55 pm)—I am glad this is so welcome! I move:

That so much of the standing and sessional orders be suspended as would prevent the Leader of the Opposition from moving immediately—that the House of Representatives:
(1) recognises that the Prime Minister and his Government:
   (a) have acknowledged that it is virtually impossible for single age pensioners to meet essential expenses on the current pension rate, yet have refused to act and instead expect struggling pensioners to wait until yet another review is completed; and
   (b) have a responsibility to act immediately to ensure that the entire pension payment system appropriately addresses these pressures;

(2) affirms the urgency of the Coalition’s pension bill in proposing to:
   (a) increase the single age pension, single age service pension and the Widow B pension by $30 per week;
   (b) provide immediate relief to single age pensioners, single age service pensioners and Widow B pensioners struggling with the rising cost of living pressures; and
   (c) provide the first step in ensuring that the Government acts immediately and accepts its responsibilities to take the urgent action required to assist all pensioners;

(3) demands that the Government:
   (a) allow the Opposition proposal to be debated immediately and in doing so, reflect the will of the Senate in passing the Urgent Relief for Single Age Pensioners Bill 2008 last night; and
   (b) recognise the urgency of the Coalition’s bill and support its enactment without further delay; and

(4) should it refuse to deal with the Coalition’s bill, demands that the Acting Prime Minister immediately introduce the Urgent Relief for Single Age Pensioners Bill 2008 in the House of Representatives with full knowledge that it will pass through this place and through the Senate.

We have seen the plight of pensioners trivialised and mocked by this government today. We have seen pensioners who are living on a pension that the Treasurer, this man who claims to be so in touch, says he cannot live on, and that the Acting Prime Minister says that she cannot live on. We have seen this move to give single age pensioners $30 a week described by the Minister for Veterans’ Affairs as ‘a stunt’. We have seen it described by the Treasurer as ‘a ploy’. And we have seen it described by the Acting Prime Minister, after listening to the comic antics of the Treasurer during question time, as ‘low-rent politics’. Low-rent politics indeed—we have had a gutful of that from the government today!

Mr Albanese—Mr Speaker, on a point of order: the opposition have chosen not to seek leave to move a motion. They have chosen to just move a motion to suspend standing orders. Therefore, it is only within the parameters of the Leader of the Opposition’s speech to address that question of why standing orders should be suspended.

Opposition members interjecting—

The SPEAKER—Order! The Leader of the House will resume his seat. The Leader of the Opposition understands that he has to speak to the reasons for the suspension.

Mr Turnbull—The urgency of this motion is acknowledged and self-evident to the government members who said that the pension is so low that they cannot live on it. They are asking Australian pensioners to accept a payment, a pension, that they say, in their arrogance, they cannot live on but they will do nothing about. Here is the bill. Here is the answer. This can fix it. It is within the power of the government. The Acting Prime Minister is sitting there, despising those pensioners over a payment—despising them.

Oh, yes.

Honourable members interjecting—

Mr Turnbull—Oh, are we respecting pensioners? Does the Acting Prime Minister claim she respects pensioners? She respects
them so much that she will not lift a finger to relieve them. She has the opportunity. There it is. All the work has been done. The Senate has passed it. All the government has to do right now is pass this bill. This bill is there for you. We have had nothing. There is the bill.

Ms Gillard interjecting—

Mr TURNBULL—All she can do—Mr Speaker, I am getting a running dialogue from the Acting Prime Minister, a sort of psychobabble going back into the past, talking about last year. What about the year before last or the year before that?

Government members interjecting—

The SPEAKER—Order! Those on my right will come to order!

Mr TURNBULL—Let me remind the Acting Prime Minister that the Acting Prime Minister is running this country today. The pensioners of Australia are not interested in her excursion into political history. They want to know what the government will do for them now and the answer that the government has for pensioners, the answer that the so-in-touch Treasurer there, running through his comic lines written by Bob Ellis, has. He sneers. He writes better lines than the ones you do yourself. The answer that they have—the only answer they have—is nothing. They have nothing to give pensioners, nothing to relieve a pension that they acknowledge is completely inadequate. And they claim that this is not urgent. They say this can wait. Till what? When? Until the Ken Henry review reports, till the end of 2009.

The coalition’s proposal of $30 a week will have the effect of increasing the rate of the single pension to approximately two-thirds of the rate of the couple pension, up from under 60 per cent. The percentage of the couple pension that the single pension in our system represents is low by OECD standards, and this can be seen as correcting an immediate anomaly at a time when we have seen extraordinary price inflation. It is an immediate challenge, and it is one where justice needs to be done.

We have heard complaints from the government as they try to defend their lack of action today, as they try to give the coldest of cold comfort to the pensioners of Australia with their recitation of political history. They claim that the previous government did not increase the pension. Let me tell you: in 1997—if you want some political history—it was a decision by the coalition government to link the age pensions to growing incomes, at 25 per cent of male total average weekly earnings rather than the CPI, and that meant that pensioners directly shared in the benefits of a stronger economy. That was concrete action. It was the coalition government that introduced the utilities allowance. It was the coalition government that increased the amount of the age pension a part-rate pensioner receives above the income-test-free area by reducing the pension income test withdrawal rate from 50c in the dollar to 40c in July 2000. And it was the coalition government that passed the legislation to halve the assets test taper rate. The coalition has stood by pensioners throughout its time in government.

But, you know, Mr Speaker, the task of government is continuing. The government is now led by Mr Rudd, by the Acting Prime Minister here and by the Treasurer. They have got the responsibility today. Just as the coalition responded to the needs of pensioners when it was in government, so it is the responsibility of this government to act today. The government has the ability to act. There it is. All the work has been done. You do not need to set up a committee. You do not need to have a review. The bill is there. You can pick it up. This can be passed. The pensioners can get the $30. The only thing
that stands between the single age pensioners and the single service pensioners of Australia and $30 a week is the cold indifference of this government.

The SPEAKER—Is the motion seconded?

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

Ms MACKLIN (Jagajaga—Minister for Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs) (3.05 pm)—Where is the member for Warringah? Goodness knows where he is. He’s bored! He is so bored.

Opposition members interjecting—

The SPEAKER—Order! Those on my left will come to order! The minister has the call.

Ms MACKLIN—He is too bored to come and do his job in the parliament, too bored to defend pensioners. He does not want the job anymore. Why is it that we are having this debate in the parliament right now? Why is it that we are having this debate? Because the great lawyer over there has finally realised that what the opposition have proposed is unconstitutional.

I see the member for Mackellar over there is giving it a very big nod. The member for Mackellar knows that I am exactly right—that the previous Leader of the Opposition, when he dreamt up this idea to try and save his leadership a week or so ago, actually said, when he made this announcement, ‘I will be introducing this bill into the House of Representatives. I will introduce this bill.’ Then we saw the member for North Sydney get completely eaten up by Laurie Oakes—

Mrs Bronwyn Bishop—Mr Speaker, I rise on a point of order. The point of order I make is precisely the same as I made before.

The SPEAKER—The member for Mackellar will resume her seat. The minister will address her remarks to the suspension motion.

Ms MACKLIN—The Leader of the Opposition says this is so urgent, because he has finally figured out that he cannot do what he wanted to do. He has to move this suspension because he knows he cannot actually bring the bill into the House of Representatives because of the Constitution. We have got a great lawyer here! He does not even understand the Constitution—and he sure as heck does not understand pensions policy. Let us just go through a few reasons why this bill should not be made into law. It should not be made into law because it is flawed policy and it is cynical politics at its worst—

Mrs Bronwyn Bishop—Mr Speaker, I rise on a point of order. The point of order I make is precisely the same as I made before.

The SPEAKER—The member for Mackellar will resume her seat. The minister will address her remarks to the suspension motion.

Ms MACKLIN—As I said, the reason that those opposite think this matter is so urgent is because they made this big commitment a couple of weeks ago to bring this legislation into the House of Representatives. They have now figured out that they cannot do that, and so the only thing they have got to do is to move a suspension of standing orders to have this debate. They thought this was so urgent in the Senate yesterday that
they could not even get a seconder for their motion! And I am told they thought it was so important in the Senate yesterday that they actually had more speakers on the luxury car tax bill than they did on their own pension motion. So much for it being so important!

Opposition members interjecting—

Ms MACKLIN—They are all saying over there that we should just get on with it. Well, you would have to ask: why didn’t they just get on with it a year ago? Almost exactly a year ago, this issue went to the Howard cabinet and it was thrown out by the Howard government. The Leader of the Opposition said no. The Deputy Leader of the Opposition said no. The Leader of the National Party said no. So much for it being urgent! They are not serious about this issue. All they want to do is to play politics with pensions—play low-rent politics. The reason we will not be introducing anything like the bill that they are proposing is that it is extraordinary in the way that it sets pensioner against pensioner. What it does is ignore the needs of two million pensioners. It ignores the needs of those on the disability support pension. It ignores those on a carer payment.

Another complication which, of course, the Leader of the Opposition does not understand is that there are actually 13,000 people over the aged-pension age—and if he actually listened to this he might learn something about the pension—13,000 people aged over 65 who are on carer payment or who are on the disability support pension. They are living on exactly the same amount of money as people on the aged pension. And the legislation that he thinks is so urgent to debate today completely ignores their needs. So we will not be introducing that legislation. It ignores the needs of two million pensioners, more than one million of them married couples, who are also doing it tough and who are having trouble making ends meet; disability support pensioners who are having trouble making ends meet; and, of course, carers, who are carrying a very heavy load. And it is the opposition who are saying that we should just adopt this bill, because they have dreamt it up in an effort to save the previous Leader of the Opposition’s skin. Well, we will not be doing that.

What we have done is taken a far more responsible approach. What we have done is made sure that we increased the utilities allowance from $107—

Mr Truss interjecting—

Ms MACKLIN—The Leader of the National Party over there just sighs! He sighs in his tired, old way; he sighs because he knows that, when they were in government and had the opportunity to increase the utilities allowance, they did not do it. They did not increase the utilities allowance. They left it at $107. We increased it to $500. And in this fortnight pensioners are going to be receiving $128, which is the third instalment of that increased utilities allowance. It was left to this government to extend the utilities allowance to carers and people on the disability support pension. They had all that time to extend it to those pensioners. Did they do it? No, they did not.

This government also decided that we would pay the bonuses both to people who are on the aged pension and to carers, to make sure that they got some extra help while we did this very important inquiry, because we do understand just how complicated it is. Another attempt by those opposite demonstrates just why it is so important to get this right. If we were to do what they are proposing then, if you were a public housing tenant, a quarter of what those opposite want to give you would just go in public housing rents. And 13,000 older Australians who are on the carer payment or the disability support pension would just be ignored. Two million
Australians who are battling on pensions would just be ignored.

We will not be introducing a flawed piece of legislation. What the government has done is made sure that we have provided around $900 extra to pensioners to make sure that they had some additional help while we did a proper inquiry to make sure that the base rate of the pension, the support that governments provide to pensioners, is right for the long term. We will not be leaving it for 12 years and doing nothing about it. We made sure that in our first budget—in our first budget, not our 12th budget—we delivered an extra $900. Our first budget delivered an extra $900, and we will get this right for the long term for pensioners.

Mrs May (McPherson) (3.15 pm)—This government is a sham. They pretend they care about the Australian pensioner, but what will they do for the Australian pensioner in the immediate time? We have had a Senate review; we have had the Harmer review and now we are told we are having the Henry review. How many reviews do we need to have before the pensioners of this country get the support they need? They are struggling now. They do not need help tomorrow; they need it today. Today is when these pensioners need some help.

The government does not think this motion is urgent. I wonder what the pensioners of Australia think when they hear that their government does not believe their needs are urgent. This is a government that has only taken nine months to be out of touch with older Australians—nine months. And the minister stands here today and talks about a seniors bonus—a measure introduced by this side of the House when we were in government. They talk about a utilities allowance—another measure introduced by this side of the House, recognising what senior Australians need. But what are they going to do about the single rate pension? A $30 increase was supported by the Senate last night and brought into the House today, and we have the government sitting before us today and the minister saying: ‘This is not urgent. We need a review. These people do not need assistance today; they will have to wait until tomorrow.’ Well, I do not think the pensioners of this country can wait until tomorrow. They are going to have to wait until next year.

Where is the Prime Minister when we talk about older Australians? The minister talks about our shadow minister not being in the chamber—where is the Prime Minister of this country? Where is he? Missing in action, when the senior Australians of this country need his support. The government calls this a stunt. I do not think it is a stunt when we are talking about senior Australians and the cost-of-living pressures that they are under today. Look at the cost increases and the promises made by this government in the lead-up to last year’s election that the cost-of-living pressures would be relieved by this government. What has it done? Nothing but review after review after review, and still no relief for pensioners in this country. Pensioners are still being told they are going to have to wait until next year’s budget. The review will not put bread on the table. It will not pay the bills of single pensioners in this country.

And now we have a minister who comes before us today wanting to rewrite history. She talks about the seniors bonus and the utilities allowance—brought in by a coalition government, not by this government. This government is a disgrace. When it comes to senior Australians, it wants to just forget they exist, forget the needs of senior Australians and not assist them. It has a budget surplus left by the coalition government, a surplus that can be used today to immediately offset the living pressures on senior Australians in this country. You are a disgrace, and senior
Australians listening to this today around the country will understand that this government does not care about their needs, their wants and their wishes. The majority of Australians support a $30 per week increase for senior Australians in this country and it is time this government took action and ensured that that happened today.

The SPEAKER—Order! It being 3.20 pm, the time for the debate has concluded.

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

The House divided. [3.24 pm]
(The Speaker—Mr Harry Jenkins)

AYES
Andrews, K.J. Billson, B.F.
Bishop, B.K. Bishop, J.I.
Broadbent, R. Chester, D.
Ciobo, S.M. Costello, P.H.
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. *
Katter, R.C. Keenan, M.
Lindsay, P.J. Macfarlane, I.E.
Marino, N.B. Markus, L.E.
May, M.A. Morrison, S.J.
Moylan, J.E. Nelson, B.J.
Neville, P.C. Oakeshott, R.J.M.
Pearce, C.J. Pyne, C.
Ramsey, R. Randall, D.J.
Robb, A. Robert, S.R.
Ruddock, P.M. Schultz, A.
Scott, B.C. Secker, P.D.
Simpkins, L. Slipper, P.N.
Smith, A.D.H. Somlyay, A.M.
Southcott, A.J. Stone, S.N.
Truss, W.E. Tuckey, C.W.
Turnbull, M. Vale, D.S.

Washer, M.J. Wood, J.

NOES
Adams, D.G.H. Albanese, A.N.
Bidgood, J. Bird, S.
Bowen, C. Bradbury, D.J.
Burke, A.E. Burke, A.S.
Butler, M.C. Byrne, A.M.
Campbell, J. Champion, N.
Cheeseeman, 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. Hayes, C.P. *
Irwin, J. Jackson, S.M.
Kelly, M.J. Kerr, D.J.C.
King, C.F. Livermore, K.F.
Macklin, J.L. Marles, R.D.
McClelland, R.B. McKew, M.
McMullan, R.F. Melham, D.
Murphy, J. Neal, B.J.
Neumann, S.K. O’Connor, B.P.
Owens, J. Parke, M.
Perrett, G.D. Plibersek, T.
Price, L.R.S. * Raguse, B.B.
Rea, K.M. Ripoll, B.F.
Rishworth, A.L. Roxon, N.L.
Saffin, J.A. Shorten, W.R.
Sidebottom, S. Snowden, W.E.
Sullivan, J. Swan, W.M.
Symon, M. Tanner, L.
Thomson, C. Thomson, K.J.
Trevor, C. Turnour, J.P.
Vamvakopoulos, M. Zappia, A.

PAIRS
Abbott, A.J. Bevis, A.R.
Laming, A. Smith, S.F.

* denotes teller

Question negatived.
QUESTIONS WITHOUT NOTICE

Economy

Ms JULIE BISHOP (3.30 pm)—My question is to the Treasurer. I refer the Treasurer to the Prime Minister’s comments yesterday, where he said, ‘Words are bullets.’ Does the Treasurer now regret saying, ‘The inflation genie is out of the bottle,’ not once, not twice but three times in the week before the Reserve Bank meeting in February?

Mr SWAN—I thank the member for her question. Words are certainly bullets. Inflation hit a 16-year high in the months of October, November and December last year. And of course the current Leader of the Opposition described that as a ‘fairy story’. The fact that inflation hit a 16-year high under the Liberals is very embarrassing to all of those Liberals who sit opposite. Essentially, it points to their central failure in economic policy. I make no apology for being frank about the situation in the Australian economy, about the legacy left to this economy by the Liberal Party—inflation at a 16-year high, which pushed up interest rates 10 times in a row. When they pushed up interest rates 10 times in a row, on about the seventh occasion, when there was a 25 basis point rise, the current Leader of the Opposition said that it had been ‘overdramatised’. Yes, words are bullets. The bullets that side have been firing into their economic record are substantial.

The record that they left this country has exposed the economy at a time when the international situation has turned. So, precisely at a time of great global uncertainty, their legacy of inflation at a 16-year high and 10 interest rate rises in a row have led to less room for the Reserve Bank to move. Fortunately, this government put in place responsible economic policy during the budget and the consequence of that budget was to provide the Reserve Bank with room to move. We cut back on reckless spending, and we put in place essential spending to enhance the productive capacity of our economy so we can do something in the long-term about inflation and do something to get interest rates down in a sustainable way. That is our record. We are proud of it. That is their record and they should be ashamed of it.

Vietnam War

Mr NEUMANN (3.33 pm)—My question is to the Minister for Defence Science and Personnel. Will the minister inform the House of the current status of recovering the remains of those Australians who died in the Vietnam War and whose remains have never been recovered?

Mr SNOWDON—If you go over the lake and drive up Anzac Parade, you will pass the Vietnam Forces National Memorial. It is a very impressive and imposing memorial indeed, with three large concrete walls. Around the memorial are three seats. These three seats contain the names of six Australian servicemen, who at the time the memorial was established had not come back from Vietnam. Fortunately, owing to the work of Mr Jim Bourke and Operation Aussies Home, and with the support of the previous government and the then minister responsible, the member for Dunkley, finances were made available to allow work to be done and provide a capacity to return three of those soldiers back home: Lance Corporal Richard Parker, Private Peter Gillson and Lance Corporal John Gillespie. Their remains have been returned to this country and they were buried with the honour they properly deserve.

On 27 September 1969, Private David Fisher was hanging by a rope from a helicopter during a hot extraction at Nui May Tao, 32 kilometres north, north-east of Nui Dat. He fell from the rope. Aircraft personnel undertook an immediate search. There was another search by light helicopter, then an SAS
squadron did a search. Later a rifle company searched for three more days and then another rifle company searched for three more days, but they could find nothing. The search was complicated by the fact that the aircrew were unable to identify exactly where he fell.

But owing again to the diligence of these people and Mr Bourke, we were able to, after a time, undertake an extensive search. In consultation with the Vietnamese government and Vietnamese veterans, we were able to identify a place where we thought we might find the remains of Private Fisher. On 8 August this year, an Australian investigation team discovered remains that they believed might belong to this man. On 21 August, another investigation team was sent in. That investigation lasted until 28 August. They were able to find further remains and Private Fisher’s identification tags. After extensive forensic work, the Australian authorities and Vietnamese authorities were able to confirm that these were indeed the remains of Private Fisher. We will be repatriating Private Fisher home to this country on 10 October.

On 3 November 1970, Flying Officer Michael Herbert and Pilot Officer Robert Carver disappeared without a trace in a Canberra bomber, A84-231, during a bombing mission approximately 65 kilometres southwest of Da Nang in Vietnam. Despite four days of extensive air search, their remains have never been recovered.

So, from the original six listed on that memorial, by 10 October we will have the remains of four Army personnel returned home with the honour they deserve. We are still hopeful that, over time, we may find the remains of these two missing airmen.

On behalf of the government and, I am sure, on behalf of the House, I wish to thank the Vietnamese authorities for the support we receive while we undertake these searches.

Honourable members—Hear, hear!

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

PERSONAL EXPLANATIONS

Mr KERR (Denison—Parliamentary Secretary for Pacific Island Affairs) (3.38 pm)—Mr Speaker, I wish to make a personal explanation.

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

Mr KERR—Yes.

The SPEAKER—Please proceed.

Mr KERR—Perhaps more lightly than my immediately preceding remarks, I wish to raise a grievous misrepresentation that was published in today’s Australian by DD McNicoll, who refers to me as a supporter of the Hawthorn Football Club and as having posted in my office window—and being first off the mark—a jumper hailing the success of the Tassie Hawks flying high ahead of their big win on the weekend. While it is impossible not to admire the Hawthorn Football Club’s skills and efforts—and, of course, it does have a sponsorship arrangement with my state of Tasmania—anybody who knows me in this House would know that I am, tragically, a St Kilda supporter. So you would understand how bruised I feel after the events of Saturday night and this terrible misrepresentation.

Might I entirely absolve DD McNicoll from any fault in relation to this. I have a tribally-divided office—a rat in the ranks, as it were. One of my staff is a supporter of Hawthorn and displayed the jumper in my office and conveyed that information to Mr McNicoll. Tested as I have been by this circumstance, and provoked as I have been, I have not dismissed that staff member. He remains and I wish him well for the finals.
Ms JULIE BISHOP (Curtin) (3.40 pm)—Mr Speaker, I wish to make a personal explanation.

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

Ms JULIE BISHOP—Yes, I do.

The SPEAKER—Please proceed.

Ms JULIE BISHOP—Firstly, when the Treasurer said that I did not know the cash interest rate, I in fact said ‘seven’. Secondly, the Treasurer said that I had plagiarised the Wall Street Journal. In my speech I was referring to the United States’ plans, and, in fact, the words I used were a technical explanation of US Treasury Secretary Henry Paulson’s plan, which have been published widely. It is a shame that the Treasurer seeks to smear rather than manage the economy.

Mr Swan—Mr Speaker—

The SPEAKER—Order! The Leader of the House will resume his seat. I call the member for Mackellar.

Mrs BRONWYN BISHOP (Mackellar) (3.41 pm)—Mr Speaker, I wish to make a personal explanation.

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

Mrs BRONWYN BISHOP—Indeed, most grievously, Mr Speaker.

The SPEAKER—Please proceed.

Mrs BRONWYN BISHOP—It was by the member for Jagajaga during her speech in the debate on the motion to suspend standing orders. She indicated that somehow I was supporting her contention that the bill was unconstitutional. Let me say: I was verbally and I think it is constitutional.

The SPEAKER—First of all, I apologise for misrepresenting either the Leader of the House or the Treasurer when I asked the Treasurer to resume his place and called him the Leader of the House. The Treasurer has the call.

ECONOMY

Mr SWAN (Lilley—Treasurer) (3.41 pm)—Mr Speaker, I wish to table the Wall Street Journal of 20 September and a copy of the shadow Treasurer’s speech to the parliament.

QUESTIONS TO THE SPEAKER

Question Time

Mr HOCKEY (3.42 pm)—Mr Speaker, I know that you have said on previous occasions that you do not wish to revisit the events that occur during question time. I do ask you whether it will be your practice to give members the call by line of sight rather than actually uttering the words ‘the member for X’ or the member’s title.

The SPEAKER—I am honestly not sure what the member for North Sydney is getting at, but if it was the incident preceding the suspension of standing orders—

Mr Hockey—Yes.

The SPEAKER—I will simply say—reluctant as I am to revisit the events of earlier on, not just in this case but in any case—that it is my intention, and it has got me into trouble before, to rotate the call on questions. That is because the written word is a bit silent on that. The convention of the House is to rotate the call. The second thing that I would indicate is that I have been very conscious of not denying members the ability to raise legitimate points of order. That has tested my popularity with certain members, but I continue to protect that.

You will recall, earlier in question time, that I was nearly overly firm with the member for Sturt when, in fact, he had the right to come to the dispatch box to raise a point of order. I indicate that on that occasion I was wary because we had moved on, I felt; but he
legitimately raised the point of order where he was seeking the tabling of a document.

In the case before when the rotation was going to the government side and there was a government member standing and then the Leader of the Opposition stood, if you want an admission from the chair, there was an element of the bunny in the spotlight because I was unsure of the intentions of the Leader of the Opposition. He indicated those intentions which then meant that I had more reason, in my mind, to give the call to the member for Chisholm. I am not sure what the replays will show but, in my own mind, I had not given the call to anybody.

Mr Melham interjecting—

The SPEAKER—Order! The member for Banks might think he is assisting but he is not.

Question Time

Mr HOCKEY (3.45 pm)—Further to that, Mr Speaker, there was a previous occasion in this parliament where, even though a member had jumped to his feet, you identified that a member on the government side in fact was on their feet quicker. But what you have just said is that you will rotate the call and, just to get clarity, you will not entertain motions at the end of an answer—we have to wait for the rotation of the call. Is that right?

The SPEAKER—If that is the construct that the member takes from my comments that would assist the chair. But can I say that I understand that the Manager of Opposition Business has a long memory. I remember the incidents earlier in this parliament and every incident and every day I learn something new about this place.

Question Time

Mr PYNE (3.46 pm)—Mr Speaker, I appreciate your explanation for the matters in question time. I have a general question to you, which goes to my experience in the last 15 years, that when the Leader of the Opposition or the Prime Minister seek the call they have generally been given precedence because of their positions in the House, especially over a backbench member of the parliament. Has that changed or will you continue that practice?

The SPEAKER—in general, as I have indicated in private to others, that would be what I would do. In the case where there is a rotation of the call, it does not automatically apply. I have already apologised to the Leader of the Opposition for his first day when he was merely trying to make a personal explanation and I gave two of his backbenchers the call before him on the basis only that they had tipped me off that that was what they were wanting to do. In that case, clearly, I should have given him precedence. Today I am satisfied that, in trying to be consistent, I have conveyed what I intend to try to achieve in the rotation of the call. It will not always be perfect; I am a mere mortal.

AUDITOR-GENERAL’S REPORTS

Report No. 3 of 2008-09

The SPEAKER (3.47 pm)—I present the Auditor-General’s Audit report No. 3 of 2008-09 entitled Establishment and management of the Communications Fund—Department of Broadband, Communications and the Digital Economy—Department of Finance and Deregulation.

Ordered that the report be made a parliamentary paper.

DOCUMENTS

Mr ALBANESE (Grayndler—Leader of the House) (3.48 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.
MINISTERIAL STATEMENTS

Googong Dam

Mr Tanner (Melbourne—Minister for Finance and Deregulation) (3.48 pm)—by leave—On 4 September, I had the pleasure of sitting down with the ACT Chief Minister and signing a long-term lease over the land at Googong Dam. This dam has always been slightly controversial for one reason or another. The Commonwealth built it in the 1970s to supply water to the Australian Capital Territory and to Queanbeyan. The dam was constructed on Commonwealth land near Queanbeyan in New South Wales, while the water it contains from the Queanbeyan River is reserved for use in the territory under an agreement struck with the New South Wales government in 1909, when the national capital was being established. I am sure that no-one could have foreseen in 1909 that we would still be sorting out the fine details of the land and water subject to the agreement in late 2008.

More recently, Googong Dam made the headlines during the 2007 New South Wales state election. During the campaign, the New South Wales Liberals promised to divert water from the dam to Goulburn to try and solve Goulburn’s water crisis. As the New South Wales Liberals are not in government, that plan did not eventuate.

But for the Commonwealth and the ACT government, the issue has been which government is the rightful owner of the land, and this question has been batted back and forth since ACT self-government in 1989. It comes as no surprise then, that this was one of the first matters raised with me and also with the Minister for Home Affairs by the Chief Minister as soon as we took office last year.

With the two governments working cooperatively, however, this matter has been settled to the satisfaction of both parties. This has required intense negotiations, by all parties, but we have been able to resolve the matter in just a few months. The government’s commitment that the land will remain in Commonwealth ownership, and the reasons that it adopts that position, are now clearly understood by the ACT government.

In sorting out the ownership issue it has been difficult to overcome the misunderstandings between the two governments going back to 1988, just before ACT self-government. We are just beginning to discover that there are a number of residual issues remaining from the arrangements for ACT self-government, which the Commonwealth will need to address in the future. Some things were implemented quickly rather than thoroughly thought through at the time. With the benefit of hindsight, it is now clear that these things have not stood the test of time in practice.

Going back to the land at Googong, the then Minister for Arts, Sport, the Environment, Tourism and Territories, Senator Graham Richardson, made it clear on 24 November 1988 why the federal government intended to retain ownership of Googong Dam after the ACT was self-governing. He told the Senate that, because Googong Dam was located in New South Wales, the Commonwealth had obligations to the New South Wales government under the 1909 agreement and, further, because the three water supply dams within the ACT borders would continue to be sited on Commonwealth land after self-government, it would be appropriate for Googong Dam also to remain on Commonwealth owned land.

This reasoning is as applicable today as it was in 1988. Our approach to the resolution of the problem—and this was also the line taken by the previous government but pursued with considerably less zeal—was that there should be a formal agreement between
the Australian and ACT governments so that both parties understand their relationship, roles and obligations at the site, in particular, their obligations to fully protect its environment and heritage features. So, early this year, I offered the ACT Chief Minister a comprehensive lease to suit the ACT’s purposes at the dam.

Not only did this government quickly agree to the ACT’s request for a lease term of 150 years—an unusually long lease, taking it to September 2158; Madam Deputy Speaker, you and I and members of this House will no longer be around, I suspect—

Mr Ian Macfarlane interjecting—

Mr TANNER—we look forward to the shadow minister for energy and resources still being around; the rest of us might have some trouble—but also we will have provided the ACT government with certainty over its use of the dam, and Queanbeyan with certainty over its water supply.

We also intentionally drafted the document to ensure that, while the Commonwealth’s interests in the land are fully protected, the ACT government will be able to acquit its responsibilities without us constantly looking over its shoulder. In fact, what we aimed for was to allow the ACT government to get on and manage the dam on our behalf as set out in the Canberra Water Supply (Googong Dam) Act 1974, an act of this parliament.

There are several notable features of the lease apart from the length of its term. It provides the ACT government with security of tenure. The peppercorn rent will allow the ACT to proceed with planned upgrades at the dam and to implement infrastructure projects which will assure the territory’s water supply into the future, such as the Murrumbidgee to Googong pipeline. There are provisions for timely approvals to be given to the ACT’s plans for proposed developments connected with the dam. The lease also includes model contamination handling and dispute resolution procedures, aimed at avoiding litigation.

I did apply one additional condition on the lease. The negotiations provided the opportunity to rectify an omission over Queanbeyan’s water supply, which has not been legally assured to date under the Googong Dam act. What I said was that an agreement must first be signed between the Australian, New South Wales and ACT governments to guarantee Queanbeyan’s water supply from ACT sources, including Googong Dam. I made it clear to the ACT government that the lease could not come into effect until the Queanbeyan water supply agreement was signed.

In a significant breakthrough, the Chief Minister agreed, early in the negotiations, to guarantee to supply water to new housing developments proposed around Queanbeyan. This is an important step forward for the region’s economy and will allow significant new housing choices in the Queanbeyan area. The Minister for Home Affairs, Mr Bob Debus, has overseen the satisfactory conclusion of the Queanbeyan water supply agreement.

This lease and the supporting Queanbeyan water supply agreement are good examples of cooperative federalism. It is essential for the future of efficient government in this country that thorny issues like Googong Dam are raised and resolved. We also have to acknowledge that the quantity and quality of water is now a major issue for all governments in this country to address—and address quickly and purposefully.

The last round of lease negotiations required the resolution of many complex issues between the two governments. I acknowledge the contributions made by officials and legal advisers in bringing this matter to a
conclusion. I wish the ACT government a successful and trouble-free tenancy at Goo-
gong Dam and extend my especial thanks to
the Chief Minister for his patience, coopera-
tion and sense of purpose throughout; to the
member for Eden Monaro, Dr Mike Kelly; to
the NSW state government; and to the
Queanbeyan City Council for the goodwill
and good sense that they brought to the final
stages of the lease negotiations and the set-
tling of the Queanbeyan water supply agree-
ment.

In conclusion, we are pleased to have re-
solved these matters and 20 years of misun-
derstandings between the Australian gov-
ernment and the ACT government. Finalising
the Googong Dam lease and the associated
water agreement sets the scene for a good
and cooperative working relationship be-
tween the ACT government and the federal
government into the future.

I ask leave of the House to move a motion
to enable the member for Goldstein to speak
for eight minutes.

Leave granted.

Mr TANNER—I move:

That so much of the standing and sessional or-
ders be suspended as would prevent Mr Robb
speaking for a period not exceeding eight min-
utes.

Question agreed to.

Mr ROBB (Goldstein) (3.56 pm)—I am
pleased to respond in my new capacity and
acknowledge that the issue of water security
has been of long-term concern for residents
in the ACT and Queanbeyan. I lived in the
Queanbeyan area with my family for quite a
few years. I am very conscious of the signifi-
cance of water and, in particular, the Goog-
gong Dam to the tens of thousands of people
living not only in and around Queanbeyan
but also within Canberra itself. I offer the
opposition’s support for the 150-year lease
and the associated agreements outlined in the
Minister for Finance and Deregulation’s
statement.

However, I would just like to raise a few
points. Firstly, I would like to refer to one of
the minister’s comments that this was one of
the first matters raised with him by the ACT
government after his appointment as minister
for finance. It is with just a touch of cyni-
cism that I note the announcement of this
agreement just as the ACT government is
going to face an election and several weeks
after the agreement has been signed. Almost
exactly one year ago, the former member for
Eden-Monaro, and Senator Gary Humphries
in the other place, announced that a re-
elected Howard government would transfer
ownership of the dam to the ACT govern-
ment on the proviso that there was a secure
allocation water for Queanbeyan. At the
time, the ACT government said it was an
election stunt. How things change! Also at
that time, the acting Chief Minister of the
ACT, Katy Gallagher, said the coalition had
delivered a ‘status quo announcement’. She
also said, ‘What is occurring today, that is,
that the ACT government owns the Googong
Dam and are supplying water to Quean-
beyan, will not change.’ Given it is the status
quo, it was surprising to see the ACT Chief
Minister just three weeks ago refer to the
agreement as ‘historic’. Again, I can feel an
election coming on.

Maybe it is just because I have been
around politics in this town for a fair while
that I was, and will be, interested to see what
actions the government takes in the lead-up
to the New South Wales election, or its own
re-election in 2010, regarding the allocations
of water from this dam. Will the member for
Eden-Monaro be forced to consider his port-
folio responsibilities and the needs of the
planned defence headquarters near Bungend-
dore? Will the New South Wales govern-
ment, in their desperation to cling on to
power given the parlous state of affairs in

CHAMBER
New South Wales, pressure the Rudd government to give them assistance in the lead-up to their own election? Will the federal government seek to use the water from Goo-gong in other areas once the ACT election is over and done with? Time will tell. Again, I confirm the support of this side of the House for the 150-year lease and the associated agreements that have been finalised.

**Defence Procurement**

Mr FITZGIBBON (Hunter—Minister for Defence) (4.00 pm)—by leave—In May of this year the government fulfilled yet another key election commitment by commissioning an independent review of the Defence Materiel Organisation and the effectiveness of Australia’s defence procurement systems. We made this commitment when in opposition in response to broad industry and community concern over the poor performance of the previous government in delivering the capability that the men and women of the Australian Defence Force need to do their job effectively, efficiently and as safely as is possible while also delivering value for the investment of Australian taxpayers.

In recent years, public confidence in the ability of the Australian government to provide the Australian Defence Force with critical defence capability has been severely undermined. Projects like the Seasprite helicopter, Wedgetail and the Adelaide class frigates have combined to trigger significant widespread community concern about the waste and mismanagement that too often seem synonymous with expensive defence projects. We honoured our pre-election commitment by commissioning well-known businessman David Mortimer to undertake a review of the DMO and defence procurement more generally. Mr Mortimer was a good choice. He is well suited to this task, having been the chairman of the Defence Procurement Advisory Board since 2004. He is also the current chairman of Leighton Holdings and Australia Post. Mr Mortimer delivered his report to the Parliamentary Secretary for Defence Procurement, the Hon. Greg Combet MP and me last Friday. In all, he has made 46 recommendations, the contents of which the government will consider in the lead-up to the release of the defence white paper.

In opposition, I said that I wanted the DMO to run more like a business and less like a bureaucracy. The government’s response to Mr Mortimer’s report will be largely guided by the likelihood that the suggested changes will give effect to that aspiration. This is so critical, given the budget challenge we face. This year and in the coming years the government will spend more money on defence than at any other time in the history of the Federation. Indeed, in three years time we will be spending $6 billion more annually on defence than the Howard government spent in its last year in office. We will need this funding growth to deliver all the capability and people we need to secure the nation. But to achieve these goals we will also need to better prioritise defence spending to get better value for taxpayers’ dollars and to ensure the defence budget is sustainable into the future.

Making the challenge greater is the huge defence funding black hole we have inherited from the previous government—a black hole with a value of up to $15 billion. This is why I have directed Defence to undertake a savings drive which will deliver $10 billion of savings over the course of the next decade. That is $10 billion which will be reinvested into defence to bolster higher priorities. Not one cent of those savings will leak out of Defence; all of those savings will be reinvested in the broader defence project.

The deeper reforms delivered by the white paper and its associated companion reviews...
will further drive savings and efficiencies. The Mortimer review is an important precursor to these broad reform projects. It will be important to have procurement reforms in place to ensure we can deliver on the list of capabilities that the white paper will define.

With a cash budget of more than $9 billion each year, the Defence Materiel Organisation manages over 230 major capital equipment projects and over 180 minor projects. It also maintains thousands of vehicles and items of equipment in an inventory valued at more than $36 billion. Over the next decade, the DMO will manage $100 billion worth of acquisition in sustainment projects. Yet, despite this massive commitment of Australian taxpayers’ dollars, I was deeply concerned while in opposition that Defence faced serious challenges in its procurement of new equipment and its upgrading and sustainment of existing equipment. A significant number of defence projects faced serious delays in terms of their delivery. Each dollar wasted is a dollar of taxpayers’ money not available to be invested elsewhere. Just as concerning, each project delayed means that the men and women of the ADF go without much-needed equipment whilst trying to do the task the government expects of them. To this end, Labor committed that if elected we would conduct a formal evaluation of the effectiveness of reforms to the Defence Materiel Organisation that were implemented for the 2003 review of defence procurement by Mr Malcolm Kinnaird.

Despite the concerns I held while in opposition, I have to say that upon coming to government I was shocked at just how badly a number of projects had performed under the custodianship of the Howard government. While it is fair to say that a large number of projects in defence are executed as planned, the seriousness of the issues facing key projects that are central to the warfighting capability of the ADF over the coming years was staggering. Many of these are now common knowledge to the broader Australian public and have combined seriously to damage the public’s confidence in the Australian government’s ability to provide the ADF with critical defence capability.

The examples of Defence project night-mares that we inherited from the previous government are all too well known to the members of this House and to Australian taxpayers. Probably the most infamous of all was the Sea Sprite helicopter project. When we were elected, the project was seven years late and $100 million over budget, and there seemed to be no prospect whatsoever that the capability would ever be delivered. Consequently, the new government was left with no choice but to cancel the project. The former government was trying to develop a 21st century helicopter out of a 1960s air frame—

Mr Baldwin—It was 1994!

Mr FITZGIBBON—And the member opposite knows that was all the work of the previous government. It involved a contract not signed by the previous government—

Mr Baldwin—It was 1994!

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Ms AE Burke)—The member for Paterson will have his opportunity later.

Mr FITZGIBBON—It was signed by the government just preceding this government, which was led by Mr Howard. They are the facts, and the member opposite knows it. The result was that more than $1 billion worth of taxpayers money was flushed down the drain and, of course, a further $1 billion has to be found—or maybe more than $1 billion—to replace that capability with an alternative capability.

Another troubled project was the upgrade of six, now reduced to four, Adelaide class guided missile frigates. They are old platforms and, again, the former government
underestimated the complexities involved in conducting a major systems and weapons upgrade on this platform. The result? Over $150 million cost variation, 4½ years late and only after significant effort and the attention of this government—in particular that of the Parliamentary Secretary for Defence Procurement, Mr Combet—are we now starting to feel confident we can recover that program which we inherited.

Another example is Project Wedgetail, the acquisition of six airborne early warning and control aircraft. Again, the complexities of the project were massively underestimated. It was assumed that brand-new, leading-edge capability could be delivered within the time and budget promised. Unfortunately, that is not going to be the case. The result? Currently 38 months behind schedule, hundreds of millions of dollars lost by Boeing alone, and it is still uncertain what capability we are going to get from the aircraft and in what time frame.

The litany continues: armed reconnaissance helicopters delivered two years late, a network of high-frequency radio stations 4½ years late and still not delivered, antisubmarine torpedoes three years late, upgraded armoured personnel carriers 12 months late and so on. The list is long indeed.

The Australian taxpayer expects and deserves better. The men and women of the Australian Defence Force expect and deserve better and this government is determined to meet their collective expectations. The Australian Defence Force, the Department of Defence and the Defence Materiel Organisation have a wealth of highly skilled, dedicated and experienced people. In the large, it is not the people letting us down but the systems government provides to facilitate their very important work.

That is what the Mortimer review is about—addressing the architecture of the Defence Materiel Organisation and the capabilities assessment and approval processes. The Parliamentary Secretary for Defence Procurement, Mr Combet, played a key role in tasking this review, selecting Mr Mortimer and in determining the review’s terms of reference. The report of Mr Mortimer’s defence procurement and sustainment review, boldly entitled Going to the next level, constitutes a far-reaching and in-depth examination of the often complex and bewildering processes, practices and acronyms that comprise Defence’s procurement system. A key focus of Mr Mortimer’s review was examining the implementation and effectiveness of the ongoing reforms to the Defence Materiel Organisation following the 2003 Kinnaird review of defence procurement. The Kinnaird review investigated systemic failures that had caused delays and cost increases to a number of earlier Defence acquisition projects and made 10 major and 12 minor recommendations for potential reform across the whole procurement cycle.

Mr Mortimer was also asked to examine financial, staffing and governance arrangements for the Defence Materiel Organisation, potential for further utilisation of private sector expertise and involvement in Defence projects, the advantages and disadvantages of greater utilisation of off-the-shelf products, and options to optimise the involvement of Australian defence industry in Defence acquisition and sustainment.

A major review of our defence policy is also currently underway as part of this government’s defence white paper. This will focus on key examinations of our future strategic environment and the capabilities needed by the Australian Defence Force to best address the challenges of the future. As Mr Mortimer recognises, if Australia is to maintain or, indeed, improve its ‘strategic weight’, we must seek to ensure our procurement processes are as efficient and as
effective as possible. This is essential if the Australian Defence Force is to achieve the capability when and where it is required and if we are to ensure the maximum return from the Defence budget.

Mr Mortimer’s review has made a total of 46 recommendations covering five principal areas of concern:

- the strategy and needs analysis of capability planning;
- defining the requirements of capability;
- the capability acquisition process;
- sustaining and disposing of capability; and
- driving cultural change in the Defence Materiel Organisation.

An important component of the Mortimer review was the public consultation process. The review received 59 written submissions and held consultations with over 40 stakeholders. The views and input received from these contributors and stakeholders have helped to shape Mr Mortimer’s report and its recommendations—and I thank those people.

There are several key recommendations made by Mr Mortimer. The review sensibly suggests Defence should increase the rigour with which projects are assessed for entry to the Defence Capability Plan. Central to this is achieving a more disciplined understanding of the cost, schedule and risk information for a project to allow government to make an informed decision on a project’s suitability for entering the Defence Capability Plan. Commercial acquisition strategies for projects should begin to be developed from the outset, and Defence should continue to monitor projects closely following their entry into the Defence Capability Plan and advise government of any changes to a project’s justification, scope, cost, schedule or risk that might warrant a review of the sustainability of the project.

This would assist in ensuring projects like the air warfare destroyer project, for example, are delivered on time and on budget with all the capability that was promised. Under the previous government, problems on the AWD project were already evident with a $3 billion cost gap between first and second pass. This increase was caused not by massive scope changes but by poor cost assessments. Capability procurement involves trade-offs between capability, risk and opportunity costs. Government cannot make informed decisions without accurate cost assessments.

Mr Mortimer also suggests that a more tailored application of the two-pass process introduced under the Kinnaird reforms should be considered. While an in-depth, multilayered approval process by the National Security Committee of Cabinet might be appropriate for particularly complex projects such as the air warfare destroyer project, more simple projects, such as those focusing purely on off-the-shelf technology, or ‘repeat’ purchases of previously acquired equipment could potentially be more efficiently examined and approved by government. This could include a single-pass approval, particularly where a more rigorous approach is taken for entry to the Defence Capability Plan. Another option could include establishing a subcommittee of the National Security Committee. This would have the effect of potentially speeding up the less complicated acquisition decisions, whilst allowing the NSC to better focus on the more complex projects. All of these options will need to be closely examined by the government ahead of our response.

Another key recommendation from the review is a greater focus on the provision to government of off-the-shelf capability solutions. This is aimed at strengthening the requirements introduced by the Kinnaird review, in particular by introducing a clear
definition of what constitutes 'off the shelf', to avoid repetitions of the post-Kinnaird project failures such as the trucks offered under LAND 121 or the Tactical Unmanned Aerial Vehicle in JP 129, where off-the-shelf solutions turned out to be anything but off-the-shelf solutions.

The review also recommends that alternative contracting methods, in particular public-private partnerships, should be applied to defence procurement projects where appropriate.

Undoubtedly, one of the more contentious aspects of the review is the recommendation that the Defence Materiel Organisation become an executive agency, while also retaining its current prescribed agency status. This was a recommendation of the Kinnaird review that the previous government chose not to implement. It is a concept which appealed to me when I was the opposition spokesman of defence matters and one which should be further canvassed and considered. I said both in opposition and since the election, that I want the DMO to run more like a business and less like a bureaucracy. This imperative will apply whichever approach the government takes.

I have touched on a number of Mr Mortimer’s key findings and recommendations but the review makes a number of additional helpful observations which, along with the key recommendations, will be considered by the government ahead of the white paper process to ensure the correct procurement architecture is in place to drive our other defence reform projects.

I would like to take this opportunity to express my sincere gratitude to Mr Mortimer for the time and effort he has invested in developing this thorough and comprehensive review into what is undoubtedly one of the most complex and important areas facing Defence, underpinning as it does our national security. Of course, I would also like to thank my Parliamentary Secretary for Defence Procurement, the Hon. Greg Combet, for his ongoing effort, dedication and commitment to reforming Defence’s acquisition and sustainment processes. I would like to thank the review team from within Defence who supported Mr Mortimer throughout the project. That Defence team was headed by Major General Tony Fraser.

For the benefit of the House, I table the report for the information of members and senators and indeed the broader Australian community.

I have advised the opposition that I will take a few moments to update the House on the welfare of the nine Australian special forces soldiers who were injured in Afghanistan on 2 September. I am very pleased to advise that the soldier most critically injured— that was the soldier who you will recall was evacuated to Germany— has arrived back home in Australia. He is under the very best of care. I can also report that he is in good spirits and we are hopeful of a full recovery. Two other wounded Australian soldiers also returned home earlier. Again, I take the opportunity while reflecting on their courage to pay tribute to all those putting their life on the line in Afghanistan in the interest of not only Australia’s security but, indeed, global security and, of course, in the interest of the Afghans. I also take this opportunity, as the Prime Minister has done directly to President Karzai and I have done to the defence minister through the Afghan ambassador to Australia, to again express regret over the incident that occurred in Afghanistan last week which involved the death of some Afghan police and a well-known and respected district chief, Rozi Khan. I again commit the government to fully participating in the various investigations being undertaken into that incident so that we can fully understand its cause, and to best ensure that
if mistakes have been made that those mistakes are not repeated in the future.

I ask leave of the House to move a motion to enable the member for Paterson to speak for no longer than 20 minutes.

Leave granted.

Mr FITZGIBBON—I move:

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

Question agreed to.

Mr BALDWIN (Paterson) (4.21 pm)—I rise to respond to the ministerial statement of the Minister for Defence and the tabling of Going to the next level, the report of the Defence Procurement and Sustainment Review. Let me start by stating that this report is evolutionary, not revolutionary—it is evolving from Kinnaird, not getting rid of Kinnaird; it is building on the foundations of Kinnaird. It is obvious that, after five years, you would need to review how the implementation of the 2003 Kinnaird review commissioned by the former Howard government was progressing. The Kinnaird review was critical in establishing a new methodology in procurement of the assets important for our Defence Force in providing security for our nation. The Defence Materiel Organisation has over $100 billion of military equipment under sustainment, in the process of acquisition or being planned over the next 10 years. This includes the management of some 230 major projects worth over $20 million each and the sustainment of over 100 Australian Defence Force fleets, platforms and weapons systems. The size of this task has seen DMO grow to an organisation with over 7,000 employees and an annual budget of nearly $10 billion.

On behalf of the coalition I take this opportunity to congratulate Mr David Mortimer AO on the review. Mr Mortimer is highly credentialed. He is currently chair of Leighton Holdings and Australia Post—and, after all, it was the Howard government that appointed Mr Mortimer as the Chairman of the Defence Procurement Advisory Board in 2004. I also extend those congratulations to Major General Tony Fraser, currently head of helicopter systems division in the DMO, who headed the review team secretariat.

This report is the evolution of review of practices and principles that have evolved since the process of the management refinement of acquisition in ironing out the difficulties. But, in listening to the Minister for Defence today, what we continue to hear from the minister is a crisis in confidence and the continual condemnation and undermining of the professionalism and ability of those in Defence and DMO. Since becoming minister he has set out to play the blame game, even blaming the previous Howard government for projects initiated by the former Hawke-Keating Labor governments. It is very clear that it is the Parliamentary Secretary for Defence Procurement, the Hon. Greg Combet, with the interest and administrative ability with respect to the very important issue of capability acquisition for the ADF. It is the Minister for Defence, through his words and actions, who has sought to introduce a crisis in confidence in those we entrust to supply the necessary systems and platforms for the defence of our nation.

In playing the blame game on acquisitions, costs and delays, the Minister for Defence has overlooked a statement by Dr Stephen Gumley, CEO of the DMO, on 10 July 2008 at the hearings of the Defence Subcommittee of the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade into the 2005-06 Defence annual report. Dr Gumley said:

The biggest problem we are facing in Defence equipment acquisition is schedule. As we have benchmarked ourselves against other countries and as we have looked at our own performance,
we find that, once you make corrections for foreign exchange, inflation, changes of quantity and transfers to other parts of the Defence organisation, that post second pass or post contract formation we are bringing in most of the projects at/or around the budget. In other words, cost is not the thing that gives us deep concern. The statistics we have are that in 239 major projects—and we define a major project as over $20 million—closed over the last 10 years with an accumulated value of $27 billion, when you make those corrections for foreign exchange, inflation, quantities and transfers they came in on average at 98 per cent of the budget.

So that starts to belie the statements made by the Minister for Defence. Importantly, Dr Gumley went on to say:

When you look at the data it shows that about 20 per cent of the projects go over in cost, about 20 per cent of the projects come in or around the budget, and about 60 per cent actually come in under.

He continued:

The cost problem is primarily up to second pass. I am not saying we do not have a few costly projects afterwards, but primarily the pattern is estimating up to second pass.

Further, in his statement to the committee, he said:

That leads us to what I think is the major problem with Defence acquisitions, and that is schedule—in other words, delivering the projects on time. Typically the more complex the weapons system, the greater the project delays. Most of our major projects run two or three years late. We have been doing quite a bit of analysis on the causes of those schedule delays.

One of the greatest challenges facing defence procurement is in the continual changing of performance specifications, known as ‘scope creep’. A clear example of this was the major time and cost blow-out in the Bushmaster program. But who amongst us would want to compromise the safety of those who serve our nation on the battlefield and who use these assets? Again, in phase 3 of the LAND 121 project scope creep was the thing that made the project go back to re-tender. But I cannot see us ever faltering in continuing to develop programs and look for further and better ways of providing protection to our men and women.

However, where the two-pass system from the Kinnaird review has been applied it has actually supplied some discipline in the procurement process. There is a danger in what appears to be a suggestion that this system should be partially dismantled for so-called less complicated acquisition decisions. The devil is in the detail here and also in the definition of ‘less complicated’. Further, who will make the decision that an acquisition will be less complicated? It appears that the Mortimer report is suggesting that there be two approaches to acquisition—a ‘two-and-a-half pass’ system for complex procurement and a ‘one-and-a-half pass’ system for less complex procurement. Further evaluation of that by the DMO, Defence and industry needs to be explored.

Further, I note that in chapter 5 of the report, ‘Driving Cultural Change in DMO’, Mortimer reiterates recommendation 6 of the 2003 Kinnaird review that the DMO should become an executive agency. He states, and I agree, that to ‘drive further reform there must be a clear separation in the financial and non-financial resources allocated to and used by each agency’.

Even though the formation of DMO as an executive agency reporting directly to the minister was originally recommended by Kinnaird, the evolution of the process of acquisition management reflects that now is the time to put forward the legislative framework for DMO to become an executive agency with a separate budget allocation and clear lines of separation in management of acquisition and responsibility for the through-life sustainable costs of projects.
The coalition agrees that DMO should become an executive agency and that Defence should become a customer of DMO. Again, to quote an extract of the Mortimer report:

Prescription of DMO has not delivered the necessary accountability, authority, independence and control over inputs for it to be fully results driven and commercially orientated.

However, to my concern, after an initial, very brief read of the report, it would appear that recommendation 5.1 suggests that DMO should be both an executive and a prescribed agency. This itself appears to be fraught with danger. How does one agency separate itself cleanly? I would urge the government to do some further research into whether this has been done before and whether it is even possible. The danger in treating sustainment differently to acquisition is that you would endanger the integration of acquisitions and through-life support. While in 2006 Dr Gumley thought that being totally separated was the wrong answer, in June this year he said:

It’s the greatest frustration that as a prescribed agency I’ve got accountability for outputs, but my inputs are controlled and that leaves you in a very difficult position.

In particular, I’d like to make the DMO workforce more commercial and more professional.

In relation to major acquisitions, what we have seen from the minister is a continual dithering and a lack of faith in our experts. This was most evident in the issue of the acquisition of the 24 Super Hornets as a replacement for the F111 and continues on with the lack of a solid commitment to the Joint Strike Fighter. One minute, the minister was creating a crisis in confidence among those we entrust to make informed decisions in Defence, DMO and DSTO about acquisitions by publicly denouncing the acquisition of the Super Hornet, and then, shortly after, he was proclaiming it the best aircraft of its type currently available.

Prior to the election, Labor was committed to the Joint Strike Fighter and the Super Hornet projects. On 30 October 2007, the member for Hunter, Joel Fitzgibbon, said:

The Howard government has committed us to both the JSF and the Super Hornet and we accept that they will be part of our air capability mix.

Then, on coming to government, the story changed. Labor was now backing away from this commitment, putting at risk millions of taxpayers’ dollars and industry investment in Australia and threatening our air combat capability. Then, after his little charade, in March the Minister for Defence said the Labor government would go ahead with the plan to buy 24 Super Hornet fighter planes from the US Navy for over $6 billion. His tune has changed so much that he was quoted as saying:

… based on the advice of the air capability review, the new Government is satisfied that the Super Hornet is an aircraft with significant capability and more than capable of meeting all of Australia’s defence needs …

Labor were all over the place on whether they supported these vital acquisitions and were not even aware of the obligations surrounding these contracts should they be terminated. Termination liability for the Super Hornet contract would have been, to cite Dr Gumley, around $400 million, escalating at between $80 million and $100 million per month. The minister is creating a crisis in confidence in the defence industry, not a refined procurement regime. Perhaps, with his lack of judgement, he should step aside and let the parliamentary secretary step up to the plate.

There is no doubt that the Howard government got on with the job. Some of the major acquisitions during the term of the Howard government that allowed the Australian Defence Force to grow in size, flexibility and firepower with significant investment in new and expanded capability included, for
our Army, 59 new Abrams tanks, 40 new multirrole MRH90 helicopters and the Bushmaster vehicle, which now is proving so effective that it is being exported—to name but a few projects. Our Enhanced Land Force means that Australia will have eight regular Army battalions by 2010, up from five in 1996, each with greater strength, better equipment, mobility, combat weight and networked capabilities.

For our Navy it included 14 Armidale class patrol boats, the commencement of three new air warfare destroyers, the commencement of two new large amphibious ships, a new replenishment ship and an upgrading of our frigates and Collins class submarines to be an effective part of our systems platforms.

For our Air Force it included four new C17 heavy lift aircraft—the C17 was one of the best executed off-the-shelf procurements and was instigated by the Howard government—and the 24 off-the-shelf Super Hornet multirrole aircraft and six Wedgetail airborne early warning and control aircraft. As the minister would know, it will always be a problem when you acquire leading edge technology such as this project, as Labor would have known from their experience with the JORN project and the Collins class submarine, to name but two.

I now refer to the Seasprite helicopter, a project commenced in 1994 under the former Labor government. The minister has made only one decision of note since taking his position, and that was to terminate the Seasprite at a cost to the taxpayer of $1.1 billion. There was no haggle, no resistance; he just threw up the white flag. There was not even a serious contemplation of litigation, which was quoted to the Senate to cost about $20 million. This minister’s first act of significance was to surrender and then to sign a release and discharge in favour of the contractor, disposing of the taxpayers’ capacity to recover anything like the money spent. That was the first thing the minister did: wave the white handkerchief.

Back to the report: the Mortimer recommendation on the early adoption of commercial acquisition strategies is commended. These strategies set the plan for the department and for the industry to allow government to exercise an appropriate level of control over both the capability being acquired and the method of acquisition. As I have said, on an initial speed read, it appears that this Mortimer report is evolutionary, not revolutionary. It is evolving from Kinnaird, not getting rid of Kinnaird. It is building on the foundations of Kinnaird.

The minister raised the issue relating to the incidents last week on 18 September in the southern region of Tarin Kowt. This unfortunately led to the death and wounding of a number of Afghans, including the Chora District Governor and tribal leader, Rozi Khan. My understanding from the information provided to me is that the Special Operations Task Group were fired upon from a number of locations, and, in self-defence, they returned fire. I understand from the information provided to me that at all times our Australian troops acted within their rules of engagement.

We should never underestimate the seriousness of the situation that our brave Australians find themselves in in such areas. In fact, on the injured soldiers, I am glad that we have seen a return of some of the injured nine back to Australia. I am also thankful for the treatment provided by both US and other forces to our injured nine in Afghanistan. I know that all of us in this House and, indeed, all Australians extend our prayers and thoughts to those who have been injured and pray for the safety of those who go to defend
the freedom and democracy of people other than Australians.

MATTERS OF PUBLIC IMPORTANCE

Economy

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Hon. BC Scott)—Mr Speaker has received a letter from the honourable member for Curtin proposing that a definite matter of public importance be submitted to the House for discussion, namely:

The Government’s failure to provide leadership on the economic and financial challenges facing Australia.

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

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

Ms JULIE BISHOP (Curtin) (4.37 pm)—Australia is facing a crisis of confidence. The level of consumer and business confidence in this country has hit record lows, and the lack of confidence is in the ability of the Rudd Labor government to deal with the challenges faced by this nation. Rarely has a government come to office promising so much and delivering so little, and the crisis of confidence that this country is facing stems directly from a lack of leadership on the part of the Prime Minister and his senior ministers. Of course, the Prime Minister is not in the parliament this week—he has left on an overseas trip. Yet the issue is not about how many times the Prime Minister goes overseas or what he does when he is overseas. The fact is that his priorities are such that he would rather be addressing the United Nations than be here in Australia taking charge of the challenges that face this nation.

Australian pensioners could be forgiven for being very disappointed in the Prime Minister for failing to be in parliament this week, when the issue of an increase in the single age pension was debated in the Senate; the Senate expressed its will and supported the opposition’s proposal to increase the single age pension by $30 a week. But the Prime Minister chose to be overseas. And then, when the coalition gave the government the opportunity today to show some leadership on an issue that is causing great distress to pensioners across Australia, the government rejected that opportunity. The government is very good on reviewing and inquiring, and on having a green paper and a white paper and commissions and forums and summits, but inaction is absolutely no substitute for the kind of leadership that this country craves.

People could also be forgiven for assuming that this Prime Minister has a slight touch of the delusions. He actually is rather deluded about his place in the world. His attempts to place himself at the centre of all global issues are as embarrassing as they are pathetic. On the eve of his trips overseas—and this is now the pattern of behaviour we have come to expect from this Prime Minister; he has done this on the eve of each of his 10 trips overseas in the 10 months that he has been Prime Minister—he announces some grandiose scheme, designed to capture the headlines and the early morning news, that places him at the forefront of global initiatives. Forget the G8 or the major countries of the world—the Prime Minister of Australia takes the lead!

But what is he really doing? Just think about the example where he announced, on the eve of one of his overseas trips, that Australia would take the initiative on nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament. He announced that former minister Gareth Evans was going to lead the global initiative. Well, that went down like a lead balloon, didn’t it. And have we heard any more of that initia-
tive? Not a word. Then, of course, remember how the Prime Minister was going to take Japan to the International Court of Justice over whaling? He was going to lead the world in the charge against whaling. What happened to that global initiative? What happened to the case against Japan—to be prosecuted no doubt by the minister for the environment? It has just sunk without a trace.

Then, of course, the Prime Minister recently announced the establishment of a $100 million global clean coal initiative, where Australia is again going to lead the world. Well, I suspect that that will share the same fate as all the others. But I think the piece de resistance must be this: on the eve of one of his trips to Japan, he announced— with just a couple of hours notice; he managed to cobble this idea together in a couple of hours—that he would create and establish a European-Union-style Asia-Pacific union. He was going to rearrange the Asia-Pacific architecture. He forgot to consult? No, he did not forget to consult! He is so deluded, and his ego is so out of control, that the Prime Minister thinks it is diplomatic to announce a rearrangement of the Asia-Pacific architecture in advance of a trip to Japan, without having the diplomatic skills to pick up the phone and discuss it with other leaders in the region. Is this the best we can expect from a middle-ranking bureaucrat from the department of foreign affairs who now finds himself in the position of Prime Minister? It is a worry. And the Australian people are greatly concerned about these announcements of grandiose schemes where he is going to lead the world and then we hear nothing more. Would this be because he is just seeking a cheap headline and refuses to deal with the domestic issues that are facing people in their everyday lives back here in Australia?

Why is it that the Prime Minister had no difficulty at all in making announcements about a $35 million injection to the Toyota corporation, while he was in Japan, to build a car in Australia that they were going to build anyway, which took Toyota by surprise—they did not know what they were going to do with the money because they were going to build the car anyway—and yet this Prime Minister cannot make an announcement while he is in New York on a $30-a-week increase for Australia’s pensioners?

I guess we should be grateful for small mercies. I guess we should be grateful that, on the eve of this trip to the United Nations—and this is why the trip was planned: the trip was planned for the Prime Minister to take centre stage at the UN General Assembly so he could make a speech at the millennium development forum, with no lesser world leaders than Scarlett Johansson, Missy Higgins and Colin Firth—he did not announce the Australian Global Initiative to End World Poverty by 2010! He is just going to introduce an emissions trading scheme by 2010, but he is not yet going to end world poverty! I have likened him to Don Quixote. He is delusional in his sense of grandeur and his tilting at windmills. We find that when he gets back to Australia there is no mention of these grandiose plans—they just disappear into thin air.

The coalition have no problem at all with the Prime Minister travelling overseas. We expect our leaders to be in touch with world leaders. We expect them to pick up the phone when they are about to announce the establishment of a European union in Asia. We expect them to have contact with the leaders around the world. We expect them to observe and experience what is happening in the rest of the world. But what benefits have come to Australia from the Prime Minister’s 10 overseas trips in 10 months? Can we name a benefit that this country has received? The pensioners certainly have not received a benefit. The pensioners today have been re-
buffed by the government, who have failed to show leadership and refuse to admit that they are wrong on the issue of pensions. That is another failing of the government: they refuse to admit they are wrong, even in the face of the most compelling evidence.

Take Fuelwatch. Remember how the government—

**Opposition members interjecting—**

**Ms JULIE BISHOP**—I am going to get to GroceryWatch. Remember how the government when in opposition promised to reduce petrol prices? They promised pensioners, motorists and householders that they would do something to bring down petrol prices. Petrol prices have gone through the roof since they were elected to government. And what has the government’s response been? Have they shown any leadership at all? No. What they did was appoint a petrol commissioner, who, during his very short tenure, admitted that he had no powers at all.

**An opposition member**—He just walked away.

**Ms JULIE BISHOP**—He walked away from it; I do not blame him. He walked away from the flawed Fuelwatch scheme. Fuelwatch was essentially a website to inform motorists about the cost of petrol. There are already websites that do that. You do not have to spend millions of dollars of taxpayers’ money in order to set up a website to give them information they can already access. But the government refuses to admit that this was just a stunt, and it has backfired.

Then of course we had GroceryWatch. The government having promised pensioners and householders that they would bring down the price of groceries, we have seen grocery prices soar. What was the government’s answer? Another website—yet this time the website contains information that is a month old. You do not even get up-to-date information. Instead of going to the postbox and getting the leaflets from the supermarket that set out the specials and the prices, or going to your supermarket and getting the current daily prices, you log on to the government’s website and you find information that is a month old, has no reference to specials—and most Australians look for specials when they are going to their supermarkets—and avoids supporting the independent retailers in Australia. What it does is it backs Coles, backs Woolworths and ignores the small independent grocers in this country.

It is so flawed, so out of touch and so out of date that it is embarrassing for the government. Yet have we seen any leadership? A true leader would stand up and say: ‘Okay, I’ve made a mistake. That was a waste of taxpayers’ money. We’ll put an end to it now.’ There is nothing that is in the least bit salvageable about this GroceryWatch website, apart from the fact that the Assistant Treasurer obviously taps into it every day to make sure that it gets enough hits to keep the little monitor ticking over. That is a real concern with the government: they will not admit they are wrong. And they are so incompetent when it comes to the handling of the serious financial challenges that are facing this country.

I just want to touch on the subject of short selling—not in itself, because of course it is not an issue that affects people day to day, but because it is such an important response to the international financial crisis. It is illuminating to see how botched the government’s response has been to the question of putting a ban on short selling. Let me take you through a chronology because then you will appreciate how incompetent this government has been in its response to the international financial crisis—its inability to respond under pressure. On Wednesday last week, 17 September, the US Securities and Exchange Commission adopted some new rules requiring that short sellers and their
broker-dealers deliver securities by the close of business on the settlement date—in other words, to stop short selling—and they imposed penalties for the failure to do so. The following day, Thursday, 18 September, in the United Kingdom, the Financial Services Authority agreed to introduce new provisions to the Code of Market Conduct to prohibit the active creation or increase of net short positions in publicly quoted financial companies. Then, on the morning of 19 September, reports began to emerge from the United States that the Securities and Exchange Commission intended to temporarily ban short selling. That was being reported in the media by Friday morning Australian time.

In contrast to the measured approach of the SEC in the United States and the Financial Services Authority in the United Kingdom, the Rudd government dithered. They were like rabbits caught in the spotlight. You see, not a few weeks ago the Minister for Superannuation and Corporate Law stressed that the Rudd government would not ban short selling. To give you an idea of how in touch the Prime Minister was on this important issue of banning short selling to stem the impacts of the international financial crisis, in a press conference on 19 September the Prime Minister referred to his Assistant Treasurer, Chris Bowen, who is sitting at the table, being in consultation with the finance industry on short selling. He identified the minister at the table, the Assistant Treasurer, as the person in the government who was working on a proposal with the financial industry about the future of short selling. He said that was the man. Then he said:

... as far as short selling is concerned I draw your attention to what Chris Bowen has been doing already and this was well ahead of the developments of the last week or so.

Mistake! That was not Chris Bowen at all. What happened to the Minister for Superannuation and Corporate Law, who was apparently handling this? Doesn’t that tell you about the Prime Minister’s grasp on what is going on in his government? In the face of one of the greatest financial crises that the United States has faced, that is having impacts across the world, the Prime Minister does not even know—he has no idea—which one of his ministers is actually handling this issue.

But it got worse. Not only did the Prime Minister have no idea; the government had three—now four—positions on the issue of short selling, day by day. They had one position on Friday, then, whoops, they had not gone far enough, so they had another position on Sunday—after the Leader of the Opposition had been on the Laurie Oakes program, coincidentally. Then they managed to come up with another position—’Whoops, that’s gone too far.’ What is going on within the government? It is a failure of leadership on the part of the government. (Time expired)

Mr BOWEN (Prospect—Minister for Competition Policy and Consumer Affairs, and Assistant Treasurer) (4.52 pm)—I welcome this MPI because it provides another opportunity to discuss the economic and financial crisis facing the world, and the government’s response to it, although I must say it does surprise me that the shadow Treasurer lodged this MPI on the economic and financial issues facing the nation and waited until the last couple of minutes of her allotted 15 minutes before she chose to talk about them. Before she chose to talk about the economic and financial crisis facing the world, she spent 10 of her allotted 15 minutes taking cheap pot shots at the Prime Minister’s travel and cracking undergraduate jokes at the expense of the Prime Minister. The shadow Treasurer and the Leader of the Opposition talk about bipartisanship when it comes to economics and the financial crisis facing the world, and then the shadow Treasurer spends 10 minutes of her allotted time on the MPI—
lodged by the shadow Treasurer—ignoring the financial crisis and the financial turmoil facing the world.

The government, of course, regards the financial turmoil facing the world with some seriousness. We regard the current events as being quite serious. We regard the failing of the world’s 18th largest company, the failing of a company as well known and as famous as Lehman Brothers, and the takeover of Merrill Lynch, as having implications for Australia, as having important implications for the world financial markets. The opposition talk about bipartisanship, but when they get this opportunity to talk about the challenges facing Australia and the appropriate policy responses, the alternative Treasurer of this nation takes cheap political pot shots about the Prime Minister’s travel and cracks undergraduate jokes. That is not going to do much for the shadow Treasurer’s economic credibility when all is said and done.

We can look at the financial crisis facing the world and the response of the Australian government, and we can look at the response of the opposition. We believe that one of the important responses that the opposition can provide if they are really interested in bipartisanship is to pass the federal government’s budget through the other house. In May the government substantially increased the size of the budget surplus to 1.8 per cent of gross domestic product, to put downward pressure on inflation and give the Reserve Bank the flexibility they need to deal with the inflationary problems in this nation. We all know why that was necessary, and of course just last week we saw the release of the Treasury advice to the former Treasurer that the IMF was concerned about the expansionary nature of the previous Treasurer’s fiscal policy. The Treasury was warning that the expansionary approach of the previous Treasurer would add to inflationary pressures and that the IMF shared that concern.

I would suggest to the shadow Treasurer, if the shadow Treasurer wants to be taken seriously about leadership, if the shadow Treasurer wants to be taken seriously about bipartisanship, if the shadow Treasurer wants her economic credibility to be respected, that the shadow Treasurer show some leadership and encourage the Liberal Party to pass the budget in the Senate, to pass the savings and revenue measures so important to ensuring we have the flexibility to deal with the financial crisis facing the world. Stop playing populist games, support the budget passing the Senate and support the important fiscal reforms that the government has embraced.

Another thing that is required here in these troublesome times is the promotion of confidence—confidence of the international markets in Australia and confidence domestically. Confidence has fallen in Australia, it is true, to 1990s levels, just as it has fallen in every country in the world, despite the claims of the Leader of the Opposition. Despite the valiant attempts of the new alternative Treasurer to ignore the fact that confidence has fallen to 1992 levels in every comparable country, we have seen confidence fall.

There are two areas that are important, as I say—confidence domestically and confidence internationally. It is important that the economic decision makers in the United States and other major nations, both in the public sector and in the private sector, understand the soundness of our economy, the soundness of the fundamentals, the importance of our terms of trade and the importance of the fact that, of the 12 of the 100 major banks in the world with AA ratings, four are located here in Australia. It is important that the Prime Minister take this opportunity to communicate with those leaders.

I know that the Leader of the Opposition and the Deputy Leader of the Opposition, the
shadow Treasurer, want to take cheap political pot shots about this. We saw the Leader of the Opposition on Sunday, on the Laurie Oakes program, say this:

The question is he is spending more time overseas than any Prime Minister in our history. He’s spending more time overseas than his own foreign minister. Have we elected a prime minister or a prime tourist? That’s the question.

I would make two observations to the Leader of the Opposition and his deputy. The first is: show a bit of leadership. The second is: show a bit of honesty. If the Leader of the Opposition seriously wants to go on national television and claim that the Prime Minister travels more than any Prime Minister in history, he might want to explain to the Australian people why this Prime Minister has been overseas for 43 days this year when Prime Minister Howard was overseas for 64 days in 2002, 60 days in 2003 and 65 days in 2005. They claim that this Prime Minister spends more time overseas than any of his predecessors—except for the last one perhaps.

Ms Julie Bishop interjecting—

Mr Bowen—The Deputy Leader of the Opposition says: ‘What about the first year? What about 1996?’ It is true. Prime Minister Howard stayed home more in 1996. He had to stay home to replace his ministers, who kept resigning—nine in the first year and three by the time that the government had been in office for nine months. So if we want to talk about prime ministers staying home, perhaps he had different reasons to stay at home.

The Leader of the Opposition has claimed that the Prime Minister spends more time overseas than the Minister for Foreign Affairs. There is a slight technical problem: that is completely false. The Prime Minister has been away for 43 days and the Minister for Foreign Affairs has been away for 67 days. If you want to be taken seriously when it comes to economic credibility—or if you want to be taken seriously when it comes to credibility full stop—you might start by levelling with the Australian people and telling the truth instead of telling fibs to Laurie Oakes on the Sunday news.

The opposition says it is not really important that the Prime Minister spend his time overseas; it is not important that he spend his time in New York. But this was not the view of the then shadow Treasurer in April. He said:

The security, the mortgages, the homes, the jobs of Australians depend in large measure on the international developments coming out of the United States of this credit crisis, so it was important for me as Shadow Treasurer to come here and discuss that with the Treasury Secretary Hank Paulson and of course with the Federal Reserve Vice Chairman Don Kohn and other senior officials and political figures here.

The member for Wentworth seems to think it is more important for the shadow Treasurer to be in touch with what is happening in the United States than it is for the Prime Minister of the nation. As Laurie Oakes said, he has never been very good at covering his innate modesty—but that does take it to new levels.

Of course we also need to boost confidence here in Australia. That is not helped when the member for North Sydney, with the approval of the Leader of the Opposition, questioned in this House last week the viability of Australia’s health funds—private health insurance. How irresponsible can you be at this particular time in our economic development? The member for North Sydney, with the express approval of the Leader of the Opposition, questioned the viability of our health funds. It is hard to get more irresponsible than that.

If the Leader of the Opposition and his deputy want to get involved in bipartisanship, they can start by repudiating the member for North Sydney and reinforcing the fact
that there was no substance, no evidence and no possible basis for the allegations he made in the House last week—because confidence is important when it comes to the Australian economy.

The Deputy Leader of the Opposition, when she finally got to the substance of her MPI, in the last couple of minutes, dealt with the matter of short selling. I was glad that she commented on short selling because it is an important matter. With the greatest respect, can I submit that we have seen quite a bit of sophistry from the Deputy Leader of the Opposition when it comes to short selling. The Deputy Leader of the Opposition has alleged that the government has changed its position. Of course, that is quite wrong.

My Treasury colleague Minister Sherry said some time ago that the government had no intention of legislating to ban naked short selling—and that remains our intention. In fact, the Minister for Superannuation and Corporate Law has today released the draft legislation relating to the disclosure of short selling. As is the case with other countries, ASIC, as the independent regulator, has moved, over the weekend, to deal with naked short selling and short selling more generally. When conditions come down, ASIC will assess the situation and may determine that it is appropriate to remove the current halt on short selling. The government are taking the responsible step of preparing for that outcome with the release today of the draft legislation which my colleague Senator Sherry flagged some time ago. So the government continue to act responsibly and work with our regulators while the Deputy Leader of the Opposition sits on the sideline taking pot shots. The financial markets and the financial commentators will comment on her credibility when it comes to such matters.

While I am on the economic credibility of the alternative Treasurer of the nation and the financial markets, my attention was drawn to her comments yesterday—not the comments that have received some recognition in question time but some other comments she made in reply to the Treasurer’s ministerial statement. My attention has been drawn to these comments because there are financial commentators in this nation and members of the financial services industry who are already shaking their heads at the shadow Treasurer’s lack of economic literacy and economic credibility. This is what the shadow Treasurer said yesterday:

It is symptomatic of a government … that says it wants to promote Australia as a financial services hub and then reduces withholding tax for foreigners.

The shadow Treasurer said there was a contradiction between promoting Australia as an international financial services hub and reducing the withholding tax on distributions for foreigners. I am not sure who the Treasurer thinks we should be a financial services hub for if it is not for foreigners. Perhaps we should be a financial services hub for ourselves! We already are that. The whole idea is to promote Australia as an international financial services hub. The shadow Treasurer, the alternative Treasurer of this nation, says that cutting the withholding tax is contradictory to promoting Australia as a financial services centre. There are many others who would beg to differ—and they do not sit on this side of the House or that side of the House. They do not sit in the House at all. John Stewart, the Managing Director and CEO of NAB, said in relation to the government’s withholding tax cut:

I think it will make a big difference, it’s a vote of confidence for the fund management industry. Because he’s spoken about moving from 30 to his low 7.5.

The Investment and Financial Services Association—the new shadow Treasurer might get around to talking to them—are strong
supporters of the government’s measures. This is what they say:
The announcement goes beyond our expectations. It sends a very positive signal to the financial services sector and will enhance our industry in the Asia Pacific region. It will also encourage more young people to enter the industry.
Stephen Dunne, the Managing Director of AMP Capital Investors, said:
Reducing the withholding tax for foreign residents will strengthen Australia’s competitiveness as an international investment centre.
Jeremy Duffield, the Managing Director of Vanguard, said:
This single initiative delivers a vital fillip to Australia’s credentials as a regional investment centre, allowing our local industry to attract greater capital inflows through a sharpened competitive edge.
Peter Verwer, the Chief Executive of the Property Council, said:
The Government has shown its commitment on a crucial election promise that will reduce the withholding tax rate in line with our global competitors.

The world property markets have copied our successful funds model but with lower tax rates and less red tape.
We have established that the Deputy Leader of the Opposition has no idea. The shadow Treasurer of this nation does not realise that cutting the withholding tax rate for foreigners actually encourages foreign investment in this country. The alternative Treasurer of this nation apparently thinks that it would actually be a good thing to continue with the world’s highest withholding tax rate. She thinks it would be a bad thing to embrace the government’s policy of having effectively the lowest withholding tax rate in the world. In her first ministerial statement as shadow Treasurer, in her first response to the Treasurer, the shadow Treasurer has shown that unfortunately she is completely and utterly not on top of the facts of her portfolio. She is completely and utterly failing to come to grips with the government’s economic policy. We have this time and time again from this opposition. We have an opposition which talks about leadership and about credibility, but it talks about what it cannot deliver. (Time expired)

Mr Pearce (Aston) (5.08 pm)—I strongly support this matter of public importance today. This is all about the lack of leadership that Australia has. We have just heard this diatribe from the Assistant Treasurer. I was just mentioning to the member for Reid that he really should spend some time coaching the Assistant Treasurer, because, as we know, the Assistant Treasurer is the great branch stacker from the western suburbs of Sydney and obviously he has been spending even more time stacking his branches in recent times. He needs to go back and actually have a look at what the Minister for Superannuation and Corporate Law, Senator Sherry, actually said about short selling. He did not say that he would not introduce legislation. What he said was that the government would not ban short selling.

The fact of the matter is that this country is experiencing a crisis of confidence and is without economic and financial leadership. When we talk about leadership, I think it is always instructive to look back at what Labor left the Australian people when the coalition came to office in 1996. We inherited the results of Labor’s leadership at the time. That leadership left us with a $10 billion budget deficit. As you know, Mr Deputy Speaker, net government debt was $96 billion and the Australian people were suffering under crippling unemployment, rocketing interest rates and high inflation. Now the Assistant Treasurer is walking out of the House. He does not want to hear the truth. He is not prepared to listen to the truth of the matter. He is off to stack some more branches in his electorate.
When we came to office, having been elected in 1996, rather than set up a committee, we showed true leadership. We repaid Labor’s $96 billion in debt, we returned budget after budget to surplus and of course we left a record of low unemployment rates that had not been seen in a generation. The fact is this Prime Minister has inherited economic surpluses of $110 billion over five years. Labor’s so-called leadership—and I do use the term very loosely—have inherited net assets of $45 billion—all as a result of the coalition’s economic leadership and reflecting the fact that more Australians are now employed than at any other time in our history. It is important to put this into context. When the coalition was in government, we did all of that despite the financial meltdowns and crises that gripped the world throughout our time in office and despite the regional environmental disasters that impacted on our friends to the north. The fact is our financial position in Australia is strong and robust, and we are the envy of the region and, in fact, the world.

Going to this matter of public importance, you have to ask yourself these questions. What has the Rudd government achieved in almost 12 months of office? What effective action has the Prime Minister taken to consolidate that strong economy, that robust economy, that we left him? Well, Mr Deputy Speaker, I have to tell you: not much. But I can tell you what the Prime Minister has done. He has watched, he has watched, he has watched and he has travelled. This Prime Minister is not a Prime Minister of Australia; he is now Australia’s prime tourist. In fact, he has now become Kevin 747. He watches from his first-class plane seat or from his limousine and he ponders, he considers and he muses. He watches petrol prices, he watches grocery prices, he watches interest rates, he watches the cost of living, he watches inflation, he watches whales and, as we have heard today, he is watching the pension. He watches child care, he watches water, he watches state debt, he watches Asia, he is watching hospitals, he is watching teenagers’ teeth and health, he is watching schoolteachers, he has been watching Belinda Neal, he has been watching the republic and he has even been watching his weight lately. As a matter of fact, he has watched the lot of them. All he does is watch. But then he does have a lot to muse about as he is travelling overseas.

Since the Prime Minister has come to office he has announced 83 reviews; 17 committees, commissions or boards; 12 inquiries; 11 working groups; seven summits and 11 discussion papers. This Prime Minister does enjoy talking and we do know that he does like to ask himself questions and provide the answers. But he has also undertaken seven consultations and five audits—and that was only up until recently and in the last couple of weeks more have been added. So what does all of this achieve? Are we paying less for groceries? Are we paying less for fuel? What has been achieved as an outcome of the millions of dollars of taxpayers’ money that this Prime Minister has spent on these limitless inquiries and commissions?

I have to say that I wish that all of this activity had achieved something and I really wish that there had been effective action by this government. But the sad reality is that this Prime Minister constantly gets confused. He gets confused between shuffling papers from one side of the table to the other, in question time, and doing something that is appropriate and actually undertaking action. But then I suppose we have to expect that from a Labor Party hack that has been working in Labor state governments for many years and has had to explain the appalling performance of Labor state governments for many years.
I remember when the Prime Minister was Leader of the Opposition he once asked the question, ‘Where will the buck stop?’ He said that the buck was going to stop with him. I thought to myself at the time, ‘That’s good, that’s a Leader of the Opposition that wants to take responsibility, that’s a Leader of the Opposition that’s taking a mature approach.’ He said he wanted to see an end to the blame game, but what I find very interesting is that, whenever anything goes wrong, it does not matter what it is, it is generally the coalition’s fault or it could be the fault of global forces, the international credit crunch, OPEC, the Iraq war, even his own staff, the mining boom, alcohol companies, quite often oil companies, the solar panel industry, his own department, the Public Service, the drought, global warming, luxury car companies—the list goes on and on. The fact of the matter is that the buck never seems to stop with Prime Minister Kevin Rudd. He cannot get within cooee of the buck, because it is always someone else’s fault or somebody else’s doing.

Australia is without leadership at a very uncertain time in our history. We are told by leading economists throughout Australia that the risk of Australia actually going into a recession is very high. There are economists saying that we have a prospect of going into a recession. Look at what is happening: household wealth has fallen, real wages have stagnated, prospects for employment do not look good. This government has projected in its budget that Australian working men and women will lose their jobs over the next 12 months. This government plans in its budget for Australian workers to be sacked. There are signs that the pace of domestic demand is slowing, and consumer and business confidence is at an all-time low.

When we talk about leadership, normally you expect leadership from a Prime Minister, you expect leadership from a Treasurer and you expect it from the whole government. But this is the Treasurer who said the day before the Reserve Bank of Australia was to meet to make a decision about interest rates that the genie was out of the bottle. What sort of economic leader would say the day before the Reserve Bank was going to meet that the inflation genie was out of the bottle? Leadership is about leading. It is all about doing what is right for Australians. It is about building confidence. It is about ensuring that Australians working out there today, tomorrow and tonight—those people on shiftwork tonight—have confidence. It is about giving them confidence in their future and their destiny. How on earth does Kevin Rudd expect Australians to go about their daily work when they do not have confidence in their government?

Australians themselves are making the necessary changes. They are making those changes because they know the government is not making the changes. The government is not showing the leadership that is needed. We are in a state of financial turmoil, and the best that the Australian Prime Minister can do is get on an aeroplane, go over to New York and go to yet another talkfest. There have been no outcomes from any trip he has done since he became Prime Minister of this country. (Time expired)

Ms BIRD (Cunningham) (5.18 pm)—I thank the shadow minister for lists for his contribution to the matter of public importance debate! I suggest to him that, while lists are a good way to fill a speech, they do not actually contribute to the topic that the opposition obviously feels is significant enough for an MPI debate today. We have had 25 minutes of contribution from the other side and have had a great deal of personal vilification, a great deal of personal criticism, a touch of policy criticism and absolutely no outlining of a responsive, responsible opposition position on the future of the
economy in Australia. In this debate about economic credibility, we are now facing an opposition who, if they would like to get some economic credibility, might then earn the right to call for some.

I suggest that people remember some of the debate leading up to the last election in this country. The member for Higgins, at that time the Treasurer, made a few comments in a few speeches about the fact that the economic clouds were gathering over Australia. Clearly at that time he had begun to understand that there were some real challenges facing the international economy. Indeed, the members of the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Economics, Finance and Public Administration—some of my colleagues from the House sitting here and me—in August of last year called a national roundtable summit on the housing affordability and house-lending issue. At that time the chair of the committee, the then member for Cook—I see his successor is with us today—agreed that it was such a significant issue it was important for the House committee to have a look at it. It was a significant roundtable, well attended by regulators, bankers and insurers, where we had a discussion about the situation in Australia and the potential flow-on effects of what was rolling out in the subprime crisis in America. At the time the then member for Cook indicated that he was very much in the then Treasurer’s black books for allowing that roundtable to go ahead. What was clearly happening at that point in time—

Mr Ciobo—Don’t verbal him when he’s not here!

Ms BIRD—I am sorry, but the comment—that he had got a bit of flack for allowing that to go ahead—was made to many of us on that committee. The reality at that time was that it was clear, as the then Treasurer had intimated until he was pulled into line because it was not in line with the position the government was putting to the Australian people in the election, that there were significant economic clouds gathering over the international situation and that they may have implications for our country. That was in August last year. This situation has been developing over time.

What did we, in opposition at the time, do in taking a policy position forward to the election? We outlined the importance of addressing two factors that the Reserve Bank of Australia had been talking about for a long time in terms of what the Australian government needed to be doing to address the inflationary pressures in our country. They were education and skills, and infrastructure. In putting together a policy that we took to the federal election—later endorsed by the people of this nation—we had a platform for building the skills and education levels of our nation through the education revolution and for reinvesting in important infrastructure, unblocking those major arteries which feed the export potential of this nation. They were important initiatives around productivity and performance. They were endorsed and they were delivered.

In the budget in May Labor put in place three major infrastructure investment funds through which the future growth and prosperity of this country could be assured. Not only did we do that but we increased and delivered a substantial budget surplus. I have certainly never heard anybody from the other side argue that a significant budget surplus is not an important factor in creating instability in a nation, particularly at a time when there is international turmoil.

Mr Ciobo—Swannie delivered the surplus, did he?

Ms BIRD—What do we now have from the opposition? A raid on that surplus. I find it quite amazing that those who tout them-
selves as fiscal conservatives, particularly the member interjecting, who, I would say, is as dry as they come economically, can sit here and say, ‘We are economically responsible, we are fiscally responsible, we are worried about the economic future of the country, yet we have not announced a single significant policy decision to contribute to that long-term economic stability.’ And, even worse, they say, ‘We’re going to raid the budget surplus; we’re not going to cost our proposals. When we do cost them, we get them wrong,’ and then, ‘We don’t think that was heading in the right direction; we had better dump our leader and put in another new leader who we are going to portray as an economic guru.’ Does he then come in and say, ‘We were heading in the wrong direction. We now need to be responsible. We have to drop all that populist claptrap that we have been going on with. We have to drop blocking the budget in the Senate, and we have to look like we are taking the issue of costing our proposals seriously and ensure we’re not raiding the budget surplus’? No, we do not get any of that. A week down the track and we have not had a word from the new leader about how he will take action to prove that he will be an economically responsible Leader of the Opposition. We have not heard a word.

We have had a continuation of the populist appeals, the populist lines, with no fiscal responsibility behind them, and then the opposition have the hide to come in here and say: ‘We can be all things to all people. We only have to name ourselves as economically responsible, we only have to get up in an MPI and criticise the Prime Minister, make lists and not outline an economic platform for the future,’ When those on the other side want to outline—

Mr Ciobo—Union hacks!

Ms Bird—I take the interjection from the member opposite. I would suggest that he take the time—we have known each other for a while—to read my biography. I take the member’s interjection that he is calling all members of the community who are members of a union ‘hacks’. I appreciate that contribution. At the end of the day, this is an opposition which want to put forward an MPI about economic credibility, while their own actions indicate they have absolutely none at all. What they need to understand is that there are a few things they actually could do which would be in the great tradition of their party, including supporting the budget measures in the Senate that will allow that budget surplus to stay in place. That would be a good and sensible start if they want to create some economic credibility with which to enter this debate.

The second thing is that the opposition need to understand that there are some real long-term challenges that we need to address in terms of the prosperity of our economy over the long term. Clearly, one of those is productivity. Productivity has stalled. It has stalled because we walked away from investing in the human capital of our nation and from understanding that, if you improve the education and skills levels of our communities, not only are they more productive but you do not create skills blockages, which have been occurring in my own area in the last week. Media reports have revealed that major projects and major businesses cannot get the skills they need. That has been a problem for a significant time and Labor have some policies in place to address that. When the opposition want to enter into a debate about the best way to deliver those policies then I think they will have some credibility.

The other area is infrastructure. Indeed, I sat on the then House of Representatives Standing Committee on Transport and Re-
ational Services. We brought down an excellent report—under the chair at the time, Paul Neville, the member for Hinkler—that outlined the major problems with rail infrastructure that needed to be addressed. One of the major requirements was the creation of a national coordinating infrastructure body. We heard it everywhere we went from every one of the major players in infrastructure. We have delivered on that. We are moving on it. We have a platform being delivered through the budget by the government for the future economic wellbeing of this country. All the opposition are doing is sniping and playing populist games. Until they get some credibility on economic issues they cannot expect to come into this place and be all things to all people and not be economically credible. (Time expired)

Mr HARTSUYKER (Cowper) (5.28 pm)—The world is facing very difficult economic times. The markets are nervous, business is nervous and consumers are nervous. What has happened—

Mr Ciobo—They’ve seen Swannie!

Mr HARTSUYKER—That is right; they have seen the Treasurer. Confidence in this country has evaporated. Why has it evaporated? It has evaporated because this government has failed to show leadership. It has fiddled andiddled and mucked around. It has reviewed, it has consulted. It has established committees—

Mr Ciobo—It’s watched!

Mr HARTSUYKER—It has watched just about everything imaginable. The only thing it has not done is take concrete decisions and show leadership. Confidence is the glue which binds the operation of markets and our economy. Through its lack of leadership and its indecision, the government has presided over that very collapse in confidence. We need to look at the facts to see the degree to which confidence has actually fallen and the impact on our economy. Let us look at small business confidence. Small business confidence has fallen 57.4 points since the election of the Rudd government. This is the worst result in a Sensis survey since the survey started, in 1993. The Commonwealth Bank ACCI Business Expectations Survey for the June quarter shows the lowest level of business confidence since the survey began, in 1994. The ACCI Small Business Survey for the June quarter shows that small business conditions are at their worst since that survey began, in 1996. Sensis reported a perception amongst small businesses that federal government policies worked against them. That is what Sensis found when it consulted small business—unlike the findings of a raft of reviews. When it actually talked to small business, what did it find? It found that federal government policies were working against small business.

In November 2007 attitudes towards the Australian government’s policies were at 29 per cent. By August 2008 they had fallen to minus 28 per cent. And this federal government has the least support from small-and medium-sized enterprises of any government in Australia. That means that small business has even less confidence in this government than it does in the New South Wales state government, potentially the worst state government in Australia’s history.

Mr Ciobo—A gold medal performance.

Mr HARTSUYKER—It is a gold medal performance in incompetent government. The September Sensis Consumer Report found that only 32 per cent of Australians are confident of their financial prospects for the year ahead. That is 29 points below what it was when the Prime Minister took office. Since November, Australia has had the largest drop in consumer confidence amongst all OECD nations and has the second lowest level of consumer confidence, behind Spain.
The Prime Minister cannot pass the buck on this one. The other countries are in the same world environment; the other countries are facing the same types of challenges; but in Australia consumer confidence has dropped more than it has in other OECD countries.

AC Nielsen reports that the drop in consumer confidence for the first half of 2008 was almost twice as severe as it was in the rest of the world. Does that indicate that people have confidence in this government? Does it indicate that they have faith that this government is taking this country in the right direction? Clearly not. The Australian Industry Group’s Performance of Construction Index has dropped by over 16 points since December. The AIG Performance of Manufacturing Index has fallen 6.8 points since the election. The Roy Morgan Consumer Confidence Rating for September 2008 is 18.9 points below the September 2007 level.

Retailing is sluggish. Confidence has got up and left. That is because this government has failed to show leadership. It is all about committees and all about reviews; it is not about the sorts of policies that are needed to drive this country forward. This government is losing the confidence of the Australian people more and more, day by day. It has abandoned pensioners, as we have seen in the House today, just as it has abandoned small-and medium-sized business enterprises.

Mr NEUMANN (Blair) (5.33 pm)—It is interesting that the member for Cowper should mention this, because just today the government has announced the concept design for the Coffs Harbour bypass in his electorate, which has gone on public display. A week ago we opened the Bonville bypass in his electorate, the same day that we announced the partners in the Ipswich Motorway upgrade. These are all good infrastructure projects that this government is delivering on. So I do not really understand what the member for Cowper is on about when he talks about this government doing nothing. We have heard a great dollop of personal vilification of the Prime Minister and almost nothing of what the opposition would do if they sat on this side of the House.

The reality is that the Rudd government is acting to secure the long-term future of this country. The Liberals are divided and shallow about this. We have had three leaders of the Liberal Party in the last 12 months and we have Hamlet, the member for Higgins, up the back there—

Mr Champion—He’s like Banquo’s ghost.

Mr NEUMANN—like Banquo’s ghost; that’s right—you think he is dead but he is an apparition lurking in the background. The reality is that the Rudd government is delivering on the education revolution. Access Economics has said that we could lift the wealth of this country by $9 billion if we could increase to 90 per cent the retention rates of our high schools. What happened for the 12 years of the Howard government? Year 12 retention rates flatlined to about 75 per cent. The reality is that this government is delivering on education, health and infrastructure, just as I mentioned to the member for Cowper opposite.

The Liberals really have no credibility when it comes to economics. They think it is 1975. It is not 1975.

Mr Ciobo—Are you an economic conservative? You’ve been outed.

Mr NEUMANN—Just get onto the Rudd government’s agenda; it might do you good. It is 2008. We have seen almost nothing in South-East Queensland—as the member interjects—where one in seven Australians live, an area that is growing all the time. What about infrastructure in South-East Queensland delivered by the Howard gov-
ernment? There is almost nothing. It is the Rudd Labor government that is delivering the infrastructure that has made such a difference to South-East Queensland and to economic development for the future of this country. That is the reality.

The opposition cannot duck and dodge the fact that they mismanaged the economy. The reality is that for the last few years, under their leadership, the government kept increasing public expenditure, putting pressure on inflation. There were interest rate rises year after year, which put pressure on working families, carers, pensioners and those who were doing it tough in my electorate and electorates around the country. That is the reality.

They thought that working families had never been better off. That was their mantra. But through their legacy we have seen that there was inaction, inertia and ignorance both nationally and locally—certainly in my electorate. That was the reality under the tutelage of the now opposition. There was flatlining of productivity, rising inflation, skill shortages, infrastructure bottlenecks and warnings from the Reserve Bank. But they did nothing. There was declining expenditure on public hospitals and health. The member for Warringah, the former Minister for Health and Ageing, let it out of the bag just before the election when he admitted that the Howard government had failed in that regard. And there was a disinvestment in education compared to our OECD partners.

The reality is that those opposite failed when it came to economic leadership in this country and—guess what?—the worst example of their economic leadership was Work Choices. They are still devoted to it and they are still disciples of it. We have the Deputy Leader of the Opposition still fanning the flames and talking about the wonders of statutory individual contracts. They are still talking about it. If they came back and she sat on that bench on this side and the Leader of the Opposition were sitting where the Prime Minister sits, they would bring Work Choices back and it would drive down the wages and terms and conditions of working people in this country. That is what would happen.

The SPEAKER—Order! The discussion has concluded.

URGENT RELIEF FOR SINGLE AGE PENSIONERS BILL 2008

Consideration of Senate Message

Bill received from the Senate.

The SPEAKER (5.38 pm)—As members will know, this issue has been the subject of considerable discussion for several days. I present a copy of advice I have received from the Clerk of the House on the issues involved. Copies of this advice have been provided to the Leader of the House and to the Leader of the Opposition. The bill transmitted by the Senate does give rise to some important issues in terms of the role and responsibilities of the House of Representatives. The advice I have presented goes into the interpretation and application of the constitutional provisions, particularly those set out in sections 53 and 56 of the Constitution, and the practice of the House in these matters. As I understand it, this bill provides for increases in payments that are funded by means of standing appropriations in the Social Security Administration Act and the Veterans’ Entitlements Act. I understand further that the practice has been that such bills originate in the House and that they require a message from the Governor-General in accordance with section 56 of the Constitution.

Mr ALBANESE (Grayndler—Leader of the House) (5.40 pm)—I move:

That this House:
(1) notes the statement of the Speaker concerning the constitutional issues associated with this bill;
(2) is of the opinion that a bill which is intended to have the effect, and which would, if enacted, have the effect of increasing expenditure under a standing appropriation: 
(a) should be introduced in the House of Representatives; and
(b) would require a message from the Governor-General in accordance with section 56 of the Constitution; and
(3) believes that it is not in accordance with the constitutional provisions concerning the powers of the houses in respect of legislation as they have been applied in the House for such a measure to have originated in the Senate, and therefore declines to consider the Urgent Relief for Single Age Pensioners Bill transmitted from the Senate.

Mr Pyne—Mr Speaker—
Mr ALBANESE—The motion rests on—
The SPEAKER—The Leader of the House will resume his seat. I call the member for Sturt on a point of order.

Mr Pyne—Mr Speaker, if the Leader of the House has finished his speech I would like to move an amendment to the motion.

Mr ALBANESE—You have to wait—
Mr Pyne—I didn’t realise you were going to speak to the motion.

Mr ALBANESE—Of course I’m going to speak.

Mr Pyne—You didn’t seek the call.

The SPEAKER—Order! No, the Leader of the House has the call. He has now moved his motion and debate ensues. He still has the call.

Mr ALBANESE—Thank you, Mr Speaker. We actually see in that trivial move how little those opposite have any respect for, in this case, three important documents. One of those documents is House of Representatives Practice, the second is the standing orders and the third—and most important in this case—is something called the Australian Constitution. That is the basis on which this motion rests, particularly sections 53 and 56 of the Constitution and the principle of the financial initiative of the executive. Section 53 of the Constitution is very clear, and it states:

Proposed laws appropriating revenue or moneys, or imposing taxation, shall not originate in the Senate.

Advice which I have received considers the bill from the Senate to be a proposed law appropriating moneys, very clearly. Section 56 of the Constitution states:

A vote, resolution, or proposed law for the appropriation of revenue or moneys shall not be passed unless the purpose of the appropriation has in the same session been recommended by message of the Governor-General to the House in which the proposal originated.

The financial initiative of the executive is enshrined not just in the Constitution, of course, but in House of Representatives Practice and in standing orders. House of Representatives Practice has been used in this chamber since Federation, for 108 years. Page 408 of House of Representatives Practice states:

It is a long established and strictly observed rule which expresses a principle of the highest constitutional importance that no public charge can be incurred except on the initiative of the Executive Government.

The Executive Government demands money, the House grants it, but the House does not vote money unless required by the Government …

Page 567 of House of Representatives Practice states:

A private Member may not initiate a bill imposing or varying a tax or requiring the appropriation of revenue or moneys. This would be contrary to the constitutional and parliamentary principle of the financial initiative of the Executive—
that is, that no public charge can be incurred except on the initiative of the Government.

Then we come to the standing orders. Standing order 180 clearly spells out the principle again:

(a) All proposals for the appropriation of revenue or moneys require a message to the House from the Governor-General recommending the purpose of the appropriation in accordance with section 56 of the Constitution.

(b) For an Appropriation or Supply Bill, the message must be announced before the bill is introduced.

(c) For other bills appropriating revenue or moneys, a Minister may introduce the bill and the bill may be proceeded with before the message is announced and standing order 147 (message recommending appropriation) applies.

Page 568 of *House of Representatives Practice* says the following:

It would not be possible for a private Member to obtain the Governor-General’s recommendation for an appropriation. Furthermore, of those bills requiring a Governor-General’s message, only those brought in by a Minister may be introduced and proceeded with before the message is announced. Therefore, only a Minister may bring in a bill which appropriates public moneys.

Page 431 of *House of Representatives Practice* deals with section 53 of the Constitution and limitations on Senate powers of amendment. It states:

Section 53 of the Constitution, as well as limiting the rights of the Senate in the initiation of legislation, provides that the Senate may not amend proposed laws imposing taxation, or proposed laws appropriating revenue for the ordinary annual services of the Government.

So the position is very clear. The bill proposed by the opposition amends the Social Security Act 1991 and the Veterans’ Entitlements Act 1986 to change pension entitlements. These entitlements are funded by a standing appropriation, and the effect of the amendments proposed in the bill would be to increase the actual amount of money appropriated from the Consolidated Revenue Fund. Indeed, the explanatory memorandum of the bill states that the financial impact is $1.45 billion a year. Notwithstanding the fact that Treasury has questioned the figures done by those opposite, it is clear on the basis of legal advice that the bill can only originate in the House.

It can only be introduced into the House by a minister and it cannot be passed by the House without a message from the Governor-General. It is very clear that this bill cannot be considered by the House. We do not actually have an option on that. That actually is not a political decision by either side of parliament. It has something to do with a responsibility by us as members of the House of Representatives to act in accordance with the Constitution. But, of course, those opposite know that that is the case because they are not serious. That is why they did nothing about the base rate for 12 long years in office. Just last year when Mal Brough put forward—

*Opposition members interjecting—*

Mr ALBANESE—I know that the members of the Queensland Liberal-National Party are upset at the mention of Mal Brough’s name. When Mal Brough took the position to the cabinet, asking for an increase in pensions, they chose not to do anything when they were in a position to do something about it. They rejected the position Mal Brough put forward just last year.

But, of course, the opposition have floundered around looking for an issue. There is no real concern for pensioners, because, if they were really concerned about pensioners, they would not be putting forward a bill which ignored two million pensioners—married pensioners, carers, people with a
disability—including half a million single carers and disability pensioners living on the same $281 a week as single age pensioners. The $30 a week payment is not even indexed, so its value will erode over time—another mean and tricky Liberal policy.

There is no mechanism in the bill to ensure that increased payments are not taken up by increased rents, and that is because they have not taken this issue seriously. In the Senate yesterday, they could not even get a second speaker on this bill. The shadow minister responsible for this portfolio cannot be bothered to be in the chamber for this debate. They have a shadow minister who regards the Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs portfolio as not being the main game. He is not interested in the portfolio that he has been given. I am sure there are a few disappointed people opposite who would not have minded being given that portfolio.

This is all about playing politics. Indeed, when the member for Bradfield led the opposition, he stated that he was going to introduce the bill into the House. In a press release on 10 September 2008, he stated:

I will move to introduce legislation when parliament sits next week to give Mr Rudd the opportunity to deliver an extra $30 a week to around 860,000 Australians …

He said he would do that, but of course he did not because you cannot submit to the House private members’ bills which have an impact on revenue. That is why it was rejected when the opposition attempted to move this bill in the House. What this comes down to is the born-to-rule mentality that those opposite have. They refuse to accept that they are not the executive government of the day. When they were the executive government, they chose to do nothing. Now they are the opposition, they choose to engage in politics, not in policy development.

The opposition would have been given the same advice that the bill was unconstitutional, that it was contrary to House of Representatives Practice, that it was contrary to standing orders. But they say that that just does not matter. They say we should just forget about that and forget about the Australian Constitution. Unfortunately for the opposition, they did get some good advice from Laurie Oakes—often a source of good advice. In a question to the member for North Sydney, Laurie Oakes stated:

… you can’t increase the pension by $30 a week without appropriating moneys and Section 56 of the Constitution says that you require a message from the Governor-General, and the Governor-General acts on the advice of ministers. Parliamentary Standing Orders say that a private member cannot introduce a bill to appropriate moneys, so Dr Nelson was obviously quite ignorant of this when he made that proposal last week, wasn’t he?

The Manager of Opposition Business said:

No, that’s not right, Laurie.

You have the Manager of Opposition Business, the person who is responsible for standing orders and House of Representatives Practice in this House, being like all those opposite—completely ignorant about the basic processes that occur in this parliament. That is why the promised bill never appeared. They said it would appear but, of course, they were more worried about knocking off the member for Bradfield than they were worried about pensioners. That was their priority on the day that they said—they gave a commitment—that they would be introducing legislation about pensioners. Their sole concern was knocking over the member for Bradfield so that people such as the member for Sturt and others could climb over Dr Nelson and get a few places further up the front bench as one of the 32 gondoliers in the merchant of Venice’s team that sits opposite the government in the chamber at this stage.
You cannot actually produce a bill that has $1.45 billion a year in it, that is in breach of the Constitution, that is in breach of Standing Orders and that is in breach of House of Representatives Practice, and hope that nobody notices. But it does say something about the psychology of where they are at. We have seen a number of therapy sessions conducted—one on a Friday and one the first sitting night, until the very early hours of the morning. No political party that sees itself as a future government would try this on. No serious political party that is concerned with executive government would simply argue that the Constitution and the processes of this House do not matter. This is a sign from them that they are more interested in fighting over the spoils of opposition—which is the context in which this bill arose—than they are in fighting seriously to get back on the treasury bench so that they can put in place whatever policy they like as the government.

It is a fact that I, as a member of the opposition, put forward a number of private members’ bills. One of those was the Superannuation (Entitlements of same sex couples) Bill—which is now government policy, I am pleased to say, thanks to the Attorney-General and, I would hope, with some bipartisan support from those across the chamber. At the time when I introduced that bill, it was contentious. It had to specifically exclude Commonwealth public servants. Why was that the case? It was not because I thought Commonwealth public servants should continue to be discriminated against but because I was given advice that a private member, through a private member’s bill, could not seek to appropriate funds and that that was the role of ministers. Hence the bill was framed in that way. It is unfortunate that nothing happened throughout the years, right up to 2007, but now—thanks to the Attorney-General and the Rudd government’s commitment—we are resolving the issue of discrimination against same-sex couples. I acknowledge that there are many opposite who also support that position and who supported it when they were in government, but they could not get it past those narrow-minded people in their party room who were prepared to play politics with people’s lives.

Last week they had to amend their own bill—before it had even been discussed or talked about by anyone—to add a group. They were amending their own bill before it had even gone to the House—quite extraordinary. This government is actually acting. The fact is that this very fortnight all pensioners will receive the third quarterly instalment of the utilities allowance of $128 to help with their bills. Why is it $128 rather than $125, which is a quarter of $500? It is because it is subject to indexation, and the indexation is already kicking in. They have got a bill before the House in which they have forgotten about indexation, because it is a sloppy, badly and hastily-put-together bill. This is not real work; this is meaningless politics from those opposite. Of course, we extended the utilities allowance—unlike ever before—to carers payments and the disability support pension. But the opposition continue to play low-rent politics with this.

It is clear that the opposition gave themselves up earlier today. They did not actually move anything today. People have got to understand that. They just tried to suspend Standing Orders. They did not move their bill. They did not seek leave. They sought to suspend Standing Orders.

Mr Pyne—We’d like you to take our bill up.

Mr ALBANESE—The member opposite says that they would like us to take their bill up. We are not going to take up inadequate, hopeless work that leaves out two million Australians. We are engaged in immediate assistance for pensioners, right now. But we
are also engaged in a comprehensive review to make sure that we actually deliver real reform—unlike those opposite who were unable to do it. It is extraordinary that, in their suspension of standing orders motion today, they actually called upon the government to introduce their legislation. I will tell you what: this government is about introducing our legislation—our agenda that understands that people who are doing it tough need to be looked after.

Labor has a proud history of looking after pensioners and the less well off in our society. Unlike those representatives of privilege opposite, we will act in accordance with our proud history of some 117 years. That is why this pathetic attempt should be and will be rejected. The problem with those opposite is that they do not understand that the role of opposition is actually to put up a constructive proposition and, instead of that, they just engage in this political activity at the expense of pensioners.

(Time expired)

The SPEAKER—The question is that the motion moved by the Leader of the House be agreed to.

Mr PYNE (Sturt) (6.00 pm)—I move:

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

The House—

(1) affirms the justice of the measure in this bill in proposing to:

(a) increase the single age pension, the single age service pension and the widow B pension—

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

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

A division having been called and the bells being rung—

Mr Tuckey—Mr Speaker, on a point of order: I drew your attention earlier today to standing order 150, which records the rights of members to move amendments. I do not see anything there that says that they can be cut off halfway through that by a motion of the government or the opposition. The amendment should be concluded and then—

The SPEAKER—Order! I refer the member for O’Connor to standing order 81.

Mr Tuckey—Mr Speaker, on a further point of order: did you put the question because standing order 81 says:

After a question has been proposed from the Chair, a Member may move without notice, and whether or not any other Member is speaking—

That the question be now put.

I am not aware, from my listening, that you proposed the question. There was a speech made—

The SPEAKER—Order! I would just remind the honourable member for O’Connor that, if I had not proposed the question, I could not have given the member for Sturt the call. He was very keenly waiting at the dispatch box and he politely waited until I read the motion. I am willing to give him credit on some occasions.
Question put.
That the motion (Mr Albanese’s) be agreed to.
The House divided. [6.05 pm]
(The Speaker—Mr Harry Jenkins)
Ayes………… 78
Noes………… 55
Majority…… 23

AYES
Adams, D.G.H.
Bidgood, J.
Bowen, C.
Burke, A.E.
Butler, M.C.
Campbell, J.
Cheeseeman, D.L.
Collins, J.M.
Crean, S.F.
Danby, M.
Dreyfus, M.A.
Ellis, A.L.
Emerson, C.A.
Ferguson, M.J.
Garrett, P.
George, J.
Gillard, J.E.
Grierson, S.J.
Hale, D.F.
Irwin, J.
Kelly, M.J.
King, C.F.
Macklin, J.L.
McClelland, R.B.
McMullan, R.F.
Murphy, J.
Neumann, S.K.
Owens, J.
Perrett, G.D.
Price, L.R.S. *
Rea, K.M.
Rishworth, A.L.
Saffin, J.A.
Sidebottom, S.
Sullivan, J.
Symon, M.
Thomson, C.
Trevor, C.
Vamvakou, M.
Albanese, A.N.
Bird, S.
Bradbury, D.J.
Burke, A.S.
Byrne, A.M.
Champion, N.
Clare, J.D.
Combet, G.
D’Ath, Y.M.
Debus, B.
Elliot, J.
Ellis, K.
Ferguson, L.D.T.
Fitzgibbon, J.A.
Georganas, S.
Gibbons, S.W.
Gray, G.
Griffin, A.P.
Hayes, C.P. *
Jackson, S.M.
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.
Raguse, 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.
Zappia, A.

NOES
Andrews, K.J.
Baldwin, R.C.
Bishop, B.K.
Broadbent, R.
Ciobo, S.M.
Farmer, P.F.
Georgiou, P.
Hartsuyker, L.
Hawker, D.P.M.
Hunt, G.A.
Jensen, D.
Keenan, M.
Macfarlane, I.E.
Markus, L.E.
Morrison, S.J.
Nelson, B.J.
Oakeshott, R.J.M.
Ramsey, R.
Robb, A.
Ruddock, P.M.
Scott, B.C.
Simpkins, L.
Smith, A.D.H.
Southcott, A.J.
Truss, W.E.
Turnbull, M.
Washer, M.J.
Wood, J.
Bailey, F.E.
Billson, B.F.
Bishop, J.I.
Chester, D.
Dutton, P.C.
Forrest, J.A.
Haase, B.W.
Hawke, A.
Hull, K.E. *
Irons, S.J.
Johnson, M.A. *
Lindsay, P.J.
Marino, N.B.
May, M.A.
Moylan, J.E.
Neville, P.C.
Pyne, C.
Randall, D.J.
Robert, S.R.
Schultz, A.
Seeker, P.D.
Slipper, P.N.
Somlyay, A.M.
Stone, S.N.
Tuckey, C.W.
Vale, D.S.
Windsor, A.H.C.

PAIRS
Bevis, A.R.
Smith, S.F.
Abbott, A.J.
Laming, A.

* denotes teller

Question agreed to.

Mr Dutton—Mr Speaker, I second the motion. This is a government that is denying—

The SPEAKER—Order! The member for Dickson will resume his seat. The question now is that the motion moved by the Leader of the House be agreed to.

Mr Pyne—Mr Speaker, on a point of order: with due respect, I did actually read the first part of my amendment up to the word ‘bill’—

The SPEAKER—The member for Sturt will resume his seat.
Mr Pyne interjecting—

The SPEAKER—The member for Sturt will resume his seat.

Mr Pyne interjecting—

The SPEAKER—No. The member for Sturt can prattle on all he likes, but he will resume his seat. He will resume his seat and sit quietly for at least 30 seconds. The only motion that had been put to the chamber was the motion that was moved by the Leader of the House. The member for Sturt rose to move an amendment. The Leader of the House moved that the question be put. That has been agreed to.

Opposition members interjecting—

The SPEAKER—Before we get too carried away, we will clearly go through this. The chamber knows that on several occasions I said that the question—which we have just dealt with—was that the question be now put. The member for O’Connor, thankfully now, raised two points of order with me, and I referred to standing order 81—Closure of question.

Original question put:
That the motion (Mr Albanese’s) be agreed to.

The House divided. [6.14 pm]

(The Speaker—Mr Harry Jenkins)

Ayes…………… 78

Noes…………… 56

Majority……… 22

AYES

Adams, D.G.H. Albanese, A.N.
Bidgood, J. Bird, S.
Bowen, C. Bradbury, D.J.
Burke, A.E. Burke, A.S.
Butler, M.C. Byrne, A.M.
Campbell, J. Champion, N.
Cheeseman, D.L. Clare, J.D.
Collins, J.M. Combet, G.
Crean, S.F. D’Ath, Y.M.
Danby, M. Debus, B.
Dreyfus, M.A. Elliot, J.
Ellis, A.L. Emerson, C.A.
Ferguson, M.J. Garrett, P.
George, J. Gillard, J.E.
Grierson, S.J. Hale, D.F.
Irwin, J. Kelly, M.J.
King, C.F. Macklin, J.L.
McClintock, B.B. McMullan, R.F.
Murphy, J. Neumann, S.K.
Owens, J. Perrett, G.D.
Price, L.R.S. Rea, K.M.
Rishworth, A.L. Saffin, J.A.
Sidebottom, S. Sullivan, J.
Symon, M. Hawker, D.P.M.
Thomson, C. Hunt, G.A.
Trevor, C. Vamvakou, M.

NOES

Andrews, K.J. Bailey, F.E.
Baldwin, R.C. Billson, B.F.
Bishop, B.K. Bishop, J.I.
Broadbent, R. Chester, D.
Ciobo, S.M. Dutton, P.C.
Farmer, P.F. Forrest, J.A.
Georgiou, P. Haase, B.W.
Hartsuyker, L. Hawke, A.
Hawker, D.P.M. Hull, K.E. *
Hunt, G.A. Irons, S.J.
Jensen, D. Johnson, M.A. *
Katter, R.C. Keenan, M.
Lindsay, P.J. Macfarlane, I.E.
Marino, N.B. Markus, L.E.
May, M.A. Morrison, S.J.
Moylan, J.E. Nelson, B.J.
Neville, P.C. Oakeshott, R.J.M.
Pyne, C. Ramsey, R.
Randall, D.J. Robb, A.
Robert, S.R. Ruddock, P.M.
Schultz, A. Scott, B.C.
Secker, P.D. Simpkins, L.
Slipper, P.N.                           Smith, A.D.H.
Somilyay, A.M.                          Southcott, A.J.
Stone, S.N.                             Truss, W.E.
Tuckey, C.W.                            Turnbull, M.
Vale, D.S.                              Washer, M.J.
Windsor, A.H.C.                          Wood, J.

PAIRS
Bevis, A.R.                              Abbott, A.J.
Smith, S.F.                              Laming, A.

* denotes teller

Question agreed to.

AUSTRALIAN ORGAN AND TISSUE
DONATION AND TRANSPLANTATION
AUTHORITY BILL 2008
Referred to Main Committee

Mr PRICE (Chifley) (6.16 pm)—by leave—I move:

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

I point out to all honourable members that this motion enjoys the support of the Chief Opposition Whip, the honourable member for Fairfax.

Question agreed to.

COMMITTEES
Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Committee
Membership

The SPEAKER—I have received a message from the Senate informing the House that Senator Cormann has been discharged from the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade and that Senator Johnston has been appointed a member of the committee.

SAME-SEX RELATIONSHIPS (EQUAL TREATMENT IN COMMONWEALTH LAWS—GENERAL LAW REFORM) BILL 2008
Second Reading

Debate resumed from 22 September, on motion by Mr McClelland:

That this bill be now read a second time, upon which Ms Ley moved by way of amendment:

That all words after “That” be omitted with a view to substituting the following words: “whilst not declining to give the bill a second reading, the House:

(1) affirms its commitment to the central importance of the institution of marriage to Australian society;

(2) nevertheless recognises that partners in same-sex relationships ought not to be discriminated against on the basis of their sexuality, and ought to be treated on a similar basis to partners in heterosexual de facto relationships;

(3) recognises the right of children who live in same-sex households not to be discriminated against; and

(4) notes that the Opposition has referred the bill to the Senate Legal and Constitutional Affairs Committee for reporting by September 30 with a view to ensuring that, in removing discrimination against people in same-sex relationships:

(a) the centrality of marriage is not devalued, whether by the use of inappropriate statutory language or otherwise;

(b) there is no unintended recognition of same-sex marriage, including through amendments to the Migration Act 1961;

(c) the rights and status of children are properly protected; and

(d) the rights and status of people in interdependent relationships other than same-sex relationships are recognised and properly protected”.

Mr NEUMANN (Blair) (6.18 pm)—The Same-Sex Relationships (Equal Treatment in Commonwealth Laws—General Law Reform) Bill 2008 will amend 68 Commonwealth laws. The Attorney-General said that the bill was long overdue. I think it is far from long overdue; it is very overdue. We should not treat Australians differently, whether they live in Tasmania or the Torres
Strait, in Perth or Penrith, or in my electorate in Booval or Boonah, or in Kalbar or Karalee. It is simply wrong to penalise children on the basis of the sexual orientation of their parents. The best interests of children must be the paramount consideration in all legislation. It is unacceptable that more than 20,000 Australians are discriminated against and their families and children denied fundamental financial and work related entitlements which, for example, my wife and I and our children enjoy in what is often described as a traditional marital relationship. Why should my family be entitled to more in terms of carers’ leave, spend less for medical care, have better access to Medicare and the PBS safety net, and receive more tax concessions than those who are my friends and family who live in same-sex relationships. It is unacceptable in a society which says that it aspires to a fair go to allow this sort of discrimination to continue. If we say we live in a humane society, then we must believe that any child should have the same equality of opportunity and equality before the law as anyone else. And if we say we care about the financial security of all Australians, then we must pass this bill.

Specifically, this bill inserts a new definition of a de facto partner into the Acts Interpretation Act 1901 to ensure equality for all. A couple will be taken to be living in a de facto relationship if they are living together on a genuine domestic basis, having regard to a whole range of factors included in the definition. Those factors are similar to what we have seen in state legislation governing property and spousal maintenance issues, and specifically in part 19 of the Property Law Act of Queensland and the Queensland Acts Interpretation Act. It is also akin to the groundbreaking bill which we debated in this House a few weeks ago on a very long overdue Commonwealth jurisdiction enhancement in terms of family law disputes in relation to property and superannuation issues between de facto heterosexual couples and same-sex relationships.

Some of the factors that the court will have to look at to establish that the couple is actually living in a de facto relationship, whether of a heterosexual or homosexual nature, include the duration of the relationship, the nature and extent of their common residence, whether a sexual relationship exists, the care and support of children, the degree of mutual commitment to a shared life, the reputation and public aspects of the relationship and other factors. Interestingly, under proposed section 22B amending the Commonwealth Acts Interpretation Act, a person will be considered to be in a de facto relationship if that relationship is registered under a prescribed law of a state or territory as a prescribed kind of relationship. In other words, if the couple has taken the time to register their relationship under state or territory schemes, they automatically come within the definition of a de facto relationship for the purpose of the Commonwealth, and so they can enjoy the entitlements that the legislation provides.

The bill expands the definition of ‘child’. It does not replace the definition of child in the current legislation; it expands the classes of children. It states that a child will be considered to be a person’s child where the child is the product of a relationship the person has had with another person or with another couple. The key definition of child is extended to include recognition of children of opposite-sex relationships who are not covered by existing definitions in terms of other acts and other provisions. For example, if a child is biologically related to either member of an opposite-sex couple and was conceived through a private surrogacy arrangement, either by the use of artificial insemination or sexual intercourse, that child would be recognised. Consent to the procreation of a
child is not an express requirement in the key
definition of child and that is because, as it
has been described in the explanatory memo-
randum, the term ‘product of a relationship’
implies an element of joint endeavour. In the
circumstances, the extension of class of chil-
dren is a good thing for those children who
in the past have not enjoyed the benefit of
this type of legislation.

There is a lot of legislation being
amended—68 Commonwealth laws. They
cover a vast array of Commonwealth jurisdic-
tion and legislation, including legislation
in relation to agriculture, fisheries and for-
ery and legislation under the Attorney-
General’s purview. These include the Acts
Interpretation Act, the Administrative Deci-
sions (Judicial Review) Act, the Age Dis-
crimination Act, the Australia Federal Police
Act, the Bankruptcy Act, the Crimes Act, the
Judges (Long Leave Payments) Act, and the
High Court Justices (Long Leave Payments)
Act. So there is a lot in terms of the Attor-
ney-General’s portfolio, and you would ex-
pect that a lot of legislation would go to-
wards that in which the Attorney-General has
coverage. There are also changes in terms of
the Broadband, Communication and the
Digital Economy portfolio. Defence also has
legislation which is amended—specifically,
the Defence Force (Home Loans Assistance)
Act, the Defence (Parliamentary Candidates)
Act and the Royal Australian Air Force Vet-
erans’ Residence Act. Education, employ-
ment and workplace relations are also cov-
ered to ensure that children are not discrimi-
nated against in their educational opportuni-
ties. The Education Services for Overseas
Students Act, the Higher Education Support
Act and the Judicial and Statutory Officers
(Remuneration and Allowance) Act are also
amended.

There are some changes in the definition
of stepchildren, step-parents and widowers.
This is another area which needed reform.

Ordinarily, references to stepchildren, step-
parents and widowers means that there has to
be a marital relationship. In the future, that
will not be the case. The bill expands the
definitions of stepchild and step-parent to
include a child of an opposite-sex or same-
sex de facto partner by a former relationship
and includes same-sex or opposite-sex de
facto partners of a parent of a child by a for-
mer relationship. That obviously intends to
correct what has been a longstanding injus-
tice. There are amendments to the tracing
rule as well, which will help identify family
relationships. For example, where family
relationships such as brother, aunt and
grandparent are provided for in the bill, the
tracing rule will allow those relationships
referred to in the bill to include those rela-
tionships through a parent-child relationship.

I cannot really see how removal of dis-
crimination against same-sex couples and
their children in any way undermines mar-
riage. It does not. It does not alter or affect
marriage in any way whatsoever. I find it
hard to accept that groups that have cam-
paign against this type of legislation claim
to promote faith, family and freedom. How
can they say that they promote these types of
virtues when they oppose freedom from dis-
crimination? Many good friends of mine are
involved in the Australian Christian Lobby
and they have played a constructive role in
advocating for the relief of poverty, for more
foreign aid to those countries that have been
disadvantaged and they have rightly pushed
the case for responsible alcohol consumption
and protection of children from pornography
and all its exploitation. To its credit, the ACL
have actually given approval to end dis-
crimination and actually agreed that the state
legislation in terms of registration of rela-
tionships is appropriate. But I do not agree
with their criticism that the Rudd govern-
ment is engaging in anything which would
undermine marriage. The bill does not have
this intention; it does not have this unintentional consequence.

This bill has its origin in the 2007 HREOC report, Same-sex: same entitlements. This bill is the fulfilment of an election commitment. It is about lifting up; it is not about bringing down. It is not the thin end of the wedge. It is not a backdoor attempt to legislate for polygamous relationships, as was said previously in relation to the family law amendments. It is an attempt to help people who are currently disadvantaged in our community. There has been a lot of public comment in relation to ‘interdependent relationships’. This bill should not recognise ‘interdependent relationships’. How does one really define that? It is notoriously complex and it covers a vast array of relationships. It is almost impossible to quantify the cost to the Australian taxpayer if that were included in this bill. There is simply no evidence or data from which one could calculate the expected number of relationships. Sadly, I think the infusion of this type of issue in the debate is a distraction; it is a ruse. It is a device to delay equality from being achieved.

It is a great shame that, in their nearly 12 years in government, the Howard government did not bring this type of legislation into the House. Their attitude to same-sex law reform could be characterised as idleness, indolence and inactivity. Their response in relation to helping people in these circumstances and their children is a disgrace. They did nothing. They promised much and delivered little in this regard. They denied economic justice to same-sex couples. This bill will help tens of thousands of Australians and their children. About 20 per cent of lesbian couples and about five per cent of gay male couples have children. Their children will benefit. This bill will overcome the challenges left by the Howard government. It is a fair and humane bill. It is about ending discrimination. It is about equality before the law. It is about financial security. It is about lifting up and helping fellow Australians to achieve their full potential in life and giving them the kind of life that those of us who are in other relationships take for granted every day of our existence. I commend the bill to the House.

Mr ROBERT (Fadden) (6.30 pm)—The government’s Same-Sex Relationships (Equal Treatment in Commonwealth Laws—General Law Reform) Bill 2008 proposes to build on the Same-Sex Relationships (Equal Treatment in Commonwealth Laws—Superannuation) Bill 2008 to provide equality of treatment between same-sex couples and opposite-sex de facto couples in 68 pieces of legislation. This is the foreshadowed omnibus bill that intends to treat same-sex couples and their children in the same manner as heterosexual de facto couples and their children in Commonwealth legislation. Whilst the coalition will not deny the government a second reading of the bill, I strongly support putting this bill to the Senate Standing Committee on Legal and Constitutional Affairs for greater scrutiny—and amendment if needed.

It is important that this bill achieve the stated intent of ensuring property and financial justice—which I strongly support—but without diminishing the time-honoured institutions of marriage and parenthood. According to the 2006 census there are 3.275 million families with children in this country, of which 2,868 are same-sex couples with children. While same-sex couples with children make up just 0.09 per cent of those families, that does not mean they should not enjoy the same rights and access to property and financial justice. However, no government in this place has the right to fundamentally alter the definition of ‘parenthood’ to suit just 0.09 per cent of couples when property and finan-
cial justice can be achieved through other means.

As I have consistently stated in this place, I do not support in any way, shape or form the loss of the privileged position of marriage in our society. Thus, I am concerned that same-sex relationships are to be treated equally to marriage in all Commonwealth laws except the Marriage Act 1961 and the Family Law Act 1975. This one bill being debated tonight amends no fewer than 68 laws to achieve this levelling of marriage. My absolute support for marriage is based on the conviction, shared overwhelmingly by ordinary Australians, that children do best when raised by a mum and a dad and that nothing should be done by any parliament to make it likely that more children will be raised by same-sex couples, who by definition cannot provide a mum and a dad. The population statistics support this contention. Same-sex couples with children account for only 0.09 per cent of families—99.91 per cent of the nation hold a different view.

An overarching concern is that this bill seeks to normalise same-sex parenting by changing the definition of ‘parenting’. It has moved past its stated intent of property and financial justice and seeks to make the lifestyle choice of homosexuality equal to the time-honoured mum and dad as the basis for parenthood. This is something I do not agree with. I support removing injustice but I do not support a change in the definition of parenting as a mechanism to achieve justice when justice can be achieved in other ways.

This bill needs to treat property and financial justice in cases involving homosexual couples as the exception to the norm; it should not seek to change the norm. Marriage between a man and a woman is the norm. Parenthood with a mum and a dad is the norm. Kids growing up with a mum and a dad is the norm. Fatherhood is the norm. In saying this, I do not seek to undermine those many single-parent families who love and support their children in difficult circumstances and set an example for all of us of what it means to sacrifice for our kids on a daily basis.

I was very privileged to hear the Leader of the Opposition, Malcolm Turnbull, share some of his own personal experiences at a public IBL lunch on the Gold Coast recently. He told of growing up in rented flats with his dad because his mum had left. He spoke of how his father worked hard to give him a great education, how his father loved and supported him and how his father never once talked his mother down to him—not a single time. This is the essence of great fatherhood.

Many single mums and dads in this nation do an outstanding job and they are to be commended. Yet, despite it all, children ostensibly need a mum and a dad. Speaking as a father of two small boys, my kids need me. My little three-year-old said to his mother the other day when I left to come back to parliament, ‘My daddy isn’t here and I’m very sad.’

Dr Wade Horn, the editor of the Father Facts book and probably the most researched social scientist on issues surrounding fatherhood, says that a family without a father is a lot like a car without one of its front wheels: it can still be driven but it is pretty hard to steer. A 12-point plan for strengthening and supporting Australian fathers was launched by the then Prime Minister in June 2003 with bipartisan support from the then opposition. The National Fathering Forum, which put together the 12-point plan, stated that every child has the fundamental right to both a mother and a father. The best way to secure this right is to establish a loving and stable marriage between a man and a woman for life. A large body of social science research confirms the near-universal belief, across
time and cultures, that marriage between a mum and a dad is the best environment for raising children.

Norway recognised same-sex unions in 1993, the second country in the world to do so, followed by Sweden in 1995. A major study that looked at the entire population registers of those two countries was published under the title ‘Divorce-Risk Patterns in Same-Sex Marriages in Norway and Sweden’. The unequivocal results show that gay male unions are 50 per cent more likely to separate and lesbian unions are 167 more likely to separate within the first eight years. Thus, two of the first nations that went down this path have discovered, empirically, beyond any doubt, that homosexual relationships are far more unstable than heterosexual relationships between a mum and a dad.

Furthermore, a study of Australian primary schoolchildren was published in 1996 by Mr Sarantakos, associate professor of sociology at Charles Sturt University, entitled ‘Children in Three Contexts’. The study found that out of the primary schoolchildren from three family types—married heterosexual couples, cohabiting heterosexual couples and homosexual couples—in every area of educational endeavour, including language, mathematics, social studies, sport, class work, sociability and popularity, and attitudes to learning, children of married heterosexual couples performed better than the other two groups. The study concluded with these words: ‘Married couples seem to offer the best environment for a child’s social and educational development’. This is not to suggest that a same-sex couple cannot be loving and supportive of their children. It is simply to say that all the available evidence points to what history has always known through the eons of time: children will do better with a mum and a dad, in a stable marriage, who love each other and their kids.

Children with a biological mother or father with a homosexual partner should not be discriminated against. Children must be able to inherit their parents’ and partners’ assets and have equal rights with regard to workers compensation and to victim compensation payments where one parent or partner is killed or injured. However, this bill is looking to redefine the definition of a child—not through amending any central piece of legislation, such as the Acts Interpretation Act 1901, but through expanding the definition within each of the acts that this bill seeks to amend. The basis for the change of definition of a child is the premise that a child is a ‘product of a relationship’. The bill states:

… someone is the child of a person if he or she is the product of a relationship the person has or had as a couple with another person (whether of the same or a different sex). For this purpose, someone cannot be the product of a relationship unless he or she is the biological child of at least one of the persons in the relationship or was born to a woman in the relationship.

The bill also redefines the meaning of stepchild to include a child of an opposite-sex or same-sex de facto partner by a previous relationship. Thus the parental status of a same-sex partner who has no biological relationship to a child will continue for the child’s life even if the same-sex relationship breaks up. A new definition of stepchild dispenses with the need to marry a child’s parent and makes every successive de facto or same-sex partner of the parent a ‘step-parent’. This has profound implications, as step-parents have rights under the Family Law Act to seek contact orders with a child.

This bill fundamentally alters the definition of a child and removes the assumption that has lasted since humanity began that a child is born as a result of the union between a male and a female. A child is not a product of two males or two females and can never
biologically be; therefore, this place should not legislate to say they can be.

Furthermore, if a homosexual couple were looking to parent a child outside of a step-child situation, there are a range of significant consequences that this bill now allows. For example, a lesbian couple would need a sperm donor to allow one woman to become pregnant, or perhaps they could ask a male friend to father a child, and it would all be based on unenforceable agreements about what role if any the father will have in the child’s life. A male homosexual couple would need a surrogate mother, who would become pregnant with the sperm from one partner, carry the child full term and then relinquish the child to the care of the male couple, again with no enforceable agreements. This bill, in giving such wide sweeping legal recognition as ‘parents’ to both parties of a homosexual couple, gives implicit endorsement to these methods used to conceive a child and the family construct they will grow up in. To legalise that a child can actually have, for example, two fathers and no mother is at odds with the norms that our society is built on. It is at odds with the preamble to the National Fathering Forum’s 12-point plan that identified:

The quality of the relationships between mothers and fathers and their children will determine the destiny of Australia.

Hence the need to support and revitalise marital relationships and secure marriage in Australia as an institution that provides greater social good for the benefit of the whole community. Marriage has been shown to be the foundation link for involved and committed fatherhood.

I do not believe that the consequences of this bill are what the Australian people voted for. They may well have voted for financial and property justice for all—something I support—but I suggest very few people were aware of exactly what this government is now seeking to do to achieve that property and financial justice. The Rudd government is looking to achieve its goal by putting marriage and homosexual relationships on the same footing, by defining them both as simply a ‘couple relationship’ in all but two of the Commonwealth laws. This is not what fatherhood and motherhood are about.

I believe that deliberately creating a child to be placed in a homosexual partnership is irresponsible, considering all of the available evidence, and that the Commonwealth should not be complicit in allowing it either by permitting access to reproductive or surrogacy services for such couples or by granting both partners equal recognition as parents. Yet, through this bill, this Rudd Labor government proposes such things whilst also giving official recognition under the Family Law Act 1975 to surrogacy arrangements without any legal framework for such arrangements and without even an inquiry to engage the Australian people on their views.

The bill also proposes to make amendments to the Migration Act that may permit homosexual marriage contracts obtained overseas to be recognised for the purposes of a visa under regulations to the act. This is clearly unacceptable, particularly as the Rudd Labor government stood and looked the Australian people in the eye and said, ‘We do not support gay marriage.’

In conclusion, I support the coalition’s intent to move this bill to the Senate Standing Committee on Legal and Constitutional Affairs for consideration and amendment if needed. I support property and financial justice for all, and I passionately support the roles of mum and dad and the support they bring to children within their family. Parliament must do all it can to remove any discrimination from any people, but it must also protect marriage as the unique institution,
and it must preserve mum and dad as the single best way within the family unit to bring up children.

Mr DREYFUS (Isaacs) (6.46 pm)—The move towards a fair, inclusive and just society is a journey. It is a series of steps that this nation takes together, mostly forward but occasionally backward. The Same-Sex Relationships (Equal Treatment in Commonwealth Laws—General Law Reform) Bill 2008 is most definitely a step forward. It is a significant piece of human rights legislation, and it is a significant piece of pro-family legislation that will help to overcome the discrimination still faced by tens of thousands of gay and lesbian Australians, their families and their children. This bill will amend 68 Commonwealth statutes to remove discrimination against same-sex couples and their children. These amendments extend across the entire scope of government activities because the discrimination experienced by gay and lesbian Australians has been both unjust and pervasive.

This bill is an acknowledgement that the Commonwealth has failed to ensure what should be a fundamental right for all Australians: equality before the law. Our Commonwealth has failed to provide equal access to health and social security. Our Commonwealth has failed to honour and support every one of our veterans. Our Commonwealth has failed to support equally all working Australians as they save for retirement. Our Commonwealth has failed to treat with respect and dignity all Australian families. In short, our Commonwealth has treated gay and lesbian Australians as second-class citizens.

To consider just how pervasive this discrimination has been, it is worth listing some of the acts which are being amended by this bill: the Crimes Act 1914, the Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918, the Superannuation Act 1976, the Health Insurance Act 1973, the National Health Act 1953, the Migration Act 1958, the Australian Citizenship Act 2007, the Privacy Act 1988 and the Corporations Act 2001. Every single one of the acts that I have just mentioned is significant to our national life. The acts deal variously with the provision of government services, with participation by Australians in political life, with the relationship between individuals and the executive and with the functioning of our national economy. In every single one of these acts, we find discrimination against our fellow Australians.

The laws of this nation must speak to and reflect the lives that Australians lead. Australian families and relationships are diverse, and our laws should reflect this diversity. Schedule 2 of this bill makes a number of amendments to the Acts Interpretation Act 1901 to insert consistent definitions for ‘de facto partner’, ‘child’, ‘parent’, ‘stepchild’ and ‘step-parent’ across Commonwealth legislation. The inclusion of these definitions is a positive step, providing consistency across government where appropriate, as well as reflecting the reality of modern family life in Australia. Importantly, proposed section 22A(a) of the Acts Interpretation Act will recognise state and territory relationship registers. Like this legislation, the development of relationship registers in Victoria, Tasmania and the Australian Capital Territory also represents another step towards a fair, inclusive and just society, and I look forward to their establishment in other states and territories.

This bill has both functional and symbolic meaning. These changes are important in removing the functional discrimination that is experienced by gay and lesbian Australians every day. A number of these changes in particular merit further explanation. Under the Aged Care Act 1997, both an accommodation payment and daily residential care
fees are payable for residential accommodation in an aged-care facility. The accommodation payment is subject to an assets test, and a person entering an aged-care facility will only have to make an accommodation payment if their qualifying assets are worth more than $33,000. In a number of circumstances, the family home is excluded from consideration as an asset. These circumstances relate to the continued residence in the home of the person’s partner, a dependent child, a close relation or a carer.

The government has made the decision in relation to removing discrimination in this act for a very good reason. The decision for one family member to go into care or to be placed into care is a decision that thousands of Australian families struggle with each year. Placing yourself or an elderly family member into care is an acknowledgement that professional assistance is needed due to declining health or mental faculties. It is a difficult time for families and it should not be made more difficult. Yet that is precisely what we do in the case of same-sex couples.

The Aged Care Act 1997 does not, currently, recognise same-sex couples. For the purposes of this act in its current form, they are considered to be single. Putting aside the offensiveness of ignoring what has possibly been a lifetime of love and care, there is a very real financial burden placed on many same-sex couples in these circumstances. In many cases, people who find themselves in this situation may be forced, due to the high costs of aged care, to sell their homes. The Aged Care Act effectively says to elderly gay and lesbian couples, many of whom have been together for much of their lives, ‘Your relationship does not exist. The relationship that you have built and the love and support that you have provided to each other count for nothing in the eyes of your government.’ And it also says something like this: ‘Because you are not in a relationship, if one of you requires care you will be charged higher costs. Your family home will not be protected and your partner may be forced to move in their old age.’ The description of this situation as ‘discrimination’ seems almost too clinical. It is, in fact, cruel. It is offensive. It is mean-spirited. And it is unworthy of our Commonwealth.

Similarly, under the National Health Act 1953, same-sex couples and their families experience discrimination in accessing the Medicare and the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme safety nets. These safety nets exist to limit the amount that will be spent on medical expenses by people with high medical costs either through out-of-hospital expenses, in the case of the Medicare safety net, or through pharmaceutical expenses, in the case of the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme safety net. Neither the Health Insurance Act 1973, the legislation which governs the Medicare safety net, nor the National Health Act 1953, which governs the PBS safety net, recognises same-sex couples. As such, same-sex couples and their families are placed at a financial disadvantage. For a family which faces high medical expenses, this may result in hundreds or thousands of dollars being paid out which an opposite-sex couple in a similar situation would be protected against paying.

I would like to quote something that Mr John Goldbaum said in his submission to the inquiry conducted by the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission:

We are now getting old. My husband’s sister and her husband are allowed to combine their expenditure in order to reach their PBS and Medicare safety net thresholds. My husband and I need to pay out twice as much because we have to reach our safety nets individually. It’s not the money that concerns us; it’s the principle. It makes us second-class citizens despite the fact that we are first-class taxpayers.
This is a recurring theme throughout the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission’s report. The people who made submissions and gave evidence often said that it is not merely the financial disadvantage that the discrimination causes, although this is a problem; it is equally the knowledge that their government treats them as second-class citizens.

The reforms contained in this bill, along with those in the Same-Sex Relationships (Equal Treatment in Commonwealth Laws—Superannuation) Bill 2008, the Evidence Amendment Bill 2008, and the Family Law Amendment (De Facto Financial Matters and Other Measures) Bill 2008, have been a long time coming. The previous government failed to address, and failed to rectify, the discrimination experienced by gay and lesbian Australians. I am proud of the leadership that has once again been shown by the Labor Party in enacting law reform that advances human rights in this country.

Consider this fact, Madam Deputy Speaker Saffin: over the last 25 years in Australia, gay and lesbian law reform has either been enacted by Labor, or attempted by Labor, and stymied by a conservative upper house in every single period of federal, state or territory Labor government. Only two conservative governments in that period have enacted any gay and lesbian law reform: the Liberal government of Victoria, under then Premier Jeff Kennett, enacted manifestly inadequate antidiscrimination laws based on lawful sexual behaviour rather than sexual orientation; and the Country Liberal Party government in the Northern Territory decriminalised homosexuality in 1983 and passed antidiscrimination protections belatedly in 1992. For all the Liberal Party’s talk of freedom and liberty, they have demonstrably failed to deliver for gay and lesbian Australians and for human rights more generally in this country. I would like to commend the Attorney-General for continuing and furthering Labor’s traditional role of action in the area of human rights. That, over the last six months, four bills that seek to remove discrimination against same-sex couples and their families across a vast array of legislation have been introduced into this House is testament to the Attorney-General’s commitment to human rights.

It is important for us to remember that human rights are not some sort of abstract notion that exists purely in the realm of legal theory or political philosophy. These reforms will make a real difference in the lives of thousands of Australian families and, in particular, in the lives of thousands of children who live in same-sex-couple families. As the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission’s report concluded:

Many of the federal laws ... discriminate against the children of same-sex couples and fail to protect the best interests of the child in the area of financial and work-related entitlements.

Consider this fact, Madam Deputy Speaker Saffin: over the last 25 years in Australia, gay and lesbian law reform has either been enacted by Labor, or attempted by Labor, and stymied by a conservative upper house in every single period of federal, state or territory Labor government. Only two conservative governments in that period have enacted any gay and lesbian law reform: the Liberal government of Victoria, under then Premier Jeff Kennett, enacted manifestly inadequate antidiscrimination laws based on lawful sexual behaviour rather than sexual orientation; and the Country Liberal Party government in the Northern Territory decriminalised homosexuality in 1983 and passed antidiscrimination protections belatedly in 1992. For all the Liberal Party’s talk of freedom and liberty, they have demonstrably failed to deliver for gay and lesbian Australians and for human rights more generally in this country. I would like to commend the Attorney-General for continuing and furthering Labor’s traditional role of action in the area of human rights. That, over the last six months, four bills that seek to remove discrimination against same-sex couples and their families across a vast array of legislation have been introduced into this House is testament to the Attorney-General’s commitment to human rights.

It is important for us to remember that human rights are not some sort of abstract notion that exists purely in the realm of legal theory or political philosophy. These reforms will make a real difference in the lives of thousands of Australian families and, in particular, in the lives of thousands of children who live in same-sex-couple families. As the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission’s report concluded:

Many of the federal laws ... discriminate against the children of same-sex couples and fail to protect the best interests of the child in the area of financial and work-related entitlements.

This bill is a pro-family bill of the best kind. It places at front and centre the needs of children, and it gives to same-sex couples and their families some of the legitimacy provided by the power of the Commonwealth. It sends a clear message that the Commonwealth is supportive of all Australian families. I have made this point previously, in speaking to the legislation in the same-sex area that was before the House earlier this year, but the point is worth making again: you are not pro-family if you actively work to disadvantage some Australian families. You are not pro-family if you actively seek to exclude some Australian families from enjoying the rights enjoyed by others—you are merely a hypocrite.

I believe that Australia is a better country than the hypocrisy and judgementalism that pervades so much of the opposition to achieving equality for gay and lesbian Aus-
It is a simple idea—that all families and all children are owed the respect of our Commonwealth, and that equality under our law for all citizens should be a given. One day we will look back as a country with puzzlement at those who opposed and resisted this idea at every turn, regarding them the way we today regard those who opposed gender or racial equality. I would like to end with a quotation from another of the submissions to the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission inquiry, this one from a lesbian couple from Adelaide, who said:

We are an average suburban family. We are working hard and contributing to our community. We don’t want special treatment - just what others can expect from their legal and social community. Our rights are denied simply because of who we love. We just want equality.

With this bill, we take one more step forward towards equality. I commend this bill to the House.

Mr COMBET (Charlton—Parliamentary Secretary for Defence Procurement) (7.01 pm)—I obviously also wish to speak on the Same-Sex Relationships (Equal Treatment in Commonwealth Laws—General Law Reform) Bill 2008. Labor went to the last election with a clear commitment to end discrimination against same-sex couples in the area of federal law. The Labor platform, approved at the 2007 national conference of the Australian Labor Party, was very clear in this respect. It said:

Labor believes that people are entitled to respect, dignity and the opportunity to participate in society and receive the protection of the law regardless of their sexuality or gender identity. Labor supports the enactment of legislation prohibiting discrimination on the grounds of a person’s sexuality or gender identity and will audit Commonwealth legislation to amend provisions that unfairly discriminate against any person on the grounds of sexuality or gender identity.

It would not be an exaggeration, of course, as I think previous speakers have observed, to say that action in this area is well and truly overdue. As highlighted by the Attorney-General in his introduction of this bill to the House, it is almost 20 years since sexual preference was added as a ground of discrimination under the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission regulations. The Attorney-General also highlighted in his introduction to the bill other examples of this discrimination. In 1997, the Senate Legal and Constitutional Committee identified discrimination in laws and programs that dealt with tax and superannuation benefits. In 2004, the United Nations Human Rights Committee found that Australia was in breach of the prohibition on discrimination in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights because the Veterans’ Entitlements Act denied a person a pension on the basis of sexual orientation.

Last year, the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, following a substantial inquiry, tabled a report in parliament entitled *Same-sex: same entitlements*. I spoke about this report during my speech on the last bill in relation to this issue that was before the House, but I think it is important to reiterate some of the findings of that report as they are pertinent to the bill before the House at the moment. The report found that same-sex couples experience discrimination under a wide range of Commonwealth laws, including superannuation, taxation and social security laws. More specifically, the report identified a number of areas where legal and financial discrimination were faced by same-sex couples and their children. The report found, among other things, that: same-sex couples and their families are denied basic financial and work related entitlements which opposite-sex couples and their families take for granted; same-sex couples are not guaranteed the right to take carers leave...
to look after a sick partner; same-sex couples have to spend more money, generally, on medical expenses than opposite-sex couples to enjoy the Medicare and PBS safety nets; same-sex couples are denied a wide range of tax concessions that are available to opposite-sex couples; the same-sex partner of a federal government employee is denied access to certain superannuation and workers compensation death benefits that are available to an opposite-sex partner; and older same-sex couples will generally pay more than opposite-sex couples when entering aged-care facilities. These are indicators of deep and entrenched discrimination in our society that must be remedied. The Same-sex: same entitlements report also found that approximately 20,000 Australian couples and their children were experiencing discrimination and lack of equality for no other reason than the parents’ sexuality.

The report also rightly framed the issue of discrimination as an abuse of fundamental human rights, as the previous speaker was adverting to. It highlighted some of Australia’s international human rights obligations, finding that international treaties that we were party to created an obligation upon us to remove the discrimination against same-sex couples. It named four international conventions to which Australia was a party and which raised relevant rights and obligations of the Australian government. These included: the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights; the Convention on the Rights of the Child; the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights; and the Discrimination (Employment and Occupation) Convention, which is known as ILO 111.

The report examined the rights and obligations that arose from these international agreements, compared these to the discrimination that was present within Commonwealth legislation and found that discrimination against same-sex couples and parents can interfere with the right to protection of family; that discrimination against same-sex couples and parents can interfere with the right to privacy, family and home; that discrimination against same-sex parents can amount to discrimination against a child; that discrimination against same-sex parents can interfere with the best interests of a child—unsurprisingly so; that discrimination against same-sex parents can interfere with the performance of their common and household responsibilities; that discrimination against same-sex parents can interfere with a child’s right to identity; that discrimination against same-sex couples in adoption can interfere with the best interests of a child; that discrimination against same-sex couples can interfere with the right to social security; that discrimination against same-sex parents can impact on a child’s right to benefit from social security; that discrimination against same-sex parents can interfere with the right to health; and that discrimination against same-sex parents can interfere with a child’s right to health.

This is an appalling indictment of Australia’s response to this form of discrimination. Time is up, and these matters must be addressed to ensure there is fairness and justice in our community for people in same-sex relationships and their children. All of these things can be interpreted as nothing less than a damning indictment of our ability to provide basic and fundamental human rights to all of our citizens. I believe that HREOC’s report was extremely valuable in helping to educate the general community on the extent of the discrimination contained within federal legislation, on the impact that this can have and on the need to make sure that government takes action on this failure to provide for fundamental human rights in our society.
I am proud to be part of a government that is finally addressing these issues. I am also personally close to a same-sex couple who are parenting a child and I wish to see, on their behalf, an end to this discrimination. Upon coming to government the Attorney-General instructed his department to conduct an audit of all Commonwealth legislation to identify examples of discrimination against same-sex couples. That audit confirmed the findings contained in HREOC’s report and also identified further areas of discrimination in a range of non-financial areas, such as administrative and evidence laws. From this work the Attorney-General, on behalf of the Rudd government and in partnership with the Attorney-General’s staff, has been working on a program of legislation designed to remove all of this discrimination. It is my pleasure to be able to speak today on what is the second part of the government’s program to remove discrimination against same-sex couples and their children from all Commonwealth law.

The first part of that program, of course, was contained within the Same-Sex Relationships (Equal Treatment in Commonwealth Laws—Superannuation) Bill 2008, and I was pleased to have spoken in the debate on that bill in the House. However, along with others who were supporters of that bill, I am not pleased to see that that bill still has not passed the Senate due to the actions of those opposite. Instead the opposition appear to be more focused on the politics of this situation and perhaps pandering to some of the more conservative elements within their own party. They have hidden behind the veil of an argument that suggests that more work needs to be conducted on interdependent relationships.

The purpose of this bill is to eliminate discrimination under a range of Commonwealth laws in the manner that I have described. In detail, as previous speakers have adverted to, the bill will amend 68 Commonwealth laws to achieve this purpose. It does so by altering a number of definitions across a range of laws. Firstly, the bill before the House will introduce across these laws a new definition of a child. The new definition will include a child who is the product of a relationship where one partner is linked biologically to the child or where one partner is the birth mother of the child. The bill also includes a new definition of de facto partnerships, which will become the standard for most Commonwealth laws. Under this definition the couple will be taken to be in a de facto relationship if they have a relationship as a couple and live together on a genuine domes-
tic basis, having regard to a number of circumstances included within the definition. Registration of a relationship on a prescribed state or territory register will also be recognised as proof that a couple is in a de facto relationship. Currently Tasmania, Victoria and the ACT have such schemes, and I encourage other states to look at adopting similar practices.

The bill expands the definitions of step-child and step-parent to include a child of an opposite-sex or same-sex de facto partner by a former relationship and to include a same-sex or opposite-sex de facto partner of a parent of a child by a former relationship. The bill also removes some laws that treat people in the same circumstances differently depending on whether they are married or not. These amendments to the definitions contained within the Acts Interpretation Act will help remove the discrimination of same-sex couples and their children that currently resides in a number of laws of the Commonwealth. Similarly, in legislation such as the Social Security Act, which these definitions under the Acts Interpretation Act do not provide for, relevant amendments are made to ensure that same-sex couples and their families are recognised.

The amendment of legal definitions may not appear to be much; indeed, at first glance it appears to be just a number of technical amendments. However, the provisions contained within this bill can make a real difference to many families across this country. I would like to take the opportunity to outline some of the benefits that may now accrue to same-sex couples, depending upon their circumstances, and their children following the passage of this bill, to give concrete examples of some of the discrimination that will be removed.

Prior to the introduction of this bill, same-sex couples were not eligible for some payments because a same-sex partner did not qualify as a ‘partner’ under social security legislation. This meant that, for the purposes of some entitlements and benefits under social security legislation, same-sex couples were not recognised. This bill will correct that. Prior to this bill, a same-sex partner of a veteran could not receive benefits such as the war widow or war widower pensions, income support supplement, bereavement benefits, funeral benefits, gold repatriation health card or military compensation. Subject to the particular circumstances of a veteran, this bill will change the arrangements to remove discrimination. In relation to Medicare, prior to this bill a same-sex family had to spend more to access general and extended safety net subsidies. They also had to spend more to access the PBS safety net subsidies. Again, this bill corrects these injustices and deficiencies.

I conclude by reiterating how proud I am to be part of a government that is finally putting an end to discrimination suffered by many thousands of same-sex couples and their families. I urge the opposition to support the legislation and ensure that this discrimination is removed as promptly as possible.

Ms ANNETTE ELLIS (Canberra) (7.17 pm)—It is indeed with pride and pleasure that I rise this evening to speak on the Same-Sex Relationships (Equal Treatment in Commonwealth Laws—General Law Reform) Bill 2008. It has been said before, and I need to say again, that it is a matter of shame for both sides of this parliament that it has taken so long for this to happen. It is hard to believe that it is almost 20 years since sexual preference was added as an additional ground of discrimination under the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission regulations. More recently, in 1997, the Senate Legal and Constitutional Affairs References Committee identified discrimination in
Commonwealth laws and programs that deal with tax and superannuation benefits.

This long-awaited and welcome bill will amend 68 Commonwealth laws. It has taken the work and dedication of 19 government departments and the public servants within those departments who have been involved in its drafting. I am extremely proud that we have a government that is prepared to remove discrimination against same-sex couples in the way reflected in this legislation. The Australian Human Rights Commissioner, Mr Graeme Innes, has welcomed wholeheartedly the introduction of the bill. The Association of Superannuation Funds of Australia, ASFA, has given in principle support for superannuation and tax legislation which does not discriminate against partners of either gender.

As I said, approximately 20 years ago sexual preference became a ground of discrimination under the regulations of the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, yet federal legislation continued to discriminate against sexual preference. In 2004 the UN Human Rights Committee found that Australia was in breach of a prohibition on discrimination in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights because the Veterans' Entitlements Act denied a person a pension on the basis of sexual orientation. This bill will remove discrimination not only against same-sex couples but also against their families and, most notably, their children.

It is fair to ask how same-sex couples are discriminated against. There is a long list of areas of discrimination, and previous speakers have referred to some of them. Same-sex couples and their families get fewer leave entitlements, including less carers leave to look after a sick partner; less workers compensation; fewer tax concessions; fewer veterans entitlements, such as pensions and concessions; fewer healthcare subsidies; less access to the Medicare and PBS safety nets; and less superannuation. They also pay more for residential aged care than do opposite-sex couples in the same circumstances. The amendments will allow same-sex couples equal access to these entitlements.

At least 20,000 couples experience systemic discrimination on a daily basis throughout our community. That is a very large number of people who, just as a matter of course through their daily activities, suffer discrimination. Same-sex couples are denied basic financial and work related entitlements because they are excluded from the definitions of a couple in federal laws. Federal laws generally define a ‘partner’, a ‘member of a couple’, a ‘spouse’ or a ‘de facto spouse’ as a person of the opposite sex. The bill will change these definitions to include same-sex couples. The bill will also formally recognise children of same-sex couples, with the general approach taken that it will include a child who is the product of a relationship where one partner is linked biologically to the child or is the birth mother of the child. Presently, there are inconsistencies in the recognition of relationships across states and territories. This legislation will provide national uniformity to the recognition of same-sex relationships and therefore provide certainty.

The legislation will remove discrimination in relation to access to superannuation benefits. Under the current law, a surviving member of a same-sex couple does not meet the definition of either ‘spouse’ or ‘dependant’ and therefore cannot receive the deceased partner’s lump sum or the pension benefits paid by most of the Commonwealth’s civilian or military superannuation schemes. Payment of superannuation benefits to children is another point. At present, dependent children of a deceased partner have access to benefits but children of a surviving partner
do not. The legislation will, hopefully, change this. It is particularly important where the surviving partner may be incapacitated or terminally ill. Those circumstances are well known to many of us in the House, unfortunately. Then there is the question of taxation of death benefits. This legislation will allow same-sex partners to receive benefits tax free, as do current opposite-sex partners. With respect to the ability to contribute to superannuation, under the current law a member of an opposite-sex couple may make a tax deductible contribution to their spouse’s superannuation account. Amendments in the bill that will define ‘spouse’ for the purpose of superannuation will allow same-sex couples to also make these contributions.

Over the years that I have had the privilege of being in this place, you often hear in debates of this kind people saying, ‘I know someone who knows someone who has had that experience’ or ‘I have had that experience’ or ‘I understand how they feel because my best friend has had that experience.’ We hear those sorts of references often, and I have to be tempted to go down that path now because, like many other people in this place, I have very close friends who are in same-sex relationships. These are people in the community who have very longstanding, highly regarded relationships and for whom I have a very high regard. I have always been embarrassed that our community and this parliament have never found it possible to remove the discrimination that these people have to suffer through their normal, everyday lives in workplaces or wherever. I am extremely pleased that we have this piece of legislation before the House. I sincerely hope and trust that those on the other side will find themselves in a position to give us the support to get this legislation through.

This is very good legislation, it is very important legislation and it is very welcome legislation. It is shameful that it has taken us so long to get to this point in our history. Blatant discrimination based on whom people have a relationship with or whom they love is the most misunderstood direction I could ever wish to see a society go in. I frankly do not understand why we have not been able to do this before. I am very proud to be part of a government that is presenting this legislation. I want to put on the record my absolute, heartfelt commendation for the work of the Attorney-General, the member for Barton, and for his leadership on this issue. I know that it has not been easy. I know that the work put in by members of the Public Service, in those 19 departments that I have referred to, has been long and hard. They are to be commended and the Attorney-General is to be commended for the leadership that he has provided in bringing this legislation to the House. I congratulate him, I congratulate everyone within those departments, and I sincerely look forward to the passage of this very important and, I believe, historic legislation through the parliament.

Ms REA (Bonner) (7.26 pm)—It is with great pride that I rise tonight to support the Same-Sex Relationships (Equal Treatment in Commonwealth Laws—General Law Reform) Bill 2008. There have been many comments made about this bill both inside and outside this chamber, but I think what is really important to note is that this legislation is not about sexuality or sexual preference. It is about children. It is about the family values that we all share within this chamber and within our broader communities. It seeks to uphold those values by acknowledging the rights of all children, regardless of where they live in this country and regardless of the relationship of their parents.

This legislation acknowledges that children and adults have the right to live in a secure and loving domestic arrangement. They have the right to enjoy the comfort and
security of a place that they can call home, where they grow and are nurtured by people who care for and love them. I do not think that anyone can disagree with that basic right for our children, and I do not think anyone can disagree that it is a basic rights for adults to live in a caring and loving relationship within their own home.

Families come in all shapes and sizes; we know that. I am one of seven children and our parents were married. I have many friends and family members who live in a number of different relationships. It is not a measure of the love that people feel for the children that they care for. There is no measure for a relationship other than one where people are tied together emotionally. Marriage is not the only relationship in which children can grow up and be nurtured, and it is not the only way in which adults can live together in a fulfilling and satisfying relationship.

Of course, the nuclear family of working dads and stay-at-home mums is one that is cherished by many, but it is in fact a phenomenon of a very small part of the 20th century. It has been perceived as the norm for a very short period of time. Relationships of all kinds have existed over the years. They have changed through Western society. They exist in different forms in very different religious and cultural societies. I think we need to acknowledge that the notion of family is not one size fits all; it is many sizes. What is important is that the rights of people to enjoy the benefits of that relationship are recognised by law.

I am very pleased that our laws and our attitudes have changed. As a woman, I have benefited as a result of changing attitudes in our society which have resulted in changes in laws. This has enabled me to pursue a career that I find satisfying and interesting, it has allowed me to be financially independent, and it has allowed me the great fulfilment of having children and pursuing my career at the same time. It was not so long ago that these were hard-fought rights. Many, many women campaigned for many, many years for laws that reflect my right as a woman to enjoy all of those relationships and, as a result, to have what I believe is a better quality of life than many women who have preceded me. I am also proud to support this bill because it acknowledges the support that the Australian community has always given to human rights.

In my capacity as the Chair of the Human Rights Subcommittee of the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade, I am pleased that we are once again ending what has been unfair and necessary discrimination towards same-sex couples and their children in our community. It has taken a long time to acknowledge that we as a country, whilst appearing to be progressive and liberal, have had some hard fought battles to acknowledge the individual human rights of many within our society. It was not so long ago that Indigenous people were not even allowed the right to vote. It was not so long ago that many people with disabilities did not enjoy access to the services and opportunities that they do now, because we did not acknowledge their individual rights and support them in their endeavours to lead a better quality of life.

That is why I am so pleased that this government has acted on the inquiry that was conducted by the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission. That inquiry investigated and eventually acknowledged that there were many financial and work related entitlements and benefits that people in opposite-sex relationships take for granted whereas people in same-sex relationships were clearly discriminated against. Most importantly, that inquiry found that it was not just the adults who are involved in those re-
relationships but also their children who are discriminated against. I appeal once again to any Australian who supports the right of a child to a loving and nurturing relationship to support this legislation, because many children in same-sex relationships live in domestic circumstances that are much more nourishing, loving and caring than those of many opposite-sex relationships. Unfortunately, it is a fact of life that it is not the legal status of your relationship that defines your ability to care for your children and for your partner; it is in fact what an individual brings to that relationship.

It is important therefore that we introduce laws that allow everyone who has the desire and the capacity to share their life with someone to bring children into that relationship if they so choose. We as a society can only benefit by more loving parents, not simply a stereotype of what we think should be the case. That is why I would like to take this opportunity to congratulate the Attorney-General for ending these areas of discrimination so quickly on being elected to public office. I think it is a clear sign both of the individual fortitude of the Attorney-General and indeed the support and aspirations of the whole Labor government that these laws have come into place within the first 12 months of our election to office. It acknowledges and builds on that great Labor tradition, which has always been about equality, about fairness and about ending those social and cultural obstacles which deny individuals and, indeed, in this case, their families the opportunities that are enjoyed by some but not all.

These amendments build on the previous legislation introduced by the Attorney-General regarding superannuation entitlements. What is interesting is that the essential aspects of this legislation actually build on a very simple concept. It is simply, when you boil it down and look at the essence of this discrimination and these laws, about the definition of words. The legislation says that a ‘spouse’ and a ‘child’ are recognised regardless of whether you are in a same-sex or an opposite-sex relationship. These are two words that many of us simply acknowledge as describing the relationships that we individually have with others or that our whole social framework is built on. We now can define those words more broadly to acknowledge all families in this country.

There are also close relationships that are defined by the words ‘stepchild’, ‘widow’ and ‘widower’—once simply definitions that could only apply in the case where two people were married. We all have many examples of people who live in de facto relationships and people in de facto same-sex relationships who clearly have relationships where those words come into play. They clearly have stepchildren, and when one of the partners dies we can only acknowledge the other as a widow or widower because we have seen for many years the strength of their relationship and the close connection and bond that their relationship enjoyed over the many years that they were together.

To acknowledge the grieving of the death of a partner by considering them as a widow or widower does not change the fabric of our society; it simply gives compassion and understanding to the living partner’s grief. A stepchild, a child who is not the biological child of one partner but has in fact grown up in that family unit, has built those very close bonds that occur in a domestic relationship when you live for many years in a house together and indeed occupy the same roles and relationships as a parent and child. The fact that they cannot be considered a stepchild until this legislation comes into force again does not diminish the nature of existing relationships; it simply adds a broader acknowledgement that stepchildren are part of all loving relationships not just married ones.
This bill amends 68 Commonwealth laws, and 19 departments were involved in drafting those laws. This alone must demonstrate to the Australian community the systematic discrimination that Australians in same-sex relationships and their children have endured for so long. The fact that 68 laws are to be amended only serves to indicate and emphasise how important this bill is. It demonstrates how significant and widespread the discrimination against same-sex relationships has been throughout our history. It means that so many of the financial benefits that have been enjoyed by those in opposite-sex relationships are now recognised for those in same-sex relationships.

The laws remove discrimination in many areas. These are areas in which those of us who are married or involved in opposite-sex relationships take our rights for granted: social security, taxation, Medicare, veterans affairs, workers compensation and educational assistance. These fundamentals rights that we take for granted have only now, in the year 2008, been extended to acknowledge the number of same-sex relationships in Australia at the moment. It is in fact incomprehensible to believe that, as the previous speaker said, simply because of who you love, you are not entitled to certain benefits under things like the taxation system and the health system through Medicare. It is incomprehensible to think that veterans, who have done so much and contributed so much to the freedom and the liberal minded policies that we have in this country, can have partners who cannot be acknowledged because they do not happen to fit into the current definition.

It is incomprehensible that it has taken us so long. It has been 20 years since discrimination on the ground of sexual preference was added as an additional ground of discrimination in the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission Regulations. It has taken that long for a child of a same-sex relationship to enjoy the same freedom, the same rights and the same benefits as those who have grown up with parents in an opposite-sex relationship.

I understand that this is a sensitive issue and that many people will find it hard to comprehend and understand the need for these laws. I appreciate that people have different beliefs and different attitudes—in fact, it is the strength of our democracy that we are allowed to express those differences—but what is important about this legislation and what is important about my privilege to be able to stand in this place to support it is that this is a time that we must act as decision makers. It is a time when we do not necessarily listen to the chorus out there. We are acting as decision makers in this national parliament to acknowledge that discrimination is wrong and that there are people within our own country who have been denied basic human rights. These people deserve to enjoy not just the privileges but, indeed, the very basic benefits that so many other families in this country enjoy. It is time for us to act—to support this legislation and show that, as a government and as a parliament, we want this country to progress and prosper and that we want everyone to enjoy that privilege.

Ms PARKE (Fremantle) (7.40 pm)—I speak in support of the Same-Sex Relationships (Equal Treatment in Commonwealth Laws—General Law Reform) Bill 2008. This bill is a positive and overdue step towards ensuring equality in Australian society. It eliminates discrimination against same-sex couples and the children of same-sex relationships in a wide range of Commonwealth laws, including taxation, social security, health, aged care, veterans entitlements, workers compensation, immigration and other areas. I welcome the fact that this bill follows so quickly upon the heels of the Same-Sex Relationships (Equal Treatment in
Commonwealth Laws—Superannuation) Bill 2008, which passed the House of Representatives on 4 June 2008 and which is currently the subject of an inquiry by the Senate Standing Committee on Legal and Constitutional Affairs.

I would like to congratulate the Attorney-General, his department and his staff for the diligence and attention to detail with which they have approached this highly complex and sensitive area. I would also like to pay tribute to the careful work of the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, HREOC—now called the Australian Human Rights Commission—whose report in 2007 entitled Same-sex: same entitlements provided much of the evidence and analysis underlying the bills presently before the House. Upon coming to office the Attorney-General commissioned a whole-of-government audit of Commonwealth legislation, which not only confirmed HREOC’s findings in relation to 58 federal laws but identified further discrimination in a range of other areas, such as administrative and evidence laws.

I would like to refer to a couple of submissions made to the HREOC inquiry that have also been highlighted by other members just now in their excellent contributions to this debate. In one submission a gay doctor described his situation as being that of ‘a first-class taxpayer but a second-class citizen.’ In another submission, a same-sex couple from Adelaide said:

We are an average suburban family. We are working hard and contributing to our community. We don’t want special treatment—just what others can expect from their legal and social community. Our rights are denied simply because of who we love. We just want equality.

HREOC found that at least 20,000 couples in Australia experienced systematic discrimination on a daily basis—whether it is not being guaranteed the right to take carers leave to look after a sick partner, being denied a wide range of tax concessions available to opposite-sex couples, being denied access to superannuation and workers compensation benefits available to dependants of opposite-sex partners or paying more than opposite-sex couples to enter an aged-care facility.

It is incorrect to regard this legislation—as some have—as undermining the right or entitlements of anyone else in Australia, as if the wider availability of equitable treatment before the law will somehow dilute the rights that many already have. This legislation in no way lessens or reduces the rights or entitlements enjoyed by many in our society, nor does it confer any special rights. All it does is put same-sex couples on an equal footing to opposite-sex couples.

It is fitting that these bills are presented to the parliament in the year of the 60th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which provides for equality of all people before the law and entitlement to protection from discrimination. Australia played a key role in the drafting of the universal declaration, and an Australian, Doc Evatt, was the President of the General Assembly when the declaration was adopted by the General Assembly in December 1948. We can be justifiably proud of Australia’s contribution to the development of the international human rights system, but there is no point signing up to international standards and then ignoring them at home.

HREOC found that the discrimination that currently exists in Commonwealth laws is a serious and fundamental breach of Australia’s international legal obligations under human rights law, in particular the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Article 26 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the ICCPR, states:
All persons are equal before the law and are entitled without any discrimination to the equal protection of the law. In this respect, the law shall prohibit any discrimination and guarantee to all persons equal and effective protection against discrimination on any ground ...

In 1999, an Australian by the name of Edward Young took a case to the UN Human Rights Committee alleging a violation by Australia of article 26 because of discrimination in Commonwealth laws that denied him the right to receive a veterans pension because he was gay. Mr Young had been in a 38-year relationship with his partner, who was a war veteran, for whom he had cared in the last years of his life. When his partner died at the age of 73, Mr Young applied for a veterans pension under the Veterans' Entitlements Act 1986. His pension application was rejected because a same-sex partner does not qualify as a veteran's dependant, even though an opposite-sex de facto partner does qualify.

The Human Rights Committee found no reasonable or objective reasons for denying Mr Young the pension. It concluded that the distinction between the treatment of unmarried opposite-sex couples and same-sex couples under the Veterans' Entitlements Act was discrimination in breach of article 26 of the ICCPR. Some seven months after the response deadline, the Howard government replied that it did not accept the Human Rights Committee’s finding that Australia had violated article 26 of the ICCPR, and it rejected the committee’s conclusion that Mr Young was entitled to an effective remedy. The decision was buried. The UN committee’s decision was not publicised by media release in Australia nor was a copy or summary of the decision available on any government department’s website. With this bill, the Rudd Labor government is saying to Edward Young, and to all those who find themselves in similar situations, that this government respects the undertakings it has made in international law and will ensure that such injustices are not perpetuated.

Australia does not have a bill or charter of rights—unlike Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, the United States and other nations within the developed world. Perhaps, because of this, the meaning and significance of inequality and what it means to deny it is not as scrutinised here as it should be. As I have stated previously in this place, I look forward to the national consultation on a charter of rights that this government intends to undertake.

As HREOC found, it is not just Australia’s same-sex couples who suffer discrimination in breach of international human rights standards; it is their children too. Approximately 20 per cent of lesbian couples and five per cent of gay couples in Australia are raising children. The lives of children are inextricably bound up with the lives of their parents. Therefore, the exclusion of same-sex parents from financial benefits and entitlements will inevitably have an impact on their children. Article 2(2) of the Convention on the Rights of the Child provides that:

States Parties shall take all appropriate measures to ensure that the child is protected against all forms of discrimination or punishment on the basis of the status, activities, expressed opinions, or beliefs of the child’s parents, legal guardians, or family members.

The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child has stated that discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation is discrimination for the purpose of article 2, and that direct and indirect discrimination against children, their parents or legal guardians will breach article 2 of the convention. In evidence to HREOC’s inquiry, Mr Philip Lynch, Director of the Human Rights Resource Law Centre, submitted that discrimination against same-sex parents or guardians of a child which has an adverse impact on the child—for exam-
ple, parents unable to access a particular financial entitlement which would have been of benefit to the parents and, by extension, the child—directly engages and violates article 2(2) of the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

The implications for same-sex couples and their children of our discriminatory laws have made me think about the types of things I have seen and heard in my career as a lawyer with the United Nations, as a legal academic, and as someone who has practised law in Australia. I have seen what happens when equality is denied, suppressed and ignored: women denied education because they are women; refugees stranded for years in the inhumane conditions of some refugee camps simply because they are seen as not belonging; women and children trafficked as sexual property; men, women and children with AIDS denied housing, employment, education and life-saving medications; and Indigenous Australians living an average of 17 years less than non-Indigenous Australians.

Some might ask what someone being denied a veterans pension or a family benefit because they are gay or lesbian has to do with women in developing countries not being educated, refugees suffering in camps, AIDS discrimination, human trafficking or Aboriginal disadvantage. Actually, it has everything to do with these because, at their core, all of these examples share a common trait: they happen because inequality is allowed to occur and is allowed to persist, and, when not taken seriously, such inequality becomes a way of being that, once normalised, soon permits the previously unimaginable. Fundamental inequality—and nothing is more fundamental than the equal enjoyment of basic human rights—hurts all of us, even those who believe we have everything. To the extent that we allow one person or group of people to be disenfranchised socially or legally, to be treated as inferior, to be silenced through prejudice and ignorance, we prop up a system of inequality that makes it very difficult for any of us, in any context, to participate fully as citizens, and it denies our sense of common humanity.

During its inquiry, HREOC heard from a woman who told of a lesbian friend who had been denied the right to farewell her dying partner. She said:

One of our lesbian friends lay ill and dying in her hospital bed. When it came time for her to die the hospital staff prevented her partner from entering her hospital room and sitting with her at the end of her life because she was not the ‘spouse’.

Our friend died, alone. Her partner sat outside in the corridor prevented from being with her. She continues to suffer great distress that her life-time partner died without her comfort and without knowing she was there with her.

Another contributor to the HREOC inquiry wrote:

There is evidence that hate crimes against gay men and lesbians result from the systematic discrimination entrenched in the law. When gays and lesbians are determined to be unequal at law, then homophobes assume the privilege of vigilante justice by bashing and attacking gays and their organizations.

Systematic discrimination was found to be evident in the 68 federal laws which this bill seeks to amend, as well as in other laws which will be amended by separate legislation. Equality, if it is to counter such discrimination, must also be systematic, hence the very comprehensive package of legislation put forward by the government. While acknowledging that the fight against discrimination cannot be waged solely through state and federal laws for the very reason that discrimination is hardest to dislodge from our hearts and minds, this nevertheless, to the extent of this bill’s application, represents a great step forward for ordinary Australians in same-sex relationships and their children.
And it is a great step forward for all Australians because a society in which equality is the pre-eminent right is, at its base, a good and fair society. With this bill the Rudd Labor government is making the necessary and overdue changes to remove inequitable discrimination against same-sex couples and their children. In a country that prides itself on egalitarianism and on a fair go, this is legislation that is very much in the spirit of Australia. We are all richer for it.

**Ms KING** (Ballarat) (7.53 pm)—I rise today to strongly support the Same-Sex Relationships (Equal Treatment in Commonwealth Laws—General Law Reform) Bill 2008. This bill follows Labor’s election commitment to remove discrimination for same-sex couples from the Commonwealth system, and it has been a longstanding commitment. I am very proud to be part of a government that, in its first nine months, saw this as one of the issues to be brought forward in its first tranche of legislation.

The government is absolutely committed to amending Commonwealth legislation that discriminates against same-sex couples and their children. Current Commonwealth laws do not properly reflect the views and values of the Australian community. Current Commonwealth laws are outdated, and both sides of this House have taken too long to act against that discrimination. At present, some laws within the Commonwealth system reflect a view that we should somehow treat same-sex couples differently. Almost a quarter of a century after it was determined to be unlawful to discriminate against a person on the basis of sexual preference, the Commonwealth system is now only just catching up.

Since coming to office, the Rudd government has made significant inroads on this important issue. Despite making many promises to the gay and lesbian community, the previous government never ever acted. There was a lot of rhetoric and a lot of promises to act, but the previous government never actually introduced legislation to make good on their promises. Unlike the previous government, we have put this issue at the forefront of our legislative agenda because the federal government should be, across this nation, a leader on antidiscrimination reform. We have lagged behind for far too long.

On coming to office, we commissioned a whole-of-government audit of Commonwealth law to address the discrimination against Australians in same-sex relationships and their children with a view to removing that discrimination. Following this, in May this year the Attorney-General introduced the Same-Sex Relationships (Equal Treatment in Commonwealth Law—Superannuation) Bill 2008. That bill was first introduced by the Rudd government to remove the very significant discrimination that exists within our superannuation system. Unfortunately, those members opposite followed through on threats to delay the passage of that legislation by using the final days of their Senate majority to refer the bill to a Senate committee. That bill now sits with the Senate committee until next month. The bill before the House today is the second stage of the Rudd government’s reform to remove same-sex discrimination from the Commonwealth system. It reforms many parts of our Commonwealth system to remove discrimination against same-sex couples and their children. I urge those opposite not to again stall the legislation or play the political games with this second stage of reforms that they did with the first. Removing discrimination from our Commonwealth system should be something that we all embrace. It should not be delayed and it is critical that passage of this bill through both chambers is achieved during the spring sitting.
The bill is strongly supported by many domestic and international groups. The Human Rights Equal Opportunity Commission released its report *Same-sex: same entitlements* in May 2007. The first line of the report reads:

At least 20,000 couples in Australia experience systematic discrimination on a daily basis. That is 20,000 couples who we have accepted will be facing discrimination on a daily basis. That is the issue that has been ignored for far too long. I would like to read an extract from the HREOC report. It states:

It is not just Australia’s same-sex couples who suffer discrimination; it is their children too. Approximately 20% of lesbian couples and 5% of gay couples in Australia are raising children. That is the reality of the sorts of families we have within our community today.

The financial disadvantages imposed on same-sex parents will inevitably have an impact on their children.

This discrimination breaches human rights. And it can be stopped. All it takes is a few changes to the definitions in some federal laws.

That is exactly what this bill does.

Following the election of the Rudd government, the Attorney-General, Robert McClelland, commissioned a whole-of-government audit of Commonwealth legislation. The audit reiterated the statements in the report released by the Human Rights Equal Opportunity Commission. The report recognised the dire need for major reform to remove the discrimination that exists in the Commonwealth system. This bill also follows on from the United Nations Human Rights Committee that in 2004 found Australia to be in breach of the prohibition on discrimination in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. The United Nations Human Rights Committee recognised discrimination in the Australian Commonwealth system because under the Veterans’ Entitlements Act veterans were denied a pension based on their sexual preference. The case of Edward Young has been canvassed fairly extensively throughout many of the other members’ speeches, so I will not endeavour to go into that now, but it is a discrimination that brought shame on our system.

The bill addresses the core anomalies within our system that currently discriminate again same-sex couples. The bill moves to reform those key areas that have been identified by the United Nations Human Rights Committee, the Human Rights Equal Opportunity Commission and the whole-of-government audit commissioned by the Attorney-General, and which, most importantly, have now been recognised by this government. This bill will remove discrimination to ensure that same-sex couples and their children will be able to receive equal treatment under the law. The same treatment cannot exist under the current Commonwealth laws, which are arbitrary and discriminatory. This bill will amend some 68 laws and will reform a significant number of areas of Commonwealth responsibility including taxation, social security, health, aged care, veterans entitlements, workers compensation and immigration. The bill will amend these laws and will reform our current system to properly remove discrimination against same-sex couples and their families.

Part of achieving such a major change in our Commonwealth system is to redefine our literal interpretation of words. The bill will amend our system to recognise a child in a same-sex family. The bill will recognise a child as being a child that is the product of a relationship—whether the child is linked biologically to one partner or where one parent is the birth mother of the child. The Rudd government is applying this proper definition to guarantee equal treatment for same-sex families.
Constituents throughout my electorate have raised their concerns with me on the issue of discrimination against same-sex couples on a number of occasions. Many same-sex couples in my electorate have raised legitimate concerns about why their children are treated differently in the eyes of the law depending on the choice of gender of their parents’ partner. These are legitimate concerns, and this bill addresses those issues raised by people in my electorate.

This bill will redefine the term ‘de facto partner’ to equally recognise same-sex de facto couples. A major change within this bill is the way in which we recognise relationships. Couples may now register their relationship with their state or territory register—whether it be an opposite-sex or a same-sex couple—to properly recognise their de facto relationship. This will reduce the burden that couples face when dealing between different levels of government.

As a result, couples that satisfy the requirements of their state or territory government will now be automatically recognised by the Commonwealth government. This system already exists in my home state of Victoria, and this practice will provide much incentive to those wishing to officially register their relationships across Australia.

I would like to briefly touch on the issue of interdependent relationships. This is an issue that has been of particular concern to constituents in my electorate. The reforms outlined in this bill today set out to remove discrimination against same-sex couples and their families. Some members opposite have been very vocal in their desire to recognise interdependent relationships. The way the Commonwealth government views interdependent relationships is something that I and my colleagues are closely monitoring. If interdependent relationships were to be recognised through this bill, it could result in them being worse off. Interdependent relationship can be difficult to define, and the government may closely consider some forms of interdependent relationships into the future.

The bill goes even further to address discrimination that currently exists within other areas of our Commonwealth system. In some situations some laws give people differing treatment, depending on whether or not they are ‘married’ under the definition in the Marriage Act. This bill addresses this discrimination and recognises both opposite-sex couples and same-sex de facto relationships. As stated earlier, almost a quarter of a century after it was determined to be unlawful to discriminate against a person on the basis of marriage, the Commonwealth laws are only now catching up. I want to say a bit about marriage a little later in my speech.

We have also now addressed the discrimination that exists in relation to stepchildren, step-parents, widowers and widows. The bill will now redefine those terms to go beyond recognising only those cases where persons have been married to another person. Once again, this is another reflection of the expectation of values in today’s society and the reality of the many different family structures we have in our community.

Many members opposite have raised the issue of marriage in relation to this bill, and I want to say a bit about that. We well and truly stated our position on marriage when we supported the changes to the Marriage Act that the then government brought in. Marriage means a commitment between a man and a woman to the exclusion of all others. Some would say a marriage is ‘never to be torn asunder’, but obviously these things happen to people as well. Despite some of the speeches on this bill from those opposite—although not many have chosen to speak on it—there is absolutely nothing in the Mar-
riage Act, nor does it undermine the principles of marriage and our understanding of marriage. There is nothing in this bill that diminishes the notion of marriage and there is certainly nothing in this bill that threatens my marriage or anybody else’s marriage. This bill should not be viewed with the fear we have had from some of those opposite.

By supporting this bill, I am proud to be supporting Labor’s election commitment to remove discrimination against people in same-sex relationships. At the same time, we continue to recognise the importance of marriage and the current definition of marriage under the Marriage Act. The current law, as it stands, in relation to same-sex and de facto relationships is discriminatory, arcane and very arbitrary in the way it is applied across laws and across the different states and territories. If we are to be a modern society then we need to ensure that our laws keep pace with changes in our society.

Just as we amend laws to keep up with economic progress, so must we amend laws to keep up with the community’s understanding of our social progress. The reality is that there are many configurations within relationships, and there have been for quite some time. It is not new that people are forming same-sex relationships. It is disappointing that it has taken until 2008 to get this right but, as the saying goes, I guess it is better late than never. It is imperative that our laws reflect the culture that we see around us. It is even more imperative that everyone is recognised before the law. This is particularly important in the case of children, who do not have an adult voice to lobby for what is rightfully theirs. A humane society is one which acknowledges all people—all taxpayers—and represents them all equally.

I am mindful that a number of members opposite are supportive of the removal of discrimination in this area. I certainly want to acknowledge the contribution made by those members—particularly the member for Kooyong—who have been fighting within their own party on these issues for some time. I am very pleased that they agree with the Rudd government on the action that is being taken and have acknowledged publicly that action has taken far too long.

As I stated earlier, this issue should be not used for political gain. I urge members opposite to stand up for their beliefs on this issue and to stand up for this bill. I say to those opposite that it is imperative that this bill pass through the House without delay. This issue has been a sore point for many same-sex couples for a long time. This bill has broad support across the nation and will go a long way towards showing that our nation’s leaders, across the Commonwealth, recognise and will amend the discrimination that exists in our national system.

The bill reflects that Australian families comprise many different structures. We need a legal system and a financial system that do not discriminate between same-sex couples and opposite-sex couples. The Rudd government needs to continue to reform our Commonwealth system to better reflect the realities that exist in our community and treat people equally. This bill works towards reflecting these realities. I am very proud to be part of a government that has done exactly what it said it was going to do in the election campaign. It said that it was going to end discrimination against same-sex couples in the Commonwealth system. This is the second piece of legislation that we have introduced in the nine months that we have been in office. I again urge members opposite not to delay the passage of this bill. I commend the bill to the House.

Mrs BRONWYN BISHOP (Mackellar) (8.07 pm)—I rise to speak on this issue for the second time, in the sense that I have spo-
ken on one of the companion bills in the area of same-sex relationships. There are some important points that need to be made about the attitude that the coalition took when in government to the need to remedy those areas of discrimination that needed to be dealt with, in particular with regard to financial aspects, and about dealing with the shift that this government has brought to the whole area.

When the coalition were in government we took the attitude that, where there was a need to remedy injustices, there was a need to set a standard by which one could make an analogy in order to legislate in a fair and just way. The coalition took a very strong stand that, were we to recognise same-sex relationships, it should be done on the same basis that we would recognise interdependent relationships. In his second reading speech on this bill, the Same-Sex Relationships (Equal Treatment in Commonwealth Laws—General Law Reform) Bill 2008, the minister said: ‘The bill does not recognise interdependent relationships.’ We took the attitude that, where there were, for instance, a brother and a sister who were financially dependent upon one another, there ought to be all sorts of alterations to the law that would allow superannuation to pass from one to the other, for instance, and many other issues that related to financial security that were equally sought by people in a same-sex relationship. The test that we applied was one of financial dependency, and it completely ignored the question of any sexual relationship. It was one that related to the financial interdependency of the relationship.

De facto relationships, which are acknowledged already in so many pieces of legislation, have always been determined on the basis of being ‘marriage-like’—in other words, a man and a woman living together in a relationship similar to that of a marriage. The current Prime Minister, Mr Rudd, and the current opposition made the firm statement that we were both committed to the sanctity of marriage and that marriage was to be held up above and beyond the concepts of de facto or same-sex relationships. There was an undertaking given by the Prime Minister of the day that marriage was in a privileged—or discriminatory—position.

I unashamedly believe that there is a need to discriminate in favour of marriage as the basis of the formation of family relationships within our community. That is not to say that there are not children who are born into very stable de facto relationships—indeed, if memory serves me correctly, about a third of children in this country are born into de facto relationships outside marriage. Nonetheless, both sides of this House have upheld marriage as the preferred basis for the establishment of the family unit and therefore have upheld discrimination in favour of it. Indeed, if I recall, we passed legislation that inserted into the Marriage Act that only a man and a woman could be married.

Accordingly, when I looked at this legislation, and at the 68 acts that are to be amended, I was somewhat shocked to find that, in the area of migration law, it is proposed by the government that this government will recognise marriages between same-sex couples that have been performed overseas. They will be recognised for the purpose of those people migrating to this country. It is not necessary for that amendment to be made in order for same-sex couples who are dependent on each other to obtain a visa and come to this country as migrants. So this is a deliberate act by this government to go against its undertaking that marriage would remain sacrosanct. Acknowledging overseas same-sex marriages is the thin end of the wedge to having them recognised in this country.
Because of the complexity of this package of bills, and because of the sorts of woolly words that are used by so many people who speak about it, we never actually get to the substance of what is being done to the fibre of our society by this package of bills. When I spoke previously, I pointed out the way in which the legislation relating to the Family Law Act in fact recognises a form of polygamy, which we are opposed to in this country. Under that act, if it goes ahead unamended—that means that the government does not accept the amendment that we are proposing—it will mean that a married couple and a spouse who leaves that marriage and sets up a de facto relationship, be it heterosexual or same-sex, will have the same rights before the Family Court. In other words, it recognises more than one spouse at a time—and there is no limit on the number of spouses you can have. There has been a move in this country by certain people within the Islamic faith that they would like to see polygamy recognised. We have staunchly opposed that, and ostensibly the government is opposed to it. And yet in its own legislation it proposes a situation that would allow the court to recognise a person who is married and a person who is in a de facto relationship, be it heterosexual or same-sex, having equal status before the court. That is polygamy. The amendment that we are proposing in the Senate will remedy that and will prevent that from being the case. It will be a test of the government to see whether or not it will do that.

Now I turn also to the Veterans’ Entitlements Act. Coming into this House soon will be the Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs and Other Legislation Amendment (Further 2008 Budget and Other Measures) Bill 2008. There is not a mention in the title of veterans’ affairs—not a single, solitary mention. And yet in schedule 2, called ‘Partner service pension’, the bill implements the budget measure that will remove a spouse service pension where the husband and wife are separated for 12 months. The spouse will automatically lose their pension. Where the veteran sets up in a de facto relationship, the spouse’s pension will automatically end. This was meant to save the government $77 million over four years. That is read down to $33.9 million because they estimate that those people will in fact move onto other forms of social security.

The point I made very strongly when I was shadow minister for veterans’ affairs was that we on this side believe in entitlements for veterans that are not social security. They are distinct. Indeed, they are the result of a contract between us and a veteran, who is prepared to serve their country and to lay down their life for the country, to be entitled to certain things, in that we promised to look after them for the rest of their life.

The government over there, and Mr Rudd in particular, promised veterans that they would never lessen their entitlements. And yet in the budget papers in two instances he did. He made the age for a partner service pension rise from 50 years to 58.5 years for a woman and 60 years for a man. In other words, in a single step, the entitlement at 50 years is moved up to 58.5. When criticised, the minister gives two responses. He says, firstly, ‘Not too many people will be covered or affected by this, so it doesn’t matter.’ Sorry, it does. One person who is affected matters. Secondly, he says, ‘Well, that brings it in line with social security.’ In other words, entitlements are being morphed into social security payments. There are many on that side of the House and within the bureaucracy who would like to see Veterans’ Affairs as a department disappear and be merged into social welfare.
We have made a strong commitment on this side. My commitment as shadow minister was very firm, and my commitment as the member for Mackellar remains very firm. Our commitment is to see that the department services veterans, that the term ‘veteran’ is to be honoured and revered, not to be disparaged, and that the entitlements that flow should continue to do so.

Now for the changes in this part of the bill that is going to come to us soon. It will enact that a spouse who is separated for 12 months or where the veteran moves into a de facto relationship will lose their pension, but it goes a bit further. It reads:

**Part 3—Amendments commencing on the same-sex start day**

*Veterans’ Entitlements Act 1986*

8 Paragraph 38(2AA)(a)

Omit “marriage-like”, substitute “de facto”.

Item 9 says:

Omit “when this subsection commenced”, substitute “on the same-sex start day”.

And on it goes. ‘Same-sex start day’ means:

... the day on which Schedule 15 to the *Same-Sex Relationships (Equal Treatment in Commonwealth Laws—General Law Reform) Act 2008*—the bill we are debating now—commences.

That is 1 July 2009. What does this mean? What does it translate into?

Suppose we have a husband and wife. Suppose they have been married for 30 years. Suppose the veteran has had a very troubled life, with post-traumatic stress disorder or whatever it is. Suppose they separate. They are perfectly happy to live separately but to maintain their marriage relationship. After 12 months, the spouse will lose all entitlement. I have a case of someone who has written to me to say that she is 61½ years old—she is not entitled to a social security pension—she has the obligations of a mortgage payment and she lives alone. She still has an involvement in the care of her husband; they just cannot live together. No, it is not an illness related separation; it is just one that cannot be sustained. But she will lose her entitlement.

Then we take another example. Suppose we have a veteran and spouse living together. Suddenly, for whatever reason, the veteran, who in this case happens to be male, moves into a same-sex relationship. The wife, to whom he is still married, will immediately lose her pension, and the same-sex partner will be entitled to apply for her pension. Is that what veterans expected? Is that what they thought protecting their entitlements meant? I think not.

It is the small print in all of this legislation that makes the difference. The difference in the approach that the coalition had when we were in government was that we made the analogy between interdependent couples, who have on their side the right to be entitled, but your second reading speech says the bill does not recognise interdependent relationships. We made that analogous with same-sex couples so that the question of sexual relations was not relevant to the financial justice that could be received. But, because of the way in which, in the definition of de facto, the sexual relationship becomes part of the definition, you have totally changed the ground—and yet nobody is prepared to talk about it. It is woolly words. It is all about: ‘There has to be fairness and equity.’ They are words that are full of emotional content, but when we seek to dig down to find out how it translates we see the problem with the legislation.

When the Prime Minister, Mr Rudd, said that marriage was sacrosanct and he wanted to protect it as the primary institution of the establishment of the family unit, he knew, when he was introducing this legislation, that
what flows from the consequences of this legislation is totally at odds with his statement about upholding the integrity of marriage. Those who say that this legislation does not change or interfere with the Marriage Act are being less than honest, because it is the consequences of what flow that undermine the institution. On two counts, as I have said here tonight, this is occurring. Firstly, the changes to the Family Law Act will mean that we do have, de facto, polygamy—unless the government accepts our amendment with regard to the definitional clause. Secondly, with regard to veterans, we are going to see the situation where the partner of a veteran, be she a woman, can lose her entitlement and it can be taken up by someone in a same-sex relationship. Is that what veterans think this government has in line for them? I think not.

So when we talk about fairness and equity, I think it is also fair to consider the situation of people who enter into a marriage. And bear in mind the distinction between marriage and any other form of relationship: marriage is a public commitment—made in public with witnesses. A document is issued which proves that relationship is established. The production of that marriage certificate is evidence that the relationship exists. Any other relationship—any de facto relationship—is dependent upon an interpretation of a set of criteria, set out in these various pieces of legislation, which are not conclusive. They are to be considered by a judge making a decision. But he may consider other things, and it does not say which issue is more important than another. So it is a subjective judgement. And yet this government is prepared to put on the same footing a public commitment—witnessed, evidenced by a certificate—and a set of criteria which a court may have regard to. They are two entirely separate things. But, by doing this, you are undermining the commitment that the Prime Minister gave and agreed with the coalition: that marriage is sacrosanct and that marriage is to be discriminated in favour of.

That does not mean to say that there is not justice and fairness for other people in other relationships; it just means that we draw a line in the sand and say, ‘This is the basis of our society; this is the basis of the formation of family.’ To have these bills undermine that—a commitment to which has become a statement of falsity on the part of the government but on which the opposition is standing firm—would be to do a sincere injustice to people who enter into a marriage relationship and, in good faith, think that their rights will be protected, only to find that, after they have been in that relationship, the government of the day introduces legislation which undermines that primacy position. I would sincerely say to the government, ‘Pay heed when the Senate committee’s inquiry is handed down on 8 October.’ There will no doubt be competing findings from the government and opposition members. But I would say to the government: ‘Heed the evidence that is given. Much of it is very compelling. And give credence to the fact that there are those who simply say that this legislation has not had sufficient airing and that the public is being deceived by the manner in which you are bringing this suite of legislation into the parliament.’

Mr BUTLER (Port Adelaide) (8.27 pm)—I rise to speak in favour of the Same-Sex Relationships (Equal Treatment in Commonwealth Laws—General Law Reform) Bill 2008. I also had the pleasure of speaking in favour of the first bill introduced by the Attorney-General as part of a suite of measures to address business that has been left unaddressed for far too long.

In the government’s view, the truest measure of an enlightened society is how it treats difference and diversity. The history of
humanity, it is fair to say, has been pretty ordinary at that, and, for most of our history, we have seen awful discrimination on almost any grounds imaginable. I, and many others in the House and in the other place, have been lucky enough to live through an era which has seen the most significant advances in addressing that discrimination in the history of humanity. The fight against discrimination on the grounds of race, gender, religion, political belief and many other grounds has been very significant in recent decades and has achieved much. To be very clear: that fight, in almost every area possible, has not been won. Discrimination on all of those grounds and more continues to exist.

One ground of discrimination with which we are dealing tonight—discrimination on the grounds of sexual preference—remains a deep and continuing scar on our society and many other societies in the world. Over recent years and decades, the legal sanctions against sex between consenting adult males have disappeared in Australia, it is fair to say. But those advances are not locked down and in many other parts of the world remain very fragile advances indeed. Several jurisdictions in the United States continued, until very recently, to outlaw that sort of practice and continued the discrimination against gay and lesbian persons in their jurisdictions until the Supreme Court, in the case of Lawrence v Texas in 2003, invalidated all of those laws in several states of the United States of America on the grounds of the due process provision in the Bill of Rights. The focus here, and to some degree in the United States, has shifted from that fight, which has largely been won in Australia, to the treatment and status of same-sex relationships. Again, much of the heat that we have heard from the other side of the House comes in a reflected way from the—

Debate interrupted.
tal—30 beds, I might point out, which remain empty to this day. Doctors at the Murwillumbah and Tweed hospitals are in open revolt against government cutbacks. What does the member for Richmond, elected on a promise to fix our hospitals, do about it? Does she immediately get on the phone and call the New South Wales minister for health and ask the minister to keep a promise made by the Labor Party? No. Instead, she blames the state Labor government—members of her own party! It beggars belief that the member for Richmond would pose for the media outside Murwillumbah hospital and pose for the media inside Tweed Hospital, and then, when push came to shove, not be able to bring herself to keep an election promise and ‘fix our hospitals and end the blame game’.

The third failure: yesterday the Senate passed the coalition’s Urgent Relief for Single Age Pensioners Bill. This measure would provide welcome and much needed relief for over 7,000 single age pensioners, single service age pensioners and widow B pensioners to the tune of $30 a week in the electorate of Richmond. The member for Richmond and her colleagues call extra money in the pocket of our struggling pensioners a ‘stunt’. Australia’s pensioners disagree. The Chief Executive of National Seniors Australia, Michael O’Neill, had this to say:

For these older Australians an immediate increase represents more than a steak, rather than baked beans, for dinner ...

As we all know, earlier this evening the coalition moved to introduce the Urgent Relief for Single Age Pensioners Bill into the House of Representatives. The Labor government used its majority to ensure the bill was not introduced, treating older Australians with utter contempt.

Those were three broken promises from the member of Richmond and her government. I wonder how many more broken promises we are going to see from the member for Richmond. Today is a sorry day, in particular for the 7,000 age pensioners in the electorate of Richmond who will not receive any relief from the cost-of-living pressures that they are all feeling. I feel for them. We are fighting for them. We on this side of the House believe age pensioners in this country deserve some relief from those cost-of-living pressures.

**Australian Football League: Grand Final**

**Mr MARLES** (Corio) (8.33 pm)—I rise to speak of a matter which tonight and this week has been occupying much of the thoughts of those in my electorate—namely, the AFL grand final this Saturday. The significance of the Cats and footy to our community cannot be overestimated. It really matters. In my childhood, following Geelong principally taught me about defeat. Kicking empty cans in the empty outer at Kardinia Park, watching the Cats get a kicking, drilled into my consciousness that it was other teams that won premierships and other supporters that enjoyed the sweet nectar of success.

Years in the barren wilderness finally landed us at the doorstep of 1989, a year to remember. A young team led by the best footballer ever took us to an encounter with the mighty Hawks in the grand final that became an epic. The Hawthorn supporter of the eighties was an imposing beast. They would take their seat in the ground with regal assurance. Like their mascot, a bird of prey, they would focus on their victim with complete certainty that within a couple of hours they would make their kill and have their feast. Playing in September was considered a birthright. One word epitomised their demeanour: arrogance.

A six-point loss was painful but it promised the beginning of a golden age. The pas-
assage of time alone would surely provide passage to the Promised Land. But then we started losing grand finals. For many the journey was just too much. By the time Carlton had buried us in the 1995 grand final, streams of Cat fans were wiping off their tear streaked cat faces and wondering why. Barracking for Geelong had become like a medieval test of faith. Had the Spanish Inquisition had the Geelong Football Club at its disposal it would have prescribed a decade of following the Cats to sort the faithless from the penitent.

Fast forward to round 6, 2007, when Geelong beat Richmond by 157 points. From there, week by week, we kept winning, until we grabbed top spot mid-season. We started contemplating the last Saturday in September while at the same time reminding ourselves not to take off the lid. Soaring at this altitude was uncomfortable. It had the effect of making one’s head giddy.

Then came 29 September 2007. Our team was steely and determined. Collectively they wielded Excalibur, vanquished Port, and, in a procession glorious and joyful, claimed the Holy Grail. The Geelong Football Club had repaid its supporters. It knew that this was a town full of demons and at last it had the means of exorcism. And so the 2007 premiership cup was put to work. It became the most handled trophy in human history. They let everyone and anyone play with it, from corporate dinners to union meetings. If a supporter, demented from years of heartbreak, needed the cup to spend the night next to him in order to finally ward off the nightmares then the cup arrived to provide merciful relief.

With the new year dawned a different Geelong. We unveiled a flag and then serenely ripped Melbourne apart. We beat Essendon by a tonne and then jogged off the ground picking their bones from our teeth. As the weeks went by so did the wins. The winter became a sublime march to the best home and away season played since 1929.

But then, a couple of weeks ago in the corridors of this place, I had a very different experience: an old friend looked me in the eye and accused me of being an arrogant fan. I was taken aback, but she was right. All year I had spent the weeks leading up to the weekends enjoying the win before the game had even been played. That is arrogant. All year I was focused on who would come fourth because that would be the team that would be our first meal come the finals. That is arrogant, too. If I am really honest, I probably emotionally banked the 2008 premiership back in July. That is indeed arrogant. This cocky arrogance was the reason I hated the Hawthorn supporter of the eighties, but the worst thing is that, now that it is us, it feels great. The certainty of it, the security in it, the joy from it—all of it is wonderful.

The players, of course, are immune to this. Thankfully, Bomber, Frank and Cookie have managed to put together a team of Zen Buddhists who seem as unperturbed by lunatics like me as a Tibetan monk. For the rest of us, though, we are wallowing in an experience I never thought would be ours: being arrogant Geelong supporters. Yet arrogance is born of insecurity protecting the scared inner child from the vagaries of life and, halfway through the third quarter last Friday night, as Eagleton lined up to close the margin to single figures, life started to look very vagary indeed! It reminded me that the trembling, frightened Geelong fan was very much still inside. O please, Lord, let me still be arrogant come Sunday.

Cowan Electorate: Warwick Greenwood Junior Football Club

Mr SIMPKINS (Cowan) (8.38 pm)—It is strange that I should follow the member for Corio speaking about one great football club
when I want to speak about that other great football club of this nation: the Warwick Greenwood Junior Football Club—the Knights. Last Friday night I attended their awards night. The Knights are my local junior Australian Rules football club because I live in the suburb of Warwick. They are the second-smallest club in their league, but while they may be small in numbers they are mighty in spirit. Why is that? Mr Speaker, I know that you would know what it is like. You walk into a room, and the feeling of pride and esprit de corps is immense. I could tell that this was a strong community organisation, a strong local club for local people.

Such a strong spirit will always see results realised. It is the sum of that collective strength that saw the delivery of two premierships. This year the 13s and the 14s both won their premierships, and I congratulate the boys for those strong victories. I also congratulate the coaches of those teams. Mr Steve Dickson is coach of the 13s. Apart from being a champion coach, Steve is also the principal of Hocking Primary School and, as the foundation principal, he has got that school in an excellent state. I know that my constituents in Hocking have welcomed the opening of the school and Steve’s efforts in making sure the children have the best educational facilities and educational aids available. The coach of the 14s is James Anfuso. I congratulate James not only for his team’s victory but also for his leadership as president of the Warwick Greenwood Knights.

Although the club had two victories, such success could not occur without the efforts of its volunteers. I would like to specifically mention three of the volunteers recognised at the awards night. Mr Norm Bryant won lifetime membership. Norm has been involved with the club for 23 years. He started when his son Garreth began Auskick. This was before the amalgamation of the Northern Districts and Warwick football clubs into the Warwick Greenwood Knights. Garreth stayed with the club for all of his junior football career, finishing with the under-17s. Norm has been involved at many levels throughout his time with the club. He has been a coach and member of the committee for many years despite Garreth finishing with the club about five years ago. He is a quiet achiever. He is the sort of person who goes about his business without any fuss or fanfare. He has been the grounds manager for the last six years; it is a job that he does conscientiously and thoroughly. He can also be relied upon to help out whenever there is something happening. Whenever there is a need for work to be done at the club, he will always be there.

I also make mention of Suzanne Brooke, who won the Club Person of the Year award. Suzanne is a busy single mum who works full time but is also very active on the committee. She is the treasurer and next year will also be the registrar. She runs the canteen on Saturdays and Sundays; that was where I saw her when I was last down at one of the games.

Helen Watkinson was nominated by the club community as the Club Volunteer of the Year. She has two boys who play football for the club and works as a registered nurse, but she still finds time to be involved as a team manager and also does first aid for her other son’s team. She was also part of the quiz night organisation this year. The honour of presenting her with the Club Volunteer of the Year award fell to me.

I also pay tribute to the members of the committee: James Anfuso, the president; Glen Stribbling, the registrar; Liz Manera, the secretary; Kevin Josephsen, the vice president; Suzanne Brooke, the treasurer; Norm Bryant for grounds; Courtney Jones for property and the Auskick program; and
Richard Watson for property. Finally, I once again congratulate the club and the players for the success they had this year and the volunteers for their dedication. I wish the Warwick Greenwood Knights, that other great football club of Australia, every success in 2009.

**Home Interaction Program for Parents and Youngsters**

Mr HAYES (Werriwa) (8.43 pm)—Last Tuesday, along with the Prime Minister and the Parliamentary Secretary for Early Childhood Education and Child Care, Maxine McKew, I had the pleasure of announcing 13 new locations for the Home Interaction Program for Parents and Youngsters, including the Minto Family Centre in my electorate. The Rudd government is proud to have committed $32½ million over the next five years to the rollout of the Home Interaction Program for Parents and Youngsters right across this nation. This government is committed to the education revolution, and that is why we are building the best educated, best trained and best skilled workforce in the world. To achieve this, we have to get to work at the earliest opportunity and start with kids in preschool. That means ensuring that kids, regardless of their postcode, get the best possible start in life.

The home interaction program will go a long way to support kids in communities right across this country. It is not a new program; it has been trialled and used in other countries around the world, including the United States, Canada and Germany. Borrowing not only from the international experience but also from the experience of the Brotherhood of St Laurence, where it has effectively been trialled over the last 10 years, it has been demonstrated that this program works remarkably efficiently.

Children who undertake the home interaction program when they enter primary school show that they are well ahead of or at least equivalent to their peers in the first year of primary school. The program is aimed at three- to five-year-olds to assist with the provision of home tutors and books and assisted education resources to prepare these kids for school. Grants will be provided to local community organisations which engage tutors to provide home based services for these children. The program will offer educational support to very young kids from disadvantaged families not only across my electorate but in all Australian states and territories. From next year we will be rolling out a further 50 of these programs.

One of the 13 new centres announced by the Prime Minister in Minto the other day will be in Claymore, in my electorate. The centre will be up and running soon and I have encouraged a number of dedicated and established organisations in my electorate, including Macarthur Diversity Services and UnitingCare Burnside, to make expressions of interest to implement the program locally. When I talked to the Chief Executive Officer of UnitingCare Burnside, Jane Woodruff, last week in Minto, she informed me that they would be only too pleased to be part of this program that will prepare children for school.

Macarthur Diversity Services help disadvantaged and marginalised people in my area to overcome poverty and distress. They currently offer a successful program that aims to help families with young children who have little or no support network. I meet regularly with Judith Taylor, the Executive Officer of Macarthur Diversity Services, and I know that they too would be delighted to help develop in our Claymore residents the skills and resources that assist in parenting.

We all know that parenting plays a crucial role in our children’s education. This program is designed to help parents provide
their children with the skills and confidence to start school with a more optimistic approach to learning. Evidence shows that the earlier you make educational intervention the more chance you have of ultimately getting a positive educational outcome. This is particularly the case when we are talking about kids from disadvantaged backgrounds.

This program is a positive step forward to make sure that all little ones, regardless of their postcode, get the best possible start in life. It is designed to ensure that their parents have the confidence, skills and commitment to participate in the lifelong process of educating their children. The program has been well received in my area, and I am committed to supporting it into the future.

Swan Electorate: Mental Health Care

Mr IRONS (Swan) (8.48 pm)—I rise tonight to talk about the challenges facing those relying upon mental health care in my electorate of Swan. There are numerous types of mental illnesses with varying degrees of severity. Examples include anxiety, depression, bipolar disorder and schizophrenia. Mental illness is widely recognised as a major health concern in Australia. Mental health illness affects a large number of Australians across the nation. It surprises many people to find that one million Australians experience some form of mental health illness. One in five Western Australians will suffer from mental illness in their lifetime. There can therefore be no doubt that mental health is an important issue at a both a state and a national level.

When I was campaigning as the Liberal Party candidate for Swan back in November, I met a lady called Mary. Mary is a recovering schizophrenic and she told me about her concerns about the local mental health services. At the time, I said that, if elected, I would raise the issue of mental health in parliament. Following the budget announcement in May, Mary contacted me again about the Rudd government’s proposed cuts to the funding of the mental health system and made the following points. First, there are not enough rehabilitation centres at present. People are pushed too soon to live independently, and this often has disastrous consequences. Second, while people are forced to function independently, there are not enough community nurses. Third, staff in hospitals are overworked and cannot devote the one-to-one time that patients need.

Unfortunately, the Rudd government’s cost cutting means that $244.3 million will be taken out of mental health services over the coming four-year period. The spending cuts look set to exacerbate the problems Mary raised. As the member for Sturt recently stated, we need to recognise the importance of providing state-of-the-art mental health care for the mentally ill and acknowledge that the way to help the mentally ill to be rehabilitated from their illness is to improve mental health services, not cut them.

Having spoken with the Hon. Helen Morton, West Australian MLC for the East Metropolitan Region and the new Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Mental Health and Water, I am disappointed to report that the inaction of the Labor federal government has been matched by the state Labor government. Incredibly the Carpenter government failed to provide a safety net of services for people with mental illnesses. Patients are dying and families are suffering because Labor has failed to implement self-harm risk management guidelines in hospital wards and emergency departments despite these guidelines being established in 2000. Supporting Mary’s point, Helen Morton said that patients are often discharged from treatment before they are ready and that there is an absence of proper planning for the transition of patients back into the community.
The responsibility for caring for seriously ill patients is being pushed onto the community and prisons, which are ill-equipped to manage the medical and psychological needs of patients. The result of Labor’s careless discharge of seriously ill patients is the staggering rate of readmission. Rates of readmission within 28 days of discharge are up to eight times higher for mental health patients than for recipients of other health services in Western Australia.

The human toll of Labor’s deficient mental health system extends beyond the high rate of suicide, which is greater than the total number of deaths on the road in WA. Eight active patients of mental health services die each week in WA. I am informed by the Hon. Helen Morton that the WA Labor government has been unable to provide specific information on the causes of these deaths. Despite a $2 billion surplus, the state of mental health in Western Australia is disgraceful. I hope that the incoming state government in WA, being sworn in today, will mark a turnaround for the state and propel Western Australia to international best practice.

Labor’s inaction is in sharp contrast to the progress made by the Howard government in improving support and services for people with mental disorders and their families. The investment of $1 billion in the Commonwealth’s mental health reform package in the 2006 budget represented the biggest government investment in mental health in Australian history.

New Medicare services for people with mental illnesses commenced on 1 November 2006, including better access to mental health services provided by psychiatrists, GPs, psychologists and other allied health professionals. The strong uptake of these new services shows that it is an area of previously unmet demand within the community. The provision of $18 million to Lifeline has significantly enhanced telephone counselling services for individuals experiencing a psychosocial crisis. The announcement of community grants totalling $23.5 million has reinforced the Commonwealth’s suicide prevention efforts. The new funding also allows an additional 1,800 people, mostly from overseas, to receive specialised torture and trauma services each year. I call upon the Rudd government to match the vision and intent of this policy.

In summary, I have outlined the challenges facing people relying upon mental health care in my electorate of Swan. I urge the Rudd government to abandon their spending cuts, which have led to great concern among people in my community. I urge them to cooperate with the new WA government and to properly address the issue of mental health. Too many lives in my electorate and in Western Australia depend upon it.

**Focal Extended Inc.**

Mr NEUMANN (Blair) (8.53 pm)—Tonight I want to congratulate Focal Extended Inc. on the opening of the Focal Community Centre at 6 Canning Street, North Ipswich. It was my privilege last Saturday to be at the opening of this new facility. The Nunukul Yuggera Aboriginal Dance Group welcomed the dozens of people who were there. Roy Henderson, the president, was the MC. The patron is Sir Llew Edwards, a former member for Ipswich and a former Liberal Party Deputy Premier of Queensland. The executive officer, Tanya Miller, was present; and Rachel Nolan, the member for Ipswich and Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Disability Services in Queensland, opened the facility by cutting the ribbon and unveiling the plaque.

Focal Extended Inc. supports individuals who have disabilities and their carers. It is a strange name. It comes out of the Friends of Challinor Aid League, which was formed in...
February 1974, 34 years ago, in Ipswich. Its vision is to provide support to enable and empower people who have a disability and to help them participate freely in their chosen community—which happens to be my chosen community as well, Ipswich. Focal’s early work involved active lobbying for legislative change regarding the rights of people with disabilities. You could barely be a politician in South-East Queensland in the 1970s and 1980s without receiving some lobbying from Focal. As individuals moved into the community, Focal took a wider support role, and the name was changed to Focal Extended Inc. to reflect that development.

A number of Focal’s members, who are known to me—Lionel Rackley, Peg Tozer, Jim Cummings and Betty McCrindle—had the honour of being awarded the Order of Australia in recognition of their fine community work over the years. Furthermore, Jim Cummings, whom I have known for many years, was awarded the Ipswich Citizen of the Year award in 1995—an honour he certainly deserved.

The opening of the Focal Community Centre is a new chapter in the life of Focal. The centre provides a home base and it is a place of new opportunities that will be limited only by the imagination of those who attend. There will be tremendous contributions by local residents, and many people have shown tremendous commitment to disability support in Ipswich for a long time.

What does Focal do? There are about 16 staff at the centre. There are about 27 support workers and they have five to six who work regularly in vacation care. In the Independent Pathways program they can have up to 15 clients at a time. Independent Pathways is a development program for young people aged 18 to 35. It is designed to assist individuals with a disability to develop skills and independence. There is also an independent living program, which is an accommodation support program for people with a disability. There is a family respite care program, an out of school hours care program—with a senior program and a junior program—and there is a postschool program and adult lifestyle support services, which enhance community access, life skills and vocational training opportunities.

This is very important for my local area, because the Challinor Centre was a disability centre for people who were institutionalised. In Ipswich there are a lot of people with disabilities who are now in the community leading lives of personal development, social integration, independent living and playing an important role in the life of the community. I congratulate all the people involved in Focal Extended Inc. for their many years of hard work and lobbying, and I look forward to the Parliamentary Secretary for Disabilities and Children’s Services coming to Ipswich, as he has promised to do. I would be delighted to have him visit the new centre, and the people are looking forward to his visit very much. I hope that will happen later this year or, if not, early in the new year. This is a wonderful community facility and these are wonderful people.

Member for Richmond

Mr Grey (Brand—Parliamentary Secretary for Regional Development and Northern Australia) (8.57 pm)—I rise to answer some comments made at the start of this adjournment debate by the member for McPherson, who accused the member for Richmond of a number of shortcomings during the election campaign—not least of which was the mention of the Tweed skate park, which had been promised by the former government. During the election campaign, those present in this chamber will recall the then Deputy Prime Minister showing some skill riding a skateboard, with his hat on back-to-front, to pub-
licly announce that the skate park would not only be funded but was a done deal. The truth of it is: no contract had been signed and no documentation had been concluded by the former government in order to allow that funding to flow. The fault is not that of the member for Richmond; it is the fault of the former Deputy Prime Minister, who was in charge of that program.

The member for McPherson went on to criticise the member for Richmond for promises about the Murwillumbah hospital. I know how hard the Minister for Ageing works, both in her electorate and in her portfolio, and I find those allegations to be not simply unsubstantiated but absolutely and totally unfair. What is worse is that the third allegation refers to the pensions bill, which was deemed by this House to be unconstitutional. I am astonished that those three points would be raised in a debate at the end of a day’s proceedings in an adjournment debate which is normally held in polite terms and is informative, addressing matters more relevant to the electorate and less relevant to such scurrilous mudraking as the member for McPherson demonstrated in this adjournment debate this evening.

The SPEAKER—Order! It being 9.00 pm, the debate is interrupted.

House adjourned at 9.00 pm

NOTICES

The following notices were given:

Ms Gillard to present a bill for an act to amend the law relating to education, and for related purposes. (Education Legislation Amendment Bill 2008)

Ms Gillard to present a bill for an act to grant financial assistance for non-government primary and secondary education for 2009 to 2012, and for related purposes. (Schools Assistance Bill 2008)

Ms Plibersek to present a bill for an act to provide for the establishment of the National Rental Affordability Scheme, and for related purposes. (National Rental Affordability Scheme Bill 2008)

Mr Brendan O’Connor to present a bill for an act to amend the law relating to social security, and for related purposes. (Social Security Legislation Amendment (Employment Services Reform) Bill 2008)

Dr Emerson to present a bill for an act to amend the law in relation to measurement, and for related purposes. (National Measurement Amendment Bill 2008)

Ms Burke to present a bill for an act to amend the Dairy Produce Act 1986, and for related purposes. (Dairy Adjustment Levy Termination Bill 2008)

Mrs Hull to move—

That the House:

(1) recognise the seriousness of the drought situation across rural Australia; and

(2) calls on the Government to:

(a) recognise the need for long term commitment for Exceptional Circumstances (EC) declared areas, and to provide continued support to allow those areas to fully recover from the drought;

(b) look at the history of EC declared areas and the direct correlation between longevity of declaration and hardship inflicted;

(c) commit to the extension of support programs to allow those areas to fully recover regardless of meeting current EC requirements; and

(d) extend EC assistance to all rural based businesses who meet the criteria.

Mr Georganas to move—

That the House commend the Australian Government for its initiatives in increasing the:

(1) proportion of water within the Murray-Darling Basin reserved for environ-
mental purposes through the purchase of water licences; and

(2) volume of water within metropolitan and other areas for domestic, public and industrial uses through the capturing, storing and recycling of storm and waste water.

Ms Owens to move—

That the House:

(1) notes:

(a) that 12-18 October marks Anti-Poverty Week with the United Nations declaring Friday 17 October as International Anti-Poverty Day; and

(b) that the last time Australia contributed .5 per cent of Gross National Income (GNI) was in 1974-75 and that the contribution has declined since then to as low as .25 per cent from 2000-04;

(2) recognises:

(a) the Federal Government’s commitment to lifting the nation’s contribution to .5 per cent of GNI by 2015; and

(b) that the majority of the world’s poor live in our region;

(3) commends the excellent work done by Micah Challenge and Make Poverty History in bringing this matter to public prominence; and

(4) calls on the Government to continue to play a leadership role in our region and to honour our commitment to the Millennium Development Goals.
The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr PD Secker) took the chair at 4.00 pm.

CONSTITUENCY STATEMENTS

Gippsland Electorate: Education

Mr CHESTER (Gippsland) (4.00 pm)—I rise today to highlight an issue of major concern to residents of Gippsland and many other regional areas. As secondary students across Gippsland near the end of year 12, I seek to highlight the issue of retention rates and participation in higher education. The Gippsland region has one of the worst education retention rates in Victoria. Compared to a state and metropolitan retention rate in excess of 80 per cent in 2006, just 65 per cent of Gippsland students finished year 12. These figures naturally translate into low participation rates for Gippsland students in university and higher education. Unless you fundamentally believe that city students are more intelligent than country students, there is obviously a problem with the way in which we are managing the education of young people in regional areas like Gippsland.

I note that the Victorian parliament is conducting an inquiry into geographical differences in the rates at which Victorian students participate in higher education. The inquiry was the initiative of Nationals state MP Peter Hall, a former schoolteacher and an outstanding member of parliament for the past 20 years. In its submission to the inquiry, the Gippsland education precinct identifies many of the key issues, as I see them, including socioeconomic status as the single biggest factor influencing student performance.

Many of our regional areas, including Gippsland, have comparatively low average household incomes, and that situation is a major barrier to participation in higher education. It affects entrance scores, parents’ capacity to support students to live away from home for study and other purposes, and the aspiration within families to actually seek higher education in the first place. At a time when skills shortages in a range of professions, including particularly the health sector, are having an enormous impact on the quality of life of country families, we need to do more to help rural and regional students overcome these socioeconomic barriers.

We know that students from regional areas are more likely to return to those areas in the future to practise their skills. The greater use of cadetships, bonded scholarships or studentships to pay students an allowance whilst at university and then guarantee them a job after a fixed period if they serve in a regional area is worthy of further investment. Such programs in the health sector have enjoyed bipartisan support in the past and they need to be increased and broadened in their scope in the future. Similarly there must be greater recognition of the extra costs borne by country families in sending students away for tertiary studies.

We need to explore all options to overcome the accommodation and cost-of-living pressures which place a disproportionate burden on rural and regional students. These costs are a major disincentive to pursuing further studies and addressing the skills shortages of regional areas like Gippsland. The problem is getting worse, and we must do more to help our young people from regional areas to achieve their full potential.
Mr BRADBURY (Lindsay) (4.03 pm)—I rise to acknowledge the contribution of a number of men and women from my electorate who participated in the recent Beijing Olympic Games and Beijing Paralympic Games. I am very proud, as are all members of my local community, of the impressive list of athletes from my electorate who represented Australia at the games in a very broad range of sports. In my electorate, sporting fields are packed with children and adults every weekend, participating in team and individual sports. Penrith is blessed with a wealth of athletic talent from our local school and club teams right through to our professional sportsmen and sportswomen.

Sport is a crucible of personal development. It is a great battleground upon which we can compete against others, ourselves and the elements. It is a place where we test our strength, our speed and our agility. But in sport we also test our integrity, our passion, our fortitude and our commitment. Sport can be a microcosm of life. It can distil the broader challenges we face in our lives into a 90-minute game, a three-round bout or a 10-second sprint. Our Olympic and Paralympic athletes have risen to the pinnacle of their sports through talent, determination and sacrifice. They are held in high esteem in our community, and for good reason. They have demonstrated a strength of character to which we can all aspire.

I would like to acknowledge and congratulate all of the Olympians and Paralympians who hail from my local community and who took part in the Beijing games last month: Melissa Wu, who achieved silver in diving; Janelle Shepherd, judo; Mark Bellofiore and Lachlan Milne for the canoe slalom C2; Jacqui Lawrence, who won a silver in kayaking; Torsten Lachmann, canoeing; Matt Neilsen, basketball; Luke Madill, BMX racing; Lexie Feeney, archery; Kerry Wyborn, with a bronze in softball; Luke Boyd, boxing; and Mark Bridge, soccer. I also acknowledge and congratulate our Paralympians: Peter Leek, who I will speak about in a moment; and John McLean and Kathryn Ross in the double sculls rowing, who received a silver.

Unfortunately time does not allow me to expand on the achievements of each of these individuals, but I would like to reserve a special mention for 19-year-old Paralympian Peter Leek. Peter was arguably one of our most outstanding athletes in the Olympics and Paralympics in 2008. He took home eight medals, including three gold, four silver and one bronze. A resident of St Mary’s and a student at Colyton High School, Peter competed in freestyle, butterfly and his pet event, the 100-metre backstroke, and he did not disappoint any of his fans. Peter was born with cerebral palsy and took up swimming at the age of eight to help with his disability. Now, as a world-class athlete, he trains six days a week and his efforts have paid off in spades. On behalf of my electorate and the Australian people, I would like to say congratulations to Peter. He was an excellent ambassador for his sport, our local community and his country. Well done to Peter and all the Olympians and Paralympians from my electorate.

(Time expired)

Dickson Electorate: Community Spirit

Mr DUTTON (Dickson) (4.06 pm)—I would like to talk about the community spirit that has been well and truly alive within my electorate of Dickson over the last few months. Dur-
ing this time six local shows took place, spread right across what is now a very vast electorate. We need to acknowledge the committees that, each year, volunteer their precious time to make these events go ahead. Why are these events important? They provide the opportunity for all of the community to come together socially and for local businesses and producers to display their work and products. They also allow the children within the district to experience and learn firsthand about the local talents their community offers and to seek involvement in community events.

I was able to visit the shows and I have much admiration for the long hours and the many months of planning that go into each and every one. I would especially like to thank all the show society presidents and their committees: Mr Peter Eggleston, President of the Too-goodlah Show Society; Mr Don Connolly, president of the Pine Rivers show; Mr John Dry-nan, president of the Esk show; Mr John Lautenbach, president of the Dayboro show; Mr Noel Kammholz, president of the Lowood show; and Mr Frank Lippett, president of the Sam-ford show.

As the representative for Dickson it is important that I have as many opportunities as possible to speak with people and I am grateful to the show societies for allowing me to have this. As always, our stall was involved over the days of the shows and we were visited by literally hundreds of people of all ages. I think it is a time to listen and to realise that to hear the issues of our communities we need to reach all ages. I find that there is no better way to understand their individual issues than by being out and about, not just at these shows but by taking a caravan out in the electorate, by conducting mobile offices and by attending events, schools, community groups and the like. It also gives my constituents the opportunity to offer suggestions and to have frank debates with me about local, as well as federal, issues.

I would also like to acknowledge today the many people who volunteer their time to staff my stall and to offer assistance to all of my constituents: Penny Edwards, John King, Jill Sheppard, Annette Tidbury, Dale Shuttleworth, Ethel Betinni, Graeme Lee, Lyn Tate, Phillip Pease, Raelene Fittkau, Roger Brook, Stephanie Martin, Ashley Kruger, Chantal O’Rourke, Michael Daley, Nan McQuilty, Don and Olwyn Connelly, Jacki Buckland, Peter and Glenda Ebert, Paul Banks, Melissa McDonald, Keith and Joan Penman, Hazel Perry, Margaret Lester, John Howard and the other people who provided assistance to make the stall possible.

In closing, I would like to again congratulate all of the show societies. These shows provide a wonderful opportunity to display the best elements that our local communities have to offer. Quite often people from outside the region visit, and they are encouraged to take up residence as a result of seeing the community spirit which is alive and well at these shows. It is a great credit to all of the local people who put these shows together year after year.

Pensions and Benefits

Mr SIDEBOTTOM (Braddon) (4.09 pm)—Last night in the Senate, and today in the House, the opposition have turned their back on 13,400 north-west coast of Tasmania pensioners and some two million Australian pensioners through the constitutionally botched introduction of their so-called pension bill. They have turned their backs on 1.1 million age pensioners, 732,000 people on disability pensions, 130,000 carers and 32,000 women on wife and widow pensions across Australia. In my home state of Tasmania they have ignored some 59,274 pensioners.
Mr SIDEBOTTOM—Even closer to my electorate of Braddon on the north-west coast of Tasmania—and you had better listen to this—they ignored 13,400 pensioners, including 998 carers, 5,583 disability support pensioners and 6,819 pensioner couples. There is no denying that single age pensioners are doing it tough, but so too are many other people who have pensions to rely on.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr PD Secker)—Order! Members on my left and right!

Mr SIDEBOTTOM—Take, for example, the disability support pensioners that the other side do not want to talk about and those living on the carers pension. They live on the same amount as age pensioners, yet they were completely ignored for 12 years under the Howard government. Under the Howard government they were not even included in the provisions for the utilities allowance, which at the time was $107.20 per year for age pensioners to help them pay their utilities bills. This year, for the first time ever, the Rudd government extended the utilities allowance to those on the DSP and carers. This payment has also been increased fourfold to help pensioners out in the short term while we investigate how best to fix things for the longer term. In fact, as a result of Rudd government measures, all eligible pensioners—singles, couples, carers, veterans, disability pensioners and women on the wife pension—will this week at the latest receive a $128 instalment of their annual $514 utilities allowance. The regular pension indexation increase is $15.30 per fortnight for singles, and that also kicked in this week.

The other mob had 12 years to do something—they did not. So no-one can deny that many pensioners need extra support. The Rudd government want to make sure that we get it right for everyone. We are not just going to pick and choose a couple of categories in the sort of cheap political point-scoring activity we have just seen. Labor are well on the way to completing a comprehensive inquiry into how we can improve the pension system for everyone fairly. When this inquiry has been completed, the government will act quickly, it will act comprehensively and it will act fairly. It is great to know that there have been more than 600 submissions to the inquiry from pensioners in every sector, including carers, age pension couples and people on disability support pensions. So taking a little bit longer and acting more comprehensively, more fairly and, in the end, quickly will help all these people. (Time expired)

Mr HUNT (Flinders) (4.12 pm)—I rise to speak on the issue of polio awareness and the treatment of postpolio syndrome sufferers within my electorate of Flinders. In particular, I want to acknowledge the work of three groups within the context of the fact that October is Polio Awareness Month. Firstly, there is the Mornington Peninsula Post-Polio Support Group, which works with people who have both postpolio syndrome and late effects of polio—separate but related conditions. As part of that group, Fran Henke from my electorate has been a tireless champion along with the chairman, Dennis Lloyd, and others. She has raised the needs of polio sufferers—people who have passed through the polio stage and now suffer the legacy and the conditions which are associated with that illness.

On 28 October at the Sandhurst Club, the Frankston Peninsula eastern region polio day will be held, and I would urge all those who can to support it and to pay tribute to the work of the
Mornington Peninsula Post-Polio Support Group. They are working with people with real needs. Because we have had such success, albeit imperfect, with the eradication of polio around the world, we often forget that there are many people in Australia who suffer the effects of postpolio syndrome and late effects of polio. These are real conditions, in many cases debilitating, and often there is embarrassment or a lack of confidence among people who wish to bring forward these concerns.

That brings me, secondly, to the work of Rotary. Rotary is a sterling organisation which does many things. Its work on polio eradication around the world is perhaps its single most important contribution. That task is not yet complete. There are a number of countries where more work is still to be done. I have examples before me from Dennis Lloyd: in India, Somalia, Pakistan and Afghanistan, as well as Nigeria and elsewhere, there are ongoing cases of polio. But Rotary, and in particular the groups on the Mornington Peninsula, at Western Port and on the Bass Coast who have contributed to the global task, deserve great credit for the extraordinary steps they have taken to date.

The third group I want to acknowledge is Polio Services Victoria. This group of men and women do a great job in addressing the needs of polio sufferers. They would like to be better resourced and to have the ability to access greater data on those who suffer from either postpolio syndrome or late effects of polio. These are real and pressing concerns. It would be good if more could be done to assist Polio Services Victoria. Above all else, I draw the House’s attention to the fact that October is Polio Awareness Month. I thank and congratulate all of those groups—(Time expired)

Dyslexia

Mr SHORTEN (Maribyrnong—Parliamentary Secretary for Disabilities and Children’s Services) (4.15 pm)—I wish to draw the House’s attention to dyslexia and what is being done in Australia to assist people with learning difficulties. Dyslexia literally means difficulty with words. Symptoms of dyslexia vary immensely, but it often manifests itself in difficulty learning to read and spell words. Young children may begin speaking later than usual or have problems learning new words. Once children begin learning to read they may struggle with learning the connection between letters and sounds. They might reverse words or write letters in the wrong order. These difficulties can also extend to mathematics or learning new languages.

Dyslexia can occur among people of any intelligence and is not an intellectual disability. Accurate and early diagnosis of dyslexia is crucial, yet many students are not diagnosed until later primary school years. It can be difficult to diagnose younger children who learn to understand writing with the support of memory or illustrations rather than by reading the words. For this reason, accurate diagnosis requires a range of standardised tests. With the right help, people with dyslexia can learn to read and write well. Treatment requires flexibility and patience from schools, teachers and institutions. Individual assistance is crucial to enable people with dyslexia to learn at their own pace. Dyslexic students can also benefit from having additional time to complete work and having appropriate assessment. By shifting the focus of school to the content and not its form, students can in fact thrive. Support can come from taped tests, audio books and computer programs which assist in reading and writing.

While the states and territories have primary constitutional responsibility for education, and therefore for assisting students with dyslexia, the federal government can also play an important role. The government has provided an additional $20.2 million over five years to extend
the Australian Early Development Index. Under this program, children starting school for the first time will be assessed on their skills in language, cognition and communication, amongst other development indicators. This delivers valuable information for teachers, communities and families. It can also assist literacy support services to target appropriate support for students with dyslexia. We have also provided $2 billion through the literacy, numeracy and special needs program to support the most disadvantaged students. This will obviously include students with dyslexia.

We still do not know much about dyslexia. However, we do know how important it is to provide the right assistance as early as possible. Undiagnosed dyslexia can be a frustrating and upsetting experience for individuals and their families. If untreated, it can worsen over time and, as such, undiagnosed dyslexia has a huge impact on the workforce. We can defeat dyslexia and its challenges can be overcome. (Time expired)

Stirling Electorate: Beaches

Mr KEENAN (Stirling) (4.18 pm)—I rise to talk on one of my favourite subjects: the beaches in my electorate. Stirling has the honour of showcasing some of the best beaches in Australia. If we needed confirmation of that, it happened this week. It was fantastic to see Scarborough Beach, which is managed by the City of Stirling, scoop two awards at the Keep Australia Beautiful Clean Beaches Awards held in Sydney. Scarborough won the national awards for the litter prevention and resource recovery categories. Everyone in my home state knows and loves Scarborough Beach because it is one of Perth’s premier beaches. These awards cement Scarborough’s place in the list of the best beaches in the nation. More importantly, the awards are recognition of the people whose day-to-day work and volunteering efforts keep Scarborough Beach maintained in such a pristine condition. Their hard work encourages the wider Western Australian community to come to Scarborough and the areas further up the coast to enjoy the magnificent beaches and to support local businesses, cafes and restaurants. I have often taken interstate colleagues and friends to enjoy the atmosphere and views across the Indian Ocean coastline.

With summer just around the corner it is the perfect time for me to acknowledge the hard work and dedication of the volunteers in surf-lifesaving at both the Scarborough and Trigg Island surf-lifesaving clubs. I have firsthand knowledge of the fantastic teamwork that goes into both of these clubs. I am always happy to attend the numerous surf-lifesaving carnivals that take place on the Stirling beaches throughout the summer, and it is encouraging to see so many young people signing up for the surf-lifesaving programs run by the clubs. The younger generation are the future of these organisations, and I encourage young people to get involved wherever they can.

I also want to mention the City of Stirling and its dedicated team of staff who maintain Scarborough Beach and its surrounds. They are to be congratulated and thanked for their ongoing and committed work. Together with the newly elected Barnett state government and the local government, the City of Stirling, I am committed to ensuring that Scarborough Beach and the other beaches in my electorate remain pristine and family friendly. I will continue to support programs from all levels of government that will ensure the safety of generations to come.

In the time remaining I want to mention the former president of the Scarborough Surf-Lifesaving Club, Mark Irwin, who has left that role to take up the presidency of the surf-
lifesaving association in Western Australia. He is a wonderful member of my community and a very good bloke, and we wish him well in that role. Surf-Lifesaving Western Australia plays a tremendous role in protecting Western Australians and visitors on our beaches every summer. The Scarboro Surf-Lifesaving Club, I understand, carry out about one rescue per day at the height of summer. The service they provide in a voluntary capacity to my community is vitally important and I commend them very heartily for it.

National Youth Leadership Forum

Mr PERRETT (Moreton) (4.21 pm)—It has been said that our young people are the leaders of tomorrow, and it is true. But nothing should stop young people in leadership today. That is why events like the National Youth Leadership Forum on faith and values, held in Canberra last weekend, are so important for developing a culture of effective leadership. The forum explored how people’s faith and values can impact on their approach to leadership. I was pleased to sponsor Katherine Allmond from Graceville in my electorate to attend this wonderful forum in Canberra. Katherine is studying education at the Queensland University of Technology and is using her skills, abilities and zeal to really make a difference in our community.

Another young leader in my electorate is Yassmin Abdel-Magied. Yassmin was the 2007 Young Australian Muslim of the Year and is the founder of the charity Youth Without Borders. This is a youth-run community body that strives to empower young people to work together to effect positive change in their communities. This is not bad for somebody who completed high school last year. She is now undertaking a degree in engineering at the University of Queensland, which I am sure has its own challenges, especially for a Muslim woman.

The Rudd government is looking to young people to play a significant role in meeting the big challenges of the future. And they really are significant challenges. We have a growing, ageing and increasingly unwell population with, unfortunately, a decreasing percentage of taxpayers; a skills crisis that will only deepen as members of the baby boomer generation retire; and climate change and the challenge of transitioning to a low-carbon economy. Young people are already leading the way when it comes to climate change because their future depends on it. We will not be here but they will. I often hear of children teaching their parents about the ways in which they can conserve water and energy around the home, and that is just the start of it. I expect that many young people will be among those who attend a community climate change forum in Yeronga in my electorate next month.

I have heard some people despair of generation Y as being apathetic and disengaged from the political process, but I think we unfairly blame young people for this. John Howard went as far as closing the electoral rolls early to keep 300,000 new voters from taking part in the last election. With this kind of cynicism from the previous government, it is no wonder that some young people can be a little disengaged from politics. A week before the last election, a Facebook poll found that 72 per cent of 18- to 29-year-olds would vote for a Rudd government. The message was loud and clear that young people do not want to be ignored any longer. They deserve to be front and centre of the political process. If we equip young people for leadership, read their blogs and listen to their views, we can meaningfully engage with them. They in turn can be inspired to get involved in their communities and to play a vital part in Australia’s future. (Time expired)
Mr BRUCE SCOTT (Maranoa) (4.24 pm)—I rise today to call on the Queensland state government to embrace the Royalties for Regions policy championed by the Western Australian National Party. Queensland has many similarities to Western Australia. Like Western Australia, the majority of the Queensland population is in the state coastal capital city, with regional towns littered across the rest of the large expanse. Western Australia, like its eastern counterpart, enjoys a rich abundance of natural resources and is prospering from the current resources boom. In fact, the Western Australian state government receives more than $2.5 billion in royalties each year from mining and oil and gas producers. The Queensland state government receives some $4.4 billion in royalties each year, yet somehow, despite this massive amount of wealth coming into the government’s coffers, it has managed—through mismanagement—to accumulate a $60 billion public debt, it has not provided essential infrastructure and it has failed to fix the overburdened health system. Meanwhile, rural, remote and regional councils work effectively, efficiently and tirelessly to provide their communities with essential services.

If the Queensland state government were to embrace a policy similar to the Royalties for Regions program, which calls for 25 per cent of royalties to be reinvested in regional areas, local councils would receive a much-needed $1.1 billion boost for roads, local services, amenities and other essential infrastructure for their area. Schools and hospitals in rural areas would receive the funding needed to provide the best education and quality health care. It is imperative that the Queensland government develop such a policy and do so quickly.

In my own electorate of Maranoa, the Surat coal basin is currently in its early stages of development, and already the farming towns in the area are witnessing changes to their local economy and communities. Housing rental prices are starting to increase dramatically, and lonely dirt roads once used by local farming families are carrying trucks laden with mining equipment and coal and gas infrastructure. Direct reinvestment of royalties into regional areas will not only help to address certain social and economic changes in these communities but also assist local councils in implementing policies on housing affordability, population management and infrastructure development.

The opposition in Queensland has been pressuring the Queensland government, as I have, along with local councils and their mayors. It is reassuring to see that the government are belatedly starting to show interest in the welfare of regional communities—and I welcome that—and of course the landholders who have been affected by this resources boom. However, more must certainly be done to provide these communities with the support they need to adequately deal with the profound changes that are occurring as a result of the resources boom in Queensland.

Mrs D’ATH (Petrie) (4.27 pm)—I rise to speak about my local community’s Relay for Life event. Cancer Council Queensland first held this event in October 2001, at which time it raised $70,000. This event is now held throughout Australia in many local communities, and this year there are over 30 relay events scheduled, with an expected fundraising total of $3.2 million. Relay for Life is an overnight community event organised annually by Cancer Council Queensland. It is 18 hours of fun, festivities and camaraderie to celebrate those who have survived cancer, to remember those who lost the battle and, importantly, to raise money for
cancer research, support, education and early detection programs. Teams raise money by collecting donations or sponsors or by holding fundraising events. Relay team members must take turns to walk around the track through the entire 18 hours, making sure that at least one team member is on the track at all times.

Last year I participated as a walker, with Senator Mark Furner, at the Pine Rivers Relay for Life. This past weekend, 20 and 21 September, Redcliffe held its inaugural Relay for Life at the Redcliffe Tigers AFL Sporting Club at Rothwell. The walk commenced at 3 pm on Saturday and finished at 9 am on Sunday. The Redcliffe peninsula has an unrivalled sense of community, and the relay was a terrific occasion for everyone to come together and celebrate what makes our local area special and raise money for a very important cause. Highlights of the event included the survivors’ walk to kick off the relay and a moving candlelight ceremony in the evening to remember those we have lost to cancer. Major sponsors of the event included the Redcliffe and Bayside Herald, 99.7FM community radio, the Redcliffe Leagues Club, Moreton Bay Regional Press, JH Grant Real Estate and REDAIR Tours and Transfers.

This year I organised a team and filled the role of team leader, camping out and participating in the relay over the 18 hours. I would like to take the opportunity to thank all of the sponsors and walkers who supported the team. At final count we have raised $3,895 for the Cancer Council of Queensland. My team, the Petrie Possums, was entered with the generous help of Redcliffe Leagues Club; BallyCara Retirement Village; Lions Club, Kippa-Ring; Rotary Club, Redcliffe Sunrise; Senator Mark Furner; Queensland members of parliament, the Hon. Dean Wells and Lillian Van Litsenburg; the Golden Ox Restaurant; and Commerce and Industry, Redcliffe. A total of $40,000 was raised, which is a great effort for the inaugural Redcliffe Relay for Life event. This figure was reached due to a spontaneous pledge by Des Webb, Chairman of the Board of Directors of the Redcliffe Leagues Club, when we found out we had reached around $38,000 and he agreed to top it up to $40,000. I congratulate the Redcliffe community on this fantastic effort.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr PD Secker)—Order! In accordance with standing order 193 the time for constituency statements has concluded.

AUSLINK (NATIONAL LAND TRANSPORT) AMENDMENT BILL 2008

Second Reading

Debate resumed from 18 September, on motion by Mr Albanese:

That this bill be now read a second time.

Ms LIVERMORE (Capricornia) (4.30 pm)—It is good to have the opportunity to continue my contribution on the AusLink (National Land Transport) Amendment Bill 2008. As I said in my opening comments last week, it is great under this government to be able to talk about the infrastructure planning and the infrastructure investment that this country has been crying out for for so long. I will mention a couple of the projects that are already underway in my electorate as a result of the commitments that Labor made under AusLink during the election campaign. AusLink funding does not actually commence until 2009, but on the strength of the funding that will flow next year some work is already happening, thanks to the Queensland government, and planning is underway for other work.

The Minister for Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Local Government, Anthony Albanese, was in Mackay a couple of weeks ago to see the work that is already hap-
pening as a result of one of the major commitments that we made during the election campaign, which is the duplication of the Bruce Highway south of Mackay, going from Bakers Creek up to the southern entrance to Mackay at the city gates. That is going to be very much welcomed by people in my electorate of Capricornia, which now goes right up to just north of the town of Sarina. The people living in that northern section of Capricornia will benefit greatly from the duplication of that highway up into Mackay, which is the major service centre for the town of Sarina and the communities between Sarina and Mackay. There is so much industrial activity happening around the southern outskirts of Mackay in Paget industrial estate, and that road was getting very congested. So my constituents will be very pleased to see that work is well underway on that important piece of roadwork.

Another project that I am aware is already in the fairly advanced planning stages is the work that I committed to delivering, which is a realignment of the southern approach to Sarina, which covers another section of the Bruce Highway. That stretch of road is quite dangerous; sadly, it has been the site of some fatalities in the past. We have committed $10 million to do the work to realign that road and make the thoroughfare through the main street of Sarina much safer.

Staying up in that northern part of the electorate—and this is not AusLink funding but another commitment that the Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, made when he was at the Community Cabinet in Mackay—I was very pleased that I was able to organise a meeting between the Prime Minister and representatives of the Road Accident Action Group, which is based in places like Walkerston and Nebo just to the west of Mackay in my electorate. They wanted to see the Prime Minister about the Peak Downs Highway, which runs between Mackay and the mining towns of the Bowen basin—towns like Glenden, Moranbah, Dysart and Middlemount. These are places that are absolutely booming at the moment. The Peak Downs Highway between Mackay and those mining towns is an absolutely vital strategic link. Mackay is where a lot of the heavy engineering and supporting industries are based, it is where the fuel supply is sourced for the mining operations and it is where a lot of the workforce live. So there is an enormous amount of traffic on this road.

The Peak Downs Highway crosses the Eton Range 30 or 40 kilometres west of Mackay and it has a notoriously dangerous stretch of road, so the community have been calling for action on that road for some time now. The Peak Downs Highway is actually a state road, but in recognition of the vital strategic importance that it has for the coal industry and for the growing communities in the Mackay region the Prime Minister listened to the arguments that were made by the representatives from the Road Accident Action Group and committed $1 million, to be matched by the Queensland government, to undertake a major investigation into how to realign the Peak Downs Highway around that stretch of the Eton Range. That is very welcome news, and I know from talking to the Main Roads people in Mackay that that work is already starting. The investigation will be completed in the next 12 to 18 months.

We really need to do something about the crossing of the range, because it has been the site of about 31 truck rollovers in the last two years. That is an amazing figure and underscores the importance of making changes to that road. There have also been two fatalities on that stretch of road in the last year. So I thank the Prime Minister for the time that he gave my constituents at that meeting and the quick response he made in pledging that money to get some work done on realigning that very important road.
In the time that I have left, I want to comment on another issue related to roads, which is that of petrol. There will not be too much driving going on on these new and safer roads without affordable petrol. I want to put on the record that petrol prices in Rockhampton, the main city in the electorate of Capricornia, continue to defy what is happening to petrol prices elsewhere in Queensland. We have seen some significant drops in petrol prices in recent weeks, which are very welcome, in response to movements in the international price, but Rockhampton still routinely and regularly has prices that are 5c, 6c or 7c higher than those in comparable regional centres. For example, last Thursday unleaded petrol was selling in Rockhampton for $1.49 a litre; in Mackay, which is 350 kilometres to the north of us and is a similarly sized city on the Bruce Highway, just like Rockhampton, petrol was selling for $1.42; in Toowoomba, again a provincial city similar in size to Rockhampton, petrol was selling for $1.41; and in Brisbane it was $1.40.

I want to raise that here in the House on behalf of my constituents. We do need to see action on petrol prices, and I am pleased to know that the Rudd government is continuing with its moves in this regard, introducing measures such as formal price monitoring. The government is giving the ACCC the power that it needs to conduct formal monitoring of petrol prices, costs and profits to try and improve transparency, because obviously this is not about what the world oil price is doing. There is an inexplicable discrepancy between the prices in Rockhampton and those in other comparable cities in Queensland. We need to get behind what is happening in the pricing there.

We have also announced the appointment of a petrol commissioner to supervise the new powers of the ACCC. Importantly, the petrol commissioner is going to have powers to scrutinise documents and other information from any participant in the petrol supply chain whenever it is deemed necessary to ensure pricing is consistent with international benchmarks. Again, we are making sure the market mechanisms are in place in Australia, with strong regulations behind them, to stop the discrepancies that we see and that motorists in Rockhampton are suffering from at the moment.

In conclusion, I want to commend this bill to the House. It has two very important measures. One is the extension of the Roads to Recovery program for an additional five years, with additional money committed to that very important program, and also the changes to the definitions of ‘road’ in AusLink which will allow the government—once the opposition stops its blocking tactics in the Senate—to put in place the measures announced in the budget for heavy vehicle productivity and safety initiatives. I look forward to the money rolling out to provide those additional rest stops and parking bays for the truckies who are on our highways and doing a great job keeping the industries going in my electorate of Capricornia.

Mr IRONS (Swan) (4.40 pm)—I rise to support the AusLink (National Land Transport) Amendment Bill 2008 and to outline the many transport challenges in my electorate of Swan. It is great to hear from the member for Capricornia that the Rudd government is meeting their commitments in her electorate, and I will go onto that further in my speech. As members of the House will know, this bill has three components. Each of these components is important and carries my full support.

The bill’s first purpose is to extend the Roads to Recovery program from 1 July 2009 to 30 June 2014. The Roads to Recovery program is an enormously successful and popular program. It was great to hear the member for Braddon last week recognise the success of this
Howard-initiated program. He said that it was the bee’s knees. He went on to say it was all about safety and we should not bring politics into it but later in his speech pilloried the Howard government for allocating $15 million in 2004 in his electorate as purely an election stunt. So it is okay for the member for Braddon to first criticise the members of this side of the House for speaking about the inadequacies of the Rudd government and then turn around and do exactly that as to the previous government. I like the way he thinks! He certainly put a smile on my face. The member for Dunkley spoke on the same day about tolls and the inconsistencies of the Victorian state Labor government on this issue. It is fantastic that in the great state of Western Australia road tolls are an issue we do not have to deal with.

The Roads to Recovery scheme was established by the Howard government in November 2000 with the aim of providing a new support program for local roads of $1.2 billion over five years. In January 2004, the coalition government announced a further $1.2 billion over the four years from July 2005 to June 2009. At this point, it became a component of AusLink. AusLink was first established by the former coalition government in 2004 and represents the most significant change since Federation in the way the Commonwealth tackles the national transport task. The national land transport AusLink network is a single integrated network of land transport linkages of strategic national importance which is funded by federal, state and territory governments. The AusLink network is based on national and interregional transport corridors, including connections through urban areas, links to ports and airports, rail, road and internodal connections that together are of critical importance to national and regional economic growth, development and connectivity. Therefore, when the Roads to Recovery fund became part of AusLink it became part of the long-term Howard government transport infrastructure plan for Australia. In the 2005-06 budget, the fund was supplemented with a bonus of $307.5 million to provide an extra boost for councils that year.

This coalition policy has made an enormous contribution to the local community in my electorate of Swan. The Roads to Recovery life-of-program allocation for 2005-06 to 2008-09 for the councils in my electorate has been as follows: the City of Belmont received $921,000; the City of Canning, $2,175,000; the City of Perth, $729,000; and the Town of Victoria Park, $157,000. It was obviously a popular policy with the local councils. Up to 2005, 19 projects were nominated by the City of Belmont; 19 by the City of Canning; 12 by the City of South Perth; and 16 by the Town of Victoria Park. The beauty of this policy is that it decentralises power. It allows local governments to nominate projects they see as necessary and spend the money appropriately. This has never been as important as now, given the ever-centralising tendencies of the federal government. I will take this opportunity to commend the local councils who do an excellent job in implementing this program. With local government responsible for 80 per cent of all roads nationally, this was and will continue to be a vital policy for the health of Australia’s transport system.

The second purpose of this bill is to allow certain funds allocated under Roads to Recovery to be preserved in particular states or territories while arrangements can be made to determine the most appropriate entities to receive the funds. This provision is less important to my electorate on account of the local government entities that administer the scheme. However, I appreciate that in Western Australia seven per cent of Roads to Recovery funds are provided for special projects, being divided up between bridge works and access roads to Indigenous communities. In such cases it has been necessary to preserve these funds while a suitable au-
The amendments in this bill provide legislative clarity to this longstanding practice.

The third major component of this policy is the provision to amend the definition to put beyond doubt that future funding under AusLink may be applied to rest stops, parking bays and decoupling facilities. This is a necessary amendment and I am happy to support it.

While other components of this bill are clearly admirable, it is important for all members to accept that this is purely a continuation of coalition government policy. It has become increasingly clear that the Rudd government has continued with the me-tooism of the campaign, and I will reflect on that with particular reference to my electorate of Swan. For a government that has continually criticised the Howard government and its achievements in government, it is great to see that it can at least recognise and applaud the Roads to Recovery program by continuing this program.

I would now like to refer to some specific issues that demonstrate the challenges facing my electorate. First I would like to talk about the Great Eastern Highway, which runs through my electorate of Swan. The Great Eastern Highway is a major road linking Perth with Kalgoorlie. It is also the gateway to Perth and is the first experience of many interstate and international visitors to Perth and Western Australia, besides the ashtray exits of our airports. It should be the golden pathway to our beautiful city and state but it has been sadly neglected by the state Labor government for the last eight years. It is the key route for vehicles accessing the wheat belt and the eastern goldfields. It also forms the western-most 595 kilometres of the main road transportation link between Perth and the east coast of Australia.

The road is mostly a federally funded national highway due to its national strategic importance. It is signed as National Highway 94, except for a nine-kilometre stretch between the Great Eastern Highway bypass and the Roe Highway and the 40-kilometre section between Coolgardie and Kalgoorlie. It is also signed as Highway 1 between The Causeway and Morrison Road and as State Route 51 between Johnson Street, Guildford, and the Roe Highway.

I have here a press release from the Labor Party dated 29 October 2007. It states:

A Rudd Labor government will put $180 million into the Great Eastern Highway upgrade from Kooyong Road to the Tonkin Highway, a project that will cost $225 million, with the Western Australian government funding the balance.

I will seek leave to table that at the end of my speech. The promise of funding during the election came four days after the Howard government offered a similar package. This road has needed a section upgrade between Kooyong Road and the Tonkin Highway since 2000. It has always been considered a state road but the lack of care and concern by the Gallop and Carpenter governments means that they have ignored previous offers of funding to fix this road and have put at risk the people who use it daily.

The need for the Great Eastern Highway to be updated is highlighted by the figures in the document I hold here on the aircraft and passenger movement increases. This document says that the total aircraft movements in 2003-04 were 78,000 and in 2007-08 were 107,000. The passenger numbers have risen from six million in 2003-04 to over nine million in 2007-08. The road has not seen a cent of the promised money yet. It was obviously a promise made so that the sitting member at the time, Kim Wilkie, would be re-elected. It did not work. Instead, the Rudd government has pursued its favourite policy: delaying tough decisions by commis-
sioning reports and organising committees. The people of my electorate have clearly been let down. I pledged on my first day in parliament to make sure the Rudd government delivered on its promises to the people of Swan. And on this I will continue until the money is forthcoming and the people in Swan benefit from the easing of congestion and a safer road.

Secondly, I would like to highlight the key need for an integrated transport solution network in my electorate. An integrated transport solution involves taking a holistic approach to transport operations in Swan. Kewdale rail freight terminal is a WA transport hub which receives goods from all over Australia by road and rail. Most people like to see their freight transported by the rail network as it takes heavy vehicles off the road. Kewdale is in the seat of Swan and is considered to be the key transport area of WA as there are so many companies and jobs in the area. Transport to the north-west and south-west and into the eastern states all leave from this area. It is an important part of the Western Australian economy and many of my constituents are employed in this industry. However, it becomes increasingly difficult for rail freight companies to profitably operate when they are constantly impeded by bureaucracy.

It is unbelievable that an operator of an interstate train may have to deal with seven safety regulators, three transport accident investigators, 15 pieces of legislation covering occupational health and safety of rail operations and 75 pieces of legislation over environmental management. Even negotiating the road freight bureaucracy can be problematic, with varying state based interpretations of the national heavy vehicle reforms on fatigue management, incomplete rollouts of state approved road networks that can carry the highly efficient B-triple vehicle combinations and the different treatment by states of widths and heights of loads. An integrated transport solution should therefore be negotiated cooperatively at COAG level.

An additional aspect of the integrated transport solution is safe and accessible public transport to free up congested roads and provide an affordable transport option for thousands of local people. I was pleased to see the WA Liberal Party commit to free public transport for the elderly in Western Australia during the recent election campaign. It will make a great deal of difference to the many pensioners in Western Australia. However, as I have communicated to my state colleagues, pensioners across my electorate are currently scared to use public transport on account of recent crime spree near public transport nodes. I recently spoke in parliament about the disabled woman who was badly beaten at a bus stop near Curtin University in Bentley in my electorate. I also spoke about the Thornlie train line that runs through the heart of my electorate. It is well known in the local area for being the ‘crime line’ after a certain time at night. This message was reinforced on Sunday at a community barbecue in Como organised by local resident Janet Reid, where a recent crime near Canning Bridge station was discussed. We must address this situation, which the Carpenter government allowed to get out of control, and make public transport a truly viable alternative for the people of Western Australia.

I would like to finally concentrate on what can be done in the future to address these issues. I have recently spoken with a senior member of the incoming WA state government about the transport and infrastructure challenges facing my electorate, and the future seems bright. The person in question pointed out that there are vast sums of federal money that the Howard government allocated for projects that are yet to be utilised. Ending this tremendous neglect seems immediately possible. There are also many potential land transport projects that I look
forward to working with the new state government on to ensure appropriate funding is available. The proposed new entrance to Perth airport in my electorate could be one of these.

I am sure that with the new Liberal-National government in WA we can look forward to a significant improvement in the transport infrastructure of Western Australia. We will have a government that will practise long-term planning as opposed to the short-term panic policies of the outgoing state Labor government. It will be a government that will produce a feasible state infrastructure strategy. It will be a government that will help foster an integrated transport system for the state and for country areas.

In summation, Australia is facing a growing transport task, with the amount of freight on Australia’s road and rail systems estimated to nearly double by 2020. The demand in our capital cities continues to grow. Perth’s population is expected to double in the next 50 years, and it will need to provide a strong and integrated transport network if it is to cope. The ineptness of the Carpenter government in meeting their basic responsibilities to local people on transport infrastructure is well known and has only made the problem worse. The challenge is limiting our carbon emissions and adding impetus to the need to develop an efficient and effective transport sector.

The Howard government’s record was commendable. The coalition created AusLink in 2004. Under the first AusLink program from 2004-05 to 2008-09, the Howard government provided $15.8 billion in land transport infrastructure funding. For the second AusLink program, the coalition pledged another $16.8 billion over five years for national road and rail projects, totalling around $32 billion, to improve Australia’s road and rail infrastructure. The coalition will press the states to harmonise their laws so that all Australians in the transport sector will be subject to the same regulatory treatment. We support a single national system of recognition for heavy vehicles. The coalition’s policies to build on its achievements in creating a national rail network via the Australian Rail Track Corporation are welcome. Total infrastructure spending in Australia in constant 2007 dollars rose from $21 billion in 1996 to $56 billion in 2007. The Labor Party’s continuation of these policies in this legislation is a testament to the Howard government legacy and I hope they will continue to support them. However, I urge the government to pursue an integrated transport policy and to meet the election policy commitments they made to the people of Swan. I commend the bill to the House. I seek leave to table the document that I referred to.

Mr CHAMPION (Wakefield) (4.54 pm)—I rise today to support the AusLink (National Land Transport) Amendment Bill 2008. I am proud to be a part of a government that is working with councils to deliver safer roads in my electorate of Wakefield. I have a very good relationship with the councils in my electorate. They form the Wakefield Group of councils, which covers all the councils from Salisbury to Clare. It is good to have feedback from them on many different issues, including roads.

This bill fulfils two important needs. First, it represents an increase in funding for local roads in Wakefield and across the country. Second, it ensures that facilities for heavy vehicles—the trucks and B-doubles that pass through Wakefield each day—will be funded. It goes without saying that roads are an essential part of our economic and social infrastructure. Transport corridors for both industry and commuters are central to our economy and our society.
With this bill, the government will secure the Roads to Recovery program for another five years, delivering $1.75 billion in new money to improve the safety and condition of local roads. Importantly, this legislation ensures that funds can be allocated under the Roads to Recovery program for use in a particular state while the most appropriate entity to receive the funding is being determined. Local roads are critical for efficient and safe freight movements because often the last kilometre from highway to port is a local government controlled road, and that is true across the country. Local governments are responsible for more than three-quarters of all Australian roads. The continuation of the Roads to Recovery program means that local governments can confidently plan for continued improvements of those road networks.

If this bill is passed, councils in my electorate of Wakefield will receive over $2 million for urgent safety upgrades and repairs. That includes almost $1 million for the City of Salisbury alone. As a resident of that great city, I think it is a terrific contribution from the federal government. Local residents are always petitioning me on local roads. One of those roads is Main North Road between Clare and Gawler, a road that is currently being upgraded with federal funds in partnership with the Light Regional Council. Another road that comes to mind is the Kapunda to Tralee road, which is a state road but is a road that residents continually petition me about and one which I continually bring up with the state government. It is a road that, in my opinion, could do with a bit of attention. These moneys from the government are in addition to money received under financial assistance grants, ensuring that the people of Wakefield can have good local roads that do not come at the expense of other parts of the councils’ budgets—the maintenance of decent libraries and parks and other essential services.

As I said, this legislation does more than just fund local roads in places like Wakefield. It also provides for the effective implementation of the heavy vehicle safety and productivity package. This bill amends the definition of a road so that it includes heavy vehicle facilities such as rest stops, parking bays, decoupling facilities and electronic monitoring systems. This change to the definition will enable the government to provide funding of $70 million for these essential transport facilities. Not only will this ensure that our infrastructure is up to scratch, encouraging more economic activity, but it also has great potential to reduce fatalities on our roads.

One in five road deaths involves heavy vehicles, with speed and fatigue often being contributing factors. In 2007, there were over 200 road deaths in Australia involving heavy vehicles. This week the Advertiser reported on a tragic series of accidents under the headline ‘The night of ruined lives’, with the subheadline ‘Four die in 40 minutes’. The picture in this article was of an accident on the Dukes Highway at Ki Ki in the south-east.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr PD Secker)—It is pronounced ‘Kai Kai’.

Mr CHAMPION—Thank you very much, Mr Deputy Speaker. I am, of course, referring to your great electorate of Barker. The graphic image of three trucks smashed to pieces, literally, on the highway in an accident that killed a female car driver and saw a truck driver airlifted to Adelaide in a serious condition just underlines, I think, the risk that having heavy vehicles on our roads poses. It does create a significant risk to drivers. Of course, these are always tragic figures. I do not think they are inevitable. We know from the reduction in road fatalities over the last 20 years that government policy can have a positive effect and that it is
possible for governments to make our roads, vehicles and drivers safer. That is something I would certainly support, and I am sure that would be bipartisan.

By providing real facilities for heavy vehicle drivers to reduce the incidence of fatigue, to monitor their travel and to make roads safer, we have a real opportunity to address this problem. I did notice that in the House some members, including the member for Bradfield, had a go at the major retailers in this country, saying that they do not provide facilities and the like. But I happen to know that Woolworths in South Australia has provided facilities for drivers who have to wait to unload their trucks, so I do not think it is entirely fair to say that nothing is being provided: those companies do on occasion try to provide such facilities. I think it is important that through this bill the government can actually provide those facilities so that all drivers can use them, and that will make our roads safer.

Obviously, we are not undertaking this important work alone. Funding for the package is contingent on the passage of the heavy vehicle road user charges and that is a charge that was unanimously endorsed by the Australian Transport Council—the Commonwealth, state and territory transport ministers—in February this year. This legislation basically makes sure that the heavy vehicle industry pays its fair share of the infrastructure costs incurred by government in building and maintaining the roads and facilities that they use. I think it is disappointing that the previous 2007 heavy vehicle charges determination was blocked or disallowed in the other place. This year it is disappointing that, in effect, the coalition in opposition are opposing something that they proposed when in government. I hope that the charge is passed so that we can provide these very important facilities, because we want to see these upgrades rolled out as soon as they can be after 1 January 2009.

In a country as vast as ours, roads are always an infrastructure priority. They certainly are in my electorate of Wakefield, which links the north and the wine regions, particularly the Barossa Valley, with the metropolitan area, Adelaide, and especially the export corridor through to Port Adelaide. These roads are essential to our economic and social wellbeing, and that is why the Rudd government is funding the $564 million Northern Expressway, which runs from Gawler down to Port Wakefield Road and really does create a world-class transport corridor for heavy vehicles and also for commuter traffic moving between Gawler, the Barossa Valley, the port and Adelaide.

This bill provides an increase in funding for roads in the local council areas in Wakefield and across the country. It is a bill that addresses the needs of heavy vehicle drivers and, most importantly, improves the safety of our roads for every Australian motorist. For those reasons, I commend the bill to the House.

Mr RANDALL (Canning) (5.04 pm)—In the short time I have before a division is called in the House of Representatives, I will begin speaking in support of the AusLink (National Land Transport) Amendment Bill 2008. We know that this bill allows for the continuation of the Roads to Recovery program, with funding of $350 million a year to the year 2014. It also enables Roads to Recovery funding to be saved for use in a particular state or territory while arrangements are made to figure out the best way in which this money is to be spent. Finally, it amends the definition of a road to include off-road facilities used by trucks, such as truck bays, so that they are eligible for funding. I commend the government on recognising the importance of the Roads to Recovery program and expanding it.
Today I wish to speak on a broader range of topics under the umbrella of AusLink in my electorate of Canning. In November 2000, the Roads to Recovery program was introduced as a single intervention by the Commonwealth to address the specific problem of local roads reaching the end of their economic life and their replacement being beyond the capacity of local government. In the first four years of this program, the Australian government provided $1.2 billion to local councils for local road improvements, funding in excess of 15,000 projects around Australia. Roads to Recovery has been very much welcomed in Canning, and I would like to outline some of the projects that these moneys have gone into. Up until 2007, the Roads to Recovery program alone brought in $28 million to fix local roads in Canning. Almost $4 million went to the city of Armadale, $4.5 million to the city of Canning, $3 million to the shire of Murray, $3 million to the shire of Serpentine Jarrahdale, $1.2 million to the shire of Waroona and $3½ million to the City of Mandurah. To name a couple of programs, they made the intersection of Lake and Ranford roads safer, improved Armadale Road, improved safety for cyclists on Forrest Road, widened Butcher Street in Mundijong for better visibility and enabled the construction of the east-west link road in Mandurah, a road linking the city with the new train station, which was absolutely needed.

As I said previously, the problem is that local governments in most cases have little or no funding to deal with the upgrade or expansion of the roads in their local government authorities. On the state of the roads in Canning, earlier this year the state’s peak motoring body, the Royal Automobile Club of Western Australia, named three Canning roads as amongst the 10 worst roads in Western Australia, so there is no doubt that the Roads to Recovery funding is vital in Canning. On this list was the Brookton Highway between Roleystone and Karra-gullen. In December I approached the then Western Australian Minister for Planning and Infrastructure, the Hon. Alannah MacTiernan, about the safety issues of the Brookton Highway. The minister responded by saying that it was not possible to install speed humps and other traffic-calming devices on this section of the road because it was considered to be a primary distributor road. Another road was the 15-kilometre length of the South West Highway between Hamel and Cookernup, and the third was a 12-kilometre stretch of the South West Highway at Byford. These roads were named as the worst roads for several reasons: poor visibility, fading markings, narrowing, deteriorated sealing and bad alignment. This all adds up to dangerous conditions for drivers and a greater likelihood of tragic accidents. At the time, I supported the RAC’s call for the state Labor government to commit to a program bringing these worst roads up to an acceptable standard and, of course, I will urge the new Liberal government in Western Australia to investigate these roads as well.

The Tonkin Highway extension and the Byford bypass are a vital piece of road infrastructure in my electorate. Despite a 12-kilometre stretch of the South West Highway at Byford being named by the RAC as the seventh worst road in Western Australia, the then Carpenter Labor government refused to make a financial commitment for extending the Tonkin Highway to Mundijong, in turn alleviating the increasing burden on the South West Highway. I know the state member for Darling Range, Tony Simpson, has been a strong advocate for this infrastructure, and I am sure that in government he will work hard to secure this financial commitment. Road safety in the region is already a serious concern, with heavy haulage vehicles forced to take Thomas Road to the South West Highway because the Tonkin Highway comes to a dead end. In other words, it is pouring a lot of highway traffic into local roads.
Byford is one of Perth’s fastest growing areas and, without forward planning and infrastructure development, locals will be left with an unsafe and unreliable public transport network.

While we are on Byford, I would like to mention the Byford train. Together with Councillor Murphy of the shire of Serpentine Jarrahdale and residents, I persistently called for the previous state government to honour its 2001 election commitment to get the Byford train on track by 2008. This involves extending the existing Armadale line. Stops along a future Byford line have been suggested at Wungong, at Byford and at Cardup, where park ‘n’ ride has been proposed.

Despite the previous state government’s promise, until recently the Byford train was belittled as being unrealistic and too expensive by the former minister. I said to the former minister that she needed to deliver on this extension of the railway to Byford. She said how unrealistic and expensive it was until I pointed out a press release that she had issued in 2001 in which she had promised to deliver it by 2008. It had not even been started, so she got it on the radar and said she would have a look at it.

We have now got to the point where a lack of road and rail infrastructure is strangling development in the south-eastern corridor. The state Labor government was so fixated on constructing the Perth-Mandurah rail link that it neglected to look at the bigger picture of public transport in the south-eastern corridor. Considering the rising cost of petrol, it is important that we look at alternative means of transportation and improving public transport—that actually has to be a priority. We will be doing our best with the new coalition government in Western Australia to get this extension.

The Pinjarra bypass, with more than 10,000 vehicle movements, including 500 haulage vehicles a day through the main street of Pinjarra, has long been on the cards. The $22 million bypass is in the shire of Murray and sees a dual carriageway deviation around the busy town. The proposed stage 1 runs from the South Western Highway south of Pinjarra to the Pinjarra-Williams Road, connecting at a T-junction. The bypass will reduce the volume of traffic forced to travel through the town on the South Western Highway, in particular the huge number of B-double trucks and heavy haulage vehicles forced to travel down the main street and past two schools.

The expansion of the mining activities of Boddington, the expansion of the Wagerup refinery and the continued development of the Peel region are putting pressure on the existing infrastructure. The freight demands on this region are only going to increase, and the current developments in the shire of Murray could see a population increase of almost 20,000, meaning that not only are there more trucks on the road but a lot more cars.

In 2006, the Department of Transport and Regional Services was forced to rank the shire of Murray’s application for AusLink funding for the same project as a low priority. Why? When the then state government were asked if they would support it in matching funding through the AusLink strategic roads funding program they said, ‘We’re happy to support it but the funds will have to come from the Perth to Bunbury highway’. In other words, they were not really serious about putting money into the bypass because they would have had to rip it out of the Perth to Bunbury highway. That is why DOTARS had put it as a low priority—the state government were not serious.
Main Roads has conducted assessments into the project; however, no construction funds are currently allocated in state or federal budgets. Last year the coalition promised $10 million towards the Pinjarra bypass and there were indications that the state government would match it. In fact, I had a letter from Alannah MacTiernan, the state minister, saying if it got federal funds she would match them. However, to date the Rudd government has shown no indication of acting on the coalition’s initiative. The member for Murray-Wellington, Murray Cowper, is committed to seeing this project through, and I trust that funding for the highway will be high on the new government’s agenda.

I am pleased to say there is real progress being made on the new Perth-Bunbury highway. It is a project that I am very proud of having been associated with. I know the member for O’Connor, when speaking on this bill yesterday, noted the work of both me and my colleague the former member for Forrest in securing funding for this project. I know that the member for Forrest, who is in the chamber, is also a passionate supporter of the Perth to Bunbury highway because Bunbury is in her electorate, which would benefit very much from this magnificent piece of road infrastructure.

The 70-kilometre dual carriageway starting at the current south-eastern end of the Kwinana Freeway at Safety Bay Road is to join the Old Coast Road near Lake Clifton. It is on track to be open to motorists well before the December 2009 deadline, possibly for Easter but certainly by June. Around 50,000 motorists travel down to south-western Western Australia for Easter, so it would be pretty good if we could have it open by then, because of the major traffic snarls and the dangerous road conditions that the Easter weekend brings.

It is not often that state managed projects are completed on time. I would like to say that on this occasion it is largely as a result of the former coalition putting boundaries around the then state Minister for Planning and Infrastructure, Alannah MacTiernan. Together with the strong partnership of the Southern Gateway Alliance, the main reason for the highway being ahead of schedule is the conditions that the federal government set into the AusLink funding agreement. As the member for O’Connor pointed out, and I reconfirm it, we as a government said that we would not support any AusLink funding going into Western Australia unless the minister committed to a 2006 start date and a 2009 completion date, because she had been fooling around with the date for years and years. The $170 million was conditional on this agreement, and she did begin the road in 2006. I stood at the end of the Kwinana Freeway with silver shovels along with the then Premier, Alan Carpenter, and dug a couple of holes in the ground. That got her out of the 2006 commitment.

With the Labor government’s record on major projects running late and over budget, the coalition’s agreement was designed with Peel motorists in mind so they could have some certainty of this highway finishing by the expected time. Progress is extremely clear, as you can see when you drive along the alignment, and the construction of the Murray Bridge, crossing Pinjarra Road and the Murray River at North Yunderup, commenced last May. The 272-metre long bridge is being built in 18 stages, and it is the biggest structure in the biggest single road project in Western Australia’s history. So it is a massive piece of road infrastructure and it is very much needed for the region. I am very pleased that we are actually getting it built on time and, I understand, on budget.

The Mandurah Entrance Road—or road A, as it is commonly known—is another project that is high on the priority list for Mandurah motorists. The state government originally pulled
the Mandurah Entrance Road off the Perth to Bunbury highway project as a way to reduce costs. This was often done—they did the same on the Tonkin Highway extension and Corfield Road. Now this road is imperative, because unless road A is constructed Mandurah will be isolated. It is estimated to cost $130 million. Road A comes off the Perth to Bunbury highway south of Paganoni Road and joins the rail alignment, goes under the bridge at Gordon Road and intersects Fremantle Road adjacent to the rail station in Mandurah. When the Gordon Road bridge was built over the rail line it was built to accommodate the required four-lane road.

The timing of this road is now becoming an issue with the completion of the Perth to Bunbury highway approaching. Early construction would mean that freeway traffic would not have to disperse onto local roads, particularly Gordon Road, past the schools on Lakes Road and past the hospital, allied health services and accommodation for the aged in the area. Main Roads needs to work out a time frame for this project, but more and more it is looking unlikely it will commence before the highway opens, which is very sad because it is going to take a lot more to complete once the contractors leave the Perth to Bunbury highway.

In October last year the then opposition spokesman for transport, Martin Ferguson, said, ‘$130 million for the Mandurah Entrance Road will be delivered with the new Perth to Bunbury highway project and funded fifty-fifty by federal and state Labor governments.’ Well, we have a federal Labor government but we do not have a state Labor government anymore, but we would like it delivered, because the then shadow minister said that he would deliver the federal government’s component, should they be the government. I will keep them to that promise, I can assure you, Mr Deputy Speaker.

The bridges in Mandurah are also a very important consideration in this AusLink funding. The traffic congestion in Mandurah has got to such levels that existing bridges over the canals and estuaries are being pushed to breaking point. The Old Mandurah Traffic Bridge, which is an icon in the seaside township, is in desperate need of upgrading. Should the upgrades not be made by 2013, the city may be forced to close this bridge, which would put even more pressure on the Estuary Bridge. Just to put this in context, the old Mandurah bridge is made out of timber supports and has been refurbished many times. However, it is in such a state now that it is almost getting to the point of being dangerous.

The City of Mandurah is in discussions on the early implementation of an automated switching system for the three traffic lanes on the Estuary Bridge, because it is certainly a bridge that helps access to the city. The city has raised the option of converting the existing lanes on the Estuary Bridge from north to south in peak periods on weekdays, which would relieve pressure on the old traffic bridge.

Recently the Mayor of the City of Mandurah, Mayor Creevey, said:

With the increasing population in the City's southern areas, our major concern is that if the region ever faced a major emergency the traffic-carrying capacity of the bridge could be a ‘life or death’ matter.

Statistics from 2003 show that whilst the opening of the Perth to Bunbury highway would relieve some traffic off the Mandurah bridges it would only be around 20 per cent, indicating that the majority of truck movements are local. The city is desperate to have the duplication of the Estuary Bridge brought forward. To explain very clearly, the Estuary Bridge is the bridge out of town which has to be reconfigured every morning and afternoon to allow a single lane one way and a dual carriageway the other way to get the traffic through at peak periods. The
bridge needs to be duplicated. The Peel region is one of the fastest growing areas in Western Australia, and the situation will continue to be dangerous if the duplication does not happen.

Interestingly, the old wooden Mandurah bridge was handed to the City of Mandurah in a benevolent way by a previous state government’s Main Roads, which said, ‘It’s your responsibility now.’ But it is such a major cost pressure to refurbish it that the City of Mandurah, which is at the maximum of its borrowings, cannot afford to do this. Unless they get help from the federal and state governments, this bridge will have to be closed because it is gradually decaying. What I am suggesting, and I will be approaching both the City of Mandurah and the new transport minister in Western Australia over this, is that this bridge now be put back into the care of the state government and Main Roads WA because no local or government authority can afford in any way to take on the responsibility of rebuilding or refurbishing such a major piece of infrastructure. Their ability to raise funds to do something like this is totally out of the realms of possibility, and they do need help with this.

Finally, I wish to mention the Dwellingup bypass. The shire of Murray has looked at the possibility of a Dwellingup bypass. As I mentioned earlier, there is a need to upgrade the infrastructure in this area to take into account the impact of the Boddington Gold Mine and the expansion of the Wagerup refinery. Interestingly, the Boddington Gold Mine will be a lot more on my radar because, under the redistribution in Western Australia, there is a good chance that I might end up with the shire of Boddington as part of the Canning electorate and I am sure they will be asking me for help on this issue. Whilst it has been deemed that the Pinjarra bypass may not be viable, upgrades to the Pinjarra-Williams Road between Pinjarra and Dwellingup is becoming more important, particularly as huge trucks will now be transporting gold ore down to the port of Bunbury. On a single-lane and hilly road with very few bypasses this is going to become a major traffic hazard and safety issue. I have already written to the previous minister, Alannah MacTiernan, about upgrades of this road or rerouting trucks so that they are taken away from the rural traffic on this very small rural road and I got a rejection. That is very disappointing. I will be taking it all up again with the new state government and looking at the assistance of this federal program for infrastructure, the new AusLink program. It will be an enormous amount of money over the years to 2014. I will also be making sure that the new member of state parliament, Mr Grylls from the National Party, realises that under the royalties for regions proposal—and Dwellingup is a region in Western Australia—there is an opportunity for some of the $650 million that he is talking about to go into some of these rural roads that would not necessarily be funded out of ongoing programs. This program generated by the coalition government is a good one, and I support its intention.

Ms VAMVAKINOU (Calwell) (5.24 pm)—Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker Sidebottom. I will just road-test my voice and get it back gradually. I was in the chamber last week when you were making your contribution to this bill. Can I just say on the record that I found your presentation extremely poetic, with a lot of dramatic flair. I knew then that I could not emulate that kind of narrative when talking about roads.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr S Sidebottom) (5.20 pm)—Thank you. I share the same birthday as Shakespeare.

Ms VAMVAKINOU—I am sure you do. The AusLink (National Land Transport) Amendment Bill 2008 currently before us demonstrates, without doubt, the Rudd Labor govern-
ment’s commitment to improving road safety as well as the quality of our local roads and local road infrastructure. Road safety and the adequacy of local road infrastructure to meet residential and transport needs are two issues which are never far from the minds of Australian motorists or from the minds of the people in my electorate of Calwell, which covers much of Melbourne’s outer metropolitan north-west region. Road upgrades and improvements to local road safety continue to feature as strong electorate concerns.

Calwell is home to some of Melbourne’s strongest growth corridors, where there has literally been an explosion in new housing developments. Some of those high-growth corridors include Craigieburn, in my electorate, and Mount Ridley, which is experiencing a significant and phenomenal growth rate. This population growth means that there are more motorists on our local roads and more pressures in terms of road use, convenience and minimising traffic congestion. Unlike the inner suburbs of Melbourne, where public transport is more likely to be an option for those not wishing to drive, in Calwell everyday activities such as dropping the kids off at school, going to the shops and getting to work nearly always require the use of a car, making these pressures on the roads in my electorate all the more acute.

We also have regional areas where local roads were built with only a small local population in mind but which today are burdened by the daily thoroughfare of local commuters going into and out of the city. Bulla Road, in the still tiny town of Bulla in my electorate, runs through to the satellite suburb of Sunbury and is one such example of a road where many local residents are forced on a daily basis to battle the delays, inconveniences and frustration of peak-hour traffic. I can attest to that frustration because I have been caught at that time as I moved through my electorate. It is indeed a horrendous situation for the locals and for people who wish to use Bulla Road to come in and out of Sunbury.

Calwell is also home to Melbourne airport and a number of freight and export companies that rely on the airport to keep their businesses going, as well as being a centre for manufacturing in Victoria. The Hume Highway is one of the main arterial roads running from Sydney to Melbourne and it cuts a direct path right through my electorate. This means that heavy vehicles are frequently on our local roads. We often talk about the use by heavy vehicles of the Hume Highway. I would say that on a daily basis there are thousands on that road that often find ways to meander through my electorate onto smaller roads, creating pressures and undue concerns for the people who live there.

Keeping on top of the many challenges that these issues pose in terms of road safety and the adequacy of our local road infrastructure in Calwell is crucial. This is why the AusLink (National Land Transport) Amendment Bill 2008, which I speak to today, is a very important bill. The bill contains two main provisions. The first is to amend the definition of ‘road’ in the AusLink (National Land Transport) Act 2005 to allow for the funding of heavy vehicle facilities like off-road rest stops and heavy vehicle bays. In particular, this bill seeks to expand the current definition of a road to include ‘a facility off the road used by heavy vehicles in connection with travel on the road’. This includes off-road rest stops, heavy vehicle bays, weigh stations and decoupling areas but not commercial developments such as food or fuel outlets or motels.

To build more off-road facilities designed to accommodate heavy vehicles, the government has committed $70 million under its Heavy Vehicle Safety and Productivity Program announced by the Treasurer in the last budget. In addition to funding off-road facilities, the pro-
gram also makes provision for trialling new technologies that electronically monitor a truck
driver’s work hours and vehicle speed, as well as road capacity enhancements that will enable
high-productivity vehicles to use more of the road network. These measures are designed to
tackle driver fatigue and improve road safety—measures that all motorists will welcome, in-
cluding those living in my electorate of Calwell.

The importance of these measures takes on added weight when it is remembered that there
were over 200 road deaths on Australian roads involving heavy vehicles last year alone, with
speed and fatigue often being key contributing factors. Yet, despite this emphasis on improv-
ing road safety, the opposition seems determined to block these important measures in the
Senate. Sadly, it seems that the safety of Australian motorists comes a distant second to the
recalcitrance of an out of touch opposition.

The funding allocated under the government’s Heavy Vehicle Safety and Productivity Pro-
gram will be offset by an increase in the heavy vehicle road user charge. Only last June, the
former transport minister and now Leader of the Nationals, Mr Warren Truss, was advocating
just such an increase to the heavy vehicle road-user charge. Yet the opposition has now de-
cided to do a backflip on this issue, blocking the passage of this charge in the Senate in much
the same way that it is doing with a raft of other legislation, such as the government’s plans to
invest in Australia’s ailing public dental healthcare system, which was left to badly deteriorate
under 11 years of the Howard government. Obstructionism for its own sake is not what the
Australian public expect of a credible opposition, and they certainly deserve better.

The second provision of this bill is to extend the life of the Roads to Recovery program for
another five years through to 30 June 2014. Under the current act, this program is due to end
on 30 June 2009. This extension will see the Rudd government commit a record $1.75 billion
over the next five years to help improve local roads around Australia. In essence, the Roads to
Recovery program provides additional funding to local government for improvements to both
urban and rural roads, with grants being paid directly to local councils to help upgrade and
improve local road infrastructure. This funding serves to supplement the money local councils
spend on roads.

This financial year, Hume City Council, whose borders coincide identically with those of
my electorate of Calwell, received just under $780,000 under the government’s Roads to Re-
covery program. This is on top of the $8.8 million that the Rudd government is providing to
Hume City Council in financial assistance grants over the coming financial year to fund im-
provements to roads and services within the city of Hume and, by extension, within my elec-
torate of Calwell. The Roads to Recovery program is an important source of funding when it
comes to improving local road infrastructure and road safety for local residents living in
Craigieburn, Sunbury, Roxburgh Park, Greenvale, Tullamarine, Broadmeadows and across the
breadth of my electorate. The five-year extension to this program that is contained within this
bill not only ensures that this important source of Commonwealth funding will continue to be
made available for the improvement of our local roads in Calwell; it also provides local coun-
cils like that of Hume with the certainty they need to be able to plan ahead for road upgrades
and safety improvements.

Another source of AusLink funding through which the Rudd government has continued to
help improve road safety in Calwell is the federal Black Spot Program. Just last month I had
the pleasure of announcing an additional $393,000 in Commonwealth funds to fix three dan-
dangerous black spots in my electorate. Under the latest round of accident black spot funding, the Rudd government will provide $205,000 to install speed humps and associated signs, remove the traffic island at Edmund Street, paint a centre line, provide indented roadside parking and upgrade street lighting on King Street between Barry Road and Terang Street in Dallas. In the five-year period to 2006, there have been four accidents on King Street causing injury along this stretch of road, with three of those crashes involving parked cars and one involving a turning related incident. All occurred at night, with traffic congestion and speed significant contributing factors.

I also announced $105,000 in funding to install traffic lights, with pedestrian crossings, at Station Street and Evans Street in Sunbury. In the same five-year period to 2006, there were seven accidents causing injury at this intersection, with the majority of those the result of turning related incidents. And an additional $83,000 has also been committed to fund the installation of traffic lights, with pedestrian crossings, where David Munroe Drive intersects with Stainsby Crescent and the shopping centre access road in Roxburgh Park—one of the high growth suburbs I mentioned earlier. There were injuries from a total of 10 crashes at this intersection over the five-year period to 2006. All were again turning related accidents, which, as any local resident will tell you, are inevitable given the blind corners involved at this intersection.

In relation to the improvements at Roxburgh Park, I would like to briefly mention the efforts of a Roxburgh Park resident and a constituent of mine, Mr Antonio Taranto, who took it upon himself to lobby the council and the government for a period of about four years to draw attention to the need to do something about the dangers associated with this road close to his home. Antonio is in his 70s and retired but decided that he had to make it his job to secure the safety of his neighbourhood. He spent those years putting a petition together. He was able to collect in excess of 400 signatures from local residents calling for traffic lights to be installed at the intersection of David Munroe Drive and Stainsby Crescent. His efforts, I can say, made all the difference. I want to take this opportunity to recognise him because he did an amazing job. He documented his campaign in such a way that it is almost a historical document or even a proforma for anybody on how to lobby local, state and federal governments in order to achieve an outcome. Antonio certainly did, and I had the great pleasure of being able to visit him at home and tell him that his mission had finally been achieved.

All three road safety upgrades in Dallas, Sunbury and Roxburgh Park will be funded under, and made possible by, the federal government’s Black Spot Program. Extending the government’s Roads to Recovery program for another five years and continuing to invest in improvements to local road infrastructure will be welcomed by local residents and motorists not just across my electorate but across Australia.

The same can be said about plans to improve local road safety by building additional heavy vehicle facilities like off-road rest stops and heavy vehicle bays. Both are key tenets of the AusLink (National Land Transport) Amendment Bill 2008, which demonstrates this government’s commitment to improving road safety as well as the quality of our local roads and local road infrastructure. It is for these reasons that I support this bill and commend it to the House.

Mr SECKER (Barker) (5.38 pm)—I rise to speak on theAusLink (National Land Transport) Amendment Bill 2008 because it is very important to my electorate and the sorts of
things that I want to achieve as a member of parliament. In fact, my first speech after my maiden speech was about road infrastructure and the need for the improvement of road infrastructure in rural areas. I have certainly kept up speaking on that matter wherever I am because it is a very important issue to my electorate of Barker.

As Deputy Speaker Sidebottom would remember, together we were on an agriculture and regional services committee of this parliament. I can remember hearing from the then President of the Australian Local Government Association, John Ross. I know him well because he actually happens to be a councillor on my local government council, the Tatiara council. He raised the issue of the need for greater funding for rural roads, especially local government roads. He showed us quite clearly that if we kept up the present rate of funding our roads would only get worse because we were not spending enough.

The Howard government responded to that report with the Roads to Recovery program. I feel proud that together, Mr Deputy Speaker Sidebottom, we were part of that happening. It has been a great program for all the roads in local government areas in this country. It has certainly helped their funding for roads. In fact, in South Australia we got the best deal of the lot, probably because we were not getting such a good deal in other areas. Our funding increased by 118 per cent for every council in South Australia. I know the Australian average was about 70 per cent, which, in any terms, is still a very substantial increase in funding for roads. I was in local government for 11 years before coming to this place. When I talk to my local council people, they are very thankful for that program and I am pleased to say that, as part of this legislation, we will be guaranteeing that funding for another five years.

There are two main purposes to the AusLink (National Land Transport) Amendment Bill 2008. The first is to change the definition of ‘road’ in the Auslink (National Land Transport) Act 2005 to allow for the funding of heavy vehicle facilities such as off-road rest stops. I think it is very important that we do that. The second purpose is to allow the Roads to Recovery program to be extended for another five years to 2014. That will certainly help planning for local government areas all around Australia.

For those of us with rural electorates, especially large rural electorates as in the case of Barker, AusLink is a critical program. My electorate is so large that it is about 10 per cent larger than Tasmania. You can imagine the roads we have in that electorate and many constituents travel large distances on rural and regional roads as they go about their business and family duties. Also this has critical safety implications for the heavy vehicle industry. This is of significant economic importance in Barker with a number of major heavy vehicle transport firms based throughout the electorate. It also has safety implications for other vehicles on the road. We have large transport hubs in the Mount Gambier area and Murray Bridge, in the Riverland and Bordertown. The AusLink national network comes right into my electorate. I have the privilege of travelling on that network nearly every day that I go to my office or around my electorate. It is a very important connecting corridor in my electorate, as it is in many other electorates around Australia.

AusLink focuses the Australian government’s future investment in land transport infrastructure by providing a strategic framework for the planning and funding of Australia’s key roads and railways to meet long-term economic and social needs. In the Roads to Recovery program element of AusLink, grants are paid directly to councils if there is a council for the relevant area. Councils receive those funds and the money is intended to supplement council
road spending. One of the wonderful records of the Roads to Recovery program is that something like $375 million a year, if my memory serves me correctly, is administered by two public services. I think it is quite incredible that two public servants can administer that amount of money. We have given it to the local governments and they make the decisions. I have always been a great believer of local people making, as best they can, decisions for their local area because they know it better than we here in Canberra. So that has been a great part of the hugely efficient Roads to Recovery program—that that spending has had just two public servants to administer it. Funding is also applied to unincorporated areas—that is, where there is no local council such as in the area north of the Riverland in my electorate. I have a small part of that area. The rest of the unincorporated roads in South Australia are, I believe, in the electorate of Grey—and, of course, that is a pretty large electorate.

The Howard government established the Roads to Recovery program in 2000, and in July 2005 the program became part of AusLink. AusLink was a successful program under the Howard government, and the funding was $2.24 billion, of which $304 million was for Roads to Recovery. So I correct my earlier statement that it was $375 million. The actual figure in the last year was $304 million. This bill extends the Roads to Recovery program funding from 30 June 2009 until 30 June 2014. I suspect that, when we come nearer to 2014, we will be doing the same thing, because of the absolute necessity for this program.

The benefits of the Roads to Recovery program, particularly for local government with its responsibilities for some 800,000 kilometres of roads across our country, are well acknowledged and the extension of the program is well justified. Just last week, on 16 September, four people died in 40 minutes of horror in three separate accidents on South Australian roads. I note that the member for Wakefield referred to this in his contribution to the parliament as well. One of those horrific deaths was in Ki Ki, in my electorate, on the Dukes Highway. Two other people were seriously injured in that accident. It was a black day indeed on South Australian roads, and it reminds us of the responsibility we as members of parliament bear in road safety funding. I make the point because it was the Keating government, I think, that in error got rid of the black spot funding, and the Howard government restored that black spot funding. It has been so well recognised that our state government—and, I suspect, other state governments—have copied the Black Spot Program, even using the same name. It shows the necessity of that funding.

Successes of AusLink funding in my electorate include projects such as the $205 million for the Sturt Highway, a very important road because it services the Barossa and the Riverland and, of course, is the main road from Adelaide to Sydney. In 2003—I did not actually represent the area then; it was in the seat of Wakefield at the time—the Sturt Highway featured in the 10 most dangerous stretches of highway in Australia at that time, with 25 casualty crashes and four deaths. So $205 million committed by the Howard government to the Sturt Highway has gone a long way towards fixing up some of the problems that we had occurring on that road due to poor infrastructure.

We also spent enormous amounts on the Dukes Highway, on the South Australian side of the main road from Adelaide to Melbourne. I think we probably spent more money on the Dukes Highway than on any other road in South Australia, certainly in recent times. It is the most important road for South Australians, either for their local transport or for their interstate transport. It certainly has the highest traffic. I was able to get a grant of $15 million to spend
on 17 kilometres of road from Bordertown to the Victorian border because the road infrastruc-
ture had deteriorated quite badly. It is now the best part of the Dukes Highway.

I also make the point that, because the road was so bad, the state government reduced the
speed limit from 110 to 100 kilometres an hour, which we all thought was fair enough because
the road had deteriorated, but now that it has been fixed up, and is the best part of the whole
Dukes Highway from Adelaide to the Victorian border—some 250 kilometres, I would say, at
a guess—they have kept that speed limit at 100 kilometres an hour, whereas on the rest of the
Dukes Highway it is 110 kilometres an hour. And guess where they put the police radars. It is
on that stretch where you would expect to be travelling at 110 but they have kept the limit at
100 kilometres an hour. That is why some people get cynical about revenue raising in the
name of safety, because this is the safest part of the road and yet it has the lower speed limit.

So there has been a lot of money spent on road infrastructure already in my electorate, but
there is a deal more to be done. Other critical needs include a bypass of Renmark—at the
moment all the heavy traffic passes through the middle of Renmark, and I do not think that is
a very satisfactory position—and the Truro bypass. Unfortunately, as a result of timing and
running out of funding the state government has decided it cannot afford to do the Truro by-
pass. We need to fund the Penola bypass; the Murray Bridge to Karoonda road, which is quite
shocking at times; long sections of the Mallee Highway; sections of the road from Border-
town to Loxton; and the Barossa Valley Way. That is very important for our tourism, not just
for transport. Under AusLink, I have already obtained the funding for the Millicent bypass
and the Mount Gambier Worrolong Road bypass and many others. Whilst there were some
people on Worrolong Road that were concerned about having that as a bypass, we actually
made it a better road and the trucks were using it as a bypass anyway, so this was really fixing
up what was an existing position.

The Penola bypass is a major project and a critical safety issue for the town of Penola. The
safety of pedestrians and vehicular traffic in Church Street, Penola, due to existing and in-
creasing volumes of heavy traffic using the road, has been an issue of concern for the entire
Penola community for some years. Current figures indicate that there are approximately 550
heavy transport vehicle movements through the Penola township per day, and that will sig-
nificantly increase when the blue gum transportation traffic comes online.

I might add that Penola is where the Mary MacKillop Interpretive Centre and the Tenison
Woods MacKillop Schoolhouse are located, and these bring many tourists into the town. I
would like to think that we could rely less on the intervention of the blessed Mary MacKillop
to assure the safety of tourists and residents in Penola and more on the government to inter-
vene and fund the much-needed bypass. On 22 February 2008, I wrote to the Minister for In-
frastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Local Government about funding for the
Penola bypass, but I have not yet received a reply. I note that the minister did actually attend a
function at the nearby Coonawarra race day a couple of weeks before that, so he is well aware
of the issue. It would be nice to actually get a reply from the minister to show that he has
some real concern about a dangerous position.

Long-distance truck driving in Australia remains a dangerous occupation. Stressful work
schedules and fatigue in the long-haul trucking industry have been well documented. Back in
2000 a report found that, compared to the UK and the USA, Australians were twice as likely
to die in a crash involving a heavy vehicle. The Howard government legislated, and that has
gone a long way to fixing that. I know that in my electorate the industry itself has cleaned up its act in ensuring the safety of its drivers. The trucking industry over the past five years has had about a 22 per cent decrease in fatal crashes for articulated trucks. So, while one death is one too many, there certainly has been a rate of improvement in conjunction with high productivity in the industry.

Nonetheless, long-haul driving is a tiring job and rest areas play an important role in helping all drivers manage their fatigue on the road. Roadside rest areas provide opportunities for heavy vehicle drivers to take rest breaks during work periods and to check their loads. Rest areas are a vital part of the road infrastructure on rural roads. The Australian Trucking Association have called for heavy vehicle rest areas on key interstate routes to be given a high funding priority, and I support this. Whilst they have nominated 18 priority rest areas for funding, regrettably there are none in my electorate. I can assure them there are plenty of areas where there should be, although I note they have left it open in South Australia to submit more. There is also plenty of scope for the state Labor government to match the funding. In fact, it was the South Australian Road Transport Association Executive Director, Steve Shearer, who recently pointed out that the Australian national highway network should have 22,000 rest areas for heavy vehicle drivers instead of the current 986.

This bill will give the government the legal power to fund truck rest areas under its Heavy Vehicle Safety and Productivity Program and it will also open the way for the government to provide more money for rest areas under its AusLink land transport program in the years to come. Unfathomably, the Minister for Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Local Government has said that the funding of rest stops is contingent on the passage of previously defeated bills which imposed higher registration costs on heavy vehicles and which would have bankrupted small owner-driver operations. While I am pleased that there is nothing in this bill that reflects that contingency, I recall saying in this place earlier this year that heavy vehicle operators already pay significant registration charges, which vary by truck type and varying axle loads, and diesel fuel excise.

Australia’s national freight load is expected to double by 2015—and let me remind the House that is only seven years away—and road transport’s share of this compared with rail is expected to increase. It follows then that it is important to keep the Australian trucking sector cost efficient to support Australian industry’s international competitiveness. Many truck drivers in my electorate are small business owner-operators who have taken out substantial mortgages so they can cover the cost of their vehicles, which need replacing every five years or so. Holding safety to ransom, as the minister would have done by linking funding for rest stops to increased registration charges, is not reflective of a responsible government.

In conclusion, I remind the Rudd Labor government that rural and regional Australians are already hurting from this government’s abolition of funding programs, to the tune of $1 billion, and that these are people who are not fooled by spin. Our country’s truck drivers deserve safety and support with no strings attached, and rural and regional Australians who have little or no public transport options deserve a decent road system. For this reason I commend the bill to the House.

Mr ADAMS (Lyons) (5.56 pm)—As many before me have said in this debate on the AusLink (National Land Transport) Amendment Bill 2008, the bill is giving an ongoing commitment to road safety and local road infrastructure. The bill amends the definition of a road so
that it includes heavy vehicle facilities such as rest stops, parking bays, decoupling facilities and electronic monitoring systems, which are a modern phenomena in road transport. This will enable the government to provide funding for these facilities under the $70 million Heavy Vehicle Safety and Productivity package, which I understand has been worked through with players in the trucking industry. It will fund areas, such as trials of technologies that electronically monitor a truck driver’s work hours and vehicle speed, along with rest stops for drivers. It will also include bridge-strengthening projects and upgrades to linkages between existing AusLink freight routes, enabling access to those roads by more productive heavy vehicles. Mr Deputy Speaker Sidebottom, you would know some of those roads in Tasmania and that all those things are relevant to the trucking industry of our state. Driver fatigue is a major concern affecting all categories of road users; therefore this bill should contribute to a reduction in driver fatigue and hence accidents involving heavy vehicles.

The other part of the bill is for the Roads to Recovery program, which provides much-needed funding to local councils around Australia so they can make urgent repairs and provide upgrades to their roads. This will allow for better management of the funding list which sets out all funding recipients in Australia and the amount they receive and which is currently not able to be amended except in very limited circumstances. So the heavy vehicle safety program links closely with the Roads to Recovery program, making it even more important as much of the heavy traffic currently on our roads is slowed by the state of those roads off the national highway and puts pressure on their condition.

I understand the current funding ceases on 30 June 2009, but the current government has decided to continue this funding for the period 2009 to 2014. As we all know, local governments are responsible for more than three-quarters of all Australian roads. I understand that is over 810,000 kilometres. That is a lot of road. This gives them an opportunity to plan for the future for the continued improvement of the road network. The increase in funding will add another $50 million to the program, from $300 million to $350 million under the government’s commitment to increase our investment.

The features of this program are: grants are paid directly to councils, if there is a council in the relevant area; all councils receive funds; the money is intended to supplement not substitute the council’s spending on roads—and we know that there is no council in Australia that would ever do that, and, of course, they are not supposed to—councils nominate the projects to be funded. It also applies to unincorporated areas—that is, where there is no local council.

Tasmania knows how important this program is. Many small areas have been left off the map over the years. The one area that comes to mind is the Woodsdale Road, which passes the Woodsdale Hall and the old schoolhouse there—which now is playing a very important role.

A division having been called in the House of Representatives—

Sitting suspended from 6.01 pm to 6.20 pm

Mr ADAMS—Previously, I was talking about small areas being left off the map in road funding at times over the years. One such area in the electorate of Lyons is the Woodsdale Road. This passes the Woodsdale Hall and the old schoolhouse, which is now playing a great role in rejuvenating the region as an historical centre and museum. The maintenance of this road was taken over by the council in return for the Mud Walls Road being done up by the state government, and it has breathed new life into the Woodsdale-Levendale area. We had to
put together some interesting funding arrangements to achieve that. Senator Watson, who re-
tired at the last election—he was a Liberal senator for Tasmania over a long period of time—
and the state member for Lyons, Michael Polley, helped achieve those goals, but it was diffi-
cult to work out an arrangement for that funding.

I know there are sure to be other roads that have been left off the map and remain unsealed
because of changing circumstances, and we need road funding to achieve those things. This
funding fits into those needs very well and assists us to do that. Lorinna Road, in the Kentish
municipality, is another prime target for Roads to Recovery funding. For decades that road
has been on a high cliff; it has been there for many decades and causes great difficulties in
being there. There has been an estimate of something like $40 million to rectify the problem.
So I think Roads to Recovery will have a role to play in doing up River Road and having that
become the main road into the Lorinna Valley.

Black spot funding has achieved much, but we need to improve the criteria of how we
make judgements about what is a black spot. The number of deaths on a certain stretch of
road should not be the only reason to fix a very dangerous section of road. There is a need for
more community input. I know that local government does have a say and this is good for the
council, the community and the local economy, as well as being good for the safety and well-
being of everybody who travels on those roads. I guess many of us write many letters seeking
changes to roads in our local areas without, at times, much success. To get those ideas to filter
through to the decision-makers is sometimes a very slow and tedious process. Funding of in-
frastructure was left off the agenda in the Howard days. Thank God, the Rudd government has
got the Infrastructure Australia fund together to fund roads, ports and airports. With road
funding, of course, we can build the long-term viability of the country.

I am particularly keen on this bill, which deals with safety and local roads infrastructure in
northern Lyons, and I welcome the promise of $3.1 million towards the $6.2 million upgrade
of the Illawarra Road link at Longford. My aunt—my mother’s sister—died, much too early,
on a particularly dangerous T intersection that has changed very little over the years, and there
continues to be too many accidents and deaths at this intersection. It has never been fixed, the
problem being that the national highway, which runs from Hobart to Launceston, is funded to
go into Launceston. A few kilometres before that is the turn off on the Illawarra link road, so
people use the link into Launceston—if that is their destination—and go out through Prospect
on to the north-west and down to the ports, Devonport and Burnie. The truckies that are head-
ing to the ports of Devonport or Burnie, and to the ferries there, use the Illawarra Road as a
shortcut from the Midlands Highway to the north-west coast. I have never been able to con-
vince anybody that this piece of state highway needs to become part of the national highway.
It needs to be upgraded to that effect so that we can change this difficult and dangerous situa-
tion.

This road was not designed to take such heavy traffic. The junction at Longford has been
the scene of many crashes, including, as I mentioned, that of my aunt. The pledge to upgrade
this link road is welcomed and I hope that at some point it may be reclassified as part of the
national highway with a proper intersection works to acknowledge the amount of traffic that
uses it.

With this strong commitment to fund infrastructure projects, this government has allowed
regional areas—in this case, Tasmania—to upgrade a sadly lacking road network, at all levels
of government. The local mayors of southern Tasmania took up the fight to upgrade the entrance to Hobart and were able to convince the Labor Party to take this on board. We saw the opportunities provided by $131 million towards the $164 million Brighton bypass and the upgrade of the East Derwent Highway. The improvements are massive and will help the state provide, possibly for the first time, an integrated transport package. The state of Tasmania really needs to put together a proper integrated transport strategy that incorporates all levels of transport. It is one of the last pieces of infrastructure that we need to put together, which was started by the late Premier Jim Bacon.

As well as this, there is $56 million provided specifically towards the $79 million Brighton transport hub, which is at the end of my electorate as you go into Hobart where we think the railway will now come to an end, instead of rattling down the river to Hobart. This will become a major hub which will bypass the township of Brighton, in the southern part of the Lyons electorate, and will also bypass a busy shopping complex and a primary school, which is just around the corner from the national highway. There is also $11 million towards a $14 million upgrade of the Bridgewater Bridge. There is $24 million for rail capacity improvements at Rhyndaston on the main north-south rail line, which will put rail back into the picture a bit more than it currently is, with its present management levels and a company that does not seem to be able to make any headway in improving its lot.

The Rhyndaston rail area was built in the 1880s using horses and drays, picks and shovels. There are many very bad bends. It needs to be upgraded considerably and $24 million is allocated to do that. There is also $30 million to upgrade the Derwent Valley rail line and bridges from Boyer to Karanja to reduce the number of log trucks on the road, as well as $50 million to upgrade the H5 engine of the Derwent Valley Railway. This is a tourism issue, not a road funding issue. There is $5 million towards a $6.2 million investment to start planning the Pontville-Bagdad bypass and build the new Bridgewater Bridge. There is $4.5 million towards a $5.6 million to upgrade the Northern Midlands Highway. There is $31.6 million to improve the main north-south line rail capacity. When you take bends out of the rail line, you improve the travel time and less fuel is used by those rail engines. There is $11.7 million to upgrade the west coast rail spurs to Hellyer Mine and the Melba Flats connection to Zeehan, which I certainly hope to see come together in the future.

Altogether, around the state, these commitments total $446 million and they will be delivered in partnership with the Tasmanian government through to 2014. These programs, along with Roads to Recovery and help from the trucking industry, are vital and will boost the capacity of Tasmania to continue to contribute to the Australian economy. I commend the bill to the House.

Debate (on motion by Mr Melham) adjourned.

Main Committee adjourned at 6.30 pm