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SITTING DAYS—2008

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Month</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>February</td>
<td>12, 13, 14, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22</td>
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<td>March</td>
<td>11, 12, 13, 17, 18, 19, 20</td>
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<td>May</td>
<td>13, 14, 15, 26, 27, 28, 29</td>
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<td>June</td>
<td>2, 3, 4, 5, 16, 17, 18, 19, 23, 24, 25, 26</td>
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<td>August</td>
<td>26, 27, 28</td>
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<td>September</td>
<td>1, 2, 3, 4, 15, 16, 17, 18, 22, 23, 24, 25</td>
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<td>October</td>
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<td>November</td>
<td>10, 11, 12, 13, 24, 25, 26, 27</td>
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<td>December</td>
<td>1, 2, 3, 4</td>
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- **GOLD COAST** 95.7 FM
- **MELBOURNE** 1026 AM
- **ADELAIDE** 972 AM
- **PERTH** 585 AM
- **HOBART** 747 AM
- **NORTHERN TASMANIA** 92.5 FM
- **DARWIN** 102.5 FM
FORTY-SECOND PARLIAMENT
FIRST SESSION—THIRD PERIOD

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

House of Representatives Officeholders

Speaker—Mr Harry Alfred Jenkins MP
Deputy Speaker—Ms Anna Elizabeth Burke MP
Second Deputy Speaker—Hon. Bruce Craig Scott MP

Members of the Speaker’s Panel—Hon. Dick Godfrey Harry Adams MP, Hon. Kevin James Andrews MP, Hon. Archibald Ronald Bevis MP, Ms Sharon Leah Bird MP, Mr Steven Georganas MP, Hon. Judith Eleanor Moylan MP, Ms Janelle Anne Saffin MP, Mr Albert John Schultz MP, Mr Patrick Damien Secker MP, 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

Leader of the House—Hon. Anthony Norman Albanese MP
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

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

Liberal Party of Australia
Leader—Hon. 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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## Members of the House of Representatives

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Members</th>
<th>Division</th>
<th>Party</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abbott, Hon. Anthony John</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
## Members of the House of Representatives

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Members</th>
<th>Division</th>
<th>Party</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Georganas, Steven</td>
<td>Hindmarsh, SA</td>
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<td>Shortland, NSW</td>
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<td>Cowper, NSW</td>
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<td>Mitchell, NSW</td>
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<td>Wannon, Vic</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hockey, Hon. Joseph Benedict</td>
<td>North Sydney, NSW</td>
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<td>Riverina, NSW</td>
<td>Nats</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Flinders, Vic</td>
<td>LP</td>
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<td>Irons, Stephen James</td>
<td>Swan, WA</td>
<td>LP</td>
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<td>Fowler, NSW</td>
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<td>Hasluck, WA</td>
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<td>Tangney, WA</td>
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<td>Ryan, Qld</td>
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<td>Kennedy, Qld</td>
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<td>Kelly, Hon. Michael Joseph, AM</td>
<td>Eden-Monaro, NSW</td>
<td>ALP</td>
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<td>Denison, Tas</td>
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<td>Balfarar, Vic</td>
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<td>Farrer, NSW</td>
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<td>Herbert, Qld</td>
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</tbody>
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Members of the House of Representatives

<table>
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<th>Division</th>
<th>Party</th>
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</table>
### Members of the House of Representatives

<table>
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<tr>
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<th>Division</th>
<th>Party</th>
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<td>Windsor, Anthony Harold Curties</td>
<td>New England, NSW</td>
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<td>Wood, Jason Peter</td>
<td>La Trobe, Vic</td>
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<td>Zappia, Tony</td>
<td>Makin, SA</td>
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**PARTY ABBREVIATIONS**

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

### Heads of Parliamentary Departments

- Clerk of the Senate—H Evans
- Clerk of the House of Representatives—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

[The above ministers constitute the cabinet]
RUDD MINISTRY—continued

Minister for Home Affairs Hon. Bob Debus MP
Assistant Treasurer and Minister for Competition Policy and Consumer Affairs Hon. Chris Bowen MP
Minister for Veterans’ Affairs Hon. Alan Griffin MP
Minister for Housing and Minister for the Status of Women Hon. Tanya Plibersek MP
Minister for Employment Participation Hon. Brendan O’Connor MP
Minister for Defence Science and Personnel Hon. Warren Snowdon MP
Minister for Small Business, Independent Contractors and the Service Economy and Minister Assisting the Finance Minister on Deregulation Hon. Dr Craig Emerson MP
Minister for Superannuation and Corporate Law Senator Hon. Nick Sherry
Minister for Ageing Hon. Justine Elliot MP
Minister for Youth and Minister for Sport Hon. Kate Ellis MP
Parliamentary Secretary for Early Childhood Education and Childcare Hon. Maxine McKew MP
Parliamentary Secretary for Defence Procurement Hon. Greg Combet AM, MP
Parliamentary Secretary for Defence Support Hon. Dr Mike Kelly AM, MP
Parliamentary Secretary for Regional Development and Northern Australia Hon. Gary Gray AO, MP
Parliamentary Secretary for Disabilities and Children’s Services Hon. Bill Shorten MP
Parliamentary Secretary for International Development Assistance Hon. Bob McMullan MP
Parliamentary Secretary for Pacific Island Affairs Hon. Duncan Kerr MP
Parliamentary Secretary to the Prime Minister Hon. Anthony Byrne MP
Parliamentary Secretary for Social Inclusion and the Voluntary Sector and Parliamentary Secretary Assisting the Prime Minister for Social Inclusion Senator Hon. Ursula Stephens
Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Trade Hon. John Murphy MP
Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Health and Ageing Senator Hon. Jan McLucas
Parliamentary Secretary for Multicultural Affairs and Settlement Services Hon. Laurie Ferguson MP
SHADOW MINISTRY

Leader of the Opposition
Hon. Malcolm Turnbull MP

Deputy Leader of the Opposition and Shadow Treasurer
Hon. Julie Bishop MP

Leader of the Nationals and Shadow Minister for Trade,
Transport, Regional Development and Local Government
Hon. Warren Truss MP

Shadow Minister for Broadband, Communications and the
Digital Economy and Leader of the Opposition in the
Senate
Senator Hon. Nick Minchin

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

Shadow Minister for Infrastructure and COAG and Shadow
Minister Assisting the Leader on Emissions Trading De-
sign
Hon. Andrew Robb MP

Shadow Minister for Foreign Affairs and Manager of Oppo-
sition Business in the Senate
Senator Hon. Helen Coonan

Shadow Minister for Finance, Competition Policy and De-
regulation and Manager of Opposition Business in the
House
Hon. Joe Hockey MP

Shadow Minister for Energy and Resources
Hon. Ian Macfarlane MP

Shadow Minister for Families, Housing, Community Ser-
vices and Indigenous Affairs
Hon. Tony Abbott MP

Shadow Special Minister of State and Shadow Cabinet Sec-
retary
Senator Hon. Michael Ronaldson

Shadow Minister for Human Services and Deputy Leader of
The Nationals
Senator Hon. Nigel Scullion

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

Shadow Minister for Health and Ageing
Hon. Peter Dutton MP

Shadow Minister for Defence
Senator Hon. David Johnston

Shadow Minister for Education, Apprenticeships and Train-
ing
Hon. Christopher Pyne MP

Shadow Attorney-General
Senator Hon. George Brandis SC

Shadow Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry
Hon. John Cobb MP

Shadow Minister for Employment and Workplace Relations
Mr Michael Keenan MP

Shadow Minister for Immigration and Citizenship
Hon. Dr Sharman Stone MP

Shadow Minister for Small Business, Independent Contrac-
tors, Tourism and the Arts
Mr Steven Ciobo MP

[The above constitute the shadow cabinet]
<table>
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<tr>
<th>Position</th>
<th>Shadow Minister</th>
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<tr>
<td>Shadow Minister for Financial Services, Superannuation and Corporate Law</td>
<td>Hon. Chris Pearce MP</td>
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<td>Shadow Assistant Treasurer</td>
<td>Hon. Tony Smith MP</td>
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<td>Shadow Minister for Sustainable Development and Cities</td>
<td>Hon. Bruce Billson MP</td>
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<td>Shadow Minister for Competition Policy and Consumer Affairs and Deputy Manager of Opposition Business in the House</td>
<td>Mr Luke Hartsuyker MP</td>
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<td>Shadow Minister for Housing and Local Government</td>
<td>Mr Scott Morrison MP</td>
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<td>Shadow Minister for Ageing</td>
<td>Mrs Margaret May MP</td>
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<td>Shadow Minister for Defence Science and Personnel</td>
<td>Hon. Bob Baldwin MP</td>
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<td>Shadow Minister for Veterans’ Affairs</td>
<td>Mrs Louise Markus MP</td>
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<td>Shadow Minister for Early Childhood Education, Childcare, Women and Youth</td>
<td>Mrs Sophie Mirabella MP</td>
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<td>Shadow Minister for Justice and Customs</td>
<td>Hon. Sussan Ley MP</td>
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<td>Shadow Minister for Employment Participation, Training and Sport</td>
<td>Dr Andrew Southcott MP</td>
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<td>Shadow Parliamentary Secretary for Northern Australia</td>
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<td>Shadow Parliamentary Secretary for Roads and Transport</td>
<td>Mr Barry Haase MP</td>
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<td>Shadow Parliamentary Secretary for Regional Development</td>
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<td>Shadow Parliamentary Secretary for Energy and Resources</td>
<td>Mr Don Randall MP</td>
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<td>Senator Marise Payne</td>
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<td>Shadow Parliamentary Secretary for Disabilities, Carers and the Voluntary Sector</td>
<td>Senator Cory Bernardi</td>
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<td>Shadow Parliamentary Secretary for Water Resources and Conservation</td>
<td>Senator Fiona Nash</td>
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<td>Shadow Parliamentary Secretary for Health Administration</td>
<td>Senator Mathias Cormann</td>
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<td>Shadow Parliamentary Secretary for Defence</td>
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<td>Shadow Parliamentary Secretary for Education</td>
<td>Senator Hon. Brett Mason</td>
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<td>Shadow Parliamentary Secretary for Justice and Public Security</td>
<td>Mr Jason Wood MP</td>
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<td>Shadow Parliamentary Secretary for Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry</td>
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<td>Shadow Parliamentary Secretary for Immigration and</td>
<td>Senator Concetta Fierravanti-Wells</td>
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<td>Shadow Parliamentary Secretary Assisting the Leader in the Senate</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
CONTENTS

THURSDAY, 16 OCTOBER

Chamber
Parliament House: Breastfeeding................................................................. 9321
Delegation Reports—
— 29th ASEAN Inter-Parliamentary Assembly, Singapore ......................... 9321
Committees—
— Treaties Committee—Report...................................................................... 9321
Customs Amendment (Australia-Chile Free Trade Agreement Implementation)
Bill 2008—
— First Reading ................................................................................................. 9323
— Second Reading .............................................................................................. 9323
Customs Tariff Amendment (Australia-Chile Free Trade Agreement Implementation)
Bill 2008—
— First Reading ................................................................................................. 9324
— Second Reading .............................................................................................. 9324
Aged Care Amendment (2008 Measures No. 2) Bill 2008—
— First Reading ................................................................................................. 9325
— Second Reading .............................................................................................. 9325
Water Amendment Bill 2008—
— Consideration in Detail .................................................................................. 9328
— Third Reading .................................................................................................. 9334
Trade Practices Legislation Amendment Bill 2008—
— Consideration of Senate Message ................................................................. 9334
Committees—
— Publications Committee—Report................................................................. 9338
Education Legislation Amendment Bill 2008 ................................................... 9338
Schools Assistance Bill 2008—
— Second Reading ............................................................................................ 9338
Questions Without Notice—
— Economy ........................................................................................................ 9389
— Economy ........................................................................................................ 9389
— Economy ........................................................................................................ 9390
— Economy ........................................................................................................ 9392
— Banking .......................................................................................................... 9395
— Banking .......................................................................................................... 9396
— Medicare Levy Surcharge ............................................................................. 9397
— Banking .......................................................................................................... 9397
— Economy ........................................................................................................ 9398
— Mining ............................................................................................................ 9399
— Occupational Health and Safety ................................................................. 9400
— Bonnie Babes Foundation ......................................................................... 9401
— Disability Services ....................................................................................... 9402
— Medicare Levy Surcharge ............................................................................. 9404
— Housing Affordability .................................................................................... 9404
— Greater Western Area Health Service ......................................................... 9405
— Infrastructure ................................................................................................ 9407
— Member for Bennelong .............................................................................. 9408
— War Graves ................................................................................................. 9409
CONTENTS—continued

Member for Bennelong ................................................................. 9410
Spring Racing Carnival ............................................................... 9410
Department of Parliamentary Services ..................................... 9411
Parliamentary Service Commissioner ....................................... 9411
Australian National Audit Office—
   Annual Reports........................................................................ 9411
Auditor-General’s Reports—
   Report No. 7 of 2008-09......................................................... 9411
Documents .................................................................................. 9411
Ministerial Statements—
   Australian Youth Forum.......................................................... 9411
Committees—
   Australian Commission for Law Enforcement Integrity Committee.................................................. 9416
   Corporations and Financial Services Committee—Membership .......................................................... 9416
Financial System Legislation Amendment (Financial Claims Scheme and Other Measures) Bill 2008— 9416
Financial Claims Scheme (Adis) Levy Bill 2008 and
Financial Claims Scheme (General Insurers) Levy Bill 2008—
   Returned from the Senate.............................................................. 9416
Matters of Public Importance—
   Indigenous Communities............................................................ 9416
Petitions—
   Royal Australian Air Force Museum Wagga Wagga................ 9419
Tax Laws Amendment (Medicare Levy Surcharge Thresholds) Bill (No. 2) 2008—
   Consideration of Senate Message.............................................. 9419
Adjournment .............................................................................. 9423
Business—
   Rearrangement........................................................................ 9424
Matters of Public Importance—
   Indigenous Communities............................................................ 9424
Main Committee
Constituency Statements—
   Dunkley Electorate: Frankston Bypass.................................... 9430
   Longman Electorate: International Day of Older Persons......................... 9431
   Swan Electorate: Mr Andrew Williams.......................................... 9431
   Deakin Electorate: Economic Security Strategy......................... 9432
   Maranoa Electorate: Mineral Development.................................. 9433
   Lowe Electorate: Aircraft Noise................................................. 9434
   Mitchell Electorate: Video Games Classification........................ 9435
   Sydney Electorate: National Youth Mental Health Foundation........ 9436
   Forrest Electorate: Brendan Fitzgerald...................................... 9436
   Melbourne Ports Electorate: Elwood Talmud Torah Congregation 9438
Committees—
   Family, Community, Housing and Youth Committee—Report....... 9438
   National Rental Affordability Scheme Bill 2008 and
   National Rental Affordability Scheme (Consequential Amendments) Bill 2008—
      Second Reading................................................................. 9451
Adjournment—
   McPherson Electorate: Powerlines.......................................... 9470
   Port Adelaide Electorate: Kurruru Indigenous Youth Performing Arts 9471
CONTENTS—continued

Poverty ........................................................................................................................ ... 9472
Bass Electorate: Economic Security Strategy ................................................................. 9474
Mr Sergio Prado ............................................................................................................. 9475
McEwen Electorate: Community Organisations ............................................................ 9475
Bonnie Babes Foundation National Babies Day ............................................................ 9475
Banks Electorate: Bankstown Children’s Festival .......................................................... 9476

Questions In Writing
Child Care—(Question No. 136).................................................................................... 9478
Productivity Places Program—(Question No. 226)...................................................... 9478
Productivity Places Program—(Question No. 228)...................................................... 9478
Productivity Places Program—(Question No. 230)...................................................... 9479
Productivity Places Program—(Question No. 231)...................................................... 9479
Productivity Places Program—(Question No. 232)...................................................... 9479
Productivity Places Program—(Question No. 235)...................................................... 9479
Work Experience Placement Program—(Question No. 238)...................................... 9480
Work Experience Placement Program—(Question No. 240)...................................... 9480
Personal Support Program—(Question No. 242)....................................................... 9480
Personal Support Program—(Question No. 243)....................................................... 9481
Personal Support Program—(Question No. 245)....................................................... 9481
Personal Support Program—(Question No. 246)....................................................... 9482
Disability Employment Network—(Question No. 256)............................................... 9482
Disability Employment Network—(Question No. 267)............................................... 9482
Job Network—(Question No. 268).............................................................................. 9482
Employment Services—(Question No. 269)............................................................... 9483
Employment Services—(Question No. 294)............................................................... 9483
Employment Services—(Question No. 296)............................................................... 9483
Employment Services—(Question No. 297)............................................................... 9484
National Museum of Australia: Acquisition of Boomerang—(Question No. 324).... 9484
Road Infrastructure—(Question No. 326).................................................................... 9485
Caring for our Country Program—(Question No. 348)............................................... 9485
Thursday, 16 October 2008

The SPEAKER (Mr Harry Jenkins) took the chair at 9.00 am and read prayers.

PARLIAMENT HOUSE:
BREASTFEEDING

The SPEAKER (9.01 am)—In the last parliament, the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Health and Ageing reported on an inquiry into the health benefits of breastfeeding. One of the recommendations was that the President of the Senate and I take the appropriate measures to enable the formal accreditation, by the Australian Breastfeeding Association, of Parliament House as a breastfeeding-friendly workplace. I am pleased to inform the House that the parliamentary departments have been successful in attaining accreditation as breastfeeding-friendly workplaces. They will receive certificates from representatives of the Breastfeeding Association at a morning tea in Parliament House on 17 October.

In attaining accreditation, the parliamentary departments have put in place policies demonstrating a commitment to breastfeeding and have also made available suitable facilities. Two small rooms in Parliament House—one in the Senate wing and the other in the House of Representatives wing—are available for mothers to breastfeed their babies or express milk at work. The Press Gallery and other licensees in Parliament House will be advised that Press Gallery members and staff may also use the rooms. The rooms are also available for use by the staff of members and senators.

DELEGATION REPORTS

29th ASEAN Inter-Parliamentary Assembly, Singapore

Ms BIRD (Cunningham) (9.02 am)—by leave—I present the report of the Australian Parliamentary Delegation to the 29th AIPA General Assembly held in Singapore from 19 to 24 August 2008.

COMMITTEES

Treaties Committee

Report

Mr KELVIN THOMSON (Wills) (9.02 am)—On behalf of the Joint Standing Committee on Treaties, I present the committee’s report, incorporating a dissenting report and supplementary remarks, entitled Report 95: Treaties tabled on 4 June, 17 June, 25 June and 26 August 2008.

Ordered that the report be made a parliamentary paper.

Mr KELVIN THOMSON—by leave—The report reviews 12 treaty actions, including:

• the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities;
• the Australia-Chile Free Trade Agreement;
• the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women;
• an agreement with the EU on transferring air carriers’ passenger name record data to the Australian Customs Service;
• agreements on Defence cooperation with France and the United Arab Emirates; and
• six other treaty actions which are more technical in nature.

In each case the committee has supported the proposed agreements and recommended that binding treaty action be taken. However, we have made additional recommendations on the Australia-Chile Free Trade Agreement; the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities; and the agreement on Defence cooperation with the United Arab Emirates. The additional recommendations are made because the treaties committee in this par-
liament is not simply acting as a rubber stamp, but rather seeking to ensure that Australia’s treaty-making protects, and where possible advances, human rights, labour rights and the protection of the environment.

The Australia-Chile Free Trade Agreement will remove most barriers to Australia’s exports of goods to Chile, and provide economic integration for markets through commitments in a range of areas, including trade in services, investment, government procurement, intellectual property, electronic commerce and competition policy. Horticulture Australia has expressed concern about the potential impact of the free trade agreement on their industries, including the risk of added pressure from Chile for Australia to weaken our biosecurity measures or to expedite Chilean requests for biosecurity assessments. The trade union movement has expressed concern that short-term labour movements from Chile under Australia’s 457 visa conditions, which have attracted controversy and are currently under review, could be locked in by the free trade agreement.

To address these concerns we have recommended that the department undertake and publish a review of the operation of the agreement, no later than two years after its commencement, to assess the ongoing relevance of the concerns expressed. Furthermore, we have recommended that the government, before commencing negotiations for any future trade agreement, should table in parliament a document setting out its priorities and objectives. The document should include independent assessments of the costs and benefits. Such assessments should consider the economic, regional, social, cultural, regulatory and environmental impacts which are expected to arise. I believe that such an arrangement would improve transparency in trade agreement negotiations and address a number of concerns which were expressed by witnesses to this inquiry, who feel that we get presented with a fait accompli when it comes to trade agreements.

The committee heard evidence that, while the Australia-United States Free Trade Agreement contains chapters that refer to ILO and UN standards on labour rights and the environment, this agreement does not, and that environmental and labour standards in the Australia-United States Free Trade Agreement were inserted at the insistence of the United States. During a hearing I asked DFAT’s Trade Development Assistant Secretary whether we had an objection to ILO conventions such as the abolition of child labour being included in free trade agreements, and she said, ‘It is not our preferred position that they be included.’ I think the government can expect that the question of relevant ILO conventions in future free trade agreements will be the subject of detailed scrutiny.

Earlier this year the committee recommended that binding treaty action be taken on the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. We undertook to produce a more detailed report outlining the scope of our inquiry into the convention and our conclusions. This report contains the committee’s additional findings in relation to the convention. It is our view that the convention will help protect the rights of all people with disabilities and promote respect for their inherent dignity. The convention reflects protections already existing under Australia’s domestic laws and has received widespread support. However, taking into account the concerns of witnesses, the committee has made some additional recommendations.

The committee recommends that the government consider expanding the role of the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commissioner to enable the commissioner to provide parliament with an annual report on
compliance with the convention. We also recommend that a review be carried out of the relevant provisions of the Migration Act and the administration of migration policy to ensure that there is no discrimination against persons with disabilities in breach of the convention.

The Treaty on Defence Cooperation between Australia and the United Arab Emirates is designed to promote cooperation in a range of fields, including military training and education, joint military exercises, defence materiel and equipment, security and defence policy and protection from weapons of mass destruction. The committee supports this agreement. However, the UAE imposes the death penalty for certain serious criminal offences and, in evidence to us, it was noted that Australian service personnel could potentially be subject to the death penalty if convicted of such offences during their posting. The committee has recommended that in any further arrangements which are to be made for the exchange of defence personnel the government seek to ensure that Australian personnel are protected from corporal or capital punishment under UAE law.

A majority of the committee is pleased to support Australia’s accession to the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. As a party to the optional protocol, Australia will recognise the competence of the Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women to consider complaints about alleged violations of Australia’s obligations under the convention. It is important to stress that a complaint could only be made to the committee once all domestic legal avenues are exhausted, and such recommendations that the committee might make will not be binding on Australia.

Liberal and National Party members do not support this optional protocol and have issued a dissenting report. This reflects poorly on their commitment to ensuring women are not discriminated against. It is another example of their ongoing snobbery concerning the United Nations, which manifested itself most seriously in recent years in their blunders over Iraq and over the United Nations Kyoto protocol on climate change. This ongoing snobbery is unfortunate. Back in 1945, Australia played a key role in setting up the United Nations, and it remains the only truly global organisation, playing a critical role in meeting global challenges.

This report reviews 12 proposed treaty actions in total. It has been a substantial undertaking, and I thank my colleagues on the committee and the treaties secretariat for their diligence. I thank the numerous agencies and individuals who gave evidence. I commend the report to the House and I move:

That the House take note of the report.

Debate adjourned.

CUSTOMS AMENDMENT (AUSTRALIA-CHILE FREE TRADE AGREEMENT IMPLEMENTATION) BILL 2008

First Reading

Bill and explanatory memorandum presented by Mr Debus.

Bill read a first time.

Second Reading

Mr Debus (Macquarie—Minister for Home Affairs) (9.12 am)—I move:

That this bill be now read a second time.

I am pleased to introduce this bill, which is implementing legislation for the Australia-Chile free trade agreement.

The agreement negotiations were concluded on 27 May 2008 by the Minister for Trade, Simon Crean, and the Chilean Foreign Minister, Alejandro Foxley, with the agree-
ment being signed by the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Stephen Smith, and Alejandro Foxley on 30 July 2008, during Mr Foxley’s visit to Australia.

The Australia-Chile free trade agreement is expected to enter into force on 1 January 2009. The agreement is a comprehensive and wide-ranging agreement that provides Australia and Chile with more liberal access to each other’s goods and services. The agreement reaffirms the close relationship between Australia and Chile and will contribute to greater growth, prosperity and security in the region.

Implementing Legislation

In order to implement the agreement, two pieces of legislation require amendment—the Customs Act 1901 and the Customs Tariff Act 1995.

The Customs Amendment (Australia-Chile Free Trade Agreement Implementation) Bill 2008 contains proposed amendments to the Customs Act 1901. These amendments provide the rules for determining whether goods originate in Chile and introduce powers to allow Customs to obtain manufacturing records from Australian exporters and producers. The amendments will give effect to Australia’s obligations under chapter 4 of the Australia-Chile free trade agreement. That chapter provides the rules for determining whether goods originate in Australia or Chile. The rules are essential for the purposes of determining whether imported goods from Chile are eligible for preferential customs duty rates under the agreement.

This bill will be complemented by the Customs Tariff Amendment (Australia-Chile Free Trade Agreement Implementation) Bill 2008. Goods will be considered to originate in Chile for the purposes of providing a preferential duty rate if they are wholly obtained or wholly produced in Chile or if they meet the product specific rules of Annex 4-C of the agreement.

The product specific rules use the ‘change in tariff classification’ concept as used in previous Australian free trade agreements. Under the change in tariff classification rules, origin will be conferred on a product where the tariff classification of each non-originating material—in this case, a material from outside Chile and Australia—used in the manufacture of the product is different from the tariff classification of the good. The rules are a means of demonstrating that there has been substantial transformation of the non-originating material inputs.

For certain goods, the change in tariff classification rule is combined with a regional value content. Customs will have the power to obtain manufacturing records of Australian exporters and producers to verify that the goods that they export to Chile were produced in Australia.

The bill I introduce today will reinforce the contribution of both countries to the multilateral trading system and serve as a model for other APEC economies as they work towards deeper economic integration.

Debate (on motion by Mr Lindsay) adjourned.

CUSTOMS TARIFF AMENDMENT (AUSTRALIA-CHILE FREE TRADE AGREEMENT IMPLEMENTATION) BILL 2008

First Reading

Bill and explanatory memorandum presented by Mr Debus.

Bill read a first time.

Second Reading

Mr DEBUS (Macquarie—Minister for Home Affairs) (9.15 am)—I move:

That this bill be now read a second time.
I am pleased to introduce the second piece of Australia-Chile Free Trade Agreement legislation.

The Customs Tariff Amendment (Australia-Chile Free Trade Agreement Implementation) Bill 2008 contains amendments to the Customs Tariff Act 1995 to implement part of the agreement by:

- providing duty-free access for certain goods and preferential rates of customs duty for other goods that are Chilean originating goods;
- phasing the preferential rates of customs duty for certain goods to zero by 2015; and
- creating a new Schedule 7 to the Tariff to accommodate those phasing rates of duty.

This bill, like the bill I have introduced together with this one, will complement the amendments contained in the Customs Amendment (Australia-Chile Free Trade Agreement Implementation) Bill 2008.

With those very brief remarks, I commend the bill to the House.

Debate (on motion by Mr Lindsay) adjourned.

AGED CARE AMENDMENT (2008 MEASURES No. 2) BILL 2008

First Reading

Bill and explanatory memorandum presented by Mrs Elliot.

Bill read a first time.

Second Reading

Mrs ELLIOT (Richmond—Minister for Ageing) (9.18 am)—I move:

That this bill be now read a second time.

Caring for our ageing population is one of the major challenges facing our nation this century—it requires careful planning, adequate funding and comprehensive safeguards to ensure the protection of our frail, older Australians.

The government takes this responsibility very seriously and is committed to the highest quality of care for older Australians.

I am pleased to be able to demonstrate our commitment in a very concrete and real way today, by introducing the Aged Care Amendment (2008 Measures No. 2) Bill 2008.

The bill is part of a package of reforms designed to ensure that frail, older Australians who enter in residential care receive high-quality care, that the significant sums of money paid by care recipients are managed responsibly by the aged care provider, and that the aged care regulatory framework is robust.

In the decade since the Aged Care Act 1997 (the act) first came into effect the industry has matured significantly.

The setting in 2008 is significantly different from what existed in 1997.

The sector is evolving from typically a one site, one service ‘cottage’ type to multi-site, multi-state, multi-service operations using complex financial and legal arrangements.

The act as currently written does not scrutinise these complex corporate structures to the same extent as it does the business model that existed when the act was first developed.

Another feature of the sector in 2008, not envisaged in the 1997 legislation, relates to the provision of a broad range of aged care services within the one facility.

This bill addresses each of these major areas of change in a considered way to meet the challenges of the 21st century.

Addressing changes in business structures

When the aged-care legislation was developed 10 years ago, the typical business
The model adopted by aged-care providers was one whereby the owner of the facilities also operated the aged care facility.

The regulatory framework reflected the ‘cottage’ nature of the sector as it then was.

In recent years a different model of aged care has emerged, one in which the owner and operator of a facility have distinct roles and responsibilities and may function quite separately.

The last decade has also seen a significant increase in the level of investment in the sector from large corporate entities. The regulatory framework has not kept pace with this shift in business practice.

This lack of consistency between the regulatory framework and contemporary business practice means that the regulations have not been able to be applied equally to all approved providers regardless of their corporate structure.

Under current arrangements, those ‘pulling the financial strings’ may not be currently considered as ‘key personnel’ for the purposes of regulatory scrutiny.

Amendments to the range of people considered to be ‘key personnel’ of an approved provider will ensure an inspection of those pulling the financial strings, and that the relevant provisions apply consistently to approved providers.

Presently, there is limited capacity for the Department of Health and Ageing to consider the record of ‘related entities’ when making decisions about approvals, which unnecessarily and inappropriately limits the ability of the department to make an informed assessment of a company’s record in service delivery and its suitability to be approved to deliver care in the future.

The bill addresses this issue, to provide better protection for residents and to promote public confidence in the industry.

The changes outlined in the bill will ensure that the legislation holds large aged-care providers as accountable as smaller ones, and that no entity can avoid their accountabilities through sophisticated business structures.

It will enable the department to consider the record of related entities when making decisions and considering approvals.

The requirement for more comprehensive assessment of applicants for approvals also provides better protection for residents and promotes much greater public confidence in our aged-care system.

Very importantly, the bill also eliminates ambiguity about which aged-care services are regulated by the legislation. Increasingly developers are putting aged care, retirement villages and sometimes disability or some forms of step-down care all in the same development, and this gives rise to uncertainty relating to the regulatory reach of the Aged Care Act.

Changes to the regulatory and administrative framework will clarify that only the aged-care services are regulated by the Aged Care Act.

This provides greater certainty for care recipients and providers about their respective rights, obligations and protections.

These changes are a critical structural platform for other changes and for ensuring the ongoing protection of aged-care recipients.

**Increased protection of bonds**

Significant sums of money are held on behalf of residents—these accommodation bonds—and often represent most of their life savings.

As at 30 June 2007, around 970 approved providers held accommodation bonds, with a total value of $6.3 billion. Comprehensive consumer safeguards must be in place to protect these funds.
Since the introduction of the Accommodation Bond Guarantee Scheme in 2006, which guarantees the repayment of bonds in the event that a provider becomes insolvent or bankrupt, experience has highlighted some areas where the protections for residents could be strengthened.

This bill addresses these issues and ensures that accommodation bonds and similar payments paid by residents for entry into aged-care services are fully protected under the guarantee scheme.

**The number of people seeking access to care**

I will now turn to the way the bill addresses the increase in the number of people seeking approval for access to care.

In 2006-07, aged-care assessment teams conducted a total of 189,000 assessments of frail older Australians across community, hospital and residential settings.

This requires significant resources to enable timely assessment of care needs.

The government is committed to meeting this need.

However, we also recognise that there are ways that we can do business better in order to reduce waiting times for our elderly Australians.

The bill addresses this issue by streamlining assessments and reducing red tape.

Following these amendments, negotiations will commence with the states and territories so that the greater efficiencies provided for in this bill will result in improvements in the timelines of assessments for older people.

**Ensuring the health, welfare and other needs of care recipients are met**

Finally, and most importantly, the reform package ensures that the protection of residents is of the highest priority.

The reform package includes changes to the Aged Care Principles, which very directly address the safety of residents.

Measures to be included in amended principles include reducing the risk of potentially unsuitable people working with vulnerable older Australians, and this is done through strengthened police check requirements.

This ensures that people with convictions for very serious offences such as murder, sexual assault and physical assault are not employed to care for older Australians.

This change will be put in place through an amendment to the Accountability Principles.

A new measure requiring providers to raise the alarm with the Department of Health and Ageing is particularly important for protecting residents who are absent without a reason known to the home, and who have been reported to the police as missing.

This will enable the department to determine whether appropriate action has been taken and to ensure that the service has systems and processes in place to ensure the safety of all residents.

This change will be established by amendments to both the act and the Accountability Principles.

Finally, changes to the act will make certain that when the department needs to take action against an aged-care provider for non-compliance, and is considering both the safety of the residents and the rights of aged-care providers, the department must give the most weight to whether the noncompliance threatens or would threaten the health, welfare or interests of current and future care recipients.

While this has always been the intent of the legislation, this requirement will now be placed front and centre so that there can be
no doubt about what is the paramount consideration.

In addition, the amendments will make some minor operational changes to improve the administration of the legislation so that it operates effectively.

**Timing**

Subject to the passage of the bill through parliament and the development of associated changes to delegated legislation, it is proposed that the package of reforms will take effect from 1 January 2009, with a transition period for some of the reforms until the end of June 2009.

This transition period will ensure that aged-care providers and residents have an opportunity to prepare for, and become familiar with, these changes.

These changes have been the subject of consultation with the aged-care industry and consumer representative groups, which has helped shape this bill.

To ensure smooth implementation, the government will continue to work collaboratively with our older Australians, their families, aged-care providers, unions and professional bodies, and we will be listening very closely to their views.

**Conclusion**

I am very pleased to be able to introduce this bill and announce the package of reforms of which it is part.

The reforms strike the right balance between maintaining contemporary, effective regulation to protect vulnerable and elderly people and delivering change to reduce the regulatory burden for aged-care providers.

They also complement the record funding by the Australian government to support aged and community care.

Over the next four years, the Australian government will provide more than $40 billion funding to aged and community care, including more than $28.6 billion to nursing homes and hostels.

These changes will promote public confidence in the aged-care system, ensure the regulatory framework is appropriate in an evolving corporate environment and, most importantly, provide the best possible protections and quality of care for our older Australians.

Debate (on motion by Mr Lindsay) adjourned.

**WATER AMENDMENT BILL 2008**

**Consideration in Detail**

Consideration resumed from 15 October.

The SPEAKER—The question is that the bill be agreed to.

Mr WINDSOR (New England) (9.29 am)—I move:

Schedule 2, Part 2, page 295 (after line 34), after item 161, insert:

161A After section 255

Insert:

255C Mitigation of unintended diversions

Prior to exploration licences being granted for subsidence mining operations on alluvial floodplains that have underlying groundwater systems forming part of the Murray-Darling system inflows, an independent study must be undertaken into the impacts of such mining on those systems.

The amendment that I am moving to the Water Amendment Bill 2008 is to mitigate unintended diversions. This issue has been around for quite some time and many members would remember from the last parliament that the then Minister for Environment and Water Resources, Malcolm Turnbull, agreed to fund a study into the offsite impacts of longwall mining activities on groundwater systems and the interconnectivity of those systems with the river systems.
At the time, Mr Turnbull and then Prime Minister John Howard stated on a number of occasions when under questioning in this House that there was a lack of knowledge about the connectivity issues of groundwater and the way in which it would impact on the Murray-Darling system. The issue needs to be resolved, because the bill that we have before the House at the moment, which amends the Water Act, is putting in place a structure related to basin plans and the various cap activities on the ends of catchments. To be able to do that successfully, we really need to understand those relationships that are happening in the groundwater systems. It is very clear that we do not.

This issue has come about in my electorate because of the exploration licence that was granted at the state government level to the company BHP to explore quite a large area of the Liverpool Plains, which is an alluvial floodplain on a portion of the Namoi Valley catchment. The Namoi Valley not only is one of the most productive areas of Australia but also forms part of the Murray-Darling system. It not only has river systems involved in it but also has very extensive groundwater systems. Those groundwater systems, we believe, are interconnected; the degree of interconnectivity is unknown. The way in which those systems relate to the river systems is also largely unknown, but it is understood that there is a relationship between the two. BHP were granted a licence by the New South Wales state government to explore for coal, and they are currently doing that. A Chinese company, Shenhua, has recently been granted another licence to explore for coal. I think it cost something like $360 million for the granting of the licence. To my knowledge that has not been paid yet, and hopefully that is a good sign, but the fact is that the state government is granting licences on these alluvial floodplains when it really has no idea what impact longwall min-

ing would have on those particular areas if those licences went ahead.

Under a state based planning process, as long as the area that is impacted by the mining activity is remediated, that is all that is required. What concerns a lot of people in that area—and should concern the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and the Arts, the Minister for Climate Change and Water and this parliament—is, if we are trying to come to grips with the Murray-Darling system, what offsite impacts there could be if longwall mining did occur and there was a breach in the hydraulic nature of those systems. No-one knows the answer to that. That is why we need an independent study to determine the relationships between the groundwater systems themselves and between the groundwater systems and the river system.

I particularly congratulate Mr Tim Duddy, who is currently blockading BHP on a property on the Breza Plain. The landholders there have formed themselves into a group and are very serious about this issue. Senator Wong is well aware of this issue and has been asked on a number of occasions to look closely at it. The state government has put in place a facilitator, Pam Allan, whom you would remember, Mr Deputy Speaker Schultz, from your days in state parliament. (Extension of time granted) She is to look at the issue of whether there is a need for an independent study.

I believe that it is in the interest of the coal industry that an independent study take place, because it is pointless to grant exploration licences if the companies will not be able to mine on those areas of land. It is in the interest of everybody that those licences not be granted on these alluvial floodplains, where not only will subsidence occur but there could be impacts on those groundwater
systems in the Murray-Darling system. I call very strongly for an independent study.

Part of the evidence base in relation to my call for a study is the National Water Commission, and I would advise the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and the Arts to look at the website of the National Water Commission today, because I believe this would still be on that website—it was there yesterday. Under the heading ‘Groundwater-surface water connectivity and water reform’ it says:

Groundwater and surface water resources are intimately linked. Although we are still unclear as to the extent of these interconnections, they have important implications for management of both ground and surface water resources. It is critical that we build the knowledge and capacity needed to jointly manage these resources.

The National Water Initiative recognises the connectivity between surface and groundwater resources and requires connected systems to be managed as a single resource.

In 2007, in its first biennial assessment of progress in implementation of the National Water Initiative, the National Water Commission found:

… limited recognition in water plans of the connectivity between surface water and groundwater resources. States have arrangements in place to manage groundwater, although they do not yet amount to sophisticated, integrated management. This is largely due to the complexity of the hydrology and a lack of knowledge of linkages and impacts.

The commission concluded, and this report is available on their website today:

Significantly more effort needs to go into building knowledge of groundwater resources and the capacity to manage them.

If that is not a clear indication of the lack of knowledge on this particular issue, I do not know what is.

After I spoke on this amendment in the House yesterday I was contacted by members of Senator Wong’s staff. They told me not to be too concerned about the passage of this amendment because the bill, and the original bill that we are amending, actually allows for a study to take place. I looked at the legalese of what it actually says, and the words used are ‘may’ and ‘can’. The authority may or can, and the minister may or can, implement a particular study if in fact there is seen to be a diverting of water from one system to another, a polluting of water or a whole range of other issues. The fact is that it does not say ‘will’.

The purpose of this amendment is to protect these very productive lands. I know the same sort of issue is starting to evolve in the Darling Downs, in the seat of Maranoa, where there are very similar concerns. There is an extraordinary lack of knowledge. I know the minister will probably stand up in a minute and say, ‘This is a state based issue.’ That is what he did when I asked him a question about this issue about a month ago. Minister, the state based planning process is flawed. It looks at the localised impact—

(Time expired)

Mr GARRETT (Kingsford Smith—Minister for the Environment, Heritage and the Arts) (9.40 am)—I note the amendment moved by the member for New England and I will offer some comments by way of reply. I note also that he has had the opportunity to have some discussion, as we have now learnt, with staff from Senator Wong’s office. I think the first thing to say to the member is that the basin plan in relation to water resources is a comprehensive one and it does cover surface and groundwater use. It does not have the gap in coverage that the honourable member has referred to. I refer the honourable member to sections 22(3)(d) and 22(3)(k), which in fact sets out the aspects of the mandatory content for the basin plan in relation to managing interception activities which would have a significant impact on the
basin’s water resources, including provisions in relation to harnessing scientific knowledge, which I know goes to the heart of the member’s concerns, so to inform those considerations. In particular, section 22(7) requires water access rights to be held for specific kinds of interception activities and also requires assessment of the potential impact of such interception activities on water resources in the area prior to approval under state law. The terms 'may' and 'can' are entirely appropriate designations of ministerial authority in that sense.

The second thing to say to the honourable member is that the independent expertise that the authority will exercise is responsible for the considerations that are contained in this amendment to this bill. So this is what the authority will primarily be concerning itself with. In relation to the matter that the member specifically raises—that is, the issuing of mining licences—it is the case that it is a state issue, and it is unclear as to what obligations a Commonwealth mandated independent study would place on this state process.

Mr Katter interjecting—

Mr GARRETT—And on that basis the government does not support the amendment given the comprehensive nature of the mandatory content of the basin plan already provided. I thank the member for New England for his contribution and for bringing this important issue to our attention.

Mr WINDSOR (New England) (9.42 am)—I would like to respond to what the minister has just said, and he may be able to outline in some greater depth some of the relationships that he just established. He referred to the way in which the original Water Act, the act that we are amending, actually allows for an independent study of this nature to take place. But he would be well aware of section 22(7) of the act. It says that this can go as far—that this 'may' require. Right throughout the amendment bill that we are debating today and the act itself there are these constant references to 'can' and 'may'.

The point I was making earlier is that that does not mean that they will in fact carry out a study. The fact is that you yourself, Minister, again said that the mining licence arrangements are a state issue. Minister, you spent quite some time in your speech talking about the blame game in terms of the Murray-Darling system and the history of what has happened. A lot of the tragedies in the Murray-Darling system have occurred because of exactly that principle—one state was doing something and another state was doing something else.

This whole amendment bill is about bringing a process together that has an impact across the four states. I do not have any argument with that, but how can you bring a process together when, as you have said in your own words, the state will determine where the licences are? The member for Kennedy was right; the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Act does allow the Commonwealth minister to override the states in relation to some of these issues, but how can you override something if you have no knowledge of the potential impact of it? We have this absurd arrangement where the National Water Commission, I think it is, is carrying out a survey of the impacts of mining on groundwater systems essentially in reverse—waiting for an impact to occur and then saying, ‘If we do that again, we had better change the rules.’ That is a farcical way to look at this. These are highly valuable lands. What is the point of this legislation if it is not about preserving our environment?

Here we have an unknown risk—there is a lot of talk of risk assessment in the amendment bill—to the environment. How can you determine a cap on the system when you do
not know how much is coming from the groundwater systems into the system? If someone knows what that amount of water is, they should say so. We do not understand those systems. I chaired a committee in 2000 on this very valley, and the lack of knowledge was outstanding. Determining the interconnectivity between groundwater zones side by side was almost guesswork. We do not understand those systems. The Commonwealth does have a role. It makes a farce of this bill if, in fact, because of the relationship between the states and the Commonwealth, a state can actually go ahead and, because of its lack of knowledge, do whatever it likes in relation to mining, thus destroying the very initiatives that you, Minister Garrett, and Minister Wong are trying to put in place for the preservation of the environment.

You also refer, Minister, to the issuance of mining licences, which is a state issue. Irrigation licences are a state issue as well. I would like you to comment on this if you would. Are you saying that the state will have jurisdiction over the issuance of irrigation licences as well within the context of the four-state agreement? I do not think you are, but you cannot have it both ways and say that one is on one side of the fence and the other one is on the other side. We are going to castrate the irrigation industry through a process but allow big business to move across the food-producing areas. I ask you to answer those questions. I believe the coalition will be supporting this legislation and I thank them for that. I intend to take this further and talk to the crossbenchers in the Senate to see whether this amendment can be relayed in the Senate. *(Time expired)*

**Question put:**

That the amendment *(Mr Windsor)*’s be agreed to.

The House divided.  [9.52 am]

(The Deputy Speaker—Mr AJ Schultz)

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Mr GARRETT—(Kingsford Smith—Minister for the Environment, Heritage and the Arts) (10.00 am)—I present a supplementary explanatory memorandum to the Water Amendment Bill 2008. I ask leave of the House to move government amendments (1) to (8) together.

Leave granted.

Mr GARRETT—I move amendments (1) to (8):

(1) Schedule 2, page 273 (after line 7), after item 59, insert:

59A At the end of section 41
Add “together with any document prepared under paragraph 43(11)(a) or 43A(6)(d)”.

(2) Schedule 2, page 273, after proposed item 59A, insert:

59B Paragraph 43(11)(b)
Repeal the paragraph.

(3) Schedule 2, page 275 (after line 29), after item 63, insert:

63A At the end of section 45
Add “together with any document prepared under paragraph 47(11)(a) or 47A(5)(d)”.

(4) Schedule 2, page 275, after proposed item 63A, insert:

63B Paragraph 47(11)(b)
Repeal the paragraph.

(5) Schedule 2, item 77, page 279 (after line 27), after subsection 74A(2), insert:

(2A) The Minister is taken, on the commencement of this section, to have made a determination under subsection (1) that New South Wales is a State to which this section applies.

(6) Schedule 2, item 93, page 282 (line 26), after “the Commonwealth”, insert “(including any agency of the Commonwealth)”.

(7) Schedule 2, item 93, page 282 (line 27), after “the Commonwealth”, insert “(including any agency of the Commonwealth)”.

(8) Schedule 2, item 93, page 282 (line 30), omit “the Authority”, substitute “the Commonwealth (including any agency of the Commonwealth)”.

The Commonwealth is moving amendments relating to three distinct matters, the first involving an amendment to recognise New South Wales as a state applying the National Water Initiative risk assignment framework. In the IGA, on the mechanism for this referral of power, the government committed to recognising New South Wales as a state applying the National Water Initiative risk assignment framework as modified by the Murray-Darling Basin IGA. On 24 September 2008 the New South Wales parliament passed amendments to its Water Management Act 2000 to adopt the National Water Initiative risk assignment as modified by the Murray-Darling Basin IGA. The Commonwealth is therefore moving an amendment to the Water
Amendment Bill to recognise New South Wales as a state which applies the National Water Initiative risk assignment framework.

The second matter involves amendments to schedule 2, item 93 of the bill to clarify that water access rights and interests held by the Commonwealth for the purposes of the Living Murray initiative are not part of the Commonwealth Environment Water Holder holdings and therefore do not fall under the management of the CEWH. Presently the bill only separates Murray-Darling Basin Authority rights and interests from the Commonwealth Environment Water Holder holdings. However, the Department of Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts also holds some water access rights and interests for the purpose of the Living Murray initiative, and an amendment is therefore required to separate these rights and interests from those of the CEWH.

The third matter involves clarifying the process for consideration and adoption of the Basin Plan. Currently the provisions of the existing Water Act 2007 and the bill, read together, would require the Murray-Darling Basin Authority to give the minister a document summarising public submissions and explaining resulting changes to the proposed Basin Plan and a copy of the Basin Plan for adoption before the ministerial council is required to consider the plan. The proposed amendment would ensure that the authority is not required to provide this documentation and a copy of the Basin Plan for adoption to the minister until all consultation processes, including with the ministerial council, are complete.

Mr HUNT (Flinders) (10.03 am)—We accept, and have no problems with, the eight amendments to the Water Amendment Bill 2008 laid down by the government here. We thank the government for the notification, and we agree that the amendments are consequential to actions taken within New South Wales by the New South Wales parliament. I would, however, pose one question for the minister: will the government be setting out an express, clear and absolute timetable in relation to water savings from infrastructure investments so that we can see an actual intended annual saving in terms of megalitres and gigalitres which will come from the deployment of the funding for water infrastructure savings? Will there be such a table and, if so, when will it be published?

Mr GARRETT (Kingsford Smith—Minister for the Environment, Heritage and the Arts) (10.04 am)—The government’s approach to dealing with the matters that are raised by the honourable member has been laid out clearly both in the second reading speech and in the Water Amendment Bill 2008, which amends the original act, and I think that the member will find that information contained therein.

Question agreed to.

Bill, as amended, agreed to.

Third Reading

Mr GARRETT (Kingsford Smith—Minister for the Environment, Heritage and the Arts) (10.05 am)—by leave—I move:

That this bill be now read a third time.

Question agreed to.

Bill read a third time.

TRADE PRACTICES LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL 2008

Consideration of Senate Message

Bill returned from the Senate with amendments.

Ordered that the amendments be considered immediately.

Senate’s amendments—

(1) Schedule 1, items 1 and 2, page 3 (lines 6 to 16), omit the items.
Mr BOWEN (Prospect—Minister for Competition Policy and Consumer Affairs, and Assistant Treasurer) (10.06 am)—I indicate to the House that the government proposes that amendments (1), (3), (4), (6) and (7) be agreed to, that amendments (2) and (5) be disagreed to and that a further six relevant amendments be made. I suggest, therefore, that it may suit the convenience of the House to first consider amendments (1), (3), (4), (6) and (7), then amendments (2) and (5) and, when those amendments have been disposed of, to consider the further amendments. I move:

That Senate amendments Nos 1, 3, 4, 6 and 7 be agreed to.


Following the bill’s introduction into parliament on 26 June 2008, it was amended by the opposition and minor parties in the Senate. The Senate opposed the provisions of the bill which would align the predatory pricing prohibition in subclause 46(1AA) with the longstanding prohibition in clause 46(1). Those amendments would have removed uncertainty in the current drafting of subclause 46(1AA). The government is disappointed in this as it means that this ill-conceived and poorly drafted piece of legislation will continue in place.

However, the bill contains a number of other important amendments including those clarifying the meaning of ‘take advantage’ and the role of recoupment under section 46. These amendments derive from the recommendations of the 2004 report of the Senate inquiry into the effectiveness of the Trade Practices Act 1974 in protecting small business. They are well-overdue amendments which the previous government neglected to introduce and the absence of which would prevent section 46 effectively prohibiting unilateral anticompetitive conduct to the detriment of consumers. Accordingly, the government reluctantly accepts the Senate amendments which will relate to subclause 46(1AA) in the interests of passing the bill. However, the government will continue to monitor the effectiveness of subclause 46(1AA) and reserves the right to revisit this issue given the concerns of the ACCC and the concerns of every expert credible commentator on this issue.

The government has good reason to be concerned about the opposition’s insistence on keeping the Birdsville amendment because the very people who will be enforcing the law are advising that the law is confusing and has unintended consequences. It not only creates confusion but also opens up the possibility of small businesses being prosecuted, which is the very opposite of its intention. It is a poorly drafted, ill-conceived amendment which does not set out what it is intended to set out and it has unintended consequences.
The only commentator who thinks that it is good law is the one who drafted it. Every other academic expert and every other practitioner have noted that it is a seriously deficient law. We do, however, accept it. If we did not accept these amendments, then this bill would fail and it would remain in law anyway. We do, however, reserve the right to revisit the issue in the future.

Question agreed to.

Mr Bowen (Prospect—Minister for Competition Policy and Consumer Affairs, and Assistant Treasurer) (10.09 am)—I move:

That Senate amendments (2) and (5) be disagreed to.

The Senate moved amendments which purported to prevent the bill conferring jurisdiction on the Federal Magistrates Court to hear section 46 matters in appropriate circumstances. The government does not accept these amendments. The Senate has opposed the consequential amendments which would have been required as a result of any conferment of jurisdiction on the Federal Magistrates Court but has not opposed the actual conferment of that jurisdiction. As a result, the amendments cannot be accepted in their present form.

Mr Hartsuyker (Cowper) (10.10 am)—We in the opposition believe that competition is the way in which we get the best deal for consumers, and certainly it has always been an issue in this country that we have in many areas highly concentrated markets. The Birdsville amendment has been part of the now opposition’s response to the issue of ensuring that there is strong competition in the marketplace. I note the comments of the Minister for Competition Policy and Consumer Affairs and Assistant Treasurer in relation to that amendment, but this amendment was enacted in September 2007 and during its time of operation, which has been ample time to make its presence felt, there has been no floodgate of litigation on the matter and there has been no measurable concern generated in the community. So in the time that this amendment has been operating there have been no adverse consequences to date. Small businesses that have been in dialogue with the opposition certainly favour the amendment that was put in place in 2007 and they welcome the change in the definition to a definition of market share. They can certainly see that as a benefit to small business rather than a hindrance.

Question agreed to.

Mr Bowen (Prospect—Minister for Competition Policy and Consumer Affairs, and Assistant Treasurer) (10.12 am)—I move:

That further amendments (1) to (6) be agreed to:

(1) Schedule 1, page 3 (before line 6), before item 1, insert:

1A After subsection 46(1)

Insert:

(1AAA) If a corporation supplies goods or services for a sustained period at a price that is less than the relevant cost to the corporation of supplying the goods or services, the corporation may contravene subsection (1) even if the corporation cannot, and might not ever be able to, recoup losses incurred by supplying the goods or services.

(2) Schedule 1, item 4, page 3 (lines 19 and 20), omit the item.

(3) Schedule 1, page 3 (before line 21), before item 5, insert:

4A Subsection 46(4A)

Omit “Court” (wherever occurring), substitute “court”.

(4) Schedule 2, page 5 (before line 6), before item 1, insert:
1A After subsection 46(1) of the Schedule

Insert:

(1AAA) If a person supplies goods or services for a sustained period at a price that is less than the relevant cost to the person of supplying the goods or services, the person may contravene subsection (1) even if the person cannot, and might not ever be able to, recoup losses incurred by supplying the goods or services.

(5) Schedule 2, item 4, page 5 (lines 19 and 20), omit the item.
(6) Schedule 2, page 5 (before line 21), before item 5, insert:

4A Subsection 46(4A) of the Schedule

Omit “Court” (wherever occurring), substitute “court”.

I present a supplementary explanatory memorandum to the bill. Accepting the Senate’s amendments necessitates the government moving its own amendments to the bill to ensure that it continues to effectively address predatory pricing. Simply accepting the Senate’s amendments would have had the consequence of removing one of the key amendments of the bill—the clarification of the role of recoupment under section 46. To rectify this, the government’s amendments reinstate the government’s proposed recoupment amendment. The reinstated provision ensures that where an action relies on an allegation of sustained below cost pricing under subclause 46(1), it will not be legally necessary to prove recoupment. This was necessitated by the decision of the High Court in the Boral case. It has been called for for a long time since that case. Almost every expert commentator thinks that these are appropriate amendments. They are amendments that the previous government abjectly neglected to introduce despite the fact that the failure to do so effectively neutered section 46. This government is not prepared to do that and we are certainly not prepared to accept an opposition amendment which does that now.

Secondly, accepting the Senate’s amendments necessitates amending the bill so that it would no longer repeal section 46(4A). That subsection presently ensures that the court may consider allegations of predatory pricing under section 46(1). The bill would have rendered section 46(4A) redundant by creating a specific prohibition against predatory pricing by corporations with substantial market power. However, accepting the Senate’s amendments necessitates the retention of subsection 46(4A).

Finally, the equivalent amendments to those outlined above are made to the provisions of the bill which amend the Competition Code. The Competition Code contains the version of section 46 that applies to all persons in the states and territories by virtue of application of legislation in those jurisdictions. Despite the Senate’s amendments, the bill continues to improve the overall effectiveness of the Trade Practices Act in protecting the competitive processes in Australian markets. I commend the amendments to the House.

Mr HARTSUYKER (Cowper) (10.14 am)—The opposition is certainly of the view that the need to have recoupment provisions becomes redundant under the Birdsville amendment. There is no need to prove market power; the new definition has become the issue of market share. Whilst an ability to recoup costs after a competitor is removed from the market is a factor, certainly evidence of market power, under the Birdsville amendment that has become redundant.

Question agreed to.
Mr Bowen (Prospect—Minister for Competition Policy and Consumer Affairs, and Assistant Treasurer) (10.15 am)—I present the reasons for the House disagreeing to Senate amendments (2) and (5) and I move:

That the reasons be adopted.

Question agreed to.

Committees

Publications Committee

Report

Mr Hayes (Werriwa) (10.16 am)—I present the report from the Publications Committee sitting in conference with the Publications Committee of the Senate. Copies of the report are being placed on the table.

Report—by leave—agreed to.

Education Legislation Amendment Bill 2008

Cognate bill:

Schools Assistance Bill 2008

Second Reading

Debate resumed from 24 September, on motion by Ms Gillard:

That this bill be now read a second time.

Mr Pyne (Sturt) (10.17 am)—The Schools Assistance Bill 2008 is the primary funding instrument for non-government primary and secondary education in Australia for the 2009 to 2012 period, appropriating $28 billion for that purpose. The Education Legislation Amendment Bill 2008 is a complementary piece of legislation focused on simplifying the legislative arrangements for Commonwealth funding of schools with a high proportion of Indigenous students. It appropriates more than $640.5 million for non-Abstudy payments and anticipates Abstudy payments of an estimated $102.1 million, an amount that will be adjusted as per demand.

The coalition is committed to improving educational outcomes for Indigenous Australians and will be supporting the Education Legislation Amendment Bill 2008. The coalition is committed to ensuring that the non-government sector remains a real option for parents who wish to make the sacrifices necessary to exercise choice in relation to their children’s education. The Schools Assistance Bill is the vehicle through which the government says that they are fulfilling their election commitment to continue the previous government’s funding level for non-government schools.

One thing we are learning about the Kevin07 new Labor government is that the key is to note what they do, not what they say. The Prime Minister spent much of 2007 reinventing himself as a new style of Labor leader, a faux economic conservative, a supposed safe pair of hands. The rhetoric has continued into government, but now we have the opportunity to judge the quality of their conduct in government. We find that the rhetoric only rarely matches the reality. Unfortunately, the Schools Assistance Bill is one such example.

We have heard that Labor is no longer the party of class warfare and the politics of envy. They claim that the Latham-Gillard resource index and the hated private schools hit list of 2004 have been consigned to history. At the last election we saw a pledge of support to continue the SES funding model for non-government schools. The SES or socioeconomic status funding model is, of course, the fairest method yet suggested for providing government support to school students. The model incorporates census data of the average socioeconomic status, based on occupation, education and income, of the census collector districts of the parents of students at a school. In this way the school is given an SES score. Schools are then funded
per student at a level commensurate to that score.

Many parents from struggling working families make significant sacrifices to be able to send their children to schools that reflect the values they hold or specialise in programs in which their children excel. The SES model reflects government’s appropriate role in enabling those parents to make the choices that are best for their family and best for their child.

The SES model replaced the discredited education resource index or ERI. The ERI model was not concerned with fairness according to what parents were able to afford. Rather, it was open to political manipulation and arbitrary judgement of the wealth of the school. Meanwhile, schools could achieve more or less advantageous ERI ratings, depending on their familiarity with the calculations involved. In its later years it was found that the schools were increasingly using the services of financial advisers or accounting firms with ERI specialists so they could maximise their government support. During the debate in this House in September 2000, when the SES model was introduced, former Minister Kemp explained the inadequacies of the ERI model using the example of the eight non-government schools in Launceston—which should interest the Parliamentary Secretary for Pacific Island Affairs at the dispatch box. The schools were classed in categories 3, 5, 6, 9, 10, 11 and 12 under the ERI model, suggesting that the school communities might represent all ends of the socioeconomic spectrum. The truth is those school communities drew students from a very narrow socioeconomic range, which was reflected in their SES scores all rating between 101 and 104, a small band in a much broader index. As then Minister Kemp said, there was ‘very little differentiation in the communities served by these schools which are attracting vastly different rates of funding’.

In the eight years since, the SES model has served us well, so well in the fact that its maintenance became official ALP election policy last year. It is interesting to follow what happens when we observe a party’s political contortions as they adopt a position of political expediency that they do not believe in. So it is with the SES model. When the Prime Minister and the member for Perth announced on 9 October last year that a Rudd Labor government is committed to adopt the existing socioeconomic status funding model for the next funding quadrennium, you can be sure that one member of the Labor frontbench who would have been gnashing her teeth in response was the member for Lalor. It is important to consider what the member for Lalor thinks of the SES funding model as it is now she in her part-time capacity as Minister for Education who has framed this legislation that will implement the election commitment. One might look for evidence of her commitment to the Labor election policy of supporting the SES model in some of the 605 media releases, speeches, released transcripts or contributions in this House that she has made since becoming education minister, but you would have to look very hard. It seems that prior to introducing this bill she has only managed to mention the SES funding model seven times, each time couched in the explanation that it was an election commitment, as if that is the only reason she can bring herself to maintain it. It is usually quickly followed by a reassurance that the whole model will be reviewed in 2010.

The fact is that the Deputy Prime Minister let the cat out of the bag in September 2000 when she described her objections to the introduction of the SES funding model in this place. She said:

The last objection to the SES model is more philosophical, that the model makes no allowance for the amassed resources of any particular
school. As we are all aware, over the years many prestige schools have amassed wealth—wealth in terms of buildings and facilities, wealth in terms of the equipment available, wealth in terms of alumni funding raising, trust funds, endowment funds and the like.

... it must follow as a matter of logic that the economic capacity of a school is affected by both its income generation potential—from the current class of parents whose kids are enrolled in the school—and the assets of the school. The SES funding system makes some attempt to measure the income generation potential of the parents of the kids in the school but absolutely no attempt to measure the latter, the assets of the school. This is a gaping flaw ...

The fact is that in reading the detail of the Schools Assistance Bill 2008, we find that Labor’s politics of envy, their private schools hit list, has not been abandoned at all. It has just been partially deferred, and partially hidden in the devilish detail of this bill.

There are some serious areas that need redressing before the opposition can give its support to this bill, and I foreshadow that we will be moving substantive amendments in the consideration in detail stage to sections 15, 22 and 24 of the bill. I hope that the government will take these amendments seriously, and by accepting them demonstrate that their election commitments reflected a wholehearted philosophical expression of support for choice in education for Australian parents.

The realist in me fears that the Deputy Prime Minister is all too aware of the implications of the clauses in question, as their implementation could clearly foreshadow an end to fairness in school funding and a return to class struggle and the discredited envy-based funding arrangements of days gone by. First, section 15 of the bill specifies grounds upon which the minister may refuse to authorise or delay a payment to a non-government school. These grounds include: if the school is being wound up—section 15(a)—or is unable to pay its debts—section 15(b). Section 15(c) of the bill provides for new reasons for such refusal or delay in the case that:

(c) if a law of the Commonwealth or a State requires the body or authority to be audited—the relevant audit:

(i) is expressed to be qualified; or

(ii) expresses concern about the financial viability of the body or authority.

The opposition is happy to support this clause to the extent that it requires that an audit confirm the financial viability of the school, but subsection (c)(i) presumes that if an audit statement is qualified, then it necessarily signals that a school’s financial situation is precarious enough to warrant the minister refusing or delaying payment. There may be grounds for an auditor to qualify an audit that does not go to financial viability but instead to a hesitation about a school model, whether a financial hesitation or otherwise. Audits can be qualified for all manner of reasons that have nothing to do with the school’s financial viability—indeed they could be qualified simply on the basis that an auditor was reluctant to completely endorse an educational model used in the school with which they might be unfamiliar. The change would allow the minister to delay or refuse funding in spite of absolute financial viability. This subsection would be procedural gold for a minister who was looking for excuses to suspend funding to a private school, for whatever reason.

Secondly, section 22 of the bill deals with the national curriculum. It mandates that any school receiving funding from the Commonwealth comply with the national curriculum. At this stage we have very little idea what the national curriculum in maths, science and history will look like—all we have...
are very broad framing documents. For the English curriculum we are yet to even see the framing document, although we know that the gentleman drafting it believes that: ‘Literacy education is not about skill development, not about deep competence.’

There is much to be concerned about in relation to where Labor is taking the national curriculum. The final documents will not be presented until some time in 2009, yet this bill seeks to tie school funding to that curriculum’s acceptance. Even were there no concern about the framing documents of the national curriculum, this clause would still elicit concern. Section 31 of the previous legislation required schools to commit to curriculum related activities, such as statements of learning in five areas—English, mathematics, science, civics and citizenship education, and information and communications technology—but not specific curriculum.

Comparable state legislation demanding adherence to a specified curriculum will usually include a qualifying statement, for example that a school implement the curriculum, or other curricula deemed as broadly equivalent. If this clause is to remain in the legislation, despite the fact that we are still in the dark as to what the new national curriculum being developed by the Deputy Prime Minister’s team of academics will actually look like, then at a very minimum it should include an additional subsection allowing for equivalent curricula to be practised within a school.

This is particularly important to schools using those alternative curricula that are already well accepted and in demand in Australia and have also been deemed appropriate by relevant state bodies, despite the fact that I do not see how they could comply with the national curriculum being proposed. For a start, the national curriculum will cover four discipline areas. It is unclear how prescriptive the curriculum for these four discipline areas will be in terms of content and materials. Schools offering alternative curricula, such as the international baccalaureate or the University of Cambridge international examinations, may face problems because they will be forced to comply with the national curriculum in the four specified areas while continuing to teach other subject areas within their chosen curriculum. Students cannot qualify for an IB diploma without, for example, completing all components of the diploma including IB specified curriculum in the four disciplines covered by the national curriculum.

Similarly, schools offering alternative educational philosophies, such as Steiner or Montessori schools, will face great difficulties in meeting the requirements of this clause. These schools offer specific curricula to meet the particular needs of their student cohort, and to place restrictions on these curricula is to restrict parental choice in making decisions that may be in the best interests of their children. Of particular concern to me is that even individual education programs at special schools could be affected under a strict interpretation of this clause. This clause must be improved to allow for these curricula to continue operating as they currently successfully do, or it should be removed.

Our third serious concern is in relation to section 24(1) of the bill, which reads as follows:

24 Funding agreements—reports on programs and financial operations

(1) A funding agreement must require the relevant authority for the non-government school, or other non-government body, to ensure that a report (or reports), of a kind (or kinds) required by the Minister, is given to the Minister in relation to each of the following:
(a) programs of financial assistance provided under this Act, so far as they relate to the relevant authority;

(b) the financial operations (including the financial viability and funding sources) of:

(i) in any case—the school or other body; and

(ii) in the case of an approved school system—the schools (including each particular school) in the system.

In a briefing arranged by the Deputy Prime Minister’s office, I was told that this clause simply followed the form set out in the previous legislation. However, this is not true. ‘Funding sources’, for example, is a new concept in this context and could give the minister substantial new powers to demand information about the internal financial affairs of a school community. This section requires schools to publish information about all of their sources of funding. Such information might specifically include details of scholarship funds, bequests and other sources of funding, including community fundraising activities undertaken by associated bodies such as parents and friends associations. This could include money raised by the dunking machine or the cake table at the community school fete—events many members of this House would have attended over the years. Some data relating to school income is currently collected by government surveys of schools, but it is protected and not published.

This is a key change introduced by the Deputy Prime Minister in this legislation. The data is completely superfluous to the calculations of the socioeconomic status of a school and it is completely superfluous to the requirements of the SES model. Why does this clause exist then? Is it because the government’s real plan is to abolish the SES model and revert to an ERI model? Earlier I quoted the Deputy Prime Minister’s philosophical objections to the model. To this we can add the thoughts of the Assistant Treasurer, who spoke about school funding in this place on 1 December 2004. He said:

… the SES index …is a fundamentally flawed index. It replaces the Education Resources Index, which was much more based on the needs of the school and the capacity of the school to reach educational standards.

More recently, last year, the member for Eden-Monaro was reported as referring to the SES as a ‘ridiculous postcode system’ and promised that the Labor Party would ‘get down eventually to a proper needs based approach’. The detail of this bill shows that the member for Eden-Monaro was telling the truth about Labor’s real plans, to punish schools that receive support from their community above and beyond the basic school fees.

This clause exists in order to lay the groundwork to build up a case to radically alter the SES funding system in the next funding period to one where those schools who are the beneficiaries of acts of philanthropy by parents or old scholars are to be penalised through reduced or abolished Commonwealth support. We should be encouraging parents to make contributions to their children’s educations, not penalising the schools when they do. The reference to the new criterion of ‘funding sources’ should be excised from section 24 of this bill.

Some stakeholders have raised other concerns in relation to which we would be satisfied if the minister would commit to providing solutions through suitable regulations. The cooperative organisation that is managed in some states for funding for Indigenous student programs could be put under threat by this bill. For example, some 40 independent schools in South Australia, each with a small Indigenous student enrolment, currently use the Association of Independent
Schools of South Australia to cluster that funding to deliver support across the sector. Provision should be made in the regulations for the Indigenous education funds included in the Schools Assistance Bill 2008 to be managed by the current approved authority. Section 11(4)(c) indicates:

The State must pay amounts of assistance to the relevant authority of the school … as soon as practicable …

There are currently considerable differences across Australia in the timing of the release of Commonwealth funds from state government to non-government school authorities and schools, even though the funds are released at the same time by the Commonwealth. State governments should be required to distribute the Commonwealth funds within a reasonable time—say, five working days—of receiving the funds. This matter can be clarified in the regulations and in the Commonwealth funding agreements with the states and territories—and again we seek the Deputy Prime Minister’s assurance that this will be taken care of.

Finally, the opposition’s last major concern with the Schools Assistance Bill is with the abolition of the new non-government schools establishment grants. The previous government saw merit in increasing the viability of the non-government sector and encouraging new schools where community demand and private sector interest warranted the same—an aspiration supported through this grants program. I know that in my state, in the electorate of the new member for Mayo, one such example is the Encounter Lutheran Primary School at Victor Harbor, established in 2001. In the years since, the local community has demonstrated its support for the school, with enrolments more than doubling to 250. Parents saw an educational alternative develop in their area that they wanted for their children. Section 100 of this bill puts the final nail in the coffin of Labor’s decision to end these grants, ensuring that success stories like the Encounter school will not be supported in this government’s post-revolution Australia. Rather, the Labor Party seems to prefer the old Hawke government policy, with the astonishingly Orwellian title ‘New Schools’, a policy which ensured that no new schools were able to be established under that government. And you can check that.

Finally, I use this opportunity to fore-shadow that, when we have come to the end of the cognate debate on these bills and we have dealt with the second reading of the Education Legislation Amendment Bill 2008, I will move as a second reading amendment to the Schools Assistance Bill 2008:

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

(1) reaffirms its commitment to providing genuine choice in education opportunities for parents and students through both government and non-government schooling;

(2) notes that the Government is committed to continuing the Socio Economic Status model of funding for non-government schools until 2012 and that, while this Bill fulfils that commitment, it contains a hidden agenda evidenced by:

(a) granting greater power to the Minister to delay or end funding to non-government schools because of an audit qualified for non-financial reasons;

(b) requiring adherence to a national curriculum without flexibility that puts at risk the uniqueness of Steiner, Montessori, International Baccalaureate, University of Cambridge International Examinations and special needs schools;

(c) forcing non-government schools to comply with a requirement to inform the Minister of every funding source to a school or an associated body that can be published—information which is both
Mr BIDGOOD (Dawson) (10.39 am)—I rise to speak in support of the Schools Assistance Bill 2008. The bill will provide funding for non-government schools from 2009 to 2012. The schooling debate has often focused on the competitive relationship between government and non-government schools that exists in Australia. The truth, however, is that there are schools that struggle with limited resources as they try to serve disadvantaged communities in both sectors.

The $28 billion in this bill is part of the government’s overall $42 billion minimum commitment for schools funding during 2009-12. In this legislation the Commonwealth is honouring its election commitments. Those commitments are to use the existing funding formula, based on socio-economic status and the existing indexation formula, and to set funding levels and maintain or guarantee the current funding levels of all non-government schools during 2009-12 to ensure that no school loses a dollar and no school is worse off. State schools will not be worse off as a result of this bill. The Australian government is working through COAG on a new education agreement, which will deliver the funds promised to public schools. The federal government is committed to funding state schools and supporting state governments in running state schools in Australia. This bill is a major building block in building a fair, transparent national framework for schooling in Australia. It will meet Labor’s election commitments. It will help create a basis for reporting and accountability which is consistent across all schools in all sectors.

This separate non-government schools legislation for 2009-12 is required, firstly, to ensure that funding will be appropriated in time for payments to non-government schools in January 2009. Treasury legislation appropriating funding for all Commonwealth specific purpose payments, including funding to the states for government schools, will not commence until July 2009. Secondly, it will ensure that the Commonwealth can honour its election commitment that no school will be disadvantaged. The Commonwealth could not ensure this commitment if all schools funding was paid to the states under the national education agreement. Thirdly, this bill will allow time for the arrangements between the states and non-government schools to be put in place to ensure that the states will be able to deliver on outcomes across the entire schools system. The funding for government schools will be paid through states and territories. The intergovernmental agreement that delivers the funds will be called—

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Hon. Peter Slipper)—Order! Will the honourable member for Dawson resume his seat. I was going to adjourn the House while we waited for the minister to return to the table. However, the minister is now here. I welcome him back. I call the honourable member for Dawson.

Mr BIDGOOD—Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. The intergovernmental agreement that delivers the funds will be called the national education agreement. The government has committed a minimum of $42 million over the next four years to fund schools in Australia. In the 2008 budget the government delivered many of its election commitments to progress its education revolution. In
schools, this includes funding for the trade training centres and digital education revolution programs, which are already underway. I am passionate about education. I am a believer in life-long learning. I have completed both an apprenticeship in the print trade and university studies as an adult. I firmly believe that education is truly the key to success. When I am invited to schools in my electorate—great, vibrant schools, like Mercy College in Mackay, Ayr State School and Slade Point State School—I speak to the students, teachers and parents. They tell me about their schools and their communities, and I am always impressed by the calibre of the young people that our schools produce, the professionalism of the teaching staff and the dedication of the parents of the students.

The Rudd Labor government together with the Queensland government in my electorate of Dawson are doing great things for our schools. Only last week I visited St Patrick’s College in Mackay and, together with Principal Eamon Hannon, we powered up 187 of the computers the school received as part of the computers in schools program, which is integral to our plan for an education revolution. I also visited Mackay North State High School and Burdekin Special School, who have received funding from the federal government for a science lab and specialised playground equipment—essential tools for delivering 21st century education to our young people.

Since the beginning of 2008, the Rudd Labor government has been working, through the Council of Australian Governments—COAG—to develop a new framework for investment and reform in Australian schools. This will result in a national education agreement to be finalised through COAG by the end of this year. The COAG reform framework means that, for the first time, all governments in Australia will agree to a single set of objectives, outcomes and outputs, and hence educational priorities and reform directions, for the education system.

This bill gives funding certainty to schools in Dawson, with a focus on quality, and applies transparency and accountability requirements that are consistent with government schools and with Labor’s election commitments on transparency. As well as meeting these commitments, the bill will make important changes to funding for Indigenous students in non-government schools.

The Schools Assistance Bill 2008 will provide for: recurrent and capital funding for non-government schools; continuation of current indexation arrangements, with indexation of recurrent and targeted funding based on average government schools recurrent costs and capital grants indexed by the building price index; maximum recurrent funding for non-government schools with a very high proportion of Indigenous enrolments; and Indigenous Supplementary Assistance for Indigenous students, generally comprising the non-government recurrent funding component for Indigenous school students provided under the Indigenous Education (Targeted Assistance) Act 2000. Four existing programs have been streamlined, with funding under this element allocated on a per-Indigenous-enrolment basis, with a higher per capita rate for secondary students and schools in remote and very remote areas.

The ISA funding indexation rates and remoteness classifications have been aligned with those that apply to mainstream programs under the bill, improving the capacity of schools to ensure this assistance can keep pace with the costs of delivering education. This is complemented by an Indigenous funding guarantee to ensure schools are not worse off under the new arrangements. Finally, the bill will provide funding for non-government schools for most of the targeted
programs which currently operate under the schools legislation, other than the non-government rural student hostels program, establishment assistance for schools and the national projects program.

Under previous agreements, Commonwealth funding came with a wide range of conditions and strings attached. For example, the legislation for the previous quadrennium imposed over 20 commitments and accountability requirements spanning a range of policy areas, necessitating a high degree of regulation, monitoring and micro-management, both by the Commonwealth and by systems and schools. This new framework will reduce the number of different funding agreements, remove many of the input controls and forms of compliance that the Commonwealth previously imposed on states and school systems, and focus payments and accountability on the achievement of agreed outputs and outcomes. For example, the bill will require, as a condition of funding, the implementation of the national curriculum—being developed by the National Curriculum Board—by 2012. This national curriculum will apply to all Australian schools.

This bill provides funding certainty for schools. The Schools Assistance Bill 2008 fulfils yet another election commitment made in 2007 and is certainly worthy of the support of the whole House.

Now I wish to talk about the Education Legislation Amendment Bill 2008. The government is working with government and non-government education and training providers to achieve the very important goals of halving the gaps in literacy and numeracy achievement, halving the gaps in year-12-or-equivalent attainment and halving the gaps in employment outcomes for Indigenous Australians. The Rudd Labor government is committed to an education revolution where no Australian is left behind. The Rudd Labor government is committed to improve education outcomes of Indigenous Australians.

Current forward estimates of Commonwealth funding for Indigenous education over 2009 to 2012 total some $2.3 billion dollars. This compares with the estimated $2.1 billion for Indigenous education announced by the former government prior to the commencement of the 2005 to 2008 quadrennium. The government’s arrangements through this bill will see more funding flow to Indigenous students. The government wants to reduce red tape and improve flexibility for education providers to focus on achieving the target of closing the gap in the education outcomes of Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. The changed arrangements for schools and, in time, preschools and VET will give them greater flexibility in how they support Indigenous education to achieve agreed outcomes. The new arrangements will also recognise Indigenous education as a mainstream education issue.

The Education Legislation Amendment Bill 2008 has three main purposes. Firstly, it provides for the continuation of appropriations for 2009-12 for a range of targeted programs and projects under the Indigenous Education (Targeted Assistance) Act 2000 to support improvements in Indigenous education outcomes and assist in closing the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. Secondly, it provides appropriations for supplementary assistance to preschools and vocational education and training—VET—providers with Indigenous students from 1 January 2009 as a transitional arrangement until alternative legislation associated with early childhood and vocational education and training specific-purpose payments and national partnerships payments become operational in 2009. Thirdly, this bill makes a number of technical and consequen-

The bill will provide the government with capacity to work with Indigenous communities, parents and families to improve their engagement with education providers so that they can be supported in becoming informed consumers of educational services. Indigenous parental involvement in decision making is an essential element to improving educational outcomes. Transitional arrangements for preschools and VET providers will ensure this supplementary assistance can continue to be provided to Indigenous students from 1 January 2009 until it can be facilitated through new arrangements. This ensures the continuation of services to Indigenous families. Education initiatives generally build the capacity of families. Good educational outcomes are a strong influencing factor in higher socioeconomic status.

The bill will appropriate funding for a number of initiatives that give Indigenous people from regional and remote areas greater choice and assist them to access and participate in education. These programs include the government’s election commitment to additional boarding facilities in the Northern Territory implemented through the 2008-09 budget, the Indigenous Youth Mobility Program and the Away from Base program. Funding in this bill will appropriate $505.9 million for 2009-12 so that the Commonwealth can fund targeted and strategic projects to improve education outcomes of Indigenous Australians; continue appropriations for Away from Base for a ‘mixed-mode’ delivery program at an estimated cost of $109.3 million; and appropriate $163.3 million as a transitional provision to provide funding certainty for eligible preschools and vocational education and training providers with Indigenous students from 1 January 2009 until the introduction of relevant funding mechanisms in support of reforms to specific-purpose payments. This funding will also allow us to continue to work with Indigenous communities, philanthropic organisations, corporate leaders and national organisations to build the partnerships that are so critical to improving outcomes for Indigenous Australians.

While new arrangements for supplementary recurrent funding will provide greater flexibility to states and other education providers in how they use Commonwealth funding to address the needs of their Indigenous students under the revised arrangements, this bill will allow the Commonwealth to retain its capacity to take a national leadership role in Indigenous education through the retention of targeted initiatives as Commonwealth own purpose expenses.

The changes to reporting under the bill are a consequence of the transfer of funding as part of the reforms to specific-purpose payments, including the collection and reporting of relevant Indigenous data under new performance and accountability frameworks. The new arrangements into which some Indigenous education funding will be transferred will have their own performance and accountability requirements. It has been agreed that all progress measures under the new SPP arrangements relating to early childhood, schools and VET will be disaggregated by Indigenous status. This will provide a clearer picture of the extent of the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians in these sectors. We are committed to an education revolution. This government believes that improving education outcomes for all Australians, including Indige-
nous Australians, is very important for the long-term benefit and productivity of this nation.

The member for Sturt, who spoke previously, brought up past, old histories and made really outdated and outmoded political comments. He brought up the old stuff but he does not realise that this is a new Australian Labor Party, which is full of very successful small business people. We are caring capitalists, and there are a lot of us in this new government. The old ways are no longer in this party. We are a party of pragmatism—and that is something the other side just do not understand. When we see that something is good and that it works, we acknowledge that it is good. We do not throw out the things that work. We are pragmatic and we are realistic and we believe in transparency and accountability. There are many people in this party who have a very good, firm grip on business procedures, transparency and accountability, and these have been applied successfully. I commend this bill to the House. (Time expired)

Mr BALDWIN (Paterson) (10.59 am)—I rise today to speak on the Schools Assistance Bill 2008. I say from the outset that this bill puts into place measures which, according to Labor, are designed to bring about better education for our future leaders, but I have serious doubts about many of the key points in this legislation. In theory the idea of an education revolution is an inspiring state of play; but, as we have seen time and time again since the Rudd Labor government came to power, their ability to implement such a revolution has been repeatedly replaced by an embarrassing display of acts which showcase their utter incompetence and absolute inefficiency. I stand before you today to represent the constituents of the Paterson electorate, in which there are over 60 public and private primary and secondary schools. The Rudd Labor government came to office promising an education revolution, yet I am still waiting to see evidence of such a historic event of epic proportions taking place. I am yet to see a mere ripple of such strategic and well-placed activities being implemented, and I know that this feeling is unfortunately not isolated to my electorate.

On entering government, the listed priorities of the Rudd Labor government were improving the quality of teaching, raising outcomes in disadvantaged schools and communities, and delivering a new era of transparency to guide parents, teachers and policymakers in making the best decisions possible, all of which are admirable aspirations. However, having listened to the cries of the constituents in the Paterson electorate and the voices of the Teachers Federation and the Independent Education Union of Australia, the reality is much starker. Instead this list of priorities has been replaced with a list of consistent inadequacies and embarrassing blunders for the Rudd Labor government. Let us take, for example, the so-called digital education revolution. We all heard the shallow promises and cheap publicity stunts resorted to by the Rudd Labor government in the lead-up to the 2007 federal election. ‘Every child shall have their own computer,’ we repeatedly heard Rudd claim. Eleven months on, this promise has been replaced—

Mr BALDWIN—We repeatedly heard the Rudd government claim. Eleven months on, this promise has been replaced with a much watered down approach: a promise to provide every child from years 9 to 12 with access to the latest technology. In basic English he has already failed; ‘their own computer’ does not mean ‘access to’.
It is beyond me how the Rudd Labor government can be confident and assured in their approach to this matter and continually proclaim but not fulfil promises to the future leaders of our nation. Not only that but the schools and state governments have now been told that they will have to come up with their own ways of funding teacher training, new buildings, power points to house extra computers, insurance, electricity and broadband connections. Way to go, Prime Minister! You have effectively given a car to someone who has no licence and does not comprehend road rules. I reckon I would give you an ‘F’ on your report card for that attempt. My constituents in Paterson feel the same way. Kevin 07 has quickly become Mistake 08.

During our 11-year term, the Howard government worked hard to restore the status of technical and trade careers so that young Australians would see the trades as an avenue to rewarding and satisfying careers. As just one of the measures designed to lift the status of trades, the Howard coalition government established 28 Australian technical colleges around Australia. These colleges allow students to complete their final years of high school and at the same time start an apprenticeship in their chosen trade so that when they finish school they are well on their way to a successful career. In a blow to local secondary schools, the Rudd Labor government has also deflated the hopes of many school students in the Paterson electorate by breaking its electoral promise to open a trade centre in every Australian secondary school. In the limited examples where the Rudd Labor government has installed the so-called trade centres, all the government has effectively done is provide funding to rename the metalwork room the ‘Metalwork Centre’.

The Rudd Labor government needs to get more serious about the current trade shortage and tackle the problem head-on. As such, I want to see the Rudd Labor government provide proper trades funding as originally promised. The Paterson electorate needs dedicated, properly funded facilities like the Australian technical colleges, which have scale, local industry input and expert trade teachers. The Howard government spent an average of $24 million on each Australian technical college, while the Rudd Labor government is offering each school an average of just $900,000—and then over 10 years—to build a ‘centre’. It is becoming patently obvious that the priorities of the Rudd Labor government, whatever they may be, are definitely not with education in this country.

The alternative government believes that education is the fundamental, essential and enduring building block upon which to build opportunity for young Australians and prosperity and cohesion for Australia’s future. Parents and students must be assured that our education system is defined by choice, values and high standards. The alternative government demands that every child have access to high-quality education from a high-quality teacher in a high-quality school environment. The alternative government supports choice and believes that every parent, having paid their taxes, deserves some level of public assistance to support the education of their child.

The Rudd Labor government has, in an absurd and destructive move, scrapped the successful Investing in Our Schools Program. The IOSP will lapse on 31 December 2008, but this has not stopped a raft of Labor senators turning up to coalition held seats to claim credit for projects at their openings. If you want an example of an education revolution that was well thought out, implemented and budgeted, then the IOSP is a classic example. This program created by the former coalition government provided money directly to schools to spend on infrastructure
that the school actually wanted. An example of how vital and effective the IOSP has been was when this year I had the pleasure of officially opening the new play equipment and shade sail areas at the Mount Kanwary Public School in the Paterson electorate. The school was fortunate to receive not one but two Investing in Our Schools grants under the Howard government. These enabled it to fund the works that the parent body was busy saving for.

Another terrific example of the IOSP in action was when in November of 2007 I had the pleasure of opening new and refurbished facilities worth $48,977 at Coolongolook Public School. I personally fought for $42,905 for the construction of covered walkways, play equipment and shade cover over play areas at the school. I also fought for $6,072 for the upgrade of the file server for the computer network in the school. The file server services 20 computers and two notebooks. In October of 2007 I had the honour of presenting Clarence Town Public School with a significant contribution of $73,792 from the Howard government’s Investing in Our Schools Program. This grant enabled staff and students at the school to purchase new library resources, ICT and computer equipment, and an outdoor learning area. The grant proved an invaluable asset to the educational opportunities of the school. The Howard government’s IOSP initiative was able to assist Stroud Road Public School with an $11,907 grant, so that staff and students at the school could purchase new ICT and computer equipment. These are but a few examples of how the IOSP was able to revolutionise the Australian education system. In 2007 alone, schools in my electorate received close to $2 million to fix everything from run-down toilets and classrooms to fund upgrades of playgrounds and IT equipment.

Since the Rudd Labor government came to power, school communities in the Paterson electorate have, disappointingly, had to continually make up for state government shortfalls, which is detracting from their ability to focus 100 per cent of their energies on providing superior education opportunities. The Rudd Labor government’s decision to axe this well-received and revolutionary program is a testament to the Rudd Labor government being out of touch with reality and out of tune with Australian educational necessities. I foresee four main areas where the non-government education sector will be impacted by the Schools Assistance Bill 2008 and the Education Legislation Amendment Bill 2008. These areas include: changes to the grounds on which the minister can elect to refuse or delay payment, which makes it easier for the minister to do so, contained in section 15; the new requirement in school funding agreements to comply with the national curriculum by 2012 as specified in regulations, in section 22; alterations to the reporting requirements for schools, particularly new requirements relating to information about financial viability and funding sources, contained in section 24; and, the removal of the previous government’s new non-government schools establishment grants, in section 100.

I would like to express my concerns in relation to the new requirement that schools comply with the national curriculum. The Rudd Labor government has not outlined what the national maths, science, history and English curriculum will look like, yet this bill seeks to tie school funding to that curriculum’s acceptance. Some of the details surrounding the national curriculum’s development have been released, and I share the concerns of my colleague the shadow minister for education, Christopher Pyne, when I say that I am anxious about the prospect of the national curriculum being hijacked by
ideologues. As I am sure many of you are aware, in September former member of the Communist Party Stuart Macintyre was appointed to write the national history curriculum. I share the shadow minister’s concerns when I say that we can only hope that the required reading for our year 12 students will not include Professor Macintyre’s own works on the history of the Australian Communist Party or the history of Marxism in early 20th century Britain. However, my concerns do not end there. It also caused me great unease to hear that the English curriculum is being drafted by Professor Peter Freebody of Sydney University.

Professor Freebody has been publicly documented as saying:

"Literacy education is not about skill development, not about deep competence. It is about the institutional shaping of social practices and cultural resources, about inducting successive generations into particular cultural, normative ways of handling texts, and about access to technologies and artifacts (e.g., writing, the Internet) and to the social institutions where these tools and artifacts are used …"

I would hope that I am not alone in my reasonable views that, although these principles that Professor Freebody speaks of may be of use and relevance to our school students, learning should always relate back to the cornerstone of education—which is, of course, skills development.

I would now like to address how additional reporting requirements for schools, particularly in relation to funding services, will potentially impact on the non-government education sector. Section 24 of the bill refers to funding agreements and reports on programs and financial operations. Departmental briefs reported that this clause simply followed the form set out in the previous legislation. However, this is not true. Funding sources, for example, is a new concept in this context, and could give the minister substantial new powers to demand information about internal financial affairs of a school community. Effectively, this will mean that non-governmental schools in the Paterson electorate will have to report publicly and in much greater detail about their sources of funding. Under the new plans, for example, if an active P&F in the Paterson electorate showed great initiative and raised $30,000 for new play equipment at their school then they would have to provide a transparent account of events that allowed them to accumulate such funds. Although this notion on its own is not absurd or unjust, one can only draw the conclusion that this clause exists in order to lay the groundwork to build a case to radically alter the SES funding system in the next funding period.

Unfortunately, it would appear that those schools who are the beneficiaries of acts of philanthropy by parents may be penalised through reduced or abolished Commonwealth support. If this were to become the normalised state of play—that is, to reduce government funding to schools that show initiative and are proactive in their approach to enhance their school environment through fundraising activities—then I would be very disenchanted to support this clause. It would appear that this is a foreshadowing of the ‘Latham schools hit lists’ which are yet to come.

I now move to speak on the removal of the new non-government schools establishment grants. The Howard coalition government always believed in choice and recognised that non-government schools save taxpayers money, and proudly encouraged the development of Catholic and independent schools. The Howard coalition government saw the merit in increasing the viability of the non-government school sector and encouraging new schools where the community demanded it. I know of no better example in my electorate of this grant benefiting the
community than the Medowie Christian School.

Medowie is a growing town in the Port Stephens local government area but, until the development of the Medowie Christian School, it had no high school. Hundreds of children are bussed daily to Raymond Terrace public high schools or to Catholic, independent and selective high schools in Newcastle some 60 kilometres away. Thanks to the vision of the community behind the Medowie Christian School, the town has its first high school, providing an option for parents who do not want to risk their children’s lives travelling twice a day on overcrowded buses with no seatbelts.

The removal of this grant would make it increasingly difficult for new non-government schools, such as Medowie Christian School, to be set up. As I mentioned before, the Rudd Labor government has noted the key priorities which they think are critical to the future performance of our education system. Their priorities include improving the quality of teaching, raising outcomes in disadvantaged school communities and delivering a new era of transparency to guide parents, teachers and policymakers to make the best possible decisions.

It is the Rudd Labor government’s belief that this bill will provide for five activities that are essential to achieve transparency in education: national testing, national outcome reporting, the provision and publication of individual school information and reporting to parents. The Rudd Labor government has said that the non-government schools will be obliged to participate in these activities in a way that is consistent with the wider transparency framework applied to all sectors. However, I ask the Rudd Labor government: have they even bothered to listen to what the key stakeholders have had to say about this overhaul? The Independent Education Union of Australia agrees unequivocally that schools should be more accountable and transparent. However, representatives from the Independent Education Union are up in arms about the government’s plans to source data about schools’ performance as they fear that this will lead to simplistic league-table reporting. Such reporting styles, they believe—and I agree—will lead to media manipulation of the necessarily complex data collected into a single figure so that schools can be ranked. These sorts of ranking systems will provide no genuine information that parents and teachers can constructively use, are devoid of any real purpose and will only work to bring about greater competition between schools and teacher sackings where schools are not performing as well. The voices of the Independent Education Union of Australia and the Teachers Federation should be given more validity in negotiations between the federal, state and territory governments if we are to create a more holistic and encompassing education system within Australia.

As a parent of three children myself, I wholeheartedly agree that parents should have access to timely and meaningful information about their children’s progress and school community. The idea of an open, transparent and accountable education system is ideal and achievable. However, such a system must be the result of open dialogue between teachers, teachers unions, parents, and state and federal governments. If the Rudd Labor government creates an education system that is ill informed from its outset and does not reflect the views of current education providers then creating such a bill will only work against creating an ‘education revolution’. The education of our children is perhaps the most critical issue that we face as a nation. Therefore, it is time the Prime Minister appointed a full-time education minister and a full-time workplace relations
member; the Deputy Prime Minister should not be responsible for both. Today I have listed but a few of the Rudd Labor government’s downfalls, including their inability to listen to what key stakeholders really want, but the list continues.

Finally, perhaps the Rudd Labor government should, instead of referring to their plans as an ‘education revolution’, admit their defeats and announce what has ultimately been an ‘education dissolution’. The future of our children’s education is at stake, and I will not rest until the Rudd Labor government plays the fair and accountable game. The aim of the Schools Assistance Bill 2008 may be to implement the government’s commitment to providing stability in Commonwealth funding for non-government schools for 2009-12, but, as we have heard today, this commitment needs a serious shake-up.

Mr HAYES (Werriwa) (11.18 am)—It gives me great pleasure to rise to support the Education Legislation Amendment Bill 2008 and the Schools Assistance Bill 2008 in the House today. These two bills before us allow the government to begin tackling the big challenges on Australia’s horizon by providing long-term plans, not short-term band-aids. I have taken a deep interest in education, probably stemming from the fact that I am a parent and, as a consequence, have a very clear view of how my children, and now how my grandchildren, are accessing education throughout the system. I am genuinely committed to improving the educational outcomes for all Australians.

I would like to start off by saying that the government came to office with the promise of new leadership. In addition to industrial relations and, particularly, our position with respect to Work Choices, there were two fundamental issues that stand out in my mind and that the people of my electorate in Werriwa were very much enlivened by leading up to the last election. One was the education revolution for all Australians; the other was the apology to the stolen generations. As promised by the Rudd government, the apology to the stolen generations was the first order of business of the Rudd Labor government in this parliament. The new relationship with Indigenous Australia was exemplified through the first national welcome to country, something, as I say, that had never occurred in this place. With the knowledge of the past, respect for the people and a commitment to the future, the apology is the basis for a change in attitudes for all Australians and the basis to move forward. It was an opportunity to formally recognise the past injustices and to commit to the challenge of the future. It was the chance to move forward and work closely with the states and the territories to close the gap on Indigenous disadvantage.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Hon. Peter Slipper)—Order! Would the honourable member for Werriwa return to the bill.

Mr HAYES—Mr Deputy Speaker, I assure you that I am speaking on the bill, as one of the pieces of legislation before the House actually deals with our contribution to Indigenous education and, in that manner, closing the gap of disadvantage. This commitment was not about furthering a political agenda but rather about doing what, in my opinion, was right and decent.

Labor also made it clear that Australia needs nothing less than an education revolution: a substantial and sustained increase in the quantity of our investment and the quality of education for all Australian youth. This is required at every level of education, from early childhood education through to the education of mature age students. Our commitment to education does not have timeline. This is about putting Australia in the fore-
front of the education revolution. Education is the platform of our economic future. Our prosperity rests on what we commit to education now.

Some time ago, I had the opportunity to visit Taiwan. You have also been there, Acting Deputy Speaker Slipper. One of the things that struck me was that here was this country of 24 million people, the same population of Australia and New Zealand put together, living on half the landmass of Tasmania. Their economy was going very well when I was there—I have not checked their balance sheet of late. One of the things that struck me was that they offer degrees at 160 institutions, they value technical and further education and they conduct their business on the basis of producing manufactured goods in various countries around the globe. What they maintain is ingenuity, intellectual property and the development—the advanced side of manufacturing. The vast majority of their economy is now based on that.

When I met with their minister for economic development, it was explained to me that a lot of this could be put down to what happened some 15 years ago when that country made a disproportionate commitment to the education of its people. Education is not something that you do just to win an election; education is not something that you do just as you front up for the next budget. Education is the commitment that we lay down for the society that we want to become. That is why it is our education revolution. This is where the community that we wish to develop for the future will come from.

My kids are thankfully through the school system now. That means that I do not have to participate in their homework any longer. But I have grandchildren growing up and I want the best for them and this country, not simply in the next year, not simply for their 10th or 12th birthdays, but as they mature into their working lives and have their own families. That is why our commitment to the education revolution is so critical.

I am sure that it has not escaped many that the opposition, when they had the opportunity in respect to education over the past 12 years, squibbed it. They stripped $1 billion out of the education system. Obviously, they did not share our vision that education is integral to the future of our community. The Labor government is committed to lifting the quantity of education investment and the quality of education outcomes. We have a high standard of living in this country. That can only be sustained through further productivity increases. Underpinning that is our education system.

Turning to the specifics of the bills, I would like to make a few comments to the House in relation to the Education Legislation Amendment Bill 2008. The government is committed to providing quality education that is relevant and accessible to all Indigenous students and leads to further opportunities in the education, training and employment systems. We all know that there is still a large disparity between the educational achievement of Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. This was highlighted in the minister’s second reading speech.

The bill will appropriate more than $500 million for another four years from 2009 to allow the government to continue working with relevant stakeholders on a range of targeted programs and projects to support improvements in Indigenous educational outcomes and to assist in closing the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. An additional $109 million is estimated to be spent over the next four years to augment Abstudy entitlements to assist Indigenous students access tertiary education around the country. We also aim to see that every Indigenous four-year-old throughout
our remote communities has access to early learning programs, as is the case with non-Indigenous children.

When we talk about education, it is not simply for the non-Indigenous population of the country. If we are serious about closing the gap, this is something that must be very much targeted at those with disadvantage. That is what we are seeking to do. We are establishing national collaborative arrangements through the Council of Australian Governments which will assist all of us working collectively towards these targets. Closing the gap can only be achieved by working together. This bill will make an important contribution to closing the gaps between the education outcomes of Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.

The other bill before us today is the Schools Assistance Bill 2008. This bill will provide funding for non-government schools for the years 2009 through to 2012. It will appropriate $28 billion of Commonwealth funding for all non-government schools, including specific funding for schools and students in rural and regional areas under remote loading and recurrent grants and through the provision of Indigenous supplementary assistance, a way to provide additional support for schools and campuses in remote areas of the country.

Since we came to office less than a year ago with a promise to bring an education revolution to Australia, I do not think many people out there could conclude that we have not been striving to do just that. We have provided $2.5 billion over 10 years to enable secondary schools across the nation to apply for funding of between $500,000 and $1.5 million for trade training in schools. Trade training in schools is being established to help increase the population of students achieving year 12 or equivalent qualifications. It is also trying to bridge the gap that we currently have in our skills shortage across the nation. This is a direct response to dealing with the productivity issues into the future of this country by being able to have trade training delivered directly throughout our high schools.

Recently I had the opportunity to go through some figures for my electorate. With respect to the digital education revolution, which was packaged under two roll-outs so far, just in Werriwa we have had 1,481 new computers in 10 of our schools. These computers are being delivered so that students between year 9 and year 12 will all have access to computers. This is not, as some have put to me, about understanding the importance of knowledge of computers. This is not about teaching kids to be able to use computers; this is a move to actually incorporate computers into the general educational environment of children as they are progressing through the senior years of school. It is good news for all our local schools and for the students in those schools. To get an education in today’s world—I think the facts speak for themselves—you need to be learning with today’s technology. We need to be able to keep up to date and up to speed with technology in order to achieve the best results—producing not only kids who will be our leaders in research and other things through tertiary education but those who will take up and avail themselves of the opportunities to be involved in industry throughout their lives. To that extent, the education revolution is about giving local students, in my case in the south-west of Sydney, every opportunity to meet these challenges for the future.

We are doing, quite frankly, what we said we would do before the last election. We have remained focused on that and we are delivering on those outcomes. For many decades, the focus in the schooling debate has unfortunately been on the competitive relationship between government and non-
government schools, but the education system cannot be broken down into two groups because, if it were, we would have a disadvantaged public sector on one side and a highly resourced non-government sector on the other. That would be an oversimplistic view which would be counter to any of the reforms that we on this side of politics would ever subscribe to. To thrive in the future, we need a schooling system which delivers high-quality education for all students regardless of their address and regardless of their schools. Funding is important, and we need a framework for funding, for accountability and for improvements that are consistent across the school sector, transparent about the needs and focused on the quality and effectiveness of education in every school. Not to do so would leave us in a position where our government schools may simply be the cheap alternative. This would, quite frankly, mitigate our school system right across the board. Quality public education must always remain the hallmark of our communities; hence the need for the Commonwealth to work closely and in collaboration with our state and territory colleagues. That is occurring through COAG to ensure that there is an equally weighted focus on the value of education not only now but into the future.

I have in my electorate of Werriwa 41 government schools, including both primary schools and secondary colleges, as well as nine Catholic systemic colleges and eight other non-government schools, all of which I know to have committed staff—because one of the staff there is my daughter Elizabeth. I get to see schools firsthand because I, as I would expect every member of this place to do, go out and visit schools. Schools are not a place for politicking. With respect, schools are where we should go and talk to those who will follow us as the community leaders of the future and where we should engage people with a view to talking not simply to kids but to people whose ideas will shape our country into the future. So schools are very important. To this end, I take the opportunity to thank the staff of all those schools across my electorate for the unselfish contributions that they make. As I say, I know, through my own daughter Elizabeth, who teaches at the Good Samaritan Catholic College at Hoxton Park, how much work she does out of hours. I know how much of a thrill she gets every time she sees positive results for her students. I also know the number of kids who have graduated from the school who stay in contact with her and talk about their selection choices at university or TAFE or about what job opportunities they are going through. It is all part of community building.

Education is not a job but a profession, and we should all regard it as such. In my daughter’s case, she chose to be a teacher in kindergarten. I think that was possibly because of the fact that her kindergarten teacher had long hair. She never sought to be anything else but a teacher, and I have to say that she gets great satisfaction out of it. With all her colleagues I get to meet and all the schools I get to visit, I see the same faces. These people are not there just to do a job. I am sure they would like to make a little bit more money, but they are there to fulfil their commitment, and they are very passionate about what they do. Invariably, when I speak at end-of-year prize-giving nights and talk to schools and their students, I ask them how many kids leaving year 12 would like to make a difference to our society. I know when I stare down onto the faces of all those young children down there that they will be doctors, electricians, builders and engineers and I ask them, ‘How many of you would genuinely like to make a real difference to the community that we represent?’

What I say to them is that if you want to make a real difference within your commu-
nity, when you leave school consider education. Without the educators, the professional and dedicated teachers of all our schools, we would not have the doctors, we would not have the electricians, we would not have the builders, the carpenters or the engineers. One consistent thing that we have in developing these people to advance our community into the future and to advance our economy and our productivity, quite frankly, is our teaching profession. So to that extent I think that we need to ensure that those who participate and educate our children are accorded the respect of being the professionals that they are. I always defer to the achievements of those in the teaching profession because I realise what they are producing. They are producing the nation’s future.

All the schools in my electorate do a fine job. Sule College, for example, which is one of the local Islamic schools, does a fundamental job in terms of working with each of our other schools: our Catholic systemic schools and our other independent schools and government schools. Their principal, Mr Ahmet Yamakoglu, and the principal of Mount Carmel High School, John Barrington, who has led the charge on computers for some time, are people of absolute quality in our community. (Time expired)

Mr SIMPKINS (Cowan) (11.39 am)—I rise today to speak on the Schools Assistance Bill 2008 which represents the primary funding instrument for non-government primary and secondary education in Australia for 2009 to 2013 and involves an appropriation of $28 billion. This bill is very important for schools in my electorate of Cowan. I have 12 non-government schools in the electorate. All of the non-government schools are modest-fee schools.

When we talk about non-government schools we on this side think of choice—choice for parents who want a formal religious aspect to the education their children receive, or perhaps they want another system of learning like the Kingsley Montessori School provides. But in any case they have elected to look outside the state government system for an education for their children. It is also appropriate for the federal government to provide support for them through recurrent grants and establishment grants.

It is clear that since 1996 non-government schools in my electorate have developed in response to the demand of Cowan parents. In 1996 general recurrent grants stood at over $8 million. In 2001 they were over $13 million, and in 2005 over $21 million. Later I will come back to where that money goes and how useful it really is for these schools that are so much a part of our community in Cowan.

Now in consideration of the bill I would like to move to an area of concern I have with the Rudd government’s plan to remove access to the non-government schools’ establishment grants for any new schools. This of course will make it harder for new schools to be established, and it looks like the government and the Deputy Prime Minister are committed to making it harder for more non-government schools to be built.

With regard to the Rudd government plan of putting up obstacles to new non-government schools being developed, I think immediately of the parents of the Seventh Day Adventist school in Cowan that desperately wants to create a high school in Landsdale and thereby provide secondary education in the northern suburbs for those seeking it, an education guided by the Adventist faith. Similarly I worry for the establishment of new Roman Catholic high schools in the northern suburbs, as they will also not have access to these grants.

The next point of this bill that I would like to pursue is the matter of the additional re-
porting of funding sources. Section 24 deals with the need to provide reports on the financial operations including financial viability and funding sources. It is my view that in this context the term ‘funding sources’ will enable the minister to demand access to internal financial affairs of a school. What then would happen with scholarship funds? What about bequests and community fundraisers? What is all this about? That is the question. Will we get to the point where philanthropy by parents or former students will be penalised through reduced support? Will it be a system that thereby discourages effort and innovation? The SES system is fair and it should remain as it is.

Before I move on to other matters I also raise a concern I have with the national curriculum. For those schools that offer alternative curricula, such as the Montessori and the International Baccalaureate, I am concerned about them being forced to comply with this curriculum. I make this point because one of the main differences between the Montessori schools and the mainstream education is the philosophical and educational objection to competition and comparisons between students. In fact the Montessori schools carefully avoid them, instead, focusing on individual observation and the careful tailoring of offerings to each student. Even so, there is a well-recognised progression of curricula in Montessori schools worldwide which does not always match the progression in ‘mainstream’ schools.

The same can be said for the IB, although those curricula are very flexible for the very reason that they need to be acceptable in countries all over the world. It is my understanding that both Montessori and the International Baccalaureate have been acknowledged as ‘world best practice’, and we should say that here in parliament. It is therefore very important that the government takes this into account and that is why the opposition wants the removal of section 22.

I now turn my attention to the schools that will be affected by this bill. Firstly, I will speak of the Emmanuel Christian Community School in Girrawheen under the leadership of Mr Pedro Cruz. The school is very aware of the challenges and the needs of those who live in a low socioeconomic area. For 27 years the school has been there providing stability, care and leadership. The staff are caring and committed individuals who consider their work a ‘ministry’ and staff turnover is consequently very low. The school provides opportunities for families to have an alternative education with a low-fee structure. Local families have this opportunity. In the local area there are social problems such as drugs, suicide and the breakdown of families, and in Emmanuel there is pastoral care both through the non-government schools psychology service and through the local church represented by its pastors.

One of the many good things about Emmanuel Christian Community School is its history of accepting students with learning difficulties, and with the support of parents, grandparents, government financial assistance and staff it has been able to meet the needs of students with Down syndrome, hearing impairment, myotonic dystrophy, ADHD, global developmental delay and other learning difficulties. The school works very hard to help the students strive for excellence in literacy and numeracy using strategies which include a high priority placed on human resources and a whole-school approach to literacy and numeracy. The staff are highly qualified, including those with master’s degrees. What has always impressed me about Emmanuel Christian Community School is the way they are totally committed to helping the children, the
families and the local community. I consider the school a great part of the Girrawheen community and the Cowan electorate.

Not far away, Our Lady of Mercy Primary School is a Catholic primary school also in Girrawheen. The school has 380 children with a wide range of cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds. The challenges are significant, but the staff are dedicated and highly committed people and they provide a high quality of care and educational tuition. The school is managed and supported by volunteer school board representatives and an exceptionally active parents and friends committee. These individuals freely give immense amounts of their personal time to help in the important decision making, fundraising, pastoral care and special projects within the school community. This not only benefits all students and community member but provides a very good example to the children. The P&F demonstrate its commitment in the form of monthly meetings and many hours of assistance to the drama, music, liturgy, sporting, charity, working bees and many other varied school community events and projects.

Of course, 380 children makes it a big school in Girrawheen. The principal, Drew Jago, attributes the demand for places at the school to the exceptional teachers working at Our Lady of Mercy. He tells me that they walk the extra mile to deliver comprehensive and valued spiritual, academic, social, physical and cultural learning programs to the students. We should also remember the context of the school. They have many children who commenced school with little or no English language skills, and I am greatly impressed at the way these students progress through the grades and the learning programs. I know that the parents are immensely proud of the school. I congratulate parents, staff and Drew Jago for what they have achieved in the past and continue to achieve.

Just over in Koondoola is Mercy College. The Catholic school has 1,500 students, from kindergarten to year 12. Having been to the school and spoken to the young adults there, I was impressed with their positive outlook and determination to succeed. I even had one of their senior students at my office under a structured workplace learning arrangement, and I will take this opportunity to thank Hayley Gebbie for her efforts. Hayley, who is finishing school this year, was a great asset to me and I am sure she will succeed in the future. Mercy College is a very multicultural education centre, with students originating from more than 50 countries. While the Mercy College parents are very positive about the school and proud of their ability to access a Catholic education for their children, nevertheless the surrounding suburbs contain quite modest homes. The school’s current SES is 92, and about 35 per cent of the Mercy College families are on healthcare cards or pensioner concession cards.

Mercy College commenced in Northbridge, an inner-city suburb, but the Sisters of Mercy decided to move the school in 1972 to assist with the education of many families who had moved to the then outer suburbs. The college’s first principal—and the most longstanding one—was Mr Dick Finucane, who led the college from 1976 until his retirement in 1996. The size of the school today is clearly a testament to the efforts of Mr Finucane and the Sisters of Mercy, the staff whom they employ and the thousands of students and their families who have been associated with the college since then. Mercy College has a strong culture of achieving a high-class education in a Christian, Catholic setting. The school achieves success with the assistance of a wonderfully committed school community, many of whom are recently arrived migrants or refugees who see an education for their children as a very high priority. Overcoming the chal-
lenges of a lower socioeconomic surrounding area, the school achieved a 100 per cent graduation rate in 2007. I commend the school for that, and Dr Tony Curry for the leadership he has shown as principal at Mercy College.

The next school that adds great value in Cowan is the Liwara Catholic Primary School in Greenwood, near where I live. Liwara Catholic school is renowned for its community spirit. Before I talk about their efforts in education I have to mention the annual Liwara Fair. It is something of a legend in the northern suburbs of Perth. About three years ago I was talking to some young people there who said that they had come from 10 kilometres away. That was because of the fair’s reputation over 25 years. The fair is a testament to the community spirit, as I understand that the fair committee is bigger than the P&F. I would describe it as the best fair in Perth. It is held on a Friday evening in early November and is the culmination of months of hard work by the P&F and the committee. While the fair raises around $20,000 each year and is very important to the school’s budget, the community spirit engendered by a large group of parents working together with assistance from staff and students to stage this event is simply priceless.

However much Liwara is famous for its fair, their attitude to education is also outstanding. The philosophy of Liwara is that education is best delivered in an atmosphere where parents and staff work as partners for the good of the students. To that end, the school encourages parent participation in every area of school activity, including classroom, canteen, uniform shop, library and sports. The school has an amazing parents and friends group. Of all the P&Cs and P&Fs I have been to, theirs was the greatest in number. I also like to judge a school by the attitude of its students, and the one Liwara student I know very well is Miss Deanna Tognolini. Deanna is a very well mannered young lady, always polite, and a great credit to Liwara and to her parents, my friends Gary and June.

The next school I would like to mention is the Banksia Grove Catholic Primary School in the suburb of Banksia Grove. The school was established in 2004 to meet the needs of the rapidly growing suburbs of the Wanneroo district. The school has children of 18 nationalities enrolled, often bringing a variety of needs. There are 120 children and 12 have recognised disabilities. There are children with disabilities in every class. I visited the Banksia Grove Catholic Primary School recently with the member for Warringah, the Hon. Tony Abbott, and we were impressed with the way the leadership of the school, Mrs Tricia Davis and her staff, have developed an environment which is inclusive and tolerant. A great deal of time, energy and money has gone into establishing and supporting this. This has meant employing additional staff to assist in the classrooms and also a social worker.

The school is yet another example of where federal grants are so important. As a result of the challenges, professional development has also been required and the school has instigated supplementary programs such as Rainbows, art therapy, protective behaviours, collaborative learning, reading recovery, and EMU, which is enhancing mathematical understandings. You Can Do It and Crunch & Sip have also been introduced. All the children are involved in all activities, such as performing arts. Class buddies are well established. In addition to the religious education program across the curriculum, Aboriginal studies and sustainability are also core elements. They are proudly a waterwise, a wastewise and an asthma friendly school. A healthy foods canteen is run voluntarily by parents and complements the school’s health
program, which includes Crunch & Sip and the establishment of an edible garden watered from the rainwater tanks at the school. Children are supplied with meals when necessary, as well as those available for purchase from the canteen. It is clear that Banksia Grove is an area with its challenges, yet the school is rising to meet those challenges, and the children will be the winners. I congratulate principal Tricia Davis, deputy Joy Ketteringham, Father John Daly, social worker Leslie Bird and the dedicated education and admin staff at the Banksia Grove Catholic Primary School for the great work they do for the children.

At Landsdale Gardens Christian School, an Adventist school, they know each of the children very well. It is a small school that is very family oriented. The school is staffed with teachers that closely reflect the values of the families. As an Adventist school they do cater for students of varying religious, economic and ethnic backgrounds, but one common thread goes through all of their families, and that is their desire to entrust their children into the care of staff who will endeavour to model and uphold the golden rule of treating others as you would like to be treated yourself. I find this golden rule that they espouse very positive and I can see why parents like the school.

Pastoral care is paramount and I think that the size of the school lends itself to families who are concerned that their children will get lost in a bigger school, or fall through the cracks academically, socially or emotionally. The smaller class size allows children who are at risk for various reasons more accessibility to assistance, especially given that all of the classrooms are provided with a good level of literacy and numeracy support from qualified teacher assistants. They value academic excellence and endeavour to provide for the needs of individual children so that they are able to reach their individual potential. Smaller class sizes and dedicated teachers make this a reality, with children who are considered at risk demonstrating a level of achievement that far exceeds what assessment says they should be able to achieve.

It is right to also make mention of some of the dedicated volunteers on the management committee and the home and school committee for Landsdale Gardens Christian School. Ruth Sharp has given one day in the library each week for over 10 years and is also a member of the home and school committee. Del Dierckx, treasurer of the home and school committee for several years, has also undertaken much other volunteer work. There are the forever faithful volunteers Barb Goodnough, Lo-Anne Jenke and Narelle Duncan. Kylie Degenaar has worked in several volunteer positions over the last six years. There are also Peter and Letitia Dose. Peter volunteers his time as the management committee chairperson and Letitia is a home and school committee member.

Before concluding my comments on non-government schools, I will inform the parliament of the Montessori school in Kingsley that was founded by Mrs Duyker in 1962. It was expanded to include primary in 1965, lower secondary in 1972 and the International Baccalaureate Diploma in 1993. The Kingsley school is the longest established Montessori school in Australia. The difference in approach for Montessori is that while they are proud of all students, their philosophy is to specifically avoid ‘the glittering prizes’ and are glad that their students become well-adjusted, positive, contributing members of society. School graduates have learnt to develop a ‘can-do’ attitude and a love of learning which inform their whole lives.

The school was a recipient of a large capital grant and with a low interest loan they are constructing new buildings to replace the old
ones which had passed their useful life. Kingsley Montessori’s new buildings are constructed according to passive solar principles, using materials which so far as possible are ecologically friendly. The design also incorporates the re-use of stormwater for flushing toilets and allows for the retrofitting of solar energy panels. This has been a massive undertaking, both financially and in effort, for this very small school community and they are certainly proud of and delighted with the buildings, as they should be.

A further environmental contribution by the school community has been in the maintenance and preservation of the 2.2 hectares of remnant bushland which surrounds the school. The school has always taken great care to avoid unnecessary encroachment on the bushland. A small volunteer committee of parents takes responsibility for care of the bush, including keeping weeds down and educating the children about the bush. The school has also taken part in programs to revegetate the area around Lake Goollelal, as well as undertaking an annual tree-planting program in Gingin. I commend the co-principals, Ms Coffey and Ms Beasley, for their commitment to the children and Montessori education.

Today I have mentioned a number of schools in Cowan that undertake great work for not only the students but also the community in general. These are schools that are available for the people in the nearby suburbs and they are an option for families in lower socioeconomic suburbs. They represent choice for parents, because they represent an option for alternative education systems such as the Montessori school or education in a Christian context. There is nothing bad about this; there is nothing elite about this. This is all about parents making choices for their children, choices that the parents see as being in the child’s best interests. That is a good thing and the coalition has always supported this.

Ms Neal (Robertson) (11.57 am)—I rise in the House to speak to the Schools Assistance Bill 2008. The measure before the House today will not only continue the education revolution but will constitute a major building block in the shared national agenda for the education sector. The $28 billion provided under this bill is part of the Rudd Labor government’s commitment of $42 billion over the next four years to investment in education in both government and non-government schools. This bill appropriates $28 billion over four years for recurrent capital and for targeted assistance for non-government schools.

One of the major election commitments given by the present government in 2007 was that no school in Australia would lose a dollar under new funding arrangements. To facilitate this commitment, the existing socioeconomic status, or SES, funding system for general recurrent funding of schools will be continued. New arrangements of the SES formula and a review of the SES scores for each school are to be completed through an open and transparent review process which will conclude in 2011. In the meantime, funding certainty for schools will be guaranteed through a continuation of the SES system.

Irrespective of potential changes in a school’s SES score over the next quadrennial period, schools will have their funding entitlements guaranteed to be at least equivalent to 2008 levels during the upcoming four-year period. The Rudd government has made it clear that it is not interested in taking money away from schools. Rather, its national education priorities lie with identifying disadvantaged school communities and focusing resources on where they can have the greatest impact in improving student outcomes.
This bill will provide certainty, stability and transparency to the funding of non-government schools in the next period from 2009 to 2012. These measures will ensure the delivery of the Rudd government’s election commitments to bring an education revolution to the schools of Australia. The bill will also uphold the government’s commitment to continuing the current socio-economic status funding and indexation arrangements for these schools.

Among the other notable elements of this bill are provisions that will strengthen support given to remote and very remote schools and to schools with a very high proportion of Indigenous enrolments. Both of these provisions are extremely welcome and very much needed. This allocation will include additional assistance for individual Indigenous school students. The Rudd Labor government already demonstrated a commitment to revolutionising the education sector in Australia in its 2008-09 budget. Two of the most fundamental innovations in the budget were the funding for the Trade Training Centres in Schools Program and the digital education program, which is delivering computers and broadband access to secondary school students across Australia.

Working through the Council of Australian Governments, the Rudd Labor government has been developing a new framework for investment and reform in Australian schools. This initiative will result in the national education agreement, which is due to be finalised later this year. The COAG reform framework means that, for the first time, all governments in Australia will agree to work together to put in place a unitary set of nationally consistent objectives based on an agreed platform of educational priorities and reform directions for all the nation’s education systems.

The priorities for the reforms envisaged by the COAG process include raising the quality of teaching in our schools, ensuring that all students are benefiting from schooling, especially those students from disadvantaged areas, and improving transparency and accountability of schools and school systems at all levels. A framework of nationally consistent and socioeconomically equitable funding that is transparent in its needs based approach and is focused on the quality of its teaching and learning outcomes will thus form the basis of the national education agreement.

In implementing this framework we need to be careful to lift the quality of the states’ education systems to the best standard rather than adhering to a lesser average. With this in mind, the government has built into the Schools Assistance Bill a number of multi-faceted provisions to assist disadvantaged remote area schools and schools with high Indigenous enrolments. Part of this assistance is in changes to the implementation of the SES formula in such disadvantaged school communities. Schools with 80 per cent or more Indigenous enrolments and schools located in very remote areas with 50 per cent or more Indigenous enrolments will automatically be entitled to the maximum level of general recurrent funding. This single provision will commit approximately $5.4 million over four years to the identification of, and provision of additional support to, such disadvantaged schools. An estimated 2,157 Indigenous students will receive maximum funding under this initiative.

Perhaps the most significant initiative in the bill—and one that seeks to provide enhanced support for disadvantaged school communities—is contained in two linked programs: the Indigenous Supplementary Assistance program, ISA, and the associated measure, the Indigenous funding guarantee, the IFG program. The ISA program will pro-
vide $239.1 million for four streamlined programs that provide funds for supplementary recurrent assistance schemes, homework centres, Indigenous tutorial schemes and English as a second language schemes for Indigenous language speakers. Funding is allocated on a ‘per Indigenous enrolment’ basis, with remote area loadings and indexation of funding built into the program. The IFG program is a transitional measure that will ensure non-government providers have their funding maintained at 2008 levels. This capped guarantee scheme means that providers who might otherwise lose funding under the new arrangements will not lose precious resources.

In my own electorate of Robertson, based on the Central Coast of New South Wales, measures such as the Indigenous Tutorial Assistance Scheme are vital tools that serve a real need. Although many of the programs contained in the Indigenous supplementary assistance program outlined above will go to helping schools and students in remote and very remote parts of Australia, there are approximately 1,300 Indigenous students living and learning on the Central Coast. I am therefore delighted that these Central Coast students—and thousands more like them across Australia—will have in-school tutorial programs funded to a level that supports quality learning outcomes.

These tutorial schemes help our local Indigenous students stay on track in class and assist with the completion of homework. This is something that I am very pleased to see. They form a vital support mechanism that helps close the gaps in educational outcomes that currently exist between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students on the Central Coast and across Australia. Closing the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students is one of the goals of the Schools Assistance Bill. Gaps in literacy and numeracy benchmarks between these groups are still far too wide in Australia. In year 3 reading, there is a 13 per cent gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students and in year 7 numeracy there is a 32 per cent gap. This is completely unacceptable. This bill seeks serious solutions to these problems and I commend the government for continuing the support for Indigenous teaching and learning programs.

In addition to working with the states and territories to create a national education agreement, which I mentioned earlier and which will provide a new era of national cooperation on education priorities and outcomes, the Rudd Labor government is currently in discussion with the states and territories on three national partnerships in education. The first will target disadvantaged schools, the second will improve teaching quality and the third will improve literacy and numeracy.

Funds for the first two national partnership priorities will be determined by the COAG process. This will provide an opportunity for additional investment in public education. We certainly need additional investment to facilitate these improvements after 12 years of neglect. The third national priority—the literacy and numeracy partnership—already has $577 million budgeted in the forward estimates. The Schools Assistance Bill provides a range of allied programs that will push forward the education revolution over the next four years. These three programs will assist in laying the foundations for a truly national and coordinated approach to education across Australia.

Besides $26.3 billion provided by the bill for general recurrent grant assistance and $239.1 million for the ISA and IFG programs, some of these allied programs planned for the next four years include: $790 million for the Literacy, Numeracy and Special Learning Needs Program; $557.6 million
in capital grants to help build, maintain and upgrade non-government school facilities; $24 million for a country areas program to assist geographically isolated children; $48.4 million in remoteness loading attached to general recurrent grants to more than 400 regional and remote and non-government schools; $43 million under the English as a Second Language—New Arrivals Program, which assists newly arrived students of non-English-speaking backgrounds; $56.4 million for the languages program to improve learning outcomes of students learning languages other than English; and $4.8 million for short-term emergency assistance to support the operation of schools that have been affected by unforeseen emergency circumstances.

All this is a huge contribution to the education revolution, but these bills are only part of the overall program. There has already been significant investment in schools through the National Secondary School Computer Fund, the Fibre Connections to Schools program, the Trade Training Centres in Schools Program, a local schools working together to share facilities pilot program, the development of a national curriculum through the National Curriculum Board, the National Asian Languages and Studies in Australian Schools Strategy, and the education tax refund for parents who have paid for the educational needs of their children.

The Schools Assistance Bill will require the implementation by 2012 of a national curriculum. This is currently being developed by the National Curriculum Board, as I have said, and it will apply to all Australian schools. Another set of initiatives focuses on enhancing the transparency of each school’s performance information and reporting framework. Transparency is needed in order to give parents the right information about how their child and their school are performing. This information will support parents with accurate and nationally comparable information when they come to make the right choice of school for their children. It is very important that the right values are being assessed and that the performance of the schools is measured not just the natural talents of the children who are attending those schools. It will also help the government guide resources and policy decision-making towards the greatest possible effectiveness and improvement.

To encourage excellence in schooling, Australia needs fair, consistent and accurate analysis of how different schools are performing. Reporting on the results of individual schools in national tests will form part of these arrangements but, as has been stressed on a number of occasions, such reporting will not take the form of simplistic league tables. The COAG process will determine, through agreement with the states and territories, the final form of this national reporting framework. This should be based on the school’s capacity to improve the skills and learning experience of the students and not just a comparison of the students’ scores, which would be an indication of the students’ original abilities and the socioeconomic backgrounds they are drawn from rather than the enhancement to their education provided by each school.

The Australian government has proposed the creation of the National Schools Assessment and Data Centre to be an independent institution for the management, analysis and publication of schools data. This new era in transparency will bring together a simpler, strengthened framework for measuring and reporting on the performance of both students and non-government schools across Australia. This will be consistent with the conditions required of the states under the national education agreement. The government is currently in discussions with the states and the independent and Catholic
school systems about the next quadrennial funding agreement that will outline funding arrangements for all schools. As part of this process, the 2009-12 national education agreement currently being developed through the COAG process will provide certainty and stability for national education systems in Australia.

The Schools Assistance Bill 2008 provides a new era for the funding and other relations between schools systems in Australia. It sets in place the building blocks for a truly national education system. It represents one of the most significant and fundamental revolutions in education in Australia for many decades. I commend the bills to the House.

Mr JOHNSON (Ryan) (12.13 pm)—I am pleased to speak in the parliament today on the Education Legislation Amendment Bill 2008 and the Schools Assistance Bill 2008. These are important bills that affect the constituents of Ryan. I am very pleased to speak on these bills because it gives me the chance to go into bat for all the independent schools around the country and in my Ryan electorate and the tens of thousands of children who go to independent, non-government schools in the Ryan electorate. Some $28 billion, of some $42 billion of Commonwealth funds, are involved in this legislation, so it is important that members speak to this legislation and give their thoughts on the government’s legislation.

I spoke on the Tax Laws Amendment (Medicare Levy Surcharge Thresholds) Bill (No. 2) 2008 the other day. The preceding speaker was the new member for Flynn. I was saying to him that when he comes into the parliament to defend government bills he should speak with a bit of passion, he should get up and make his case compelling. The way he carried on put doubts in my mind whether he believed what he was saying at all. Just listening to some of the previous speakers, particularly the backbenchers, I question whether they in fact again believe in these bills.

On the other hand, I know that some of the Labor frontbenchers have deep and solid views on these bills, and they will certainly speak with vigorous passion during the debate, particularly the Deputy Prime Minister, who has carriage of the education portfolio. Her views are longstanding—we all know where she stands on independent schools. If anybody thought that the last election signalled the beginning of a fiscally conservative Prime Minister and the end of ideology, I ask them to look at this proposed legislation. And I am delighted that the Minister for Resources and Energy is in the chamber. He certainly speaks with passion when it comes to his ideologies, which I think are not too consistent with the views of the majority of Australians.

The number of students enrolled in independent or non-government schools in the Ryan electorate in 2007 was 21,002. That is a lot of students and it also means that a lot of parents value and believe in the idea of choice. These are hardworking people who sacrifice so much to be able to send their children to the school of their choice. We should be giving them the opportunity to decide which school and which form of education they wish their children to be exposed to. These bills draw a very clear distinction between the Rudd Labor government and the federal opposition in terms of what each party believes in and stands for on the issue of choice and educational values. This really is an ideological and political assault on parental choice when it comes to schooling options for children.

I know that the constituents of Ryan, who send their children to such schools as Brigidine College at Indooroopilly, Brisbane...
Boys College at Toowong, Our Lady of the Rosary School, St Ignatius School, St Joseph’s Nudgee Junior College, St Peter Chanel Primary School at The Gap and St Peter’s Lutheran College, my old school, where I was a boarder—it was and remains a very fine school—will take a very deep interest in my thoughts and the thoughts of the coalition compared to the thoughts of the Labor Party now in government. These bills reminds us that, despite all the very clever and deceptive campaigning of Mr Rudd during the last election, where he painted himself as a fiscal conservative and a responsible economic manager, at its core the Labor Party has deep-rooted philosophical problems with the place of independent schools in the architecture of our education system.

I am very pleased that my colleague the member for Casey is in the House. We both entered parliament in 2001. He is the former shadow minister for education and I know he would share very strongly my view that the ideological assault on independent schools in this country should be of grave concern to those who believe in choice and to those of us on this side of the chamber.

The Schools Assistance Bill 2008 succeeds in part the Schools Assistance (Learning Together—Achievement Through Choice and Opportunity) Act 2004, which provided funding for both government and non-government schools for 2004 to 2008. The bill also provides funding for Indigenous students attending non-government schools. This funding was previously appropriated under the Indigenous Education (Targeted Assistance) Act 2000. As I said earlier, the bill provides some $28 billion for non-government schools for the years 2009 to 2012. That is a very significant amount of money, nearly three per cent of Australia’s annual GDP, so we must focus on the methodology used to distribute it to the independent school sector. I am very interested in this bill because it marks a major departure in Commonwealth funding arrangements for schools. In fact, the bill represents a very significant change in how the Commonwealth will support and sustain independent schools into the future. Parents must understand the full ramifications of this bill, particularly section 24, which I will come to shortly.

Let me briefly explain the SES funding formula for parents in the Ryan electorate who send their children to independent schools. The SES approach measures the socioeconomic status of the parents whose children are enrolled in a school. Rather than asking parents intrusive and direct questions about their income and seeking very personal information, the SES model links student addresses with current ABS census data. An SES index is then applied to obtain an SES score for each school. Schools which draw students from areas of predominantly high SES status will receive lower levels of Commonwealth funding than schools which draw from areas of average or low SES status. A socioeconomic index can be made up of a number of variables representing various aspects of a person’s social position. The SES index used for non-government school funding includes only three dimensions: income, education and occupation. That is an important factor for people to understand.

This bill fulfils the government’s commitment to retain the current system of general recurrent funding for non-government schools under the SES system, but only for the next four years. Let me put that on the record, because I have a sneaking suspicion that in the years ahead the government will seek to amend this very drastically. The commitment is only for the next four years, and, in my opinion, the Rudd government’s promised review of the SES funding system in four years raises some very serious ques-
tions about the future of Commonwealth funding for non-government schools. That will be of grave concern to parents in Ryan who send their children to non-government schools—and who, I should add, make a significant contribution to education in this country, because what they are doing is freeing up places for thousands and thousands of other students to enter the public system. I mentioned earlier that some 21,000 students in the Ryan electorate go to independent schools. Let’s just think for a moment: 21,000 students in Ryan go to independent schools, so imagine for a moment those 21,000 students requiring places in the government sector. What a chaotic situation we would be in if, all of the sudden, those 21,000 students had to be found places in the state education system. So I take my hat off and pay tribute to those parents who do this country a great favour by sending their kids to non-government schools.

Let me also say for the record that, like my parents, so many of these parents are not born with silver spoons in their mouths. So many of these parents do not inherit massive wealth. So many of these parents are not the rich and mighty of this country. Many of these parents—in fact, I would suspect the overwhelming majority—who send their children to primary schools and high schools of an independent status are very hardworking people and they sacrifice so much to be able to give their children the opportunity of going to a non-government school. Maybe they own and operate a small business, like my parents, who did without holidays, fancy items and assets and put all their savings into their bank account to send me to an independent school. I want to pay tribute to the Australians the length and breadth of this great country who do that.

As I said, the Schools Assistance Bill 2008 is of deep concern to me because it introduces a number of very significant provisions. In fact, unprecedented requirements are placed on schools, and that is of grave concern. While a number of the conditions in the current act have been met, superseded or abandoned by the bill, it retains the broad thrust of the educational outcomes accountability framework of the current act.

I want to touch on the six conditions covering school performance where Commonwealth funding is linked. No. 1 is participation in national student assessments. No. 2 is participation in national reports on the outcomes of schooling. No. 3 is the provision of individual school performance reports to the minister. No. 4 is the provision of plain language student reports to parents to include an assessment of the student’s achievement against any available national standards and relative to the student’s peer group at the school. No. 5 is the provision of publicly available information about the school’s performance. And No. 6 is the implementation of a national curriculum. That is also of immense significance, but the financial accountability conditions for Commonwealth funding are really the provisions of deep concern to me.

This bill includes a new provision which empowers the minister to refuse or delay payments if a school’s audit raises questions about a school’s viability. Although non-government schools have always been required to complete a financial questionnaire, the bill contains a new requirement for schools to report funding sources. This is intended to provide the government with more flexibility as to what financial information it can collect from school authorities. The final decision about what schools will be required to report will be made after consultation with the non-government sector.

Previously, the financial information that was collected was treated as commercial-confidence and therefore individual schools’
financial information or profiles were not released. Now, under this piece of legislation, they are to be released; they can become public information. This is a disturbing change. This proposed section 24 in the legislation is of significant concern to schools.

‘Funding sources’, for example, is a new concept in this context and gives the minister substantial new powers to demand information about the internal financial affairs of a school community. The proposed section allows the minister to require schools to make public much greater detail or additional information about their sources of funding. Such information can include details of scholarship funds, bequests, other sources of funding such as profit-generating activities, and even community fundraising undertaken by parents and friends associations.

Let us take the example of bequests. Let us say, for example, that a bequest is made to a college and the request is that the information is confidential. Under this legislation, that request would have to be overridden. I think that is just an enormous intrusion into the funding models of certain schools. Maybe there are arrangements with businesses; maybe there are arrangements with parents. Maybe, as I said, in the case of someone who makes a bequest or, say, someone who donates funds for a scholarship would prefer to remain anonymous and be discreet about that. The school will now be compelled under this legislation to reveal benefactors and donors. I think, as I say, that must be of enormous concern to schools and colleges around the country.

Given previous statements by the Deputy Prime Minister and many of her colleagues, one can only draw the conclusion that this provision exists in order to lay the groundwork to build up a case to deeply and radically alter the SES funding system in the future. I think that abolishing this funding formula will have a significant impact on future funding for the independent school sector.

Proposed section 24, which I have touched on, will require schools to publicly declare every source of funding. The former Howard government’s SES system was specifically designed to stop this kind of class warfare, which is creeping back into public policy. It is a great shame, it is unnecessary, it does not do anything at all to value-add and enhance the status and quality of the independent school system and it is superfluous. Time and time again, we are really seeing the true colours of the Rudd government come to the fore. We are very unnecessarily seeing the politics of envy. We have seen that already via the budget, with means testing for solar panel rebates, the luxury car tax and the Medicare levy surcharge, which I spoke on earlier this week. This is a completely uncalled for intrusion into an area of public policy that is going well, that is performing, that is satisfying both the education provider and the students and delivering quality education, which must, at the end of the day, be our primary concern. This is a return to the politics of envy. A Latham hit list type of model is very regrettable indeed.

The Deputy Prime Minister and many of her colleagues have not hidden their preference for this kind of public policy. This is very much a philosophical debate about independent schools, and I think it is unnecessary that we are going down this path. It is ideological assault by stealth and very subtle language. I think it is important to let the parents who send their children to independent schools in the Ryan electorate know what the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Education has actually said. I quote here from a speech that she delivered:

The last objection to the SES model is more philosophical, that the model makes no allowance for the amassed resources of any particular
school. As we are all aware, over the years many prestige schools have amassed wealth—wealth in terms of buildings and facilities, wealth in terms of the equipment available, wealth in terms of alumni funding raising, trust funds, endowment funds and the like… it must follow as a matter of logic that the economic capacity of a school is affected by both its income generation potential—from the current class of parents whose kids are enrolled in the school—and the assets of the school. The SES funding system makes some attempt to measure the income generation potential of the parents of the kids in the school but absolutely no attempt to measure the latter, the assets of the school. This is a gaping flaw…

Again, the use of the words ‘class of parents’ I think is very regrettable. The Parliamentary Secretary for Defence Support in the Rudd government, the member for Eden-Monaro, said that the postcode system for funding schools is ‘totally crazy’. He said it was:

…it must follow as a matter of logic that the economic capacity of a school is affected by both its income generation potential—from the current class of parents whose kids are enrolled in the school—and the assets of the school. The SES funding system makes some attempt to measure the income generation potential of the parents of the kids in the school but absolutely no attempt to measure the latter, the assets of the school. This is a gaping flaw…

If people recall, he was slapped down very quickly in the campaign by the then opposition leader because the member for Eden-Monaro was giving away the philosophical direction of this Labor government. I recall well the phone calls during the campaign when he made those comments that were aired, unfortunately very briefly, by the media. It very much exposed him. That is an indication of where this government is going, and I know it will be a big concern to the parents in the Ryan electorate who send their children to the likes of Brigidine College and Brisbane Boys College.

This morning, I had the opportunity of speaking to some significant education administrators at one of the independent schools in my electorate, and they certainly expressed great reservations but urged me not to mention who they were. They said,

Ms GEORGE (Throsby) (12.33 pm)—We are all aware that in the last election our Prime Minister made education a key feature of our election commitments. It was heartening for all who see education as providing the life opportunities for children of our nation to have education at the forefront of the government’s concerns. It is through education that people realise their potential in life, and I am certainly very proud of the background that I had in the public education system, which has provided me with opportunities later in life. Of course, in an increasingly international environment, where productivity and competitiveness will determine our future economic outcomes, we all understand the importance of investment in human capital and an investment which also goes to the goals outlined in our social inclusion policies.

The Prime Minister talked about an education revolution, and he talked about a revolution that was going to grow the pie of funding allocations for education. He outlined a series of initiatives that we would deliver in government. It was heartening that in our first budget more than $19 billion in new
education funding was announced. Already some of those initiatives are being felt in my schools in a positive way. For example, our digital education revolution, which ultimately will provide access for all year 9 to year 12 students to a school computer, is very well deserved and welcomed in my electorate. In the first round of funding, eight schools in Throsby, across the sectors, were allocated funds for the purchase of 1,685 computers. Schools in Throsby were still languishing with access of students to a computer being less than one to eight. So, in that first round, we brought those schools up to the standard of at least one computer per two students. We are also very heartened by the commitment made to the trade training centres in secondary schools, particularly in an area like the Illawarra, where we have incredibly high rates of youth unemployment at a time when we have glaring skills shortages.

I note also our commitment to deliver universal access to early childhood education as being a critical component of our social inclusion agenda. Early intervention, particularly for more disadvantaged communities, does provide the bedrock on which future opportunities grow. Only this week, the commitment was made to bring forward some of the projects earmarked under our $11 billion Education Investment Fund to kick-start investment in a range of higher education and TAFE institutions.

The government is also in the process of delivering a new four-year national education agreement, which I know will deliver more Commonwealth resources to all schools. The government has committed to providing a minimum of $42 billion to schools over the next four years. It is in that context that funding arrangements for non-government schools for the years 2009-12 are now before us for debate.

The passage of this legislation will appropriate $28 billion for the 2009-12 period and, as I understand, this legislation needs to be passed before the end of the year so that payments can begin to flow from January 2009. In that context, I accept the commitment made by the Prime Minister and the Minister for Education to the non-government school sector that for those years we would continue the funding and indexation arrangements inherited from the Howard government pending a comprehensive review, which will be open and transparent and which, it is anticipated, will conclude in 2011.

I would like to now make some personal comments and observations that are relevant to this debate and relevant to the future review, although no-one can anticipate the outcomes of that review because, in the minister’s words, it will be open and transparent and all stakeholders across the sectors will be given the opportunity to make an input into it. My election to this parliament back in 2001 coincided with the Howard government’s decision to introduce a new funding scheme for non-government schools, commonly referred to as the SES funding scheme, and we have heard a lot about that this morning. At the time, as a young teacher, I was concerned that we were moving away from a well-established formula instituted in the Whitlam era following the recommendations of the Karmel report that schools across the sectors should be funded on the fundamental principle of need as a measure of ensuring fairness and equity.

What we had was an SES scheme that removed the previous link between the level of a school’s resources and the level of the public grant to which the school would be entitled. The previous education resource index known as the ERI was replaced by an indirect measure of the socioeconomic status of schoolchildren’s parents as the basis for enti-
tlement to public funding. When one looks back on the debates on that State Grants (Primary and Secondary Education Assistance) Bill 2000, before I was in parliament, rightly members on the opposition side did point to the obvious flaws that were inherent in such a model. I think it is appropriate that people do have the opportunity to look at the limitations of any formula for the allocation of public funding. It is in that regard that comments were made about the limitations of that formula. At the time, as I recall, that new formula, the SES scheme, despite its obvious limitations, was applied only to those schools that received a financial benefit while maintaining the level of funding that previously applied if schools were to have their grant reduced—commonly referred to as the funding maintained schools.

It is not an issue of alleged class warfare as I just heard expressed by the speaker before me. One only needs to look at the non-biased opinions of an internal departmental document prepared under the Howard government when they were still in power. That document noted as follows.

The consistency and equity of the SES funding arrangements is undermined by the fact that almost half of the non government school sector is funded outside the ‘straight’ SES model. In other words, under the Howard government we saw around half of all the non-government schools receiving funds above the levels that should have applied if the Commonwealth’s own criteria in the SES model had been fairly applied. As well we know the Howard government maintained the link between increases in state funding of government schools and Commonwealth funding of the non-government school sector through the application of the average government school recurrent cost measure or the AGSRC. But this automatic formula did not and does not take into account the increasing proportion of non-government schools that operate at resource levels well above those of the average government school. Let me give you an example. The government school sector caters for about 80 per cent of children with disabilities. So in the event that a state government decides to inject more funds to address the needs of children with disabilities the automatic indexation formula applies those additional expenditures into an automatic indexation factor for all non-government schools regardless of the resource levels at which they operate.

These funding measures have entrenched a resource gap between schools, one that I cannot understand how anyone could justify on the grounds of the principle of educational need. I think it is reasonable for legislators to look at the existing arrangements and the formula which currently determine how public funds are expended in the non-government school sector. I do not think any sector should be immune from accountability for the expenditure of taxpayers’ funds. If there are existing flaws and anomalies along the lines that I have indicated then surely an open and transparent review that will listen to the voices of all stakeholders would have the opportunity to examine that as part of the review process.

In my personal view, backed up by the evidence provided by an internal bureaucratic departmental document, the current scheme lacks integrity in a number of aspects and certainly has moved far away from the original notion of funding on the basis of need. However, I understand and accept that the arrangements for the non-government school sector will continue until 2012. That is reflected in this bill which delivers on the Rudd Labor government’s election commitment taken to the whole of the Australian community in the lead-up to the election.

One thing which is very clear in my view, from the legacy of the Howard years, is that
the resource gap between the government and non-government school sectors taken as a whole has grown and needs to be addressed on the basis of fairness and equity. Back in 2004 our then shadow minister for education pointed to this fact when she argued that no-one could really say that the SES formula was in any way a formula that defined funding on the basis of need; otherwise we would not have seen the massive increases to the wealthier schools in this country that we have seen under the legacy of the Howard regime.

The share of total Commonwealth school funding to government schools, which continue to educate around 2.2 million students—that is, nearly 67 per cent of enrolments—declined from 43 per cent of allocations to 35 per cent under the Howard government. The real increases in Commonwealth funding for non-government schools since 1996 have been substantial, about twice the rate of increase for government schools, which continue today to educate about twice the number of students. So the legacy of the Howard era is that we saw government schools getting an increase of around $2 billion, a 146 per cent increase, and the non-government school sector getting an increase of $4.76 billion, a 247 per cent increase. Naturally, I think it is very appropriate that in the coming review these factors are given proper and considered attention. And while no-one knows what the outcome of the review will be, these are factors that need to be addressed in that review, as do the anomalies that are contained in the automatic indexation factor through the average government school recurrent costs—the AGSRC.

In the latest AGSRC figures that I could find, the Commonwealth commitment is around $8,000 per primary student and $10,000 for a secondary student. Under this formula, Commonwealth funding for government schools provides 8.9 per cent of the primary schools’ AGSRC and 10 per cent of the secondary AGSRC. In both cases that is significantly lower than the minimum grant of 13.7 per cent, which is applied to non-government schools with the highest SES scores. In fact, in my examination I could find only one private school that gets funded on that minimum 13.7 per cent, although I found a lot of highly resourced and well-known non-government schools getting the allocations on the 17.5 per cent level—schools like Ascham, Cranbrook, Knox Grammar, Melbourne Grammar and Geelong Grammar. What I am arguing for is the current AGSRC indexation mechanisms to automatically transfer the benefits of increased state expenditure to government school students—whether they are students with a disability, Indigenous students, students of refugees or recently arrived migrants—any time that the government or territory expends more of its state funds that automatically apply to all non-government schools, including those with the highest resources whose students could, arguably, under a needs based system, have no need for a share of this additional support.

A recent comprehensive analysis by Dr Jim McMorrow shows that if the Commonwealth general recurrent per capita grants for government schools were to be increased to the minimum grant available to the independent schools—namely the 13.7 per cent of AGSRC—this would increase outlays to the public school system by some $825 million by 2011-12. He then goes on to cite facts which show that to restore funding of government schools to their share of total funding back in 1996-97 would require an additional $1.5 billion in outlays. As I said in my introductory remarks, we are certainly committed to an education revolution, we are certainly committed to growing the pie and the resources available to ensure that all our
kids have the best opportunities in life, but it is not something that we can address over-night. It needs to be noted that there is an inherent legacy left by the previous govern-
ment by the application of the recurrent in-
dexation formula and the SES funding
scheme. I am pleased, as a product of the
public education system, that my govern-
ment and the Prime Minister of the nation
continue to understand the importance of
adequately and appropriately funding the
system that continues to cater for large num-
bers of students.

While this bill deals specifically with the
funding of non-government schools for 2009
to 2012 in the context of promises we made
and took to the election, as a parliament we are yet to see the outcomes for the govern-
ment school sector. I understand these will be finalised through the COAG process by
year’s end and delivered as part of our na-
tional education agreement. It is fair to say
that the expectations of the government sec-
tor are high given its obvious underfunding
and the legacy that has been left by the How-
ard government. I understand the new
agreement for the government school sector
does not need to be legislated in order to de-
liver funding. However, the COAG process
will also result in three important new na-
tional partnership agreements for schools:
one to improve teacher quality, one to im-
prove literacy and numeracy, and one, very
importantly, to better assist disadvantaged
schools and disadvantaged communities.

The minister has clearly indicated the
government’s interest in identifying disad-
vantaged schools across the sectors so that
resources can properly be focused on where they can have the greatest impact in impro-
vigorous outcomes for all Australian students. In
conclusion, I trust that by year’s end, follow-
ing the progress of the negotiations of
COAG, we will see significant recurrent
funding allocations for the 2.2 million stu-
dents in government schools so that we can begin, in a tangible way, to correct what I see as obvious funding imbalances that occurred during the years of the Howard government.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Hon. DGH
Adams)—Order! The question is that this
bill be now read a second time. I call the
member for—

Mr Anthony Smith—Maranoa.

Mr BRUCE SCOTT (Maranoa) (12.51
pm)—Not Mount Margaret! Thank you, Mr
Deputy Speaker Adams. I know you have
spent some time in Maranoa.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Hon. DGH
Adams)—I did; it is true.

Mr BRUCE SCOTT—We have often
talked about it. And you are welcome to
come out there any time to see some of the
wonderful schools, including independent
non-government schools out there, and the
magnificent job that they are doing, particu-
larly under the funding models of the previ-
ous coalition government. But I do not want
to reflect on you, Mr Deputy Speaker. We
often have quite amicable discussions about
your days out in the back of Maranoa and I
know they are very happy memories for you.

I rise today to express some concerns I
have with the Education Legislation
Amendment Bill 2008. While I certainly
welcome the continued commitment to pro-
vide funding for non-government schools,
this bill has introduced a number of changes
which in the future may not be beneficial to
the non-government education sector. I rec-
ognise that the Deputy Prime Minister and
the Labor government are fulfilling their
election commitment to continue funding for
non-government schools. But it appears that
commitment had a caveat to it which was not
mentioned during the election campaign.

I also acknowledge that this bill will pro-
vide additional funding for non-government
schools that have a significant number of Indigenous students. I particularly welcome the fact that maximum recurrent funding will automatically apply to non-government schools in remote and very remote areas that have Indigenous enrolments of 50 per cent or more. I guess I would ask why 50 per cent is a magical figure. I can think of a very small non-government school—a Catholic school—in a town which I am sure you, Mr Deputy Speaker, will be aware of: Quilpie. St Finbarr’s is out there in that very remote part of Queensland doing a magnificent job and providing a choice in education for the people of the Quilpie region. I also have a number of Indigenous communities in my electorate. I guess, providing that more than 50 per cent of students at those schools are Indigenous, they may benefit from the automatic application of funding.

However, I have a major concern with this bill, and that is the removal of the new non-government schools establishment grants. The former coalition government was a strong advocate for supporting the viability of the non-government sector and encouraging the establishment of new schools where the need was identified within the community. And just as a matter of interest, the 153 schools in my electorate are not all non-government; the majority would be public. A significant number—I think it is something like a third—of the schools in Maranoa are non-government schools, including some boarding schools.

The new non-government schools establishment grant initiative was an effective way under a coalition government to increase the educational opportunities for communities and towns. However, with a stroke of the pen, it seems that the Labor government has decided to axe this successful program, only making provision for those schools that have approval in this calendar year—2008—to receive grants for next year. It seems Labor wants to discourage the expansion of the non-government sector and deny those communities who are looking to widen the educational opportunities and, importantly, choice for their children’s education. In fact, the Labor government seems to discourage aspiration in all of its policies and all of the direction that it wants to take this economy.

This legislation will require schools to provide a great deal of information about their sources of funding. This might include details of a scholarship fund, bequests, donations and fundraising by the local P&C. One cannot help but be suspicious that, by forcing schools to provide the details of where these additional funds come from, these additional funding sources, this Labor government may use this information to penalise them by reducing the financial support coming from the Commonwealth just because they may have received donations from past students or have a very active and devoted P&C, who at the end of the day are, obviously, raising extra funds for the benefit of their children’s education. In fact, they might find that working hard through the P&C is actually a hindrance to receiving additional funds from the Commonwealth. They are discouraging aspiration. They will be discouraging that if this bill passes the upper house—obviously, we do not have the numbers in the lower house. I have real concerns about the direction that this government is taking non-government schools funding support.

It would be a tragedy if this were the case, particularly for the schools and the parents in my electorate of Maranoa. As I said earlier, there are 153 schools in Maranoa and a third of them are non-government. Many families in my electorate—as I said, the electorate covers 30 per cent of Queensland—send their children to boarding schools in the regional towns. They do this not out of choice but out of necessity. Many of these parents are facing the terrible drought and, of course,
the impact of drought is not felt just by people on the land; it is felt by the businesses and the community as a whole. They save hard to send their children away to school. They send them away because it is the only option. Many of the schools, in both sectors, go to the high top of 10. Some of the schools in towns in my electorate only go to primary level. Those parents who have to send their children away to complete a secondary education—and many of them will be in remote communities—are council workers, police workers and small business people.

Just imagine how these parents must feel. They live in remote parts of Australia, they make a major contribution to our economy and they are an important part of our nation. They scrimp and save to send their children to a boarding school. Sometimes they send them away to flat with someone to gain access to and to complete a secondary education. And they, through this bill, may find themselves being punished, because the passage of this bill will mean that any additional money raised through bequests, donations or even the value of the assets of the school that may have been provided by past students or hard work of those fundraising efforts will penalise those schools.

So they will feel, ‘Why should former students, who have gone on to become successful in their endeavours and who feel proud of their education and proud of the school they attended, be discouraged from paying tribute to their education and, importantly, to their teachers? Why couldn’t they make a donation or a bequest to the school?’ Apparently, that donation is going to be considered part of the assets of the school and part of the sources of funding for non-government schools. This, surely, is the highest level of discouragement of aspiration, and it is certainly going to be a further blow to the dedicated members who work in P&Cs across the length and breadth of Australia. I have a lot of respect for the parents and friends associations and the parents and citizens associations of the schools because all of the parents who work in those schools are dedicated to supporting the schools because they have an interest in the schools and an interest in the educational outcomes of their children.

In my electorate it is not uncommon to see a street stall or a raffle being conducted on a Saturday morning. In fact, I know that when I go and buy the Saturday paper in my electorate it will cost me more than the price of the Weekend Australian and the Courier Mail; it will quite often cost me a whole book of raffle tickets. Why do the P&Cs raise money? They do it to support their schools. I support that effort; it really is to be admired. In some parts of my electorate, P&Cs conduct a rodeo. And in just the same manner as so many communities raise money for the health of their communities in the form of health services—I am sure you would be aware, Mr Acting Deputy Speaker Adams, that they raise a third of the money for the Royal Flying Doctor Service—they also acknowledge the need to support, through the P&C, the schools in their community. In some parts of my electorate communities often raise money through rodeos and in other parts of my electorate someone might want to donate one tonne of grain at harvest time. To go where? To go to the school.

Those parents will be penalised under this bill. They will find that if they give, in whatever form—through a donation, a raffle, a rodeo, a sports day or in kind—that it will be considered a part of the wealth of the school. I know that is going to hit rural Australia hard, but I also know that this Labor government does not really care about rural Australia. We hear sweet words from the Prime Minister and the agriculture minister occasionally that they have travelled out there on
They do not advise people that they are coming. They get a little group around them—they do not want a big group—and then they disappear. They are there for a couple of hours and then they are gone. But if they spent a bit of time out there they would understand that parents in those areas—just like our city cousins—are very supportive of choice of education for their children, and in supporting their children they know that any extra money that they can raise will go to improve the services and facilities of their school.

That is why it was, when we returned to this side of the House after the last election, it was devastating news to learn that the Investing in Our Schools Program was to be axed by this Labor government. The Investing in Our Schools Program provided schools across the length and breadth of Australia with funding to purchase much needed equipment and materials and to construct much needed infrastructure. One of the key aspects of that funding initiative is that it had to be signed off by the P&C. So you had the P&C involved with the teachers, who identified where they could improve the educational opportunities for the children at their school.

Schools in my electorate of Maranoa received more than $12 million from the Investing in Our Schools Program. We did not discriminate on the basis of whether they were a small country school that went to primary level with 20 or 30 student, or a bigger school—like the Warwick State High School in Warwick, which has over 1,000 students—because they were all entitled to the same amount, but it had to be on an application supported by, and signed off by, the P&C of that school.

I had much pleasure in going to so many of these schools where I saw upgrades to classrooms. I remember Freestone State School, I think east of Warwick, which put on an additional classroom, and at Ballandean, south of Stanthorpe, they upgraded a classroom for their prep year. The program refurbished exercise courts—multipurpose courts for tennis, basketball and netball—constructed shade structures, built new and safer playgrounds and installed air-conditioning.

One of the first things some of the schools east of my home town of Roma did—in fact, even in my own home town of Roma—was to air-condition the school. In that case it was a state public school. But we have a Labor administration in Queensland, and they think that they can live in high rises and have their offices in Brisbane fully air-conditioned but that the kids who live east of a line from about Mitchell down to St George do not need air conditioning. It is not hot there, in their determination, so they will not air-condition those classrooms, but, through the Investing in Our Schools Program under the previous coalition government, the Roma Middle School, including the administration offices, were air-conditioned because that was the priority of the P&C of the Roma Middle School. I could repeat that story for Chinchilla High School and for the Tara State School, where that was the priority.

In the summer, even on a day like today, in October, it is nothing to see temperatures above 40 degrees, day after day, with kids in their classrooms trying to learn. The teachers and parents have told me that since they put in the air conditioning, the children are able to sit there, study and concentrate in some relative comfort. But that was under the coalition government’s Investing in Our Schools Program, which was shamefully abolished by this Labor government with no regard for the impact it would have on the people from rural and remote parts of Australia—or in fact across Australia, because they were all treated equally. Some of the money from the
Investing in Our Schools Program went into specialised learning rooms, such as music rooms. Music programs are important in any school today. Some schools even bought portable classrooms. In one school, east of Warwick in my electorate, they upgraded the toilet because they could not get the money out of the state Labor government in Queensland to do so. This program was abolished by this Labor government. It is an out-of-touch and heartless act that is impacting on children. That is the important point to make.

The program was so successful and beneficial in Maranoa to so many little schools that I travel to—some, as I said earlier, which have only 20 or 30 students. It was a joy to go there to see the parents, who felt that at last they could do something to improve the school and support their fundraising efforts. They had often had a raffle or a sports day to raise money for the school. But they could never get the quantum of money that was required to make a real difference, to do things like put air conditioning in the school, which could cost upwards of $100,000, or put in a new water tank or upgrade the toilet. They never had the money to upgrade the tennis, netball or basketball courts for sporting and exercise activities for their students.

I recently visited Thargomindah State School in my electorate of Maranoa, where I was absolutely blown away by the efforts of the principal, the teachers, the P&C and the students. It was really heartening for me to see the dedication shown by the principal and the teachers in giving the best opportunity and start in life to the 30-odd children in that very small community. The children of the school took me to see not only their classrooms, which are now air conditioned, and the work they do in there but also out to the back of the school, where they have a vegetable garden, which helps them understand the importance of fresh vegetables to healthy living. They also showed me their poultry, so they are learning something about animals. It might seem a bit mundane in this part of the world, but I raise that issue because it is a great school and it was great to see the teachers, the parents and the students all showing such pride in their garden and animals and to see the lessons that are learnt from looking after poultry and from growing fresh food in the garden—food which they can take home at night. They are lessons that we can all learn from.

Time does not allow me to touch on the failure of the government in relation to the technical colleges. One very quick point I do make is that, although Labor and the now Prime Minister announced before the last election that every school would have a technical college, not one of the 153 schools in Maranoa got any funds allocated under the first round. (Time expired)

Ms JACKSON (Hasluck) (1.11 pm)—I am very pleased to have the opportunity today to speak on the Education Legislation Amendment Bill 2008 and the Schools Assistance Bill 2008. Unlike some of the issues raised by the previous speaker, I can say that across my electorate, particularly from non-government schools, there has been a great deal of support for and acceptance of the new legislation and indeed some very positive reaction to the new framework for schools funding proposed by the Rudd Labor government. These two pieces of legislation reflect yet another step in the rollout of the education revolution promised to the Australian people by Labor during the 2007 election campaign period. I am delighted to see this legislation introduced into the House. I see it as a critical step in delivering that education revolution, not just in non-government schools but of course ultimately in all schools.
What we will see fundamentally in this legislation is that it will make performance and accountability requirements on non-government schools consistent with requirements for all schools, as indeed envisaged in the national education agreement currently being finalised through the Council of Australian Governments. In March of this year we saw the groundbreaking agreement by the state and Commonwealth governments to develop a set of strategies on some key policy directions in the schools area. Amongst those policy directions were important issues like improving teaching and school leader quality; high standards and expectations; greater accountability and better directed resources; modern, world-class teaching and learning environments, including information and communications technology; integrated strategies for low socioeconomic status schools and communities; and, very importantly, building and boosting parental engagement in our schools. I congratulate COAG on that agreement and I look forward to the development of the final national education agreement hopefully by the end of 2008, which will see all government schools in Australia agree to a single set of objectives, outcomes and outputs and hence educational priorities and reform directions for the education system. It commits all governments, not just the Commonwealth government, to working together to improve the outcomes for all our children and it works towards the reforms and improvements that will deliver a world-class schooling system across Australia.

The Rudd Labor government has established three major priorities for reform, and the Prime Minister spoke about this most recently in his National Press Club address. Those reforms were, firstly, to raise the quality of teaching in our schools; secondly, to ensure that all students are benefiting from schooling, especially in disadvantaged communities; and, finally, to improve transparency and accountability of schools and the school system at all levels. Importantly, in this legislation, consistent with the agreements reached in COAG, is a commitment to ensure that Indigenous funding is guaranteed so that no non-government education providers are worse off under the new arrangements. This is a wonderful agenda for priorities in our schools. It is very clear to me, as I visit the 60-odd schools that I have in the electorate of Hasluck, that the two most important factors in the quality of education in my schools are the quality of leadership provided by the principal and the nature and quality of the teaching staff in those schools. Irrespective of the resources of the school, the quality of the classrooms and the quality of equipment available, nothing is more important than the leadership and quality of the teaching staff in those schools.

I am pleased to see for the first time a step that will bring some consistency to funding for government and non-government schools. The funding framework is about accountability, improvement and consistency across all sectors. It is important for parents as well as policymakers to have some transparency about the needs of the school and the particular quality and effectiveness issues within each school. The principal legislation I talk to today is the Schools Assistance Bill, which gives funding certainty to non-government schools during the period 2009 to 2012 and will apply to them those transparency and accountability requirements that are consistent with government schools. The legislation needs to be dealt with by the parliament at this time to ensure we have appropriated payments in sufficient time for schools to receive them in January 2009.

Previously, Commonwealth government funding, despite the plaintive submissions of the member for Maranoa, has come with a wide range of conditions and strings at-
tached, imposing a multiplicity of commitments and accountability requirements very often complained about by non-government schools for the associated bureaucracy and red tape. This new funding framework will reduce the number of differential and different funding agreements. It will remove many of the input controls and forms of compliance and, instead, we will see, far more productively, something that focuses on payments and accountability of achieved and agreed outputs and outcomes. I hope it will feature simpler, strengthened performance information as well as a reporting framework consistent with the conditions required of the states under the COAG agreement.

An important part of the legislation is the government’s commitment to continuing to use the average government school recurrent costs formula to ensure some equity between the government and non-government sectors. As we know, the process of negotiation with the states continues, but we are reassured that the government will deliver on its election commitment of $42 billion in funding over four years for both government and non-government schools. Each level of government contributes to school funding. The states have the majority of the responsibility for government schools, which they own and manage, and the Commonwealth has been the primary source of public funds for the Catholic and independent schools. When the government school funding from state and Commonwealth sources is combined, it is not the case, as is often suggested to us, that government schools receive less public funding than non-government schools.

Having said all of that, I would be the first to say that the current system of funding has many anomalies in it and, indeed, would argue that it has some flaws. But I think a considerable amount of time has been wasted on the debate between the respective funding of government and non-government schools, and I am really pleased that this framework provides us with an opportunity to shift the debate to where it should be, which is to maximise the resources required for disadvantaged children in disadvantaged schools—in other words, to put behind us the days of arguing over the respective funding merits of government and non-government and, instead, to focus on our kids and the outcomes that they are getting from our schooling system.

That is why I am pleased that the state and Commonwealth government discussions have talked about three new national partnerships which will benefit schools, the first a national partnership to better assist disadvantaged schools, the second a national partnership to improve teacher quality and the third a national partnership to improve literacy and numeracy. In total, some $577 million for improving literacy and numeracy is budgeted in the forward estimates. I look forward to seeing the final amounts for the other partnerships as determined through that COAG process, but I am confident that we will see, contrary to the fears raised by the member for Maranoa, an increase in funding for the education system across Australia.

There are some conditions attached to the non-government funding included in the Schools Assistance Bill. The bill will require as a condition of funding the implementation of the national curriculum in all schools by 2012. The bill will meet Labor’s election commitment to improve transparency in Australian schooling through national testing, easy to understand reporting and public reporting on the performance of schools. Transparency is important for understanding the needs and the performance of Australian schools as well as giving parents the right information about how their child and their school are performing to support them in making the right choices about their schooling. It will also be a valuable guide to gov-
ernment and to policymakers about resources and decision making to ensure the greatest possible effectiveness of and improvement in the system.

I hope that, through this new funding and the transparency of reporting, we will be able to more accurately identify where the greatest educational need is located and encourage excellence in every school. To achieve that we need a basis for fair, consistent and accurate analysis of how different schools are performing. This will include reporting on the results of individual schools in national tests, showing how schools are doing compared to other like schools which share the same student characteristics. Pleasingly, this transparency will apply equally to non-government and government schools.

We have heard much debate about national testing and reporting. All schools, and indeed the school system, must ensure that the national student assessments specified in the regulations are carried out. They must participate in preparing national reports on the outcomes of schooling. They have to provide individual school information covering student background characteristics, literacy and numeracy testing outcomes, year 12 attainment and attendance rates. They have to provide reports to parents, as I said, using plain language, including assessment of the child’s achievement in comparison with the child’s peer group at the school and reports which show student achievement against the national average from the national literacy and numeracy tests. As part of all this, schools have to make publicly available school information, including contextual information about the school and its teachers, parents, key student outcomes, student and teacher satisfaction, and income by funding source. The regulations will specify the required data to report according to student background characteristics such as gender, socioeconomic status, Indigenous background, language background, disability and geographic location. I believe this data will help identify and address the needs of students at risk of educational disadvantage and allow us to make meaningful comparisons, properly assess strengths and weaknesses, understand different patterns of disadvantage, share best practice and innovation, and direct assistance to where it is most needed.

The legislation gives effect also to the Commonwealth government’s commitment to implement its election commitment to continue existing SES funding and also ensures that maximum recurrent funding is automatically provided for schools that are special schools or that meet the criteria for a special assistance school. The legislation does, as the member for Maranoa pointed out, remove the provision for establishment grants. This is a matter that has been discussed in some detail, particularly with Catholic schools. They were fully integrated into the SES funding arrangements in 2005, and frankly there is no longer a need for establishment grants as we have experienced them in the past. The legislation continues to provide for the approval of new non-government schools in the non-government school system, and I hope that this will facilitate reform in the schools sector and provide an improved oversight of educational accountability and financial stability of non-government schools. As I say, I think this may also encourage better reporting and consistent implementation of Commonwealth initiatives, adherence to the legislative framework, achievement of the national goals for schooling, and ensure the viability and provision of schools in poorer and remote areas.

The legislation also touches on a number of other programs and seeks to appropriate funding for those programs. In many cases this will align arrangements in the non-government school sector with those cur-
rently applying in the government sector. I am also pleased to see supplementary assistance for Indigenous students at non-government schools, which is directed at helping to ‘close the gap’ in educational outcomes, will also be available. Programs under this funding may include homework centres, tutorial assistance and English as a second language for Indigenous language speakers amongst others. As I said at the outset of my speech, these two bills represent another step in the implementation of Labor’s education revolution. I have referred already to the historic COAG agreement reached in March this year. Most members would be aware of funding commitments already made to literacy and numeracy, to national curriculum development and to improvements and strategies in the area of the quality of teaching.

We have seen the beginning of the rollout of computers in schools. We have also seen the commencement of the trade training centres in schools program, a very comprehensive implementation of substantial changes to the Australian education system. It is my firm belief that one of the reasons why the Rudd government was indeed elected in November 2007 was its strong commitment to an education revolution. Australians want better education services in our nation and they want those services to be well resourced. They know the best way to ensure real opportunities for all Australians is to start with a good education and they want every child in Australia to have the chance of a quality education. They want investment in the early years of a child’s development, and I am very pleased to see the meeting of the new early childhood round table today in Canberra. They want higher quality, affordable schools—whether those schools are community, government or private—with great teachers, good discipline and sufficient resources to get the job done.

Too much time has been wasted in this country on debating the respective merits of and funding levels for schools based on whether they are government or non-government schools. We all know it is important to have a strong, well-resourced government school sector; but equally it is important to have a strong, well-resourced non-government school sector. This debate has not been assisted by flawed funding approaches in the past that have created unfortunate and inequitable anomalies. It is my great hope that this step, along with the introduction of the COAG national framework, will see the end of that debate and a focus instead on ensuring quality education for all our children and a schooling system that is about excellence and equity.
cabling, maintenance, training, insurance and air conditioning. The list goes on and on to the point that the state governments and schools are seeking additional funding to implement the government’s promise.

I am now concerned that the present Schools Assistance Bill 2008 will need to appropriate $28 billion for continued funding for non-government, primary and secondary education in Australia for the 2009-12 period. This bill is necessary to provide continued Commonwealth funding for the next quadrennium. The previous government’s Schools Assistance (Learning Together—Achievement Through Choice and Opportunity) Act 2004 provided funding from 2005 to 2008. However, this act provided funding for both government and non-government schools. My concern is that this bill marks a significant departure in Commonwealth funding arrangements for education in Australia. It has very specific issues for non-government schools, as it provides funding for only non-government schools and deliberately segregates and separates independent schools from government schools. We are told that future Commonwealth funding for government schools will be provided by the national education agreement, which is currently being negotiated with the states and territories through the Council of Australian Governments. However, in practical terms, this effectively means that the Rudd government will legislate for non-government schools before the finalisation of the national education agreement for government schools—a deliberate and calculated change.

I note the Labor government says it has held extensive consultation with many stakeholders, but I would like to know how many independent schools associations and representative bodies in Western Australia, particularly those representing my electorate of Forrest, were consulted and exactly what their concerns and comments were.

This bill, while apparently preserving the total funding available to non-government schools, introduces a number of changes to school-funding agreements which has and will continue to generate significant concern in the non-government education sector. There appear to be four main areas where the non-government education sector will be negatively impacted, and I cannot support those clauses without amendment. Firstly, section 15 will change the grounds upon which the minister can elect to refuse or delay payment, which just makes it easier for the minister to do exactly that. Clause 15(c) provides new reasons for such refusal or payment delay. The qualified audit report requirement contained in subclause (i) appears to presume that if an audit statement is qualified then it necessarily signals that a school’s financial situation is precarious enough to warrant the minister refusing or delaying payment. The coalition believes that a qualified audit report is too broad a basis for assessing the financial viability of a school and would allow the minister to delay or refuse funding in spite of financial viability. Further to this, the last thing a school found to be struggling financially needs is to have its funding withheld or delayed. Should the auditor qualify his statement because of concerns about the school model, as opposed to financial concerns, this may also cause the funds to be withheld or delayed. Given the diversity of independent school models, clause 15(c)(i) should be deleted from the bill.

The second concern I have is that the new requirement in clause 22 that school funding agreements need to comply with the national curriculum by 2012 as specified in regulations. At this stage, there is no indication of exactly what the national curriculum will include for maths, science, history and English. We do know that the framing documents are currently being drafted, but so far the
only documents that have been released are
the initial advice documents on the history
and the science curricula. The final docu-
ments will not be presented until sometime
in 2009, yet this bill seeks to tie school fund-
ing to the acceptance of that curriculum. We
therefore believe clause 22 should be re-
moved.

Thirdly, this bill proposes new reporting
requirements for schools, particularly relat-
ing to information about financial viability
and funding sources, as referred to in clause
24. Funding sources is a new concept for
reporting under this bill and could give the
minister substantial new powers to demand
information about the internal financial af-
fairs of a school community. This is not a
requirement under the current SES funding
model. I wonder if there is an alternative
agenda here with serious implications for
non-government schools. What is the ulti-
mate purpose of this information? Does this
further funding condition foreshadow an at-
tempt to cap or potentially decrease Com-
monwealth funding for independent schools?

This section allows the minister to require
independent schools to disclose greater detail
and additional information about their
sources of funding. Such information might
specifically include details of scholarship
funds, bequests and other sources of funding
such as profit-generating activities or com-
munity fund raising undertaken by parents
and friends associations and school support-
ers. What level of accountability will be ap-
plied to simple fetes, stalls, raffles and vol-
unteer fundraising activities? Will this effec-
tively discourage support for independent
schools? And what increased level of report-
ing will be necessary for the independent
schools in my electorate of Forrest?

I can only draw the conclusion that this
clause exists in order to lay the groundwork
to develop a case to radically alter the SES
funding system, potentially in the next fund-
ing, period, to one where those schools who
are the beneficiaries of acts of philanthropy
by parents or previous students and support-
ers are to be penalised through reduced or
abolished Commonwealth support. The La-
bor government will be conducting a review
of school funding in 2010 and the intent may
well be to restructure the funding model for
non-government schools along the lines of
the old discredited education resources index
model just in time for the next funding quad-
rennium of 2013 to 2016.

Considering statements made by Labor
members, this is certainly feasible The mem-
ber for Prospect declared in the House on 1
December 2004 that he believed the SES
index was fundamentally flawed and that he
thought the education resources index was a
better formula to provide for the needs of
schools and the capacity of the school to
reach education standards. The member for
Eden-Monaro was quoted in the Australian
on 14 November 2007 as saying that the SES
system was a ridiculous approach to looking
at the needs of schools and that Labor will
move away from that and get down eventu-
ally to a proper needs based approach.

What can be determined to be ‘a proper
needs based approach’ based on section 24 of
the legislation may ultimately punish schools
that have made effective use of their funds
and worked closely with their wider commu-
nity and it may well be a blatant attempt to
standardise well-run independent schools.
Clearly, the Labor government is harvesting
all income-generating and asset information
of private schools to calculate their economic
capacity and potentially use it to justify a
reduction of funding.

The proposed reporting requirements
could even lead to well-run successful inde-
pendent schools decreasing their fundraising
activities for extra-curricula out-of-school
activities just to maintain their Commonwealth funding for day-to-day operations. Their funding could well be capped at the 2008 rate. Well-run private schools have well-proven business plans for the future that they expect to continue to be successful, knowing that the school board makes sound education and business decisions. Many parents sacrifice other areas of their lives or work additional hours to enable their children to attend an independent school of their choice that provides the type of education that they want for their children. We in the coalition support the expectation of Australian parents that the government should contribute to the education of their children.

I have a range of very efficient independent schools offering a diversity of opportunity to students in my electorate of Forrest through processes which often include intellectual, physical, moral, social and creative growth, as well as vocational preparation, whilst encouraging students to achieve their potential within a caring environment. There are many small schools and many have very sound relationships with local and regional industry, the community and the environment.

Some examples of these schools are the Georgiana Molloy Anglican School in Busselton, the Kearnan Catholic College in Manjimup, the Yallingup Steiner School, Ocean Forest Lutheran College in Dalyellup and Bunbury Cathedral Grammar School. Each one of these schools provides for a specific set of needs within their communities and within the expectations of parents, families and teachers.

It is equally important that families in regional areas have access to the diversity of educational opportunities provided by independent schools. Schools such as these should not be disadvantaged for their professional or diverse approach to providing opportunities and choice for parents and students. Measures in this bill could reduce funding simply because a school is offering high-quality facilities and resources. This proposal is a major change to the formula for Commonwealth funding for non-government schools. This is not an education revolution; it is a potential budget cutback ultimately reducing funding to non-government schools.

I have a total of 29 non-government schools in my electorate of Forrest, 27 of which have SES scores. There is a difference of over $1,400 per student per year between the highest and lowest SES score. The current SES model for schools funding is a much fairer model than what is proposed in this bill. It measures the socioeconomic status of parents whose children are enrolled at a particular school. The SES model links student addresses with current ABS census data and the SES index is then applied to provide an SES score for each school. Schools drawing students from high scoring SES areas receive lower levels of Commonwealth funding than schools that draw from areas of average or low SES.

I intend to maintain my focus on looking after the interests of all schools, students and parents within my electorate and that includes independent schools and their students. I do this by also supporting my coalition colleagues in calling for the removal of section 24(1)(b).

The fourth area of concern I have is with the Labor government intention to immediately phase out the new non-government schools establishment grants. The previous government encouraged the non-government school sector and the right of parents and students to have a choice of a range of educational opportunities. However, this bill only makes provision for those schools approved in 2008 to receive grants in 2009.
The Labor government is making it increasingly difficult for new non-government schools to develop.

Some measures in this bill will allow struggling schools to fail, while compromising successful independent schools. Schools should be strongly encouraged to provide both a diversity of educational opportunities as well as enhanced education by way of improving resources and assets such as new buildings, equipment, information technology and teachers, I intend to maintain my focus on supporting parents and families in my electorate to have the choice as to how and where their children are educated in a way that reflects their values by ensuring that non-government schools continue to receive an appropriate incremental increase in Commonwealth funding into the future. I believe that they should continue to excel in the provision of both educational and pastoral services as well as capital investment in facilities that will not compromise their future funding rounds. I support the shadow minister’s proposed amendments.

Mr TREvor (Flynn) (1.44 pm)—I rise to support the Schools Assistance Bill 2008 and the Education Legislation Amendment Bill 2008. The Schools Assistance Bill 2008 will appropriate $28 billion for non-government schools and non-government bodies for 2009 to 2012. This bill will also implement the Commonwealth’s commitment to providing funding certainty to non-government schools for 2009 to 2012 through the continuation of the existing socioeconomic status funding formula and indexation arrangements. This bill will appropriate funding for all non-government schools for 2009 to 2012, including specific funding for schools and students in rural and regional areas under the remoteness loading for recurrent grants and through the provision of Indigenous supplementary assistance weighted to provide additional support for schools’ campuses in remote or very remote areas; it will also fund the Country Areas program.

This bill will address the funding of non-government schools for 2009 to 2012 as part of the Rudd Labor government’s overall agenda for delivering an education revolution to all schools whether they are government or non-government schools. This bill will also meet the Rudd Labor government’s election commitment to continue the current SES funding. The Schools Assistance Bill 2008 will appropriate $28 billion worth of Commonwealth funding for recurrent capital and targeted assistance for non-government schools and bodies, including supplementary assistance for Indigenous school students, as well as establishing an Indigenous funding guarantee to ensure that non-government education providers are no worse off under these arrangements. This bill will combine Indigenous-specific school education programs into a single streamlined Indigenous supplementary assistance element, align the indexation and remoteness classifications of this funding with those which apply to mainstream recurrent funding and provide for maximum recurrent funding for non-government schools with a very high proportion of Indigenous enrolments.

A positive example of this in my own electorate of Flynn is the Harmony in Between program, which was launched at the masses for the opening of the 2008 school year across the Rockhampton diocese, which takes in my electorate of Flynn. The project is focused on presenting Indigenous perspectives to all learners in our diocese. The mission statement for the project declares:

With Jesus as our guide it is our purpose to enrich the experiences of all our learners with different ways of knowing and doing, to lead them to reflect on these perspectives and to act in inclusive and socially just ways.
Indigenous perspectives are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people’s ways of knowing, doing, being and relating to the world. For Indigenous people, the relationships between individual, country, law and spirituality are not easily separated, as each informs the other.

For us to fully appreciate contemporary Indigenous issues, it is vital to gain an understanding of Indigenous world views and how historical events continue to impact on and live with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples today. Intergenerational experiences, both positive and negative, are manifest in the behaviours and attitudes of many young Indigenous people in our care. To gain a deeper understanding of Indigenous experiences, we need to develop relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Schools are encouraged to form genuine partnerships with members of their local Indigenous community so that the most authentic of Indigenous perspectives can be presented to our students. To support these personal interactions, teachers will have access to a class page on Mysuite, our intranet service. It contains internet links which have been evaluated using criteria formulated for this project, along with other resources to support teachers within the classroom and in their own professional and personal development.

At the masses, each school received a print of the Harmony in Between artwork, which was created by local Indigenous artists Howard and Kaylene Butler. The painting tells the story of how we are honouring the past, enriching the present and shaping the future in partnership with our Indigenous communities. Schools have been asked to hang the print in a prominent place to indicate that they are places where Indigenous peoples and their cultures are valued and respected and that together we are working for harmony between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.

Unravelling some of the mystery surrounding the hidden history of Indigenous Australians was the focus of the Crossing Cultures workshops held in all schools across the diocese over terms 1 and 2. Indigenous education coordinator Coral Way and liaison officers Phillipa Johnson, Hazel Hill and Katie Wragge presented the in-service, which detailed the last 220 years of Australian history from an Indigenous perspective. The in-service taught that most people today have a reasonable knowledge of Aboriginal culture before 1788 and also of what is happening now but that there is a great void of knowledge surrounding the two centuries in between, that this period of history has shaped the complex and diverse issues that Indigenous Australians now experience and that open, honest dialogue and further education will pave the way forward.

Crossing Cultures aims to improve understanding of issues affecting our Indigenous students and, in doing so, our teachers and staff are in the best position to provide an education for these students specific to their needs. The Schools Assistance Bill is a major building block in that shared national agenda. It appropriates funding for non-government schools during the 2009 to 2012 period in a way that will give funding certainty, focus on quality, and apply transparency and accountability requirements that are consistent with government schools and with Labor’s election commitments on transparency.

As well as meeting these commitments, the bill will make important changes to funding for Indigenous students in non-government schools. The Education Legislation Amendment Bill 2008 has three main purposes, that is to say, continuation of appropriations for 2009 to 2012 for a range of
targeted programs and projects under the Indigenous Education (Targeted Assistance) Act 2000 to support improvements in Indigenous education outcomes and assist in closing the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.

The second purpose is to provide appropriations for supplementary assistance to preschools and vocational education and training providers with Indigenous students from 1 January 2009 as transitional arrangements until alternative legislation associated with early childhood and vocational education and training specific purpose payments and national partnership payments become operational in 2009. The purpose is making a number of amendments to the Indigenous Education (Targeted Assistance) Act 2000, the Australian Technical Colleges (Flexibility in Achieving Australia’s Skills Needs) Act 2005, the Schools Assistance (Learning Together—Achievement Through Choice and Opportunity) Act 2004, and the repeal of the States Grants (Primary and Secondary Education Assistance) Act 2000.

This bill will provide the government with capacity to work with Indigenous communities, parents and families to improve their engagement with education providers so that they can be supported in becoming informed consumers of educational services. Indigenous parental involvement in decision making is an essential element to improving educational outcomes. For example, in my home town of Gladstone in Central Queensland, the Gladstone South State School has been through a holistic program we call Working Together, making a brighter future that invests in the growth and development of our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and their families. A major innovation is the involvement of an Adopt-an-Elder project by the Gladstone South State School and looking at a total package for improving the education and employment outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Their main focus has been on improving the education outcomes of their students by targeted work and the monitoring of this on a weekly basis. The school has seen an improvement in the reading, spelling and writing ages of these students on average from 12 months to two years growth in a six-month period. The Gladstone South State School has, through this careful monitoring, identified a number of Indigenous students to be included in their school’s gifted program extension. This success has also resulted in improved self-esteem and self-concept for these students, creating a positive cycle that will continue to see their learning improve through regular attendance.

Another example can be found in another part of my electorate of Flynn, Biloela. Biloela State High School, a member of the Biloela Indigenous Education Advisory Group, has successfully conducted Parent School Partnership Initiatives programs over the last two years. Both projects have had a different focus and Indigenous students and their families have benefited from these programs. The major focus has always been literacy, numeracy and attendance, with a number of different strategies utilised. Engagement of the local Indigenous community has been paramount to the success of the program and has resulted in much greater communication between participating schools and home with positive results in the area of attendance. Students have been provided with opportunities through the PSPI program such as Successmaker, individualised student support in literacy and numeracy via an interactive computer package Cultural Calendar, a literacy and numeracy research activity on the local Indigenous culture.

The success of these programs can be best measured by the outcomes of the students
supported. An excellent example is a year-10 male Indigenous student from Biloela State High School who was identified through the 2007 program. This student had not successfully passed either his English or maths programs at school and had no clear career direction. Through the intervention and support of the PSPI program this young man completed Access 10 studies, resulting in a pass in both year 10 English and maths, and he also completed a valuable work experience. This work experience placement then led to a full-time traineeship position as a mechanic with a local employer.

The PSPI funding provides a full-time Indigenous project officer who supports students through their families and coordinates the involvement of participating schools across the state, Catholic and independent sectors in all aspects of the program. The PSPI coordinator for 2008 was also very pleased with the results of Indigenous students at Biloela high school in the year 9 national literacy and numeracy assessment program in which 75 per cent of Indigenous students were above the state mean in grammar and punctuation and 75 per cent of Indigenous students were above the school mean in spelling. Both of these areas are covered extensively by the Successmaker program.

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

QUESTIONS WITHOUT NOTICE

Economy

Mr TURNBULL (2.00 pm)—My question is addressed to the Prime Minister. I refer to the Prime Minister’s answer yesterday in which he confirmed that the government relied upon an estimate that growth next year, in the absence of the $10.4 billion stimulus, would be at least two per cent. What impact has the government been advised the stimulus will have on that forecast growth of two per cent?

Mr RUDD—What I said yesterday was that the government had before it the budget forecast, those from the RBA and, of course, those which were also outlined in the IMF’s World Economic Outlook for growth, all of which had a number with a ‘2’ in front of it for calendar 09 or financial 08-09. What I further said was that the government judged it necessary to have a financial stimulus package to provide a buffer for growth into the future because of the difficulties which were arising through recent developments on global financial markets. The government stands by its policy. It has acted prudently, it has acted early and it has acted decisively.

Ms CAMPBELL (2.01 pm)—My question is to the Prime Minister. Will the Prime Minister update the House on developments overnight in the international financial system, and Australia’s response?

Mr RUDD—There has been further turmoil overnight on global share markets as US equity markets had their biggest fall since 1987. The Dow Jones industrial average fell 7.9 per cent, the S&P 500 by some nine per cent. We also saw significant falls in the United Kingdom, France and Germany of between seven and six per cent. Falls on share markets and commodities markets reflect a general concern that the global economy is slowing rapidly. In fact, US retail sales fell by 1.2 per cent in September, their biggest monthly drop in three years. These concerns have been added to last night by the Chairman of the Fed, Ben Bernanke, who said:

By restricting flows of credit to households, businesses, and state and local governments, the tur-
moil in financial markets and the funding pressures on financial firms pose a significant threat to economic growth.

The IMF is now forecasting the slowest growth in advanced economies for over a quarter of a century. In other words, the impact that we have seen in terms of financial market turbulence and instability in recent times has flowed through not just to equities markets but also to the real economy, and that of course has implications for jobs.

This underscores the importance of early and decisive action here in Australia. The Australian government has acted responsibly in this respect. On Sunday the government took action to guarantee all Australian bank deposits to build confidence and stability in our banking system. We also guaranteed term funding arrangements for banks in order to ensure that banks could continue to provide credit to those seeking credit in the real economy, including business and small business as well as households. On top of that, on Tuesday the government acted to strengthen the national economy and support household budgets with the release of the government’s $10.4 billion Economic Security Strategy for the future. The government has acted to give financial support to seniors, to carers, to pensioners, lower and middle-income families and first home buyers. Furthermore, the Economic Security Strategy will allow greater spending by families and by seniors on consumption, home buying and construction. These all represent vital economic stimulants for the future. At a time when the global economy is going backwards at a pace of knots, this level of stimulus is absolutely necessary and it is responsible, and it should obtain genuine bipartisan support.

The government welcomes the support we have received from the Australian business community on this package. The BCA President, Greig Gailey, said the $10.4 billion package is ‘the right response to the threat of economic slowdown’. He said:

This package contains all three ingredients to have maximum impact. It is well-timed, well-targeted, and temporary.

AiG’s CEO, Heather Ridout, said:

These spending measures will complement the recent interest rate reductions and steps to underwrite confidence in our banking system.

In coming days and weeks we will continue to work with business and industry groups on Australia’s response to the global financial crisis. The Treasurer, the Assistant Treasurer and I will be meeting with business leaders tomorrow in Sydney to discuss the impact of the global financial crisis further with industry leaders and work with business leaders to determine further appropriate collective responses by the government to what is a global financial crisis impacting not just Australian capital markets and equities markets but the real economy as well.

The government remains determined to act, and to act decisively, whenever necessary to respond to the challenges which now present themselves to the Australian economy for the future. We have acted accordingly on the weekend. We have acted accordingly on Tuesday. We will act in the future in relation to infrastructure provision. And we will take whatever further action is necessary to ensure the long-term health of this economy and to help Australian households on the way through.

**Economy**

Mr Turnbull (2.06 pm)—My question is addressed to the Prime Minister. I refer the Prime Minister again to the answer he gave yesterday to a question in which he was asked whether he was telling the House that the growth forecasts upon which the government had relied were not less than the 2.2 per cent forecast by the IMF. The Prime Minister’s response was:
… the most recent data available to the government was about growth with a ‘2’ in front of it … Did the Prime Minister in formulating the stimulus package rely on growth estimates lower than two per cent and, if so, why did he fail to mention them yesterday?

Mr Rudd—What puzzles me about the opposition’s attack on this is, first of all, that they have given bipartisan support for this package and within 24 hours there is no longer bipartisan support for this package. We have an opposition determined to engage in short-term partisan politics rather than participate in a long-term economic security strategy for the nation. I draw the Leader of the Liberal Party’s attention to the following facts. The first goes to the growth numbers for the Australian economy, which I have referred to before. The second is the real information contained in the IMF’s most recent report on both the global economy and on the developed economies within that. The October IMF report points to a downward revision in the growth projections for 2009 of about one per cent for the global economy. Secondly, it goes to a further revision downwards by about one per cent for the advanced economies. In the case of the global economies, what you had was the fourth downward revision within a year and in the case of the advanced economies a revision down to growth which is practically zero, which would see across the advanced economies a level of growth lower than we have seen for the last 25 years. That is the first set of factors which galvanised the government’s attention.

The second is this: what has happened with growth in the Chinese economy as well? Revisions downward in the Chinese economy in terms of their growth—

Mr Turnbull—Mr Speaker, on a point of order: really the Prime Minister is circumnavigating the globe of irrelevance. The Chinese growth forecasts! Really! I have asked him a question about the growth estimates for Australia.

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

Mr Rudd—I find it remarkable that the alternative Prime Minister of Australia says that growth in the Chinese economy is irrelevant to the future growth prospects of the Australian economy. I think it reflects a level of illiteracy about the impacts of growth in the global economy and in one of Australia’s most significant export partners and the most significant demand element out there in the global economy at present. And with one brush of the hand he says, ‘China is not relevant.’ He assumes therefore—

Mr Hockey—Mr Speaker, on a point of order: clearly the Prime Minister is struggling here. He was asked a question about growth rates in Australia. Australia—the country you are Prime Minister of!

The Speaker—The member for North Sydney will resume his seat.

Mr Laming—Too much time in a 747!

Mr Adams interjecting—

The Speaker—Order! The member for Lyons is warned. The member for Bowman is warned. The Prime Minister has the call.

Mr Rudd—In the most recent IMF report we have revisions down by one per cent in global growth and revisions down by one per cent in the growth of the most advanced economies. There are also revisions down in Chinese growth, which uniquely the Leader of the Opposition seems to think irrelevant to growth prospects in this economy—a remarkable conclusion. On top of that you should have a close look at what has happened most recently in business and consumer confidence indicators around the world and in Australia. The growth data for Australia is that which was outlined in my...
answer to the honourable gentleman’s first question—the budget projection for 2008-09 of 2.75, the RBA’s most recent statement of 2.25 and the figure of 2.2 in the IMF’s report. This is the data which is before the government.

What the opposition leader suggests is that what is going on in the global economy in the period ahead is irrelevant to how those growth numbers will be affected in the future. And I say this to the Leader of the Liberal Party: these numbers for the global economy predate the convulsions in global stock markets and capital markets of the last two weeks. Therefore, the logic which flows from this is transparently obvious: if you have a revision down in growth globally of one percentage point, and that is prior to the convulsions in stock markets and capital markets in the last couple of weeks, it is a wise course of action to create a buffer against Australia’s future growth prospects. One per cent of Australian GDP is $10 billion. Therefore if you are seeking to construct a buffer for the future it is within that ballpark that you should be aiming in order to ensure that you are providing a proper buffer for growth in the future.

But let us look carefully at the economic strategy which the Leader of the Opposition is advocating. He is advocating that this government should wait until MYEFO and wait until the new national accounts data emerges to demonstrate what the actual growth numbers for the future will be. I say to those opposite: the response to the global financial crisis is along these lines. You either act early and decisively before there is a problem—

Mr Hockey interjecting—

Mr Turnbull—Mr Speaker, relevance!

The SPEAKER—Order! The Leader of the Opposition did not have the call. He was denied the call because the member for North Sydney is continually interjecting. Does the Leader of the Opposition want the call?

Mr Turnbull—I have made the point, Mr Speaker—

The SPEAKER—It is a point of order.

Mr Turnbull—It is a simple question; it demands a straightforward answer.

The SPEAKER—Order! The Leader of the Opposition will resume his seat. The Prime Minister will respond to the question.

Mr Rudd—Effectively what the Liberal Party is saying is: ‘Wait for the data to roll in in the future and then decide it is time to act’—by which time it is too late. The advice from the Treasury is that you act early, you act decisively and you act responsibly. This government has done so in order to create a buffer for economic growth for the future. What is remarkable about this intervention by the Leader of the Opposition is that it does go to a question of the character which he deploys in this economic debate—always walking two sides of the street: on one day saying that he gives this package bipartisan support and on the next day seeking to undermine it.

Mr Hockey—Is that the answer?

The SPEAKER—Order! Has the Prime Minister concluded?

Mr Rudd—Yes.

Economy

Mr Trevor (2.13 pm)—My question is to the Treasurer. Will the Treasurer outline for the House the ways the government has stayed ahead of the game as it goes about strengthening Australia’s economy in the face of the global financial crisis?

Mr Swan—I thank the member for Flynn for his question. In recent weeks the global financial crisis has entered a new and dangerous phase. It is a new and dangerous
phase that those opposite do not seem to recognise. But the Rudd government has been acutely aware of the possibility of this global financial crisis deepening.

Mr Hunt—We warned you in February, in March and in April. You guys drove up interest rates, and you know it!

Mr Swan—The member over there just said that the opposition warned us about this in April—is that right? Well, this is what the Leader of the Opposition had to say on 30 September at a press conference:

There is nobody that would have predicted these events a year ago or even a few months ago.

That is what he said. And this is what he said on 1 October:

… as recently as March people felt … the worst had passed. But it has got a lot worse and the events of the last few weeks would not have been predicted a few months ago.

So what did he say last night? What did he say in his address to the nation? This is what he said—

Mr Tuckey—Mr Speaker, I rise on a point of order on relevance. I listened to the question; I did not hear a request for a rundown on the statements of the Leader of the Opposition. The question, as it must, sought information.

The Speaker—The member for O’Connor will resume his seat. The Treasurer will be relevant to the question. The question talked about outlining the measures that kept the government ahead of the game in strengthening the economy.

Mr Swan—The government has been ahead of the game—ahead of the game all year. But this is what the Leader of the Opposition said last night:

… governments should have acted a lot earlier …

Mr Tuckey—Mr Speaker, I rise on a point of order of relevance. There can be no relevance to the question when the Treasurer is continuing to defy your order, Mr Speaker, to answer the question.

The Speaker—The member for O’Connor will resume his seat. I will listen carefully to the Treasurer.

Mr Swan—The point is this, Mr Speaker: the Leader of the Opposition is walking both sides of the street. These are dangerous events and in recent times they have taken a turn for the worse, and what that demands is immediate action—

Mr Hockey—Decisive action?

Mr Swan—Decisive and immediate action, and that is what is being delivered by the Rudd government because of the events in recent times. But we have been ahead of the game all year. We have been in discussions with the Reserve Bank, with the Treasury and with our international counterparts since January this year. And, of course, in the May budget we highlighted the risk to this economy from international forces. That was very much highlighted in our argument for a strong surplus. This is why in June this year we strengthened the investment mandate of the AOFM, it is why we introduced a financial claims scheme—

Mr Pearce—That was our idea.

Mr Swan—it is why we moved to crack down on short selling. We just had an interjection from over there that the Financial Claims Scheme was their idea! It was recommended to them in 2003, after the HIH royal commission, and ignored. So we have been ahead of the game from the very beginning. They are walking both sides of the street. They would rather wait for events to overrun us. We will not do that; we will take decisive and strong action.

Banking

Ms Julie Bishop (2.18 pm)—My question is to the Treasurer. Will the Treasurer advise the House what he expects to be
the ultimate size of the contingent liability to the taxpayer of the government’s 100 per cent guarantee for bank wholesale funding?

Mr SWAN—The Prime Minister and I have indicated that MYEFO, the Mid-Year Economic and Fiscal Outlook, will be produced in the next month, and those contingent liabilities will be contained in those documents. They will be contained in those documents, as is usual practice. MYEFO is a very important document. I think I remarked in the House yesterday that the practice of the previous Treasurer was to deliver it at a time when people were not around, just before Christmas.

Opposition members interjecting—

Mr SWAN—MYEFO from those opposite—

A government member—Christmas Eve.

Mr SWAN—Christmas Eve it was—on the 21st.

Mr Randall—Mr Speaker, I rise on a point of order. As you know, yesterday after question time the member for Higgins denied that that was the fact from the—

The SPEAKER—The member for Canning will resume his seat. There is no point of order. As I recollect, there were a couple of questions to me that I was not able to answer because they were not in my administration.

Mr SWAN—Ten of the opposition’s MYEFOs when they were in government were released more than six months after the budget. I remember the day well; everybody had left Canberra. There are people up there who remember it as well because it was the day on which the former Treasurer reneged on their promise in terms of the childcare rebate. They decided to publish it just before Christmas so nobody would notice they were going to make families wait two years for their childcare cash rebate.

Opposition members interjecting—

Mr SWAN—That is why it was published right on Christmas Eve: because Christmas followed the weekend and nobody was in Canberra. Nobody was in Canberra; they had all gone home. They tried to bury it—

Opposition members interjecting—

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

Mr SWAN—Unlike those opposite, we will produce MYEFO, the Mid-Year Economic and Fiscal Outlook. We will produce it next month. All of these figures will be—

Ms Julie Bishop—Why not now?

The SPEAKER—Order! The Deputy Leader of the Opposition asked the question. It is being responded to.

Mr SWAN—She says, ‘Why not now?’ Because it is being prepared by the Treasury. We will deliver it earlier than it was delivered by them on at least 10 occasions, because that is the responsible thing to do. The responsible thing to do is deliver it in a measured and considered way. All of that data which is being asked for by those opposite will be there for all to see. But what is all this about? To hide their embarrassment they are trying to walk both sides of the street. They are trying to pretend they support the package and then they are trying to nitpick at it around the edges all the way through because they do not support it and because they do not want to stand up for the national interest. We have taken a decision to get ahead of the game by strengthening our economy, because of what is occurring in the international economy. If those opposite cannot understand what is going on in the international economy, given all of the events in the United States, in Europe and in the emerging economies, then they simply do not get it.
Economy

Mr DREYFUS (2.23 pm)—My question is to the Assistant Treasurer. Will the Assistant Treasurer outline to the House the powers that Australia’s regulatory authorities have in dealing with the current global financial crisis? Has there been any criticism of those powers or of other government action in relation to current events?

Mr BOWEN—I thank the honourable member for Isaacs for his question, because it is important that the House is aware of the powers that APRA has, on behalf of the government and the Australian people, to protect bank deposits in these difficult times. Following the announcement of the guarantee of bank deposits by the government, it is also important that the House is fully aware of the substantial powers that APRA has to protect government funds.

Of course, Australia’s regulatory framework and APRA’s powers have been recognised as being among the best in the world. APRA has the power to request any information from a deposit-taking institution and can direct the institution to do or not do anything in relation to the conduct of its business. This includes giving directions to an institution to correct its behaviour before a crisis happens. If an institution is likely to fail, APRA can organise a compulsory transfer of the business to another willing institution. APRA has the power to remove any director or senior manager from office or to direct the institution to undertake or not undertake various financial transactions. APRA may appoint itself as a statutory manager to replace the management of a distressed institution.

The government has given APRA even further powers in this climate of uncertainty. APRA will be able to, if needed, more easily change the ownership of a bank by issuing new shares, selling shares or cancelling shares. This is important because, in times of distress, APRA will be able to strengthen the financial institution in question in a short period of time and avoid damage to deposit holders or the financial system more generally. In the unlikely event that an institution failed, the government through APRA would take control of the institution’s insolvency. And, if the government is not fully compensated through the insolvency proceedings, a levy on financial institutions can be imposed to ensure taxpayers are not out of pocket due to the financial collapse.

I am asked by the member for Isaacs if there is any criticism of these powers. I can report to the House that, despite all these powers and the strengthening of these powers by the government, the Leader of the Opposition continues to quibble as to whether the powers are strong enough. We saw this again last night in the latest instalment of Kath-and-Kim economics—also known as the Leader of the Opposition’s address to the nation, his latest ‘look at me’ moment. Last night the Leader of the Opposition again said:

… we are concerned to ensure that safeguards are put in place so that Government guarantees offered to banks do not result in taxpayers picking up the tab for bank losses.

That is what the Leader of the Opposition said last night, despite the fact that, in his speech to the House on the bill, he recognised the safeguards that are in place. It is the conviction politician saying one thing in the address to the nation and saying anything in the House to gain popularity.

I am also asked about criticisms of government actions. As the Treasurer has outlined to the House, last night the Leader of the Opposition criticised the government for not predicting this crisis, despite just a few weeks ago saying that nobody could have predicted this crisis. Even the American version of Kath and Kim had more credibility
than the Leader of the Opposition last night; it was a joke. But it gets worse. This morning, the member for Aston went one better. The member for Aston, the member for Higgins’s campaign director, went on Sky’s Agenda with the member for Rankin and said this: ‘The member for Higgins has been warning of the financial tsunami for some months.’ We know he is the campaign director for the member for Higgins, and he is still at it, saying the member for Higgins has been warning of a tsunami for some months. In fairness, the member for Higgins did talk about a financial tsunami last year. There is only one problem: he was talking about and predicting a tsunami arising out of policy decisions made in China. This is what the member for Higgins said on 26 October last year:

… the day they—

referring to the Chinese—

decide to float their currency, you will get a huge reversal of financial flows around the globe which will affect all exchange rates. That is why I compare it to a tsunami.

Mr Speaker, through you, with the greatest of respect, can I send a memo to the opposition: China has not floated the yen—that is not the cause of the international crisis.

Opposition members interjecting—

Mr BOWEN—China has not floated its currency. I do not blame the member for Higgins for not predicting this crisis, but they should not pretend that he did.

Mr Dutton—Mr Speaker, for not predicting this crisis, but they should not pretend that he did.

Mr Bowen—Mr Speaker, on a point of order: this is a government that is supposed to be restoring some sort of confidence to the market instead of conducting something like a clown show.

The SPEAKER—What is the point of order?

Mr Dutton—It goes to relevance.

The SPEAKER—The member for Dickson is warned, because it is not a point of order. The House will come to order! The Assistant Treasurer will resume his seat for a second—hopefully it will be for a second.

Mr Bowen—We do not blame the member for Higgins for not predicting this crisis, but we do blame the member for Aston for claiming credit for the member for Higgins for predicting something he did not—for predicting that the Chinese would float their currency—

Opposition members interjecting—

Mr Bowen—Yuan is what the Chinese currency is called—and then claiming, in hindsight, that he knew it was coming. I do not know what is worse on the other side: the Leader of the Opposition claiming to see the future or the member for Higgins refusing to acknowledge the past.

Banking

Ms JULIE BISHOP (2.31 pm)—My question is to the Treasurer. Given that ratings agencies take account of contingent liabilities in their assessment of a national government’s credit risk, what impact will the government’s 100 per cent guarantee on bank wholesale funding have on the credit rating of the Commonwealth?

Mr SWAN—I thank the member for her question. Because it is a contingent liability it will be reported in MYEFO. It will be there in the statement of risk. It will be there for all to see. The rating agencies read those documents very closely. The statement of risk—

Opposition members interjecting—

Mr SWAN—This is a very serious matter and so it will be—
Opposition members interjecting—

Mr SWAN—That is why we are very serious about producing MYEFO; it is read very closely by organisations like rating agencies. That is why we take our responsibility to publish this document as soon as we possibly can. It will be recorded as a contingent liability in those documents and all of the documentation will be there to be seen.

Medicare Levy Surcharge

Ms GEORGE (2.32 pm)—My question is to the Minister for Health and Ageing. Will the minister explain to the House the benefits to working families of passing the Medicare levy surcharge?

Ms ROXON—I thank the member for Throsby for her question. She will be very delighted, as will her constituents, to know that the Senate, just before we commenced question time today, passed the Medicare levy surcharge bill. This means that working families earning under $140,000 or singles earning under $70,000 will get immediate tax relief as a result of these measures. Two hundred and fifty thousand Australians will receive these immediate tax cuts and for many people it will be $1,200 and $1,300 that is very much needed for working families at this time. At a time of economic uncertainty, an agreement having been reached in the Senate provides certainty to these hundreds of thousands of Australians. At a time of tight family budgets, it gives those families the choice about how they will spend their money. And at a time when economic stimulus is needed, it is putting money back in the pockets of 250,000—one quarter of a million—Australians. And at a time when there is, of course, importance in a strong budget surplus, this is delivering $380 million to the budget bottom line. But as I have said, perhaps most importantly this bill removes an unfair tax trap for every Australian earning less than $140,000—not just today, with the measure being passed in the Senate, but into the future. The new Medicare levy surcharge thresholds will be indexed for wages growth, meaning that the community will never again be able to be stuck in the tax trap created by the previous government.

I want to take the opportunity to acknowledge the efforts of senators from the minor parties: the Greens, Senator Xenophon and Senator Fielding. They have been very constructive and reasonable in their discussions. I do have to say that it is a bit remarkable—and in some ways disturbing—that these senators have shown much appreciation of the economic circumstances that we are in, and much preparedness to discuss a sensible resolution of this matter, when the Liberals have had no such inclination at any time. At this time of great global economic uncertainty, Senators Xenophon and Fielding and the Greens have recognised the need for economic responsibility—something that the Liberals seem incapable of doing.

I do want to remark that it seems to me that the vote in the other place earlier today has really highlighted a problem for the parliament. The problem is that those opposite us, even at a time of global economic uncertainty, are more interested in giving tax cuts to the alcohol industry than they are in giving tax cuts to working families. I am proud of this measure, and people on this side of the House will be delighted that we are providing relief to many thousands of Australians—something that the Rudd government has long argued for and will always stand behind.

Banking

Ms JULIE BISHOP (2.35 pm)—My question is to the Treasurer. Will the Treasurer advise the House whether a BBB rated bank would be charged a higher fee to access the government’s 100 per cent guarantee for
Mr SWAN—These are all matters that are being dealt with by the Treasury as we speak. 

Opposition members interjecting—

Mr SWAN—It is a very important thing that must be put together. I do not intend to debate those commercial matters on the floor of the parliament, given all of the circumstances that we are in at the moment in terms of the global financial system. It will be put together—

Mr Robert—You don’t know. You just don’t know.

Mr SWAN—This will be done on a case-by-case basis. That is what it will be done on, and it is not my job to make those commercial decisions on the floor of the parliament. No Treasurer would do that. These arrangements will be developed by the Treasury. They will be transparent, they will be public, they will be capable of public scrutiny, but I do not intend to debate them or to throw them onto the floor of the parliament or to make my commercial judgments, which must be made by the officials.

Economy

Ms COLLINS (2.37 pm)—My question is to the Minister for Finance and Deregulation. Why is it important that the government’s Economic Security Strategy receive broad support? Is the minister aware of any comments which seek to undermine the strategy?

Mr TANNER—Australia is facing very powerful downward pressures on our economy from the global financial crisis and the knock-on consequences that are beginning to ripple through the global economy, and Australia is not immune from the influences that are emerging from this trend. The government has taken decisive action in response to these developments to push back against those downward pressures on the Australian economy, particularly by injecting a $10 billion Economic Security Strategy stimulus into economic activity but also by guaranteeing bank deposits and guaranteeing wholesale lending to Australian banks and financial institutions in order to ensure that their activity can continue, and these are of course added to the stimulatory impact that is already beginning to flow from interest rate reductions by the Reserve Bank and the decline in the value of the Australian dollar. The impact of these things of course does not flow instantaneously but it does gradually move throughout the economy.

It is vital that this strategy does receive broad support from within the community and it is important that people do not talk down the Australian economy. I note with some interest that the opposition appears to be trying to have it both ways on this issue. It wants to have people believe that it supports the government’s Economic Security Strategy and it wants to have people believe that it supports the payments that are being made to pensioners, to carers and to families as part of that strategy; yet, at the same time, it wants to unpick that strategy and it wants to convince Australians that that strategy is actually bad economic policy. It wants to walk both sides of the street. It wants to both support the package and attack it at the same time.

In the opposition leader’s address to the nation, he made the following statements:

With the benefit of hindsight, government should have acted a lot earlier.

And:

… Mr Rudd’s government missed the warning signs at the beginning of the year—about the global financial crisis. This statement stands in stark contrast to earlier statements, only very recent, by the Leader of the Opposition. On 30 September he said:
There is nobody—

Mr Tuckey—Mr Speaker, I raise a point of order. I stand again on relevance in answering the question. The question did not ask for a commentary on the past statements of the Leader of the Opposition and unless these people can get their question right, they should—

The SPEAKER—Order! The member will resume his seat. The question went on to talk about comments undermining the strategy. I call the minister.

Mr Tanner—On 30 September the opposition leader said:

There is nobody that would have predicted these events a year ago or even a few months ago.
The following day, on 1 October, he said:

… events of the last few weeks would not have been predicted a few months ago.
So the position that the opposition leader is taking with respect to the government’s approach to the global financial crisis is that the government could not have known but it should have known. That is the net effect of his position—walking both sides of the street, saying that nobody could have known yet the government should have known. The opposition leader has in effect created a new category of soothsayer. Some people think they can see into the future. Well, he has gone one better: he can see into the past—absolutely sensational!

If I were the Leader of the Opposition, I would not focus too heavily on the past because, for example, he might discover that the government of which he was an integral player was advised no fewer than seven times over the course of the past seven years that it should consider enacting some kind of protection, some kind of insurance, for depositors in Australian banks and financial institutions. This advice came from, amongst others, the Financial Stability Forum, APRA, the Reserve Bank of Australia, the International Monetary Fund and the Council of Financial Regulators. So if we were to look into the past, as the opposition leader seems to suggest, we might find that his recent posturing, his recent suggestion that the government was not doing enough to protect deposits in Australian banks, stands in stark contrast to the actions of his own government when confronted on numerous occasions by the key regulators in our economy with the proposal that something should be done on this, when nothing was indeed done by a government that he was an integral part of.

In conclusion, the opposition’s approach to dealing with the government’s economic security strategy is straightforward. It wants to be all things to all people. It wants to walk both sides of the street. It wants to make it up on the spot to support the individual payments, because it knows that they are well received in the community, but to undermine the overall strategy being put forward by of the government. It does not care. The Leader of the Opposition does not care whether what he says today is the direct opposite of what he said yesterday.

People in this country want clear, responsible, sound and consistent economic management and if you cannot deliver clear, responsible, sound and consistent economic policy in opposition, they will judge that you are not capable of delivering clear, sound and consistent management in government.

Mining

Mr Windsor (2.43 pm)—My question is to the Prime Minister and relates to ongoing calls for an independent study into the potential impact of subsidence mining on alluvial flood plains that are underlain with hydraulically linked and interconnected groundwater systems. Prime Minister, given the lack of available scientific evidence and the significance of these systems to the in-
flows into the Murray-Darling river system and the growing investment uncertainty in the mining industry over a state based approval process and a Commonwealth disapproval process, could you investigate the option of the federal government breaking this nexus and co-funding a study in conjunction with the New South Wales government and the mining industry?

Mr RUDD—I always take questions from the member for New England seriously.

Mr Hockey—You don’t take them from the opposition.

Mr RUDD—The member for New England, I know from experience, represents his constituency effectively and comprehensively and asks questions of direct relevance to the people that he represents in this parliament; therefore, I extend to him the courtesy of saying I will provide to him a substantive reply to the matter he has raised, given his deep commitment to industries in his area.

The SPEAKER—I call the member for Brisbane.

Occupational Health and Safety

Mr BEVIS (2.45 pm)—Thank you, Mr Speaker.

Mr Hunt—He had a bill to do it on today!

The SPEAKER—Is it okay if we move on now, Member for Flinders? The member for Flinders should really learn that the courteousness of warnings that I give him is not necessary for standing order 94A. He is warned.

An opposition member—The courtesy!

The SPEAKER—The courtesy. Is that ‘the Doc’? Thank you for the English!

Mr BEVIS—My question is to the Minister for Education, Minister for Employment and Workplace Relations and Minister for Social Inclusion. Will the Deputy Prime Minister advise the House on the progress of harmonisation of national occupational health and safety legislation? What contribution will these reforms make to national productivity?

Ms GILLARD—I thank the member for Brisbane for his question. I know that he has been interested in the policy area of occupational health and safety for a long time. It has been a long-sought-after policy goal to have uniform occupational health and safety laws in this country—something that people have wanted for a long time. Why? Because it would be better for business; in particular, it would be better for those 39,000 businesses that operate across state boundaries to be able to have all of their workforce under the same occupational health and safety regime. That is just common sense. It would be better for working people if there were uniform high standards around the country, because we know that, tragically, 300 Australians are killed at work each year and over 140,000 Australians are injured at work each year, costing the economy $34 billion and bringing tragedy to the people involved in those injuries and the family members of those who are lost at work.

In July this year COAG had a breakthrough. After years—indeed, decades—of this kind of reform being talked about, COAG agreed to an intergovernmental agreement to get on with the job of ensuring occupational health and safety laws are uniform around the country. It had an agreed end point, model laws, model regulations, model codes and an agreed time frame; and, importantly, it had agreement for the creation of a new body, to be known as Safe Work Australia, to guide this process. The legislation to create this new body is before this parliament. Amazingly, the Liberal Party are on a strategy to frustrate this legislation and prevent it passing the parliament. They know that this legislation is the product of an inter-
governmental agreement and that we have a best endeavours clause to deliver the legislation so it matches the intergovernmental agreement, and they are on a strategy to frustrate it. In particular, they are moving amendments to increase the number of representatives from the employer organisations and the number of representatives from the unions.

When the Liberal Party first moved those amendments it did seem to me that that was a very strange thing for the Liberal Party to do, given they had spent the best part of a decade or more trying to destroy the Australian trade union movement. I thought that that was a very unusual thing for them to do. But I am in a position to advise the House why they are going on this strategy, because I have come into my possession the shadow cabinet brief that was taken to their shadow cabinet dealing with this legislation. It is marked ‘shadow cabinet in confidence’. It makes abundantly clear why they are moving these amendments. It says:

The Coalition should propose amendments to the bill to alter the membership of Safe Work Australia, increasing the number of representatives submitted by each social partner to 3 from 2. This may also assist in defeating future policy proposals by State or Federal Labor.

That is, they are deliberately moving these amendments to derail the occupational health and safety harmonisation process. They are so desperate for political advantage that a reform that business wants, a reform that working people want, they will stand in the way of because they are about playing politics.

Who endorses this reform? The Business Council does. The Australian Mines and Metals Association does. Indeed, it is No. 1 on the Business Council of Australia agenda for deregulation, and here they are with their mind-numbingly petty politics with amendments deliberately calculated and designed to derail this process. The Leader of the Opposition is a man who seeks to present himself to the Australian community as someone who knows about business. He is seeking to present himself to the Australian community as a merchant banker who is therefore an expert in the ways of business. I believe this is a test of the leadership of the Leader of the Opposition. Is he going to allow an objective as important as having harmonised occupational health and safety laws in this country to be derailed by the petty politics of his shadow cabinet and his shadow minister or is he going to instruct his shadow minister to withdraw from this strategy and pass this bill unamended? It is a test of leadership for the Leader of the Opposition. This is a man who walks both sides of the street. One day he is in support of the Economic Security Strategy of the government; the next day he is against it. One day he is for pensioner relief; apparently now he is against it. One day he is working in the interests of Australian families; now he opposes them getting payments.

Mr Hockey—Mr Speaker, I rise on a point of order that goes to relevance. It also goes to the fact that this response has been going for six minutes—we are suffering relevance deprivation.

Ms Gillard—This is a man walking both sides of the street not only on the major economic package before the nation this week but also on this important reform of occupational health and safety. I am asking the Leader of the Opposition: does he believe in this reform and will he instruct his shadow minister to stop frustrating it for these petty political motivations.

Bonnie Babes Foundation

Mrs Mirabella (2.52 pm)—My question is to the Prime Minister. The Prime Minister would be aware that tomorrow is National Babies Day—an important initiative of the Bonnie Babes Foundation, which
provides national 24-hour grief counselling services to Australian families who have lost a baby. Why won’t the Prime Minister provide the Bonnie Babes Foundation with the urgent $800,000 it needs to continue to be the only provider of 24-hour, seven-day a week free telephone counselling for mothers who have suffered tragic events like miscarriage or stillbirth?

Mr RUDD—The government congratulates Bonnie Babes for the significant contribution they provide for families affected by the loss of a baby through miscarriage, through stillbirth or through premature death in the case of kids and related issues such as infertility. They do a very good job. The government also congratulates them for their contribution to providing medical equipment for the care of premature babies and their support for research. The government is strongly committed to improving maternity services to ensure that quality care is provided to mothers and their babies. At the same time, the government recognises that pregnancy and childbirth can result in often tragic outcomes for women and their families. That is why the government is committed to the development of a national maternity services plan, which is being led by the newly-appointed Commonwealth Chief Nursing and Midwifery Officer, Ms Rosemary Bryant.

The maternity services review will consider a broader range of concerns relating to maternity services, including possible support for maternity related counselling and psychosocial support services and research into all aspects of maternity care. Key stakeholders and the public have been invited to participate in the review by written submission and we intend to make sure that we get the policy in this area absolutely right. In recognition of the importance of peer and social support in the perinatal period and will be held on 24 October. I am pleased that Bonnie Babes will be represented at that forum.

What I would say to the House is that this is a very sensitive area and we are absolutely determined as a government to get it right. That is why the Minister for Health and Ageing has commissioned the maternity services review. That is why we have the Commonwealth Chief Nursing and Midwifery Officer actively engaged in this process. We will get it right. And the allocation of government funding will therefore follow the recommendations of her inquiry into this matter to make sure that we get it right for the future.

No member of this House regards stillbirth and the problems of premature child death in any way as a matter to be taken lightly. We want to make sure that we get this absolutely right. That is why the health minister and others have commissioned this as an appropriate course of action. Once the recommendations have come to the government we will act, and act comprehensively across the complete delivery of these services for the nation and each community within the nation.

Disability Services

Ms ANNETTE ELLIS (2.56 pm)—My question is to the Minister for Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs. How is the government providing extra support to people with a disability and their carers through the government’s Economic Security Strategy and have there been any responses to this strategy?

Ms MACKLIN—I thank the member for Canberra for her question. As all members of the House know, the member for Canberra does an outstanding job for carers and, I must say, people with a disability not only in her own electorate but in many parts of the country. Carers and people with a disability
got some great news from the government this week—some 470,000 people on carer allowance will get $1,000; 130,000 people on the carer payment and more than 700,000 people on the disability support pension will receive $1,400 if they are single people, and couples will receive $2,100. This is great news for all of those people with a disability or people who are carers. This is a down payment on our long-term pension reform and is part of our economic security package.

We know that we need to provide much needed support to those people who are having trouble making ends meet. We also want to sustain economic growth.

We have seen some very supportive comments from carer organisations and from organisations representing people with disabilities. The Chief Executive Officer of Carers Australia, Joan Hughes, said earlier in the week:

“This is an important victory for all those left out of previous proposals,” … “The announcement will provide desperately needed relief for Australia’s hardest-working families.”

Just recently I was in Adelaide, where I met one of those hardworking families—in fact a woman who typifies the types of people who will benefit from the government’s strategy. Dianne is a grandmother. She is a carer for 15-year-old Nick. She is living on the disability support pension and, of course, struggling to pay her bills. I spoke with Dianne on Tuesday to tell her the good news. Of course she already knew that this was the first time that she and more than 700,000 other people on the disability support pension would get a lump sum payment. In the past, under the previous government, these people, who have been finding it very difficult, were completely ignored. Dianne, I am pleased to say, will also receive additional family and carer payments for her and for Nick. Of course that will make the Christmas coming that much easier, both for her and for Nick.

I was also asked about other comments that have been made. Earlier this week we saw comments from the Leader of the Opposition, who said in response to the Prime Minister’s announcement of these very significant improvements for pensioners and for carers:

… we are not going to argue about the composition of the package or quibble about it.

That is what he said on Tuesday. But last night the Deputy Leader of the Opposition, on Lateline, put an end to any bipartisan support. Here is what she had to say:

… had we been in Government we may well have done things differently …

She went on to say:

… we may well have looked at a different composition …

We know what this means, because we know in their recent proposals they ignored the needs of carers, they ignored the needs of people on a disability support pension and they ignored the two million families who are going to be beneficiaries of the package that the government has announced. So if the Deputy Leader of the Opposition had had her way, 700,000 people who are dependent on the disability support pension would have missed out. They would have missed out, according to the Deputy Leader of the Opposition. Half a million carers would have missed out under the propositions of those opposite.

And it seems that the Deputy Leader of the Opposition is not alone. I know members on this side will not be surprised to hear that there are some strange remarks coming from the Leader of the National Party in the Senate, Senator Joyce. He has called giving support to four million pensioners and two million families ‘a dangerous piece of policy’. I have yet to meet a pensioner or a carer who would think that it is dangerous to give them a little bit of extra help just before Christmas.
The Leader of the Opposition wants to walk both sides of the street. On Tuesday he said that he wanted to support it without any quibble. By today we have the Deputy Leader of the Opposition saying the exact opposite. By contrast, the government intends to give six million Australians—families, pensioners and carers—the support that they need.

**Medicare Levy Surcharge**

Mr DUTTON (3.02 pm)—My question is to the Minister for Health and Ageing. Minister, how much will private health insurance premiums rise by as a result of the government forcing half a million people off private health into the public health system? Minister, what discussions has the government had with the states about compensating them for the one-half million extra people who will be joining the public hospital queue?

Ms ROXON—I thank the member for his question. As the member is well aware, the private health insurance funds annually request increases if they think that they are justified. They will do that again, inevitably, at the end of this year, to be assessed and announced in the new year. That is the normal process and that will not change. We have made absolutely clear to the private health insurance funds that we will not regard favourably any requests that are based on the removal or changing of the threshold of the Medicare levy surcharge.

Mr Dutton—Mr Speaker—

Ms ROXON—Don’t you want to know the answer?

Mr Dutton—Mr Speaker, I rise on a point of order on relevance. With due respect, the question was: how much will private health insurance premiums rise by as a result of the government forcing these people off—

The SPEAKER—The member for Dickson will resume his seat. The minister is responding to the question.

Ms ROXON—Of course, the other issue in the member’s question which it is impossible for me to ignore is this concept that we are forcing the community to do anything. In fact, what we have delivered is some real choice to those people who are doing it tough to make a decision about how they might use an increasingly tight budget—something that those opposite never did when they were in government, leaving the threshold exactly where it was. So I am not going to take a lecture from the member opposite about choice—something they pretend they are about—when this measure is something that has returned choice to those working families and singles who are doing it tough. We are proud of this measure. We will look closely at any requests that come in at the end of the year and we will not look favourably on any that use this as an excuse for an increase in premiums.

**Housing Affordability**

Mr CRAIG THOMSON (3.04 pm)—My question is to the Minister for Housing. What has been the immediate response to the government’s announcement of increased assistance for first home buyers?

Ms PLIBERSEK—I want to thank the member for Dobell for his question. The member for Dobell represents an area that is very fast growing. There are a lot of young families moving from Sydney up to Dobell, buying house and land packages, and I am sure he will see a lot more of them moving to his electorate as a result of this very important measure. This measure, as I described earlier in the week, is a very important measure in very difficult economic circumstances. It is a $1½ billion investment that doubles the first home buyers grant for existing properties and triples it for newly built
properties, and it has received very favourable support from a number of sectors. In the finance sector, Craig James, the CommSec Chief Equities Economist, said:

We certainly welcome the government’s move to boost housing construction. Australia’s population is growing at the fastest rate in almost 20 years but construction hasn’t been keeping pace. The incentives for first home buyers to build new homes or buy newly erected homes represents a major and much-needed boost for house construction.

But it is not just the finance sector that has welcomed this move. The housing industry is already reporting an increase in interest, activity and employment in the housing sector. We have been receiving calls from builders in my office telling us that they are going to start laying slabs and building houses as a result of this measure. Dr Ron Silberberg, the managing director of the HIA, said today:

Thanks to the tripling of FHOG for new housing, major builders have told HIA that they will now curtail further job retrenchments … Building product manufacturers will be looking to re-open plant and move from a 4-day to 5-day operating week.

There have been reports from all over the country. Udo Jattke, one of Queensland’s largest builders, is reported in the Cairns Post as saying, ‘It is bloody great news,’ and that, instead of shedding staff, he would be rehiring. Len Blakeney of the Master Builders Association in Newcastle said in the Newcastle Herald that the measure will ‘give the region’s building industry a much-needed shot in the arm’.

The residential construction industry is a very important part of our whole economy and it has a significant multiplier effect. The real estate industry are also reporting increased interest. Colin Lake, the sales manager of the Cornish Group of home builders in Camden, said in the Daily Telegraph:

We’ve had an instant response in just the past two days and the phones have been running hot with younger buyers asking how they can make it work.

First home buyers have been coming into our office which is unusual for us as it’s usually only second and third home buyers that can afford a new home.

My office has had an enormous number of calls and emails about this measure. I want to take the opportunity to reassure members and the Australian public that the Treasurer has written very promptly to the states and territories to make sure that these new benefits are available as quickly as possible. Applicants will have 12 months after settlement or completion of their new home to apply, providing that the contract they signed was signed between 14 October 2008 and 30 June 2009. They will have 12 months after the completion of their home to receive that money.

This measure has been enormously well received by potential homebuyers, members of the finance sector, builders and people who are hoping to move into their own homes. It is a very important measure in very difficult economic times.

**Greater Western Area Health Service**

Mr COULTON (3.09 pm)—My question is to the Prime Minister. I refer the Prime Minister to his statement of 23 August 2007, where he said:

When it comes to improving Australia’s health and hospital system, as Prime Minister if elected, the buck will stop with me.

If that is the case, why have surgeons and visiting specialists in the Greater Western Area Health Service in New South Wales not been paid since May and why have the Dubbo medical staff passed a vote of no confidence in hospital management?

Mr RUDD—The government is concerned about the proper delivery of health
services and hospital services across the nation. That is why the government, with the states and the territories, in the middle of November will be determining the future shape of the Australian healthcare agreement. I say to those opposite before they jump in and make a short-term political and opportunistic remark that the reason that is important is as follows: the government of which they were part—and so many of them sat around the cabinet table, including the member for Wentworth—pulled billions of dollars out of the public hospital system in the country. You did it systematically. As a consequence, what you—the previous government—did over time was push responsibility onto the states and territories—

Mr Tuckey—I rise on a point of order to protect you again, Mr Speaker. The Prime Minister is accusing you of all sorts of dreadful things.

The SPEAKER—The member for O'Connor will resume his seat. The Prime Minister is aware of the need to address his remarks through the chair.

Mr Rudd—The previous government simply absented the field, pulled billions of dollars out of the public hospital system in the country, pushed that responsibility onto the states and territories and then played the blame game. That is exactly what they did—year in, year out.

This government takes a different approach because Australians want an answer to this problem. They do not want excuses for inaction. That is why the government has sat down these last nine months with the states and territories, through the agency of the Minister for Health and Ageing and with the Treasurer, to go through the future shape of the Australian healthcare agreement for the following five years. That will go to a proper role for Commonwealth funding into the future. That is the responsible course of action. We intend to prosecute it, rather than simply pull money out of the system and say, ‘It’s all over to you.’

The individual management of hospitals within any particular state, including those to which the honourable member has just referred, is of course an operational responsibility for the state health authority concerned.

Opposition members interjecting—

Mr Rudd—It is.

Opposition members interjecting—

The SPEAKER—Order! Those on my left!

Mr Rudd—They are very excited this afternoon, Mr Speaker.

Mr Coulton—Mr Speaker, I raise a point of order on relevance. This issue is very relevant to the people of western New South Wales, and I ask the Prime Minister to respond.

The SPEAKER—The member for Parkes will resume his seat. The Prime Minister is responding to the question.

Mr Rudd—The Commonwealth’s responsibility is to ensure that proper funding levels are delivered to the states, who run the health system. Secondly, I am not familiar with the details of the individual management practices in the state health authority of New South Wales as they apply to the hospital which the honourable member is concerned about. Of course, there are problems with the administration of certain hospitals across the country, including in New South Wales. We fully accept that, but the bottom line for the Commonwealth is to ensure that there is a proper forward funding stream for the states, who run the hospital system. I suggest the honourable member get behind the government’s program of delivering proper funding to the states long term so that these hospitals within state health authorities
can have certainty about their funding stream into the future.

This is a complex area of public policy. There are 750-plus public hospitals across this country. Each of them is administered separately by state and territory health authorities but, you know something, the bottom line is to make sure that the Commonwealth is in there as part of the solution, not simply perpetuating the blame game, as those opposite under repeated health ministers did for 12 years.

Infrastructure

Mr KELVIN THOMSON (3.14 pm)—My question is to the Minister for Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Local Government. Will the minister advise the House on the role of infrastructure as part of the government’s Economic Security Strategy? Is the minister aware of any threats to the government’s strategy?

Mr ALBANESE—I thank the member for Wills for his question and for his ongoing interest in infrastructure. Indeed, infrastructure is a key part of the Economic Security Strategy of the government’s response to the global financial crisis which was outlined by the Prime Minister and the Treasurer just on Tuesday. This is a strategy to have Commonwealth involvement in the delivery of our roads, our railways, our ports, our urban transport systems and our communications networks. Importantly, we established Infrastructure Australia to ensure that proper cost-benefit analysis was brought to the assessment of the nation’s infrastructure needs and the merits of individual projects. Indeed, we have announced that the priority list from Infrastructure Australia will be brought forward by more than three months to December this year.

But, of course, we have not sat around waiting for this report. In the budget we brought forward some half a billion dollars worth of projects that were not scheduled to start until the following financial year—projects such as the Townsville port access road and projects right around the country including in Bunbury and Perth. And shortly we will be introducing legislation to set up the Building Australia Fund. So the government has a very clear plan when it comes to infrastructure development and nation building as an important component of ensuring that we build in a plan for securing long-term prosperity and dealing with the capacity constraints that were, of course, identified by the Reserve Bank on more than 20 separate occasions.

The opposition’s approach has been characterised by inconsistencies and partisan political games. Indeed, when the merchant of Venice was hunting down the member for Bradfield to become the Leader of the Opposition—hunting him down, day in, day out—he was saying that the then Leader of the Opposition was doing damage to the Liberal Party brand because he was damaging their economic credentials. Remember the criticism about budget measures and the opposition leader’s—

Mr Hockey—Mr Speaker, on a point of order, how could this possibly be relevant to the question that was asked?

The SPEAKER—The minister is responding to the question. It was a broad question that went to threats, and I will listen carefully to the minister’s response.

Mr ALBANESE—There are indeed threats to the government’s nation-building agenda, and they are personified by those opposite in this chamber and by their colleagues in the Senate. We know that just three weeks ago the shadow minister was threatening to block the Building Australia Fund legislation. But that did not come as a surprise from the shadow minister, given that the now Leader of the Opposition stated, as
part of his response to the Rudd government’s budget, that the Building Australia Fund and nation building was ‘the greatest con of all’. That was what he stated at the time about infrastructure development and nation building.

On Tuesday of this week, the shadow minister changed the positioning—if you watch them for long enough, you always get both sides of the street, usually at the same time. But at this stage, on Tuesday this week—it will probably change by next week—the shadow minister said:

… the Coalition has never said, at any time, that we will block any infrastructure legislation.

Well, they actually voted against it when the Infrastructure Australia legislation came before the parliament. They said that it was just all a con and that it was not real economic reform. And, of course, we know from their inaction in government that they did nothing about this for 12 long years.

When it comes to tackling issues such as urban congestion, which the government has identified as one of the priorities, we know that the opposition also cannot agree with itself on the way forward. The former Leader of the Opposition, the member for Bradfield, had the following to say in September:

Well we always look favourably on investment in public transport.

I thought that was a pretty positive sign from the then opposition leader. Probably one of the reasons why they knocked him over was that he was being positive about nation building. That was a mistake, clearly, by the member for Bradfield. So I went back and had a look at whether there was any form from the merchant of Venice before he became the Leader of the Opposition.

The SPEAKER—Order! The member will refer to members by their titles.

Mr ALBANESE—Indeed, there is some form there, because he said in 2006: ‘Urban public transport is unequivocally within the state governments’ bailiwick. The public know who is responsible.’ We on this side of the House actually think there is a role for national leadership when it comes to infrastructure, including on issues of urban infrastructure. Those opposite are a threat to the Australian economy. They constantly change their positions. They have been totally inconsistent since the government’s announcement on Tuesday about the Economic Security Strategy, on each and every element of that strategy. Whether it be the payments to pensioners and carers, whether it be the issue of increases in skills or whether it be the nation-building agenda of the government, they try to take both sides of the street.

We know that the Leader of the Opposition stands for nothing except himself. That is the only thing on which he is consistent. We on this side of the House stand for nation building. We will continue to pursue the agenda as part of securing our economic future.

Member for Bennelong

Mr PYNE (3.21 pm)—My question is to the Prime Minister. It is a very serious question.

Government members interjecting—

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

Mr PYNE—In light of revelations about the alleged impropriety in the office of the member for Bennelong, will the Prime Minister immediately refer the matter to the Auditor-General for an independent investigation?

Mr RUDD—My understanding is that the staffer in question took steps to divest her interests in the Allen Consulting Group prior to commencing as an adviser to the Parliamentary Secretary for Early Childhood Education and Childcare. I also understand that
the staffer in question declared an interest in this company in her statement of private interests to the parliamentary secretary, consistent with the ministerial staff code of conduct. The government staffing committee will examine the staff member’s conduct with reference to the provisions of the code. In relation to the—

Mr Pyne—Mr Speaker, on a point of order: the question was a serious one and goes to the same issue as the CMAX investigation by the Australian National Audit Office. Will he refer it to the ANAO along with the CMAX investigation into—

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

Mr Pyne interjecting—

The SPEAKER—Obviously, the member for Sturt is not interested in the ruling.

War Graves

Ms NEAL (3.23 pm)—My question is to the Minister for Defence Science and Personnel. Will the minister update the House on the current plans to exhume and appropriately commemorate the Australian soldiers who fell at Fromelles?

Mr SNOWDON—I thank the member for Robertson for her question and note her special interest as her grandfather, Oliver Hoskin, served at Fromelles, which, as we are aware, was a dreadful battle. You will recall, Mr Speaker, that that was a battle on 19 July 1916 in which 5,533 Australian soldiers were casualties and 2,000 of them were dead within 12 hours of battle. I am pleased to inform the House that we have made significant progress in relation to the exhumation and reburial, with full military honours, of those brave souls who lost their lives in that tragic battle.

After advice from the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, consultation with my colleague, the Minister for Veterans’ Affairs, and discussions with my French counterpart, Jean-Marie Bockel, and then British minister Derek Twigg, we agreed upon a new site and a process for building a new cemetery. This cemetery is about 400 to 500 metres away from the current site at Pheasant Wood. It has been offered up to us by the local community. Whilst in France recently, I met with their representatives, who were particularly concerned to make sure that we understood their commitment to this process. The mayor, Hubert Huchette, was most impressive in his support for the proposal. I met Madame de Massiet. You will recall, Mr Speaker, that Madame de Massiet owns a property at Pheasant Wood where the soldiers currently lie. I thanked her for the donation of that property. Once these exhumations and reburials take place, there will be a memorial at that site.

The French minister was very supportive of the proposal, as was Derek Twigg. We agreed upon not only a site for the cemetery but also a timetable for its development. The Commonwealth War Graves Commission have the responsibility on our behalf of issuing tenders for the cemetery. They will concurrently issue a tender process for the exhumations. We will then rebury the soldiers individually in caskets with full military honours.

We have had significant support from a range of people who should be acknowledged, apart from those I have already mentioned. One who has been significant has been Lord Faulkner, Chairman of the British All-Party Parliamentary War Graves and Battlefields Heritage Group of the British parliament. He was at Fromelles the day I was there. I have already observed the plans the Commonwealth War Graves Commission officials have for this new cemetery and they are very impressive indeed. I should say, for those who have been to Fromelles or VC Corner—as my colleague the Minister for...
Veterans’ Affairs will be doing in the near future—that this new cemetery will be on high ground very close to the outskirts of the community, opposite the church and overlooking VC Corner. So it is a very good site.

The support we have been given goes so far as the French military. General Montford, who is the military commander of the Lille region, has been very supportive and we think and hope that he will be providing us with some assistance in the months ahead. The GUARD archaeologists, the Glasgow University archaeological team, were the ones responsible for doing the initial research for us at Pheasant Wood. Dr Tony Pollard was at Fromelles when I was there and I was able to thank him for the work that he has done, as was Mr Peter Barton, who has been employed by us and the British government to do research in Munich on ways in which we might identify precisely which soldiers are buried at this site.

We are anticipating, all going well, that we will commence this work at Fromelles in the next northern summer. We hope that, on the basis we are successful with the exhumations, we will be able to have a ceremony on the site at least by 19 July 2010. That would be a significant event which I am sure would grab the interest of all Australians as we finally bury properly these at least 400 souls, of whom we believe 170 or thereabouts are Australian soldiers.

Unfortunately, as is the way with these things, three or four days after I left England, Mr Twigg was no longer the minister. Nevertheless, I am assured of the British government’s continuing support. I have written to the new minister, Kevan Jones, and expect to finalise all remaining issues in the coming weeks.

Mr Turnbull (Wentworth—Leader of the Opposition) (3.29 pm)—Mr Speaker, on indulgence and briefly: the opposition wants to associate itself with the thanks that the Minister for Defence Science and Personnel has given to the officers of the Australian government, the British government, the French government and, of course, the local community in France that have assisted him in his very diligent efforts to secure an appropriately sacred final resting place for the remains of those brave soldiers.

Member for Bennelong

Mr Pyne (3.30 pm)—My question is to the Prime Minister, and I refer to his answer to my previous question regarding the office of the member for Bennelong. Will he refer the matter involving the office of the member for Bennelong to the Australian National Audit Office, along with the investigation into the office of the Minister for Defence?

Mr Rudd—As I was saying in answer to the honourable member’s earlier question, consistent with the ministerial staff code of conduct, the government staffing committee will examine the staff member’s conduct with reference to the provisions of the code. Secondly, in relation to the contract with the Allen Consulting Group, I am advised that the parliamentary secretary and her office played no role in the procurement process. Additionally, the contract was awarded by the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations. Ms McKew, the parliamentary secretary, is sworn to administer the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, not the department engaged in this contracting process.

Spring Racing Carnival

Ms Saffin (3.30 pm)—My question is to the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry. Will the minister please update the House on preparations for the Spring Racing Carnival?

Mr Burke—Honourable members will be aware of the devastation that was caused last year by the outbreak of equine influenza
and will be pleased to see the racing industry getting back on its feet and doing well again as we now move into the Spring Racing Carnival season. A couple of weeks ago I referred to a test that had come out as a positive for some horses that were in quarantine. I indicated at the time that it was likely to be a false positive. It is important to advise the House that this did turn out to be a fact. Each of the 74 horses in the quarantine station was tested using 14 different procedures before they were all given a clean bill of health.

We still have some horses at the moment in the quarantine facilities. In fact, nine internationals are at Sandown at the moment preparing to compete in the racing carnival. One of them is the Irish champion horse Septimus, trained by Aidan O’Brien. The Spring Racing Carnival is not just held in the capital cities. The member for Page, who asked me the question, not long ago was kind enough to invite me to the Ballina Cup Race Day, which last year was not able to be run on the usual day. Regional members will understand just how important those race days are, both for enthusiasm for the local economy and for the local community. Ballina Cup Race Day is also a half-day holiday for workers in Ballina and provides a major economic boost for the region.

As we now move into the period for the Spring Racing Carnival, the preparations behind the scenes continue, even though some of the races have already begun. In particular, we move with great enthusiasm towards the race that stops the nation, the Melbourne Cup. This is a particularly important day for me as someone who was born on Melbourne Cup Day when Rain Lover won the cup. I am certainly looking forward to the opportunity this year when hopefully, once again, we will see Efficient win the cup.

Mr Rudd—Mr Speaker, I ask that further questions be placed on the Notice Paper.
ple from all corners of the country to engage with government on the issues that matter most to them.

It is clear to me that young Australians are increasingly grappling with emerging pressures unique to their generation. The AYF presents the opportunity for young people to highlight concerns and work in partnership with government to identify solutions. While some claim that today’s young are facing the same pressures that have been dealt with by generations past, it is clear that young Australians are facing new challenges not experienced by those who have gone before. While there is certainly nothing to gain from battling it out in a contest of which generation has done it the toughest, there is a real need to accept that different generations have done it differently and that there are unique circumstances and pressures faced by each.

The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare report, *Young Australians: their health and wellbeing 2007*, paints a picture of a vastly different array of issues challenging young Australians today. Issues like soaring rates of self-harm bring home the magnitude of pressures today. The report identifies that intentional self-harm is one of the leading causes of death for teenagers and also identifies that one in 10 Australians aged 15 to 19 reported a mental or behavioural problem.

Housing affordability, body image, drug and alcohol issues and climate change are all now high on the list of young people’s concerns. Emerging technology alone has brought a host of new issues and opportunities—the internet and cyber bullying, text messaging and videophones, constant bombardment of messages through various mediums, just to name a few. To respond effectively to emerging issues, we need to better engage with those who are actually facing these challenges—the young people of Australia. And first we need to accept that at times these issues may be unfamiliar or removed from our realities, but they are all too real for Australia’s youth.

Our government is committed to empowering Australia’s youth and supporting them in the many challenges they face. It is of course in our nation’s long-term interest for us to ensure that a group of confident, empowered and healthy Australians inherit the future. The Australian government stand ready to respond to the challenges facing our younger generations. Indeed, we are addressing many of these issues through a range of different programs and support systems put in place across government portfolios. However, in better equipping ourselves to respond, we have also had to make some changes.

In recent weeks the government has made some of the most significant youth affairs announcements this country has heard in literally decades. As previously reported to the House, the establishment of the new Australian government’s Office for Youth provides us with the capacity and infrastructure to work far more effectively and strategically across portfolios, to ensure the best outcomes in policy and programs for young Australians. On 2 October I was also delighted to announce the government’s $8 million initiative to include, to empower and to give young Australians a seat at the table in public discussions.

The Australian Youth Forum will foster national dialogue between young Australians and their government, but also between young Australians and each other. For too long, young people have been silenced and sidelined in public debate and the AYF is breaking new ground—important ground. We have sought input far and wide. And we have done something outrageous—we have actually asked for input from Australia’s
youth on the way they want to engage with the government.

A public consultation was conducted right around the country earlier this year to determine the best model for the AYF. This process heard nearly 1,000 voices—many of these young people in addition to youth sector representatives. The AYF sets Australia apart internationally. And with this we seek to lead the world in youth engagement and participation. Participation by young people is also being transformed by the internet and new media. Importantly, the latest research suggests that young people value participation in democracy and decision making which is culturally relevant, flexible, effective, makes a difference to them personally and can even be fun. Family background, gender and ethnicity also affect how young people tend to engage in the democratic process.

The AYF is structured to achieve two primary objectives: (1) widespread youth engagement across the country and (2) meaningful and ongoing engagement with the youth sector—those individuals and organisations that work with and for young people. We will achieve these two objectives through a number of local public and policy forums held at multiple sites around the nation. These forums will be open to all young Australians and link them in a nationwide conversation and debate with the use of emerging technologies. We are also committed to an outreach initiative to involve the disengaged and meet with young people on their own turf. And we have launched an AYF website so that wherever young people are they can connect with their government online. These proactive approaches will provide the government with regular, direct input on key issues of the day that impact directly on young people’s lives.

We have also established a steering committee to provide advice on the future shape and activities of the Australian Youth Forum, and give young people the chance to be centrally involved in decision-making processes about the AYF. In addition to the steering committee, the government has committed $400,000 annually over the next four years to support the Australian Youth Affairs Coalition in its role as an independent voice and advocate of young people and the youth sector.

We expect the Australian Youth Affairs Coalition will have robust discussions with government on the issues raised with them by young people themselves. The Australian Youth Affairs Coalition will also provide the youth sector with new opportunities to work with government to ensure young people have access to the support they need to achieve their full potential.

I want to stress that the AYF is about dialogue—a two-way exchange between young people, the youth sector and the government. We are serious about genuine engagement and follow-through. And, of course, it will be my role as minister to front up, follow up and provide that feedback. The AYF will contribute to a vibrant and healthy democracy. It will generate lively public debates and serious discussion and cultivate a new generation of young people embracing the opportunity to get their voices heard and views known.

But this is just the beginning. The AYF will evolve over time, shaped by feedback, advice and input from the AYF steering committee and the national youth peak body. It will be responsive, dynamic, seek to embrace emerging technology and meet changing needs as we assess and evaluate along the way. The AYF will provide young Australians with the opportunity to converse with government on a level and in a way
never available before. The government is committed to governing for all Australians and this new forum will enable us to continue to work with and represent the young more effectively.

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

Leave granted.

Ms KATE ELLIS—I move:

That so much of the standing and sessional orders be suspended as would prevent Mrs Mirabella speaking for a period not exceeding eight minutes.

Question agreed to.

Mrs MIRABELLA (Indi) (3.43 pm)—I join with the Minister for Youth in congratulating the young Australians who attended the launch of the Australian Youth Forum on 2 October in Adelaide. The coalition does support measures and initiatives that see young Australians given a bigger seat at the policy table of this great nation. I would like to make it clear that the opposition supports any attempt to establish bodies that directly focus on young people. However, Labor’s new national Youth Forum must meet the very high standards and opportunities that the coalition’s National Youth Roundtable has provided young Australians with over the past decade.

When in government, the coalition had a very proud record or supporting and promoting young Australians. No greater example of this was the coalition’s very successful National Youth Roundtable. It gave young Australians a very strong voice in government and an input into the many policy areas that impact on their lives. As outlined by the Minister for Youth, there are many unique issues facing young Australians today, and the AYF must recognise these and take decisive action. Dialogue and open discussion are all very helpful and good and well and provide information to government ministers, to the opposition and to other bodies interested in developing policies affecting young people, but this must lead to real outcomes—and real outcomes come from implementing policies that make a difference, that affect the lives of young people in various ways in the areas with which they are concerned.

There is no more important issue to the lives of young people than the opportunity to get a job, to gain employment. There are many issues across the spectrum—technology based issues, environmental based issues and other global issues. No doubt the current financial crisis is of concern to young people, as it is to all Australians. The opportunity to get a job, the opportunity to have that freedom to develop their own career and to choose their own path in life, gives young people the freedom to make choices about their lives. The opposition, particularly the Liberal Party, has as one of its founding principles to maximise freedom for individuals to lead their lives. The best way you can do that is not to have people consigned to welfare but to give them the freedom to create opportunities in their lives, and that is through giving them a job. There are also issues such as learning and developing skills. Having the opportunity to fulfil one’s educational aspirations, whether that leads to education or to a broader understanding, allows young people to build on their confidence and their knowledge and to go forth—to have a family, to have a job and to have a life.

The government must put policies in place that address the concerns of young people. Simply holding a forum will not achieve this. Action, leadership and decisions need to follow immediately. We cannot have endless reviews and endless summits. My fear, which I hope is not fulfilled, for the future wellbeing of young Australians is that the
AYF will fall into the same talkfest that the 2020 Youth Summit was. There has been a considerable amount of criticism from many different individuals and organisations across the nation regarding the 2020 Youth Summit. My hope is that the AYF will be a lot more beneficial and meaningful to young Australians than the 2020 Youth Summit, which many have labelled as a complete waste of time considering that no significant action by the government has followed. Discussion and feedback from delegates to the AYF need to be given serious consideration. I would not like to see the AYF swept under the carpet as have so many reviews, inquiries and forums already undertaken—and, no doubt, to be undertaken—by this government. It is all very well to convene all these forums and summits, but at some point young Australians are no different from other Australians in wanting action.

For instance, there is little point talking about issues impacting on young people when they cannot get a job. We know of the depressingly high unemployment rates that beset young people under the former Labor government. The unemployment rate reached over 34 per cent in July 1992. There was little hope for young people during that time, and unemployment affected young people across the board—young people who wanted to do apprenticeships and young people who had good university degrees. Their lives were fundamentally altered for a significant number of years because they could not fulfil their potential. They were consigned to a life that was not as fulfilling. They were consigned to a very difficult life that former generations had not suffered. That is something that we must guard against. This government must introduce policies and must listen to young people to ensure that we do not get to those high levels of unemployment again.

I am very proud of the track record of the previous coalition government in focusing its attention on specific policies that affected young people. I will mention a few of them. We had the $80 million package for the Reconnect program. This program was very important. It provided early intervention for young homeless Australians to move back with their families and their communities. Any family that has been severely affected or torn apart by the homelessness of one of their young family members will know that this is a very serious issue that affects families across all socioeconomic levels in our society. We had the $12 million package for the Mentor Marketplace program, which saw the business sector and the community unite to provide mentoring for young Australians who needed assistance. We had a very significant and very visible Tough on Drugs campaign, and we know that nothing affects the future ability of young people to lead their lives—to work, to study, to have meaningful relationships—than the physical, mental and emotional damage that can be caused from drug taking. It was very important to also see parents engaged in that campaign. I know many young people were educated on the long-term effects of drug taking, as were their families.

We had other programs like the POEM pilot program that began in May 2002, which provided full-time education and personal development programs for young people aged between 13 and 19 who were disconnected from mainstream schooling or had a tenuous connection to school. The coalition is very proud of the programs that it implemented. They were part of a very proud record that represented the concerns and the needs of young people and their families.

We support the government in the establishment of the AYF as a body that will aim to represent the concerns and aspirations of young people, which is exactly what it must...
do. It must represent their concerns and aspirations and lead to decisive action by this government.

COMMITTEES
Australian Commission for Law Enforcement Integrity Committee
Corporations and Financial Services Committee
Membership
The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Ms AE Burke)—Mr Speaker has received a message from the Senate informing the House that Senator Fierravanti-Wells has been discharged from the Parliamentary Joint Committee on the Australian Commission for Law Enforcement Integrity and that Senator Johnston has been appointed a member of the committee; and that Senator Mason has been appointed a member of the Parliamentary Joint Committee on Corporations and Financial Services.

FINANCIAL SYSTEM LEGISLATION AMENDMENT (FINANCIAL CLAIMS SCHEME AND OTHER MEASURES) BILL 2008
FINANCIAL CLAIMS SCHEME (ADIs) LEVY BILL 2008
FINANCIAL CLAIMS SCHEME (GENERAL INSURERS) LEVY BILL 2008
Returned from the Senate
Message received from the Senate returning the bills without amendment or request.

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

The need to maintain the intervention in remote Northern Territory townships especially the welfare quarantining as received bipartisan support last year.

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

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

Mr ABBOTT (Warringah) (3.53 pm)—Madam Deputy Speaker, I appreciate that to facilitate the business of the House this matter of public importance might be interrupted at some point. As I am sure most members would be aware, back in June last year the Howard government announced an emergency intervention into the remote Indigenous communities of the Northern Territory. The essential elements of the intervention were: first, a regular and in most cases permanent police presence; second, tight controls on alcohol availability; third, welfare quarantining; fourth, better housing; and, fifth, better governance. These very important and quite far-reaching measures were a response to the Little children are sacred report. The report was a catalyst—but that is not to say that these measures came out of the blue—for implementing new thinking that had been crystallising within the government’s collective mind for months if not years.

Aboriginal communities as permanent welfare villages are doomed to unemployment, substance abuse and domestic violence. That is a simple fact. Communities which are permanent welfare villages are doomed to that fate, regardless of their ethnicity or their culture. Tranquillity had to be restored in the Northern Territory so that the kids could go to school, the adults could go to work and people could be empowered to make real choices in their lives—including
the choice to leave if that is what seemed best to them.

The government’s intervention was supported by the then opposition, now government. I should say in this House that it cannot have been entirely easy for the then opposition to support the intervention. The intervention was prominently opposed by some elements of the Labor movement, most notably by the Northern Territory Deputy Chief Minister and most notably here in this parliament by the member for Lingiari, now a minister in the government. These prominent Labor figures said that the intervention was not a measure of support and assistance; it was more like an invasion. But, to the credit of the then opposition leadership, they recognised that an extraordinary situation demanded an extraordinary measure.

The fact that these problems had been present, if less recognised, for years did not justify business as usual. As a result of the intervention, we have seen in the 73 remote townships in the Northern Territory more food being purchased and consumed, better school attendance, less violence, less alcohol abuse, more police in these communities and some 10,000 health checks for individual children of the Territory. Not for a second would any of us suggest that these communities are perfect as a result of the intervention, but certainly they are better.

The problem is that the intervention was always loathed and hated by large swathes of what might be described as the Indigenous policy-making establishment. These are people who have long thought that different standards should be applied to Aboriginal people and their communities. These are influential people, many of whom have been prominent in government and certainly prominent in policy debate over the years, who instinctively think that problems in Aboriginal communities and for Aboriginal people are whitefella’s fault. Of course, over the years governments have made many mistakes. Individual Australians have made many mistakes. There have been many failures of goodwill; there have been some failures of justice. But if a crime is committed, that is the responsibility first and foremost of the perpetrator. That is why argument about the events of 1788 and its aftermath, argument about what may or may not have been done better in the distant past, should not have obscured a firm government response to the problems that were most graphically revealed by the Little children are sacred report.

In recent days, we have had a published report of the review board into the intervention. The government released its report a few days ago, and yesterday morning we had on the front page of the Australian quite a detailed article on the original draft report that the government received. The original draft report that the government received some weeks ago expresses the Indigenous policy establishment viewpoint of the intervention. The draft report essentially states two things: first, that the intervention has not worked and, second, that the intervention is racist. Let me quote a section of the original draft report that the government received as it appeared in the Australian under the byline of Paul Toohey, one of the most perceptive and distinguished journalists in this area:

Claiming that Aborigines felt the intervention was akin to a return to “ration days”, the draft report stated: “These words describe real things. These are expressions of the deep emotional and psychological impacts of the [Northern Territory Emergency Response]. The long-term effects of such impacts can be as potentially damaging as the experience of violence itself.”

So the intervention has not worked and it was almost an act of violence against Northern Territory Indigenous communities.
The draft report, the one that was originally given to the government, also claimed, and again I am quoting from Paul Toohey’s report:

“In every community there is a deep belief that the measures introduced by the Australian Government under the [Northern Territory Emergency Response] were a collective imposition based on race that no government would ever direct at any other group of Australians” …

So there we have it: the view, in a nutshell, of the Indigenous policy-making establishment that the intervention, first, has not worked and in fact has harmed remote Indigenous communities and, second, that it is racist.

I want to say this: I do not object for a moment to the government, having received that report, sending it back to be rewritten. If I had received a report as intemperate and as over-the-top as that, I certainly would have sent it back to be rewritten. I do not object to the minister seeking to have a poor report rewritten at all. What I do object to is any subsequent call that that report is truly independent. And I also object to any subsequent statement that the report has not been interfered with. I think it is important that the minister, when she responds to this MPI, clarifies exactly what has happened to this report. When did she get it? Who read it? I do not object to the minister seeking to have a poor report rewritten at all. What I do object to is any subsequent call that that report is truly independent. And I also object to any subsequent statement that the report has not been interfered with. I think it is important that the minister, when she responds to this MPI, clarifies exactly what has happened to this report.

As members of this House should know, welfare quarantining means that Indigenous people in these remote communities who are receiving government benefits have 50 per cent of that money quarantined to the necessities of life—a perfectly reasonable thing to do, particularly in situations where we had that money regularly spent not on the necessities of life but on booze, cigarettes, gambling and other things. It was a very reasonable thing to do. I should point out that, in response not to the draft report but to the official published report, the Deputy Chief Minister of the Northern Territory, Marion Scrymgour, a former ferocious critic of the intervention, has come round. We have seen a very commendable getting of wisdom on the part of the Deputy Chief Minister. I am quoting from the Northern Territory News of earlier this week:

Ms Scrymgour does not want to see it—that is, the welfare quarantining—rolled back “in any way”.

Mrs Scrymgour is quoted as saying:

“For a lot of women in those communities they have actually found income management to be a good thing, not a bad thing …”

“However, we’ve still got a lot of problems where we have parents who don’t take that responsibility.”

So we have no lesser a person than the Deputy Chief Minister of the Northern Territory, a former ferocious critic of the intervention—including welfare quarantining—now saying that welfare quarantining in its current form must stay as it is. And if it was amended, we would immediately see the humbugging start again. We would immediately see large quantities of money being spent on things which no responsible person could regard as the kind of thing that would benefit the families of those communities. I think it is very, very important that the government makes its intentions clear. What does it propose to do with the recommendation in respect of welfare quarantining in the report that it finally published?

We have already seen the government roll back the intervention in some significant respects. In particular, the government has
restored the permit system, even in places such as Hermannsburg which do not want it. The trouble with ending welfare quarantining and moving to a system as recommended by the report that the government published is that the only people subject to it will be those whose children do not regularly attend school.

I spent three weeks recently, admittedly in a different area in Cape York, in a remote Indigenous community and I can tell you, Madam Deputy Speaker, that there were lots of parents in that community whose kids attended school with commendable regularity, but that is not to say that there was not money spent on the sorts of things which are not going to help those families. That is why it is critically important that the government commits to keep welfare quarantining in its current form. If the government wants to preserve any bipartisanship in this area it must keep welfare quarantining in its other form. The intervention is working far better than its critics could ever have imagined 12 months ago. It needs to be given time, and the last thing we want is the people who got it wrong for 30 years of Indigenous policy to sabotage this fresh and promising start.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Ms AE Burke)—I thank the member for Warringah for his understanding in this matter.

Mr ALBANESE (Grayndler—Leader of the House) (4.08 pm)—I move:

That the business of the day be called on.

I will speak briefly so that members can be informed about what has been agreed. It is intended to have a brief debate on the return of the Medicare levy surcharge legislation from the Senate. It is then intended that once that is dealt with there will be a division. Someone will move to suspend so much of standing orders as would prevent the resumption of the debate so that, rather than have the adjournment, we can have additional time. The member for Riverina has informed me that she intends to table a petition. I will grant leave if she seeks to do that at this time.

Question agreed to.

PETITIONS
Royal Australian Air Force Museum
Wagga Wagga

Mrs HULL (Riverina) (4.09 pm)—by leave—I rise in the House today to present a petition from 2,713 citizens of Australia to the Speaker and the members of the House of Representatives. The petition calls on the Speaker and the members to note that the RAAF Wagga Wagga museum has been closed for many years for refurbishment. The petitioners are asking the House to complete the refurbishment and to urgently reopen the museum. This petition was approved by the Standing Committee on Petitions on Wednesday, 15 October. I thank the Leader of the House for allowing this to take place.

The petition read as follows—

To the Honourable the Speaker and Members of the House of Representatives:

This petition of citizens of Australia draws to the attention of the House:

The RAAF Wagga Wagga Museum has been closed for many years for Refurbishment. We therefore ask the House to:

Complete the refurbishment and to urgently reopen the Museum.

from 2,713 citizens.

Petition received.

TAX LAWS AMENDMENT (MEDICARE LEVY SURCHARGE THRESHOLDS) BILL (No. 2) 2008

Consideration of Senate Message

Bill returned from the Senate with amendments.

Ordered that the amendments be considered immediately.
Senate’s amendments—

(1) Page 2 (after line 2), after clause 3, insert:

4 Review of operation of Act

(1) The Minister for Health and Ageing must cause an independent review of the operation of this Act to be undertaken as soon as possible after each anniversary of the commencement of this Act, for a period of three consecutive years.

(2) The review is to consider and report on the impact on public hospitals of the amendments made by this Act, including the number of episodes of care, the impact on operating costs and the impact on elective surgery waiting lists.

(3) The person undertaking the review must give the Minister a written report of the review, and the Minister must cause a copy of the report to be tabled in each House of the Parliament within 15 sitting days of receiving the report.

(2) Schedule 1, item 2, page 3 (line 15), omit “$75,000”, substitute “$70,000”.

(3) Schedule 1, item 4, page 4 (line 21), omit “$150,000”, substitute “$140,000”.

(4) Schedule 1, item 4, page 4 (line 21), omit “$153,000”, substitute “$143,000”.

(5) Schedule 1, item 7, page 5 (line 7), omit “$75,000”, substitute “$70,000”.

(6) Schedule 1, item 8, page 6 (line 14), omit “$150,000”, substitute “$140,000”.

(7) Schedule 1, item 8, page 6 (line 14), omit “$153,000”, substitute “$143,000”.

Ms ROXON (Gellibrand—Minister for Health and Ageing) (4.10 pm)—I move:

That the amendments be agreed to.

The Tax Laws Amendment (Medicare Levy Surcharge Thresholds) Bill (No. 2) 2008, which we are bringing back to the House this afternoon, will deliver immediate benefits to 250,000 Australians by adjusting the Medicare levy surcharge thresholds from their current levels of $50,000 for singles and $100,000 for couples and families, which was set by the Liberal government in 1997, to levels of $70,000 and $140,000 respectively. We know that there are many hundreds of thousands of Australians who will benefit from this bill being passed today by the Senate and, hopefully, now by the House—250,000 Australians in fact. These 250,000 Australians have not had the support of the Liberal Party for the tax relief that they will be gaining. There is an opportunity of course for them in the House now to show their support for this relief that will be provided, and vote for the measure. Very importantly, the amendments before the House also ensure that these thresholds will be indexed against wages in subsequent years, locking fairness into the system for the future so that the Medicare levy surcharge will never again become the tax trap that the Liberals created in 1997 and that, because of their failure to act over the following 10 years, increasingly exposed more and more people to this unfair tax.

I place on the record the government’s appreciation for the constructive manner in which the Australian Greens, Senator Xenophon and Senator Fielding have conducted themselves during our negotiations over this legislation in the last few days. Of course, it will not be a surprise to this House that we did not agree on all matters but we have been able to reach a sensible compromise which I think is a tribute to all involved. In particular the Australian Greens were very concerned that the measure of indexation that is used be wages—something the government strongly supports as it is of course the way we ensure a tax trap is not created. They have also sought and we have happily granted an assurance about investing heavily in public hospitals, something very dear to our hearts, to make sure we keep the balance of our investment between private and public insurance right.
Senator Xenophon was concerned to ensure that the threshold was at a lower point. He had a view that it should be lower than that proposed in the bill that was before the Senate and has asked that we agree to a referral to the Productivity Commission with, I think, a legitimate request on his behalf to get more information in the public arena, enabling the public to compare and contrast public and private services and the cost of those services. We have explained, and I know Senator Xenophon has noted, that much of this work is being undertaken through the COAG process in terms of the public side of this debate, and we have made that clear to and been engaged in discussions with the private providers as well. So this is something that we will work on, noting that the other important work of COAG needs to be undertaken first in order for the Productivity Commission to have some of the data that it might want.

I record the government’s appreciation for the constructive approach taken. It is of course part of our democracy that the Senate does not always have the same colour as the House and I think that it has been a constructive approach. Disappointingly for us the Liberals have been determined to maintain an opposition to this tax relief to hurt the surplus. In great contrast, the Greens and Independents have shown economic responsibility and we thank them for that. The Liberals approach to this is about as relevant as the Medicare levy surcharge thresholds that they want to maintain.

Let me make it clear to the House—and it might assist those opposite, because they have been determined to ignore these figures—that two people on average incomes of $60,000 each will get a tax cut provided by this bill of $1,200, something that the Liberal Party have opposed. For singles earning between $50,000 and $70,000, it will be $500, $600 or $700—something that people dearly need in these difficult times. We also know that many other Australians will benefit from having a real choice about their health care. When budgets are tight Australians will be able to make real decisions about where they want to spend their money, without having fear of being hit by a tax penalty.

In opposing this bill—and I am sure we will hear more of this—the Liberal Party have feigned concern about the potential impact of this measure on public hospitals. They have feigned concern, because we know that it was the former Minister for Health and Ageing responsible for the previous negotiations who pulled $1 billion out of our public hospitals. He is here rolling his eyes again, showing his lack of interest and commitment to the public and their health-care needs. I think it is a sad indictment when those opposite—(Time expired)

Mr DUTTON (Dickson) (4.16 pm)—The opposition refuses point-blank to support bad legislation, and this is bad legislation. The minister talks quite dishonestly about a tax savings. If she wants to present a tax savings to the parliament for the Australian public, then increase the thresholds or decrease the tax rates—do it in the normal way—but do not pretend that this is about providing a tax cut to the Australian people. This is an ideological attack on private health insurance in this country. She talks about providing benefit to 250,000—the numbers change quite dramatically on a daily basis. She talks about providing tax cuts to a quarter of a million people. She neglects to remind the House and the Australian people that this will mean a hike in premiums for 10 million Australians who have private health insurance. For that the Rudd government should stand condemned. They should stand condemned because this is bad policy that is going to drive half a million people off private health and into the public health system, a system which is already at breaking point. To say to people,
particularly older Australians who are on waiting lists around the country at the moment, that it is acceptable to push 500,000 more people onto waiting lists around the country is a disgrace by this Rudd government.

This is going to rip $2½ billion out of premiums out of the private health sector. That is going to have to be borne by somebody and it will be borne by those 10 million Australians who have private health insurance. None of these questions have been addressed or answered properly by this minister. When in question time today the minister was asked how much premiums would go up by as a result of this government action, she refused to answer. When this minister was asked in question time today exactly what cosy deals had been done with the states to compensate them for the extra burden on their waiting lists, she refused to answer that as well.

She provided advice yesterday to ABC radio that it was too difficult for Treasury to forecast how much premiums were going to go up. How can you introduce public policy into this parliament that will affect 10 million Australians and not have the proper costings done by Treasury? That is why this minister and this Prime Minister stand condemned. That is why 10 million Australians are going to see an increase in their private health premiums, and it is why the public hospital system is going to be under greater stress right around the country. This Rudd government is managing health exactly the way in which state Labor has managed health for the last 10 years, and it is a disgrace. That is why we condemn this government. That is why we oppose these amendments and this bill.

Ms ROXON (Gellibrand—Minister for Health and Ageing) (4.19 pm)—Let us go absolutely directly to the issue—

Opposition members—Let’s get on with it!

Ms ROXON—It is not a matter for those opposite to make a decision about whether I want to continue to speak in this debate for longer.

Mr HOCKEY (North Sydney—Manager of Opposition Business) (4.19 pm)—I move:

That the question be now put.

A division having been called and the bells having been rung—

Mr Albanese—The Manager of Opposition Business has agreed to call off the division.

Mr Hockey—Yes.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Ms AE Burke)—The division is called off.

Ms ROXON (Gellibrand—Minister for Health and Ageing) (4.24 pm)—I inform the House that we have two more minutes before we will be having a division on this matter. In those two minutes I want to inform the House that the shadow minister cannot continue to use absolutely false arguments to oppose this bill. He cannot say that thresholds changing will put premiums up when premiums went up every year under the previous government when the threshold was the same. That cannot be sustained. It is not logical. It is also not logical for the shadow minister to say that 500,000 people will stop taking out private health insurance and immediately go onto a waiting list for a public hospital. That is not how people’s illnesses occur. He knows it. What he is doing is using that to hide the fact that the Liberals are blocking a tax cut for 250,000 people. The Labor Party want to deliver that tax cut, and we intend to do so. I commend the bill to the House.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Ms AE Burke)—I inform the House that the Speaker has been briefed in relation to the
Senate amendments. The effect of some of the amendments would be to increase the number of persons subject to the surcharge tax above the number covered by the bills as passed by the House. I understand, however, that the burden would still fall on a smaller number than under the existing law. Therefore, the Speaker considers this not to be an occasion on which any objection should be taken on constitutional grounds.

Question put:
That the agreements be agreed to.

The House divided. [4.30 pm]

(The Deputy Speaker—Ms AE Burke)

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AYES

Adams, D.G.H. Albanese, A.N.
Bevis, A.R. Bidgood, J.
Bird, S. Bowen, C.
Bradbury, D.J. Burke, A.S.
Butler, M.C. Byrne, A.M.
Champion, N. Cheeseman, D.L.
Clare, J.D. Collins, J.M.
Combet, G. Crean, S.F.
D’Ath, Y.M. Danby, M.
Debus, B. Dreyfus, M.A.
Elliot, J. Ellis, A.L.
Ellis, K. Emerson, C.A.
Ferguson, M.J. Fitzgibbon, J.A.
Garrett, P. Georganas, S. *
George, J. Gibbons, S.W.
Gray, G. Grierson, S.J.
Griffin, A.P. Hale, D.F.
Hall, J.G. Hayes, C.P. *
Jackson, S.M. Kelly, M.J.
Kerr, D.J.C. King, C.F.
Macklin, J.L. Marles, R.D.
McClelland, R.B. McKew, M.
Melham, D. Murphy, J.
Neat, B.J. Neumann, S.K.
O’Connor, B.P. Owens, J.
Parke, M. Perrett, G.D.
Plibersek, T. Raguse, B.B.
Rea, K.M. Ripoll, B.F.
Rishworth, A.L. Roxon, N.L.
Saffin, J.A. Shorten, W.R.
Sidebottom, S. Smith, S.F.
Snowdon, W.E. Sullivan, J.
Symon, M. Thomson, C.
Thomson, K.J. Trevor, C.
Turnour, J.P. Zappia, A.

NOES

Abbott, A.J. Andrews, K.J.
Bailey, F.E. Baldwin, R.C.
Billson, B.F. Bishop, B.K.
Bishop, J.I. Briggs, J.E.
Broadbent, R. Chester, D.
Cobb, J.K. Coulton, M.
Dutton, P.C. Forrest, J.A.
Georgiou, P. Haase, B.W.
Hartsuyker, L. Hawker, D.P.M.
Hockey, J.B. Hull, K.E. *
Hunt, G.A. Irons, S.J.
Jensen, D. Johnson, M.A. *
Keenan, M. Laming, A.
Ley, S.P. Lindsay, P.J.
Macfarlane, I.E. Marino, N.B.
Markus, L.E. May, M.A.
Morrison, S.J. Moylan, J.E.
Nelson, B.J. Neville, P.C.
Pearce, C.J. Pyne, C.
Ramsey, R. Randall, D.J.
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.
Washer, M.J. Wood, J.

* denotes teller

Question agreed to.

ADJOURNMENT

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

That the House do now adjourn.

Mr Albanese—Mr Speaker, I require that the question be put immediately without debate.

Question negatived.
MATTERS OF PUBLIC IMPORTANCE

Indigenous Communities

Ms MACKLIN (Jagajaga—Minister for Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs) (4.35 pm)—Following the shocking findings of the Little children are sacred report and the recommendations that it made, the Northern Territory emergency response was launched in June last year. Initiated by the Howard government when we were in opposition, we supported the measures, acknowledging the need for an urgent response and we offered bipartisan backing. As I said in my press statement when I released the Northern Territory emergency response review report this week, the government remains committed to continuing and strengthening the Northern Territory emergency response. We are determined to work in partnership with Indigenous Australians to improve the safety and wellbeing of children and families in remote Northern Territory communities and to make real inroads towards closing the gap.

We are also committed to an approach that examines the facts and makes policy decisions based on evidence, anchored in what works. The Prime Minister reiterated this government’s commitment to evidence based policy after yesterday’s Press Club address. He said, ‘Our approach will be to embrace all those things that have worked in the intervention and be mindful of where there may have been shortcomings and how we can improve them.’ He stated: This Government is driven by one thing: how do you close the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians and what in practical terms makes that work.

That is why we commissioned a review into the effectiveness of the Northern Territory emergency response measures—to examine what has been effective and what needs to be strengthened and to make recommendations for the future.

I received the report on Monday and made it public. I did not receive any drafts. I thank the members of the review board and the expert group for their personal commitment in preparing this report. I note in particular that they made a number of visits—over 30 individual visits—to remote communities, met with many delegations of interested people and reviewed over 200 submissions to make sure that they heard the concerns of all people affected by the Northern Territory emergency response.

The report makes three overarching recommendations and sets out 48 specific recommendations on a number of different emergency response measures. In recognition of the importance and complexity of the issues and the need to make sure that we understand the implications of solutions recommended by the review board, the government will take a small amount of time to consider the report. I do expect that there will be a comprehensive response from the government by the end of the year.

The government committed in the 2008-09 budget $666 million to address Indigenous disadvantage in the Northern Territory. As part of that, we will be continuing all the current Northern Territory emergency response initiatives while we considered the review report’s recommendations. We also made almost $100 million available for 200
extra teachers and almost $30 million for three Indigenous boarding colleges in the Northern Territory. One of the very concerning findings in the review report’s analysis is that there is an enormous amount more to be done in education. The regular attendance of children at school is still nowhere near good enough.

Income management is continuing in the Northern Territory to make sure that welfare payments are used for the benefit of children and to increase the financial security of families raising those children. As at 10 October this year, over 15,500 customers were being income managed in 70 Northern Territory communities and their associated outstations and 10 town camp regions.

The food security of communities has been assessed and upgraded on a region by region basis through community stores’ licensing arrangements. As at 15 October, 68 community stores have been licensed for income managed customers and five communities have access to bush order food security. The introduction of a school nutrition program operating in 68 communities and associated outstations and 10 town camps is providing breakfast and lunch to school-aged children. We certainly hope that that is improving their concentration and engagement in education.

The government decided this week to make a down payment on pension reform—a payment of $1,400 for single pensioners and $2,100 for couples—and a one-off payment of $1,000 per child to family tax benefit A families. These significant payments will be made automatically in early December. Eligible pensioners and families will receive this payment in the same way as other existing Centrelink payments. I announce today that this means that if a person’s pension or payment is currently subject to income management then 100 per cent of the one-off payment will be quarantined.

Income management is currently operational in the Northern Territory and in Cape York and, subject to the agreement of the new Western Australian government, income management is due to have commenced in selected urban and remote areas of Western Australia by that payment date. People will be able to discuss with Centrelink how they want to allocate the extra funding towards meeting priority needs under the income management system. Income management of these payments will prevent a sudden flow of cash towards items such as alcohol, tobacco, gambling or pornography, which has unfortunately happened in the past with one-off bonus payments.

The income management of these funds will support the government’s objective of protecting the health and safety of children. This is tangible evidence of our commitment to get our approach to protecting vulnerable families and children right and to put in place comprehensive welfare reform policy for all Australians. We certainly know that housing is critical to children’s safety, well-being and health. No family can function in substandard, overcrowded houses and we know that there are far too many of those in Indigenous communities in the Northern Territory. We have announced that we are investing $813 million in remote Indigenous housing and infrastructure in the Northern Territory. We did that in a joint agreement with the Northern Territory government.

Just last week, while I was in Wadeye, I announced details of three building industry consortia that will deliver the largest upgrade of housing ever undertaken in remote Indigenous communities in the Northern Territory. Each of these consortia will design and construct housing works packages with an emphasis on training and jobs for Indige-
nous people. A key focus of the program is to provide local jobs and training opportunities for Indigenous people. Specific targets for employment and training will be negotiated with alliance partners.

The housing works packages will be delivered across 73 communities and targeted urban living areas, 16 communities will receive major capital works and 57 communities will receive housing refurbishments. We expect to see around 750 new homes built, including new subdivisions, more than 230 new houses to replace homes that will have to be demolished, more than 2,500 major housing upgrades, essential infrastructure to support new homes, and improvements to living conditions in town camps. Long-term leases must be in place in the 16 communities before work can commence. Leases have already been secured at Nguiu, and negotiations are well under way at Tennant Creek and on Groote Eylandt. These leases are expected to be finalised later this month.

The Australian and Northern Territory governments are working with land councils, communities and town camps to secure appropriate land tenure in the remaining communities. Work on upgrading essential services is expected to commence in Tennant Creek and Nguiu in November this year, with housing works to follow in Tennant Creek, in Nguiu and on Groote Eylandt from April next year. The entire program is scheduled for completion by June 2013.

The Australian government also recognises that creating socially and economically viable communities in remote Indigenous parts of Australia is a huge challenge. Our approach, as is known by the parliament, has been to set high-level targets to close the gap, to identify effective policy building blocks and to then put in place the policy and program settings to reach those targets. On employment, our target is to halve the gap in Indigenous employment within a decade. This is critical if we are to see economic participation, especially in remote communities. It is fundamental also to sustainable long-term improvement in the life outcomes for Indigenous Australians. Lifting Indigenous economic participation demands concerted, cooperative effort and attitudinal change from governments, industry and Indigenous people themselves.

Under the Northern Territory emergency response, as of 8 October over 1,500 Australian government funded jobs have been created in areas such as night patrols, rangers, broadcasting, education support, child care and municipal services. On 6 October 2008, the government released a paper on the government’s preferred model for Indigenous employment programs. It is called ‘Increasing Indigenous employment opportunity’. The model includes reforms to the Community Development Employment Projects program and the Indigenous Employment Program. These reforms are a key element to meeting our target of halving the employment gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians within a decade. We know that we have to create opportunities and also give Indigenous people the skills and training that they need to get and keep a job.

The government also welcomes the Australian Employment Covenant proposal initiated by Mr Forrest to work with Australia’s major corporations to provide 50,000 employment opportunities for Indigenous Australians. The Prime Minister has indicated that the Australian government will help bridge any training gap through the provision of appropriate employment related training.

Our Commonwealth agencies will work very closely with the business sector to make sure that we have the smooth implementation of this initiative and to maximise the em-
ployment opportunities that it will create. The proposed changes to the Community Development Employment Projects and the changes to the Indigenous Employment Program will certainly assist the Employment Covenant’s task. We want the Community Development Employment Projects to focus on work readiness skills. We want to see more Indigenous people able to get regular jobs in their communities and in nearby places. We want to see people moving into regular jobs where opportunities exist and, of course, to bring about the arrangements with the private sector that will see those job opportunities created.

Minister O’Connor has also announced the proposed changes to the universal employment service, which will begin from 1 July 2009. These changes too will see a much more tailored, individualised response, especially to the most disadvantaged job-seekers in this country. We intend to consult on our Community Development Employment Projects proposals. These consultations will be held from 20 October to early November. Following feedback from those consultations, the government will make final decisions and announce reforms that are expected to start on 1 July next year.

The government also values its relationship with Indigenous communities in the Northern Territory and in particular has made every effort to listen to the voices of the most vulnerable—and I would have to say that they are the women and children in these communities. We respect the positive leadership coming from many men in the Northern Territory and that was especially displayed at the Aboriginal Male Health Summit this year, when hundreds of Aboriginal men apologised to Aboriginal women for the impact of family violence. (Time expired)

Mr Laming (Bowman) (4.50 pm)—It may be useful to evoke the memory of eye surgeon Fred Hollows and his outstanding remarks in the mid-seventies that brought through the mainstream media to the rest of Australia a realisation of the true conditions on Aboriginal communities. From Hollows we learnt that solutions to the Indigenous crisis as he saw it lay not purely in white Australia, but Indigenous people had to lead. Then, of course, a generation later it was the former Minister for Families and Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, Mal Brough, who, through the Northern Territory emergency response in June last year, for the first time broke a generational fixation—a left-wing ideology—that believed that only Indigenous Australia had the solution to Indigenous problems.

From that intervention onwards it was clear that so many of the challenges that are superimposed onto Indigenous Australia will require a combined effort to fix—and that is the essence of the intervention. Although the minister has already departed from the chamber, let it be recorded in Hansard that that spiral bound, rote-read speech, presumably prepared by someone else, was utterly lacking, utterly devoid of passion or life. What she had in that 15 minutes was an opportunity to defend the intervention and to make it absolutely clear that she would rebuff page 23 of the report that she received a few weeks ago. Covered in the minister’s own liquid paper, sneaking through, were those five recommendations upon which this matter of public importance is based. Those recommendations bring to an end income quarantining and make it, as it was so euphemistically referred to in the report, ‘voluntary’ for those who wanted to remain on it and compulsory only for those enrolled to attend school or for infant health. By implication, income quarantining is removed where chronic alcoholism, violence, abuse of tenancy agreements, destruction of housing, antisocial behaviour and so on are involved.
That is what is written in the report that has been tabled by the minister. She had an opportunity today and we got nothing less, as I have said, than a bland, anodyne response to the report.

Let us remember some history, because they have been in government only nine months. Across the aisle was a Prime Minister falling over himself to apologise who then, to make it look like the sleeves were being rolled up, announced some teachers the next day. Since then, what have we seen in Indigenous communities? Virtually nothing. The Indigenous field has been left vacant for nine months. Let us remember that, with this review in place, it has almost been used as an excuse to do nothing. It has been an excuse to not take those rough edges off the intervention, to not support it where it needed support and to not give additional resources where they may have been required. It has just been fine to add an additional 100 teachers. We could have done so much better than the 18 alcohol inspectors. We could have done even better than the 11,000 that have currently had child health checks. There is so much more that could have been done and so much more that additional resources could have been used for. What we have had is the excuse that, because this intervention is under review, it has to be in some black box and not reinforced and not supported.

Judge not then on their absence from the field but on the legislation they have been moving at the same time. This is a government that has sought to change the rules on pornography, that has sought to change and soften the rules on the broadcasting of 18+ subscription television into Indigenous communities and that has sought to provide loopholes so that, if you have a boot full of pornographic DVD material, you can simply say, ‘I am moving through a prescribed area’, and not be intercepted. The very point of the intervention was the damage, as Sue Gordon and many others have pointed out, that alcohol, kava and pornography do. We have a minister that can read a speech like the one that preceded me only to then further relax permits, the broadcasting of pornography and the availability of pornographic DVDs in the very communities where we are trying to break that dysfunctional cycle. It has been referred to before as a horrid, dysfunctional cycle of ‘piss, petrol, poker and potato chips’.

This is the first time that we have had coherent voices of mums who finally have shopping trolleys full of food and of children who finally have food in their bellies. Yet we have this unbroken nexus supported by the other side of this chamber that allows that ongoing relationship between big men, chronic alcoholism and opposition to the intervention. I have been given 15 minutes to support the intervention and the principles on which it is based. I do not care which side of government came up with this intervention, but let us remember how weak the support for it was. It was there but it was weak and through gritted teeth from the current Prime Minister when it was announced. It may run deeply against the grain of left-wing ideology. As Marcia Langton pointed out today in the Australian, it goes against those human rights advocates who are caught up in ‘…50-year-old abstractions of the sanctity of the individual versus the collective rights of groups’. We need to move away from that and remember what the intervention is based upon. It is based upon the children. As Sue Gordon has said, whatever breach there might have been of human rights ‘paled in comparison to the damage done to Indigenous children over decades of neglect by governments’. That is why the intervention is in place, and that kind of support was absent from the minister.
We need to remember that income management simply ensures that 50 per cent of income is spent on clothing and food. I do not see that as some sort of human rights violation, and please forgive me if it is. I do not see support for children to attend school as some sort of human rights violation. Remember that we are operating in an environment of territory and state governments, many of whose education departments have railed against encouraging attendance at schools and have railed against providing school attendance data to Centrelink because of privacy concerns. These are education departments that do not back up the very principals who want to ensure improved attendance at schools. Those school principals are not supported by their own department. That is where this debate was as recently as 12 months ago and it took the former coalition government to change that, to break that and to connect school attendance to Centrelink for the first time. It was such a novel concept. We regard it as almost normal now, but it had not happened for a generation.

The intervention is about health; it is about health checks. My urging to the minister is: do not lose the nerve now. You have a report that provides an out but do not lose the nerve, because this intervention is about providing housing that is not destroyed and tenancy agreements that are respected. Do not lose the nerve. It may well be about changing land tenure agreements that some academics can twist as being some human rights violation—do not lose the nerve. It is about delivering housing stock where it is needed most. It is about providing meaningful employment and meaningful on-the-job training. That means reforming CDEP, not protecting it in its current form and waiting another year. We do not have a year to lose. Do not lose the nerve. Of course, most importantly of all, it is about an opportunity to break the cycle of antisocial behaviour that comes with chronic alcoholism. The women of the communities are speaking but they have so often been liquid papered out of this report by the selective choice of the individual who wrote this report. The very people who were the architects of this intervention have been ignored in the report. Was the well-known Bill Glasson, who played such an important role and who is also an eye surgeon, consulted about the minister’s report? In the entire review, Dr Bill Glasson was not even consulted. I remember those words spoken in the House of Commons by Churchill that:

The era of procrastination, of half-measures, of soothing and baffling expedients, of delays, is coming to a close. In its place, we are entering a period of consequences.

That period was last year. We have another similar moment appearing right now, with a minister who can go soft on this intervention and follow the recommendations that that minister allowed not to be liquid papered out—they remain in the report as an escape clause for this government when the timing is right. Let us remember what this intervention was all about: bringing the Little children are sacred report to life so that it did not remain an ignored and dusty report with recommendations that were never acted upon. They were acted upon last year; it was a changing and defining moment for Indigenous Australia and, as a matter of public importance, I urge the government to retain all those elements of the intervention.

House adjourned at 5.00 pm
Thursday, 16 October 2008

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Ms AE Burke) took the chair at 9.30 am.

CONSTITUENCY STATEMENTS
Dunkley Electorate: Frankston Bypass

Mr BILLSON (Dunkley) (9.30 am)—Madam Deputy Speaker Burke, you perhaps are one of many from our area of Victoria who awoke this morning to this screaming headline in the Herald Sun on the Frankston bypass. It is welcome news; I hope it is accurate. The newspaper says that the Frankston bypass, something we have canvassed many times in this place, will be built. It will be a toll-free bypass and the article in the newspaper says that the Rudd government will fund half of it. This is welcome if not surprising news. Today I seek to draw out whether this is a positioning by the state Labor government or whether the Rudd government has decided to apply some of that Herculean surplus that was left for it by the Howard government to this very important local project.

The Herald Sun carries the detail of the project in some clarity and clearly makes the case for its need. It concludes in its editorial that a toll-weary community down our way will welcome this $700 million project, half the funding of which is to come from the state coffers and Mr Brumby will tap the Prime Minister for the balance. It is terrific if there is $350 million of federal money going towards this project.

Madam Deputy Speaker, you might recall in the lead-up to the last election that the Howard government pledged that, if re-elected, we would contribute significant funds to this project and we were condemned for making a commitment to the project until those vital costing and EES processes had been concluded. How ironic that the EES process has not been concluded, the costings have not been finalised and yet we have this screaming headline in the local paper.

I found it amusing to look back over some articles, particularly when Martin Ferguson, the then shadow minister for transport, was quite critical of the Howard government showing its clear commitment to this project and outlined the very key criteria that needed to be addressed to see the project move forward. These were about an environmentally responsible alignment. I am pleased that my suggestion to realign the northern end of the bypass through the old Keith Turnbull Research Institute, protecting much of the Pines flora and fauna reserve, has been embraced. There are areas of wildlife corridor where elevated sections of freeway are required. There is also the importance of sound barriers to protect the local residents and the need to provide for active transport modes for those wanting to either walk or use a bike along that pathway. It is necessary to make sure that the bypass is connected to both the Frankston Freeway and the EastLink Tollway.

Madam Deputy Speaker, you may be aware that the EastLink consortium did offer, to the state government, to build it by extending their concession over the EastLink Tollway. That was declined. The Howard government’s proposal to part-fund the project was condemned by Labor, and now we are greeted with this headline. I hope this headline is true. I hope we can believe that there will be a toll-free Frankston bypass. I do hope that the funding claimed in this article is accurate and that the Rudd government has made a decision to get behind the
project, because as all of the media coverage shows we have had to drag Labor kicking and screaming to the project. I hope there is a bright light at the end of the tunnel. *(Time expired)*

**Longman Electorate: International Day of Older Persons**

**Mr SULLIVAN** (Longman) (9.33 am)—The International Day of Older Persons was held on 1 October. The Sex Discrimination Commissioner and Commissioner responsible for Age Discrimination, Elizabeth Broderick, had this to say:

International Day of Older Persons has given us the long overdue opportunity to honour the contributions older people make and continue to make to the strength of our economy and the health and wellbeing of our country. After all, our future depends on it.

I guess what Commissioner Broderick did not say was that our present is in large part only possible because of the contributions of older Australians. Many people facing difficulties because of rising cost and low fixed incomes still contribute so much to our communities. I had the distinct pleasure and very great honour on 1 October of presenting at a small function certificates of appreciation to some of the older constituents who contribute to life in our communities.

Last Monday the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Family, Community, Housing and Youth presented their report titled *The value of volunteering: a discussion paper on volunteering in the community and welfare sector*. Our colleague the member for Canberra, Annette Ellis, said during the presentation of that report:

It is estimated that volunteers contribute around $42 billion to the Australian economy each year.

I would like to mention just some of the recipients of the awards in Longman on 1 October. Firstly, I would like to mention May Payne, from the Caboolture Senior Citizens Club. May has been volunteering for as long as I can remember, and my engagement in public life in the community goes back 25 years. I would also like to mention Vic Kennett, from the Burpengary Meals on Wheels. Vic is a nonagenarian—90 years plus—and he has been Treasurer of the Burpengary Meals on Wheels for 17 years. It is an organisation that delivers meals to people many years younger than Vic himself. Ces Conte, who is from the Caboolture Multicultural Association, has been a tireless worker in our community, particularly aiding the growing number of non Australian born members of the community.

I would also like to mention Uncle Allan Gill, from the Murriajabree ATSI Association of Deception Bay; Joy Mason, from the Bribie Island Golden Age Day Respite Centre; and many others, from arts groups, St Vincent de Paul, the 60 and Better Program, horticultural groups, the RSL and the Vietnam Veterans Association. These people contribute so much to our communities, not just to older people but to younger people as well. I am very pleased to be able to say that I am proudly part of a Labor government that has recognised the contribution of older Australians no matter what form of compensation they will receive from the government through the recent announcement of the bonuses to be paid in December.

**Swan Electorate: Mr Andrew Williams**

**Mr IRONS** (Swan) (9.36 am)—I rise today to acknowledge Mr Andrew Williams, a PhD student in my electorate of Swan, for being awarded one of the 2008 Australian Agricultural Industries Young Innovators and Scientists Awards. Andrew, who studies at the University of Western Australia, was awarded the Australian Meat Processor Corporation Award for his innovative research into parasitic intestinal worms among sheep.
The Australian Agricultural Industries Young Innovators and Scientists Awards support young people in pursuing innovative scientific ideas that will deliver long-term benefits to Australia’s rural industries. The awards, a Howard government initiative started in 2001, have helped 117 young Australians to make their ideas a reality and showcase their talent to the world. This year’s winners represent some of the best scientific talent in Australia, and it is a privilege to have someone of Andrew’s talent living in the electorate of Swan. Andrew is one of only 14 winners nationwide and receives a grant worth $20,000 to help continue his research.

Andrew was required to submit an innovative project proposal that addressed a significant issue in Australia’s rural communities and that could be completed within 12 months. Projects could relate to animal welfare, dairy, egg, emerging and niche agriculture, fisheries and aquaculture, forestry, grains, horticulture, meat and livestock, pork, sugar, viticulture or natural resource management industries. Andrew’s project will investigate the reasons behind increased scouring among Rylington Merino.

Andrew’s work is important, as it addresses an issue of great importance to the industry. Parasitic intestinal worms are estimated to cost the Australian sheep industry more than $500 million a year in lost profits. According to Andrew, sheep with parasitic intestinal worms gain less weight and also suffer from a type of diarrhoea known as scouring. Scouring is of particular concern to sheep farmers as soiled wool is less valuable and the animal is more susceptible to fly strike, which is costly to manage. Unfortunately, it is becoming increasingly difficult to control these parasites because many are highly resistant to current chemical treatments.

Andrew believes that the long-term solution is to breed sheep that are naturally resistant. His recent research has indicated that resistant sheep respond to worm infection by mounting an inflammatory immune response. He hopes to determine whether this immune response may also be the cause of scouring in resistant sheep. If Andrew is successful, it may lead to genetic and biochemical markers being developed that could help select sheep that are resistant to worm infection and less susceptible to scouring. This would be a major breakthrough in parasite control in the sheep industry.

My electorate of Swan in Western Australia may be a metropolitan electorate, but it has strong links with the agricultural community in WA. Many students of agricultural studies such as Andrew Williams live in Swan whilst undertaking their studies at the surrounding universities. Agriculture is therefore an important issue for the people in my electorate of Swan. Providing research opportunities to individuals like Andrew Williams is an excellent way to acknowledge the contribution that these people make to the local community.

**Deakin Electorate: Economic Security Strategy**

Mr SYMON (Deakin) (9.39 am)—Today I would like to talk about the positive effects that the Rudd government’s $10.4 billion Economic Security Strategy will have on the families and pensioners of my electorate of Deakin. From 8 December each of the 7,069 families with children who receive family tax benefit A by fortnightly instalments in Deakin will receive a one-off payment of $1,000 for each eligible child in their care. That covers 13,008 children in my electorate of Deakin and is a direct boost of over $13 million to the local economy at a time when the global financial crisis is placing an increasing pressure on household budgets that are already stretched by the rising cost of living. This $1,000 one-off payment will also be paid to families who receive family tax benefit A as a lump sum at the end of the financial
year when they make their claim, and there are quite a few of those in the electorate as well. Also, the $1,000 one-off payment will be paid to families whose dependent children receive the youth allowance, Abstudy or a benefit from the children’s education scheme payment.

The Rudd government is also delivering for pensioners, seniors and carers by delivering a $4.8 billion down payment for immediate financial help in the lead-up to comprehensive reform of the pension system. In the seat of Deakin over 20 per cent of the electors are over the age of 65, and it is a very important issue out my way. One-off lump sum payments of $1,400 to single pensioners and $2,100 to couple pensioners will be paid to the full range of pensioners. That includes 6,253 single aged pensioners in Deakin and 8,689 pensioner couples; 3,452 disability support pensioners; 443 carer payment recipients; 431 wife and widow B pensioners, partner, widow and bereavement allowees; and 2,459 eligible self-funded retirees in Deakin holding a Commonwealth seniors health card. These payments will also be made to all Veterans Affairs service pensioners, veterans income support supplement recipients, Veterans Affairs gold card holders eligible for seniors concession allowance, and those of pension age who are receiving a parenting payment, special benefit or Austudy. The 2,187 people in Deakin who receive a carer allowance will also receive $1,000 for each eligible person being cared for.

Pensioner, seniors and carer payments will be made automatically through Centrelink and the Department of Veterans’ Affairs in the fortnight beginning 8 December 2008. These payments will recognise the additional costs that single pensioners face relative to couples, as many cost-of-living expenses are fixed for the household. As all of these payments will be non-taxable and will not be included for future income-testing purposes, it means the full amount flows through to where it is needed most. This decisive action will strengthen the Australian economy in times of global financial turmoil and will be of great benefit to the people of Deakin and Australia as a whole. (Time expired)

Maranoa Electorate: Mineral Development

Mr BRUCE SCOTT (Maranoa) (9.42 am)—I rise today to discuss an issue of major concern not only to the people of my electorate of Maranoa but to the entire Australian population. The farming communities of Haystack and Warra in the region of the Darling Downs have recently been informed of a decision by the Queensland Labor government to grant Tarong Energy, a state government owned enterprise, a mineral development licence over the most fertile, arable soils in the state. The community and farmers are obviously devastated by this news. With just one letter to the stakeholder, the Queensland Labor government has just wiped away long-laid plans to pass on farms to children, grandchildren and even great-grandchildren. With just one letter, the families of Warra and Haystack now face an uncertain future. Last year Haystack farmers alone produced enough grain to make 68 million loaves of bread—1.3 million loaves each week for Australian families. Under the rich, arable lands that provide this grain lies only 25 years worth of coal. In 25 to 30 years, when the mining equipment has been packed up, that area will no longer be making bread for Australian families.

We are on the verge of a global food crisis. By the end of this year, the world will have eaten more grain than it has produced in the last 12 months. Global grain production will need to increase by around 50 per cent between 2000 and 2030 to meet global demand, and yet the Queensland Labor government is happy to destroy an area that is so crucial in helping Australia provide the world with clean, green food. Mining companies in Queensland, as in many

MAIN COMMITTEE
other parts of Australia, have more rights than the title deed holder. We understand the importance of energy generation and export success, but we must recognise the fundamental importance of food security for our nation. Our prime arable farming soils are so very limited across Australia, and they must be provided with the same protection as our conservation areas. There is no point in inviting foreign tourists to visit the Daintree Forest and the Great Barrier Reef if we cannot feed them when they arrive.

It is of the utmost urgency that we put in place policies and legislation to protect Australia’s prime arable soils. The question needs to be answered: what is more important, coal or food? I think most Australians would answer that question rather easily. As the farmers of the Warra and Haystack areas say about this rich arable soil that is a gift to all of us in this nation, ‘You cannot eat coal for breakfast.’ I support the drive by many farmers in some of the most productive arable soils, so limited in our nation, that we must take strong and decisive action to protect these soils from mining operations. (Time expired)

Lowe Electorate: Aircraft Noise

Mr MURPHY (Lowe—Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Trade) (9.45 am)—On behalf of the constituents I represent in my electorate of Lowe, I again raise the issue of aircraft noise in Sydney’s inner west. My constituents will not easily forget the long history of the mismanagement of Sydney airport by the Howard government. They will not forget the coalition’s worthless announcement that it would not sell the Sydney airport ‘until there is a satisfactory solution to the current aircraft noise problem in Sydney’. As it turned out, the former government sold Sydney airport without fixing aircraft noise problems. Worse still, the former government sold the airport without placing any caveats on the airport’s new owners with respect to noise reduction or community engagement. It is appalling that, since the airport is no longer operated or owned by the government, the direct line of responsibility has also faded.

The owners of Sydney airport have previously treated my constituents with disdain. The former government’s culture of indifference significantly contributed to the airport’s cavalier attitude towards my constituents. Nowhere was this better demonstrated than in the handling of Sydney airport’s runway safety enhancement project. On 27 November 2007, just two days after the federal election, Sydney airport announced that the work on the runway end safety area would result in the closure of the east-west runway for a period of not less than 15 months. The east-west runway is essential for a fairer distribution of noise at Sydney airport, and my constituents well know the implications for increased noise of the closure of that runway. Despite the very obvious impact of any closure on my constituents, the project was concealed from all of us by the Howard government.

The owners of Sydney airport would do well to note that there is no culture of indifference within the Rudd government to the suffering of the residents in the inner west. We now know that the work on the east-west runway is necessary to minimise the harm to passengers in the surrounding area in the unlikely event of an aircraft overrun or an aircraft that lands short of a runway. Importantly, I am pleased to report that my colleague the Minister for Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Local Government, Anthony Albanese, has responded to my constituents and to the Sydney Airport Community Forum, of which I am a member. The minister has imposed conditions requiring the full availability of the east-west runway during critical periods after eight months—not the 15 steadfastly proposed by Sydney airport.
As someone who lives directly under the flight path, I too know firsthand the impact the construction phase will have. That is why I applaud the minister’s prompt intervention following the last federal election and his commitment to arrest Sydney airport’s agenda.

The people I represent in Lowe deserve much better than to have Macquarie Bank and Sydney Airport Corporation Ltd run roughshod over them. The minister has already demonstrated his commitment to opening honest lines of communication within the community about proposed developments at Sydney airport. But my constituents have suffered long enough and I will continue to push for a fairer distribution of aircraft noise. Despite the best efforts of the former government to destroy our drive, the positive action of the new minister strengthens my resolve and that of the Sydney Airport Community Forum to continue fighting each challenge that Sydney airport presents to us. That resolve was plain for all to see when I attended last Friday’s Sydney Airport Community Forum’s meeting, and all of the members at that meeting are firmly committed to fair aircraft noise distribution. (Time expired)

Mitchell Electorate: Video Games Classification

Mr HAWKE (Mitchell) (9.48 am)—I rise this morning to support calls from parents within my electorate for a R18+ rating system to be applied to video games. Currently the highest maximum rating that can be applied to video games is the MA15+ rating under the system. The relevant legislation is the Classification (Publications, Films and Computer Games) Act 1995 as—

A division having been called in the House of Representatives—

Sitting suspended from 9.49 am to 10.02 am

Mr HAWKE—As I was saying, games—video games in particular—have advanced in the last 30 years. They are full of complex concepts and adult themes, and there really is very little to differentiate them from films. Of course, under the Classification (Publications, Films And Computer Games) Act 1995, there is a lack of consistency in the ratings that are applied across these media. It is the case that there are four classifications for video games and six classifications for films. I think it is a sensible proposition that, if it is good enough for television that we assess that some films are not able to be rated as MA15+ and require a higher rating of R18+, then that ought to be the case for video games.

I note that on 27 and 28 March this year the Standing Committee of Attorneys-General met and agreed in principle to a consultation in relation to an R18+ scheme for video games—a national classification scheme—and this is a good development. They have also agreed to consider, at a subsequent meeting, the outcome of the public consultation on this issue and resolve whether an R18+ classification for computer games should be introduced into the national classification system, and whether amendments to give effect thereto should proceed. This is a good development and a welcome one for the parents in my electorate who have raised this matter with me.

I am not one who seeks to censor what freely thinking adults may view or think, but, in the case of children and people who we define as minors, regulation is lagging behind the reality of modern video games. Indeed, it is important to note that from all of the representations I have received from the parents in my electorate, they understand that this rating system is no substitute for responsible parenting and parents taking an interest in their children. In fact, I find these parents to be the most responsible, because they, in spite of the lack of classification—
tion, ensure that all of the material that their children watch in these video games is suitable. But, in a complex and diverse world, with technological advances, this will be an important aid to parents. There is a case that consistency must be applied and I strongly recommend that the consultation process proceed and that we ensure that we move as quickly as possible to ensure an R18+ classification is applied to computer games and video games.

Sydney Electorate: National Youth Mental Health Foundation

Ms PLIBERSEK (Sydney—Minister for Housing and Minister for the Status of Women) (10.04 am)—Last week I was very privileged to attend the launch of Central Sydney Headspace at Youthblock Health and Resource Centre in Camperdown in my electorate. It is a very good time to mention this because the government has recently established an Office for Youth Affairs, and the Central Sydney Headspace measure is a terrific next step in raising the issue of young people with a mental illness. I want to talk about this new service and how it will help young people with a mental illness who are potentially at risk of homelessness.

Headspace, the National Youth Mental Health Foundation, is a foundation for young people. It is targeted at 12- to 25-year-olds, and it delivers assistance on mental health issues, social wellbeing and economic participation. Youthblock, the venue for the launch of this new service, provides essential services to young people who are homeless or who are at risk of becoming homeless. Central Sydney Headspace will be setting up three one-stop shop centres. Youthblock at Camperdown will be one of them, South Sydney Youth Services in Redfern will be another and there will be another in Marrickville. South Sydney Youth Services is a service that I have had an enormous amount to do with over the years and it has consistently provided excellent support to many young people who are at risk of homelessness—young people with a dual diagnosis of a mental health issue as well a drug or alcohol issue and who often have nowhere else to turn.

These three centres will work together to bring services to young people. These will be services from across the levels of government so that young people will be able to go to one service and access all the support they need. This is the way the Rudd government prefers to support young people. Rather than trooping around from service to service, navigating complex support systems, they will be able to go to the one service and receive the help of people like a clinical psychologist, a social worker and a GP.

The launch was terrific. It was very well attended and there was a fantastic band, Total Revolution in Perspective. They were great young people with enormous energy and enthusiasm and were terrific musicians. There were a couple of rappers there as well who were absolutely marvellous, first rate performers. I really enjoyed the launch, and I enjoyed meeting the staff of the services that will be working so closely together. I particularly enjoyed meeting many of the young people who will use these services, have been using the services as individual services and will continue to use them in this new combined way, where the services will be working together to provide wraparound support for the young people who need it most.

Forrest Electorate: Brendan Fitzgerald

Ms MARINO (Forrest) (10.07 am)—This week we have seen the sixth anniversary of the Bali bombings. However, I rise to pay tribute to young 16-year-old Brendan Fitzgerald from
Busselton, who was killed by the bomb blast in Kuta in 2005 while on holiday with his father, Terry, and sister Jessica, who were both injured in the blast.

Brendan was on his first overseas holiday and learning to surf with his father in the Bali seas. His friends and family were devastated by the tragic loss and waste of a young, precious life. Hundreds of people packed into a small local chapel to pay tribute to sports-mad Brendan’s life and to offer sympathy and comfort to his family. Terry Fitzgerald arrived at his son’s funeral on a stretcher, his body still recovering from injuries sustained in the blast. Thirteen-year-old Jessica Fitzgerald overcame her injuries from shrapnel wounds and burns to attend the funeral, delivering a moving poem in honour of her brother entitled, With Love. It says:

There is a hand I love to hold, two eyes I love to see, there is a voice I love to hear, that means the world to me
There is a heart that understands what I am dreaming of—all of these belong to you …

Brendan’s mother, Lisa, also addressed the congregation, saying:

To my beautiful son, who had become my friend, your voice is quiet but your spirit echoes still …

Busselton Senior High School students and Georgiana Molloy Anglican School students were profoundly affected.

Brendan loved Australian Rules Football and was buried in a coffin painted in the Busselton Magpies team colours, covered with his own football jumper and cricket bat. Terry Fitzgerald has published a book about the family’s harrowing experience in Bali, and I can only imagine what an emotional task this was for him. The book is titled A Beautiful Boy and documents the memories and experiences of those who lived through the bombings. Mr Fitzgerald said that he wanted to document the experiences for his youngest daughter and as therapy and part of his healing.

I would also like to acknowledge the loss experienced by Brendan’s grandparents, Win and Trevor Fitzgerald, expressed in their son Terry’s book. I quote from the notes on Trevor Fitzgerald:

It was 5.30 am Sunday, we went to the internet again and learnt of the death of a 16 year old boy from WA.

We thought how many 16 year old boys would there be over there? He just couldn’t be ours. Not our beautiful, warm, gentle grandson, without a mean bone in his body, who loved all his family and friends, his cricket, football and skateboarding, and lived his life to the fullest, with not a harsh word to anyone. It just couldn’t be possible.

The phone rang and it was two Federal Police agents calling from just outside our front door. They had driven from Perth in the middle of the night to tell us to prepare ourselves for the worst. They were so kind and caring, but our world just fell apart.

Brendan had his student card in his pocket, so that was how they identified him so quickly. We were devastated. How were we going to tell his mum, all our families and friends? There is no easy way. It is something that will haunt us for ever.

Our house was soon filled with comforting family and friends and endless cups of tea and a pain that will never go away.

I offer my sincere condolences to Brendan’s family and friends.
Mr DANBY (Melbourne Ports) (10.11 am)—On the weekend, I attended the 75th anniversary celebrations of the Elwood Talmud Torah Congregation. It was a well attended affair with over 200 people present and included my state colleague Martin Foley and the Mayor of the City of Port Phillip, Janet Cribbes. In a wonderful historical booklet especially produced for the occasion and a video, the historian Yossi Aron noted that the congregation was formed at the home of Joseph Fisher in 1932. The Fishers came from the Ukraine in 1928 but settled in Elwood. Together with their daughter’s fiance, Samuel Gandel, over many decades they played a role in the formation of this very important local synagogue, which is just around the corner from my house.

Over the afternoon, an important element of history became clear. Most Australians and most historians think that the Jewish community in Melbourne was formed largely in Carlton. However, it was very clear from Mr Aron’s book and the film that this was not so. Elwood, of course, has had the legendary rabbi who looked after Holocaust survivors, Rabbi Chaim Gutnick, who was the progenitor of a great rabbinical dynasty; and an internationally famous cantor, Reverend Adler.

The current rabbi, Mordechai Gutnick, the eldest son of Chaim Gutnick, was at the celebrations, as were Rabbi Shmuel Karnowsky, Rabbi Avigdor Aron and Moshe Hanovich. Also present were the great philanthropists Les and Eva Erdi and former presidents Fred Antman and Shmuel Rozenkranz, who steered the congregation through many of the last decades. The historian Yossi Aron, who wrote the wonderful history of the Elwood Talmud Torah Congregation, was present and is owed great credit for the function, as are Magdi Bar Zeev and Max Singer.

Yossi Aron’s history is not just about a 75-year-old Hebrew congregation. It is partially a social history of migration in south-eastern Melbourne, particularly in Elwood. It is very fortuitous, when you look back at it, that this congregation was formed by central and east European migrants prior to the Second World War. These were the very people who were able to look after the refugees and the displaced persons who came off the ships during the Second World War and who, subsequently, filled the pews at this very special shule.

The emphasis on education by the Elwood congregation is well known. There was originally a talmud torah there and then there was the Moriah College and now there is the successful primary school Yesodei HaTorah. I pay great tribute to all of the people who have worked there, prayed there and been great members of the Australian community, in Elwood and in Melbourne, and who have contributed so much beyond their community to our great country Australia.

ORDER! In accordance with standing order 193 the time for constituency statements has concluded.

Debate resumed from 13 October, on motion by Ms Annette Ellis:

That the House take note of the document.
Ms LEY (Farrer) (10.14 am)—I am pleased to be able to speak on volunteering in connection with the discussion paper put out by the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Family, Community, Housing and Youth. It results from a roundtable conducted in Sydney on the value of volunteering, which I and other members of the committee took part in.

I would like to emphasise the importance of and the place that volunteers hold in our community. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, more than 4.4 million Australians aged 18 years and over did voluntary work in 2000, contributing a total of 704 million hours of unpaid work to the Australian economy. I was in the west of my electorate recently at the Australian Inland Botanic Gardens at Buronga, near Wentworth in Western New South Wales. These beautiful inland gardens are run almost entirely by volunteers. In the gift shop there is a really big sign, which I think is cross-stitched, which says, ‘Volunteers are not paid, not because they are worthless but because they are priceless.’ I think that captures very much the spirit of volunteering.

In an electorate as diverse as mine in Farrer, there are many volunteer organisations. For most of the towns and communities throughout these areas, the backbone of the community is the volunteer. Without the volunteers these communities would be so much poorer in so many ways. There are many examples of those who volunteer for the betterment of their community, their neighbours, their children, their animals and the environment and—possibly—just to promote the values that they hold dear.

Over recent weeks I have been encouraging volunteer organisations to apply for the Volunteer Small Equipment Grants, and I must thank the current government for continuing these grants. In the past they have been invaluable to so many organisations which do not have the funds to purchase often very small items of equipment to help them carry out their volunteer duties. Only yesterday, I was contacted by a volunteer from the western end of my electorate, who, I think, is eligible for an IGA award, an unsung hero award—the prize being $500. Her attitude was: ‘Please vote for me. If I win the award I will put it straight back into hampers to send out to drought affected communities.’ I was humbled to hear of such a gesture.

Last week I was in Broken Hill, a town with an uncertain future due to major job losses, meeting with volunteers from the Broken Hill and District Hearing Resource Centre, who are desperate for support to sustain a facility that was simply begun by a woman who lost her hearing and wondered how many out in the community were feeling just as she did. They had applied for funds under the Regional Partnerships program. That program is, at worst, cancelled and, at best, on ice. I am worried that volunteers within my electorate are now finding it difficult to find a program that suits their needs.

The Henty field days are a major event in the eastern part of my electorate. Some 30,000 people attend the field days. Volunteer organisations from a 100-kilometre radius work at the field days. They set up, they man the gates, they serve food. St John’s Ambulance volunteers attend and local school parents clean the toilets. The field day organisers pay the organisations for their time, and volunteers do the work. In May this year, I was invited to present certificates to volunteers at Culcairn’s community newsletter, the Oasis. The Oasis was one of the volunteer groups that received a grant under the 2007 Volunteer Small Equipment Grants program. The newsletter is going strong and is a great example of how volunteering connects with our local communities.
People and, as I said, animals benefit from the valuable work of volunteers. This was evident at the Million Paws Walk held in Albury recently. Volunteers at the RSPCA help more than 138,000 animals find shelter, and every dollar raised at the walk assists the RSPCA operate its animal shelters, support its inspectorate services and provide community education on animal welfare issues. I should mention Landcare, with their volunteers helping the environment and the absolutely crucial role that they play. The Landcare cuts—we have seen quite strong and deep cuts made by the incoming government—have meant that Landcare groups and communities in my electorate are desperate to continue the good work but are finding it very hard to manage with limited resources. I should mention St Vincent de Paul, the Salvation Army, the CWA and many of our service organisations, such as Rotary and Lions, who are there looking after people who are too easily forgotten. I should also mention the RSL. In my area, the Hume veterans just recently celebrated 60 years of support for local returned service men and women.

The member for Forrest made a moving speech about someone in her electorate who was a victim of the Bali bombings, and we should recognise our volunteer services here in Australia. These volunteers attend after geographic devastation, accidents on our roads or a crisis that no-one could have possibly foreseen. We should recognise that the volunteers in rescue associations in the various states and in the SES give an enormous amount of their time. And it is not just the time taken to attend an accident scene; it is the ongoing effect that that accident may have on them and their families. It is quite remarkable when you consider that so many of those positions are filled by volunteers.

Meals on Wheels is another fantastic example of the work that volunteers do. Since its inception 55 years ago, providing meals to only eight people, the service has grown to become one of Australia’s most vital volunteer institutions, delivering upwards of 50,000 meals a day to frail aged and disabled residents throughout the country. Meals on Wheels helps to provide regular social contact and community involvement to clients and volunteers alike. I think the simple act of providing a warm and enjoyable meal provides a measure of independence for many of my constituents and others and enables them to live in their own homes for longer.

In conclusion, may I thank all of the volunteers in the electorate of Farrer for the work that they do. May I recognise and encourage our young people. What we found out at our volunteering roundtable was that there may be a public perception that it is the older folk who are volunteering—and certainly, if you look at the small towns and communities around rural Australia, that is what you see—but it is definitely not the case that young people are uninterested or excluding themselves from volunteering activities. What we found was that young people see themselves very much as part of the interconnected global community, and so they may not volunteer in their town but they may belong to global organisations such as Make Poverty History or the Micah Challenge or be connected with overseas aid organisations in a different way. This reflects the fact that young people do in fact see themselves not as part of a small rural community but very much as part of a global community. That is a good thing, that is a positive thing, and the hours and the efforts that young people are putting into volunteering are also considerable. I think that does bode well for the future, and I look forward to many more successful volunteering events and recognition in the communities in which I serve.
Ms CAMPBELL (Bass) (10.22 am)—I have spoken before on the vital nature of volunteers, of the integral role which they play in all of our communities. I believe it is not an exaggeration to say that, without the tens of thousands of unpaid man-hours worked by volunteers, our communities and our society would simply cease to function. It is for this reason that I stand before you today.

The House of Representatives Standing Committee on Family, Community, Housing and Youth, of which I am proud to be a member, has investigated volunteering in the community and welfare sectors. I would like to take this opportunity to thank the incredibly hardworking staff of the secretariat for all of their organisation and assistance. I note their attendance here today, and I thank them for everything that they have done.

In speaking to the roundtable’s draft discussion paper, I would like to reflect on not only its findings but my own experiences with volunteering and some of the outstanding contributions made by volunteers in my electorate of Bass. I believe one of the great challenges we face is how we encourage our young people to become involved in volunteering. When I was 17, I completed a Lifelink Samaritans course. This is an organisation with a 40-year history of helping people when they need it most. I was trained to answer telephones and provide support to those who called. They may have been lonely, depressed or under pressure. Whatever it was, I was there to provide a presence on the other end of the phone. This was a most rewarding and life-informing period, and I can speak firsthand of the benefit which comes from giving something back to the community.

I was both amazed and humbled during my time as Deputy Mayor of Launceston to attend many events recognising the contribution of volunteers. One, however, sticks out and has stayed in my mind. It was honouring volunteers at the National Trust’s Franklin House for thousands—and I say again, thousands—of hours of volunteer time. Many at Franklin House are elderly, and with each passing year filling the roster of house and garden staff proves harder and harder. People like Pat Ahern, Terry Childs, Joy Spence, Jan Towns and Julie Dineen are tireless in their commitment and passion. To each of them and to the hundreds of volunteers across my electorate of Bass, I take this opportunity to say thank you. Among those volunteers are the workers at Launceston’s City Park Radio, or Friends of FM as they are known. I recently attended their annual general meeting and took the opportunity to stress the integral role which volunteers play in the rich fabric of our society.

As I said earlier, the roles of unpaid workers—of volunteers—are essential to our communities. Without them our health system could not cope, our education systems would fail, the most basic of services would go undelivered and our arts, cultural and sporting groups simply would not exist. The most basic elements which go to make communities what they are are so often provided by volunteers. That is why I am so passionate about wanting more young people to become involved.

This is a theme on which I often speak when I get the opportunity, be it at schools or community events, because I believe in the fundamental importance of giving back and of acknowledging the amazing opportunities which we are afforded in this wonderful country. It was pleasing to read in the discussion paper that the greatest increase in volunteering rates is in the 18- to 24-year-old age group. In 1995 it was 17 per cent; however, by 2006 that had risen to 32 per cent. That equates to around 6.3 million incidents of volunteering. I would per-
sonally like to see a greater number of these young people working in the welfare sector; however, all volunteering is to be commended.

I mentioned before the thousands of hours volunteered at Franklin House. If we use that as an example, it is possible to imagine the sheer cost involved if we were to pay these people. Some estimates put it at around $30 billion a year; others place it closer to $50 billion. Whatever the reality is, it is clear that it is a considerable amount of money which is contributed to the economy as time.

Clearly, there is a role for governments of all levels in supporting volunteers. As freely as they give of their time, volunteers often end up out of pocket. That is why I wrote to volunteer organisations across Northern Tasmania encouraging them to apply for grants under the Rudd government’s Volunteer Grants Program. Among other things, groups and individuals can receive assistance to cover costs associated with volunteering, including fuel. This is only fair and appropriate given the rising costs associated with fuel in particular.

I also know from discussions with constituents that there are concerns associated with insurance for volunteers. In my home state of Tasmania the state government has been considering this issue for a number of years and I would urge it to act soon as volunteers are entitled to protection. It is, I would argue, the very least they could and should expect.

I commend to the House the discussion paper of the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Family, Community, Housing and Youth The value of volunteering: a discussion paper on volunteering in the community and welfare sector, adding again my gratitude to our country’s many, many volunteers and my voice to those calling for greater recognition of their efforts.

Mrs MARKUS (Greenway) (10.27 am)—I preface my remarks by first thanking the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Family, Community, Housing and Youth for inviting the participation of not just me but my colleagues, the Hon. Judi Moylan, the Hon. Tony Abbott, the Hon. Sussan Ley who worked together to produce The value of volunteering landmark document.

The purpose of producing this body of work was, most importantly, to identify the challenges faced in the volunteer sector. Changing patterns of volunteering in terms of time given, a decline in the numbers of people volunteering and an increasing administrative and legal environment meant that the study of this important activity was timely.

There are two types of volunteering. The formal definition is an activity where someone will ‘willingly give unpaid help in the form of time, service or skills, to or through an organisation.’ The Australian Bureau of Statistics says that 30 per cent of the population are involved in this kind of volunteering. For example, the Sydney Olympics and Clean Up Australia Day are examples of formal volunteering.

Then there is informal volunteering. This is where an individual, a neighbour, friend or colleague, does not even realise that they are giving their time in the form of volunteering. This could be as simple as collecting a neighbour’s children from school, driving an elderly friend to a doctor, or collecting cans for charity. It is unstructured, often random, and most of the time just seen as giving a helping hand. The ABS estimates that 19 per cent of Australians are identified as informal volunteers.
The committee held a forum in Sydney in May 2008 and a number of individuals and representatives were invited to participate. These included Volunteering Australia, the national peak body for volunteers and volunteering; a number of large and smaller community and welfare organisations, from both local and regional areas; and individuals. In fact, a very good cross-section of the community involved in volunteering were present. Their contribution to the research was invaluable, and I thank them. At the forum, discussion focused on emerging trends in volunteering in Australia—notably, challenges for individual volunteers, and also operational, administrative and legislative challenges for volunteer organisations.

According, again, to the Bureau of Statistics, more than five million Australians aged 18 years and over performed voluntary work in 2006. These volunteers contributed a total of 713 million hours of unpaid work to the Australian economy. The economic value of volunteering in Australia has been estimated to be approximately $42 billion per annum, with the time donated by volunteers to welfare services alone being responsible for $27.4 billion per annum. Governments and the community do value our volunteers because of the enormous savings that their unpaid work delivers to our economy. We need—it is vital for us—to support their work and encourage their activities.

A number of issues emerged during the forum, including the changing patterns of volunteering. I will highlight several points. Some organisations are facing declining volunteer numbers and are having difficulty attracting new recruits. Volunteers have less time to give to volunteering. Thirteen years ago 24 per cent of the total number of annual volunteer hours was contributed to the community and welfare sector but, by 2006, the ABS reports that this number had halved. Younger volunteers contribute a smaller number of volunteer hours per individual. The emergence of corporate involvement with volunteering is another point. The concept of social responsibility has been embraced by a number of large corporations who have set up employee groups.

The volunteer organisation sector is as diverse as it is large. In my own electorate of Greenway we have examples of the broad range—and this list is not exhaustive; there are many other volunteer organisations—including Lions; Rotary; chambers of commerce; sporting and recreation groups; farmer groups; environmental organisations; multicultural groups such as Sri Om Care, a voluntary care organisation for elderly people which has a day centre and activities for seniors, and the Australian Sikh Association in Glenwood, which has a number of community support programs and relies solely on volunteers; and Connections Community Developments, which operates in the newer Rouse Hill development sector within my electorate. They are supported by the corporate organisations but, again, rely heavily on volunteers. Thanks to them, initial support groups for families, such as parents groups, are being developed for the first time. They run a number of community activities and events where they bring the community together.

What type of people are likely to volunteer? Historically, of course, women have volunteered more commonly than men, although the percentage is not that different—36 per cent versus 32 per cent. For the population as a whole, the volunteering rate was highest, at 43 per cent, in the 35 to 44 age group, followed by the 45 to 50 age group at 39 per cent. Those groupings correlate to families with children in sport and people reaching retirement age with extra free time. The saying ‘If you want something done just ask a busy person’ is evident in
the statistics for people in employment. They had an 11 per cent higher rate of volunteering than those who were unemployed.

I suppose the question needs to be asked: why do people volunteer? The most popular reason, of course, was ‘helping others or helping the community’. Other reasons are more personal, such as personal satisfaction, social contact, learning new skills and gaining work experience.

One participant at the forum said that the older generation seemed, from their experience, to volunteer out of a sense of responsibility and that, growing up in a culture of responsibility, they felt a responsibility to contribute. The younger generation are often looking to how they can develop their needs and their skills, and so this is where volunteer organisations are challenged with adapting to and engaging younger volunteers, and newer groups are having to think outside the box and connect with the real motivations behind people volunteering. Whatever the reason, we are all better for the experience—those who volunteer and those who are the beneficiaries of their work.

Of course, the downside of volunteering is the increasing paperwork and levels of duty of care. There is an increasingly complex administrative and legal operating environment that affects volunteers. There is a view that volunteers are reluctant to accept governance or administrative roles because they did not volunteer necessarily to do paperwork, they want to do the practical side of things. In addition, concern was expressed regarding possible legal implications and liabilities for volunteers who accept governance positions.

The work of the committee revealed a new view of volunteering issues. Organisations wishing to recruit volunteers looked at trying to link opportunities for personal development and skills, or the opportunity to undertake training or gain qualifications. Assistance with costs would be of some benefit, and 28 per cent of volunteers reported that out-of-pocket expenses had a negative impact on their volunteering and that could be the high cost of fuel, phone or other items.

While volunteering may be free, the cost of recruitment, support, management and retention of volunteers is not. That is a cost to organisations and there may need to be some support for these. Ways of harnessing the goodwill of people, who are already volunteers or who are seeking to volunteer, are being canvassed and this work needs to be done. That work has started with the work of this committee and the generous and honest participation of volunteer organisations and individuals. I was pleased to be a part of that work and I wish the committee well in the future. I commend the report to the House.

Ms COLLINS (Franklin) (10.37 am)—I rise as a member of the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Family, Community, Housing and Youth to talk about the discussion paper that we prepared, titled *The value of volunteering*. This document canvasses the changing nature of volunteering in Australia. It looks at the many challenges and the issues that organisations and community and welfare sectors face as they find it increasingly difficult to attract and retain volunteers.

As a member of the committee I was fortunate enough, along with many other committee members, to spend some genuine time, talking with the volunteers and representatives who rely on volunteers at a roundtable discussion in Sydney earlier this year. It was this consulta-
tion process that formed the foundation for developing the discussion paper. It really revealed that the rates and patterns of volunteering have changed significantly over the past decade.

It also gave members of the committee a valuable insight into Australia’s volunteer profile. As members before me have said, the Australian Bureau of Statistic figures suggest that more than 30 per cent of people in Australia are volunteers. These volunteers contributed a total of 713 million hours of unpaid work to the Australian economy. The economic value of volunteering has been estimated at around $42 billion per annum. The time donated by volunteers to the welfare services, in particular, equates to $27.4 billion per year.

We noted that Australians participate in a range of volunteering activities, including fund-raising, preparation and serving of food, teaching and providing information as well as management and committee work. The majority of Australians put up their hand to volunteer simply to help others or to help their communities. However, volunteers also participate for personal satisfaction, for social contact, to learn new skills and to gain work experience. The paper also identifies challenging trends and changing trends in volunteering.

One of the most significant changes in trends is in relation to the increase in the number of young people—those aged 18 to 24 years—who now participate in volunteering. Over the past decade, the number of young people volunteering has increased from 17 per cent to 32 per cent, and this is certainly an interesting demographic shift when you consider that most people who volunteer are in the 35- to 44-year age group, followed by those aged 45 to 50. The trend seems to be that young people are turning more towards environmental and overseas aid organisations rather than considering volunteering in a role with more traditional community or welfare organisations. There seems to have been a considerable shift of volunteering by young people in the corporate sector also, with a growing trend towards corporate social responsibility.

This discussion paper raises many contemporary issues around volunteering and the way Australian people participate. I believe the discussion paper will foster healthy debate around the many challenges and changing trends facing those organisations that rely on the volunteers for their day-to-day activities. I know that in my own electorate of Franklin volunteers play a significant role, particularly across the welfare and community sectors. I want to take this opportunity to mention one, the Loui’s food van, which plays an integral role in assisting families and young children in the greater Hobart area. Last year alone the volunteers who work with Loui’s food van provided food, companionship and information and facilitated access to referral services to more than 11,000 homeless and disadvantaged people. This is in one year. It is run by the Society of St Vincent de Paul; they are a great organisation, helping many disadvantaged people in my electorate.

My electorate also has many other volunteer organisations and to list them all would take quite some time, so it is not my intention to do that. But I have been approached by many of the community volunteer organisations asking for assistance and asking if I can help them attract volunteers. I have, for the first time, put a notice in my newsletter for a particular organisation—the Clarence Community Volunteer Service—calling for volunteers to try to give them some support. I truly believe that as a nation we really cannot afford to lose this precious volunteer base. Volunteers are an essential linchpin to the continuation and delivery of vital services across the community and welfare sectors particularly. The role of volunteers in the Australian society is a valuable one. Volunteers contribute to building social capital, to sus-
taining communities and promoting social inclusion. There is no doubt that the Australian society benefits from those who volunteer their time and their expertise to organisations. New opportunities for volunteers are also emerging, and the standing committee recognises the challenges for the voluntary sector.

The committee also recognised the critical role for all tiers of government to ensure a dynamic, innovative and sustainable volunteer sector for the future. But overwhelmingly, the standing committee recognises the valuable contribution that volunteers make to society and to the economy. I put on record my appreciation for all of those people who volunteer in Australia, and particularly in my electorate of Franklin. I am sure the many people who benefit from those hours that they volunteer are extremely pleased that they do so. I commend this discussion paper to the House and, in doing so, I wish to thank the chair of the committee and the committee support team for their valuable work in preparing this paper. I commend the discussion paper to the chamber.

Mr RAGUSE (Forde) (10.43 am)—I rise today to speak to The value of volunteering report; it is a very important discussion paper. Looking at the material, I understand this will certainly be the basis for much discussion and very much the reward in terms of recognising people and their volunteering efforts. As we know, volunteers are the beating heart of our nation. Without volunteers, governments, hospitals, schools and the community as a whole would falter. Every year Australians give up eight million hours of their time to volunteer. The reason for volunteering is generally wanting to help others in our community.

This report recognises that all three levels of government have extensive involvement with volunteering. Governments provide funding and program support and also invest in research. Governments initiate policy, often with the assistance of volunteers. Volunteers note that costs associated with volunteering are often a deterrent for encouraging people to volunteer. The federal government is making a start on this by expanding the Australian government’s $21 million Volunteer Grants Program in 2008. The government expanded items eligible for funding under the program to include things like petrol and other benefits for volunteers who use their own resources for volunteering purposes. This new measure will assist volunteers who use their vehicles to support people in the community, including delivering food to the homeless, taking disadvantaged children to Saturday sports and visiting the elderly.

We as the federal arm of government have a Minister for Social Inclusion and a Parliamentary Secretary for Social Inclusion and the Voluntary Sector. What governments at all levels need to do is ensure that government support is not inconsistent and fragmented. There are many challenges facing the volunteering sector, and governments must manage those challenges and work with community organisations.

In my electorate of Forde, every year over 15,000 people volunteer their time for the benefit of the community. This is a great contribution to community life. In fact, just last week I addressed a classroom of students from the Tamrookum Primary School. It is a great little school in the southern area of my electorate, overlooking the beautiful Border Ranges into New South Wales. One question they asked me, when I addressed them as their federal member, was why I wanted to be a member of parliament. My answer included a reference to the ability to help the community and advocate for groups and organisations. Of course, as a member of the government and of the House committee that produced this report, I can say
that this work and the opportunity to support volunteers in my community make me very proud to be a member of parliament.

I would like to thank the school for my warm welcome on that occasion. I should say that in the school communities, particularly in small communities like the Tamrookum school, the community spirit is very high and that shows in the amount of volunteering in that sector. I would like to make special reference to the school captains, who made me very welcome on that occasion, Ryan Carroll and Emily Hocking; the teachers, Chris Caverly and Michelle Holohan; the Principal, Liz Salmoni; and on that occasion the Acting Principal, Mike Kelly. While we did not specifically talk about volunteering, there was recognition that the school of Tamrookum has a very good community spirit.

I would also like to take the opportunity to thank those in the community of Forde who donate their time. The people of Forde, like many around the country, engage in a voluntary capacity in many activities that help our communities. This year on Queensland Day, which is 6 June, I introduced for the seat of Forde Queensland Day Awards to celebrate and recognise the members of our community who have worked very hard and committed themselves to voluntary work and the task of volunteering. I would like to make special mention of a select number of people who were nominated for their work within the community. This year I gave out 40 awards—which is a very small number compared to the identified 15,000 people at least who volunteer their services every year in electorates like mine.

I would like to make mention of a number of those people who were specially commended. One particularly stands out amongst them all. The inaugural Queenslander of the Year in the seat of Forde is Colin Nelson. I briefly want to give a bit of background, which also will enhance our understanding of what volunteers do. Colin worked on a voluntary basis for many years, particularly in the area of community banking and providing help to people in the area of finance. He established three community banks in the Logan and adjacent areas. He has also been responsible for organising large events, such as Logan’s Big Day Out, which is an event for the people of Logan who have disabilities, and Logan’s Little Heroes, which is an event for young people in Logan who have a terminal illness. I take this opportunity to congratulate Colin, who is the inaugural Queenslander of the Year in the seat of Forde.

There are another few people I would like to make comment on. Ada Banks has been involved with the Relay for Life committee, and I have had the pleasure of being involved in that group for a number of years. Albert Pryor has worked tirelessly for the Beaudesert community through Rotary, at the same time as running his own business full time. Both Albert and Ada were awarded what I call the Community Spirit Award, which is very much about their volunteering activities. I would also like to acknowledge Robert and Nikki Cheslin, from a group called On the Edge, for their work with youth and those who are disadvantaged. I would also like to acknowledge community groups such as Tamborine Mountain Landcare, who work to keep pristine the surrounds of Tamborine Mountain. In the age of major development in South-East Queensland, that is quite a task. They are doing some wonderful things and they know they have an enormous amount of support from me as their representative in government. The Logan and Albert Conservation Association educate the community and advocate for the protection of our natural environment. I would also like to acknowledge Eve Curtis and her team of volunteers at the Tamborine Mountain News, who will celebrate its
50th year in publication. This is the longest-running small format A4 newspaper, and its staff is completely volunteer based. It provides a wonderful service to the community.

We cannot thank volunteers enough for the work they do in our community. This report demonstrates that the community spirit is alive and well in this country. It is our role as the government to support community organisations, as they are the backbone of our nation. For that reason I commend the contents of this report to the Main Committee.

Mr BRADBURY (Lindsay) (10.49 am)—It is a great privilege to be able to stand up in this place and speak in support of the discussion paper that has been tabled by the committee, *The value of volunteering*. I take the opportunity to congratulate the committee on their good work. I am not a member of this committee but I can see from the outcomes of their deliberations, and particularly the work that they have done in organising a roundtable discussion, that they have done a great deal to advance the interests of volunteers so far as decision making in this place is concerned.

As someone who spent nine years in the Penrith City Council as a councillor and on two occasions served as the Mayor of the City of Penrith, I had the opportunity and great privilege of meeting many volunteers and volunteer organisations within my community. I must say that meeting those volunteers, hearing the stories that they have to share and meeting the people that they have helped have always been sources of inspiration to me. I acknowledge the efforts of all of the volunteers. I became the mayor in my first term just shortly after the Olympics were held in Sydney. Penrith, as one of the venues that had hosted events for the Olympic Games, had a very large group of local people involved in contributing to the Olympics as volunteers. Shortly after that, 2001 became the International Year of the Volunteer. I had the privilege as the mayor of the city of hosting a series of civic receptions to acknowledge the good work of volunteers in our community. Without question, I rank that as being one of the most satisfying things that occurred in the time that I served on the council. I take my hat off and acknowledge today the efforts of all volunteers for building social capital, contributing to our community and making the Penrith city the great place that it is today.

I would like to comment specifically on some of the items that have been outlined in the discussion paper—in particular, the issue of training. This is something that has been raised time and time again with me by local volunteer groups. It is emerging as a significant issue. It is connected in some ways to the increased administrative and legislative complexity that is associated with conducting the ordinary business of volunteers, but it is a separate proposition and one that I wish to speak to. The report articulates the need for a greater degree of uniformity in the way in which volunteer accreditation and training is undertaken, perhaps with a view towards leading to a system of accreditation that allows the seamless transition of volunteers from one volunteer organisation to another. That is something that should be commended.

Recently, in September, I had the opportunity in my electorate to attend a volunteer training project which was hosted by the Nepean Community College. I take this opportunity to acknowledge the outstanding work of the principal of the college, Mr Eric Wright, who has been doing a tremendous job with that organisation over many years and is a great local citizen. The project emerged out of the strong relationship that had been developed between Great Community Transport and the Nepean Community College. The project’s vision is to underpin the training of volunteers locally with nationally recognised units of competency. The im-
petus for this particular project followed a tragic incident involving a volunteer, where the volunteer had an accident involving a client with the service that they were volunteering for. I will speak more specifically about that incident a little bit later. This raised a range of quality compliance and of course recognition issues, both from an insurance and a regulatory perspective. The need was identified to generate an organic program that would underpin current volunteer training efforts with recognised training rather than enforcing a top-down accreditation and compliance approach. A focus group was held with a group of agencies whose core business is delivered by volunteers.

I want to acknowledge those participating agencies. I do not have sufficient time to acknowledge each and every one of the volunteers associated with these organisations but, collectively, I acknowledge their efforts and pay tribute to the great work that they do in our local community. The participating agencies on the day included: Nepean Migrant Access; Nepean Food Services; the Benevolent Society; the Cancer Council; Great Community Transport; Penrith City Council, particularly the volunteers used by its library; and the Nepean Volunteer Service and the various projects that are under its auspices. I will come back and talk about the Nepean Volunteer Service in a moment.

One of the outcomes of the project was agreement amongst the stakeholders that the Nepean Community College should make an application to be granted a licence from Volunteering Australia to deliver certificates I, II and III in active volunteering, which will provide the underpinning units of competency for the delivery of a locally based volunteer training course. I was very pleased to have attended and participated on that occasion and I congratulate all of the stakeholders for the enthusiasm with which they came together and initiated that process.

I said earlier that I wanted to say a few words specifically about the Nepean Volunteer Services. I acknowledge in particular that 2008 represents the 20th anniversary since its incorporation. It is a tremendous local organisation. As I said, it has been servicing the local community for two decades and has been doing so with great distinction. I acknowledge the staff, the volunteers and the members of the management committee, specifically the chairperson, Ann Ash; vice-chair, Kevin Forbes; the secretary, Peter Wilson; the treasurer, Alan Carter; the public officer and management committee member, John Ewan; other committee members, Kevin Finlayson, a great local citizen; David Arnett and David Taylor; and the services staff member, Tami Ross, who looks after accounts and administration.

The Nepean Volunteer Services run a number of significant projects that rely upon both state and federal funding. In particular, I wish to acknowledge the efforts of all of the volunteers associated with these services, but some of the paid staff as well—Kim Vlotman, the coordinator; Robin Mooring, associated with the Nepean neighbour aid service; Helen Woelfenden, from the Community Visitors Scheme; Antoinette Abdelseed and Margaret Elder from the HACC volunteer training; and also Laurel Raddatz and Trish Boyd who are from the Volunteer Referral Service.

I note that the discussion paper engages in a fairly detailed discussion of the need to develop mechanisms for the linking of volunteers and potential volunteers with organisations in need of volunteers. I think the report describes them as volunteer-using organisations, or VUOs. I am pleased to report to the House that the Volunteer Referral Service, which is in fact a New South Wales state government funded program, is very much delivering that spe-
cific service to volunteers and volunteer-using organisations within our local community. Laurel Raddatz and Trish Boyd are at the helm; they do a great job. They are funded by the Department of Community Services. They essentially interview and recommend volunteers for community work in more than 80 not-for-profit organisations throughout the Western Sydney region.

One of the great things about this service is that it is not a simple database where volunteers can assess whether or not there is an opportunity to go and assist a particular organisation. This particular process involves someone sitting down and discussing with the potential volunteer their attributes and qualities and where they can make a contribution. As a result of that, the success rate of maintaining volunteers in the organisations that they are sent out to participate in has been very high.

I congratulate the service on the good work that they have been doing. On average, they refer more than 250 volunteers a year. The age range of volunteers is in their 20s through to retirees well into their 60s and beyond. They refer volunteers to great local organisations like the Museum of Fire, Barnardo’s at Cranebrook, Edinglassie Lodge, the Governor Phillip Nursing Home, Great Community Transport, Nepean Food Services and the North St Mary’s Neighbourhood Centre—just to name a few. They do a tremendous job and I acknowledge their efforts in linking volunteers with volunteer user organisations.

I said earlier that I wanted to say a few words in relation to increased administrative and legislative complexity. Clearly that is an increased burden on the not-for-profit sector. But what I would like to comment on more specifically is some of the legal implications that community groups are facing. There was an insurance crisis in this country not all that long ago and that led to massive increases in premiums, and that is something the not-for-profit sector had to confront. I think they did a good job by and large in coming to terms with that. In addition to that there are the criminal history record checks and, more and more so, the working with children checks which are obviously required and legitimate but impose a significant compliance and administrative burden on these organisations.

I want to read from some correspondence that I received from Helen Walker, who is the Manager of Great Community Transport. I take this opportunity to congratulate Helen. She is a great local resident and a great advocate of the region. Helen recently received the Woman of the West Award for her contribution to community services across the region of Western Sydney. I acknowledge her efforts. In advocating on behalf of her group, Great Community Transport, she alluded to a case that raises some of the real concerns that are expressed within this discussion paper in relation to legal obligations and requirements that arise for volunteers. She sets out in this email the events of ‘a dreadful accident’, as she describes it, that occurred in April this year and involved the death of a client. One of the volunteer drivers of the service had been charged with a criminal offence—that is, negligent driving causing death. This matter involved the volunteer pleading not guilty. The insurance did not cover any defence of this volunteer because there was a criminal matter involved. Notwithstanding that, support from a pro bono lawyer had been secured and that assisted. But now that the matter is going to court it involves the briefing of counsel. This person, who had been volunteering their time, through an incident that occurred on their watch and resulted in the very dreadful death of a client, now has to manage their own legal liability and exposure through the court system. That involves them having to incur costs and expenses in defending their case before the courts.
Clearly I do not wish to comment on the rights or wrongs of the charges. That is a matter for the courts. But it does raise the issue of exposure of volunteers. The organisation was insured but in this case that insurance did not provide the degree of protection necessary for assistance to this volunteer. What does that mean? What sort of message is that sending ultimately to our volunteers, who contribute their time often at their expense? Indeed, generally it is at their expense. It is their time, and potentially they could be facing a situation such as this. It is a very difficult problem that we have to confront. I think it is something that requires a coordinated response between the states and the federal government. But in the end if volunteers are exposed to this extent then I think it would be reasonable to conclude that cases such as this will discourage some people from volunteering their services, and that would be a great shame. That is an issue that I wish to bring to the attention of the House.

In concluding I would like to once again reaffirm my absolute congratulations to all of the volunteers within our community for the great work that they do. We do not pay them and, frankly, I do not think we could ever afford to pay them, such is the magnitude of the contribution that they make. There are so many outstanding groups within my local community. They are a continued source of inspiration to me. I acknowledge their efforts and I ask them to keep doing the great work that they are doing contributing to our community.

Debate (on motion by Mr Danby) adjourned.

NATIONAL RENTAL AFFORDABILITY SCHEME BILL 2008

Cognate bill:

NATIONAL RENTAL AFFORDABILITY SCHEME (CONSEQUENTIAL AMENDMENTS) BILL 2008

Second Reading

Debate resumed from 15 October, on motion by Ms Plibersek:

That this bill be now read a second time.

upon which Mr Morrison moved by way of amendment:

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

“while not declining to give this Bill a second reading, the House calls on the Government to make such amendments to the National Rental Affordability Scheme as would:

(1) provide for incentives to be given on a sliding scale to take account of the different development and land costs in different locations;

(2) provide for successful applicants to transfer their tax offsets on a once only basis to project financiers in return for a lower cost of funds, including providing such tax offsets to not for profit entities for this purpose;

(3) require that State and Territory governments match the incentives provided by the Commonwealth under the Scheme;

(4) extend project eligibility criteria to include conversions to affordable housing from existing residential stock, particularly where such projects involve substantial redevelopment to provide for specific needs groups such as aged or disabled accommodation;

(5) extend the upper level income limits for tenant income eligibility criteria by 30 per cent in each band to ensure greater access for key workers and those seeking to save to buy their first homes;

(6) provide ‘as of right’ eligibility for the Federal Government’s solar panel rebate and solar hot water rebate schemes; and

MAIN COMMITTEE
extend the establishment phase criteria that approximately 20 per cent of incentives be available for projects of not less than 20 dwellings, to the entire Scheme”.

Mr TUCKEY (O’Connor) (11.05 am)—The National Rental Affordability Scheme Bill 2008 and related bill are important bills, legislation that, with some quite clear concerns, the opposition is prepared to support. Quite clearly, those concerns have been listed in the Hansard by the member for Cook, and I will not waste the time of this place in repeating them, but I must add that I endorse them entirely because they are sensible and they raise issues that I think have been overlooked by the government, particularly in the administration of this proposal. I note that in the second reading speech the Minister for Housing says:

We may need to make improvements to the scheme before it is expanded.

Of course, maybe some of those improvements need to be applied before the scheme is commenced. Notwithstanding that, we are also advised that the timetable that the government has set for itself is primarily being maintained.

Fundamentally, it is a proposal to provide a $6,000 per annum tax offset or grant—in the case of the grant, to non-profit organisations. I note this, although it is not very clear. I quote from the second reading speech:

Unless a participant is an endorsed charitable institution, the incentive is to be made available in the form of the refundable tax offset.

If the business has made no money—and I note the present circumstances—it appears it gets no help. Maybe that tax offset is in fact a rebate, where the ATO can send that person a cheque by that means of delivery, but that is unclear to me. I thought, coming to this debate, that an investor, not being a not-for-profit institution, could receive $6,000 cash a year to assist them in providing rental, as it will be at a suggested 20 per cent below the market at any point in time. That in itself also raises some difficulties I would like to draw to the attention of the House.

The reality is that, in administrative terms, if the cash is not available for someone or some industry that has, for instance, negatively geared the arrangement—in other words, borrowed money, as is frequently the case in rental matters—then I think we should be told whether that tax offset can occur as a rebate; in other words, the ATO sends a cheque notwithstanding. It is easy to assume that everyone will make a taxable profit.

Furthermore, I am not able to clarify in my mind whether local government is seen as a not-for-profit institution. I draw the attention of the chamber to the fact that throughout my electorate the great shortage of rental accommodation is for public servants. Some might shrug and say, ‘That’s somebody else’s fault.’ Well, we have abandoned the blame game, and local government in my electorate—I think particularly of the town of Tammin—is desperate to get some quality housing so it can actually get schoolteachers, policemen and other such officers to attend in their town.

The tenant eligibility criteria table indicates that a single person, typically the young graduate schoolteacher who comes to rural electorates on their first posting, has an annual income limit of $39,351 and an upper income limit—and I do not know how that differential is calculated—of $48,189. But one of the first actions of the newly elected Liberal state government in WA has been to increase the first-year salary of a schoolteacher to $50,000, so they will not
be able to get subsidised rental accommodation in a rural area where, of course, unlike in the cities, other accommodation is simply not available.

Someone might want to tell us how that is going to be resolved and whether there is an inadequacy in all of this. This particular table does, of course, give instruction and advice as to what low- and middle-income earners happen to be. I would say that, more particularly in cities like Sydney, people on those limits as provided to us would be very low income earners in a relative sense. That raises this question: is a fixed amount of $6,000 applicable from state to state, from city to city, considering the huge differential in building costs?

Might I add that Australia’s biggest public housing home builder, BGC, resides in Western Australia. BGC was so hated by the previous state government because the proprietor took the view that you could choose whether or not to join the union, and yet the business was vertically integrated and was providing public housing of acceptable quality cheaper than anybody else. The previous state government created a provision that no tenderer in WA could have more than $5 million worth of work on at any one time, just to get this bloke. Their own agency manager went berserk. The builder had to take them to court for the right to continue to provide more houses for the dollar. Can you imagine that circumstances—a state government reducing the number of houses that could be constructed, primarily from Commonwealth funding, so they could try to force a particular builder to make everyone join the union even though most of his people would earn about double what they would ever get if they were on any form of award structure because they are subcontractors. As I said, the business was vertically integrated. The builder won the court case and the minister involved then had to resign, but he came back through the back door later on and resumed his job as a minister until they lost government recently.

So eligibility is a serious matter, and I think that the eligibility criteria that identify people in that category will be found to be too low. But then we also discover that the states are going to make a contribution of $2,000. They will rip out somewhere between $100,000 and $150,000 in upfront charges and costs for the development of land. And, remember, this has to be new properties; you cannot subdivide a large old-fashioned house and make two duplexes out it, so you have to go out there and develop building blocks where the state governments, through their decrepit planning arrangements, cause you to achieve very substantial interest charges after purchasing the lot and getting to the point where it is actually delivered. They have headwork charges and all sorts of other costs that, as I said, add somewhere between $100,000 and $150,000; then they will be the eventual recipients of the GST on the property and will give back 2,000 bucks—excuse me! The reality is—and I hope I have a few moments to speak further on headwork charges and all these other matters, and possibly better alternatives—that the states should have been obliged to match the Commonwealth. Furthermore, by any measure, a contribution on their behalf of around $50,000 might have been sincerely altruistic.

They have made an art form of pushing up the cost of land, and everybody knows, from a substantial series of surveys, that the cost of building a house has in real terms been reasonably stable. Yes, some people have increased that cost by wanting three bathrooms and things of that nature—bigger houses—but the actual construction cost has substantially stayed where it was in real terms. This blow-out in costs that is putting people under mortgage stress—it was never interest rates; they used to be 13 and 14 per cent for housing under the Hawke gov-
ernment—has been driven by the avariciousness of state Labor governments in ripping money out of residential land development. That, I think, is something that the government should address, because it was the Howard government that gave the states the GST for the purpose of addressing their own responsibilities. All they have done is to employ more and more people. There were an additional 5,000 public servants in Western Australia in the last year of the Carpenter government. And what was their job? To tell people what they cannot do. I cannot find anybody in the Public Service today at state level who ever gives people the incentive to get out or the encouragement to do something. You, Mr Deputy Speaker Secker, might note how that has occurred in the rural sector. We used to have a department for agriculture; now it is the very department that goes around like a copper trying to fine farmers for clearing a bit of land or something of that nature.

There is a further concern when it comes to this admission by the government that we may need to make improvements to the scheme before it is expanded. I moved to the town of Carnarvon in 1958 and there was, because of the nature of the territory—it was a flood-prone little town stuck on the only remaining bit of sandhill, which was 11-foot above sea level—a block of very old houses that were privately owned and thereafter every new house was built by the then state housing authority. So everybody occupied them—business people, all sorts of people. But people got these houses—and I have seen it elsewhere—when their income was below the figures that have been quoted in this legislation. So, when someone on $30,000 a year gets one of these houses and then mum goes to work and they are over the limit, do you kick them out? Do you tell the private owner that they are no longer entitled to their $6,000 incentive? Do you tell one of the church bodies to go there and kick these people out? I can find nothing that addresses that issue. How long are people allowed to stay in subsidised housing if, as we hope for everybody, their income increases by one means or another? What are you going to do about it? I hope the following speaker says we have all this under control, because I have seen it in public housing. I have seen how difficult it is. Those people are typically very good tenants. They pay their rent on time and they do everything right, but they should have gone out and bought their own home, because their circumstances have improved or, in some cases, they were given housing because no other housing was available. In fact, in that town of Carnarvon, I as the Shire President and others intervened and built levee banks and things and developed 500 blocks of land as a council so that people could own their own house, and of course that is the ultimate ambition of most Australians.

These are issues of concern that are not sufficient to cause me to oppose the legislation but do raise very big ifs in terms of the administration. In fact, to refer to a personal experience, I made a note on this many years ago. I was in business—I had a profitable business—when Malcolm Fraser brought in the investment allowance just prior to my buying two brand spanking new road trains. When I say ‘buy’, I mean that I bought them under lease finance. I outlaid upfront $2,000 for each of these vehicles. They were to operate north of the 26 parallel, and I got a $40,000 tax cut for both of them. On paper that made me a pauper and my son became eligible for the then university study allowance. I had outlaid $4,000 and got an $80,000 tax cut. How does that work? Are you poor if you paid no tax? How is that going to work? These are the issues. Maybe I am doing the government a favour. They can go back and rewrite the rules before this program moves too far.
There are many sorts of tests that you apply in these matters. I have made the point that I hope that local government, particularly rural local government, will be treated as not-for-profit organisations and be involved. I think we are going to have great difficulty, with the returns that are suggested, getting substantial commitments from the private sector. I, of course, would not discourage that and I hope it occurs.

In closing, having made those remarks—and I support all the amendments that are proposed by the member for Cook—I want to make the point that I believe we are barking up the wrong tree in attempting this. The first responsibility is to get the price of land down. Then many other problems would disappear. Typically in the past, state governments saw it as their responsibility to provide services. Today they want to apply taxes even to the roads they have not built and may never build. As I said, it has become an art form—and that should be changed.

I think the Commonwealth, as a pilot scheme, should take one of the large areas of land it owns—Defence or otherwise—and teach the states a lesson. They need to have an area of land sufficient for it to be self-supporting. It could generate its own electricity, including from the garbage collected. There would be included sufficient solar panels to meet the electricity need. Each block would have in its development costs a large underground rainwater tank et cetera. You could do everything. You could treat the sewage on site. I represent a small country town of 2,000 or 3,000 people and we have our own sewerage plant. You would tell the states to get lost.

Furthermore, and I believe it is financially possible, you would not sell the land—that is when the states rush in and get their stamp duty—but you would rent it. You would rent it on a weekly basis and at an opening price that is pretty attractive. You would issue a bankable document to say that the city works on leased property, although you would pay freehold prices for it upfront. People then would only have to find the cost of construction of a house in the first instance. You could give them an opportunity within that lease to pay market value for that land after 10 years, or whatever—at which stage of course the state governments would be in there with their stamp duty grab. But that is another issue.

It is a fact of life that you could create a facility within Australia to teach the states a lesson and you could run it along those lines. You could have private involvement and, of course, they would wait for their profit. It would be a great opportunity for superannuation companies, particularly the industry ones, who would be creating a lot of work for their members. These sorts of opportunities need more development than I could give you in the time available today, but I have done some of the figures. It is a really cheap house, because you do not burden the land with the state’s rip-off and, what is more, you do not oblige people to pay for it in the first instance and attract the stamp duty and other fees that go with it. You run it as Commonwealth property; that is why it needs to be leased, not sold. I think we should look further at some of these ideas, rather than the types of schemes that are promoted. I think the government will find this a very difficult scheme to administer.

**Dr KELLY** (Eden-Monaro—Parliamentary Secretary for Defence Support) (11.26 am)—It is a great pleasure to speak in support of the National Rental Affordability Scheme Bill 2008 and related bill, which were introduced into this House by the Minister for Housing, the Hon. Tanya Plibersek. I think all Australians will have cause to be grateful to the minister for presenting such critical legislation at this time in our economic and social circumstances.
The National Rental Affordability Scheme Bill is designed to assist some of the millions of Australians who missed out on the benefits of the years of growth that Australia enjoyed following the economic reforms of the Hawke and Keating governments. The failure of the Howard government to see that the benefits of economic growth flowed to all Australians, and not just to those who were already well-off, means that large numbers of people are still struggling. Once again, it is the Rudd government which is taking the necessary action to see that the benefits of prosperity are enjoyed by all Australians.

During the bleak Howard years, the government fashioned a governance landscape devoid of ideas. They sat here fat, dumb and happy and coasted on the back of economic growth, assuming that everything would always be fine. They never addressed the underlying, unfinished business in our economy and society. The Rudd government understands that growth is not enough: there must also be equity in the distribution of the benefits of growth.

While house prices in Sydney’s eastern suburbs and on the North Shore have doubled and doubled again, in the rest of Sydney rents have risen sharply and the availability of rental housing has fallen. The same thing has happened in all Australian capital cities, as well as in many regional areas such as those I represent in Eden-Monaro. As Australia’s economy and population have grown and as house prices have increased, people on average incomes have found it more difficult to buy a home. Between 2000 and 2005, the average price of a home in Australia’s capital cities increased by 170 per cent. Not surprisingly, many young families who in the past would be buying a home are now unable to do so and they are staying in the rental market.

The total number of rental households has increased from 1.5 million in 1995 to 2.1 million today. This increased demand is keeping rental vacancy rates very low—below two per cent in Sydney—and is pushing up rents across all the capital cities and in many regional towns. In the June quarter of 2008, rents across Australia increased by 2.2 per cent in the quarter, the largest quarterly rise since 1989. The increase for the whole of 2008 is expected to be 7.7 per cent. This is of course higher than the rate of growth of average weekly earnings and higher than the rate of inflation.

Rents overall are now on average 60 per cent higher than they were in 1990. This may not be a problem for higher income people living in inner city apartment towers, but it is a big problem for working families living on average or below average incomes and trying to raise a family, juggle work and family and send kids to school, all the while paying a quarter or a third of their income on rent. This is a problem not just for the capital cities but also for areas such as Eden-Monaro, where employment is increasingly concentrated in the seasonally dependent tourism, hospitality and retail sectors. Many people working in these industries, earning average or below average incomes, need to find rental accommodation at a reasonable rental rate close to where they work. At present, many of them cannot do so. This is hampering the efforts of many young Australians to find jobs and start families and is also hampering economic growth in these areas. As a consequence of the seasonal nature of the employment on the South Coast of New South Wales, there is significant underemployment, which makes it very hard to budget for a rent that does not follow this pattern. There are those in rental accommodation who are sometimes turned out to make way for holidaying tenants who pay higher short-term rents.
This year, an important study by the National Centre for Social and Economic Modelling found that rental stress was affecting an increasing proportion of Australians. Rental stress is said to occur when households have to spend more than 30 per cent of their income on rent. The study found that nearly 300,000 Australian households—more than 10 per cent of the total 2.1 million households in rental accommodation—are already suffering from rental stress. Since average household size is about 2.5, that means that about 750,000 people are living in households affected by rental stress. The centre estimates that this number will continue to increase sharply if nothing is done.

The centre also found that rental stress is higher in non-metropolitan Australia than it is in the capital cities, and is highest in Queensland and New South Wales. The reasons for this are fairly obvious. These are the areas where an increasing number of Australians want to live. We are seeing a steady shift away from the capital cities and into coastal areas such as those I represent on the South Coast of New South Wales. Anyone who has visited towns in my electorate can see why people want to live in them, as many sea and tree changers increasingly are doing.

An additional factor in my electorate is that it borders the ACT. Canberra has the highest rents of any large Australian city. This means that an increasing number of people who work in Canberra are looking to rent in Queanbeyan, Bungendore and Jerrabomberra, and this is squeezing the housing supply and pushing up rents in these towns. As population and employment in towns in Eden-Monaro have grown, the provision of affordable rental housing has not kept up. With house prices in the capital cities booming, investment has gone into building inner city apartment towers for the well-off and new homes in the suburbs for private buyers, not into rental housing for people on average incomes and particularly not in regional areas. That is quite understandable; investment goes where the profits are likely to be the highest. The Rudd government understands this, while the previous government did not. That is why Kevin Rudd announced during the election campaign that he would make housing affordability, particularly for renters, a priority for a new Labor government. That priority is even more important now that economic uncertainty may affect the availability of private investment capital for rental housing.

In Eden-Monaro there are 8,700 households renting and, of them, over a third are suffering from rental stress—they are spending more than 30 per cent of their incomes on rent. Anyone who has tried to raise a family on an average or below average income while paying more than 30 per cent of their incomes on rent will know how tough that is. I certainly know it. I know it from what people in Eden-Monaro told me during the campaign last year and what they have told me since I was elected.

I also know it from my own personal experience. In 1966, when my father’s business partner ran off with their funds, my father was declared bankrupt and we lost our home. This led to a downward spiral in our family circumstances that seemed to have no bottom. Our family became homeless, and I will never forget living in my aunt’s garage in a row of five beds and surviving for some time on the charity of the St Vincent de Paul Society, including the bed I slept on. This situation led to my father falling back on alcohol, resulting in domestic violence, my mother eventually suffering two nervous breakdowns and my sister attempting suicide. I finally drifted away at the age of 16 and was eventually taken into the home of a couple of friends. Homelessness can be humiliating, soul destroying and the cause of family dis-
integration and relentless misery. We need to bend all our efforts to avoid such human wreck-age in our society. Needless to say, I do not want to see the scenario depicted by the National Centre for Social and Economic Modelling of a further rapid rise in rental stress over the next decade played out in the towns of my electorate.

Rental stress contributes to a variety of other social problems: substance abuse, child ne-glect and abuse, poor school retention rates and crime. These all impose costs, social and fi-nancial, on the community as a whole. It is the responsibility of government to see that this scenario is prevented. I do not think the Howard government, with its faith that the market will always provide what the community needs, really understood that. In the absence of lead-ership from the previous government my community typically decided to get on with the job as far as it was within their power to do so.

In Queanbeyan a dedicated and hardworking team were determined to do something about the 50 to 100 homeless associated with mental illness. They formed a board under the patron-age of the Hon. Sir William Dean, our former Governor-General, and galvanised our commu-nity behind the Home in Queanbeyan project to build long-term housing for these people, with associated treatment and support rolled in. So far, they have raised over $400,000 in pub-lic money and $250,000 from the NSW government through the efforts of my colleague Steve Whan, the hardworking state member for Monaro. I am pleased to say that the Rudd Labor government has committed to support the project with $2 million.

One of the benefits of the Home in Queanbeyan project is that it has challenged the para-digm of homelessness and mental health management and has forced the NSW government to rethink its approach. It has also produced the added benefit of enlisting community responsibility and participation in a move away from the disengagement that has been an unhealthy feature of modern society. I salute all involved in the Home in Queanbeyan project, whose public spirit and compassion adds depth to the worth of our community.

Another example of this spirit in Eden-Monaro is the Bega Eco-Neighbourhood Develop-ment project, or BEND project, reflecting in fact some of the comments of the member for O’Connor that we just heard. This is a wonderful meshing of community managed affordable housing, the promotion of renewable energy, energy efficiency, water self-sufficiency and localised food production. They have benefited from federal assistance in relation to their creative water solutions and are now looking to draw specifically on the affordable housing programs that have been introduced by the Rudd Labor government. This project combines community concern to assist those in housing crisis with inspiring creativity and imagination. The BEND team are truly leading the nation as to the art of the possible and local self-help.

Another way of easing the housing problem is through greater supply. I am pleased to have been able to assist in this respect by helping to create the circumstances in which the key Googong and Tralee developments in the Queanbeyan area may now be able to go ahead. This included resolving the 20-year dispute over the Googong Dam and the water supply for the future expansion of Queanbeyan and the ACT. This took a great deal of personal effort and the invalu-al assistance of the Minister for Finance, the Hon. Lindsay Tanner, and the Minister for Home Affairs, the Hon. Bob Debus. I would like to express here my gratitude and that of my community for their support, along with the support of the Chief Minister of the ACT, Jon Stanhope. I have greatly enjoyed working with Jon to the mutual benefit of our communities and wish him well in the upcoming ACT election.
In relation to the Tralee development proposal, I believe we are close now to achieving an outcome acceptable to all parties and I was pleased to play a role in this process, particularly in ensuring realistic information was available. In addition, in my portfolio role with respect to my responsibilities for the Defence Estate I have been working with my colleagues toward the release of surplus Defence land to ease the supply situation nationally, which goes to the other comments of the member for O’Connor in relation to the overall price of land. This is part of a comprehensive national strategy by the Rudd Labor government—the sort of strategic approach that has been so sadly absent over the 12 years of the Howard government.

The Rudd government does understand the need for a constructive role for government in tackling the housing problems that Australia faces. We are not suggesting a return to the housing policies of the 1950s, with government building and owning high-rise apartment blocks or suburban housing estates. We want to see the private housing industry build the houses and flats that people want. But we acknowledge that at present the incentives provided by the market are not producing enough investment in rental housing for average- and low-income working families, and particularly not in regional areas like Eden-Monaro. That is why this bill is so important and so welcome.

This bill will establish the National Rental Affordability Scheme to encourage large-scale private investment in rental housing by offering an incentive to participants. It aims to increase the supply of affordable rental dwellings and reduce rental costs for low- and moderate-income households. The scheme will offer incentives to providers of new dwellings on the condition that they are rented to low- and moderate-income households at 20 per cent below market rates.

The bill provides for a refundable tax offset or payment to the value of $6,000 per dwelling per year, provided there is also a state or territory contribution in the form of direct financial support or in-kind contribution to the value of $2,000 per dwelling per year. The incentive will be provided each year for 10 years to complying participants and will be indexed in line with the rental component of the consumer price index. The scheme is estimated to cost $622.6 million over four years.

The modelling that underlies the bill calculates that the provision of these incentives will lead to the construction of approximately 50,000 additional new rental units by 2012. Since it is a condition of participation in the scheme that these units must be rented to people on below average earnings and at a rent below current market levels, this scheme is targeted at those that need it most. It will not be a scheme which mostly benefits those who are already well-off, unlike so many of the uncosted, uncapped giveaway schemes of the Howard government.

The minister has estimated that 1.5 million Australian households will be eligible for tenancies under this scheme. Of course, 50,000 units will not accommodate 1.5 million households, but the construction of these units will serve to reduce pressure in the rental market and help restrain the rise in rents. The scheme will thus make a contribution to housing affordability across the board.

I should also point out that this bill is not an isolated measure but part of the government’s overall housing strategy, which included $2.2 billion worth of housing commitments made in this year’s budget. The announcements this week, I might add, of the increase in the first home owners purchasing grant to take this scheme from $7,000 to $14,000 for already con-
structed homes and $21,000 for homes to be constructed have been very welcome. That is most welcome news in my electorate, I can assure you. This is combined with the pension assistance. That assistance will benefit 25,000 pensioners in my electorate and assist with the impost of their housing costs.

There would not be such pressure on the rental housing market if so many Australians had not been pushed out of home ownership by the 10 rises in interest rates under the Howard government. Hundreds of thousands of young Australian families who would have liked to start buying their own home could not do so because of skyrocketing house prices and high interest rates. These interest rate hikes had a greater impact than at any time previously because, with larger sums having to be borrowed to break into the market, the proportion of disposable income consumed by a mortgage was much higher.

That is why the Labor Party held a housing affordability summit before last year’s election. Kevin Rudd, Wayne Swan, now the Treasurer, and Tanya Plibersek, now the Minister for Housing, met with economists, developers and industry representatives to hear ideas and develop solutions. One of the proposals that came out of that summit was the Housing Affordability Fund. The fund tackles two major impediments to housing supply: costs which result from planning delays, and the impact of infrastructure charges. The Housing Affordability Fund will give local councils the chance to improve housing affordability in their communities.

The Housing Affordability Fund has been welcomed by local government and the housing industry. Mr Wilhelm Harnisch, the Chief Executive Officer of the Master Builders Association, said:

The HAF is a welcome return of the Commonwealth into this vital part of the Australian social fabric and the economy. There has been a decade of policy neglect in addressing the supply side barriers and the HAF is supported by industry as a first and vital step in redressing this area of policy neglect.

Let me repeat that: ‘a decade of policy neglect’. That is not me talking and it is not the minister talking; that is the verdict of a leading representative of the private housing industry. That is a pretty damming judgement on the previous government, a supposedly pro-business government, from someone who is in a position to know and who has no political axe to grind.

The minister said in her ministerial statement last month that the Rudd government was elected to tackle the problem of housing affordability and that since last November the government has taken that mandate seriously and delivered on its commitments. I am very proud to be part of a government that is delivering on its commitments. The people of Eden-Monaro sent me here to be part of such a government, to see that the benefits of Australia’s prosperity are made accessible to all Australians, whether they live in Bellevue Hill or Bega, in Toorak or Tumut. I take that mission seriously and that is why I am very pleased to commend this legislation to the House.

Mr BILLSON (Dunkley) (11.44 am)—I rise to speak on the National Rental Affordability Scheme Bill 2008 and associated bill and to commend to the parliament the opposition’s amendment, which seeks not to decline to give the bill a second reading but to point to a number of opportunities to improve this scheme to make it more attractive, to have the interconnections between this initiative and others and the private market work better to make available more affordable housing.
I commend the opposition’s amendment to the House. It takes account of a range of factors such as the scheme’s seeming bias towards outer metropolitan developments, given the scale of eligible projects and the number of units that are concerned with that. It also encourages recognition of different land and development costs in different locations. There is also recognition that there is a need for people to evaluate the proposition that is put before them through this measure against the commercial opportunities of not participating in the measure. Some would say those benefits and costs are finely balanced—but I will touch on that a little bit later.

There is also an issue about responding to particular areas of housing stress—not stress in the mortgage sense but stress in the lack of availability sense, particularly for the aged community and those looking for accommodation that is within reach of support services. That goes to an issue that is very relevant in the electorate that I represent, the electorate of Dunkley, and particularly for the Frankston North community. Many Pines residents have been in their public housing units for many years and now their circumstances have changed. They have occupied the family home. Given the horrendous waiting lists for public housing in Victoria, you can imagine that any tenant that has secured the emotional and financial benefits of a public housing home would not be keen to let it go. You often see, particularly in areas within my community, public houses that are more family orientated being occupied by a much smaller household.

One of the propositions that I have advanced for some years now is the concept of housing conversion—recognising our different housing needs through different stages in our lives and better responding to circumstances. Yet, given the scarcity of public housing, you can understand why there is a locked grip on any kind of public housing, even if the three or four children that may have occupied it with the parents or single parent have long flown the coop. They do not want to let it go, because of the uncertainty over having some other kind of accommodation. I will come back to that in a moment.

Something I would particularly like to draw attention to is the interconnection between affordability and sustainability. One of the most appealing opportunities about any kind of measure of this nature is that it is a chance for us to send a clear signal to the building industry that sustainability attributes are highly valued—to not simply say that we are interested in them but insist upon them as part of the process. This means factoring in sustainability attributes in the design and in the technology that is employed—the use of solar powered hot water, even photovoltaic electricity generation systems, water efficient appliances and fixtures and fittings, the thermal orientation of a home to minimise the need for energy to adjust the climate inside, and the use of building materials that are complementary and look to manage the climate within that area.

All of the sustainability attributes where we as a nation have enormous opportunities should not be put on the table as ‘it would be nice if’ but as ‘this is what we are looking for’. That is not only because it is the right thing to do. Sustainability contributes to affordability, not just in the build phase with the selection of materials and the like but also once a dwelling unit has been established, as those sustainability attributes make its tenancy more affordable, with reduced water and energy costs and a better quality of the environment in which people live. More particularly, it sends a strong signal to the building industry and the market generally that these things are within our reach. They are entirely commercially viable, readily ac-
cessible, ready-to-be-deployed attributes. A leadership role from the Commonwealth when we are making these sums of money available would mean that we would be inculcating sustainability principles and objectives in the work, not simply mentioning them as an aside. I will come back to this in a moment.

The National Rental Affordability Scheme Bill basically puts forward a number of incentives and, as previous speakers have said, captures the elements of the ALP election policy. What is not being said is why we have got to the point where we are. Previous measures—particularly through the Commonwealth-State Housing Agreement, which saw $10 billion invested in public housing to support the efforts of the Commonwealth and the states over a decade—saw a few dozen extra properties become available. That is a national scandal. It is outrageous that, with the Commonwealth government providing that financial assistance and with the enormous demand, the excruciating waiting lists and the lack of hope and even promise, people well able to benefit from public housing cannot actually get anywhere near the front of the queue. To think that $10 billion was consumed over a decade with only several dozen extra dwelling units available across the continent is an absolute scandal.

I am not surprised Labor members with strong connections with state and territory Labor governments are happily avoiding a conversation about that. That is a decade of $10 billion of resources and we have very little to show for it. It is a credit to Mal Brough, the former minister, who went out and said, ‘Surely there are better ways,’ because that methodology is not going to deliver the outcome. He was a forward-thinking minister who said, ‘Let us try and see if there are new opportunities to bring about change and see if there are new ways of the Commonwealth interacting with the community, with the private sector, with housing organisations and with institutions, and let’s see if we can also give some encouragement to the state and territories to lift their games.’ That may well be the genesis of this bill. I am not claiming we would have gone about it the same way, but the need to do something different was unavoidably obvious when you looked at the money spent for the opportunities available for affordable housing under more traditional public housing models.

This bill deals with a refundable tax offset and other taxation issues related to the scheme. Its aim is to encourage large-scale investment in new housing by offering an incentive to participants in the scheme to increase the supply of affordable rental housing dwellings at reduced rental costs for low-, middle- and modest-income households. The idea is there are incentives available and they are outlined in the bill. Essentially, they look to secure a 20 per cent reduction in rent under the market value in return for the provision of about $8,000 in annual financial incentives—$6,000 from the Commonwealth and $2,000 from the states and territories—over a maximum period of 10 years. These incentives may be in the form of tax offsets or direct financial payments depending on the applicant’s eligibility. We note, and the Bill’s Digest draws out, the clear distinction about who may be eligible project participants, and that is something we hope to learn more about as the regulations are developed.

There are a range of phasings to bring online these scheme-induced dwelling units, with the ambition of some 50,000 incentives being available over the next four or five years. A considerable amount of funding has been made available and the scheme has been welcomed by the development industry and the community housing sector, so all of that sounds pretty good. That is encouraging at this stage.
I would like to just talk about a couple of aspects within the bill. Firstly, the commercial incentive is something that will need to be weighed up. The taxation or direct payment incentives in return for a discount on the commercial rent of 20 per cent will need to be evaluated by prospective scheme participants, and at this stage the commercial sector is working through the extent to which that is an attractive proposition or not. There is something that certainly I would encourage the minister to consider. Whilst those three avenues of incentive—whether capital gains tax relief, tax offset or non-assessable for tax purpose grants from states and territories, or in kind—are canvassed in the legislation, what is less evident is where the direct payment mechanism is for those that are not taxable, for the charitable organisations that may be involved. The advice I have had is that that is not canvassed in the legislation as it is drafted, and I would certainly encourage the minister to examine that just to satisfy the parliament that that is addressed adequately in the framing of this legislation.

A second issue goes to the composition of the scheme. The shadow minister, my friend and colleague Scott Morrison, has outlined how the way it has developed might in fact skew activity to the outer metropolitan and peri-urban parts of our community. I, for one, would think that is a positive, because I represent outer metropolitan peri-urban communities, but one of the things that we have found is the strong feeling of community connectedness that many people have with the areas within which they have grown up or spent much of their lives. We need to have a nimbleness within the scheme to bring about an availability of rental accommodation supported by this scheme, right across the continent—particularly in some of the inner- and middle-urban areas, where that threshold of dwelling units or houses may be difficult to achieve.

There is also an issue about the conversion of established properties. I have touched on an example in my own community in the Pines, where the type of housing that best suits a person’s needs may change over time. There should be scope to have that recognised or even to have established properties fully renovated at some expense, with a graduated incentive to recognise that investment. The net outcome should be a far improved opportunity for affordable rental accommodation. That idea has taken hold with some of the commercial property developers. If we are seeking to have the scheme appeal to that group, it might be worth hooking the scheme to a wagon that is already moving. That area could be examined also.

Another point is the issue of sustainability. The prospectus is circulating, and that is necessary because scheme eligibility is actually retrospective. The notional start-up date is 1 July 2008, even though we are not quite through the legislative and regulatory mechanics. The prospectus is circulating, and it seeks to tantalise people to become involved. It asserts that the offset and cash incentives will:

… make renting more affordable in two key ways, an overall increase in the number of rental dwellings and through the fixed term rental discount of 20 per cent.

That is a good call, but I wish it said there would be three-way attractiveness. It should deal with the sustainability issue. As an incentive it should be recognised and embraced—and not as in ‘it would be nice if’ but as in ‘this should happen’. The prospectus seeks to appeal to potential investors by suggesting that investing would help investors point to their social responsibility. They could report to their investors that they are doing the right thing and that the decisions that have been made are triple-bottom-line investment inspired. This should include sustainability. This would affect affordability at the point of entry, and the rent that would
flow from it would be a factor. Also, affordability of occupying the tenancy would be improved because of reduced energy cost and reduction in water use. Hopefully, there would be some net gain in photovoltaic or solar electricity generation. That would be my sense. This is an opportunity that should be picked up. I encourage those present, particularly the officials present, to see whether there is scope to embrace that in the regulations. I understand the draft regulations are still being worked upon.

The prospectus, under the selection criteria and alongside ‘accessibility’, touches on ‘sustainability’ as a desired outcome. It points out at some length what the accessibility virtues of a proposal might be but does not tease out the sustainability virtues. When we go on further we see that there are some priority areas of interest. Again, all of that is heading in the right direction but I think we need to be more assertive about it. I think there is a need for leadership in these areas. We need to say, ‘No, it’s not satisfactory to build quick, readily constructible but less sustainable dwelling units just to secure this opportunity.’ We should be using the investment by the taxpayer to not only deliver the outcomes that we aspire to through this National Rental Affordability Scheme but secure something for the broader community. We could make greenhouse gains and water efficiency gains. I point to those, because everybody is talking about them. This is an opportunity to actually do something about them.

Part of my role as shadow minister for sustainable development and cities is to make sure that, where we are making enormous commitments of taxpayer resources, sustainability principles are embedded in our thinking and decision making, not just tacked on the end. There is an opportunity to do that. I urge—in the positive and constructive way in which I am seeking to raise these issues—the government to embrace these concepts and to see that they become embedded in processes like this. We have put forward a proposal that would see included in this scheme some of the rebate schemes that are available through other portfolios so that occupants would have an as-of-right ability to access them. That would be fine, but that would place the onus on the occupier. We should be saying to the developers, the proponents of dwelling units, housing developments and the like, ‘Under this scheme we expect you to do those yards and do them smartly.’ I would urge the government to take account of that. I point to that because this is what should be going on.

We look around and we see bodies of work—even Professor Garnaut’s body of work but more particularly the McKinsey work. That looked at climate change abatement opportunities in Australia. It highlighted that in the areas that are not only the most cost-effective but also cost-positive—that is, there is a net benefit for making these investments—you see things like residential heating and ventilation efficiency, refrigeration efficiency, lighting efficiency in residential areas and standby savings. These are just to name a few. There are also things like the handling of air and residential water heating efficiency.

We should acknowledge—and I again emphasise that this is not something we would like to or will take into account, as it currently is positioned under the draft regulations—that these are must-haves. Go and do your work proponents that make sure you do these things, and that will be something that the Commonwealth values. This is what the Sustainable cities report recommended, a bipartisan position. This is what the earlier work of the committee that I chaired, which looked at what sort of commercial signals we could send to see the uptake of these more sustainable technologies, was associated with. This is also the logic of the Australian Sustainable Built Environment Council, a peak body involving the Building Products

MAIN COMMITTEE
Innovation Council, the Australian Institute of Architects, the Green Building Council of Australia, the Planning Institute and the Property Council. All of these people are calling for that kind of work, and we should make sure that sustainability is inculcated and embedded in the thinking of all areas of the Commonwealth and not simply bolted on as an afterthought or left to some other portfolio to pursue. There is an opportunity for all of us to do that and we should do something about it.

I will just illustrate the point. You can look at a place like California. Not too many people are living in caves in California. It is a lifestyle that is not that unfamiliar to ours, but contemplate the fact that the state of California has a little under twice the population of Australia and its GDP is almost twice that of Australia, yet it uses the same energy that we use. Australians consume twice the amount of energy for the same GDP output. To put it another way, Californians get twice the GDP output for the same amount of energy that we use. Why is that the case? It is because the kind of argument that I have been putting about inculcating sustainable thinking and opportunities into everything that we do is something they have been doing for some years. This is not some strange, remote, mung bean, hydroponic, bok choy inspired idea; this is reality—this is happening in places with a lifestyle not much different from our own. So why don’t we step up? Why don’t we say this matters? When we are using taxpayers’ money, why don’t we embrace the opportunities to pursue the very worthwhile, virtuous objective of pursuing sustainability objectives in parallel, to complement this measure? There is commercially viable, economically justifiable, proven, ready-to-install capability to achieve that goal. It will actually add to the objective that this measure seeks to pursue.

This is the same thinking that should accompany the recent stimulus package announcement about the First Home Owner Grant. If we are going to make more money available, why not reward and encourage the uptake of these technologies so that people benefiting from that Commonwealth taxpayer funding—and deservedly so—actually get additional gains, and so do we as a continent? The stimulus argument around upping a grant for an established dwelling is a little bit harder to follow, although it may make that transaction more achievable and it may be a confidence measure, but in terms of activity there is not really a clear link. There would be, though, if you said additional funds were available because we are looking to purchasers of established homes, first home buyers, to actually embrace some of this technology, put in the solar hot water services and make sure water efficiency is part of it. Let’s not miss this opportunity; there is a chance to do this with this measure.

Mr Bidgood (Dawson) (12.04 pm)—I rise to speak to the National Rental Affordability Scheme Bill 2008 and associated legislation. This bill will provide new principal legislation relating to the Australian government’s National Rental Affordability Scheme. The object of the bill is to increase the supply of affordable rental dwellings and reduce rental costs for low- and moderate-income households. The scheme encourages large-scale investment in affordable rental housing by offering an incentive to providers of new dwellings on the condition that they are rented to low- and moderate-income households at 20 per cent below market rates. That has to be a major incentive to people aspiring to own their own home for the very first time. I think that is just a fantastic thing that this government has done. It is a pragmatic approach to a problem of supply. We are addressing this problem head-on, and it is something that has not been addressed head-on for the last 12 years in any serious, concrete fashion.
The incentive comprises a Commonwealth contribution of $6,000 per dwelling per year and a state or territory contribution in the form of direct financial support or in-kind contribution to the value of $2,000 per dwelling per year. This must be a great incentive to people wanting to own their own home. The incentive can be in the form of a refundable tax offset or payment. The incentive will be provided each year for 10 years to complying participants and will be indexed in line with the rental component of the consumer price index. That is a very important feature. It is locked in and tied in to the consumer price index so that it does not lose value over time.

The National Rental Affordability Scheme is a key part of the government’s $2.2 billion affordable housing package. This is real policy in action. It is pragmatic, well worked out and well researched with all sides and all key stakeholders. This is a really pragmatic approach to a very real need for a rental affordability scheme. This will help people save for their first home, lower housing infrastructure costs and build new homes for the homeless. I do not believe there would be one Australian across this nation who would not say that that is a noble cause of government. Let us face it: surely the game plan for all members of this House, on both sides of politics, would be to home the homeless. There can be no higher calling for government than for the citizens of this nation to have a roof over their heads, one that is affordable and within their means, and to have the ability to pay for it. This scheme delivers on one of the government’s key 2007 election commitments and a COAG agreement from May this year.

The bill provides for the establishment of the National Rental Affordability Scheme by regulations. It is desirable for most of the administrative detail of the scheme to be in the regulations rather than in the bill. This provides the flexibility required to address changing circumstances and conditions in the rental market, including determining market rent, tenant eligibility criteria and acceptable periods of vacancy.

The Prime Minister, the Treasurer, the minister and I are committed to this agenda, because we have heard firsthand from the families, singles and pensioners who are struggling to buy or rent a home and from the young Australians who are giving up on homeownership. It is just not affordable for them; it is beyond their means. We as government are putting out a hand and saying, ‘Hey; we’re giving you a hand-up. We’re not giving you a handout; we’re giving you a hand-up.’ That is the role of government: to help people, to lift people up, to improve people’s lives. This is a pragmatic way of doing it, and there can be no greater calling of any government than to do that.

We have heard this firsthand and from the grassroots in my community when the Community Cabinet was held in Mackay earlier this year. The cabinet understand firsthand the real issues affecting everyday working families in my electorate and, through laws such as this one and others like the first home owners account scheme, are delivering for the people of Dawson who are doing it tough. I remind members that Mackay was severely affected during the floods of February 2008. I know people personally who are only just beginning to go back to their own homes. The dislocation is beyond belief—it truly is—and we have not even begun to measure the psychological trauma of not being in your own home for so many months, from February through to October. It really is a tragic thing to be homeless or to be in a home or accommodation which is not yours, not of your choosing and not of your design. It is a terrible place to be; it is a terrible dislocation. There are over 8,000 homes that were affected.
in Mackay during the floods. Housing, affordable housing and affordable rentals are very important issues in my electorate of Dawson.

It should also be pointed out that in my electorate of Dawson there is less than one per cent rental availability. Rents are commonly in the region of $350 a week for a basic, standard, wood-built Queenslander with three beds. That is tough for an average family on an average income, but there is nowhere else to go. So, while there are many in Mackay who are paid well for the difficult work they do and can afford to rent and purchase homes, there are many on minimum wages and many pensioners who are unfortunately left behind. That is the sad fact and the reality of what is going on in the seat of Dawson, particularly in the city of Mackay.

We on this side of the House understand that we all need a roof over our heads, a place to call home, and the result of a booming economy and skills shortage is that there exist stresses in housing affordability which make life tough for many renters. Low- and moderate-income earners in Dawson pay a lot in rent to house themselves and their families. Vacancy rates in Dawson are at critically low levels, and rents are increasing faster than other everyday living costs. Australians who in the past would have rented as a stepping stone to buying their own home are now finding it much tougher to do that. It is virtually impossible. There is no ability to save. All disposable income is being paid out on the very high rents due to the lack of supply of rental and new stock being built. Increasing the supply of affordable rental properties is a major priority.

Why? Consider the statistics. Today the average house costs 7½ times the average annual wage, compared to four times in 1996—a major difference and a major contributor. The typical home buyer now spends a third of their income on housing costs, almost double the proportion they were spending in 1996. Rental vacancy rates are now below two per cent in most capital cities around Australia, with some cities, such as Mackay, below one per cent. Households in the bottom 20 per cent of earners that are lucky enough to achieve home ownership are spending two-thirds of their income to pay for the privilege. That is very hard for the battlers. These are the people that this government stands up for, these are the people that this government cares about, and these are the battlers who this Rudd Labor government has made clear and decisive action for in these policies. That is why the pragmatism of what we have here today must go forward to help these very needy people. It is urgent and it is essential that this bill goes through as quickly as possible.

In many suburbs in my electorate, while it does fluctuate from suburb to suburb and town to town, rents are some of Queensland’s highest. It is not unusual for a rental for a basic three-bedroom, brick-built home to be advertised from $400 per week. A basic, unfurnished two-bedroom flat is over $300. This is amazing. We are talking very basic accommodation here with the real prices being paid possibly higher than this. I cannot stress enough how tough it is to rent in the seat of Dawson, particularly in the city of Mackay. It is so hard for people to get their own basic accommodation. We have had reports in the Daily Mercury in Mackay over the last year or two of people so at wits end, with nowhere to go and nowhere to rent, that they have been living in their cars. That is atrocious: people living like Third World citizens in a First World town in a First World country—in an economy which is booming.

What did the previous government over the last 12 years do to stimulate house building that was affordable, to create a stock of affordable, rental accommodation? Very little, because
we are having to address these problems head-on. I am pleased and proud to be a part of this Rudd Labor government which has instituted a housing minister. Why? Because over the previous 12 years there was no housing minister. That shows you the priority the other side of politics put on this. They did not even have a minister to analyse and focus on the needs of the homeless in our community. That is appalling and it is an indictment on the history of the last 12 years of government.

But we are addressing this with progressive and pragmatic measures. We have a fantastic Minister for Housing in Tanya Plibersek. I held a housing forum with key community stakeholders in Mackay. She came along and listened to reports from community housing groups that people who had lived in cities like Mackay all their lives had to leave town. Why? Because they just could not afford to live there any longer. They could not afford to live in the town of their birth any longer because they simply could no longer afford to pay the rent.

Housing stability is important to families and important to the economy. The National Rental Affordability Scheme will provide incentives for investors to focus on building more affordable housing, which is a good thing; but even better, it will provide to tenants rents with a 20 per cent saving on market rental rates. This is good news for the people of Dawson, good news for the city of Mackay and good news for the towns of Proserpine, Airlie Beach, Bowen, Ayr and Southern Townsville. It is good news that we have policies which are going to reduce the average rent, down 20 per cent below the market rental rates.

It is important that a broad range of participants should be involved in this scheme, and the legislation enables that. Tenant eligibility requirements are broad, with more than 1.5 million Australian households now eligible to rent dwellings under the scheme—1.5 million are now empowered by this government. This is good news for Australian people who are doing it tough, good news for the battlers who are finding it hard to pay affordable rent—1.5 million Australian households are now eligible. That is fantastic.

The Queensland government, under Premier Anna Bligh, has demonstrated its commitment to this important new initiative by providing a $2,000 contribution to the national rental incentives and by matching the Commonwealth’s rate of indexation. This is excellent. The government expects new partnerships to emerge between institutional investors, property developers and community housing agencies in the rollout of this scheme.

The government’s resolve to pass this bill is clear. The question is whether the opposition will pass this bill or those on the other side will disallow the legislation to pass in the other place. I wonder which way the wind will blow for the opposition—and often their decisions are blowing in the wind. The Australian people are sick and tired of an opposition intent on blocking key budget measures and key election commitments made by the Rudd Labor government, using their numbers in the Senate to harm and hinder the Australian economy and our budget, let alone the will of the Australian people, for the sake of a headline, a sound bite or something on the nightly news. Opposition for opposition’s sake is despicable.

We have seen selfish acts of self-interest from honourable members of the Liberal and National parties of late, smug opportunism and simply making policy on the run on anything from denying low-income earners a tax break to keeping Medicare dental patients in limbo. I hope for the sake of working families in my electorate of Dawson that those on the other side will join with the government and provide certainty in relation to providing incentives to build affordable rental houses in Dawson. The scheme will have a positive impact in Dawson,
where incentives support building of affordable rental housing. It is an election commitment we are delivering. It is good news for Dawson, it is good news for the people of Australia, and I commend the bills to the House.

Mr SIDEBOTTOM (Braddon) (12.24 pm)—I thank the member for Dawson for his spirited contribution to the debate on this important legislation. We live in interesting times indeed. I also rise to speak on the National Rental Affordability Scheme Bill 2008 and the National Rental Affordability Scheme (Consequential Amendments) Bill 2008. The National Rental Affordability Scheme is part of the government’s $2.2 billion affordable housing package, which has now risen by $1.5 billion—through the first home owners scheme extra measures announced most recently by the Prime Minister and the Treasurer—to total $3.7 billion of packaging to try to deal with the affordable housing issues that face our communities, to help people save for their first home, to lower housing infrastructure costs and to build new homes for the homeless.

Like all pieces of legislation before the House, the rental scheme bill attempts to deliver on one of the government’s key 2007 election commitments. We look to the other side to support our commitment to the Australian electorate by supporting this legislation. The National Rental Affordability Scheme will provide $623 million over four years to increase the supply of affordable rental housing across Australia and to lower rental costs for those already struggling to make ends meet. The funds will see the construction of 50,000 new affordable rental properties across Australia to help alleviate the current rental stress on medium- and low-income earners. This is something that all members in this House are aware of. These are people who we deal with on a daily basis in our offices and this is a pressure that is continuing to build in our community. There is also an option under this legislation to build a further 50,000 properties after 2012 if demand remains strong. I suspect, given the conditions that exist at the moment, that demand will continue to remain strong.

The eligibility requirements for the scheme are pertinent to my electorate of Braddon on Tasmania’s north-west coast. Eligibility will of course include people currently living on the pension, including aged pensioners, disability support pensioners and carers, all of whom were recipients of added assistance most recently announced by the Prime Minister and the Treasurer in the national Economic Security Strategy. The government has also extended eligibility to low-income working people, for example families where the main breadwinners earn only a modest wage.

This component will be welcomed in my home state of Tasmania where many pensioners live, where wages are traditionally lower when compared with the national wage and where single-income families are very common. This is particularly the case on the north-west coast. Tenants in these properties will still be eligible for rental assistance through Centrelink. This government predicts about 1.5 million households across the country will meet the eligibility criteria for this scheme. There are two big government incentives which will be delivered every year for 10 years for every new home built and then rented out at 20 per cent below the market rate in each particular area.

Firstly, the scheme will provide a $6,000 incentive from the federal government for each residence in the form of a refundable tax offset or payment. Secondly, the state and territory governments will provide $2,000 each year for each residence, which will be provided
through a cash payment or in-kind financial support. The community housing sector will help with tenancy management of the new properties.

To talk about what this scheme will mean for my electorate I want to spend a bit of time looking at the current rental market in Tasmania in relation to the average income. In 2006 the census statistics from the Australian Bureau of Statistics indicated that the median weekly income for a Tasmanian aged 15 or above was about $398 after tax. Casual, part-time and full-time employment were combined to arrive at this statistic. This compared to about $466 on the mainland—I reiterate $398 after tax compared with $466 on the mainland. The median weekly family income was $1,032 in Tasmania compared with $1,171 throughout the remainder of Australia.

Debate interrupted.

ADJOURNMENT

Mr MELHAM (Banks) (12.30 pm)—I move:

That the Main Committee do now adjourn.

McPherson Electorate: Powerlines

Mrs MAY (McPherson) (12.30 pm)—I want to put on the record my strong opposition to Energex’s proposal to construct above-ground powerlines in my electorate from Mudgeeraba to Tugun. The Australian Energy Regulator is responsible for the economic regulation of the wholesale electricity market and electricity transmission networks. The AER advised me in writing that Energex is required to meet a regulatory test to assess the efficiency of proposed network investments. The AER letter stated plainly that the buck stops with the Queensland government when it wrote:

Energex is required under the Integrated Planning Act 1997 to seek planning approval for the proposed powerline from the Queensland Minister for Mines and Energy. It is understood that in making this decision the minister is required to consider a range of social, environmental and planning factors. The state government must follow best practice and put these high voltage powerlines underground. The state’s Minister for Mines and Energy has the power to consider social and environmental factors and I urge him to take this matter seriously. Minister Wilson suggested in his press release of 22 August 2008 that $120 million is too much money to spend on quality of life for residents of South-East Queensland. I strongly disagree. The health and safety of our residents and the amenity of our suburbs is priceless. The minister must refuse the application from Energex to put the powerlines overhead.

I have very real concerns about the potential negative impacts any above-ground powerlines will have in an already-developed community—from the devaluation of homes to the health and safety of locals and the destruction of the environment. Developed cities around the world as well as public opinion recognise that above-ground cabling is third-world technology. No new developments have above-ground powerlines—so why should existing residences have redundant technology forced upon them? Above-ground powerlines are visually unattractive, unreliable, dangerous and costly. Significantly, above-ground powerlines are at the mercy of the elements. Tropical storms are common on the Gold Coast and above-ground powerlines can be brought down in storms, causing widespread blackouts, potential dangers to public safety and disruption to local business.
Residents are outraged that not only will the amenity of their suburb be ruined by unsightly above-ground powerlines but hundreds of trees will be cut down to make way for these powerlines. The destruction of so many trees must be stopped. Residents of McPherson are passionate about their environment and the visual appearance of local streets. The significant environmental, physical, aesthetic, psychological and cultural value of street trees to local residents must not be underestimated. Trees alongside the Pacific Highway have enormous aesthetic benefits, improving the streetscapes and adding natural colour, and they attract bird life.

This serious issue was first brought to my attention by local residents, who felt they had been sidelined from the consultation process. There was confusion and concern when they realised the proposed route for these powerlines was directly behind their homes—right on their back doorsteps. I commend local residents for forming the community group Stop The Overhead Powerlines and for campaigning hard for an underground route, a comprehensive consultation process and a better deal for future generations. In particular, I want to pay tribute to Mr John Cooper who is chairman of STOP. He has worked tirelessly on this issue to bring it to the public’s attention and also to garner support from the local community.

Recently the shadow minister for the environment, climate change and water, the Hon. Greg Hunt, visited my electorate of McPherson and together we met with members of STOP and other concerned residents who will be affected by these overhead powerlines. We met residents in a cul-de-sac which is adjacent to the proposed route of the powerlines, and it was extremely concerning to see firsthand just how close to these houses these powerlines are intended to be built. Not only that, we saw firsthand the beautiful and wide tracts of trees that will be destroyed in the construction process.

I strongly oppose the delivery of power in a way that is detrimental to the community. The potential devaluation of people’s homes, their lifestyles, the destruction of local environments as well as the health and safety of our communities must be at the forefront of the decision-making process in the delivery of this infrastructure. I hope common sense will prevail in this instance. *(Time expired)*

Port Adelaide Electorate: Kurruru Indigenous Youth Performing Arts

Mr BUTLER (Port Adelaide) (12.35 pm)—Kurruru is Australia’s only Indigenous youth performing arts company and has its base on Kaurna land in my electorate of Port Adelaide. Growing out of the Port Youth Theatre Workshop, which was formed in 1984, Kurruru is a vibrant, multifaceted organisation that is involved in so many projects that I will only have time today to cover a sample of what they do.

Port Adelaide is home to a large Indigenous community. Kurruru provides an exciting weekly workshop program that gives kids and young adults the opportunity to explore the arts. The emphasis is on quality, a vital ingredient if kids are to be inspired for future involvement. Professional artists, with the help of the company’s team of Indigenous support workers, run workshops in theatre, circus, contemporary and traditional dance, breakdance and music. The workshops are organised by age and art form and are available to 200 young people aged four to 26. To ensure accessibility for all, these workshops are free of charge and transport is provided. Every parent knows the link between concentration levels and food, and Kurruru cannily provides healthy food options at each workshop to ensure young minds stay focused. At the end of the year all participants perform in the annual showcase, Yella Kiana.

MAIN COMMITTEE
Kurruru further their commitment to accessible opportunity by not limiting these workshops to the port. Working in partnership with communities across the state, Kurruru also offers a regional program which is particularly strong in the Flinders Ranges, the lower Murray region and Point Pearce on the Yorke Peninsula. These workshops are the foundation of the company. Kurruru means ‘circle’ in the Kaurna language and the workshops reflect this image. Participants develop not only skills, confidence and relationships through these workshops but often a lasting love for the arts, increased pride in their community and a desire to keep working in the promotion of Indigenous arts. It is from these workshops that Kurruru creates the basis for its troupes and performance projects and cultivates future artists and staff.

The Minister for the Environment, Heritage and the Arts, the member for Kingsford Smith, recently underlined the federal government’s support for Kurruru by choosing a visit to their base to announce funding of more than $37 million for Indigenous arts, cultural, language and broadcasting programs in 2008-09. During that visit we and others were treated to a performance by Kurruru dancers that blended hip-hop, contemporary and traditional dance moves and was choreographed by the associate artistic director, a very talented young man, Damien Ralphs. It was a showcase of the talent and innovation that is the hallmark of this company.

The Kurruru Dance Ensemble and Nunga Circus have earned a reputation as well-respected performance troupes and perform locally as well as at major festivals across Australia. Their 2006 major show, Crossing Paths, won the Best Dance Award at the Adelaide Fringe Festival. Anyone who has visited Adelaide during the fringe—as I am sure you have, Madam Deputy Speaker—would know that a frenzy of talent descends on the city from across the globe during that festival. To stand out in such a crowd is a very serious achievement.

Community cultural development underpins Kurruru’s work. The Kulcha Moves program includes activities like back-to-country camps, learning traditional practices and cross-generational learning. Confronting divisions by combining the traditional with the contemporary, the old with the young and the rural with the urban, Kulcha Moves emphasises exchange, respect and the importance of a strong sense of Indigenous pride and identity. Every two years, Kurruru also releases a professionally recorded CD entitled Blak Traks that showcases young emerging Indigenous musicians as well as giving youth voice an audience. This year, the team also worked with young men and women currently living in the Cavan and Magill youth training centres, giving them the chance to express themselves in a positive, exciting and constructive way.

I have had the pleasure of meeting just some of the people who have helped shape the philosophy and ensure the success of this extraordinary company, which has very strong links to local Indigenous communities. Just a few of those people are Kurruru’s company manager, Emma Webb; director, Diat Alferink; community networker, the incomparable Aunty Josie Agius; and acting cultural director, Pat Waria-Read. I look forward to many more years of fantastic work by this outstanding organisation.

Poverty

Mrs MOYLAN (Pearce) (12.40 pm)—In an article in Time magazine in 2005, Jeffrey D Sachs wrote an article entitled ‘The End of Poverty’. It is a powerful word portrait of the scourge of extreme poverty, but it is hopeful. Sachs said:
“The task of ending extreme poverty is a collective one—for you as well as for me. The end of poverty will require a global network of cooperation among people who have never met and who do not necessarily trust one another…”

Sachs went on to say:

“We need plans, systems, mutual accountability and financing mechanisms but even before we have all of that apparatus in place—what I call the economic plumbing—we must first understand more concretely what such a strategy means to the people who can be helped…”

That piece of writing by Sachs reminded me of a recent visit I had to the University of WA when a PhD student from WA showed me a video. He had been studying in China and he happened to visit one of the very poor villages on the very western edge of China. He went, he saw what was needed and this extraordinary young man acted when he came back to Western Australia. What he saw was that the children of these villages could not get to school and the villagers could not get produce to market because they lived at the top of a very steep cliff and in winter when the rains came the path was impassable. So they were locked in their village and the children spent many months without being able to access school. He came back to Western Australia and organised donations of cement and he raised money—something like $20,000, which is not a lot of money. He got all of it back to the village and he organised a community project with the local village leaders. The video he showed me was extraordinary because here they were, the people of this community—young men, old men, old women, young women and children—on a chain gang passing bags of sand and cement up the chain. They built something like 20 kilometres of pathway. Now the children can go to school every day of the year and the villagers can get their produce to market. I think that is the kind of understanding that Sachs was asking us to consider when he wrote that article.

On Tuesday I had the privilege of attending an art exhibition called Create to Advocate by Micah Challenge. It was also in this parliament last year. The Micah Challenge uses visual art to reflect the need to achieve the Millennium Development Goals to make poverty history. I commend the organisers for holding this exhibition to try to raise greater public awareness and particularly awareness in this place amongst those of us who have real power to help eliminate extreme poverty. Exhibiting artists presented a powerful visual portrait like Sachs’s word portrait, etching in our memory portraits and scenes that remind us that, despite our best efforts, we are nowhere near ending extreme poverty and reminding us of the devastating impact of extreme poverty on the lives of millions of people. The current financial worldwide troubles risk further entrenching extreme poverty and they will require us to redouble our efforts.

One of the artists who participated in the exhibition did so for the second year in succession. Her name is Michelle Allen, and she comes from the electorate of Pearce. Michelle captured perfectly the pain of poverty for individuals with her beautiful and, may I say, arresting portrait inspired by the work of another constituent, Mr Phil Lindsay, who is an aid worker with the aid organisation Tear.

Apart from Phil’s practical day-to-day work, which takes him into some of the most dangerous places on earth, Phil is an extraordinary photographer, capturing the images that he encounters every day in his work delivering aid to the world’s most impoverished. Michelle’s painting was inspired by one of Phil’s photos, taken during one of his many trips to Darfur in 2007. I pay tribute to Michelle Allen and Phil Lindsay and to all who join them in committing
their time and talent to Make Poverty History and remind this place that this coming week, starting tomorrow morning at 6 am, is one where we stand up and take action on extreme poverty.

Bass Electorate: Economic Security Strategy

Ms CAMPBELL (Bass) (12.45 pm)—I rise today to speak of the Rudd government’s Economic Security Strategy and in particular of the impact this plan for the future will have on thousands of pensioners in my electorate of Bass. I have spoken before of the plight of pensioners not only in Northern Tasmania but across the country. As a government, we have recognised for some time that they have been doing it tough. That is why I welcome the Rudd government’s Economic Security Strategy and applaud its architects. This is a $10.4 billion plan to strengthen our nation’s economy and, at the same time, support Australian households as all around us what can only be described as a global financial crisis unfolds. Ten thousand, seven hundred and seventy-two aged pensioners, 4,561 disability pensioners, 5,925 pensioner couples and some 803 carers across Northern Tasmania will benefit as a result of the Rudd government’s plan to safeguard our nation. In total, more than 29,500 people in Bass will reap the benefits of the government’s decisive action.

These are uncertain times. The world’s economy, the global financial system, is in the throes of the most significant upheaval in living memory. Confidence is low, consumer sentiment is falling and the Rudd government is acting. For pensioners in particular across my electorate I can say that there is relief on the way. This relief builds on the additional support already provided in the government’s first budget and is recognition that, for many, additional relief is needed now. Single pensioners—and I stress that this assistance is for all pensioners, not only single pensioners as mooted by the opposition in a desperate grab for votes—will receive $1,400, while couples will receive $2,100.

This is not the government’s final statement on reform. We are committed to pension reform. However, as the government has said consistently, this is a complex area. We need to make sure that we get it right. Making this down payment as a part of our economic package to support sustained growth recognises that many pensioners are doing it tough now. This down payment is intended to provide additional support in the nine months between now and when long-term reforms are introduced from the beginning of the next financial year.

The government recognises that many pensioners are struggling and that reform to the pension system is necessary, but it is important that we get the long-term arrangements right. The government’s pension package will be finalised following receipt of the report of the Harmer review in February. The final shape of pension reform will be detailed in the budget context. This assistance package provides a down payment on the longer term reform package.

The government’s Economic Security Strategy provides lump sum payments of $4.8 billion to assist aged pensioners, veterans, disability support pensioners and carers. And, recognising that the global financial crisis has eroded the value of retirement savings, we are also extending these lump sum payments to self-funded retirees who hold a Commonwealth Seniors Health Card. As well, people who are receiving Carer Allowance will receive $1,000 for each eligible person they care for. This is much-needed across-the-board assistance for the pensioners and carers in my electorate, who I know are finding it difficult to make ends meet.
As I have said before, this is not news to me or to the government. We have recognised the need to act, and that is what we have done. I am aware that there has been criticism from those opposite, who say that the only reason that we are helping pensioners now is because of the economic situation. To them I say that that is absolute nonsense. When the time came to develop a strategy to assist the economy, all pensioners and carers, I stress again, were top of our list. They were our first priority and as a government we make no apologies for that.

As I have mentioned previously, this in no way means that we are not still reviewing the entire pension structure. The assistance offered this week through the decisive action of both the Prime Minister and the Treasurer is on top of budget assistance and separate from the pension review. I congratulate them both for their action and look forward to the implementation of the strategy in Northern Tasmania.

Mr Sergio Prado
McEwen Electorate: Community Organisations
Bonnie Babes Foundation National Babies Day

FRAN BAILEY (McEwen) (12.49 pm)—I wish to acknowledge the inspiring contributions being made by two communities in my electorate of McEwen. The people making these contributions are volunteers, typical of the tremendous spirit found in country towns, where residents simply just get on with it and pitch in and get things done. They are legends of their local communities. One of these legends I have had the pleasure of working with for quite a few years is Mr Sergio Prado of Seymour.

Sergio came to me a number of years ago with a vision of transforming a youth and fitness centre in Seymour, helping in particular really disadvantaged youth. I am very pleased to say that I was able to assist Sergio and his committee in getting $100,000 of Regional Partnerships funding plus two very dilapidated buildings that the Department of Defence no longer wanted. That formed the basis of transforming condemned buildings into what today proudly stands as the Seymour Youth and Fitness Centre.

Sergio devotes countless hours to the town’s youth and fitness centre. Many of the improvements made at this community hub are a result of Sergio’s vision, as I mentioned, and unselfish contribution towards creating opportunities for young people. At an age when many of his contemporaries are retiring and perhaps focusing on bowls and doing the garden, Sergio is not considering retirement. He supports the youth centre and sustains that pursuit by working part-time in one of the local supermarkets. He is a man of great humility, and it was a special moment for Sergio when the Seymour Youth and Fitness Centre was awarded the Community-Local Government Partnership Award for Victoria in the 26th Sustainable Communities-Tidy Towns awards. The leadership and dedication of Sergio and his team of volunteers at the centre reflect Seymour’s community spirit. It is a privilege to work with him and his wonderful team.

Across in Gisborne there is a similar group of people displaying those same hallmarks behind building fantastic country communities. A few years the Gisborne Region Events, Activities and Tourism Committee, known as GREAT, was formed. GREAT has since been responsible for many fine achievements. Its monthly markets raise money for investing in community projects and continue to bring benefits not just to the community but by empowering the people working in the local organisations.
One of the greatest contributions to the local community has been the publication and distribution of the monthly *Gisborne Gazette*. People of all ages collect their bundles of magazines on the designated day and walk around this growing community to deliver the gazette to each and every household and business. The pride of their involvement—and the fitness and agility that comes with the regular exercise—is matched by the pride and passion of those who contribute articles to the magazine with good news stories. The gazette communicates cohesiveness, it keeps people informed, but most importantly, it keeps local people involved in their local community. For the committee of GREAT, which established the gazette four years ago—and the editor, the desktop publishers, the contributors and, most importantly, those monthly walkers—this publication simply typifies community passion and engagement. Earlier this month it was my pleasure to recognise the efforts of these volunteers with the presentation of special certificates of appreciation. These are just two organisations within my huge, vast and diverse electorate of McEwen.

In the very few seconds that are left I also want to mention the Bonnie Babes Foundation National Babies Day launch today, which, along with many of our colleagues from all parties, I had the privilege of attending at the front of Parliament House. This day acknowledges the counselling work that the Bonnie Babes Foundation provides. Four out of 10 parents suffer miscarriages or stillbirths, one in 20 have premature babies. This organisation, with the support of Target, helps many families. *(Time expired)*

**Banks Electorate: Bankstown Children’s Festival**

Mr MELHAM (Banks) (12.55 pm)—On Saturday, 20 September this year, I was honoured to represent the Parliamentary Secretary for Multicultural Affairs and Settlement Services at the 10th Bankstown Children’s Festival. This was no great ask, as I have been attending the children’s festival regularly over the years. It is a highlight of the community calendar in my electorate of Banks and the adjoining electorate of Blaxland. The children’s festival has grown from strength to strength over its 10 years, and the organisers hope that the next stage will see similar festivals in all major areas of Sydney and New South Wales, and perhaps in other states, in the coming decade.

Bankstown represents a diverse culture and the festival celebrates that diversity. There are representatives from many, many backgrounds, including Australia’s original Indigenous inhabitants as well as people from Africa, China, the Cook Islands, Greece, India, Ireland, Lebanon, Macedonia, Nepal, Poland, Spain and Vietnam—to name the largest groups. Many communities representing the diverse national make-up of the electorate contribute to the children’s festival.

The festival received funding this year through the federal government’s Living in Harmony program. This is the government’s key anti-racism program, which aims to address issues of cultural, racial and religious intolerance. It promotes respect, fairness, inclusion and a sense of belonging for all Australians. I would also like to acknowledge the ongoing support of the Bankstown City Council.

The Children’s Festival 2008 Organising Committee, who are all volunteers, have worked hard to make the festival a success, and I congratulate them. In particular I wish to single out Mr Thuat Van Nguyen OAM, the president of the organising committee. Thuat is a remarkable man with a tremendous vision for our local community as well as for the broader Austra-
lian community. Thuat doesn’t just talk about it; he does something. Thuat himself embodies what the festival sets out to achieve.

For me the best part of the day is the parade. I very much enjoy watching the children in their national costumes, walking, singing, playing musical instruments and obviously enjoying being part of the celebration. It is also a great pleasure to observe the parents and friends on the sidelines. Their pride in their children’s achievements is visible on their faces and palpable in their stature. This diversity is a source of both social and economic wealth to our country, but, importantly, it adds both vibrancy and dynamism to Australian society. It is always a great pleasure for me to attend the children’s festival and I look forward to watching the festival continue and grow.

The thing that I appreciated the most this year was that there was funding through the government’s Living in Harmony program of some $5,000—for an event organised by volunteers. There is a partnership here and we in government need to play our part. We need to provide seed funding to organisations such as this organising days such as these, which are replicated throughout the community, and to other volunteers in our society, who put in countless hours to make our communities more cohesive and to create happiness within our communities. The $5,000 that was provided went a very long way—because if the government were to pay for the thousands of hours of effort throughout the year that went towards making it a successful day, and replicated that funding throughout our community, we would have no budget surplus.

That is why it is an event I certainly enjoy attending. The cultural diversity in the Bankstown community today is not how it always was. In the old days it was a community made up mainly of British, Irish and Anglo descendants. But the community has grown and diversified and has become enriched. It is a harmonious community. The service clubs provide many, many thousands of dollars to local community organisations and to aged-care facilities. There is a partnership approach. I commend the festival to the parliament. It was a great day and is going to be replicated for many years to come. I have enjoyed seeing the festival grow from its inception. This was its 10th anniversary—I am sure it will enjoy many more.

Question agreed to.

Main Committee adjourned at 1.00 pm
QUESTIONS IN WRITING

Child Care
(Question No. 136)

Mr Abbott asked the Minister for Education, in writing, on 18 June 2008:
(1) When did the Government first receive advice that it would be necessary for families to remain eligible for the Child Care Benefit in order to qualify for the Child Care Rebate.
(2) How did the Government announce that families earning more than $110,000 a year would remain eligible for the minimum rate of Child Care Benefit if they were using registered rather than approved care; and what 2008 Budget documentation contains information on this.

Ms Gillard—The answer to the honourable member’s question is as follows:
(1) Advice was given to the Government in the course of deliberations concerning the 2008-09 Budget.
(2) There was no specific announcement around minimum rate of Child Care Benefit (CCB) for registered care in the 2008-09 Budget. It remains unaffected by changes to CCB applying from July 2008 announced in the Budget, except the rate is now referred to as the “registered care rate of CCB”. Relevant fact sheets, forms and Family Assistance Office advice were updated for implementation of CCB changes from July 2008.

Productivity Places Program
(Question No. 226)

Dr Southcott asked the Minister for Education, in writing, on 28 August 2008:
In respect of the Productivity Places Program: how will the department determine when there is no longer a skills shortage for a qualification on the Priority Occupations and Qualifications List.

Ms Gillard—The answer to the honourable member’s question is as follows:
To date, no occupations have been removed from the Priority Occupations and Qualifications List. The setting of future priorities for the Productivity Places Program is currently being considered by Skills Australia.

Productivity Places Program
(Question No. 228)

Dr Southcott asked the Minister for Education in writing, on 28 August 2008:
In respect of the Productivity Places Program:(a) from what date will (i) existing workers in Western Australia, and (ii) workers in the rest of the country, be able to commence training under phase 2 of the program; and (b) how many existing workers are expected to commence training under the program in 2008.

Ms Gillard—The answer to the honourable member’s question is as follows:
(a) (i) Western Australia had enrolled 278 trainees into the program at 29 September 2008. (ii) Arrangements for other states are still being negotiated with each jurisdiction and commencement of training places is subject to their implementation arrangements.
(b) It is anticipated that up to 10 000 existing workers will commence training under the program in 2008.
Productivity Places Program
(Question No. 230)

Dr Southcott asked the Minister for Education, in writing, on 28 August 2008:
In respect of the Productivity Places Program: has the number of existing workers expected to commence training been revised; if so, what is the revised number.

Ms Gillard—The answer to the honourable member’s question is as follows:
No, it is expected that over five years 392,000 training places will be available for existing workers. Any places not used from the notional allocation in 2008-09 will be transferred to provide additional places in the out years.

Productivity Places Program
(Question No. 231)

Dr Southcott asked the Minister for Education in writing, on 28 August 2008:
In respect of the Productivity Places Program: from what date will (a) Registered Training Organisations be able to offer Phase 2 training to existing workers,(b) the training in (a) become available, and (c) the department’s website be updated to allow existing workers in Western Australia to view their training options.

Ms Gillard—The answer to the honourable member’s question is as follows:
(a) and (b) State and territory governments are responsible for the implementation of the delivery of training places and will determine how and when Registered Training Organisations will be able to offer Phase 2 training to existing workers.
(c) Existing workers in Western Australia (WA) can view their training options at the WA Department of Education and Training website at www.det.wa.edu.au.

Productivity Places Program
(Question No. 232)

Dr Southcott asked the Minister for Education in writing, on 28 August 2008:
In respect of the Productivity Places Program: for each Australian State and Territory, when will the funding arrangements for existing workers under Phase 2 of the program be finalised.

Ms Gillard—The answer to the honourable member’s question is as follows:
Funding arrangements will be finalised gradually as agreement is reached with state and territory governments on the delivery of pilot projects under Phase 2 of the Program. Currently, Tasmania and South Australia have signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) to deliver training places for existing workers under Phase 2. All other states and territories are expected to sign MOUs shortly, including Western Australia and ACT where signing has been delayed due to governments being in caretaker mode.

Productivity Places Program
(Question No. 235)

Dr Southcott asked the Minister for Education, in writing, on 28 August 2008:
In respect of the Productivity Places Program: has the extent of skills shortages in specific geographic areas been identified; if so, how was this done; if not, will it be done.
Ms Gillard—The answer to the honourable member’s question is as follows:
The Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) does not quantify skill shortages. Investigations into the cost and feasibility of producing accurate information on skill shortages at the state/territory level suggest, given the quality of the data, the cost may not be warranted. The Department undertakes extensive research into skill shortages through contact with employers to determine their experience recruiting the skills they need. This work forms a consistent basis for decisions about skill shortages across geographic areas, and the methodology has been assessed by the Australian Bureau of Statistics as being appropriate for its purpose.

The setting of future priorities for the Productivity Places Program is currently being considered by Skills Australia, in consultation with industry through Industry Skills Councils, which now have an expanded role in providing advice on skills and training needs of business.

Work Experience Placement Program
(Question No. 238)

Dr Southcott asked the Minister for Employment Participation, in writing, on 28 August 2008:
In respect of the Work Experience Placement Program: what proportion of job seekers utilising the program were referred by (a) Job Network providers, (b) Disability Employment Network providers, and (c) Vocational Rehabilitation Services providers.

Mr Brendan O’Connor—The answer to the honourable member’s question is as follows:
As at 29 August 2008, a total of 2145 job seekers utilised the Work Experience Placement program. The following indicates the numbers referred by each employment service program since WEP was implemented:
• 809 in Job Network (38%);
• 567 in Disability Employment Network (26%); and
• 769 Vocational Rehabilitation Services (36%).

Work Experience Placement Program
(Question No. 240)

Dr Southcott asked the Minister for Employment Participation, in writing, on 28 August 2008:
In respect of the Work Experience Placement Program: what proportion of job seekers utilising the program and referred to it by Disability Employment Network providers gained employment with the Work Experience Placement host?

Mr Brendan O’Connor—The answer to the honourable member’s question is as follows:
As at 30 June 2008, Disability Employment Network (DEN) providers recorded that 93 or 26 per cent of the 347 DEN participants who commenced a Work Experience Placement (WEP) had accepted an offer of employment with their host organisation, as of result of WEP.

Personal Support Program
(Question No. 242)

Dr Southcott asked the Minister for Employment Participation, in writing, on 28 August 2008:
In respect of the Personal Support Program: how many job seekers referred to, but awaiting commencement of, the program are (a) priority 1, (b) priority 2, (c) priority 3, and (d) priority 4?
**Mr Brendan O’Connor**—The answer to the honourable member’s question is as follows:

At 30 June 2008, there were 27,705 job seekers awaiting referral to the Personal Support Programme, with the following referral status:

(a) 2,022 job seekers with a referral status of priority 1;
(b) 7,587 job seekers with a referral status of priority 2;
(c) 12,968 job seekers with a referral status of priority 3; and
(d) 5,128 job seekers with a referral status of priority 4.

**Personal Support Program**

(Question No. 243)

**Dr Southcott** asked the Minister for Employment Participation, in writing, on 28 August 2008:

How many providers offering the Personal Support Program are also Job Network Providers?

**Mr Brendan O’Connor**—The answer to the honourable member’s question is as follows:

At 12 September 2008, 41 organisations delivering Personal Support Programme services were also Job Network providers.

**Personal Support Program**

(Question No. 245)

**Dr Southcott** asked the Minister for Employment Participation, in writing, on 28 August 2008:

In respect of the Personal Support Program: what are the most common barriers to employment for job seekers who are referred to the program?

**Mr Brendan O’Connor**—The answer to the honourable member’s question is as follows:

Please see the table below that provides information about the most common barriers to employment recorded for participants in the Personal Support Programme at 30 June 2008. This information is based on barriers to employment identified by Job Capacity Assessors and Personal Support Programme providers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Order of Frequency</th>
<th>Barriers</th>
<th>Proportion of Participants with Barrier Recorded</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Psychological/psychiatric condition</td>
<td>54%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Limited employment history</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Substance abuse</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Accommodation</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Confidence</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Relationships/family</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Concentration limitations</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Limited skills/experience</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Motivation</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Support network</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Each participant can have more than one barrier recorded.
Personal Support Program
(Question No. 246)

Dr Southcott asked the Minister for Employment Participation, in writing, on 28 August 2008:
In respect of the Personal Support Program: what percentage of the program’s job seekers exit before completion.

Mr Brendan O’Connor—The answer to the honourable member’s question is as follows:
Participants may exit the Personal Support Programme for a range of reasons. Of all exits from the Personal Support Programme during the 2007–08 financial year, 10 per cent of these were for participants who sustained a placement in employment, education or employment assistance for 26 weeks. A further 44 per cent were for participants who exited before completing two years in the program (for example, for reasons such as medical conditions preventing participation at that time or relocation) but who have since returned to the program or waitlist. Around 25 per cent were for participants who exited before completion and who have not returned at 5 September 2008.

Disability Employment Network
(Question No. 256)

Dr Southcott asked the Minister for Employment Participation, in writing, on 2 September 2008:
What percentage of job seekers in the uncapped stream of the Disability Employment Network have gained employment through the program?

Mr Brendan O’Connor—The answer to the honourable member’s question is as follows:
Of the job seekers in the Disability Employment Network uncapped stream who had a minimum of 4 weeks since entering the employment assistance phase by 30 June 2008, 27.03 per cent had gained employment.

Disability Employment Network
(Question No. 267)

Dr Southcott asked the Minister for Employment Participation, in writing, on 2 September 2008:
How many people with disabilities are being serviced by the Job Network as a result of no places being available in the Disability Employment Network.

Mr Brendan O’Connor—The answer to the honourable member’s question is as follows:
The requested information is not readily ascertainable, and to provide the requested answer would require an unreasonable diversion of departmental resources.

Job Network
(Question No. 268)

Dr Southcott asked the Minister for Employment Participation, in writing, on 2 September 2008:
In each State and Territory, what proportion of the Job Network caseload is comprised of people with disabilities.
Mr Brendan O’Connor—The answer to the honourable member’s question is as follows:
As at the end of August 2008, the proportion of job seekers identified as people with disability on the Job Network active caseload, by State and Territory, is shown in the following table.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>% People with Disability</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ACT</td>
<td>14.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NSW</td>
<td>13.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NT</td>
<td>10.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>QLD</td>
<td>13.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SA</td>
<td>15.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TAS</td>
<td>13.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VIC</td>
<td>14.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WA</td>
<td>14.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>13.9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Employment Services
(Question No. 269)

Dr Southcott asked the Minister for Employment Participation, in writing, on 2 September 2008:
In respect of job seekers who are referred for a Job Capacity Assessment while already engaged with an employment service provider: how many are referred to a different employment service program as a result of the Job Capacity Assessment.

Mr Brendan O’Connor—The answer to the honourable Member’s question is as follows:
For the period 1 July 2007 to 30 June 2008, 35 659 job seekers who were already engaged with an employment services provider were referred to a different employment services program as a result of a Job Capacity Assessment.

Employment Services
(Question No. 294)

Dr Southcott asked the Minister for Employment Participation, in writing, on 2 September 2008:
What proportion of STEP-ERS participants have gained employment within one month of undertaking STEP-ERS.

Mr Brendan O’Connor—The answer to the honourable member’s question is as follows:
As at 1 September 2008, of the 11,351 STEP ERS participants, 22% have obtained an Employment placement in the program within one month of commencing.

Employment Services
(Question No. 296)

Dr Southcott asked the Minister for Employment Participation, in writing, on 2 September 2008:
What proportion of STEP-ERS participants have gained employment within six months of undertaking STEP-ERS.
Mr Brendan O’Connor—The answer to the honourable member’s question is as follows:
As at 1 September 2008, of the 11,351 STEP ERS participants, 30% have obtained an Employment placement in the program within six months of commencing.

Employment Services
(Question No. 297)

Dr Southcott asked the Minister for Employment Participation, in writing, on 2 September 2008:
Have any STEP ERS providers returned their contracts to date; if so, how many.

Mr Brendan O’Connor—The answer to the honourable member’s question is as follows:
Since the commencement of the Structured Training and Employment Projects Employment and Related Services (STEP ERS) panel in January 2007, six organisations have had their Deeds of Standing Offer (panel membership) or Official Orders terminated.

National Museum of Australia: Acquisition of Boomerang
(Question No. 324)

Mr Morrison asked the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and the Arts, in writing, on 15 September 2008:
(1) Could he advise what action has been taken following my request on 21 August 2008 for the Australian Government to bid at the auction in London by Christie’s on 25 September 2008, for a boomerang that is believed to have been acquired by Captain James Cook on his voyage to New Holland in the Endeavour in 1770.
(2) Specifically, could he advise what representations have been made to the British Government to seek its support to acquire the boomerang and return it to Australia as a gesture of good will; if no such representations have been made, why not.
(3) Could he provide detailed information on:
   (a) any investigations that have been made by the Australian Government and its related agencies to acquire the boomerang directly at auction; and
   (b) the results of any inquiries undertaken regarding the authenticity of the item.

Mr Garrett—The answer to the honourable member’s question is as follows:
(1) The National Museum of Australia undertook a thorough investigation of the provenance of the boomerang and two clubs to be auctioned. The Museum could find no direct link between these items and Captain James Cook.
(2) The Australian Government did not make a representation to the British Government prior to the National Museum of Australia concluding its research on the boomerang and the clubs.
(3) (a) The National Museum of Australia made an offer to purchase the boomerang and two clubs prior to the auction based on the Museum’s findings relating to provenance, and the items’ part in the story of the growth of Captain Cook’s reputation and fame as a navigator. The Museum’s offer was declined and the items withdrawn from auction.
   (b) The National Museum of Australia traced the boomerang and clubs back to the descendants of Mrs Elizabeth Cook.
Road Infrastructure
(Question No. 326)

Mr Morrison asked the Minister for Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Local Government, in writing, on 15 September 2008:

(1) Since November 2007, has his office received representations from the New South Wales (NSW) Premier or NSW Government ministers and their departments regarding the extension of the Southern Freeway (F6).

(2) Has his office received representations from Federal Members of Parliament representing the Illawarra region regarding the feasibility study into the F6 extension.

(3) Is either the Princes Highway or F6 defined by his department or Infrastructure Australia as ‘nationally significant’ for the purposes of Infrastructure Australia’s national audit of infrastructure.

Mr Albanese—The answer to the honourable member’s question is as follows:

I have, and continue to, receive many submissions from state and local government, community groups and local, state and federal Members of Parliament about numerous projects across Australia. The Government has established Infrastructure Australia (IA), an independent statutory advisory council, to provide advice to the Australian Government about infrastructure gaps and bottlenecks that hinder economic growth and prosperity. IA will also identify investment priorities, and propose policy and regulatory reforms necessary to deliver timely and coordinated national infrastructure investment or improve the efficient utilisation of existing infrastructure.

To meet its goal of facilitating public discussion about how the planning, investment in and use of nationally significant infrastructure can be improved, IA has called for submissions from industry and the community. As part of this process, IA has released two discussion papers on Australia’s Future Requirements and on Public Private Partnerships. The papers are available on the IA website <www.infrastructureaustralia.gov.au>. Submissions are due to Infrastructure Australia no later than 15 October 2008, for consideration in the development of the National Public Private Partnership Guidelines and National Infrastructure Audit.

I would encourage you and your constituents to make submissions as part of this process.

Caring for our Country Program
(Question No. 348)

Dr Stone asked the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and the Arts, in writing, on 23 September 2008:

In respect of the section titled “A New Approach to Climate Change, Water and the Environment” in chapter 3 of the Climate Change, The Economy, The Environment Ministerial Statement in the 2008-09 Budget Papers:

(a) has the Prime Minister made a National Outcomes Statement for Caring for Our Country; if not,
   (i) why was it not done by the timeframe indicated (end of June 2008), and
   (ii) will this delay the release of the business plan for Caring for our Country, due on 1 October 2008; and

(b) what is the anticipated new date of delivery for the:
   (i) National Outcomes Statement, and
   (ii) business plan, for Caring for our Country.
Mr Garrett—The answer to the honourable member’s question is as follows:
(a) the Caring for our Country outcomes have been released;
(b) (i) the Caring for our Country outcomes were released on 30 September 2008
(ii) the Caring for our Country business plan will be released later this year in time to allow proposals to be developed and assessed and funding to be available from 1 July 2009.