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SITTING DAYS—2008

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- ADELAIDE 972 AM
- PERTH 585 AM
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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

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

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**PARTY ABBREVIATIONS**

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

### Heads of Parliamentary Departments

- Clerk of the Senate—H Evans
- Clerk of the House of Representatives—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
The Hon Malcolm Turnbull MP

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

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

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

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

Shadow Minister for Infrastructure and COAG and Shadow Minister Assisting the Leader on Emissions Trading Design
The Hon Andrew Robb AO, MP

Shadow Minister for Foreign Affairs and Manager of Opposition Business in the Senate
Senator the Hon Helen Coonan

Shadow Minister for Finance, Competition Policy and Deregulation and Manager of Opposition Business in the House
The Hon Joe Hockey MP

Shadow Minister for Energy and Resources
The Hon Ian Macfarlane MP

Shadow Minister for Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs
The Hon Tony Abbott MP

Shadow Special Minister of State and Shadow Cabinet Secretary
Senator the Hon Michael Ronaldson

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

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

Shadow Minister for Health and Ageing
The Hon Peter Dutton MP

Shadow Minister for Defence
Senator the Hon David Johnston

Shadow Minister for Education, Apprenticeships and Training
The Hon Christopher Pyne MP

Shadow Attorney-General
Senator the Hon George Brandis SC

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

Shadow Minister for Employment and Workplace Relations
Mr Michael Keenan MP

Shadow Minister for Immigration and Citizenship
The Hon Dr Sharman Stone

Shadow Minister for Small Business, Independent Contractors, Tourism and the Arts
Mr Steven Ciobo

[The above constitute the shadow cabinet]
SHADOW MINISTRY—continued

Shadow Minister for Financial Services, Superannuation and Corporate Law
The Hon Chris Pearce MP

Shadow Assistant Treasurer
The Hon Tony Smith MP

Shadow Minister for Sustainable Development and Cities
The Hon Bruce Billson MP

Shadow Minister for Competition Policy and Consumer Affairs and Deputy Manager of Opposition Business in the House
Mr Luke Hartsuyker MP

Shadow Minister for Housing and Local Government
Mr Scott Morrison

Shadow Minister for Ageing
Mrs Margaret May MP

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

Shadow Minister for Veterans’ Affairs
Mrs Louise Markus MP

Shadow Minister for Early Childhood Education, Childcare, Status of Women and Youth
Mrs Sophie Mirabella MP

Shadow Minister for Justice and Customs
The Hon Sussan Ley MP

Shadow Minister for Employment Participation, Training and Sport
Dr Andrew Southcott MP

Shadow Parliamentary Secretary for Northern Australia
Senator the Hon Ian Macdonald

Shadow Parliamentary Secretary for Roads and Transport
Mr Don Randall MP

Shadow Parliamentary Secretary for Regional Development
Mr John Forrest MP

Shadow Parliamentary Secretary for International Development Assistance and Shadow Parliamentary Secretary for Indigenous Affairs
Senator Marise Payne

Shadow Parliamentary Secretary for Energy and Resources
Mr Barry Haase MP

Shadow Parliamentary Secretary for Disabilities, Carers and the Voluntary Sector
Senator Cory Bernardi

Shadow Parliamentary Secretary for Water Resources and Conservation
Senator Fiona Nash

Shadow Parliamentary Secretary for Health Administration
Senator Mathias Cormann

Shadow Parliamentary Secretary for Defence
The Hon Peter Lindsay MP

Shadow Parliamentary Secretary for Education
Senator the Hon Brett Mason

Shadow Parliamentary Secretary for Justice and Public Security
Mr Jason Wood MP

Shadow Parliamentary Secretary for Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry
Senator the Hon Richard Colbeck

Shadow Parliamentary Secretary for Immigration and Citizenship and Shadow Parliamentary Secretary Assisting the Leader in the Senate
Senator Concetta Fierravanti-Wells
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Monday, 10 November 2008

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

FINANCIAL CLAIMS SCHEME (ADIs) LEVY BILL 2008
FINANCIAL CLAIMS SCHEME (GENERAL INSURERS) LEVY BILL 2008
FINANCIAL SYSTEM LEGISLATION AMENDMENT (FINANCIAL CLAIMS SCHEME AND OTHER MEASURES) BILL 2008
AUSLINK (NATIONAL LAND TRANSPORT) AMENDMENT BILL 2008
AUSTRALIAN RESEARCH COUNCIL AMENDMENT BILL 2008
EXCISE LEGISLATION AMENDMENT (CONDENSATE) BILL 2008
EXCISE TARIFF AMENDMENT (CONDENSATE) BILL 2008
TAX LAWS AMENDMENT (MEDICARE LEVY SURCHARGE THRESHOLDS) BILL (No. 2) 2008
INTERNATIONAL TAX AGREEMENTS AMENDMENT BILL (No. 2) 2008
MIGRATION AMENDMENT (NOTIFICATION REVIEW) BILL 2008
ARCHIVES AMENDMENT BILL 2008

Assent

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

MAIN COMMITTEE
Private Members’ Motions

The SPEAKER—In accordance with standing order 41(h) and the recommendations of the whips adopted by the House on 22 October 2008, I present copies of the terms of motions for which notice has been given by the members for Solomon and Mallee. These matters will be considered in the Main Committee later today.

COMMITTEES
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs Committee
Climate Change, Water, Environment and the Arts Committee
Economics Committee
Education and Training Committee
Employment and Workplace Relations Committee
Family, Community, Housing and Youth Committee
Health and Ageing Committee
Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Local Government Committee
Corporations and Financial Services Committee
Migration Committee
Treaties Committee

Membership

The SPEAKER—I inform the House that the Chief Opposition Whip has nominated members to be members of certain committees.

Dr KELLY (Eden-Monaro—Parliamentary Secretary for Defence Support) (12.01 pm)—by leave—I move:

That:

(1) Dr Stone be discharged from the Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs and that, in her place, Mrs Vale be appointed a member of the committee;

(2) Mr Wood be discharged from the Standing Committee on Climate Change, Water, Environment and the Arts and that, in his place,
Ms Marino be appointed a member of the committee;

(3) Mr Ciobo and Mr Pearce be discharged from the Standing Committee on Economics and that, in their places, Mr Hockey and Mr Andrews be appointed members of the committee;

(4) Mr A.D.H. Smith be discharged from the Standing Committee on Education and Training and that, in his place, Mr Oakeshott be appointed a member of the committee;

(5) Mr Laming and Mr Hartsuyker be discharged from the Standing Committee on Employment and Workplace Relations and that, in their places, Mr Keenan and Mr Ramsey be appointed members of the committee;

(6) Ms Ley be discharged from the Standing Committee on Family, Community, Housing and Youth and that, in her place, Mrs Mirabella be appointed a member of the committee;

(7) Mr Andrews be discharged from the Standing Committee on Health and Ageing and that, in his place, Mr Irons be appointed a member of the committee;

(8) Dr Stone and Mrs Mirabella be discharged from the Standing Committee on Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Local Government and that, in their places, Mr Randall and Mr Robb be appointed members of the committee;

(9) Mr Keenan be discharged from the Parliamentary Joint Committee on Corporations and Financial Services and that, in his place, Mr Pearce be appointed a member of the committee;

(10) Mr Randall be discharged from the Joint Standing Committee on Migration and that, in his place, Dr Stone be appointed a member of the committee;

(11) Mr Andrews be discharged from the Joint Standing Committee on Treaties and that, in his place, Mr Briggs be appointed a member of the committee.

Question agreed to.

Privileges and Members’ Interests Committee

Report

Mr RAGUSE (Forde) (12.02 pm)—I present the report of the Committee of Privileges and Members’ Interests entitled Review of procedures of the committee.

Ordered that the report be made a parliamentary paper.

Mr RAGUSE—by leave—This report is issued as a discussion paper on proposed procedures for the House of Representatives Committee of Privileges and Members’ Interests to provide natural justice and procedural fairness for those involved in the committee processes. By way of background, in November 2002 the committee advised the House that it had developed procedures that it would follow for witnesses and others who may be involved with the committee in its consideration of matters of privilege. The procedures were developed to provide for natural justice and procedural fairness for witnesses before the committee.

During the 41st Parliament the committee commenced a review of these procedures. As part of the review the committee sought advice on its procedures from two leading academics in the field of parliamentary privilege—Professor Geoffrey Lindell and Professor Gerard Carney. In addition to proposing procedures for the committee and the House, Professors Lindell and Carney also proposed the transfer of the penal jurisdiction of the House of Representatives to the courts. The committee invited comment on the paper before asking the secretariat to review the paper and propose a response to the recommendations made by Professors Carney and Lindell. The response includes proposed procedures for the committee’s consideration of matters of privilege.

The committee sought the views of the Clerk and Deputy Clerk of the House on the
proposed secretariat response. In summary, the Clerk and Deputy Clerk (1) did not support the transfer of the penal jurisdiction of the House of Representatives to the courts and (2) supported appropriate procedures for the committee to ensure the protection of procedural fairness and natural justice and considered the procedures proposed in the secretariat paper were reasonable. In presenting this matter for discussion, the committee indicates that its initial view is that it does not support the transfer of the penal jurisdiction of the House of Representatives to the courts. It is therefore important that the committee has appropriate procedures to ensure natural justice and procedural fairness for all persons involved in the committee’s processes.

The committee invites comment on the proposed procedures for the protection of witnesses before the Committee of Privileges and Members’ Interests before it reports back to the House to make recommendations for the formal implementation of the procedures. The committee also notes that there are some additional procedures that relate to the way matters of privilege are dealt with by the House after the committee has examined the matters and reported. The committee proposes that these matters could be covered by a resolution of the House. The committee welcomes the views of members and others on the proposed procedures.

**TAX LAWS AMENDMENT (EDUCATION REFUND) BILL 2008**

Second Reading

Debate resumed from 22 October, on motion by Mr Swan:

That this bill be now read a second time.

Mr BALDWIN (Paterson) (12.05 pm)—I rise to speak on the Tax Laws Amendment (Education Refund) Bill 2008 and the impact that this bill will have on the constituents in the Paterson electorate. This bill amends the Income Tax Assessment Act 1997 by introducing a 50 per cent refundable tax offset for eligible education expenses, up to a maximum of $750 per child undertaking primary studies to provide a maximum offset of $375 and up to $1,500 per child undertaking secondary studies to provide a maximum tax offset of $750 per child per year. The bill proposes that families who purchase school related materials—such as computers, computer related equipment, internet connections, computer software, school textbooks, stationery and course required tools—will be refunded 50 per cent of these costs. In the second reading speech the Treasurer stated that this bill is ‘a key part’ of the education revolution, ‘helping parents meet the everyday costs of their children’s education’. While I support the notion of tax offsets to assist Australian families in the expense of education, this bill does not go far enough to ensure the education revolution that the Rudd Labor government promised and does not relieve families of the real everyday costs of education.

The former Howard government proposed at the last election that all Australians should have the opportunity to deem what is best for their own children. The coalition stands for choice. The former Howard government empowered Australian families by enabling parents to choose the best education for their children, which often required them to juggle their priorities but also the costs associated with educating their children. The coalition believes it is the parents who know what is best for their children. The former Howard government’s aim was to meet the everyday needs of Australian families.

The coalition’s policy adopted a broader approach, allowing Australians to prioritise the costs associated with educating their children. The coalition went to the election with a policy to rebate up to $800 annually for each secondary student and up to $400
for each primary and preschool student. The policy that the former Howard government brought to the last election explicitly included school and preschool fees, school uniforms, textbooks, stationery, calculators, camps, excursions, laptops, broadband, software and extracurricular activities such as sport and music. These are the real expenses of education that Australian families need assistance with. The former Howard government’s policies offered more scope and empowered choice.

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 those opposite claim. Now, 11 months on, the promise has been replaced with a much-watered-down approach, replaced with a promise to provide every child from years 9 to 12 with ‘access’ to the latest technology. The Rudd Labor government’s proposed tax offsets do little to assist parents and students alike in the purchasing of ‘education revolution’ tools such as computers and associated expenditures. How the Rudd Labor government can be confident and assured in their approach to this matter and continually proclaim unfulfilled promises to the future leaders of our nation is beyond me.

The bill’s inadequacies concern many members of the Paterson electorate. It is far too narrow and far too limiting. It is yet another example of why ‘Kevin07’ has quickly become ‘Mistake08’. Many parents in my electorate struggle to keep their children in school uniforms, let alone have the luxury of a computer. How is this bill going to help them when the price of an average computer starts at around $1,500, a quality laptop is at least $1,000 and printers start from $150? How on earth is a family who is struggling to put clothes on their children’s backs going to afford $1,500 for a computer? This bill is absolutely unrealistic. Furthermore, the bill goes to show just how out of touch the Rudd Labor government truly is with Australian families and their associated needs. In reality, disadvantaged families will not be able to afford the upfront costs of a computer.

This bill fails to address the real things that people are struggling with, like the cost of school uniforms, which starts at around $200; the cost of a pair of solid school shoes, which is at least $50; and the cost of school camps, which can be upwards of $300. And the Rees government in New South Wales has recently announced the abolition of the $50 back-to-school bonus and of free travel to school for schoolchildren. These are the issues that parents have to deal with on a day-to-day basis, the issues that the Rudd Labor government is not acknowledging. This government purports to represent working-class families when it is obvious it is out of touch with Australian families, the issues that concern them the most and what education costs are causing them the most significant financial burden.

This bill is yet another example of the Rudd Labor government failing to address the basic things families and children need. In the Paterson electorate alone there are over 2,200 preschool children whose families will reap no benefit at all from this bill. What I demand to know is: why has the Rudd Labor government excluded preschool children from this bill? If the Rudd Labor government truly believes that reimbursing books and computer software will give our children a better start, then why wouldn’t the most logical step be to include rebates for preschool children as well? Sending children to preschool does represent significant financial costs to parents. There are costs associated with preschool fees, books and school equipment. Is the Rudd Labor government too blind to see this? Or perhaps it is just that those opposite are already too arrogant to
listen to the Australian public and ask them what is important to them during this time of significant financial stress. The people of Australia deserve better. What is the Rudd Labor government doing for my electorate? And what, may I ask, are the Rudd Labor government’s plans for constituents in my electorate who may already own a computer but need relief from the other educational expenses? This bill simply neglects those families.

I agree with the shadow Treasurer and Deputy Leader of the Opposition, Julie Bishop, that the Rudd Labor government’s bill does nothing to address the basics of a good education, does nothing to support families with the real day-to-day costs of schooling and does nothing to encourage choice. The bill, in summary, is a joke. The Rudd Labor government is a joke. Australians need relief from the expensive burden of education brought on by the mismanagement of the economy by state Labor governments. The Rudd Labor government said this bill is an education revolution. I say, particularly to those children up in the gallery, this is an education dissolution. Since the Rudd Labor government came to power, their ability to implement such a revolution has been replaced with an embarrassing display of acts which highlight their incompetence and absolute inefficiency. All this bill is good for is revealing the complete lack of credibility and capability within the Rudd Labor government. This bill is significantly less comprehensive than the policy that the former Howard government took to the last election.

My real concern is how this bill will affect families in my electorate of Paterson. Why should parents in my electorate be totally out of pocket for education which is supposed to be free? The Rudd Labor government has again failed Australian families. This bill should have addressed the cost of school uniforms, fees, camps, children’s extracurricular activities and now, in New South Wales, things as simple as the cost of transportation of children to school each day. The Rudd Labor government is, as I said, out of touch with average working families in Australians. If it had consulted with the community the government would have know that these are the real concerns of Australian families. I personally know many families in my electorate that struggle to afford to pay for their children to be engaged in sport, have difficulty affording to keep their children in school uniforms, cannot pay for their children to attend school camps and cannot even consider attempting to pay for extra tuition if their children are struggling with a particular subject. And this bill does nothing for them.

The Howard government always put the interests of Australians first, rather than simply trying to look good in the limelight. The former Howard government were not into cheap publicity stunts; they were about substance. In stark contrast, the Labor government is showcasing a terrific example of what can happen to a country’s governance when the party in power is solely concerned with attracting the limelight but fails to implement fair, realistic and effective policies. This so-called ‘education revolution’ is just like a fake tan: it looks good first up but the gloss wears off eventually and, when it does, you are left with a mismatch and a mess. In contrast, the coalition’s policy was to help families provide more educational opportunities for their children, and the coalition introduced a 40 per cent rebate on education expenses, including school fees. During its 11-year term, the former Howard government worked hard to help Australian families and to provide realistic education opportunities for our children. Unlike the Rudd government, we did not parade shallow educa-
tion revolutions. We designed a policy that would actually help the Australian people.

The Rudd Labor government has not done a single thing to ensure Australians get the relief they urgently need. It is absurd for the Rudd government to suggest that refunding money from a computer or textbooks is enough to deem it an education revolution. What if the parent has already bought a computer for their child and is looking at reimbursements for other education needs? They will miss out. There is nothing brilliant or remotely exciting in this bill. There are many families in my electorate who do not need a new computer every year. What they need is help with the ongoing financial burden of education—like school fees and uniforms—and help to fund extracurricular activities. This bill is a gimmick to trick the Australian people into thinking that the Rudd government is working in their best interests. The government is doing nothing to support the real cost of education.

I believe that education is the most valuable investment that can be made in our children because, no matter what happens to children in their lives, education is the one thing that can never be taken away from them. The bill does absolutely nothing to address the basics of a good and successful education. The Treasurer, in his second reading speech, said that this bill will help kids get the best start. I ask the government: how will this bill ensure that kids get the best start? I doubt that reimbursing even the cost of a computer or some schoolbooks is enough to fulfil your promises and give Australian children the best start. My constituents tell me that they are greatly concerned about the time it will take for the rebate to be put in the pockets of hardworking families. Some of the families in my electorate cannot afford the cost of a computer without being reimbursed immediately. If somebody bought a computer tomorrow, they could not seriously put in a claim until they got their group certificate, and realistically that could mean Australian families may not be reimbursed for up to 12 months.

The Rudd Labor government’s attitude is that the single most important thing that they can do for young Australians is to give them a chance at a decent education. This is a paradox. The Rudd Labor government have excluded key factors for reimbursement that would help a child’s education. In this bill the Rudd Labor government do not reflect their supposed passion for protecting and helping Australian people. They are all spin and no substance. The Rudd Labor government’s Tax Laws Amendment (Education Refund) Bill is not practical, and it disadvantages Australians and denies them choice. In my electorate alone there are over 20,000 schoolchildren who expect more from the Rudd Labor government after all the promises they made during the election campaign. After nearly 12 months of government the bill shows how out of touch the government have become. This so-called ‘education revolution’ is nothing more than a throwaway line. This bill is an empty promise. It reminds me of the election campaign launch in June 1987 when then Prime Minister Bob Hawke said that no child would be living in poverty in Australia by 1990. Hawke’s promise was just a throwaway line, a gimmick. Unfortunately, there are still Australian children living in poverty to remind us of this every day. The Rudd Labor government’s so-called ‘education revolution’ has similarly amounted to little more than a throwaway line, a fake promise doing nothing to relieve Australians of the real cost of education.

I would like to leave you with the words of a very alarmed Paterson constituent. Steven Loft’s views echo my concern and the concerns of the coalition and represent the views of many Australians. Mr Loft recently
wrote to the Australian Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd. He said:

Dear Prime Minister,

There is nothing more important than the education of our children.

It’s time to invest more in our public schools to ensure every child gets the best education.

More funding would make a real difference.

The money should be spent on the things schools and students really need: smaller class sizes, more individual attention for students who need it and modern buildings and facilities.

Yours Sincerely,

Steven Lofts

Mr Loft’s views reinforce the fact that the Rudd Labor government are not taking their responsibility in government seriously enough and that they are abusing their power and the trust and livelihood of the Australian public. These tax offsets need to cover a wider scope of rebates to ensure more choice for Australian punters. The Rudd Labor government need to inject more money into the education system as a whole to ensure a more realistic, prosperous and efficient future for Australian education.

Ms McKew (Bennelong—Parliamentary Secretary for Early Childhood Education and Childcare) (12.20 pm)—I rise to speak in support of the Tax Laws Amendment (Education Refund) Bill 2008, because the Rudd Labor government is committed to supporting families and supporting Australians of all ages to get a quality education. This bill provides financial assistance for families with primary and secondary schoolchildren to offset the costs of their children’s education. The government has allocated $4.4 billion to deliver this promise for Australian families through the new education tax refund. As opposed to the fantasies and insults we have just heard from the member for Paterson, the Rudd government is committed to an education revolution. First of all, you have to imagine the future. Then you map the future and fund the future, and indeed that is what we are doing with our education revolution. We believe that investing in education is crucial to driving productivity growth and to building a modern and prosperous economy.

We believe that education has the potential to not only drive productivity but also empower individuals to help overcome disadvantage. We are backing our beliefs and our pre-election commitment to the Australian people with funding to drive the education revolution on multiple levels, and this is what the member for Paterson in his previous comments simply ignored. Our entire focus, let me stress, is revolutionary because it starts with very young children. If we want to look for the areas of greatest neglect by education ministers during the Howard years, I suggest that this is where we need to shed a light—because one OECD survey after another has pointed to the shameful underperformance of Australia when it comes to investing in the early years of education. For instance, in 2006 Australia was ranked 25th out of 26 countries on the OECD indicator looking at the proportion of students enrolled in preprimary education—so much for the choices of the Howard years.

There was also a complete failure by the previous government to invest in the professional training of those who care for very young children. The fact is that 40 per cent of those who care for our very young children have no qualifications whatsoever. That is where the education revolution is being focused: on investing in the qualifications of those who care for our very important young people. What an indictment this is when all of the scientific research points to the critical importance of an appropriate learning environment for very young children. The Rudd government has committed to ensuring that all Australian children have the best start in life, long before a child even arrives at
school. We have an investment and a policy commitment to a $2.4 billion package over the next five years aimed at turning around the kinds of statistics revealed a couple of weeks ago by the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth in their Report card on the wellbeing of young Australians.

The government is taking action, as I said, on a number of fronts. I would like to note just two of the initiatives that are being implemented as part of the education revolution in support of our youngest Australians. The first is the investment of $533 million—that is, half a billion dollars—over the next five years to ensure that by 2013 all Australian children have access to a quality, affordable early childhood learning program delivered by a university trained teacher in the year before formal schooling. We have given a commitment to recurrent funding after 2013 to the states and territories so that early childhood learning programs continue to be an expected and normal part of every child’s educational experience. Again I would like to draw the attention of all members, and particularly the member for Paterson, to the fact that in many parts of Australia 20 per cent of children do not get access to a preschool education. The children in his electorate of Paterson are undoubtedly going to benefit from the amount of funding that we are putting into preschool.

In Indigenous communities the figures are far worse—something like 50 per cent of Indigenous children do not get access to preschoo. COAG has signed off on $564 million of joint funding over six years, therefore, to address the needs of Indigenous children in their early years. As part of this, 35 children and family centres are to be established across Australia to deliver integrated services that offer early learning, child care and family support programs.

The government has high ambitions for our schools and for what they can deliver for all of our students. Our stated ambition is that all Australian school students acquire the knowledge and skills to participate effectively in society and employment in a globalised economy. We are working to meet this ambition by stating our clear expectations around several things—quality teaching, strong outcomes for students, improved student retention, importantly, and good parental engagement. It is a highly collaborative approach.

The government has also taken unambiguous steps to support all of these ambitions. I refer to two practical examples of how the government has acted to support the education revolution in our schools. I point first of all to the $116 million in funding to nearly 900 secondary schools across Australia for the first rollout of new computers in schools. This is part of the $1.2 billion funding commitment for the digital education revolution. In my own electorate of Bennelong, the first rollout of computers in schools has seen computers delivered to Holy Cross College, Marist College, Carlingford High School and Ryde Secondary College. These schools are very grateful for the improvement that that has made to their ICT departments. In addition, there is the allocation of $90 million of funding involving almost 100 secondary schools for the first phase of the trade training centres. Again, this is part of a much bigger commitment, a $2½ billion commitment. In my area, the electorate of Bennelong, this initiative is going to deliver hospitality training resources and a commercial kitchen at the outstanding Epping Boys High School. They put in a terrific submission. This facility is going to be used by not only students at that school but also students attending neighbouring Carlingford High School and Cheltenham Girls High School.
I come precisely to the Tax Laws Amendment (Education Refund) Bill 2008. This bill will expand on all of the initiatives—and they need to be seen as a whole—that support Australia’s education system. This will help parents meet the everyday costs of their children’s education. The third part of the government’s education revolution is about our ambitions for working-age Australians. Our goal here is that everyone has the opportunity to develop the skills and qualifications needed to enable them to be effective participants in a modern economy. Again, on this issue I point to the actions already underway by the Rudd government. There is the $2 billion Productivity Places Program, which is already offering training places to over 53,000 job seekers in this financial year. Indeed, more than 12,000 people have already completed training courses, and last week the government announced an additional $187 million for this Productivity Places Program. It will translate overall to an extra 56,000 places. In all, the government will be offering training places to 700,000 people over the next five years.

Further, the government has acted to bolster the investment available for Australia’s training and academic institutions through the creation of an $11 billion Education Investment Fund. The key priorities of this fund will be capital expenditure and renewal and refurbishment in universities and in vocational institutions as well as in research facilities and major research institutions. As the Deputy Prime Minister, the Minister for Education, said in the House a fortnight ago, she has invited 14 universities from around the country to bid for government funding worth nearly $700 million for strategic investment in capital and research facilities. I was delighted to see that Macquarie University, situated in the north-west of the electorate of Bennelong, has been invited to put forward a proposal in this round.

I have taken the time today to describe the government’s ambitions and multiple actions in enacting an education revolution. This bill forms one of a number of elements that the government are putting in place in support of the changes that we are driving across all sectors, starting with early education, going through to school education and then to the important area of training. It is a revolution that starts by giving our youngest children the best start in life. It aims to embed high expectation of our schools in preparing our young people to further their careers, and it encourages working-age Australians to engage in ongoing training.

The Tax Laws Amendment (Education Refund) Bill 2008 will play a key role in delivering up to $4.4 billion in financial support for schooling costs. Around 1.3 million Australian families will be eligible for this assistance, which is expected to support around 2.7 million primary and secondary school students. The refund is a tax offset for 50 per cent of eligible education expenses for children undertaking primary and secondary schooling. Under this initiative, eligible families will be able to claim 50 per cent of education expenses—up to $750 for each child undertaking primary school, giving parents a refund of up to $375 per year; and up to $1,500 for each child undertaking secondary school, providing parents with a refund of up to $750 per child per year. Thus a family with, say, one primary school student and one secondary school student—not an unusual combination—can receive up to $1,125 per year.

The education tax refund bill sets out the expenses that are eligible for the refund and they include laptops, computers—and the associated costs of repairing and running them—as well as printers and paper. They include home internet connections, education software, school textbooks and other materials, including study guides and stationery.
and also prescribed trade tools. So there are a range of things that can be claimed by parents.

The refund bill also sets out the characteristics of the families who are eligible to receive the financial assistance available under this bill. In defining family eligibility, the bill recognises there are a wide range of different family circumstances. Families that are eligible are in receipt of family tax benefit A and have children undertaking primary or secondary school studies. For those school students who enter or leave in any one school year, a claim of half the amount of the refund attributable to the half of the financial year that they attended school will be allowed. Parents can claim the refund against eligible expenses incurred from 1 July 2008 when they complete their 2008-09 income tax return. Parents who do not pay tax and are not required to complete a tax return will still benefit from the tax refund. Importantly, this financial assistance is available for eligible education expenses incurred from 1 July 2008.

The bill is part of building a stronger and fairer Australia by funding parents with real support regardless of their location or the schools that their children attend. In my own area of Bennelong there are 44 primary, secondary and special schools—government, Catholic and independent. I know the parents of children at all of those schools and indeed across Australia will be able to make choices with regard to what they purchase to assist their children in achieving their educational goals. I know that families such as those in my electorate value education highly. They are going to welcome this substantial contribution to their children’s educational expenses.

In this country we need dedicated efforts to ensure that every child has the opportunity to fulfil his or her potential. The Rudd government’s commitment to the education revolution is aimed at a more equitable distribution of resources for those in lower- and middle-income brackets, as it is without a doubt that by increasing the participation of young Australians in early learning environments and providing financial assistance to struggling families we build a better society with skilled and productive members in the community.

Earlier I mentioned the recently released Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth Report card on the wellbeing of young Australians. Against the measure of reported deprivation, ARACY noted that lack of educational resources is one way that poverty may be linked to poor educational achievement. In comparison to OECD countries, Australia ranked only 10th in a ranking of 30 countries on this measure. Indigenous Australia ranked a dismal 29th in a ranking of 31. These are awful figures, but I also noted one other—that is, in 2006, the ARACY report said, seven per cent of children reported having fewer than 11 books in their home. This bill, a very practical measure, offers families financial assistance by reducing the effective cost to families of practical educational resources.

To sum up, this education tax refund bill is a concrete, practical example of how the Rudd government’s education revolution is an agenda based on actions and not just on words. It demonstrates the renewed valuing of and commitment to education, to Australia’s students and educators and to parents as the first educators of the future generations. Those who diminish this notion simply do not understand or have not bothered to inform themselves of the very wide range of policies that the Rudd government is committed to. As I have said on many occasions before, I want to see the kind of early learning and educational system that will ensure that every Australian child can reach for the
stars. It will certainly be a revolutionary act when we eliminate the current long tail of educational underachievement and when Australia meets the Prime Minister’s goal of lifting school retention rates from an abysmal 75 per cent to something like 90 or 95 per cent by 2020. Equally, we will know that the barricades have been breached when every Indigenous child in the Northern Territory and in remote areas of Western Australia and Queensland graduates from school and has exactly the same set of opportunities and choices as the school graduates who live in my electorate in suburbs like Denistone, Eastwood and Epping. If we do that, the report cards on Australia’s future will be looking a lot more optimistic than the one that was released just a few weeks ago. I commend the bill to the House.

Mr RANDALL (Canning) (12.37 pm)—I am pleased to speak on the Tax Laws Amendment (Education Refund) Bill 2008 today. As we know, this bill seeks to amend the Income Tax Assessment Act 1997 to introduce a 50 per cent refundable tax offset for eligible education expenses, which are extremely limited. I will go into those details further in this speech. The proposed offset is for expenses totalling a maximum of $750 per primary school student, meaning a $375 offset, and $1,500 worth of expenses per secondary student for a $750 or 50 per cent offset.

This bill could be a lot better for and a lot more beneficial to Australian families and Australia’s 3.4 million enrolled students. There are over 22,000 students in Canning, made up of 15,215 primary school students and 7,250 secondary school students. It is interesting to note that the government’s description of all eligible items is not at all comprehensive, and this is where this bill falls short. The eligible items are limited to computers, home internet connections, computer software and textbooks associated with computers. It is nowhere near wide enough for the families of today. As we know, it is not good enough for the much generated focus group of the Labor Party, using the slogan ‘working family’, either. Under the bill, eligible families will be those receiving family tax benefit A, those who receive other payments—which means those not receiving family tax benefit A—and those independent students who receive youth allowance, disability support pension or Abstudy living allowance.

This bill emanates from the Labor Party’s election promise which was in this year’s budget. Labor’s education revolution continues to be lacklustre, all spin and no substance. Members might recall seeing the Prime Minister in the lead-up to the election standing there with a computer saying, ‘This is the toolbox of the future.’ A senior journalist from Perth who happened to be there when the Prime Minister, then opposition leader, was saying that said to me he thought it was one of the biggest spin-over stunts that he had seen in any pre-election campaign. The follow-up has not happened. We have got computers, but I will come to the detail of why this is more spin than substance later.

While the coalition support a tax offset for education, those working families that Labor vowed to look after are exactly the people that this bill could have been better for. The coalition strongly support helping parents and caregivers with the cost of education—and we are non-exclusive. All parents—and I emphasise all parents—have a right to choose how best to educate their children. The coalition’s Helping Families to Provide More Educational Opportunities for their Children policy was intended to make the offset of up to $800 for secondary school students and $400 for primary school and preschool students available to all families. The coalition, recognising the breadth of learning and the needs of individual students,
included in this policy a broad range of eligible items, again reflecting the choice of parents and the cost of education. The coalition included as eligible items school fees for both government and non-government schools, as well as uniforms, books, stationery, school excursions and camps, laptops and broadband software and extracurricular activities such as music, dance and sport. In other words, the coalition covered all of the expenses, whereas Labor continues on this one-way digital street. It is so narrowly defined. As some have mused, what happens when they all end up with their computers? Does that mean that they cannot claim eligible expenses? Are there no other eligible expenses under this policy that the Labor Party has now proffered?

Canning Vale High School, which was one of the most modern new secondary schools in Western Australia even before this policy came in, has huge banks of computers for students. Not every student is going to be working at a laptop or computer monitor day in, day out the whole time they are at school. To share them is a far better use of such items and is a far better bang for the buck to those paying for them. We are now seeing the Labor Party drift away from the suggestion that everyone will end up with a computer to saying that it could be one between two students. The Labor Party did say before the election that all students would get one, but it has gradually been diluted to one for two. There is more to come.

We do know that education is not cheap, but it is certainly imperative. Many parents struggle to pay fees, pay for books and provide internet access for their children. The coalition recognise that families need help with fees no matter where their children attend school, and that is why it was included in our policy. However, it is not reflected here. Research shows that the basic cost of raising one child to the age of 18 now exceeds $200,000. The Australian Scholarship Group estimates the cost of schooling, depending on the choice of government, independent or private schooling, as follows: the cost of preschool is between $2,662 and $6,952, reflecting parents’ choices; the cost of primary school is between $5,317 and $12,561, again reflecting the range of choices; and the cost of secondary school is between $5,618 and $21,112, again giving a range of choice. As I have mentioned, the cost of schooling is astonishing, and any help is a big help. As we know, many parents either end up with a second job or take out substantial loans to put their children through school.

Without wishing to go into the bona fides of the Prime Minister’s well-documented, old-fashioned, working-class upbringing, I would like to suggest that the Prime Minister consider giving back to those who gave him a leg up when he needed it. As a Queensland youngster Mr Rudd and his brother were fortunate enough to be offered the opportunity to attend and board at the elite Catholic boys Marist Brothers school, Marist College Ashgrove. Despite its extensive waiting list, the exclusive school made room for the future Prime Minister and the Marist Brothers themselves covered the fees. Mr Rudd then completed his secondary education at Nambour State High School, coincidentally also the school the Treasurer, the member for Lilley, attended. Mr Rudd has reached the highest office this nation can offer. Without doubt, he is extremely well educated. With Mr Rudd’s family’s highly publicised affluence, he could afford to provide an annual scholarship to both the Marist Brothers college and Nambour high school. He received a fine education from both institutions and should consider giving back to the public and private schools that gave him his start. I am sure that those schools would welcome such an offer and would be delighted with such a
showing of gratitude by the Prime Minister now.

Returning to the cost of education, those figures I gave you do not take into account the cost of extracurricular activities. Whether they be ballet classes, junior football or cricket, piano lessons or any other activities, they are a huge additional financial burden on parents—parents of any demographic who want to offer every opportunity to their children. Extracurricular activities are a big cost, and they hit low-income-earning families particularly hard. A Brotherhood of St Laurence survey found that 69 per cent of parents surveyed had trouble paying for sport and other activities. Disturbingly, I must point out, 39 per cent of parents said their children had been absent from school because they could not afford the excursion, the camp or the transport. As a former schoolteacher I remember it was often very heart rending and embarrassing for the students or their parents when the students were asked, ‘So, why aren’t you going on camp this year?’ and they would say, ‘Oh, Mum doesn’t want me to go,’ or, ‘It’s too cold,’ or, ‘I don’t like that part of the bush.’ You knew it was just an excuse because they could not afford to go, and it was very sad. On many occasions schools out of their own fundraising and on their own initiative paid for many of these students to go on camp. They would lightly sidle up to the parent, quite often a single parent, and say, ‘Look, if you would like, we will find a way to actually get your child to the camp,’ or get them onto the excursion et cetera which was part of their overall education. But it really should not be like that, because the tax offset that we are talking about would actually provide this greater choice for parents to redeem 50 per cent of those fees rather than the narrow focus on computers and computer equipment.

And what about those students who need a little bit of extra help—in tuition, for example? This is not covered under Labor’s offset either. We know that the Labor Party has now scrapped the vouchers that were available for literacy and numeracy et cetera, so parents will struggle. As a parent I know that children do need help in certain areas. If they are weak in maths, for example, it costs a fair bit of money to get in a private tutor to help. No matter how affluent you are, it would still help them if you had the opportunity to get help with some of those extra fees to help your children get through their courses.

This is a government that advocates its early childhood education credentials, yet it is excluding the cost of that education from the offset. Here we have a $4.4 billion initiative that could have been better directed to benefit Australian families. Remember the working families? They are the ones who would not mind benefiting from this as well. So go back to your focus groups and find out if they are happy with this narrow focus on education fees. Everybody agrees that we need to put money in education, but it must be directed in a way that it will do the most good.

The trumpeted ‘education revolution’ has come apart at the seams. With the additional cost of implementing the computers-in-schools program estimated at $3 billion, state Labor governments and the now non-Labor government in Western Australia are finding it pretty tough. For example, in Western Australia, every $1 of federal government funding costs the state an extra $3. It is all right to give schools computers, but where is the connection, where is the backup, where is the ongoing support? What about the repairs and maintenance of these computers? It is not there, and that is why the state governments and many of the state schools at which this initiative is targeted are bailing out: they just cannot afford it.
The way the Labor Party has spruiked its laptops you would think that there were no computers at all in Australian schools. That is just not true. In fact, Australia was one of the world leaders in providing computers, third behind Lichtenstein and the United States, in a 2003 report showing there was one computer for every three students in the country. So that was happening without the Labor Party’s much-vaunted education revolution, which is fizzing out to become less a revolution and more of a disturbance.

Despite having to pay off Labor’s $96 billion debt, the coalition provided record funding for schools. Between 1996 and 2007, investment in state schools doubled from $1.4 billion to $3.5 billion. So much for the criticism about the coalition’s lack of investment: it in fact doubled in that period. Public schools enrol roughly 67 per cent of students yet receive 75 per cent of the funding, whereas non-government schools enrol roughly 33 per cent of students and receive only 25 per cent of funding, and it is the parents and the school communities who make up the shortfall. You hear this sort of thing so often: ‘Look at that school over there; they’ve got all those nice ovals and they’ve got a bus.’ Parents who choose non-government schools for their children—and it is a choice; it should always be a choice, even though the ideologically driven would probably argue against this—make up the difference in funding out of their own pockets. It has been estimated that this difference, in addition to the cost of fees and amenities for students entering non-government schools, is $4 billion per annum.

While we are on the topic of education, let’s not forget those opposite who have axed one of the coalition’s most successful and valuable initiatives: the Investing in Our Schools Program. I defy any member of the government to tell me that not one school in Australia appreciated the funding from the Investing in Our Schools Program. In fact, I would like a dollar for every time the principals, teachers, parents or students came to me and said: ‘Look we could never have afforded that shadecloth over the playground for kids. We could never have afforded the computer hub in our school. We could never have afforded the freezer in the canteen that we had to pay for that we have finally got.’ All of those extra things that the schools could never have afforded to do were provided through the Investing in Our Schools Program and it was axed. So much for investing in schools by the Labor Party. They are so narrowly focused that they are just taking this computer direction and excluding everything else that adds to a child’s education in terms of amenities.

More than 75 Canning schools will feel the pinch with the Labor government scrapping the Investing in Our Schools Program. This funding filled a hole for projects desperately needed by schools that never seemed to make it onto the state government funding priority list, as I said, like adding to the libraries, carpeting and even air conditioning in remote and hot areas. Let us talk about not what they are doing in terms of the education revolution but what they have actually taken away. I conclude by saying we do need to give offsets and support to parents in terms of their school costs but not by just narrowly focusing on computers and the hardware that goes with them. They need to realise that an education is far broader and far more comprehensive than the narrow focus they have chosen on this occasion.

Mr DREYFUS (Isaacs) (12.54 pm)—The Tax Laws Amendment (Education Refund) Bill 2008 introduces the education tax refund. This refund will provide Australian families with a 50 per cent refundable tax offset for eligible education expenses up to a maximum of $750 per child in primary school and $1,500 per child at secondary
school. This is a significant $4.4 billion boost for education in this country. It is part of the Rudd government’s commitment to provide all Australian children with the opportunities afforded by a world-class education.

It helps to take the pressure off working Australian families, particularly at this time of global economic crisis and increasing strains on family budgets. Who can receive this refund? It will be families in receipt of family tax benefit part A. It will be those who receive other payments that preclude them from receiving family tax benefit part A, and independent students who receive youth allowance, the DSP or Abstudy living allowance. Taken all together it will cover some 1.3 million families and 2.7 million children. It will be claimable when income tax returns are submitted from 1 July 2009, so it will come in next year.

There is a long list of expenses that will be eligible for this education tax refund including computers and computer related equipment, such as printers, disability aids and associated costs. It will cover home internet connection, computer software, school textbooks and other paper based school learning materials including stationery. It will cover course prescribed tools of trade. It does not cover school fees or school uniforms.

The aim of this government is to create an outstanding world-class education system so that every single Australian child will have the best job opportunities and the best life opportunities in future. As I say often when I go to schools: the gift of an education is, apart from the love that we can give our children, the best possible gift that we can give to set children up for their future lives. It is the giving of that gift of education that is the reason why the Rudd government is committed to implementing an education revolution. The features include a universal preschool entitlement of 15 hours per week for all four-year-olds, a national curriculum board to develop a national curriculum in the areas of English, mathematics, science and history by 2011 and $1.2 billion for a digital education revolution—meaning a school computer for every student in years 9 to 12 supported by digital content resources, professional development and broadband connections. There will be a $2.5 billion investment to build trades training centres in state, Catholic and independent schools to develop vital skills. There will be Future Fellowships to support Australia’s top researchers, and the government is also investing in the teaching of Asian languages and studies to ensure that as a nation Australia is prepared for what is being called the Asia-Pacific century.

This government’s education revolution is about opportunity and it is about prosperity. It is about opportunities for all Australian children and it is about securing national prosperity in the future. It is not enough for the opposition to say that they believe in quality in education. It is not enough for the opposition to say that they believe in choice. It is not enough for them to say that they believe in providing all children with the best education possible—they have to back their words with actions. They failed during their time in government and they are still failing now. One wonders if the deputy opposition leader, who spoke earlier on this bill, has actually read the bill. She claimed:

This bill refunds parents for only a limited amount of expenditure on information technology related goods.

She further claimed in her speech in this House that the bill does not cover expenses for textbooks. This is simply false, which she would know if she had made it to page 12 of the bill. It is typical of a lazy opposition frontbench and, in particular, it is typical of
the intellectual laziness of the deputy opposition leader.

The deputy opposition leader has decried the fact that this bill does not fund what she terms ‘extra tuition’. What the deputy opposition leader really means when she says this is that she wants to prioritise government spending on private tutors in Dalkeith, Nedlands and Peppermint Grove over the very real needs of the great bulk of Australian working families, who are doing it tough and trying to provide a decent education for their children. The deputy opposition leader also claimed:

It is through values based reform measures that quality in education will be achieved.

It is an interesting choice of words from the deputy opposition leader, assuming that she has not picked them up from somewhere else. If the opposition wants to turn this debate into one of values, that is a debate that I am more than happy to have.

Underlying any government action to improve schooling in Australia must be principles of quality, equity and choice. These are values that Australian families understand to be important in providing the best future for their own children and for all Australian children. Equity in education is vital, and as a government we reject the notion that hundreds of thousands of Australian children can or should be left behind by the Commonwealth government.

The coalition talk about choice, but they fail to understand that when you remove investment in public education you remove choice from the vast majority of parents who send their children to state schools. When a government undermines investment in public education, it removes the choices that parents are able to make, the choices that schools can make in the provision of services and the choices that children will have in the future.

What values are the opposition promoting when they put up speaker after speaker on the cognate debate on the Education Legislation Amendment Bill 2008 and the Schools Assistance Bill 2008 which we had earlier this year to argue against the most basic levels of accountability on the part of schools and institutions that receive enormous levels of funding from the Commonwealth government? The outrage expressed in the arguments that we heard from those opposite gave the game away. They do not believe, it would seem, that private institutions that receive billions of dollars in government funding should in any way be accountable to the Australian public for the expenditure of that money. I cannot go past the speech by the member for Sturt, who was outraged in a way that only he can be outraged that schools might be required to ‘publish information about all of their sources of funding’. Imagine that a private institution that is carrying out an important public purpose and that is reliant on public money might be required to assure the minister that the institution is financially viable!

If you are looking for an example of the failure of those opposite—the failure of the Liberal Party and the Nationals—to understand accountability and good governance, you cannot go past the example that has cropped up in vivid colour in the last two or three weeks, that of ABC Learning Centres, of which the Rudd government is now trying to pick up the pieces. Under the former government, ABC Learning Centres were allowed to grow and grow to a dominant position in the childcare industry—

Mrs Irwin interjecting—

Mr DREYFUS—I was in fact going to mention Larry Anthony. It is now clear that many of its centres were running at a loss, but the Liberal and National Party approach to accountability of companies and organisa-
tions receiving large amounts of public funding is that accountability and disclosure are not necessary. Notions of good governance and accountability are foreign, it would seem, to those opposite.

Perhaps it is that they did not want to hold to account one of their own, the former member for Richmond, the Hon. Larry Anthony. He lost his seat, and thereby his ministry, at the 2004 election—and I remind honourable members that he was the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs. In that role he was responsible for the childcare industry in this country. He went virtually straight onto the board of ABC Learning Centres. That is revealed by the annual report, which I happen to have. At the annual general meeting in November 2005, Sally-anne Atkinson, the former Liberal Lord Mayor of Brisbane, who was the chairman of this company, had this to say about Larry Anthony joining the board.

We were looking for another when Larry Anthony had a career change and I was absolutely delighted when he accepted my invitation—

Mr Abbott—Madam Deputy Speaker, I rise on a point of order. Reluctant though I am to interrupt the member speaking, the fact is that what he is saying now appears to have nothing to do with the bill in hand, and I suggest that you draw him back to the legislation before the House.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Ms AE Burke)—I thank the member for Warringah for his point of order and I will ask the member for Isaacs to come to the bill before the House, but I do point out that the bill is on education and that many other speakers have been fairly broad-ranging on the topic of education.

Mr DREYFUS—Indeed they have, and many other speakers have spoken on this subject of accountability, which lies at the core of the Rudd government’s approach not only to education but to funding generally with public funds of private institutions. This company, ABC Learning Centres, and Larry Anthony’s role in it, provides no better example—

Mr Abbott—On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker, members opposite can start defending Bob Carr and the Macquarie Bank and the—

The DEPUTY SPEAKER—The member for Warringah is now abusing the point of order.

Mr Abbott—He is abusing the standing orders by speaking as he has.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER—The member for Isaacs will address the bill before the House, which I again state is on education and I think there has been a fairly broad-ranging discussion.

Mr DREYFUS—Sallyanne Atkinson, the former Liberal Lord Mayor of Brisbane, said:

Apart from his personal skills (and his considerable charm) he has a Bachelor of Commerce degree, a background in banking, and some experience in our industry as Federal Minister for Children and Youth Affairs.

Mr ABBOTT (Warringah) (1.07 pm)—I move:

That the member be no longer heard.

Question negatived.

Mr DREYFUS—This is an excellent example of the failure of the Liberal and National parties to understand what accountability in education is about. It is an excellent example because this was one of their own: the former National Party minister responsible for this industry who, on leaving this parliament, virtually went straight onto the board of the largest childcare provider in this country, supposedly as an independent director, which he was not. (Quorum formed)
independent director of ABC Learning Centres, is the best possible example of those opposite’s complete lack of understanding of accountability in education or indeed in public administration generally. This same Larry Anthony was described by the company in several annual reports as an independent, non-executive director, and those same annual reports record that in 2006 he received some $43,000 in fees and superannuation and in 2007 received some $65,000 in fees and superannuation—

Mr DREYFUS—I will move back to the bill by leaving on this point: the fact is that of course Larry Anthony was not at all independent. As a consultant he received fees of $110,000 for the year ending 30 June 2006 and $125,000 for the year ending 30 June 2007. Will Larry Anthony now accept responsibility—

Mr Abbott—Madam Deputy Speaker, I rise on a point of order. Perhaps the member speaking can talk about his fees from the Labor government in Victoria—

The DEPUTY SPEAKER—The member for Warringah will resume his seat. Points of order are not for abuse of the parliament. The member for Isaacs has the call.

Mr DREYFUS—We hope that when those opposite stand again to speak about accountability and why it is that there should not be accountability by private institutions operating in the education sector—be that in early childhood, in primary, in secondary or, indeed, in tertiary education—they will bear in mind the kind of debacle that has occurred in ABC Learning Centres involving one of their own, where the lack of accountability and the lack of transparency can really be said to have brought this about. This cosy relationship was so cosy that Eddie Groves of ABC Learning Centres gave $50,000 to the National Party in 2007 in the run-up to the last election. The idea of accountability, which those opposite have spoken about regularly in education bills throughout this year, is a notion that they do not understand. The government does. We are looking for accountability when public funds are expended.

This bill is a key part of the education revolution that the Rudd government has embarked on. I commend the bill to the House.
known colloquially as the ETR, or education tax refund, bill and it essentially provides a refund of $375 for a primary school aged child after $750 is spent and $750 for a secondary school student after $1,500 is spent. This will allow parents and caregivers to seek refunds for expenses to do with computers, a home internet connection, software, textbooks and stationery.

This brings me to the alternative proposal, which was the coalition’s plan which we took to the election. In our plan, the rebate could include preschool education expenses, school fees, school uniforms, extracurricular school activities and tutoring. I would encourage the government to look at extending the list of expenses for which this rebate can be claimed—that is, if they really want to focus on improving educational outcomes. The point I would make is that there are schools around this country where the children would prefer to fit in by having a uniform on as a priority before they start selecting software. There are children that would like to do the incursions, let alone the excursions, before having a printer at home.

That is the trouble with this bill and the government’s policy: the almost myopic focus on computer hardware, software and peripherals has meant that they do not understand one of the basic requirements in a young person’s or child’s life—the need to fit in. I think that it is a very bad thing for a child to miss out on the opportunities that their classmates are being given, because they are then reminded of the challenges of their socioeconomic position or other issues in their lives. To that end, I advocate that the government look at the matter of individual inclusion and widen the criteria for the items that can be claimed under this bill.

I am sure that all the government speakers will talk up this bill and the comprehensive benefits that it will provide, but my view is that the benefits are neither comprehensive nor targeted towards the reality of the need. I again urge the government and the government members to think carefully about the best way to assist parents and their children to ensure they fit in and are therefore comfortable enough to pursue the opportunities that education offers. If you do not make sure children, particularly those from more challenging socioeconomic backgrounds, are supported with a school uniform like everyone else’s and the opportunity to participate in all school activities like everyone else, then you risk these children feeling isolated. They may become disruptive, bringing themselves down and those around them.

Of course, by expanding the criteria for claims, you do not guarantee that parents will spend the money on uniforms, school activities or other expenses, but you make it a bit easier for them to come to that decision to act now and claim it back later. As a father I want my children to have the same opportunities as their peers. I do not want my children to miss out and feel bad. I know that a majority of parents think the same way. For those who do, change in the criteria in this bill would be of benefit to the parents but, most importantly, to their children. Children do not wish to be different from other children, and I believe that assisting children to fit in is the best way to start.

I draw upon my experiences with my own children and my significant experience in coaching teenagers in sport to refine my views of what is important to young people, but I also have very up-to-date information on this matter. I recently assisted the senior class of Waddington Primary School in Koondoola by paying for one of them to go to the school camp. Koondoola is a suburb challenged by lower than average socioeconomic standing and I know that many of the parents struggled to find the $170 for the camp. If they knew they could get the money
back, maybe that would make a bit of a difference. Widened criteria would mean that all the children could have the nice graduation polo shirt uniform or in fact the regular school uniform.

This is not to say that Waddington Primary School is not a proud school. I do like what they do. I like the commitment of teachers like James Cunningham, a man dedicated to ensuring the children in his class have the best opportunities. He is a fine example to the children and a role model to them. James actually brought his class up to my office and we all had morning tea. I was very pleased to have welcomed them to the office. I look forward to providing every assistance that I can in the future to the school. I would also mention that the principal of Waddington is Leanne Alderman, and she has continued the great work of previous principals of the school Stephen Blechynden and Peter Mulcahy.

I would next like to turn my attention to the Hawker Park Primary School in the suburb of Warwick, in the south-west of Cowan. The school has a strong community feel to it and an outstanding reputation. When I mention the school to other principals I always get the comment that Hawker Park is held in high regard. A school’s reputation is often developed over a long period, and it is a credit to committed staff and parents that although the school is just 25 years old it has been such a great success and holds such a positive position in the community. At the helm of this great little school is Dr Irma Roberts, the principal. The acting deputy is year 1 teacher Felicity Randell, but Tom Kelly, normally the deputy, is on long service leave and has served for many years as the deputy principal. Tom is the lead organiser behind the sports carnivals and serves the school very well.

It is also appropriate for me to mention that six teachers have 17 or more years service at Hawker Park. In fact, for 25 years Tony Bourne has been teaching the year 7 class and is now teaching the children of his former students. Tony has been a great and positive influence on every graduating class over those 25 years. The other long-serving staff include Julia Hill, with 18 years service; Lois Watt, 19 years; Pamela Barnes, 19 years; Lori Chatman, 18 years; and Liz Everett, 17 years. It says something about a school when the teachers want to stay and contribute over such a long period. I thank them for their efforts, their dedication and overall commitment to quality education.

The P&C has been working very well and effectively for many years, undertaking fund-raising activities and supporting the school. Although there are many outstanding volunteers that have been there for years, I will just mention the president, Margaret Brox, and long-time school volunteers Vicki Mattock and Chris Henry, who have been integral to the success of the school community over many years. I would also mention Belinda Mackay, who again did many years of dedicated work with the P&C. Finally I will mention Beth Worsdell, who runs the canteen. Beth has been in the position for many years and the canteen serves the school very well. Again, widened criteria for the education tax refund would benefit Hawker Park. Voluntary school fees should be included under this bill. This would encourage more parents to contribute, which would then result in an increase in funds available to the school to use for educational outcomes.

I also want to speak about another school in Cowan, which I have had a long-term association with. In 2005 I went to see Peter Smith, the then principal of South Ballajura Primary School. South Ballajura is in the north-east of Perth and it gets particularly hot in summer. The school has demountable
classrooms that are air-conditioned, but in 2005 the remainder of the school was not. I offered Peter the option of me writing the Investing in Our Schools Program application for him, and Peter told me that he did not have the time to get everything done, so I agreed to get the quotes and put together the application. This was done and the grant was received. The result was that evaporative cooling was installed in South Ballajura Primary School. I certainly found it was an easy case to make, the case for air conditioning. There is little doubt that children are able to make the most of school when they are in a cooler environment and can therefore better maintain their levels of concentration. South Ballajura Primary School is an example of the coalition government’s commitment to education, and the facts cannot be brushed away, like the current government likes to do so often.

But I think it is important to talk about South Ballajura in 2008. There are more than 600 students at the school, representing 30 nationalities. In the languages other than English program they learn Indonesian, which adds to the rich diversity that they derive from the different cultures represented by the students. A couple of weeks ago I went and spoke to a year 5 and 6 group of students about a stronger and better community. While I was there, Miss Jade Green asked me a number of questions that demonstrated to me that she cares about being a good citizen in Australia. I would say that the children were very well mannered and they are therefore a credit to their teachers, and to the principal, Lynda Moir.

I have the highest regard for Lynda and her outstanding registrar, Betty Vlahov, who has been at the school since it opened in 1994, and the dedicated school staff, yet the support of parents and volunteers remains critical to the success of the school. To properly acknowledge the work of the P&C, I will mention, with my thanks for their efforts, president Annie Whitehurst, vice-president Rachel Whitworth, Jane Green, Julie Cruden, Naomi Brown, Tracey Jones, Judith Hill, Charmaine Robertson and Karen Markham—to name just a few of the current members. I also mention the good work of previous executive members of the P&C Caroline Bennetts and Mrs Lisa Raats. Given this bill is about supporting parents, I would note just one of the many examples where the South Ballajura P&C have supported the children. This year the P&C funded 15 flexible pianos for the music room. This ensures a better and more enjoyable music experience for the children. I have great pleasure in acknowledging South Ballajura primary’s staff and parent volunteers for the excellent work they do for education in our community under what are, at times, challenging circumstances.

It is for that reason that I also believe widened criteria for the education tax refund would benefit South Ballajura Primary School. In these suburbs of challenged socioeconomic circumstances, it is all the more important that children feel that they are fitting in. School uniforms, incursions and excursions are all key features of a child fitting in and therefore feeling that link to the educational process. Without such a link, children are at risk of feeling isolated or second best and therefore may avoid school, undermining their futures. Again, if the government included voluntary school fees, extracurricular activities and uniforms under this bill, it would encourage more parents to make these outlays and make the children feel part of the school and better linked to education and its great value.

However, South Ballajura Primary School is just one part of the South Ballajura story. It would be wrong of me not to mention principal Cheryl Lennox, registrar Lee-Anne Green and the truly dedicated teaching and
support staff at the South Ballajura Education Support Centre. The ESC exists to provide education for children with disabilities. Several Fridays ago I had a look around and was better able to appreciate the challenges, the conditions and the achievements of the ESC and its students. I am informed that there are children with disabilities integrated throughout the primary school as well as classes specifically for ESC students only. This policy is good for all the students. It would be good to see widened expense criteria added to this bill in support of the parents of the ESC. These parents already struggle with the costs of transport and the other additional costs for their disabled children. Extra help and tax deductibility should be included for these parents.

Before I conclude, I will make mention of Woodvale Senior High School. Woodvale senior high opened in 1985 and has almost 1,600 students. Paul Leech is the principal and he is a great advocate for this excellent school. I know that parents at Woodvale would also appreciate a widening of the criteria to which the education tax refund applies. I make mention of the benefits that could apply to parents of Woodvale students because of the outstanding specialist programs offered. These include the academic extension program, the music program, basketball, soccer, science enrichment and forensics. The great success and high standing of the school mean that there are long waiting lists for entry for those who live outside the local intake area or who are unsuccessful in gaining entry to a specialist program. Widened criteria could result in, for instance, parents claiming a rebate for a musical instrument so that their son or daughter could fully participate in the highly regarded Woodvale music program in which more than 300 students currently participate.

I should also mention that Woodvale senior high’s students perform very well academically, being in the top 25 per cent of students in the state. State, national and international testing reinforces the high quality of academic success the school enjoys. The parents and school community have been fully involved in this success, and I will rightly acknowledge the parts played by the P&C president, Virginia McNamara, as well as Dee Briggs and Fab Zannutigh, for all the hard work they do for the school and the students. Although there are around 130 staff, I will also acknowledge the work they do in making Woodvale senior high a success academically and the help they provide for young people through the specialist programs, the extra tuition classes on offer, programs to support student development and strong cross-curricular links with students working on specialist areas. I know Phil Mullane does an excellent job with the music program, which has resulted in the school’s concert band especially being highly sought after to support local community events. I will also mention some other staff that I know do a great job at Woodvale, including Steve Jurilj, who is renowned for his great coordination of the student services staff; Sue Festa, whose can-do and positive attitude plays a crucial role in running school administration; and, of course, Carol Stokes, the chaplain, for all her work in pastoral care.

Although I have named a number of strengths of Woodvale senior high—programs and individuals—I particularly want to mention three more areas that have also impressed me. They include the digital media capabilities and professional-level software supported by the campus-wide information technology network. I have seen the work of the students with digital media, and the level of imagination and creativity is a credit to the teachers. I also have been impressed with the manual trade skills that students can learn at Woodvale. Finally, I would
make mention of the ongoing cultural exchange program with Japan which continues to work well in building strong connections with Asia. I understand a sister-school relationship also exists with a school in Jinan in China.

Further evidence of Woodvale’s high-quality education programs is provided by reference to its accreditation to enrol international fee-paying students. Today I have made reference to the many reasons why Woodvale is one of the best schools in Cowan. They are all valid reasons, yet what continually bears out its outstanding reputation is the number of parents whom I have spoken to from out of the intake area who want their child to attend Woodvale. Woodvale Senior High School achieves across a wide range of areas. They provide academic, artistic and vocational options for young people, and I am sure their success will carry on into the future.

Before concluding my contribution, I will mention of one more school, the Wanneroo Primary School. The principal is Penny Halleen and the school has around 530 students. The language other than English taught at Wanneroo is Italian, which is a departure from almost all other schools in Cowan yet reflects the history of the Wanneroo district. Of course, that is not all that the school does well. I know they focus strongly on literacy and numeracy and I know they emphasise the school values of respect, tolerance, self-discipline, cooperation, courtesy and confidence.

In closing, I reiterate the points that I made before about the shortcomings of this bill and the policy behind it. If the government is looking for another dot point in attempting to propagate just the term ‘education revolution’ then the almost exclusively narrow focus on information technology probably delivers that dot point. However, if the government believes in supplying real support and choice for parents that will benefit the children, it should look at school and preschool fees, uniforms, stationery, calculators, camps, excursions and extracurricular school activities as well as what is already part of this bill. It should add those things into the bill and achieve the basics. These things really do matter for some of the children out there from families that would really benefit from such an amendment. I urge the government to do this for the families and children of Cowan and the rest of Australia.

Mr RIPOLL (Oxley) (1.31 pm)—It is a great pleasure to be speaking on the Tax Laws Amendment (Education Refund) Bill 2008 because I think it is one of those great bills that come before the House that come from the bottom up. It is something that really has come from the people, it is something that they have wanted for a very long time and it is something that they have deserved for a very long time—some would say for more than a decade, and I would agree with them. It is finally being delivered here in this House under a Rudd Labor government.

It is has been interesting—and, I have to say, very informative—to listen to coalition speakers on this bill. While not too many of them volunteered to speak on something which I would have thought would have been key and instrumental in their electorates, it certainly has been informative. It appears to me that they only really have two arguments in relation to this bill. One is that it is just not quite ‘wide enough’, which seems to be the term they are using, and that we should include a few extra bits to hang off the bill. The other one is just the sheer disinformation or, I hazard to go a little bit further, perhaps mistruths that have been provided about what is contained in the bill.
I will try to shed some light for listeners on just what this bill is about and how much benefit it will have for parents right across the country—in every single electorate and in every single school. That should be something that the Liberal and National parties take note of. It is something which is at the core of what Labor does in terms of education policy. I can remember vividly over many election campaigns dating back quite some years a comment made to me by many parents. It was made by parents when I was out campaigning, doorknocking, on election day itself, just talking to my branch members or anywhere else—the old barbecue-stopper type conversations that you have. I recall they always said that there was one thing that would guarantee anybody a win when trying to get into government.

There are always lots of different views about what will guarantee you a win and there is lots of debate about it. But one thing that always sticks in my mind is that people would say to me: ‘If only the government could see its way clear to providing some sort of tax incentive or tax relief—some sort of offset—in terms of educational expenses for children.’ It stuck with me because that comment came from parents regardless of where their children went to school. It did not matter whether they were going to a government school or a non-government school; it seemed to be the same issue. They were content with where their children were going to school. They were happy in broad terms about systems. There are always improvements that can be made in a range of things but, in terms of their family budget and what government could do to give them some relief, parents always said to me: ‘Look, you’d make a real difference to us and our budgets if you could see your way clear to providing some sort of tax relief for education expenses for our children.’

I am pretty happy today to be speaking on this bill that actually delivers on a promise that we made during the election campaign and delivers, I think, very realistically in the budgets of ordinary, everyday working mums and dads and parents right across the country. It is a real pleasure. The Rudd government are committed to implementing an education revolution. It is something we have talked a lot about. More importantly, it is something we are doing a lot about and something that we are funding. It is something that we are more than just talking it; we are doing it and we are funding it. A key part of the education revolution is helping parents meet those everyday costs of their children’s education. That is what this bill is about, and that is why the budget included $4.4 billion to create the new education tax refund. That new education tax refund is, quite simply, payable at the end of the new financial year. That will be next year, so parents need to be collecting their receipts now and working on making sure they have all the required receipts and documentation to make a proper claim in next year’s tax returns.

The education tax refund is a refundable tax offset. It is 50 per cent of eligible education expenses for children undertaking primary and secondary school studies. Again, I want to note that it does not matter which school you go to. This is about all schools in Australia, both primary and secondary. What it will do is help about 1.3 million families across the country. That equals roughly 2.7 million students who will be eligible for this particular refund. Under the plan, eligible families will be able to claim 50 per cent of all eligible education expenses up to $750 for each child undertaking primary school to provide a maximum tax offset of around $375 per child per year. For children attending secondary school studies, families will be able to claim 50 per cent of their eligible expenses up to $1,500 per child to give a
maximum tax offset of $750 per child per year.

That is a pretty good return and a pretty good offset. For the first time in Australia it provides parents with a real opportunity to offset all of their education expenses, not just the ones that are contained within this bill—and I will get to those in a minute—but all others as well. By enabling them to get an offset in the areas which are eligible, it frees up more of their money, more of their budget in the areas that they would have spent their money on, to spend in other areas for their children. So when we hear calls from coalition Liberal and National party members saying that it is just not wide enough, I think that they ought to have a second look and another think about just what this does. Quite simply, this puts cash back into the pockets of ordinary families, mums and dads, through the education tax rebate.

On the area of what those rebates and eligible expenses will be for, typically they will be for laptops, home computers, printers, paper, education software, textbooks and associated materials, trade tools and a range of other interlinked materials in those areas. I think that is pretty wide. I think that the scope of this bill is wide enough that parents could quite legitimately have a look at their expenses in terms of their children’s education and make a decent claim back in the next year’s tax return. It goes further than those things that you might immediately see as necessary for a child’s education: the laptop, the home computer, the printer, all the software included in helping provide for their education, paper and school textbooks. It goes just that little bit further, and it actually goes all the way back home where a family establishes and maintains a home internet connection. That is also included so parents can claim that as well.

So I did find it intriguing and a little bit informative when I heard Liberal and National party members standing up in here saying that the bill was not wide enough and talking about other areas that could have been included. I would challenge them to have a close look at the bill—and I suspect that many of them have not read it. While on the surface they might be providing some sort of cursory support, because obviously this is a very good idea for mums and dads out there trying to educate their children, they have not actually read the bill, they have not read the detail and, if they have, they have not understood just how wide and how comprehensive the bill is. Nor have they understood that it stretches right across those educational expenses for their children. In the case where there might be a particular expense which is not covered—and it is not 100 per cent coverage of all education expenses—but where they do have a tax offset, where they do save money, where they do get a return, the money that they have saved is money that they can spend on other areas of their children’s education. This is a huge bonus for parents trying to educate their children. So I am very proud to be able to say that the Rudd Labor government is delivering on its promises in terms of an education revolution not just in words but in good policy, sound policy, and with money on the table.

It does not stop there; there is more. While we want to do everything we can for parents at the coalface in terms of trying to return some cash to their pockets at the end of the financial year with this rebate, we have not stopped there. We want to ensure that a child’s education is catered for properly at the school level as well as at home. In the federal budget in May we announced measures that total more than $19 billion of new education funding—$19 billion! As I have said many times now, I am very proud to talk
on these issues. We not only made an election commitment; we kept that election commitment, and we will continue to keep our election commitments and then we will fund them as well—something a little bit novel perhaps for people who are used to the past decade of policy delivery.

I will give a few examples. We have allocated $1.2 billion for the digital education revolution which will see all years 9 to 12 students have access to a school computer. Already there has been more than $116 million handed over to the states and territories and non-government school authorities to purchase more than 116,000 computers. There has been $2.5 billion set aside for trade training centres in secondary schools, and the government announced in July that 34 projects worth more than $90 million and involving almost 100 secondary schools had successfully applied for round 1.

I have got a really great story in my own electorate about how significant this funding is and just how far it has gone to create some new initiatives within schools. For the first time we are seeing out of this funding program a desire from government and non-government schools to talk together about ways they can pool those funds for trade training centres to deliver a better outcome for their students. In recent weeks I have met with five schools in my electorate, both government and non-government schools. They had got together and had a talk about how they could pool the resources that were being offered by the Australian government and whether they could build a trade training centre that would service all of their schools in that region. Obviously it is a fantastic idea. It is a great idea to be able to say that for the first time we have got a funding program through which schools can collaborate, not in the traditional way you might think a couple of non-government schools might work together or a couple of government schools might work together, but the sector coming together on the basis of providing better education for their students.

Some of the conversations I had with those school principals, I have got to say, were completely amazing and have absolutely left for dead the archaic debates of the past about government schools versus non-government schools. I could see for the first time that schools of whatever denomination wanted to work together. They were encouraged by the fact that the Australian federal government had encouraged them to work together through funding and they had a unique opportunity. It is an innovative way for schools to get together to pool their money and spend large amounts to achieve a better outcome for their kids. The sorts of comments that I got from the school principals were: ‘Wouldn’t it be great if our students could mix with students from other schools, government and non-government? Wouldn’t it be great if they could appreciate the different circumstances that people experience, if they could learn from each other? Wouldn’t it be great if teachers that may have only one educational experience could learn from another teacher having a different educational experience? And perhaps students could do the same thing.’ All the principals saw a great new advantage and ability for their students to grow and prosper out of this funding. So while it is a lot of money in total and represents quite a large sum, by the time you divide it, it is still a small amount of money for each school—between $500,000 and $1.5 million. But what it has meant for those schools is that if four or five different schools can pool that money they can build a first-class, first-rate facility where all of their students will get something much more than they had anticipated in the first place.

There is also a new $11 billion Education Investment Fund. That is going to help to
renew our universities and vocational education institutions. There has been a great lack of spending and maintenance over a long period of time which has resulted in some of our higher education institutions actually falling into disrepair in some areas or not being able to cope with demand. We are facing a global crisis in financial terms and the impact of that will no doubt be felt right around the world. There will be some job losses and Australia will not be immune to that. People will be looking to re-educate themselves, to retrain. Young people have been coming into what has been a very strong jobs market and have automatically slipped into a job, almost commanding whatever salary they want. They will now probably have to think a little bit more about either extending their studies, going to university, going to TAFE and doing a trade or perhaps looking for those skills that they may not have needed in previous years.

Universities, vocational educational training institutions and TAFE colleges all need our support to make sure that we can cater for the long term, for the future of young people and people that need training.

We have also extended our investment through to a $530 million fund to help deliver universal access to early childhood education in the year before formal schooling. We believe that it is important to provide money not only during the school years but also in that pre-educational year, that year before formal schooling, and also after school when students go on to training, whether it is at university or elsewhere.

The Rudd Labor government is very committed through its policies in a range of key areas. There are three new national partnerships which I think are critical to all of this and to how it comes together between the Commonwealth and the states and territories. The first is raising the quality of teaching in our schools—again, in all of our schools. There should no longer be this debate about government and nongovernment. This is about raising the standard, raising the bar. In the end they are all our children and they should all have an equal opportunity to work hard, study hard and get a good job and further education if that is what they want.

We also want to help improve the results in disadvantaged school communities. You do not want to leave anyone behind—those most disadvantaged regional and rural areas where they struggle to get good teachers or where they struggle to get any teachers at all, areas where they just do not have the facilities regardless of the type of school. We need as a government to invest in those schools and in those areas.

We also need a new partnership in improving literacy and numeracy. At the core of everything we do there is an absolute critical need that we deliver on children’s ability to read, write and understand numbers. With that core they can achieve anything they want to achieve. But without those core skills they will struggle. I do not need to go into statistics for people to understand that. I think it is well understood by everybody that the very basis of our education system and opportunity is the ability to read and write and to understand numbers. I am proud to stand here to talk about a very important bill which delivers on the promises that Labor made during the campaign and continue to fund and maintain while in office. I commend the bill to the House.

**Mrs MOYLAN** (Pearce) (1.48 pm)—I am pleased to rise in this House to speak on the Tax Laws Amendment (Education Refund) Bill 2008. The bill amends the Income Tax Assessment Act 1997 to introduce the education tax refund or the ETR, as it is commonly known. The ETR will provide a 50 per cent refundable tax offset for eligible education expenses up to a maximum of
$750 for children undertaking primary education study and $1,500 for children undertaking secondary education studies.

Education is the key, as the member for Oxley said, to many things. It is certainly the key to improving the quality of life for all people. Education enhances a person’s fulfilment in work, personal relations, social development and the pursuit of interests outside the workplace. Education has a profound impact on all aspects of a person’s life and on social cohesion within our communities. It is always very good to see in this place the many schools that come to visit. These kinds of bills have a great impact on those schools and those students—and there are many in the gallery today.

The fact that education is so profoundly important is why whenever we ask people in the electorate of Pearce to tell us what their main priorities are, the availability and quality of education always feature very prominently. They are always up there in the top three issues nominated as priority issues for the federal government. Any increase in funding to assist parents to ensure the best possible education for their children is very welcome.

In the lead-up to the last election—almost 12 months ago—the Prime Minister and his government promised an education revolution in Australia. However, every policy they have come up with in the last 11 months is defined by what it lacks rather than by what it offers, so it is little wonder that even the government’s own backbenchers are becoming frustrated at the lack of real action to deliver that promise. I am sorry to see that the member for Fowler has departed the chamber because speaking on this bill in the last sitting the member for Fowler let her frustration spill over when making the telling comment that while these measures ‘are welcome ... they are hardly a revolution’. Later in that speech she said:

It is not hard to see why there is some confusion about the so-called education revolution.
One only has to wonder about the adequacy of the government’s response when their own members are questioning it.

The revolution involves the government going round and round in circles without actually delivering the outcomes that families should rightly expect given the promises made prior to the election. First the Prime Minister promised each high school student between grades 9 and 12 access to a computer at school. The reality is that some schools now have to borrow money—in some cases up to $100,000—to bridge the gap between what it actually costs to run programs and the underfunded promises of the government.

The Tax Laws Amendment (Education Refund) Bill 2008 is yet another example of the Prime Minister and this government falling short of what they have promised Australian families. The announcement of the education tax refund comes in the wake of reports over several years that highlight the difficulties many parents experience in meeting a variety of schooling costs. This is particularly so for low-income families and, while this money will be welcomed by parents, the difference between the Rudd government’s policy and the coalition’s policy is quite stark. The coalition policy in 2007 was comprehensive in its delivery and administration of new refundable tax rebates to provide additional assistance to parents for school costs. Further, it was flexible in letting parents decide to what aspects the additional education expenses rebate would be applied. Conversely, the government’s ETR policy falls short of what is really needed—and falling short in this legislation on education is characteristic of much of what the
Rudd government is doing in other areas. To date there have been plenty of talkfests, reviews, inquiries and roundtables—all code for stalling and doing little of consequence. It is the oldest trick in the book. But to remain credible any government must very soon start making the hard decisions, implementing real legislation and delivering real policy outcomes for those that they are elected to serve.

When I first came into this place I observed the amounts of reports, inquiries and reviews which lined the walls of this place and which were not acted on. The public were not fooled: they were well aware that much was talked about but that there was little observable action on those issues which addressed their priorities and the quality of life expectations. On reflection, most of us would agree that was, in part, one of the reasons we saw the demise of the Hawke-Keating Labor government.

In the specifics of this bill, eligible expenses for the ETR focus mainly on information, communications and technology. I agree that all young people need to be able to use modern communication technology. We have seen a great example of this today with the launch of the Australian Diabetes Map by Diabetes Australia, aided by Microsoft and by Associate Professor Jonathan Shaw from the Baker IDI. This is a great use of technology and all young people should know how to make the most of it. The Rudd government did make this core promise without thinking through the whole policy. They need to complete the funding of that program by giving money to parents and then placing strict boundaries around what parents can apply the money to. Thus, they rather sneakily roll out their computer for every student program—clever but disingenuous. In truth, parents are missing out on being able to spend that money in the way that best suits the educational needs of their children.

One of the significant exclusions of what the money can be spent on is school based extracurricular activities. I think that everyone, regardless of what side of politics they sit on, would agree on the importance of regular physical activity to children’s growth and development. However, the high cost of organised sport often serves as a barrier to participation and social inclusion—an integral part of any child’s education. As Chair of the Parliamentary Diabetes Support Group, I have witnessed firsthand the impact of the obesity epidemic and its relationship to the growing and debilitating effects of type 2 diabetes and the increasing number of children who have been diagnosed with this disease—a disease formerly seen only in the elderly. In fact, the Australian Diabetes Map that was launched in this place this morning shows that there are now 350 children diagnosed with type 2 diabetes. As I said, this was formerly a disease of the aged.

We should be doing everything we can to encourage our young people to undertake some form of activity, some form of informal sport, to maintain good health. These activities are excluded from this tax rebate. The diabetes issue should be evidence enough for the government to allow the use of the rebate for school based extracurricular activities. The need for greater flexibility in the use of the rebate was further highlighted in a survey by the Brotherhood of St Laurence which found that 69 per cent of parents reported difficulty paying for sport and recreation and that 62 per cent of people reported difficulty in paying for school camps and 47 per cent for excursions; yet the government has chosen to ignore them in this bill. When you have up to 39 per cent of those surveyed admitting that their children have missed school because they cannot afford to pay the extra cost of excursions, sports days, school camps, uniforms and equipment, and when the government is being so rigid, you have to
ask yourself whether we are really in an education revolution or whether this is just an education devolution. It is a challenge to maximise children’s learning if they feel left out and excluded from extra activities. There are often ways to engage children’s imagination and to inspire and motivate them to learn. Not all of these things take place in a classroom. Parents need all the help they can get to encourage their children to fully participate. In the words of the French novelist Anatole France, ‘Nine-tenths of education is encouragement.’

As for the government’s stated commitment to early childhood education, words are definitely much louder than action, because preschool education is not eligible for ETR. Some consideration might also have been given to families in situations of financial hardship who would struggle to meet the upfront costs and then have to wait until the next tax return before being able to claim. By contrast, the coalition’s policy Helping Families to Provide More Education Opportunities for Their Children proposed to introduce a new refundable tax rebate of 40 per cent for education expenses—which included school fees—for every student from preschool until the end of secondary school. The coalition policy recognised that it was better to enable parents to choose the best education for their children and to make the rebate available for a wide range of education costs. The scheme included government and non-government school fees, school uniforms, preschool fees and expenses, textbooks, stationery, calculators, camps and excursions, laptops, broadband, software and extracurricular school activities such as sport, music, dance and drama. More than 2.1 million families would have been eligible to claim education expenses for 3.6 million Australian children under the coalition’s policy. I have listened to the criticisms of the coalition’s record on education from the member for Fowler and the Minister for Education when she introduced the Australian curriculum assessment.

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 Pearce will have leave to continue speaking when the debate is resumed.

CONDOLENCES

Mr Cecil Allen Blanchard

The SPEAKER (2.00 pm)—I inform the House of the death on Saturday, 25 October 2008 of Cecil Allen Blanchard, a member of this House for the division of Moore from 1983 to 1990. As a mark of respect to the memory of Allen Blanchard I invite honourable members to rise in their places.

Honourable members having stood in their places—

The SPEAKER—I thank the House.

MINISTERIAL ARRANGEMENTS

Mr RUDD (Griffith—Prime Minister) (2.01 pm)—I inform the House that the Treasurer will be absent from question time this week as he is attending meetings with the US economic policymakers in advance of the leaders meeting later in the week in Washington DC. The Minister for Finance and Deregulation will answer questions on his behalf. Further, the Minister for Veterans’ Affairs will be absent from question time this week as he is attending the Armistice Day commemoration to mark the 90th anniversary of the end of the First World War in Ypres in Belgium. The Minister for Defence will answer questions on his behalf. The Minister for the Environment, Heritage and the Arts will be absent from question time today as he is delivering the opening address to the Coral Triangle Initiative conference in Townsville. The Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry will answer questions
on his behalf. The Minister for Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs will be absent today. The Minister for Housing and Minister for the Status of Women will answer questions on her behalf.

**SHADOW MINISTERIAL ARRANGEMENTS**

Mr **TURNBULL** (Wentworth—Leader of the Opposition) (2.02 pm)—by leave—I table the new coalition shadow ministry list, dated 10 November 2008, with alterations relating to the duties of two parliamentary secretaries and an enlargement to the title of one of the shadow ministers.

**Mr Albanese**—An additional two?

**Mr **TURNBULL**—No, just changing duties.

*The document read as follows—*

**COALITION SHADOW MINISTRY**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Minister</th>
<th>Other Chamber</th>
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<tr>
<td>Leader of the Opposition</td>
<td>The Hon Malcolm Turnbull MP</td>
<td>Senator the Hon Nick Minchin</td>
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<td>Shadow Treasurer (Deputy Leader of the Opposition)</td>
<td>The Hon Julie Bishop MP</td>
<td>Senator the Hon Helen Coonan</td>
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<tr>
<td>Shadow Minister for Financial Services, Superannuation and Corporate Law</td>
<td>The Hon Chris Pearce MP</td>
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<td>Shadow Assistant Treasurer</td>
<td>The Hon Tony Smith MP</td>
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<tr>
<td>Shadow Minister for Trade, Transport, Regional Development and Local Government (Leader of The Nationals)</td>
<td>The Hon Warren Truss MP</td>
<td>Senator the Hon Ian Macdonald</td>
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<td>Shadow Parliamentary Secretary for Northern Australia</td>
<td>Senator the Hon Ian Macdonald</td>
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<td>Shadow Parliamentary Secretary for Roads and Transport</td>
<td>Mr Don Randall MP</td>
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<td>Shadow Parliamentary Secretary for Regional Development</td>
<td>Mr John Forrest MP</td>
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<tr>
<td>Shadow Minister for Broadband, Communications and the Digital Economy (Leader of the Opposition in the Senate)</td>
<td>Senator the Hon Nick Minchin</td>
<td>The Hon Bruce Billson MP</td>
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<tr>
<td>Shadow Minister for Innovation, Industry, Science and Research (Deputy Leader of the Opposition in the Senate)</td>
<td>Senator the Hon Eric Abetz</td>
<td>The Hon Ian Macfarlane MP</td>
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<tr>
<td>Shadow Minister for Infrastructure and COAG and Shadow Minister Assisting the Leader on Emissions Trading Design</td>
<td>The Hon Andrew Robb AO MP</td>
<td>Senator the Hon Nick Minchin</td>
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<tr>
<td>Shadow Minister for Sustainable Development and Cities</td>
<td>The Hon Bruce Billson MP</td>
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<td>Shadow Minister for Foreign Affairs (Manager of Opposition Business in the Senate)</td>
<td>Senator the Hon Helen Coonan</td>
<td>The Hon Andrew Robb MP</td>
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<td>Shadow Parliamentary Secretary for International Development Assistance</td>
<td>Senator Marise Payne</td>
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<td>Shadow Minister for Finance, Competition Policy and Deregulation</td>
<td>The Hon Joe Hockey MP</td>
<td>Senator the Hon George Brandis SC</td>
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<td>(Manager of Opposition Business in the House)</td>
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<td>Shadow Minister for Competition Policy and Consumer Affairs</td>
<td>Mr Luke Hartsuyker MP</td>
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<td>Shadow Minister for Energy and Resources</td>
<td>The Hon Ian Macfarlane MP</td>
<td>Senator the Hon David Johnston</td>
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<td>Mr Barry Haase MP</td>
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<td>Shadow Minister for Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs</td>
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<td>Shadow Minister for Housing and Local Government</td>
<td>Mr Scott Morrison</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 Special Minister of State and Shadow Cabinet Secretary</td>
<td>Senator the Hon Michael Ronaldson</td>
<td>The Hon Christopher Pyne MP</td>
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<td>Shadow Minister for Human Services (Deputy Leader of The Nationals)</td>
<td>Senator the Hon Nigel Scullion</td>
<td>The Hon Tony Abbott MP</td>
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<td>Shadow Minister for Climate Change, Environment and Water</td>
<td>The Hon Greg Hunt MP</td>
<td>Senator the Hon David Johnston</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 Minister for Health and Ageing</td>
<td>The Hon Peter Dutton MP</td>
<td>Senator Mathias Cormann</td>
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<td>Shadow Minister for Ageing</td>
<td>Mrs Margaret May MP</td>
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<td>Shadow Parliamentary Secretary for Health Administration</td>
<td>Senator Mathias Cormann</td>
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<td>Shadow Minister for Defence</td>
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<td>Shadow Minister for Defence Science and Personnel and Assisting Shadow Minister for Defence</td>
<td>The 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 Parliamentary Secretary for Defence</td>
<td>The Hon Peter Lindsay MP</td>
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<td>Shadow Minister for Education, Apprenticeships and Training</td>
<td>The Hon Christopher Pyne MP</td>
<td>Senator the Hon Brett Mason</td>
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<td>Shadow Minister for Early Childhood Education, Childcare, Status of Women and Youth</td>
<td>Mrs Sophie Mirabella MP</td>
<td>Senator Marise Payne</td>
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<td>Shadow Parliamentary Secretary for Education</td>
<td>Senator the Hon Brett Mason</td>
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<td>Shadow Attorney-General</td>
<td>Senator the Hon George Brandis SC</td>
<td>The Hon Sussan Ley MP</td>
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<td>Shadow Minister for Justice and Customs</td>
<td>The Hon Sussan Ley MP</td>
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Mr RUDD (Griffith—Prime Minister) (2.02 pm)—Mr Speaker, I seek to make a statement on indulgence.

The SPEAKER—Indulgence is granted.

Mr RUDD—On 4 November in the United States we saw an example of the greatness of democracy at work. The people of the United States exercised their democratic right and elected the 44th President of the United States. It is estimated that up to 130 million Americans cast their votes. The majority of them voted for Barack Obama. Forty-five years after Martin Luther King dreamed of an America where men and women would be judged not on the colour of their skin but on the content of their character, the people of the United States have made that dream a reality. On behalf of the government, I want to extend to the President-elect our congratulations. Senator Obama was elected for the message of hope that he brought to the people of America. But equally it is a message of hope for the world.

We face many great challenges in the 21st century: the global financial crisis, climate change and international security. For the international community to tackle these challenges, we will need the continued leadership of the United States into the future. We are confident that Senator Obama will provide that leadership. We are also confident that the strength of the relationship between Australia and the United States will continue to prosper and to develop. Our alliance has been strong and continuous under 13 Australian prime ministers and 12 American presidents, Labor and Liberal, Republican and Democrat. Our alliance transcends politics.

When Senator Obama is sworn in as President of the United States on 20 January next year the Australian government will be ready to work closely with the new administration to build on the strong foundation that already exists in terms of security cooperation, to respond together to the great challenges of the global financial crisis and the ensuing downturn in the global economy and to forge a new international consensus on climate change. In the months ahead, Austra-
lia looks forward to continuing to work closely with President Bush and his administration on the many immediate challenges that we share, most critically the global financial crisis, on which the President’s continuing leadership remains important.

Senator Obama’s victory is historic. The Australian government looks forward to building a partnership with the new administration which will reinforce the vital and natural ties that have always existed between Australia and the United States, ties that serve both our peoples and both our governments so well.

Mr Turnbull (Wentworth—Leader of the Opposition) (2.05 pm)—Mr Speaker, on indulgence: on behalf of the opposition, I join the Prime Minister in congratulating President-elect Barack Obama on this historic election victory. The Prime Minister referred to Martin Luther King’s ‘I have a dream’ speech given 45 years ago. A speech it was; but in truth it was a prayer. Dr King said that he looked forward to the day when his little children would be judged not by the colour of their skin but by the content of their character. When Dr King gave that speech, the 44th President of the United States, as he shortly will be, was only two-years old. He was not one of Dr King’s children, but he was the child of that prayer and the child of those dreams. And what magnificent dreams.

Who among us would have ever thought that we would see the day a black man was elected to be President of the United States, a nation that has been riven by so much racial tension, so much violence and so much hatred. It has risen above all that and affirmed the greatest democracy in the world, affirmed the strength of its diversity and affirmed its confidence in its democracy. And in so doing it has defied all of the critics who said that it was a racist nation and who said that its marbled halls of power were not open to black people, to people from minorities in the United States. It has truly been a magnificent day.

We join with the government in congratulating President-elect Obama. Our countries have so much in common. It is not simply that the United States is the world’s leading democracy; it is not simply that it is our greatest ally; it is not simply that it must take the leadership role in so many of the great challenges facing the world—the global financial crisis, climate change, the war against terror and all of those great challenges. What we have in common, which Barack Obama personifies, is that we are two nations that define themselves by commitment to common political values. There is no person who can look into the mirror and say, ‘That is an Australian face,’ or ‘That is an American face.’ The United States is a nation of choice, a nation of immigration—just as our nation is. It is in that diversity that we find our strength. In that sense, Barack Obama reflects that diversity that is so key to our nation as well as his. In many respects, he is as much a citizen of the world as he will shortly be the first citizen of his nation. We share the great hope and optimism that President Obama will answer another call of Dr King, and that is to let freedom ring around the world.

NEW ZEALAND ELECTION

Mr Rudd (Griffith—Prime Minister) (2.08 pm)—Mr Speaker, I seek to make a statement on indulgence.

The Speaker—Indulgence is granted.

Mr Rudd—On Saturday night I had the privilege of telephoning Mr John Key on his victory in the New Zealand general elections. Mr Key will become the next Prime Minister of New Zealand following those elections. Furthermore, I would also like to place on record this government’s and, I believe, the
parliament’s appreciation of the contribution of Helen Clark, the Prime Minister of New Zealand who was defeated in those elections. Prime Minister Clark was a strong friend of Australia’s throughout the Howard government’s tenure in office in Australia and has been a strong contributor to trans-Tasman relations, and we wish her well for the future.

Australia and New Zealand have a strong bilateral relationship. It is one which is of great significance to us politically. We share common economic interests through the Closer Economic Relationship, and of course we have a common aspiration to establish a single economic market. Beyond that, we have common interests in the South Pacific, where New Zealand and Australia often find themselves together doing much of the heavy lifting when challenges arise. New Zealand has been a constant, continuing and reliable partner of Australia in very difficult circumstances, ranging from East Timor through to the Solomons and elsewhere as well.

I would say to the new Prime Minister of New Zealand that our relationship, like our relationship with the United States, is one that generally transcends party political boundaries and therefore we welcome the opportunity to develop a new relationship with his government. I have extended to the Prime Minister an invitation to undertake a state visit to Australia at the earliest opportunity. We believe that is the right way in which to initiate a relationship with his government once his cabinet is sworn in. We look forward to doing good things with the new government of New Zealand in the future and we wish them well in our common aspiration for a peaceful region and our common contribution to greater prosperity in both our countries.

Mr TURNBULL (Wentworth—Leader of the Opposition) (2.10 pm)—Mr Speaker, on indulgence: we also join with the Prime Minister in congratulating John Key and the National Party of New Zealand on their historic election victory on Saturday night. New Zealand and Australia are, indeed, as close as any two nations can be. It is remarkable that our close friendship can transcend our competition on the sporting field, which occasionally does bring a bit of tension into the relationship. But I believe our relationship is stronger because it is forged in the fire of sporting contest, just as our friendship has been forged in the fire of war. Australia and New Zealand joined together in creating the name of Anzac, and that remarkable combination, which had its birth on the day that we celebrate as our most important day of remembrance of sacrifice, Anzac Day, reminds us of how close our two nations are.

John Key is a highly capable man who will work tirelessly for his country’s rejuvenation and renewal. He is going to put his considerable professional experience working in the international financial markets to great use in his leadership of the New Zealand economy through these very difficult times. We look forward to a close working relationship with the new Prime Minister and his government. We wish him well in facing the very many challenges he will now confront as Prime Minister of New Zealand.

We also want to join the Prime Minister in paying tribute to the contribution of the Rt Hon. Helen Clark to trans-Tasman relations throughout her nine years as Prime Minister of New Zealand. She has always been a stalwart friend of Australia and a strong advocate for her people. The former coalition government of course worked very closely with Helen Clark, particularly, as the Prime Minister noted, in the joint efforts in the Pacific islands and especially the Solomon Islands. So, with that, we join with the Prime Minister in congratulating the new Prime Minister of New Zealand and also in ac-
knowledging our respect and gratitude for the efforts of his distinguished predecessor.

QUESTIONS WITHOUT NOTICE

Automotive Industry

Mr Turnbull (2.12 pm)—My question is to the Prime Minister. How many more cars will be sold this financial year as a result of the government’s car assistance package?

Mr Rudd—The government is proud of the package that it has announced today. It represents decisive action for the future of the car industry in Australia. Three hundred and thirty-five thousand vehicles are manufactured in this country each year by the Australian auto industry. When you put together the three manufacturing majors, they represent some 60,000-plus employees directly. Putting them together with the rest of the people who are employed in associated industries, it represents some 200,000 people. Overall, the significance of this industry is as follows: about $8 billion worth of gross domestic product, which follows some $5.6 billion in exports.

Mr Hockey interjecting—

Mr Rudd—The global car industry right now, as the honourable member would well know, from Detroit to other car manufacturing centres around the world, is under great stress and pressure. So the alternatives are for any governments around the country to simply turn their backs on that or, as governments past, both Liberal and Labor, have done in this country, to put their shoulders to the wheel in fashioning a new car plan for the future. However, we have done so with a new element, and that is to ensure that we will enable the industry to transform itself over time. What I am concerned about is ensuring that we provide sufficient confidence and underpinnings for the industry going forward at a time when the global financial crisis is bearing down on so many.

I realise that this is something which may not attract automatic bipartisan support on the part of those opposite. In fact, I am informed that the member for Curtin has already been on the telephone this morning to various people in the car industry seeking to get up and running some negative comment against the package that we have just launched. The old bush telegraph works fairly quickly—it came back to us fairly quick smart.

Opposition members interjecting—

The Speaker—Order! The House will come to order!

Mr Rudd—I notice that the member for Curtin is not disputing what I just said. I say to those opposite: at a time of global financial crisis, at a time of global economic crisis and at a time when we have real challenges in the global economy, it would be good if we had bipartisan support not just in name but in reality for the key challenges we face—not just pretending to be bipartisan but putting our shoulder to the wheel.

This government has taken decisive action on guaranteeing bank deposits. We have taken decisive action on a $10.4 billion economic stimulus package. We have taken decisive action again today with a $6.2 billion industry innovation plan for the future of the Australian auto industry—an industry in which we believe.

Remembrance Day

Mr HALE (2.16 pm)—My question is to the Prime Minister. Will the Prime Minister inform the House of the significance to all Australians of the 90th anniversary of the end of the First World War?

Mr Rudd—As we approach Armistice Day there is a moment for reflection for all members of this House on the extraordinary events of 90 years ago. In the war which was supposed to end all wars and the carnage...
which ensued in that war we saw so many of Australia’s brave young men die. Some 50,000 to 60,000 gave their lives in the service of their country not just at Gallipoli but on the killing fields of France and in trench warfare in Belgium as well.

Tomorrow at the 11th hour on the 11th day of the 11th month Australians will stand together in one minute’s silence to pay tribute to all those Australian men and women who have fought in the service of our country. We will remember those who gave their lives for the nation. We will remember them not just as brave soldiers, sailors and air men and women but also as wives, husbands, mothers, fathers, brothers and sisters. We will honour their courage and we will honour their sacrifice. We will remember that the freedoms that we enjoy today are delivered in part because of the sacrifice which they have made. Their legacy is our inheritance.

In honouring the sacrifice of all those who have served our country we will also acknowledge what these extraordinary men and women have taught us. They have endured hardship and adversity with courage and resilience. They have shown us the importance of the bonds of friendship, of perseverance and above all of deep loyalty towards mates. Australians have responded to their country’s call to service with pride and dedication and courage in hard-fought battles across a century: the First World War, the Second World War, Korea, Malaya, Vietnam and more recently our operations in East Timor, the Solomons, Iraq and Afghanistan and peacekeeping operations around the world. As we remember the past let us keep in mind all those who wear the uniform of Australia today. As I have said before, there is no higher calling in Australia than to wear this nation’s uniform.

The events of 1918 may seem now to belong purely in the annals of history because those who fought in that war are no longer with us, but the impact of their sacrifice and the loss of so many of that generation felt in every small country town and every centre in our country still has its effect today. You still run into families who lost fathers and grandfathers. The implications for them personally of the sacrifice delivered by their loved ones in that conflict are still acute and deeply felt. We honour their service, we honour their sacrifice and we as a nation together will commemorate that with the appropriate solemnity tomorrow on the 90th anniversary of the armistice.

Mr Turnbull (Wentworth—Leader of the Opposition) (2.18 pm)—On indulgence, we associate ourselves with the sentiments of the Prime Minister in his very moving remarks on the 90th anniversary of the end of the First World War. It was a war to end all wars. Of course, history tells us that in many ways it laid the seed for the next one, a war in some respects just as terrible. When you travel around Australia, as all of us have done, and look at the war memorials in the cities or country towns that bear silent witness to the carnage of the First World War and contemplate the scale of the casualties Australia offered in that war—over 60,000 dead from a population that was less than a quarter the size it is today—you realise it was a titanic struggle and it is one the Prime Minister reminds us, and I agree with him, has not faded away into history. It will be with us forever because it was the first global conflict that our nation engaged in. It was one in which our young men went to the other end of the world, often seeking adventure, heedless of danger, and encountered horrors they could not imagine in their worst nightmares.

Many of us have grandparents who served in that war. Many of us have had grandparents like my own grandfather, who could barely bring himself to talk about it until he
came close to his own last days. The horror had been too great. We remember those men and women who sacrificed everything for Australia in that terrible conflict and we recall their valour and their loyalty and, above all, that in wearing Australia’s uniform they served this nation and helped establish the freedoms, the liberties and the way of life that we enjoy today.

Automotive Industry

Mr Turnbull—My question is again to the Prime Minister. Given that around half of all cars sold in Australia each year are either leased or financed and given that the government’s ill-considered unlimited bank deposit guarantee has dramatically reduced the availability of auto finance, why does today’s package fail to address the critical and immediate credit issues facing Australia’s car dealers and their 90,000 employees?

Mr Rudd—What I find remarkable about the question from the honourable gentleman opposite is his use of the term ‘ill-considered’ about a package to which he gave unqualified bipartisan support on the first day that it was announced. He can declare bipartisan support one day, but what you need to understand about the member for Wentworth is what he does on the second day. On the day you announce a policy the opposition say they support it and on the next day—whether it is this matter or other elements of policy in recent days—they slowly crab walk away.

Mr Turnbull—Mr Speaker, I rise on a point of order. What is not remarkable is that the Prime Minister’s answer is not relevant to the question.

The Speaker—Order! I will listen carefully to the Prime Minister. The Prime Minister will respond to the question.

Mr Rudd—it is important to establish, on any particular day, where the Liberal Party happens to stand on any particular policy, because it changes by the day and by the hour. In fact, I noticed that, on ABC Learning Centres, it seems to change by the minute: six positions in four days!

Mr Hockey—Mr Speaker, I rise on a point of order. It was a specific question about financing of motor vehicles. If the Prime Minister does not understand the question we can repeat it, but surely he can give the Australian people an answer.

The Speaker—Order! First of all, the Manager of Opposition Business does not assist his points of order by then going on with argument about subject matter rather than the point of order. It is obvious that I would have assisted myself if I had ruled out of order the part of the question that is now the matter of discussion. It is a matter of discussion not only through the response but by the numerous interjectors. The Prime Minister will respond to the question. I think his introductory remarks have come to a conclusion. He will now go to the question.

Mr Rudd—The member for Wentworth rightly points to the fact that finance companies in recent times are experiencing considerable difficulty. The Treasury currently has task forces dealing with a whole category of market linked investments—finance companies, mortgage trusts, property trusts as well as cash management trusts, including finance companies—to deal with the particular dislocations which are flowing to those companies as a consequence of the global financial crisis and the global economic downturn. For the benefit of the honourable gentleman, he should know that motor vehicle finance companies—car finance companies—are experiencing challenges in every Western economy at present. I would suggest to the honourable gentleman that, rather than seeking to make a cheap political point, he should understand that this is a global problem af-
fecting the car industry and affecting finance companies associated with the car industry, not just here but in the United States and Germany as well. The government systematically is working its way through each of the challenges affecting each sector of this economy and we will continue to do so through the task forces we have established with the Treasury and our consultations with the major banks and with the Australian regulators, as we have been doing in recent weeks.

**Economy**

Mr PERRETT (2.25 pm)—My question is to the Minister for Finance and Deregulation. What recent action has the government taken to protect Australia against the global financial crisis?

Mr TANNER—I thank the member for Moreton for his question and congratulate him on the launch of his book, *The Twelfth Fish*, which I was privileged to play a small part in. And do you know what—it was all his own work! That is unlike the attitude of members opposite, who regard writing as something for staff to do, and even when the staff do it it is not the staffer’s work. In some instances they get the father-in-law to do it. That is what the member for Higgins did. So congratulations to the member for Moreton—a new member of the Labor book club. It is good to see.

The government has taken decisive action with respect to assisting the Australian vehicle manufacturing industry to meet the challenge of fundamental transformation of that industry. We have put forward a 13-year package of over $6 billion to move the Australian industry to a different configuration to enable the production of fuel-efficient, low-emission vehicles. And this package is a significant element in the government’s wider economic strategy—in particular the strategy focusing on the impact of the global financial crisis. Australian industries’ challenges are by no means unique. By no means are the challenges facing vehicle manufacturing in Australia unique. In many respects the challenges that are facing the industry here are similar to those facing the United States industry. There is a significant difference, of course, and that is that our industry is of a much smaller scale and therefore much more vulnerable to shifts in consumer demand and wider economic circumstances.

It is notable that President-elect Obama is expected to pursue similar strategies to assist a transformation to a more environmentally friendly product in the United States vehicle manufacturing industry. The centrepiece of this strategy is a 10-year, $1.3 billion Green Car Innovation Fund, which leverages on a three to one ratio of private investment to environmentally sound technologies. That is a substantially larger fund than was originally promised by the government at the last election. In addition there is a $3.4 billion Automotive Transformation Scheme to underpin the competitiveness of the motor vehicle manufacturing industry. It is important here to note that this money is to flow on the basis of actions and on the basis of contracts. It is not money upfront; it is money in response to actions and decisions and real investments on the part of the vehicle-manufacturing companies. A third aspect is to continue with the phase-down of tariff protection from 10 per cent to five per cent in January 2010. That, of course, ensures that what is the most inefficient and most regressive way of assisting the industry, through tariff protection, is continuing to be reduced, as previously indicated.

Together with the decline in the value of the Australian dollar, cuts in interest rates and, of course, the stimulus from the government’s Economic Security Strategy, these initiatives are good news. They are good news for the vehicle-manufacturing industry,
they are good news for the 60,000-odd workers directly employed in the industry and they are good news for the much wider range of people whose economic security and opportunity depends on Australia having a strong vehicle manufacturing industry. But it also requires the manufacturers to deliver. This proposal—this plan—requires the manufacturers to invest, to take risk and to demonstrate their commitment to Australia in the long term. They face very substantial challenges and they are, in some respects, dealing with more or less a perfect storm at the moment, given the wider global circumstances and the change in consumer demand. But they have a strong base on which to move forward and the government is committed to assisting them to transform their companies into much more viable activities and operations over the course of the next 10 or 12 years.

In conclusion, the government is acting decisively to tackle the economic challenges facing this nation, whether with respect to guaranteeing bank deposits or the Economic Security Strategy that is designed to stimulate economic activity, growth and jobs in the Australian economy or the development of a Carbon Pollution Reduction Scheme in order to deal with that enormous challenge of climate change that was so comprehensively neglected by the previous government and to invest in this instance via today’s announcement—in the structural transformation of one of Australia’s most important industries. The global financial crisis is presenting Australia with an enormous challenge, but the businesses of Australia, the working people of Australia and the government of Australia are up to that challenge and together we are going to meet it and defeat it.

Economy

Ms JULIE BISHOP (2.30 pm)—My question is to the Prime Minister. I refer the Prime Minister to last Wednesday’s government forecast—

Government members interjecting—

The SPEAKER—Order! Those on my right will come to order. The Deputy Leader of the Opposition has the call.

Ms JULIE BISHOP—Thank you, Mr Speaker. My question is to the Prime Minister. I refer the Prime Minister to last Wednesday’s government forecast of two per cent economic growth for this financial year. I also refer the Prime Minister to the IMF forecast two days later of 1.8 per cent growth. Given that the Reserve Bank today stated that it expects economic growth to be only 1.5 per cent and the Treasurer has stated from Brazil that ‘the slowing in growth will be more dramatic’, Prime Minister, which growth projection is the most accurate?

Mr RUDD—As the honourable member would know, the global financial crisis is impacting on the real economies of all developed and developing economies. In fact, before I go to the heart of the honourable member’s question, I draw her attention also to the extraordinary action taken in the last 24 hours by the government of China, an extraordinary fiscal stimulus package which I believe is of significance not just to this economy but also to the economy across wider East Asia and the world. When I last looked at the numbers, the stimulus package was something in the vicinity over two years of seven per cent of GDP, some $586 billion. Obviously that reflects the concern in China about their own domestic growth prospects, but it parallels, I believe, in the degree of effort and intensity on the part of the Chinese, what we saw from the Chinese government in the late nineties following the Asian financial crisis. The Chinese authori-
ties have spoken through Xinhua press today of the importance of taking measures in a new proactive approach to fiscal policy in the same language, I am advised, that they used in 1998-99 in relation to the reflationary policies they adopted then in response to the Asian financial crisis. I regard that as very good news for this economy, very good news for the regional economy and very good news for the global economy. Certainly, it is consistent with the many discussions that the Treasurer and I have had with various Chinese counterparts in recent weeks.

On the honourable member’s question concerning the growth forecasts for Australia, I would draw the honourable member’s attention to the relevant section of MYEFO, page 29, which refers to the assumptions underpinning Treasury’s analysis in the MYEFO document. It says:

Interest rates are expected to decline broadly in line with market expectations. This is a departure from the usual assumption of unchanged interest rates, reflecting the fact that markets are forecasting a significant easing in the near term, and it would be unrealistic not to take this into account.

The reason I quote that to the honourable member is simply to point out that, when Treasury does its forecasts, that is the underlying assumption in its analysis. The Reserve Bank, because of its doctrine of independence and not speculating publicly on future movements on interest rates on its part, does not incorporate that within its analysis. That is why you see a difference in the approach to the calculation of the growth number.

Child Care

Mrs D’ATH (2.33 pm)—My question is to the Minister for Education, Minister for Employment and Workplace Relations and Minister for Social Inclusion. What is the Australian government doing to ensure that Australian families who are affected by ABC Learning going into receivership continue to have access to child care?

Ms GILLARD—I thank the member for Petrie for her question. I know that she and other members of the government are concerned about the circumstances facing mums and dads who rely on ABC Learning. We on this side of the House understand that child care is a vital service that mums and dads rely on in order to meet their work commitments and that security of supply of child care is vital to them. Obviously ABC Learning is the nation’s largest childcare provider, and as a result the government has closely monitored all year circumstances involving ABC Learning.

On 24 September this year I established the childcare industry task force in my department. That task force immediately established contact with ABC Learning directors and their lending syndicate. Until 2 November the ABC Learning directors and their lending syndicate were indicating that ABC Learning was aiming to trade itself out of current financial difficulties. As members would be aware, on 6 November ABC Learning Centres Ltd entered into voluntary administration and shortly thereafter, indeed almost immediately thereafter, a receiver was appointed.

On 6 November the receiver, McGrathNicol, wrote to all parents with children at ABC childcare centres, all employees and all centre managers with a message that their local childcare centre would continue on a business as usual basis. McGrathNicol indicated in that correspondence that it was working constructively with ABC’s financiers and with the Rudd government on measures to ensure the stability of childcare services for ABC families. The receiver also on that day, 6 November, released a media statement entitled ‘ABC childcare centres to remain open’. To ensure anxious parents and em-
ployees could get information, the government, by 3 pm on 6 November, ensured that there was a dedicated telephone line on which parents and employees could get information. In addition, we commenced regularly placing updates on the ABC Learning situation on the mychild.gov.au website.

On Friday, 7 November, the day after the receiver was appointed, I announced that the Australian government had reached an agreement with the receiver of ABC Learning and their lending syndicate. In order to ensure that all ABC Learning childcare centres remain open and providing care until 31 December, the Australian government has committed up to $22 million of conditional funding. I announced on that day, Friday, that the $22 million commitment represents the possible costs of supporting the continued operation of the unprofitable ABC centres for two months. As members of the House would undoubtedly appreciate, normally a receiver coming into a business that found parts of the business were unprofitable would immediately act either to close or to rationalise those unprofitable parts of the business. Because of the unique situation of ABC Learning, the government is providing up to $22 million to support these centres and to ensure that they continue to provide child care until 31 December this year. In the period between now and 31 December the government will continue to work with the receiver and the financiers of ABC Learning and we will be in a position to make further announcements about the future of ABC Learning Centres as a result of that work.

I do not like to criticise anything coming from Queensland, for all of the obvious reasons, but there is a report in today’s Courier Mail which contains the following words:

A spokesman for McGrathNicol—

said it was far too early to tell where and how the Federal Government’s $22 million bailout payment would be spent.

This report is incorrect. I draw the attention of the House to my transcript from 7 November which makes it clear how the $22 million is to be spent. I also draw the attention of the House to a letter, which I am advised has been emailed today by the receiver to the editor of the Courier Mail, which states as follows:

To clarify a report in your paper today, up to $22 million was made available by the federal government to assist in the prevention of closures of any ABC childcare centre before the end of December. The amount used will be verified and independently checked to ensure the funds are used effectively. The actual detail of the funding will be worked through between the receivers and the government and the discussions are already underway. The amount of support was based on a preliminary assessment of the centres which were unprofitable under the group’s current business model. The receivers are currently conducting a full and proper analysis of the centre data in line with their review of the business.

That letter is on the letterhead of McGrath-Nicol and is signed by Chris Honey, Receiver and Manager, ABC Learning Centres Ltd. The government will continue to work with the receiver and continue to work with the financiers of ABC Learning in order to find a long-term solution. The government has acted quickly and decisively to ensure that parents can rely on ABC centres being available, providing care, to 31 December this year. This is in stark contrast to the position of the opposition which has dithered about every 15 minutes since this first happened.

Diplomatic Protocol

Mr Turnbull (2.40 pm)—My question is addressed to the Prime Minister. I refer the Prime Minister to the article in the Australian newspaper of 25 October which described in graphic detail a conversation
between himself and the President of the United States said to have taken place on 10 October at 10.40 pm. The article stated that, according to an informed source:

... that Rudd was then stunned to hear Bush say: ‘What’s the G20?’

Will the Prime Minister assure the House that neither he nor any person in his office disclosed any of the details of this call to the Australian newspaper?

Mr Rudd—As both the President’s spokesman and I, together with the US ambassador, have indicated, the conversation with the President of the United States was explicitly about the G20. The fact that the meeting was subsequently convened for the G20, I think, reflects appropriately on the President’s leadership. Any suggestion that the President did not understand the significance of the G20 was simply not accurate, because he did. Furthermore—

Opposition members interjecting—

Mr Rudd—Let me restate what I was saying, and that is that the conversation with the President of United States was about the significance of the G20, the usefulness of the G20. Any suggestion that the President of the United States was not aware of the significance of the G20 was simply inaccurate. I would ask those opposite, though, on the question of our relationship with the United States: when do we get the apology from the Liberal Party for them describing Barack Obama’s victory as a victory for al-Qaeda? We had the Leader of the Liberal Party stand and say he supported Barack Obama—

Opposition members interjecting—

Mr Rudd—Order! The Prime Minister will resume his seat.

Mr Robert interjecting—

The Speaker—Hold it. It is the first day of the week. There are three weeks to go. Do not get so excited.

Mr Turnbull—Mr Speaker, I rise on a point of order on relevance. It was a very straightforward question.

Mr Robert interjecting—

The Speaker—I warn the member for Fadden!

Child Care

Ms Owens (2.44 pm)—My question is to the Minister for Education, Minister for Employment and Workplace Relations and Minister for Social Inclusion. What is the Australian government doing to get the policy settings for child care right, and what legacy challenges is the government currently confronting?

Ms Gillard—I thank the member for Parramatta for her question and for her deep interest in child care. When the Rudd government was elected less than 12 months ago, we inherited a childcare system in which the former government had let the market rip. In 1999 the former government had uncapped the number of childcare places available. Meeting growing demand by uncapping places was not an error. What was an error was doing that without a plan for quality, without a plan for workforce, without a plan to bring child care to areas that needed it and without a plan that regulated or dealt with this market in any way. Indeed, what the former government did was to let the market rip and take their eyes off the road and their hands off the steering wheel, and then, as it all went towards an inevitable crash, they prepared to blame state and territory governments. Whenever asked, Liberal
Party ministers would say in relation to child care that this was all about state and territory governments. To take just one example, the Deputy Leader of the Opposition, in 2006, said:

… State Governments have primary responsibility for regulating and managing pre-school and childcare delivery throughout Australia.

Opposition members interjecting—

Ms GILLARD—‘A statement of fact’, one of the Liberal members says. So their attitude remains unchanged: let the market rip and then take absolutely no responsibility for the consequences. This is a typical Liberal Party response—reckless and out of touch. Since we were elected late last year we have, step by step and piece by piece, acted to ensure that this is a system that has a quality plan, that has a workforce plan and that has an expansion of supply. Each and every step of the way, the Rudd Labor government has acted to deal with the problems in this system left by the former government. So, for example, with our plan for quality we are streamlining quality and licensing requirements, and there will be rigorous new national quality standards and a rating system for child care—

Opposition members interjecting—

Ms GILLARD—something. I presume from the interjections, that the Liberal Party is opposed to. We have entered into a $126 million plan for workforce development. This will include removing TAFE fees for those who want to be childcare workers and creating an additional 1,500 university places for those who want to be early learning educators. And we have a plan for childcare infrastructure, bringing up to 260 new centres around the country, and a plan for an early learning years framework so that, no matter what setting children are cared for in, they have the benefit of an early education program. Each and every day, I and the parliamentary secretary responsible in the area, the member for Bennelong, have worked step by step on these measures, which were desperately needed in this industry and neglected by the Liberal Party when in government. What seems even more amazing to me than the attitude of the Liberal Party when in government is the fact that it has learnt absolutely nothing in opposition. Can I refer the House to an extraordinary transcript this morning from the member for Indi, the shadow minister now responsible for this area—an extraordinary transcript, very interesting reading—where she is asked—

Mr Tuckey—Mr Speaker, I rise on a point of order on the matter of relevance. I did not hear anything in the question that related to quotes relating to this side of the House. The minister started with that attack. I let her go that far, but she is back at it again now, and it is up to you to bring her back to the question.

Honourable members interjecting—

The SPEAKER—Order! If there was a reflection on another member, I could not hear it above all the interjections. I will listen carefully to the way in which the Deputy Prime Minister uses her material, which I hope will be relevant to the question.

Ms GILLARD—It is certainly relevant to the question and the question of child care, and I thank the member for O'Connor for his interjection—his point of order. I presume the member for Indi is grateful as well, because he is one member of the House who makes her look good. On the question of the transcript this morning, the member for Indi, when asked about the opposition’s plans for child care, was asked, ‘What should the government do?’ She said, ‘Firstly, the government should outline its contingency plan.’ The journalist said, ‘No, what do you suggest the government should do?’ to see if she had any plans. Then the member for Indi said, ‘Well, that’s up to Ms Gillard to tell us how
she’s going to respond.’ Then the journalist said to the member for Indi, ‘You would have thought about the issues; what do you think should be done?’ and she said ‘Well, Ms Gillard needs to come up with a sustainable model,’ and the journalist said in frustration, ‘No, no, I am not asking about Ms Gillard’s opinion,’ in yet another desperate attempt to elicit from the member for Indi something that might look like a Liberal policy for child care. Then, extraordinarily, having been pressed and pressed again for a policy on child care, the member for Indi said in respect of me that I should have acted 12 months ago on this. The member for Indi might like to remember the Liberal Party was in government 12 months ago. Maybe they should have acted on it, yes, but she can hardly say that that is something for the current government.

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

Ms GILLARD—Then, finally, like all Liberal Party members when asked on child care—because they have no policies, no plans and no ideas—what does she actually do? She actually says that this is all about state governments that regulate child care. The Liberal Party learns nothing, stands for nothing—

The SPEAKER—Order! The Deputy Prime Minister has concluded.

Ms GILLARD—and, each and every day since the receiver was appointed, has dithered about its policy response because it does not know anything about child care.

Mr Hockey interjecting—

The SPEAKER—Order! The member for North Sydney will resume his seat. The Deputy Prime Minister will resume her seat.

**Diplomatic Protocol**

Mr TURNBULL (2.52 pm)—My question is again to the Prime Minister. I refer to his answer to my previous question, in which he expressly failed to deny that he or his office leaked details of the conversation with the United States President to the *Australian* newspaper. I also refer to the Australian Federal Police investigation into the disclosure of confidential files in Kathmandu and also to the Department of Defence investigation into the leaking of a confidential briefing relating to entertainers visiting our troops in Afghanistan. I ask the Prime Minister: what investigation has he instigated into the false and misleading leak of details of a private and confidential telephone conversation with the United States President?

Mr RUDD—I thank the member for Wentworth for his question. As indicated before to the member for Wentworth, the White House, the United States ambassador and I have confirmed that the President did not make the remarks that have been attributed to him in the article in question. I also ask the member for Wentworth, he having stood at the dispatch box today and welcomed Senator Obama’s election, when he is going to apologise for the attack on Senator Obama—

The SPEAKER—Order! The Prime Minister will resume his seat. The Leader of the Opposition on a point of order.

Mr Turnbull—Mr Speaker, this is the second time he has completely failed to answer an important question. It relates to our relations with the United States. He owes us an explanation.

The SPEAKER—Order! The Leader of the Opposition will resume his seat. It would assist if those on my left sat there a little quieter so I could actually hear the Prime Minister.
Mr RUDD—As the member for Wentworth just said, it goes to our relationship with the United States. If he is concerned about the attack on Senator Obama last year, Senator Fifield only last month said about Senator Obama, ‘It is a very serious matter when you have a presidential candidate who thinks it is okay to hang around—

Mr Hockey—Mr Speaker, on a point of order—relevance: I would just ask him to answer the question he was asked.

The SPEAKER—the Prime Minister will respond to the question. I will listen carefully. This is an illustration of the problem about answers starting to debate.

Mr Pearce interjecting—

The SPEAKER—The member for Aston is warned.

Mr Pearce interjecting—

The SPEAKER—I do not think it is something you should be thankful for.

Mr RUDD—On the substance of the matter, I refer again to the statement I made before about the public statements by the White House, the US ambassador and me on this. In furthering the question, the member for Wentworth said that this goes to our relationship with the United States. Calling the President-elect of the United States an ‘agent of al-Qaeda’—which is what the Liberals did last year—I think is of some consequence to that relationship.

Indonesia: Travel Advice

Mrs IRWIN (2.56 pm)—My question is to the Minister for Foreign Affairs. Will the minister advise the House of the Australian government’s advice with respect to travel to Indonesia, following the execution of the Bali bombers?

Mr STEPHEN SMITH—I thank the member for her question. Can I start where I have started on this matter in recent days, and that is to express my deepest sympathy for the family members of the victims of both Bali bombings. The last week or so, in particular yesterday, has been a terrible reminder of tragic personal circumstances and loss. I am sure that all members of the House join in the expression of sympathy and condolence to the families in what has been, in my view, a terrible reminder of very tragic family circumstances.

For some time, indeed since November 2002 in the aftermath of the first Bali bombing, the effective travel advice for Indonesia, including Bali, has been for Australians to reconsider their need to travel. Whilst until 2005 it was described differently, that has been the effective travel advice, so far as the Australian government is concerned, to Australians contemplating travel to Indonesia, including Bali.

On Saturday, 8 November and again on Sunday following the executions of the Bali bombers, the travel advisory was reissued and updated. It remains at the same level, the second-highest level: ‘Reconsider your need for travel’. But, to bring it up to date and remain current with ongoing events, it has been reissued and updated following the executions.

Can I draw the House’s attention to important parts of that travel advisory. Australians should reconsider their need to travel to Indonesia, including Bali, due to the very high threat of terrorist attack. The executions of the Bali bombers could prompt a strong reaction from their supporters, including demonstrations, acts of violence and acts of reprisal. Regrettably, the government continues to receive credible information that terrorists could be planning attacks in Indonesia and, regrettably, we continue to receive credible information that Bali remains an attractive target for terrorist activity.

In particular, given that we are at the end of the school year, members would of course
be aware that numbers of young Australians may be planning, after their school exams at the end of their school year, to travel to Indonesia, and Bali in particular. I draw the attention of those young school graduates and their parents to the travel advisory, and I urge those young Australians and their parents, if they do decide to travel to Bali and Indonesia, to exercise heightened caution at this time and to avoid those places which we know have been targets for terrorist attack in the past, in particular, bars, beaches, shopping malls and the like.

It has of course been drawn to my attention and has been part of the public commentary in the context of the execution of the Bali bombers that, as a consequence of our travel advisory, numbers of young students who have pre-booked or previously planned to travel to Bali may now be contemplating a change of circumstances, a change of plan. Over the weekend I have urged the travel industry to exercise maximum flexibility if young Australians seek to change their travel arrangements so far as Bali or Indonesia are concerned. I welcome the news that Jetstar and Virgin Blue, two of the airlines which have flights to Bali, have waived their fees for travellers wishing to change the date of their travel to Bali in November. I am advised that, so far as Jetstar is concerned, the waiver of this fee applies for changes made in November to as late as September of next year. I again call on all airlines and the travel industry generally—travel agents, airlines—to exercise maximum flexibility.

Some members of the House may be aware that for the last few years, indeed since 2004, the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade has consulted formally with the travel industry through the Smartraveller Consultative Group. This has generally taken the form of annual consultations where the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and the travel industry engage in a dialogue to ensure that the travel industry is aware of matters relating to safety so far as travel is concerned.

I can advise the House that on Friday of this week in Sydney the department will be convening a special and urgent meeting of the Smartraveller Consultative Group with the travel industry to see whether more can be done to maximise the flexibility so far as changed travel arrangements to Bali or Indonesia are concerned. I again welcome the action already taken by Jetstar and Virgin Blue.

I conclude my remarks to the House by making some comments in respect of capital punishment. Australia, through the states, abolished capital punishment, the death penalty, more than 20 years ago. The view of the Commonwealth of Australia, and I choose my words carefully to include the states, the territories and the Commonwealth, has been that the death penalty is not appropriate for Australia. Internationally, Australia supports the abolition of the death penalty as a form of punishment, and Australia and the Australian government have been active in the United Nations, urging this view upon nations who continue to use the death penalty as a sanction.

Indeed, in December 2007, one of the first acts of the current government was to co-sponsor a resolution at the General Assembly calling for a moratorium so far as capital punishment, or the death penalty, is concerned. Australia will be repeating this co-sponsorship this year. This of course followed on from when, in 2006, the then Australian government and Australia supported a similar statement presented to the General Assembly by Finland. I have noted the comments made by those opposite which reflect the bipartisan approach on this issue in terms of both of a domestic sanction and Australia’s view to the world generally.
I conclude by again urging those Australians who are contemplating travel to Indonesia, including Bali, to very carefully consider the travel advisory on the website and to bear that very carefully in mind when making their travel plans.

Child Care

Mrs MIRABELLA (3.03 pm)—My question is addressed to the Deputy Prime Minister, Minister for Education, Minister for Employment and Workplace Relations and Minister for Social Inclusion. I refer to the fact that the government has stated that 400 of the ABC Learning Centres are not profitable. Minister, which ones are they? Will they close after 31 December? Furthermore, as every centre reports its vacancy rates to the government on a weekly basis, what have the vacancy rates been for these 400 centres since January?

Ms GILLARD—I thank the member for Indi for her question. As the member for Indi should be aware, on 7 November—that is, Friday of last week—I announced that the government would provide up to $22 million conditional funding because around 40 per cent of ABC Learning Centres, some 1,040 centres, were viewed by the receivers as unprofitable. The member for Indi, if she had read that transcript, would have also noted that I indicated at the time that that was the receiver’s preliminary data, the receiver having been put in place about 24 hours previously. The member for Indi is shaking her head, but obviously the question of profitability or unprofitability of a centre is a judgement the receiver would make—and the receiver understandably, some 24 hours afterwards, was saying that he was working on preliminary data. I suggest to the member for Indi that if she has questions about that she should direct them to the receiver.

Economy

Ms HALL (3.06 pm)—My question is to the Minister for Finance and Deregulation. Will the minister update the House on recent assessments of the Australian economy, including the release today of the Reserve Bank Statement on monetary policy?

Mr TANNER—There have of course been a number of assessments recently of the state of the Australian economy and the Reserve Bank has today published its Statement on monetary policy which notes a number of important observations with respect to both global and Australian economic circumstances especially in the wake of the global financial crisis. It does note that there is less dislocation in Australian credit markets than overseas but, nonetheless, that downward revisions of global growth will have an impact on Australia. It does point out that governments and central banks responding to turbulence with various measures have generated some improvement both internationally and of course in Australia but that sentiment remains ‘fragile’ and there is a ‘deteriorating outlook for the global economy’. It notes that the government’s Economic Security Strategy will boost consumption and home building and, together with the impact of the fall in the value of the Australian dollar and the recent reduction in interest rates, that these initiatives will very strongly push back against the downward negative impact of the global financial crisis on the Australian economy.

It does point out as well that our banks are less affected by the turbulence in international financial markets than those of most other countries, that our banks are well capitalised and that their capital adequacy levels are well above the established minimum levels. It is worth noting too, as the Prime Minister referred to earlier regarding the difference in the Reserve Bank’s projected 1½ per
cent growth in the coming year as compared to the Treasury’s assessment of two per cent in MYEFO that was published some days ago, that the difference between the two can largely be explained by the fact that Treasury in its assumptions presumes that there will be some further reduction of interest rates in ensuing months whereas the Reserve Bank obviously cannot make any assumptions about future movements in interest rates, and its assumptions therefore out to June 2011 assume that interest rates remain as they currently are. So that essentially explains the difference in the projections.

There have of course been other assessments of the outlook for the Australian economy, most notably from the opposition. Unfortunately, those assessments seem to change on a daily basis and sometimes even on an hourly basis. I note that the Leader of the Opposition believes that consistency is a very important principle. In fact on 8 November he was quoted as saying, ‘I place a very high premium on consistency and integrity in politics.’ Two months ago the Leader of the Opposition was reaffirming the opposition’s commitment to cutting fuel excise. That promise has now been jettisoned. So here we have a reversal of the usual arrangements: we have a government that is honouring its promises and an opposition that is actually betraying its promises before we are anywhere near an election. They are already breaking their promises and they have not even got to the election yet.

One month ago the Leader of the Opposition was saying that the global financial crisis is overhyped. What we did not know at the time was that he was quietly moving his own money out of a property fund that has since been frozen.

Mr Hockey interjecting—

The SPEAKER—Order! The Manager of Opposition Business will resume his seat. The minister for finance is starting to stray well away from the question. I give him the call and ask him to conclude his answer.

Mr TANNER—Mr Speaker, I was referring to the sincerity of assessments of the Australian economy to which the question referred. I am referring here to matters that are on the public record, indeed a quote from the Leader of the Opposition:

Well you take advice from your financial planners, you invest in things, you dispose of things.

A million here, a million there—what is the difference? The Leader of the Opposition is a clever politician but you have to watch what he does, not what he says, because that changes on a daily basis.

And I note that we have still not seen any commentary or any proposals with respect to one key question in the global financial crisis set of issues, and that is: what does the opposition have to say about excessive executive salaries? What does the opposition have to say about this issue? I note in the assessment of the issues associated with global circumstances that this is one thing that the Leader of the Opposition has yet to address.

The global financial crisis is not overhyped. It is very serious and it is presenting very substantial challenges to the government. But the government is meeting those challenges with sound economic management and clear positions on the issues and clear initiatives to deal with those challenges. The opposition says that it is supporting the government’s initiatives, that it has bipartisan support for those initiatives, and then within minutes walks away from that position and proceeds to start to snipe at all of those propositions. I urge the opposition to rethink its position and to take a serious, clear and consistent position on these issues, because they are too important for the behaviour that we are seeing from the opposition. We do not need an investment banker’s ap-
proach; we need a sound approach from government to dealing with the challenges that Australia faces, and the government will not be diverted from what is necessary to ensure the security and prosperity of the Australian people.

Child Care

Mrs MIRABELLA (3.13 pm)—My question is to the Deputy Prime Minister, Minister for Employment and Workplace Relations, Minister for Education and Minister for Social Inclusion. Given that the minister has stated that 40 per cent of ABC Learning’s childcare centres are not profitable, does the minister stand by the government’s commitment to build an extra 260 new childcare centres that will compete directly with the existing operators?

Ms GILLARD—I thank the member for Indi for her question and I point out what I think are two very simple things. Firstly, Australia is a big country. People look—Opposition members interjecting—Ms GILLARD—All right! The member for Indi has understood that point. I am glad to have that reinforced. People look for childcare locally either near where they live or near where they work. It is therefore absolutely possible for ABC Learning—or indeed for any childcare operator in this country—to say in respect of one centre that they do not have as many children in it as they would like and in respect of others that there are crying shortages in other parts of the country where people are looking for child care. Obviously the government’s promise of introducing up to 260 new childcare centres was aimed at the following things: increasing supply in those parts of the country where people are short of centres and short of places; secondly, developing those new childcare centres in locations of convenience to parents. Most particularly we have looked at near or on school grounds so that parents can avoid the dreaded double drop-off and if they have children of childcare age and of school age they can have them dropped off in the one location.

Opposition members jeer at that as if that is something extraordinary—that a hard-working mum or a hardworking dad would want to drop their school-age children and their children of childcare age off at the same location. But let me tell you that that just goes to show how out of touch the Liberal Party is because there are mums and dads right around the country that would prefer that convenience.

Mr Pearce—What would you know about children?

Ms GILLARD—I say to the member for Indi that in respect of the second part of her question, if she thinks about it for a second the answer will be obvious to her. The Liberal Party is led by a man who says he knows about business and money. What the word ‘profit’ means is that there is something left over after you have acquitted all costs. You should not assume, as the member for Indi clearly does, that the only thing that goes into the business model of a childcare centre is the question of the number of vacancies. Obviously other costs also pertain to the question of profit, which is why the receiver of ABC, when working through whether a centre is profitable or not, will obviously be looking at all facts that pertain to that—vacancy rates would be one but costs such as the cost of the premises, the cost of the staff and other issues in relation to that centre will obviously pertain. So the member for Indi is taking an overly simplistic view of all of this.

I can understand why she would be taking an overly simplistic view of all of it because the Liberal Party has always taken an overly simplistic, neglectful view of child care—let the market rip, never think about anything else, never do anything else, never develop a
policy whether in government or in opposition, and as Leader of the Opposition never say the same thing twice. The Leader of the Opposition has never said the same thing twice since ABC moved into voluntary administration on 6 November.

Mr Albanese—Mr Speaker, I ask that the member for Aston withdraw the nasty, inappropriate and offensive remark that he made across the chamber during the Deputy Prime Minister’s response.

The SPEAKER—I am unclear because I did not hear what was said but there has been a reaction to a comment. If the member for Aston is in a position to withdraw I would ask him to withdraw. But I am in the difficulty of not having heard the comment, to which there has been a reaction, though, which is an indication.

Mr Pearce—I withdraw.

The SPEAKER—I thank the member for Aston.

Middle East

Ms PARKE (3.19 pm)—My question is to the Minister for Foreign Affairs. Will the minister report on his recent visit to Israel and the Palestinian territories? What is the government’s approach to the Middle East peace process?

Mr STEPHEN SMITH—I thank the member for Fremantle for her question and for her support of the Middle East peace process. Since the House last met, on 28 October I visited Israel and the Palestinian territories. The objective of the visit to Israel was, firstly, to relay to the Israeli government congratulations on behalf of Australia on the 60th anniversary of the independence of Israel, of the creation of the Israeli state. The second purpose was to underline Australia’s very strong support of a two-nation-state solution to the Middle East—a nation-state for Israel within defined and secure bounda-ries and borders and a nation-state for the Palestinian people.

In Jerusalem I had the opportunity of meeting with Prime Minister Olmert, Foreign Minister Livni and Opposition Leader Netanyahu and I had the privilege of laying a wreath at the Yad Vashem Holocaust Museum. In the Palestinian territories I met with Palestinian Authority Foreign Minister al-Maliki, visited the Kalandia refugee camp in the Palestinian territories and also announced the final allocation of the $45 million announced by Australia at the Paris Donors Conference to support the Palestinian territories and humanitarian assistance in the Palestinian territories. Of the final $10 million allocation, $7.5 million will be ascribed to the Palestinian Authority for capacity and institution building and $2.5 million for further humanitarian assistance.

Whilst much of my time in the Palestinian territories and Israel was spent discussing the Middle East peace process, I think it is true to say that the issue uppermost in the minds of the Israeli leadership is Iranian nuclear activity. In this respect, Australia’s recent adoption of autonomous sanctions so far as Iran and its nuclear program is concerned was very warmly welcomed by the Israeli government and the Israeli leadership.

So far as the Middle East peace process is concerned, I underlined very strongly to both the Israeli leadership and the Palestinian Authority Australia’s very strong support for a two-nation-state solution, the Annapolis process, the 2002 road map for peace process and the 2007 Annapolis initiative commenced under the Bush administration in November 2007.

In that context, I warmly welcome the statement overnight by the so-called Middle East quartet, comprising the United Nations, the European Union, the Russian Federation and the United States. The quartet have re-
ported that President Abbas and Foreign Minister Livni reaffirmed their commitment to ‘vigorous, ongoing and continuous negotiations in order to conclude a peace treaty resolving all outstanding issues, including all core issues without exception’.

As the quartet emphasised on the weekend, both sides must abide by their road map obligations to create an atmosphere conducive to negotiations. Over the weekend the quartet also reiterated that both parties must:

… fully implement their obligations under phase one of the Roadmap, including in relation to freezing settlement activity and the dismantlement of the infrastructure of terrorism.

The Australian government very strongly shares this sentiment, as we share the sentiment expressed by Secretary of State Rice on more than one occasion in the course of this year that, ‘at a time when we need to build confidence between the parties, the continued building and settlement activity has the potential to harm the negotiations going forward’.

Both parties need to abide by their obligations under the 2002 road map for peace and not do anything which disturbs or jeopardises the Annapolis peace process: peace and security, non-use of force and terrorist activities insofar as the Palestinian territories are concerned and settlement activity insofar as the Israeli side is concerned.

I take this opportunity to update the House on resolutions dealt with before the United Nations General Assembly fourth committee on Friday night and Saturday morning. The General Assembly fourth committee dealt with nine resolutions relating to the Middle East. In respect of these nine resolutions, the Australian government instructed our representative to the United Nations to change Australia’s vote from the previous voting habits of the last few years on two occasions. It is important to make the point to the House that, when it comes to General Assembly resolutions, the government adopts the following approach. Firstly, we treat these resolutions on a case-by-case basis and consider them on their merits. Secondly, we consider these resolutions firmly within the context of our very strong adherence to our support for a two-nation-state solution and our support of the peace process. If the resolutions are consistent with that approach then we support them.

In 2003 the General Assembly made a reference to the International Court of Justice for an advisory opinion on the legality of the construction of the Israeli security barrier. Since that time, the Australian voting practice changed on a number of significant resolutions, including, for example, the resolution on settlements. The Australian government has come to the view that, whilst the reference by the General Assembly to the International Court of Justice was not supported by the Australian government or by the opposition at the time, and whilst we regard—as the previous government did—that advisory opinion as an advisory opinion and not a binding opinion, we will not oppose a resolution in the General Assembly on the Middle East simply because it refers to that advisory opinion. That is the case as far as the resolution on settlements is concerned where, on behalf of the government, I instructed our permanent representative to the United Nations to change Australia’s vote to support the resolution as far as settlements were concerned because this was consistent with our approach for a two-nation-state solution, our support for the road map for peace and the Annapolis process.

In doing so on that and on the second resolution on which I instructed a change in the Australian voting position, regarding the Geneva convention, Australia joined another 160 nation-states in support of those two resolutions as compared with two-nation-
states who abstained and six who opposed. In that context, we joined the overwhelming majority of the international community. It is not necessarily about the quantity; we also need to look at where some of our longstanding, like minded colleagues are. In support of the settlements resolution we find the United Kingdom, Canada, New Zealand and the European Union. It is not so much the number of nation-states; it is whether these resolutions sit squarely within the Australian government’s policy. Australia’s longstanding policy on a two-nation-state solution for the Middle East and support for the road map for peace and the Annapolis process was in every respect consistent with the nine resolutions voted on by the General Assembly on Friday night and Saturday morning.

This is not just a government view; this is a longstanding Australian position shared by both sides of the House. This government will do nothing to jeopardise our longstanding public policy and foreign policy commitment to a two-nation-state solution for the Middle East and our very strong support of the road map for peace and the Annapolis peace process.

**Middle East**

**Mr Turnbull** (3.27 pm)—My question is addressed to the Prime Minister. I refer to the answer just given by the Minister for Foreign Affairs. I ask the Prime Minister: why has the Australian government switched its vote in the United Nations to support these two resolutions of which the foreign minister spoke, which are not simply highly critical of our friends in Israel but which accuse the state of Israel of acting in breach of international humanitarian law? Does the Prime Minister consider this change of policy, with Australia making that grave allegation of misconduct against Israel, conducive to achieving peace in the Middle East?

**Mr Rudd**—Prior to 2003, resolutions of a similar type to the two matters referred to were supported by the then Liberal government. That is the first point. The second is, as explained just now by the Minister for Foreign Affairs at the dispatch box, what occurred subsequent to that was the request for the advisory opinion from the International Court of Justice on the question of the security wall. The other point I would draw the honourable member’s attention to is that, if we are serious about a long-term Middle East peace process based on a two-state solution, part of that—a huge part of it—lies in dealing with the threat of terrorism to the state of Israel. That remains the position of this government, as it was the position of the previous government. Part of that also lies in what you do about the challenge of the settlements.

I draw to the honourable gentleman’s attention the statement overnight by the quartet comprising the government of the United States, the Russian Federation, the European Union and the United Nations which explicitly reiterates that both parties—Israel and Palestine—must ‘fully implement their obligations under phase 1 of the road map, including in relation to freezing settlement activity and the dismantlement of the infrastructure of terrorism’.

As the honourable gentleman would know, this is a very complex matter. The whole Middle East peace process is littered with failed negotiations up until now. But if there is a prospect of delivering peace in the Middle East, part of that hinges on the question of how we deal with settlements in future. A huge part of it hinges on how we provide Israel with an appropriate state of security, given the threat of continued terrorism which Israel has suffered under for many decades now.
There is a lot of sensitivity attached to these matters. We on this side of the House are as acutely conscious of this as those on the other side. But, as stated by the foreign minister, it is with the absolute best intentions that we will work constructively towards a two-state solution, mindful of all of these realities. The future of settlements is part and parcel of the road map to peace which was drafted by President Bush several years ago. That has been reiterated by the quartet in the last 24 hours. That informs the position taken by the foreign minister and the instructions that he has provided to former Senator Hill, our representative in New York.

Health

Ms NEAL (3.30 pm)—My question is to the Minister for Health and Ageing. Will the minister outline any relevant investments in Australia’s health workforce and the challenges that they are designed to overcome?

Ms ROXON—I thank the member for Robertson for her question. Her electorate, like those of many in this House, is affected by workforce shortages, particularly of doctors. There would not be a person in this House who would not be familiar with families from their electorates coming to see them about difficulties accessing doctors. We believe that action needs to be taken to ensure that families can get the health care that they need in their community when they need it.

The most recent medical workforce survey, released just in the last fortnight, shows that the overall supply of primary care practitioners—so this is mostly GPs—declined under the watch of the Liberal government. It fell from 101 to 97 full-time equivalents per 100,000 of population between 2002 and 2006. As the member for Robertson would be aware, the doctor shortage affects many families. In fact, the latest figures show us that six in 10 Australians feel the impact of this shortage. This was a clear result of a failure of leadership by the previous government. It was a failure to plan for the future and a failure to recognise the long-term impacts of the decisions that they were making.

But in case anyone opposite thinks that this is me just being political, I would remind those opposite, who might mistake this as me politicising it, that the member for Warringah said last year: ‘We failed to increase medical school places until 2000. Sure, you could say that it was overdue.’ The member for Bradfield said earlier this year: ‘In hindsight, it was obvious that the restrictions on general practice training positions imposed in 1996-97 were not appropriate and I did express my concerns at the time.’ It is quite clear that this was a problem. It was only recognised belatedly by the Liberal government, but they did belatedly recognise the error of their ways.

Over the next few years—and this is a good thing—an increasing number of young graduate doctors will be coming on line. Unfortunately, though, these young medical graduates leaving university then have to move into a specialty training place. To do that, they need there to be a training place. For example, this year there was a record number of applicants for GP training places, exceeding the number that were available, leaving young doctors facing a bottleneck which the Liberal Party failed to address. So as a result of the cap that was put in place by the previous Liberal government, promising young doctors with the ambition to become GPs were going to have those ambitions thwarted.

That is why last Wednesday in Tasmania the Prime Minister and I announced that the Rudd government is investing $148 million to immediately establish 175 new GP training places. This will allow 175 new doctors to begin training as GPs in the next two
years, bringing the total number next year to 675 and in 2010 to 700. This is, I am sure, welcome news to the whole parliament. It will be welcome news to the community that we have young doctors keen to go into general practice being able to take up their ambitions and service the community.

This was widely welcomed by health professionals in the community. For example, the President of the AMA, Dr Rosanna Capolingua, described this move as: ‘Just what the doctor ordered: a much needed show of support for general practice and our patients which will have an immediate impact.’ The Rudd government believes that Australians should be able to access health care when and where they need it, and this is an important step to us achieving that goal and an immediate down payment on future workforce reform. I encourage all graduates and medical students to consider general practice as a good career and a chance to provide valuable services in our community. I know all members of this House would encourage those young medical graduates to do that.

**Small Business**

Mr CIOBO (3.35 pm)—My question is to the Prime Minister. I refer the Prime Minister to his comments on 7 October when he said, ‘The government welcomes the relief that the Reserve Bank of Australia’s decision will provide to working families and to Australian small businesses.’ Prime Minister, how many of the banks have passed on the Reserve Bank’s now 1.75 per cent rate cut to their small business customers? If banks have not passed on the rate cut, how will small businesses be relieved by the Reserve Bank’s decision?

Mr RUDD—First and foremost, in terms of the government’s commitment to the interests of small business, one of the challenges that we sought to address in the $10.4 billion Economic Security Strategy was to provide stimulus to the economy, particularly in the household consumption sector where so many small businesses depend on a flow-through of activity. We are very mindful of that.

The second concern with regard to small business was the drying up of loan finance to small business in the future. That is why we provided the banks with a guarantee in terms of their term wholesale funding. One of the galvanising arguments put to us at that time was the need to provide that guarantee to ensure that there would be a continuing line of credit to small business.

The third point is the cost of that credit. That goes to the interest rates point which the honourable gentleman raised in his question. As I have said before—and as has the Treasurer as well—we would expect the banks to pass through interest rate cuts as rapidly as possible to all their customers. That includes small business customers as well as those taking out home loans.

**Voluntary Student Unionism**

Ms GRIERSON (3.37 pm)—My question is to the Minister for Sport and Minister for Youth. What action has the government taken to restore student amenities and representation on university campuses across Australia? What has been the response to this announcement?

Ms KATE ELLIS—I thank the member for Newcastle for her question. I know that some students at Newcastle university whom she represents made very clear to us the urgency that they see in undoing the damage caused by the legislation put forward by the previous government. I also note that we have now heard a number of very divided and differing positions put forward by the coalition on this particular issue. I recognise that we do have some ideological extremists on the other side of the House when it comes to this particular issue, but I would like to
assure all that we are advocating a reasonable, balanced and sustainable new way forward to ensure the quality of our universities.

Earlier this year I conducted consultations right around the country and heard firsthand of the devastating impact of the VSU legislation and the fact that it was students themselves who were paying the price for this extreme legislation put forward by the previous government. I will inform the House of what I learnt. I learnt that $170 million was ripped from our campuses and that the impacts were both immediate and extreme. We heard how it was students who were paying directly. We heard that childcare centres had been closed, that childcare subsidies had been slashed and that this had led to increases in fees—for example, $68 a week at La Trobe University and $800 a year at UTS in increases in childcare fees alone. We heard that sporting clubs were hit by big drops in participation as a result of them having to massively increase their fees. We heard that parking fees at Monash University, as one more example, rose from $80 a year up to $280 a year for one student. We heard of massive price increases in catering services and the closure of health, welfare, legal, accommodation and counselling services.

But it was not just directly that students were paying; students were paying indirectly. We heard that a number of universities were being forced to move resources out of teaching and research budgets into propping up student services. We also heard from a number of universities that they were very concerned about their ability to continue to attract overseas students if they did not have services on campus.

So last week we announced a new way forward. Those opposite might choose to keep fighting the same old battles of the past but we are announcing a new way forward. Under this announcement, from 2010, all universities in Australia will be required to meet basic benchmarks on access to information and basic services as a condition of their Commonwealth funding. Additionally, they will be required to meet representation protocols on every campus across Australia regardless of whether or not they choose to introduce the fee. On top of this, we will give universities a choice of introducing a fee which will be capped at $250 and accompanied by a HECS style deferred payment loan system. This fee, if introduced, can then be spent on further amenities within very strict guidelines. These guidelines will not allow for the funds to be spent on broad political campaigns such as we have seen in the past. It is universities who will be held accountable for ensuring that these guidelines are strictly adhered to.

Those opposite should note that we have absolutely no intention of returning to compulsory student unionism. In fact, we are moving forward. We will not be amending the section of the legislation which outlaws a university forcing any student to be a member of an organisation. We have outlined a balanced, responsible and new way forward.

Ms KATE ELLIS—And decisive—thank you, members opposite! We are pleased to have received many positive responses from the university sector. While the coalition might be divided on this, I would like to share some of the responses that we have heard from others.

Mrs Bronwyn Bishop—Mr Speaker, I rise on a point of order on relevance—the relevant point being that, in giving an answer which is complete, the minister should disclose her conflict of interest.

The SPEAKER—Order! There is no point of order. The minister was asked to comment on responses.
Ms Kate Ellis—As I was saying, we have heard a number of positive responses and I would like to share them. The Group of Eight universities called it a ‘sensible compromise’. We heard from Universities Australia, who said:

Universities have struggled … to prop up essential student services through cross-subsidisation from other parts of already stretched university budgets …

We heard from Australian University Sport, who stated that sport has been an innocent victim and that participation numbers had been hit hard. And we heard from the very reasonable member for New England, who noted that, under the previous government’s legislation, the baby had been thrown out with the bath water, which is absolutely true. But I can assure the member for New England and others that what we are offering is a balanced, responsible and sensible way forward to ensure that our universities remain world-class institutions with services and representation.

Mr Hockey—Mr Speaker, I rise on a point of order. I am all for preventing babies being thrown out of any baths, but it is really important that we try to get the answers down below six minutes. This has been going over six minutes.

The Speaker—Order! The Manager of Opposition Business will resume his seat. The question was in order; the answer has been in order. The minister has finished.

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

Personal Explanations

Mr Turnbull (Wentworth—Leader of the Opposition) (3.44 pm)—Mr Speaker, I wish to make a personal explanation.

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

Mr Turnbull—Yes, grievously.

The Speaker—Please proceed.

Mr Turnbull—In the course of question time today, the Minister for Finance and Deregulation asserted—not for the first time—that I had never commented on the issue of excessive executive salaries. In fact, I have spoken about this at great length on a number of occasions. I have four recent examples here and there are many more. Unlike the finance minister, I have taken action to stop executives excessively remunerating themselves. I seek leave to table these transcripts. Will the government consent to that?

Mr Albanese interjecting—

Mr Turnbull—Very well. You don’t want to know the facts, do you?

The Speaker—Order! The Leader of the Opposition is seeking leave to table transcripts. Is leave granted?

Leave not granted.

Mrs Mirabella (Indi) (3.45 pm)—Mr Speaker, I wish to make a personal explanation.

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

Mrs Mirabella—Yes.

The Speaker—Please proceed.

Mrs Mirabella—During question time, the Deputy Prime Minister referred to my comments this morning when I said she could have spoken to her colleagues 12 months ago. She omitted to include that later on in that interview I made a correction to my colloquial reference of 12 months to 11½ months, that being the exact date the Rudd government was elected and being the amount of time during which she could speak to her state colleagues—the ones who are responsible for regulating childcare centres.
QUESTIONS TO THE SPEAKER

Questions in Writing

Mr ROBERT (3.46 pm)—Mr Speaker, I put a question in writing, No. 260, to the Treasurer over 60 days ago. The Treasurer has not yet responded to it. Perhaps he has not had enough time. Could you write to the Treasurer and ask him to provide a written response to me as soon as possible?

The SPEAKER—Order! I will write to the Treasurer, as required by the standing orders.

DOCUMENTS

Mr ALBANESE (Grayndler—Leader of the House) (3.47 pm)—Documents are presented as listed in the schedule circulated to honourable members. Details of the documents will be recorded in the Votes and Proceedings, and I move:

That the House take note of the following documents:

Department of Climate Change—Report for 2007-08.
Department of Finance and Deregulation—Report for 2007-08.
Department of the Treasury—Report for 2007-08.

Debate (on motion by Mr Hockey) adjourned.

ELECTION PETITION

Court of Disputed Returns

The Clerk—I present a copy of a petition of Stewart Gordon Scott-Irving v Rob Oakeshott and the Australian Broadcasting Corporation filed in the High Court, sitting as the Court of Disputed Returns, in respect of the Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918 and the election of a member of the House of Representatives for the Division of Lyne.

TAX LAWS AMENDMENT (EDUCATION REFUND) BILL 2008

Second Reading

Debate resumed.

Mr NEUMANN (Blair) (3.49 pm)—The member for Pearce talked about a number of things in this debate. She talked about little observable action in the last few years. She talked about the fact that there were plenty of reports and recommendations, but one wonders whether in fact she was present during the years of the Howard government. Indeed, after 12 years of the Howard government, there were 24 reports into education and 220 recommendations but not much to show for them. That is why the Tax Laws Amendment (Education Refund) Bill 2008 is so important.

The legacy of the Howard government is so tragic for the education of the youth of our country. We have no national teaching standards, no national curriculum, too many children leaving school too soon, too many children incapable of basic numeracy and literacy, and 6.5 million Australians with no post-school qualifications. The 2006 OECD study shows that Australia’s average performance in reading literacy worsened between 2003 and 2006, primarily because of the decline in the percentage of high-performing students and a tail in underperformance linked to disadvantage. It showed that in scientific literacy 40 per cent of Aus-
The budget included $4.4 billion to create a new education tax refund. This is a refundable tax offset of 50 per cent of eligible education expenses for children undertaking primary and secondary school studies. About 1.3 million families—about 2.7 million students—will be eligible for the refund. My electorate and others will see families in private schools and in public schools benefit. It is not about the old, antiquated notions of providing for one system over the other; it is about helping children who attend private schools and children who attend public schools to get the best education possible.

For primary school children, it will allow eligible families to claim 50 per cent of eligible education expenses—up to $750 for each child, providing a maximum tax offset of $375 per child per year. For children undertaking secondary school studies, families will be able to claim 50 per cent of their eligible expenses up to $1,500 per child—being a maximum tax offset of $750 per child per year. Parents and others entitled to family tax benefit part A who have children undertaking primary or secondary school studies will be eligible for the education tax refund.

Students living independently from their parents are also eligible for the education tax refund. The tax offset will apply to eligible expenses incurred from 1 July 2008. This is an important initiative to improve our productivity and our participation in education, to build prosperity and to eliminate, as much as we possibly can, educational disadvantage. It is the Rudd Labor government which has seen fit to take on this task. So much was said by the Howard government in relation to educational standards, values and attainment, but precious little was done in real terms to assist the young people of this country to achieve their full potential. The Rudd government is determined to ensure that the Australian populace is as highly educated and skilled as possible.
Education empowers. It gives people opportunity. It builds up individuals. It assists families. It creates a more just and fair society. It is crucial in ensuring that our human capital achieves its latent skill and talent potential. Education is not about the philosophy of the Left or the Right. It is about both. It is about economic growth and it is about social justice. The education revolution that we talk about is about building a stronger Australian economy and a fairer Australia. It should be our aspiration to make our schools cathedrals—cathedrals of learning and opportunity. It should be our desire to ensure that our children want to attend those institutions because they provide the technology, the facilities, the structure, the sporting equipment and the cultural advantage that will enable our children to prosper in education, sports and the arts.

Too often we have heard the arguments of the past. We heard arguments by the previous government, which vilified public school teachers, public schools and state governments in every part—from Western Australia to Queensland—about what they did and did not do. It is a sad fact that poor educational levels seem to go hand-in-glove with intergenerational poverty and disengagement from society and civic responsibility. People who are better educated are less likely to commit crimes. People who are better educated have higher self-esteem. They desire to provide for their families, they desire to provide for themselves and they desire to provide for communities and for our country. That is what this bill is about. This bill is about providing assistance to families. Under the Howard government, nothing much was done in this area. The Howard government talked a lot but delivered little. One wonders whether in the 13th, 14th, 15th, 16th or 17th year of their legacy they would have done things, but we will never know. Fortunately, on 24 November of last year the people of Australia decided to vote for an education revolution.

This government is putting huge amounts of resources into schools and into assisting families, and that is what this bill is about. The current budget provides that a record $9 billion will be provided to our school system in this country. We will see an increase in funding of 5.5 per cent over 2007 in assistance to state schools and students, and an increase in funding of 3.7 per cent over 2007 in assistance to non-government schools. We saw too much blame, too much vilification and too much denigration from the previous government when it came to dealing with the states. Through the Council of Australian Governments, we are working to settle arrangements to ensure that our digital education revolution, our national curriculum and the rolling out of our trade training centres will be completed. Our national plan on literacy and numeracy will commence in early 2009.

This bill is about improving our education standards and improving the quality of teaching. I have many teachers in my family and many friends who are teachers. It is about rewarding them and others, and it is about providing that our teachers and their students have the best outcomes. In terms of teaching, it is about ensuring that teachers of the highest calibre are recruited and are paid accordingly. We should look at which schools are disadvantaged and which are not. We should measure our school performance. It is critical that we ensure that the parents of students in our schools have as much information as possible about the performance of their children and the schools. In my opinion, public reporting of schools is necessary.

But we should not forget the disadvantaged school communities. Sadly, in my electorate of Blair most of those seem to be in the public sector. We should end the idea of
one local school being pitted against another. We should end underfunding in both the public and the private system in this country. The Rudd Labor government is committed to a digital education revolution. We are putting $1.2 billion into that revolution. Already $116 million has been handed over to the states to purchase 116,000 computers.

My electorate has benefited from the trade training centres in secondary schools through the $2.5 billion policy of the Rudd Labor government. In July this year the government announced that 34 projects involving more than 100 secondary schools and worth more than $90 million had been funded in round 1. I am pleased to say that three schools in my electorate, with St Edmunds Boys College being the lead school, will create the Ipswich Trade Training Centre, and nearly $3 million will be given in that regard. The two grammar schools in Ipswich, Ipswich Grammar School and Ipswich Girls Grammar School, joined with St Eddies in making application for funding. I am pleased to say that that funding is being delivered.

Brendan Lawler, the Principal of St Edmunds Boys College being the lead school, will create the Ipswich Trade Training Centre, and nearly $3 million will be given in that regard. The two grammar schools in Ipswich, Ipswich Grammar School and Ipswich Girls Grammar School, joined with St Eddies in making application for funding. I am pleased to say that that funding is being delivered.

Brendan Lawler, the Principal of St Edmunds Boys College, and Wayne Sessarago should be commended for the fine work that they have done in making application and advocating further for the school. But that particular school is undertaking some additional applications for funding. The Local Schools Working Together initiative, which will provide $62.5 million over four years to construct shared facilities between government and non-government schools, is also in their sights. I commend them for the efforts they are making. They are doing this in partnership, and with the assistance of the Ipswich City Council. I commend the work they are doing in making use of what currently would be fairly useless ground on the north side of Ipswich. Just north of the Bremer River, in the Tivoli area, they are seeking to redevelop that particular site with funding that they are seeking from the Rudd Labor government.

It is important that we look at what we are doing for our schools locally. In my area I am pleased that the Rudd Labor government is providing $26.83 million for the relocation of the Amberley State Primary School, and I warmly welcome that funding. I ask that the Queensland government think about a name for the new school. My preferred option, as it is going to be located in Yamanto, would be the Yamanto-Amberley school, because that would ensure continuity of the name and that the historical attachment to the local school would continue. I think that would have broad community support also.

But we are also doing a lot in terms of C&K and preprimary education. It is an absolute fact that under the Howard government we spent 0.1 per cent of our GDP on preprimary education compared to the OECD average of 0.5 per cent. The Rudd Labor government is committed to the creation of 260 childcare centres. We are going to create one in Ipswich, and I warmly welcome that funding. But we need to think more about what we can do to ensure that our schools are the best they can possibly be. The Deputy Prime Minister said on 24 September this year in her second reading speech in relation to the guaranteed funding over the quadrennium of $42 billion for schools and the SES model which we committed to in 2007:

If this country is to succeed in the 21st century we need a schooling system which delivers excellence and equity for every child in Australia.

I think that should be our goal. I think that is what we should do, because, as Access Economics has said, we can create $9 billion in wealth and growth for this country by 2040 if we can raise the level of school retention to 90 per cent. If we can give our kids the opportunities that they deserve and they
need, we can create an economically prosperous country that can be of benefit not only to us but also to our neighbours and that can take something akin to the good Samarian type approach to our neighbours which, unfortunately, do not have the kind of prosperity that we have. We can also ensure that at home, here in this country, our kids can get the best opportunity possible to fulfil their potential and that we do what we can to ensure our children can be everything we hope them to be and everything they aspire to be. For that reason, I commend the bill to the House.

Mrs MOYLAN (Pearce) (4.09 pm)—by leave—Prior to question time I was giving some insight into the coalition’s record on education, because it has come under considerable criticism. The coalition invested significantly in education both in the public sector and the private sector. I was listening with interest to the member for Blair because I agree with his comments that we should not be talking about one system against another and pitting one educational institution against another. What we should be about is making sure that parents are supported to send their children to school and that children and young people are supported to achieve the best that they can.

When we were in government, we increased the funding after we had paid off Labor’s massive debt in 2004. And thank goodness we did, because it is that surplus that will now sustain us over this period of financial turmoil. There is no doubt. It is on the record that the coalition government invested a considerable amount of money in education. For the record, between 1996 and 2007 the coalition investment in all schools increased by 172 per cent. In real terms, the coalition also increased assistance to families by more than $6 billion. One of the most important and welcome initiatives implemented by the coalition was the Investing in Our Schools Program. This was very much welcomed by many schools in the Pearce electorate and many of them are disappointed that it will not continue. It was attractive because it gave the school communities an opportunity to decide what the priorities were for expenditure in their school and to apply for the funding.

It also picked up many of the deficiencies in the state system. Many of the government schools in my electorate were funded under this program for very basic infrastructure which had been neglected for years by the state Labor government. For example, Ellenbrook Primary School badly needed music and drama facilities. This was not a priority for the state Labor government, who had primary responsibility for funding school facilities. It was the federal coalition government that funded this facility worth $122,100. Even basic things like floor coverings and an assembly area had to be funded under the coalition’s Investing in Our Schools Program at the outer metropolitan school of Gidgegannup. I could go on. There is a very long list here. Darlington Primary School funded an outdoor learning area and the Quinns Rocks Primary School funded library resources. These were the kinds of things that ought to have been funded by the state government but were not funded, and if it had not been for the federal coalition government’s Investing in Our Schools Program they would not be funded today.

As I said, I have a very substantial list of government schools in my electorate that had basic projects funded through this particular program. Importantly, it was the school community who decided what the priorities were for the development of their school facilities. Little country schools and large government suburban schools—some in lower income areas—all shared in tens of thousands of dollars of funding for projects they chose through this coalition government
program, and it was a sad day when the government rejected it. There has been constant criticism about the coalition’s so-called neglect of government schools, but in my electorate many more government schools received funding through Investing in Our Schools than did private schools. We may not have had a revolution, but the coalition delivered that urgently needed funding to schools and supported parents to invest in their children’s future by giving them more opportunities and choices in education. We gave real support to parents by giving them a say in how they invested in their children’s education. The coalition want to give the youth of Australia the best opportunity to fulfil their potential and to reach their aspirations, and we want to encourage them to be the best that they can be.

Before closing, I pay tribute to the many teachers, the school principals and the school communities—particularly the P&F organisations—throughout the electorate of Pearce. I try to get around and visit as many schools as possible and, for the most part, I see very dedicated people within these school communities working hard to ensure that the best education is delivered to the children in their care.

While any funding for education should be supported, and we certainly support this funding, the fact is that this particular program that we are debating today through the Tax Laws Amendment (Education Refund) Bill 2008 is just a token gesture. It is a way for the Rudd government to cover up the gap in the ‘computer for every student’ policy, which it did not really properly think through. It ignores the fees that families pay to schools and the contributions they have to make for their students’ education; it ignores the cost of uniforms; it ignores the extra tuition that many children need in core subjects and the additional classes they take to develop their ability; it ignores the realities of buying a computer, such as the real cost and the unlikelihood of buying a new computer every year; it does not cover all families and children; and it certainly does not cover early childhood education, which was one of the areas that the proposal under our government did cover. So it is a great pity that there is not greater flexibility in the provisions of this bill.

Mrs MIRABELLA (Indi) (4.15 pm)—I rise to speak on the Tax Laws Amendment (Education Refund) Bill 2008. In speaking on this bill, I need to point out that the government’s bill is significantly less comprehensive than the policy taken to the Australian people by the coalition at the last federal election. Labor have promised so much but, sadly, delivered very little. They promised a revolution, but there has been nothing revolutionary so far. The fact is that their education revolution measures have been paid for by getting rid of existing programs. One need only see the cull of the former government’s Investing in Our Schools Program, the abolition of the $700 reading tuition voucher and the removal of support for Australian technical colleges to see this. An education revolution is a fancy title, but not when it involves merely assigning a new name to existing education programs.

On this side of the House, we do not simply rely on our own arguments. We can look at the government side to see the dispirited manner in which at least one government MP views this so-called education revolution and its rhetoric. The member for Fowler spoke on the Schools Assistance Bill and pointed out that the government’s so-called revolution is a long way off and that it is hardly a revolution. This bill provides tax refunds for education expenses incurred by parents for the cost of their children’s education. It amends the Income Tax Assessment Act 1997 through the introduction of a refundable tax offset for eligible education expenses. The refundable
tax offset will apply to expenses incurred from 1 July 2008.

The coalition’s broader and more comprehensive policy explicitly included items such as government and non-government school fees, uniforms, textbooks, camps, excursions, laptops, broadband connections, computer software, preschool fees and charges and extracurricular activities such as music, sport and drama. We know that many families, including many families in my own electorate, are doing it tough at the moment, and we recognise that there are at times significant costs associated with education, particularly with some of the extracurricular activities and technological requirements that are part of the life of a student today, be they in primary or in secondary school. That is why the coalition’s education policy made it clear that the coalition would introduce a new refundable tax rebate of 40 per cent for education expenses, including school fees, for every student from preschool—kindergarten in some states—until the end of secondary school. The policy went on to state:

… enabling parents to choose the best education for their children often requires them to juggle not only their priorities but also the costs associated with educating their children.

On this side of the House we will support passage of this bill, but we recognise that the legislation could be significantly improved. A good start would be for the government to have a closer look at the coalition’s election policy. This is unfortunately wishful thinking, but if we are to be serious about lessening the burden of the costs associated with child raising and education then we should resolve that the base of coverage of the education expenses as part of the refundable tax offset should be as broad as possible. The coalition’s plan did this, but the current legislation is much narrower.

We are the party of choice. We support choice in education. We support parents’ ability to make the right choices for their children. In addition to this, parents should be given far greater freedom as to how they spend their education tax refund. They should have a wide range of items covered by its scope, not the rigid, prescriptive approach that is proposed by the government through this legislation. This is apparently only one plank of the government’s so-called education revolution. Thus far it has been underwhelming to say the very least. We expect more from the government that promised so much in this area but that at the moment is appearing to renege on its promises, be it with the botched handling of the computers in schools program, the cessation of Investing in Our Schools or the flight away from Australian technical colleges—the list could go on. On this side of the House we acknowledge that this bill could be better, but we support the concept of helping parents with the costs of education and the fact that this policy is in some way similar to that outlined by the coalition at the last election but leaves us wanting.

Ms KING (Ballarat) (4.20 pm)—I rise today to speak on the Tax Laws Amendment (Education Refund) Bill 2008, which follows through on one of the government’s key election promises, improving our education system. In the 2007-08 budget, the Rudd government announced $4.4 billion to create an education tax refund. This commitment recognises that many families are battling with the high costs of living and seeks to lift some of the burden by way of a tax refund for education expenses. It also forms part of the government’s commitment to improving access to education and recognises the important role access to technology plays in ensuring that young people have equal education opportunities.
Education is central to the nation’s prosperity, and it is vital that we have a highly skilled and educated workforce heading into the future. It is absolutely vital that action be taken now to ensure our future prosperity, and the Rudd government is taking action. The Rudd government has already been working hard to implement its education plans. An important part of the government’s education plans was our election commitment to invest $2.5 billion over 10 years in trade training centres in schools. Round 2 of our Trade Training Centres in Schools Program is already underway, and these training centres will go a long way towards addressing the skill shortage in traditional trades that this nation faces.

Also, as part of our education plans, we announced during the election our National Secondary School Computer Fund. In my electorate we have already seen round 1 of this program provide funds for 545 new computers for local schools Damascus College, Bacchus Marsh Grammar and Ballarat Christian College—schools that met the criteria of being highly in need in terms of their computer to student ratio. Round 2 applications are currently being reviewed. This is an important investment for students in my electorate. The Rudd government is also investing $62.5 million over three years in the Local Schools Working Together program. I was pleased to discuss this program with a number of schools in my electorate, with the lead school, Sebastopol Secondary College, applying for funds for shared infrastructure. All of these programs are on top of our commitments to early childhood education, providing preschool education of 15 hours per week to every four-year-old.

I stand here today very proud to say that I am part of a government that is getting the job done, making good on election promises and taking steps to improve education for our future leaders at the same time as providing tax relief for families. Funding a child’s education is not cheap, and I recognise that many families are under financial strain. Those financial costs are particularly evident after Christmas and during the Christmas school holidays, when families need to start forking out for education costs for the start of a new school year. Money for textbooks, stationery and new software programs or, in some instances, new computers has to be found. Throughout the year, the ongoing costs of internet connection are another strain on the family budget. This bill goes a long way towards providing relief to hardworking families who are struggling to pay their household expenses. Rising petrol prices, mortgage repayments and grocery bills all add up and can leave families wondering how they will fund another essential family commitment, such as their children’s education.

It is particularly important in times like today, when we are in the midst of a global financial crisis, that we continue to focus and provide relief to families. We have seen the government dedicate $10.4 billion of the budget surplus through the Economic Security Strategy to assist those Australians who need it most. My office has been flooded with calls from pensioners and families who can now look forward to some much-needed relief before Christmas. The Economic Security Strategy, alongside this bill, demonstrates just how committed we as a government are to helping families deal with the cost of living.

The tax laws amendment bill introduces the education tax refund. Under this proposal, parents with children in primary and secondary school will be able to claim a tax refund rebate of 50 per cent of eligible education expenses, such as computers, stationery and textbooks. Parents with primary school aged children are entitled to a 50 per cent refund up to $750 per child, and parents
with secondary school aged children are entitled to a 50 per cent refund up to $1,500 per child. This refund will provide parents with refunds of up to $375 per primary school student and $750 per secondary school student. The bill will provide relief to approximately 1.3 million families across Australia and around 2.7 million students attending school. The education tax refund is active now. Eligible parents can receive the tax rebate from 1 July 2009. It is important that parents, if they have not started to do so already, from now on save their receipts relating to the purchase or hire of eligible expenses so they can receive the maximum benefit of their next tax refund. I cannot reiterate enough the importance of retaining these receipts. Without them, parents will not be entitled to reap the benefits this bill, which allows for parents putting children through primary or secondary school education.

In addition to the education tax refund, additional amendments will be made so that Centrelink and the Australian Taxation Office can share data relating to education tax refund recipients. This will enable the tax office to administer and monitor the take-up rate of the refund amongst Australian families. All parents who receive family tax benefit part A will be eligible for the refund. Parents whose child or children receive payments or allowances such as youth allowance, the disability support pension and Abstudy living allowance, and who would otherwise be eligible for family tax benefit part A, are also eligible for the education tax refund. Those families who have shared care arrangements in place and are eligible for family tax benefit part A or who share receipt of family tax benefit part A will share the education tax refund, just as they share the family tax benefit part A. Those families in similar circumstances who receive other payments and are eligible will enter into a similar arrangement for sharing of the education tax refund.

The bill also benefits families with home schooled students. Provided that student is registered with the relevant state or territory authority, families with home schooled children can benefit from the refund, as can school children who are independent of their parents. Families with children who are transitioning from primary to secondary school in a single financial year will be able to claim the full 50 per cent tax offset—that is, the full $750 education tax refund available to secondary school students for that financial year. Families with students who commence school or complete school in a school year can claim half of the full 12-month amount of the education tax refund for that financial year for the six-month period in which the child attended school. That is a refund of $187.50 for half a year’s primary school education and $350 for half a year’s secondary school education. The bill is in no way limited to one child per family. Parents can receive the full benefits for each child, regardless of whether they are primary or secondary school aged. The bill really does cater for all kinds of Australian families.

Under the Rudd government’s plan, parents will be able to claim refunds for a variety of education expenses. Recognising the central role that information technology plays in education, students and parents will be able to claim the cost of laptops, home computers, home internet connections, printers, printing paper and education software. This is on top of learning materials such as school textbooks, stationery and even tools that students in trade may use at school. The refund not only covers purchase of these items but the lease, hire or hire-purchase of those items as well. The government understands that not every working Australian family can afford to purchase a laptop at the drop of a hat. By including lease, hire and
hire-purchase options in the refund, these families have options available to them to provide education tools to their children, whilst still being able to receive maximum tax offsets as a result of this bill.

The bill is another incentive for parents to ensure that their children are equipped with all of the learning tools they need to complete their schooling to the best of their ability. Access to technology is vital in breaking down socioeconomic barriers. This measure, alongside the government’s computers in schools program, is aimed squarely at ensuring that all students, regardless of their background, have equal opportunities to access learning through technology. All the evidence shows that access to information technology can break down socioeconomic disadvantage and provide a significant advantage to children’s learning. It is no coincidence that the country’s more well-off schools have invested significantly in information technology and in information technology learning environments.

As I touched on earlier, the introduction of this bill will see parents benefit from the rebate from 1 July next year. Parents can make their first claims from 1 July 2009 for the 2008-09 financial year. I reiterate what I said earlier—that is, I urge all parents, both in my electorate and across the country, to make sure they retain every receipt relating to items that can be claimed under this refund. If parents are not doing so already, they really must start keeping receipts now so they can obtain maximum benefits from this education refund come tax time. I encourage parents eligible for tax benefit part A to store their receipts in a safe place; I know it is something I often neglect to do. Every time parents purchase a new school textbook or need to replenish their schoolchildren’s stationery supplies, if they purchase a computer or learning software or they pay their internet connection bills—all of these receipts should be stored away ready for tax time. For those parents and independent school students who do not pay tax and are not required to lodge a tax return, it is still essential that they too retain all eligible educational receipts. Their entitlements will still be refunded through the Australian tax office by completing a separate form at the end of the 2008-09 financial year.

In my electorate we have over 40 primary and secondary schools, servicing more than 24,000 students. I certainly hope that the parents of these 24,000 students are assisted through this bill. My community constantly tells me how difficult it can be to make ends meet in tough times such as those we are experiencing at the moment. Just paying the essential family expenses can be a challenge. Working families in my electorate deserve a tax break and the children in my area deserve a solid education. This bill meets both needs. It provides a cash rebate to families who are working extremely hard to provide the best possible foundation for their children’s education. It is a way to acknowledge the commitment of these families to their children’s education and to their futures. It helps to ease the financial burden and make it easier for parents to afford to invest in their children’s education through purchases of what can be expensive learning resources such as computers, education programs and textbooks.

Looking at a child’s schooling years from prep through to year 12, the refund has the potential to provide a very large cost saving for families. Parents who receive the full refund for one child during their primary school years—that is, prep to grade 6—will receive a maximum $2,625 refund from the government. That is $2,625 in assistance from the government to help cover the expenses associated with putting one child through primary school education. The total maximum education tax refund parents can receive under this bill for one child during
their secondary school education is $4,500. Overall, this government is committing over $7,125 to help fund a child’s education through primary and secondary school with the education refund. Just imagine what a difference that extra money will make to the average family. There will be more than $7,000 put back in their pockets over the 13 years of a child’s education. And, as we know, most families are not just sole-child families. If a family has more than one child and meets the eligibility requirements of this bill, their refund can move into the tens of thousands of dollars—to over $14,000 for families placing two children through their entire schooling education and to over $21,000 for families with three children—freeing families to dedicate that funding to other much needed areas of the family budget.

This is a fundamentally important bill for our families and for the children in this country. It is another way that the government is investing now in our future and it is another demonstration of our wholehearted commitment to the education plans that we have in place and that we have promised across the country. The bill is another demonstration from the government of our commitment to working families, to assist with education costs and to help, through them, to shape our nation’s future. Putting children through school is an expensive exercise, and the refund will go a long way to helping parents provide appropriate resources to fund their children’s education by helping to fund the learning resources they require in the classroom, such as textbooks and stationery, as well as helping to fund the learning resources they need at home to complete their work effectively, such as computers and the internet.

The government has allocated $4.4 billion to the refund over the next four years. It is a significant investment in this country’s future. It will help us as a nation to grow and prosper and will help ease the financial pressures placed on our families. These rebates provide a significant cost saving to families. The government believes that better education is pivotal to our society and providing better access to that education is pivotal to our children’s future. The bill is helping to ensure that our leaders of tomorrow are harnessed through their education and afforded every academic opportunity, regardless of their background, in order for them to do so. I commend the bill to the House.

Mr BRIGGS (Mayo) (4.34 pm)—I rise to speak on the Tax Laws Amendment (Education Refund) Bill 2008, the thrust of which I support. This is a bill which comes out of a promise made during the last year’s election campaign and what was a battle of tit-for-tat on several major policy areas. It amends the Income Tax Assessment Act 1997 by introducing a 50 per cent refundable tax offset for eligible education expenses, the education tax refund, up to a maximum of $750 for children undertaking primary studies and $1,500 for children undertaking secondary studies. As I understand it, it is for families who get family tax benefit A.

The bill limits eligible education expenses to laptops, home computers and associated costs, computer related equipment such as printers and disability aids, home internet connections, computer software, school textbooks and other paper based school learning material and tools of trade as prescribed by the course. It is a promise which does go a long way to helping those Australians who want to give their children the best chance at the start of their lives.

Of course, in our country we are very fortunate to have a very strong education system. It is something our country should be very proud of. It gives people an opportunity to do better, to grow, and to make the dream...
of their parents for them to live a better quality life than theirs come true. It is something that I think both sides of this House support. I listened earlier to the member for Blair, who talked about the importance of education, and I support his comments absolutely.

But I think we need to look at the history of how this bill has come into being, and to do that we need to go back to 1996. We hear a lot from the other side about what we allegedly did or did not do for education when this side of the House was in government. We must understand that this $4.4 billion over four years could not have been delivered in 1996 because on coming to government in 1996 we found that there was $96 billion of debt. There was a $10 billion budget deficit. The hard work that was done between 1996 and 2007 has allowed a promise like this to be made, which is a good thing for our country. It is a good thing for Australian families that the government can assist with education expenses, and it is something I support. But it is based on the legacy of the hard economic decisions that were made in 1996 and the years that followed. If those hard decisions had not been made, this bill could not have been implemented. That is just a simple fact. Balanced budgets with surpluses and $60 billion in savings in the Future Fund is a legacy which has allowed these types of investments to be made. So it is really to the credit of the former government, the former Prime Minister and the former Treasurer, that we are in the position that we can have a bill such as this today.

This bill came out of the last election campaign, as I mentioned earlier. It was a version of a policy that was announced by the coalition. Unfortunately it is an inferior version of a policy that was announced by the coalition. Our policy was universal; it was not limited. Our policy also included— and this is a very important point— government and non-government school fees, preschool fees and expenses. Preschool is often forgotten in the education debate. We focus much in this place on university education, and the Labor Party focuses very much on school retention rates because it suits their state premiers to have that debate. But we do not focus on the building blocks of education, those early years. I have a very strong view that we need to do more as a federal parliament in this space. It is an area that has been neglected by state governments for years. It is an area which has suffered under the maladministration which is occurring in many of our states today. It is an area where increasingly the federal government will have to step up to the plate.

Our policy also included important items such as school uniforms, textbooks, stationery, calculators, and camps and excursions—camps like the school from my electorate which came to visit Parliament House today to enjoy and understand what we do here, a great opportunity for young people to understand how our democracy works. Camps and excursions can teach much more than can be learned in the classroom. Being in this place, being in the Senate and doing a tour of this place is much better than reading about it in a classroom or being told about it by a teacher or, indeed, a politician. Being in this place can teach so much more. So our policy included camps and excursions. It also included laptops, broadband and software, and extracurricular school activities such as sport, music, dance and drama.

I am on the Standing Committee on Health and Ageing in this place and we are looking at obesity at the present time. One of the things that has struck me in this committee inquiry is the lack of opportunity for school kids now—and primary school kids in particular—to do physical education, to get outside the classroom and to have a run around like we enjoyed when we were kids.
There are many reasons for that. I think that largely there have been mistakes of policy in the past, that a focus has been taken off these extracurricular activities encouraging kids to get outside, to get away from the TV and, dare I say, the internet and to actually undertake a game of footy or netball or some other sort of physical activity and run around each day so they can get enjoyment out of being outside. Equally, it is the case with other important things like dance, music and drama.

Our policy had a slightly smaller amount of $800 annually for each student but it covered a broader field. It was not restricted to those on family tax benefit A. Where we are critical of Labor’s policy in this respect or in this bill is that it only covers a small cost of a computer. It does nothing to address the basics of a good education to support families with the real day-to-day costs of schooling, such as school fees and those camps and excursions that too many kids have to miss out on because they cannot afford to pay for them. I think that school fees is the biggest area of mistake in this bill. School fees are so important not just in the non-government sector but also in the government sector. I spoke to a couple of principals of public schools, not of private schools, in my electorate last week. I will not name them for fear of reprisal from the state education minister.

Dr Emerson—Grow up!

Mr BRIGGS—Sorry, Dr Emerson, the schools are extraordinarily concerned about the treatment they are getting from the state education departments.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Hon. Peter Slipper)—Order! I would just like to remind the honourable member that he ought to refer to the minister by his title and not by his name.

Mr BRIGGS—Quite correct, Mr Deputy Speaker. School fees are an important part of the funds. For instance, one of the schools, a public school, I spoke to has had to write off $30,000 of school fee debt because it has got no capacity to get the parents to pay. In the past public schools were able to keep any surplus funds they had and earn the interest off those surplus funds. The state Treasurer has decided in South Australia to take all those funds back into recurrent funding. That is a disgrace. That is penny-pinching at its worst and it is mean. It does not do our education system any good at all. So I think that a mistake in this bill is in the fact that it leaves out school fees. That extra $30,000 in this small school in my electorate could do so much more. It could do so much for these young kids to give them a chance and a better education. It could give them so much more one-on-one learning time with their teachers and more access to an opportunity in life, and that is of course what Australia stands for. The great ideal of Australia is that you get as much opportunity as presents.

So I think that this is a good bill because it does do something about helping families, and it does so because the federal government is in the position to be able to do so as it has inherited a very strong budget position. It has inherited a surplus. It has inherited massive savings in the Future Fund. This is a situation we did not have 12 years ago. This bill could never have been implemented 12 years ago. We should never forget the legacy that has come about for this bill. But it has some flaws, and they are flaws that I urge the other side to consider, including school fees. They are an important aspect. They will give an extra funding boost for those schools, particularly public schools, that need that extra assistance.

The other thing I will say about those struggling state schools is that one of the programs in the Howard government which helped those state schools enormously was the Investing in Our Schools Program. So
many schools have made this point to me: those small capital grants help because they build the next bit of infrastructure—the new classroom, the installation of the air conditioning. Last year a small school in my electorate received $128 in capital funding from the state government. That is probably three chairs or a desk; it is not good enough. The Investing in Our Schools Program gave those small schools the opportunity to apply for capital grants which allowed them to build new buildings or put in air-conditioning or heating systems; they allowed the school to progress. One of the schools I visited last week would not show me the back of their school because it is all made up of temporary buildings. The principal described the science lab as something ‘out of the 1960s’. That is not helping our country become smarter or to do better.

I genuinely think we need to look at the funding structure of both private and public schools in our country. We have a significant problem at the state level with the amount of money that is being put into public schools. Those on the other side will view that as a partisan comment—it is not designed to be. The federal government may have to do more to step up to this plate and the Investing in Our Schools Program was an example of that. Funding has just not been handed over to these small schools—or to larger public schools, for that matter. They are getting their recurrent funding—arguably not enough—to do what they need to do but they are not getting the one-offs to rebuild buildings, to install the new infrastructure, to make the investment for the future so the learning facilities are high class. That is where we have a problem in our country with education.

As I said earlier, I also think that we need to do more for preschools and early childhood education. I declare a conflict in this matter: I have two young children under three who are coming into this age group. The amount our two-year-old grows and learns every day is something to behold. Clearly, that is when the best education can occur. Clearly, that is when kids pick up the most and where the foundation of their educational life begins. We focus very much on the higher end, the university sector, in this place. We heard an answer to a question today about a university amenities fee and so forth, but where we err is that as a country we do not focus enough on early childhood education. I am sure the other side will jump up and say: ‘You didn’t do anything in 12 years. The Howard government just ignored education. We have dropped down in all the statistics.’ I can rebut and say, ‘Well, the state governments have not done enough,’ but that is not getting the problem fixed. We genuinely need to look at this area because this will help our country grow. This will help our country get smarter and our kids to do better.

Not every child going through school will end up in university—indeed we do not want that. But we need to identify those kids early and give them a better chance, and we can only do that by increasing the funding base. We can only do that by investing in the skills of those people who care for our children in those early years of life. We know by legend that the best time to teach a child a second language is in their early years. It makes complete sense that they learn the most in those early years.

I urge the federal government to consider including in this bill preschool fees as well as government and non-government school fees. I think it would make a huge difference, particularly to those parents on the edge, particularly those parents who live in socio-economic areas where they just cannot afford to pay the public school fees. That of course has a flow-on effect to the public schools because they do not have that revenue
stream. That is an important aspect. Sure, internet and broadband are very important, and having computers is very important, but we can do more with this money. We can give parents that choice. It should not just be focused on one small area of education.

Education is not all about laptops and broadband connections. I am sure that those on the other side will agree with that, and I do not think for a moment that they are suggesting it is. A broad education is about so much more. It is about learning our history, which we should do in this country—and tomorrow is a wonderful opportunity to reflect on our history. It is about coming to Canberra and seeing our parliament at work. It is about respecting our institutions and so forth. And these are things that you cannot do just by having a laptop computer or a broadband connection at home. These are things that families struggle to pay for these days. In the coming six months, 12 months or two years as our economy slows and we have fewer jobs, higher unemployment and more people in small business who are struggling—as I am sure the Minister for Small Business, Independent Contractors and the Service Economy understands—and as the financial crisis has its effect on the real economy, we need to do more in that area for the building blocks of our education system. This bill would be a good way to start that. This bill would be a good opportunity for those parents who choose to use it to send their kids to the preschool that might just be out of reach at the moment—the preschool that will give them that extra chance, that extra step. I do urge the government to consider those comments.

I largely support the aims of this bill, with those criticisms that I have made. I also urge the government to rethink the Investing in Our Schools Program, simply because the capital investments that particularly those small primary schools get make a real and genuine difference to the learning outcomes of those young Australians that we seek to help and to give an opportunity in life.

Mr TREVOR (Flynn) (4.53 pm)—I rise today to speak on the Tax Laws Amendment (Education Refund) Bill 2008 and it is with a great sense of pride that I do so. The bill is designed to amend the existing Income Tax Assessment Act 1997 by introducing a refundable tax offset for eligible parents or carers who are faced with the cost of providing educational material for a child or chil-
children in their care. This bill introduces for the first time the notion of a tax offset for legitimate education expenses to reduce the tax liability of the taxpayer. I personally feel that this bill is at the very heart of the government’s agenda of investing in education and making life easier for working Australians.

The bill aims to introduce a 50 per cent education tax refund set at two distinct limits: one for pupils enrolled in primary school studies and the other for students enrolled in recognised secondary school studies. The primary school limit will see eligible parents or guardians able to claim a 50 per cent refundable tax offset each year, up to an amount of $750 per year per child for eligible education expenses. This would see an amount of up to $375 per year per child refunded back to parents or caregivers. The secondary school limit will be set at $1,500 and will also be a 50 per cent refundable tax offset, which would see up to $750 per year per child refunded back to Australian parents or guardians. The method behind the two distinctly different refund amounts is in recognition of the different cost burden between a primary-school-age child and a secondary-school-age child, with the latter being, in general terms, more costly. As a member with five children, all of varying ages—now with some off my hands, thankfully—I can certainly agree that, as a child gets older, their education and the resources they need to complete their education do become more expensive. For those whose children also play sport, that additional burden or cost is often prohibitive, though it should never be.

Perhaps my government could look at this aspect of cost to parents—namely, the rising cost of playing sport—from a tax deductibility point of view down the track. In addition, I take the point of the member for Mayo, Mr Briggs, in relation to the investing in our—

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Hon. Peter Slipper)—I am loath to interrupt the honourable member, but he ought to refer to the honourable member by his electorate, not by his name. I did draw the attention of the honourable member for Mayo to the same standing order.

Mr TREVOR—In addition, I take the point that the member for Mayo raised in relation to the Investing in Our Schools Program and I agree with him on a bipartisan approach. I have travelled extensively throughout my electorate over the last couple of months and have seen some wonderful projects that have been delivered under the Investing in Our Schools Program. Unfortunately, the former Prime Minister of Australia Mr John Howard was not going to continue the program. From what I have seen in my electorate, it was indeed a good program.

What constitutes an eligible family for the purposes of this bill? The bill states that to be eligible for the education tax refund a family must be receiving or eligible to receive the family tax benefit part A. This is the defining criteria as to whether or not a family is eligible to claim for the education tax refund. However, the bill does go into detail to further explain the eligibility requirements for families, and does state that families would also be eligible for the education tax refund if they would otherwise have been eligible for the family tax benefit part A but their child is in receipt of another prescribed payment or allowance from Centrelink, such as youth allowance, disability support pension or Abstudy, and it is this payment that has made them ineligible for family tax benefit part A. Students who are also classed as independent and who receive a payment or allowance, such as youth allowance, will also be eligible for the educational tax refund.
In all these cases, in order to claim the education tax refund the claimant must have their child or children enrolled or registered in a relevant educational institution, whether it is a primary school, high school or, in the case of mature age students, enrolled in a similar course provided by such institutions as TAFE. In total it is estimated that the Tax Laws Amendment (Education Refund) Bill 2008 will benefit approximately 1.3 million families, with 2.7 million students fitting the eligibility criteria.

The bill in my opinion has also been well engineered when it comes to children in shared care arrangements with their parents. The education tax refund will be able to be shared between parents in a similar method to the existing arrangements for sharing of the family tax benefit part A.

The school year and the tax year do not perfectly coincide. Many children will be in a transition from primary school to high school during any one tax year. This could no doubt lead to some confusion amongst parents with different offset amounts between the two levels of schooling. The bill in its current form clears up this confusion, thankfully, by ensuring that the education tax refund amount for a secondary school student, or the highest of the two limits, is applicable should a child transition from primary school to high school during the tax year. The bill also allows for students who may choose to leave or enter school during a school year, with half the amount of the education tax refund able to be claimed to represent the half of the financial year that they attended school.

I am particularly pleased to see that the bill makes clear provision for amounts over the tax offsets maximum limit of $375 for primary students and $750 for secondary students. Expenses that parents incur above these amounts can be carried forward into the subsequent tax year. This will be particularly beneficial for families purchasing large-scale items such as a laptop or a computer that will exceed the yearly threshold. It is indeed comforting to know that they will be able to access the unused amount of the educational expenses in the following tax year and fully benefit from the purpose of this bill.

I am also pleased that the bill has made provision for those who are not required by law to complete an income tax return. In this instance the amount of the tax offset that would have applied to an individual’s taxable income will be paid directly to the individual. These two measures illustrate the government’s thoughtful approach to the bill and thoughtful delivery of this important election commitment.

I would like to take this opportunity to state that parents of students who are home schooled will also be eligible for the educational tax refund. This is fantastic news for them. In my electorate of Flynn, in outback Queensland, some students have no option but to be home schooled due to the vast distances between communities and educational facilities. I am pleased and glad that today this bill recognises them and treats them as no different than any other student attending any other school. In fact, earlier this year in my electorate, the Longreach School of Distance Education was awarded Highly Commended in the Excellence in Family-School Partnerships award at the 2008 National Awards for Quality Schooling. I am proud that these communities have not been forgotten in this bill or by my government.

Having spoken on the eligibility for families under this bill, I would also like to comment on the eligibility of educational expenses to be claimed under the educational tax refund. I am pleased that the list of eligible expenses is a comprehensive list of items...
that supports a child’s education. I am also pleased that this bill covers not only the purchase of items but also the lease, hire or hire purchase of these items, to better suit individual households and their requirements or preferences. Although it would be difficult to outline here today the many types of school related expenses that could be claimed under this bill I would like to note for the record that under the scheme some of the expenses able to be claimed include but are not limited to: laptops and computers, as well as related equipment including printers; computer software, such as word processing and spreadsheets, as well as antivirus software; school textbooks and stationery; and tools of trade. I am pleased to see not only that the initial cost of a computer is an eligible expense but also that the ongoing cost for home internet access is classed as a legitimate educational expense in this bill. I feel that it is worthy of special mention that the cost for disability aids or equipment to assist children with disabilities to use a computer will also be covered by this bill under the educational tax refund.

No matter which way we look at it, educating a child can be an expensive exercise for a family. Costs seem to add up, with books, stationery and other equipment endlessly on the family shopping list. It has become even more expensive today with high-tech and expensive computer equipment now also a requirement for a basic education. This government will not allow Australian families to be burdened by educational expenses and will not allow working families to face these costs alone.

Although education can be a costly exercise it is ultimately a worthwhile and rewarding one. It is, as I have often said and continue to say, one of the greatest gifts a parent can give to their child. I quote from a longstanding academic on economics and management, Mr Michael Porter. Mr Porter states in his *Competitive Advantage of Nations* book:

There is little doubt that education and training are decisive in National Comparative Advantage, that is, improving the general education system is an essential priority of government and a matter of economic and not just social policy.

This sentiment is echoed throughout economic literature, with study after study also finding the high rate of return from educational investment. One such study undertaken in 2005 by the Australian National University outlined that in Australia our rate of return for educational investment is around 10 per cent. A 10 per cent return on your investment is a great return, particularly when the investment is in the minds of our young Australians. The total cost of the education tax refund is estimated at $4.4 billion over the next four years. This is a substantial investment in education by my government and a substantial relief for working families who are battling with their children’s educational expenses.

I understand just how tough it is for low-income earners in Australia to provide for the future of their children. To illustrate just how tough it is for some low-income households, the Brotherhood of St Laurence undertook an education cost survey in 2007. The results of this survey found that an alarming 72 per cent of respondents could not afford items that would improve the education experience of their child, 66 per cent did not have access to a home computer with internet access and 60 per cent had difficulty paying for books. This is certainly an alarming set of statistics and one that urgently needed to be corrected. The educational tax refund will help these low-income Australians and ease the burden that they face in simply providing for their children’s education.

As I have stated before, the cost of a child’s education is now more intrusive with the addition of expensive computer equip-
ment which is now vital to a child’s success at school. Of course, families must also cater in the weekly budget for the cost of an internet connection to help with the many assignments and information-gathering tasks that schooling requires. Recent ABS data tells us that around three-quarters of Australian households have a computer at home. Unfortunately, if we look closer into this statistic we see that as many as 90 per cent of high-income earners in Australia have a computer at home but that this figure plummets to under 50 per cent of low-income households. This has been termed the ‘digital divide’—a divide between those who have access to a computer and the internet at home and those who do not. It saddens me that this divide may see some children in low-income households disadvantaged by not having access to a computer or the internet at home. The educational tax refund, thankfully, will help arrest this troubling figure. It will help break down the digital divide by supporting low- and middle-income households in receipt of family tax benefit part A with assistance to provide the educational equipment needed for their children to perform at school.

Already my government has taken the first steps in our commitment to delivering an education revolution. In my electorate of Flynn, 518 new computers are to be installed in high schools as a result of round 1 of the National Secondary School Computer Fund. I look forward to the second round of funding under this scheme to be announced by the end of the year. Of course, the digital education revolution does not stop with the mere purchase of new computer equipment but will continue with the government’s $100 million commitment over three years to support the provision of high-speed broadband connections to Australian primary and secondary schools as part of the Fibre Connections to Schools initiative. My government, the Rudd Labor government, is a government that believes that reliable access to the internet is not a luxury but a prerequisite for a good education and is determined to see Australian children receiving the very best in technologies by world standards.

It is hoped that this bill will be able to apply from 1 July 2008. I would like to remind my constituents in Flynn that, if they are eligible for the education tax refund, they should now be keeping their receipts as evidence of educational expenses that they have incurred and to take advantage of this new tax offset when preparing their tax affairs for the 2008-09 financial year.

With all the benefits that an education can bring to an individual, a family, a community and the nation as a whole, and with the Rudd government’s clear commitment to an education revolution, I commend the Tax Laws Amendment (Education Refund) Bill 2008 to the House and congratulate the Rudd Labor government for its outstanding leadership on this issue.

Mr ZAPPIA (Makin) (5.11 pm)—I too rise to speak in support of the Tax Laws Amendment (Education Refund) Bill 2008. As other speakers have quite rightly said, this bill introduces a 50 per cent education tax refund aimed at assisting families with children undertaking primary or secondary school studies to meet the costs of school education through assistance with certain education expenses. This side of the House understands that one of the most important investments we can make in a child is to ensure the child is provided with a good education. It is something that I alluded to in the first speech I made in this place—the importance of education in making a difference not only to a child but to changing society generally.

The education providers understand that principle, the business sector understands
that the Rudd government understands that, parents understand that and other governments around the world understand that. The only ones who do not seem to understand that education underpins opportunity are members opposite, because under their watch education standards in Australia slipped substantially when compared with other OECD countries. Study after study has confirmed that. I just want to quote from one of the most recent studies, entitled How young people are faring, which was only released a month or two ago, I believe, and was put together by Jack Dusseldorp of the Dusseldorp Skills Forum. He said:

- Australia is below many other OECD countries in terms of levels of participation in education, suggesting there is room for improvement.

I quote that study because it is all about young people and is the most recent that I have been able to get my hands on. Within that report that was prepared by Jack Dusseldorp there are a series of graphs, which others may wish to refer to, which simply confirm our position in the international sense when it comes to education.

Furthermore, one has only to look at the run-down condition of public schools throughout Australia to see just how little importance members opposite placed on education when they were in office. They offloaded their responsibility onto the private schools sector and onto the state governments. It was typical of the Howard government to starve the states of funds and then blame the states for not delivering the services or the facilities that communities needed. We saw it in the critical areas of education, health services and housing. In listening to the member for Mayo earlier on today it was interesting that we heard the same rhetoric from him in his contribution to this matter. Again, he blamed the states for any problems when it came to our education services in this country. The Howard government’s idea of funding schools, I might add, was to provide them with flagpoles. In contrast, the Rudd government fully understands that education underpins a child’s future prospects in life and also underpins the nation’s future prosperity.

Governments also have a social responsibility to bridge the gap between those in low socioeconomic sectors of society and the rest of society. Education is certainly the key to doing that. Again, if I can refer to the report How young people are faring, I will quote from some of the comments made in that report about people in low socioeconomic areas. It says:

- ... about one third of young adults who have completed year 12 were in full-time education. This was over five times the rate for those who were early school leavers.

That is the first critical point: if you were an early school leaver, you will likely not go on to full-time education.

- Year 12 attainment among 19 year-olds varies substantially by social background. Young people from low SES backgrounds attain Year 12 or its equivalent at a rate 26.1 percentage points lower than that of those from high SES origins.

Again it highlights the contrast. Furthermore, the report goes on to say:

- Year 12 attainment among 19 year-olds varies substantially by social background. Young people from low SES backgrounds attain Year 12 or its equivalent at a rate 26.1 percentage points lower than that of those from high SES origins.

At age 24, well over one-third of those from low SES backgrounds have not completed Year 12 or equivalent, compared to about one in seven of those from high SES backgrounds.

Achievement levels in school also affect attainment, and since school achievement is highly correlated with social background, policies developed to target improvements in Year 12 completion will need to address the issue of social disadvantage.

Governments have a responsibility to bridge that gap between those that are in low socio-
economic sectors and the rest of our society, and the Rudd government is doing that. That is why at the last election the Rudd government made education a priority in the policy announcements that were made. That is why the Rudd government committed to a number of important education policy initiatives for all of Australia.

This bill provides for a 50 per cent tax refund for certain primary and secondary school expenses and is a key plank in the Rudd government’s education policy reform agenda. Importantly, this bill guarantees that the children are the direct beneficiaries of the tax refund because the refund is only provided after the money has been spent on the child’s education needs. Under this $4.4 million proposal, as from 1 July 2008 about 1.3 million Australian families will be able to claim up to $375 for each primary school child’s eligible school expenses and up to $750 for each secondary school child’s eligible school expenses. These rebates will be very welcome by families around Australia, and I have no doubt that it will now make it possible for many parents to buy education resources for their children which they may have wanted to provide but did not because they could not afford the outlay. It also means that children will be more likely to have better education resources and that can only lead to better education outcomes.

For students today, IT equipment has become essential to their learning and essential to the preparation of their schoolwork. It was interesting to hear the member for Flynn quote some statistics on that. For families that come from low socioeconomic areas, only 50 per cent of households have a computer or access to a computer; in the high socioeconomic areas, the figures for computer ownership are much higher. The Rudd government recognises that it is important to have IT equipment for children and has committed $1.2 billion over five years to provide schools with computers. But we all know that students do much of their learning and much of their schoolwork from home after hours as part of their homework, so it is just as important that parents can provide children with home computers. This bill will help parents do that.

Almost without exception, the parents I speak to want the best education possible for their children. They understand just how important a good education is for their children’s future. That is why so many parents that I know take on additional jobs and sacrifice their own time to ensure their children are given a good education and are able to participate in other school activities. No parent wants to see their children miss out on what their school has to offer and no parent wants to see their children do poorly because they do not have the necessary resources.

I said earlier that education is the most effective way of bridging the gap between the socially disadvantaged and the rest of society and of breaking the cycle of poverty. One of the unfortunate outcomes of social inequality for all of us is that often some of our brightest and most talented children do not complete secondary education or embark on any kind of further education. Their natural ability is left untapped. Sadly, in those cases, it is not only the child but also the rest of society that misses out, because that child’s intellectual talents could have been used for the benefit of others if the child had been given the educational opportunity needed. With respect to those children, I commend the schools and the teachers who, when they recognise a gifted child, do all they can to assist the child in furthering their education.

I said earlier that the rundown state of our public schools is largely the result of neglect by the last coalition government. Our schools, TAFEs and universities were underfunded and underresourced by the previous
federal government. It is my view that federal governments do have a national interest and a shared responsibility in all levels of education. The Rudd government understands that and the Australian people understand that. That is why they elected the Rudd government last November, knowing full well that education was going to be one of the areas of expenditure and key policy areas of this government. The Rudd government went to the election last year talking about an education revolution, highlighting the importance of education, highlighting how Australia’s education standards had slipped compared with the rest of the world and highlighting how important education is to the future prosperity of children and to the nation. Voters voted in that election knowing full well the importance that the Rudd government would place on education if it was elected. And, as we saw, voters did elect a Rudd Labor government in that election.

Sadly, one of the outcomes of the coalition government’s neglect of education is that parents are continually having to contribute funding for the most basic of school resources in both public and private schools. So when we talk about parents having to pay for their children’s education it does not apply solely to those who send their children to private schools; today it applies as much to parents who send their children to public schools. School fundraising has become essential for schools, and inevitably that fundraising primarily comes from parents and adds to education costs.

Mr Baldwin—That’s why you are being real smart and cutting out the Investing in Our Schools Program!

Mr ZAPPIA—The member opposite refers to the Investing in Our Schools Program. If he is patient I intend to come to that. I said earlier that the run-down state of many of our public schools is the result of years of neglect, particularly during the Howard government’s years in office. Sadly, one of the outcomes of that neglect, as I pointed out a moment ago, is that parents continually have to contribute funding for the most basic of school resources. I will give a couple of examples of where I have seen parents do exactly that in public schools.

I will come back to talking about some schools in Makin in just a moment. I first want to refer to something that was published in the Australian by reporter Matthew Knott on 13 October 2008, when he wrote about the issue of parents having to pay to send their children to school. The article was headlined, ‘Cash-poor schools “running raffles to pay for textbooks”’. The headline exposes the shocking truth of how our schools have been neglected. It is a sad indictment of a country like Australia, which is generally affluent.

I said earlier that I wanted to allude to some of the schools that I have visited recently in my area. I visit schools in the electorate of Makin whenever I can. I speak to teachers and parents and I see the needs of individual families and schools. Only last Friday—7 November—I attended the Modbury West Primary School, which is in the Makin electorate, for the official opening of the school’s new landscaped frontage, which the students have appropriately named the Garden of Dreams. The entire funding for the project—this is a public school—which amounted to about $15,000, came from the school community, and the work was then carried out by volunteers. The net result was a beautifully landscaped garden which lifts the appearance of the school and lifts the pride of the students. If the work had been outsourced it would have cost around $50,000, but thanks to the school community they were able to do it for around $15,000. What the school community have achieved
in the garden is a credit to the whole of the Modbury West Primary School community.

It is also typical of what I see at so many other schools. In the same week I also attended Para Vista Primary School, Modbury Primary School and The Heights School—a reception-to-year-12 school—when these schools also officially opened improvements to their schools. Like Modbury West Primary School, Para Vista Primary School, Modbury Primary School and The Heights School have a committed staff team and a supportive school community. Each of these school communities contributed thousands of dollars of funds that they had raised towards their own school projects. Certainly in those cases the projects were assisted by funding from the federal government and other sources, but the school communities had to raise a substantial amount of the funds themselves in order to ensure that those projects became a reality. Again, the fundraising primarily came from the parents of the school-children.

This highlights the costs that are being faced by parents when they send their children to school. The Rudd government understands that, and that is why this measure has been put in place. That is why the Rudd government announced, in December, a $1,000 payment for each child of parents who come under family tax benefit A. That is why the Rudd government introduced tax cuts in July and why the Rudd government has committed to a range of education expenditure measures which will ultimately give children their best chance in life.

I want to come back to a couple of comments that have been made by members opposite. I will address the question of Investing in Our Schools, which most of them seem to want to allude to. It is interesting that members opposite support that program—and rightly so, because it was money that was used to assist schools—but why did the Howard government ever have to establish that program? It was because, after 12 years of being in government, the schools had become run-down to such a state that they needed every penny that they could get in order to get improvements just to provide basic education services. If the federal government had provided the states and the schools with the appropriate level of funding the schools would never have got to that state in the first place. When I walk through those schools and I see some of the conditions that they are in, I believe that it is a sad indictment of the previous government that they were allowed to deteriorate to that level. The program was simply a bandaid measure to pretend that the previous government cared about schools when the reality is that they could have done much, much more.

It is interesting that those opposite come into this place and talk about how this government is now doing all of this because it is possible as a result of the good economic management of the previous government. If the previous government was managing the economy so well why didn’t it invest in education and end up with a much stronger economy than we have? And why didn’t the previous government, when they had a surplus in their budget, commit to these projects? Why didn’t the previous government, when they had the funds, go into an election and commit to any of the measures that the Labor Party did?

The previous government had the same opportunities, but they were not prepared to give education the priority it deserved and they were not prepared to give education the priority that the Rudd government does.

Mr Baldwin interjecting—

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Hon. Peter Slipper)—Order! There is too much audible interjection across the chamber.
**Mr ZAPPIA**—Now they are trying to simply take credit for the policies which are being well received by the community out there. These policies were put together by the Rudd Labor government and will ultimately ensure that every child in this country will have a fair opportunity of getting a good education. A good education provides not only opportunity for the child as an individual but opportunity and prosperity for our nation as a whole.

This is just one of many measures that the Rudd government has announced, as I said earlier, but it is an important measure because it does put money directly back into the pockets of the mums and dads who are doing the best they can to ensure that their children get a good education. I commend the bill of the House, I congratulate the minister for introducing it and I look forward to working with the Rudd Labor government on rolling out a number of other education initiatives and policies that will complete the package of delivering a good education system in Australia.

**Mr COMBET** (Charlton—Parliamentary Secretary for Defence Procurement) (5.30 pm)—The Tax Laws Amendment (Education Refund) Bill 2008 will help to reduce significantly the cost of education for working families. It will also help to encourage investment by parents in school equipment for their children’s education. That, of course, means an investment in their future. Improving the education system is essential to improving the economic and social wellbeing of our country.

Before the last election Labor committed to implementing an education revolution, due to the poor performance of the previous government in this area and the long-term benefits of improving educational outcomes. Under the previous government, Australia’s investment in education was equal to 5.8 per cent of GDP. This placed us behind 17 other OECD economies in our level of investment in this area. Even worse, investment in early childhood education was just 0.1 per cent of GDP compared to an OECD average of 0.5 per cent. What a dismal performance by the previous government in that area! We were also falling behind our competitors, evidenced by the World Economic Forum’s findings that our science and maths education ranked only 29th in the world, behind countries like Singapore, France, India, the Czech Republic and Tunisia.

These results, bad enough on their own, are worse when you consider the economic and social benefits that education can have. Research has demonstrated that improvements in education have a direct impact on productivity and economic growth levels—and, of course, that is perfectly self-evident. But, as evidence, it has been estimated by Access Economics that increasing the workforce’s level of education by only 0.15 years would boost workforce-wide productivity by 0.62 per cent. It would also boost workforce participation by 0.48 per cent and economic growth by 1.1 per cent by 2040. Research by ANU economist Steve Dowrick has also found that an additional year’s schooling could boost productivity and economic growth by 0.3 per cent.

OECD research on education in 2006 demonstrated that, if the average level of education of the working-age population was increased by one year, the economy would be three to six per cent larger and the growth rate of the economy would be up to one per cent higher. As further evidence, a 2004 international study into literacy scores, human capital and growth across 14 OECD countries found that countries able to attain literacy scores one per cent higher than the international average will achieve living standards measured by GDP per capita that are 1.5 per cent higher than other countries. That
is graphic evidence from a number of research studies of the importance of education in improving economic activity, productivity and therefore social outcomes.

The business community has also long recognised the value of education to the performance of the economy. In a report in 2006, the Business Council of Australia stated:

People with higher levels of educational attainment and skills have higher participation rates and tend to stay in the workforce for longer. Raising the average level of education attainment (and ongoing skill development) can also deliver higher levels of productivity.

Education also helps to create other social benefits. US academic Robert Putnam has conducted research into this area in particular and has shown that societies with a strong commitment to education can also enjoy higher levels of civic participation in community groups, greater social cohesion and integration, lower levels of crime and disadvantage, and a more equitable and trusting society. So there is ample evidence of the importance of education in economic and social outcomes and, in particular, in the pursuit of social justice. That is why the Rudd government has made education a central element of its program in government. It realises the economic and social importance of education and that is why the government is committed to a revolution in education.

In the May budget the government established the Education Investment Fund, which absorbed the earlier Higher Education Endowment Fund. The fund is budgeted to receive an initial allocation of around $11 billion to be spent on higher education and vocational education and training needs. This is an extremely important proposed investment, for the reasons I have described. In addition to this, the budget also provided $5.9 billion over five years for areas covering early childhood education, schools, higher education, skills and workforce development.

In the area of early childhood education, which is one of the areas I identified earlier as being critical to economic and social development, the budget contained the following initiatives: $534 million over five years to provide universal access to preschool, 15 hours per week for 40 weeks per year, for all four-year-olds by 2013; and $337 million to further improve quality of, and access to, early childhood education and care, particularly for disadvantaged children. These are Labor initiatives consistent with Labor values for social equity.

For schools, the budget provided $1.2 billion over five years for the digital education revolution to deliver computers and communications technologies to all year 9 to 12 students. To digress for a moment, in my own electorate, of Charlton this initiative is extremely important. Just last week I visited St Paul's High School, a Catholic school in the electorate where about 217 computers are well in the process of being delivered. It has driven improved internet access and a wireless broadband service in the school, changed the shape and function of the library at the school and is demonstrably improving the delivery of education to students and their access to research tools. This initiative alone, in delivering computers to all year 9 to 12 students, will revolutionise significant approaches to education throughout our country.

The budget also delivered a number of other things consistent with the objectives of the government. This included: $2.5 billion over 10 years for trade training centres in schools; $577 million to improve literacy and numeracy outcomes for students; $62 million over three years for the National Asian Languages and Studies in Schools Program; and $20 million to establish a Na-
tional Curriculum Board. All of these initiatives in schools are designed to help assist in lifting the year 12 or equivalent attainment rate—that is, the participation rate of students in year 12 or its equivalent—to 90 per cent by 2020. I recall throughout the Hawke and Keating periods in government, when the lifting of the participation rate of students to year 12 was made an objective, what a significant contribution that made to the improvement of educational outcomes in this country. You need to identify these targets in order to try and lift that rate. It is particularly important for a lot of young teenage men in the area that I represent that we get them through to year 12 and improve their educational outcome.

In the area of higher education, the budget provided the following: $500 million to help universities upgrade and maintain teaching, research and other student facilities; and $626 million to reduce the cost of studying maths and science at university and to reduce HECS-HELP repayments for science and maths graduates who undertake work in a related field. Boosting the number of students in maths, engineering and science disciplines at university is critical to our economic future, and the government has targeted this area in an attempt to ensure that we achieve a greater number of graduates. In my own portfolio area of defence procurement, this is the area more than anything else that is restricting the capacity of Australian industry to deliver capabilities for the future. It will be extremely important within the defence industry alone that we address the shortfall of graduates in these disciplines.

In the area of skills and workforce development, the budget included $1.9 billion to deliver up to another 630,000 training places over five years. This was recently augmented in the Economic Security Strategy too, with funding of $187 million to create an additional 56,000 new training places this year. All of these initiatives which I have detailed are helping to lay the foundation for the government’s long-term economic reform agenda through the boosting of education. It should not be said by anyone in the community—and certainly not by those opposite—that the government are not serious about pursuing the education revolution that was part of our election platform.

The education tax refund is another extremely important initiative, particularly for the parents of school-age children. It is the subject of the bill that is before the House. The education tax refund will provide additional relief for families facing rising cost-of-living pressures. Under the plan eligible families will be able to claim a 50 per cent tax refund for up to $750 in educational expenses for each child at primary school. That represents a maximum refund of $375 per child. The second leg of the plan involves a 50 per cent tax refund for up to $1,500 in education expenses for each child at secondary school—a maximum refund of $750 per child.

As the Treasurer outlined in his second reading speech in relation to this bill, eligible expenses will include very important things that are ordinary expenses to support children’s education. They include laptops, home computers, printers, paper, education software for computers, the establishment and maintenance of a home internet connection, school textbooks and associated materials and trade tools. It will also include the purchase, lease, hire or hire-purchase costs of those items. The tax refund will be available to parents who are entitled to family tax benefit part A and have children in primary or high school. It will also be payable to those who would be eligible for family tax benefit part A in respect of a child but for the fact that they or the child are in receipt of another payment such as youth allowance or disability support pension.
The tax refund will apply to eligible expenses that are incurred from 1 July 2008. One of the things that I and, I am sure, other members of the House have been doing is to encourage all eligible parents to save their receipts so that they can claim these expenses when they complete their tax return. Those families who are not required to lodge an income tax return will be able to access their entitlement by filling out a separate form that will be available through the Australian Taxation Office.

This is a significant initiative. It is valued at $4.4 billion and it is estimated that this will affect over 1.3 million families, including 2.7 million students. In my own electorate of Charlton, I know that many families have taken an interest in this initiative. They are working very hard to put their kids through school and they deserve as much assistance with education costs as they can get. Given the socioeconomic standing of many of the families in my electorate, many of them will be eligible to claim the education tax refund. We have made sure that parents, through the schools, are aware of this by ensuring that the parents and citizens groups advertise the education tax refund to all of the parents at each of the primary and secondary schools, and I have been liaising with all of the principals of the schools in my electorate as well.

Recently we have done an electorate-wide mail-out to ensure that people are aware of their entitlement to this and other initiatives that the government has taken, particularly in view of the initiatives announced as part of the economic strategy to combat the effects of the global financial crisis. Given the recent economic events and the budgetary pressures experienced by people with schoolchildren, I know that this is a very welcome initiative in the electorate. I have a very strong belief in the importance of education, and I am very proud to be part of a government that has taken this initiative. I commend the bill to the House.

Mr SYMON (Deakin) (5.45 pm)—I rise in strong support of the Tax Laws Amendment (Education Refund) Bill 2008, which will enact the Rudd government’s 2007 election commitment announced on 25 September last year. It is especially pleasing to be able to stand up in this place and speak for the working families in the seat of Deakin. This bill will bring welcome relief from the costs of education for parents of primary and secondary school students, and it is specifically targeted, the education refund being available to those parents who are receiving family tax benefit A. In my electorate of Deakin there are a total of 7,069 families who receive family tax benefit A by fortnightly instalment, and that is paid for a total of 13,008 children. Another 1,600 or so families receive their family tax benefit A by lump sum at the end of the financial year. The cut-off rate for families with primary or secondary school children for family tax benefit A ranges from $100,801 for those families with one child to $122,263 for those families with three children. These families will be able to claim 50 per cent of the cost of eligible education expenses of up to $750 per child at primary school each year, and that provides a maximum tax offset of $375 per year for each child at primary school. For each child at secondary school these families will be eligible to claim 50 per cent of up to $1,500 of eligible education expenses per year. That provides a maximum tax offset of $750 per secondary school student per year.

Like most members of this place, I visit my local schools quite often, and an issue that comes up many times when you talk to parents is the costs of schooling. Some parents are doing okay and some are doing it really tough, and extra costs that come along at the start of the school year and during the school year for essentials that cannot be done
without—you cannot let your kids go to school without the right equipment—are a really important factor in budgetary pressures. So the education tax refund is an important way of dealing with it and getting money back to where it is needed to help a better educational outcome.

The education tax refund is also available to parents whose children are in homeschooling, and that is worth noting, as till now there has been very little in the way of Commonwealth support for homeschooling. It does not apply to that many people but there are certainly a group out there that strongly believe in that system, and they should also have support where it is needed—that is, to deliver materials to their students, their own children. Most importantly, the tax offset is real. It is in-your-hand money—it is not a gross amount—and, because it is a refundable tax offset, it will also be paid even if the person claiming it has no tax liability. The education tax refund is also payable to those people who may not receive family tax benefit A if they are or if the eligible child is receiving Abstudy or Student Financial Supplement Scheme or Veterans’ Children Education Scheme payments. The education tax refund is also payable to people with eligible children if they are receiving the disability support pension, Newstart allowance or youth allowance. Rather than requiring people to have a taxable income before a deduction could be claimed, as in the past, this bill will also benefit those who need it most, especially if they get by on very limited incomes. The education tax refund will be claimable from 1 July 2009 for eligible expenses incurred in the 2008-09 year.

I have had a look at the list of eligible expenses, and the more you look at it the more you see in it. I will go through those now because I think it is important that it be fleshed out, because we sometimes see a small list and sometimes a larger list, and if you read through the actual text of the bill it is quite an all-encompassing type of arrangement. It includes things like computers but also the components purchased to build a home computer. It includes computer related equipment such as printers and disability aids to assist with the use of computer equipment for students with disabilities. It includes establishing and maintaining a home internet connection, which is pretty much vital these days when it comes to education. If you have children and they come home, they certainly need access to a computer and to the knowledge base that is the internet. It is almost impossible these days to find a task set for students that relates only back to textbooks; there always seems to be a need to have this computer access. The eligible expenses also include computer software such as word-processing programs, spreadsheet and database applications, presentation software, educational games and, importantly, internet filters and anti-virus software. They include school textbooks, including prescribed textbooks, study guides and other paper based school learning material, including stationery items. They also include tools of trade prescribed by course. The eligible expenses also include running and repair costs for computers and computer related equipment such as printers and disability aids.

The good news does not stop there. When a child undergoes the transition from primary school to secondary school during a financial year, the education tax refund will apply to that student at the secondary school rate for the whole year. This will be most appreciated by working families, as the expense for a child starting a new secondary school is usually much higher than for a child continuing at the same primary school. It is also worth highlighting that if eligible expenses for a child exceed the $750 or $1,500 threshold—the annual limits for the financial year, as I
have just said—they can be moved over to the next year, so the excess, over-the-top expenses can be moved to the subsequent income year. Where families have more than one eligible child, the eligible expenses can be pooled and divided between the children when accessing the tax offset, providing all the children involved would have had access to the purchased items. This could be very useful for higher cost items, such as a home computer, which may cost more than the limit set for one child. At a total cost of $4.4 billion over four years, the education tax refund will certainly be of assistance to many low- and middle-income families.

In 2007, the Brotherhood of St Laurence published a report titled *Counting the cost: parental experiences of educational expenses: results from the 2007 education costs survey*. This report concentrated solely on low-income families. It found that 72 per cent of respondents indicated they could not afford items that would ‘improve the education experience of their children’. It also looked at a lot of areas more closely than that. It reported that two-thirds of the survey respondents did not have a home computer with internet access. That figure compares with ABS figures from 2007 that showed that 36 per cent of Australian households did not have a home computer with internet access. The Brotherhood of St Laurence survey also recorded that 60 per cent had difficulty in paying for schoolbooks. This included almost half the respondents reporting difficulty in paying for school and education equipment. As I noted before, the education tax refund is also payable to people with eligible children if they are receiving the disability support pension, Newstart allowance or youth allowance. This is particularly important for the Brotherhood of St Laurence survey respondents, as 98 per cent had a Centrelink healthcare or pension card. Fifty-eight per cent of them received a Centrelink pension, payment or allowance, and for 40 per cent of the survey respondents this was the parenting payment at the single rate.

When the education tax refund is added to the government’s family tax benefit A bonus to be delivered from 8 December this year, there will be an even greater benefit for working families with children attending school. The start of a new school year can be financially stressful for parents, and it can be just as stressful for children, especially if they have to do without when other children attend school with more equipment than they have. It is not a new problem; it has been around for many years. Many parents do not like to think of the day their child comes home from school at the end of the year with the list of textbooks for the next year and their prices. This bill will certainly go a long way to helping out in that situation. Hopefully, it will mean that more children go to school in the next school year and, on the first day of school, will have the right books and the right stationery equipment—the things they need to be able to learn in an educational environment.

The cost of textbooks in particular may add up to several hundred dollars a year for a family. This, of course, comes straight after all the expenses of the Christmas holiday break. If you have got more than one child going to school, the bills can double or triple. If the curriculum moves around, a textbook that has been good for one year is no longer the required text for the next. When it comes to selling them off secondhand, you do not get much. When you have to buy them new, you have to pay quite a lot. The cost of buying textbooks is then followed by the cost of going to the local newsagent and getting all the stationery items for your child to go to school for the year. Again, that bill adds up very quickly. So the best thing of all about this bill is that, by keeping receipts for these items, families will get the rebate come tax
time. For the many who struggle to send their children to school, it surely will be a great help during the year, and especially at the start of the year when those costs are higher. This is a good news bill that will greatly benefit working families both in Deakin and in every electorate in Australia. I commend this bill to the House.

Mr SHORTEN (Maribyrnong—Parliamentary Secretary for Disabilities and Children’s Services) (5.55 pm)—I am pleased to rise this afternoon to strongly support the Tax Laws Amendment (Education Refund) Bill 2008 and the new education tax refund—one more election commitment of the Rudd government that we mean to keep. I believe that the recent worldwide financial meltdown serves to highlight the enduring value of what we learn in schools, colleges and universities in a changing world. This week we believe more than ever that education is an economic investment whose value cannot be eroded by global speculation and risky lending practices in overseas economies. Education is what lasts. When the last subprime mortgage security follows the last reckless hedge fund investment into oblivion, education will be the currency that does not fail. It is for this reason that we remain committed to an education revolution and to those parents who need additional help with the everyday costs of their children’s education.

Last month, the Rudd government took decisive action to strengthen the Australian economy and support Australian families during the present global financial crisis. Indeed, the Rudd government announced it would deliver a one-off payment this year of $1,000 to the parents of around 3.9 million eligible children. Those that will receive the support include 1.9 million families who receive family tax benefit A and families who receive youth allowance, Abstudy or a benefit from the Veterans’ Children Education Scheme payment. These families will also be eligible for the new education tax refund, which will provide a refundable tax offset at 50 per cent of education expenses. In fact, the Rudd government’s first budget included $4.4 billion to create the new education tax refund. It was, I believe, our first great investment in our nation’s future prosperity. It is our affirmation of a social partnership conceived at the best-practice standard, comparable with the best in the world. We did it because we believe education increases productivity, builds prosperity and breaks the intergenerational cycle of poverty. Education is our ticket out of the underclass. It is an improvement of our souls. Education means participation. These two factors are central to lifting productivity. Whilst our physical resources are finite, human potential, human capacity, human ability and human spirit are infinite.

It is clear now to us all that Australia’s productivity declined at the same rate that education funding declined under the previous, unfocused, mendicant, somnambulant, careless Howard government. This is why, unlike our tired, dispirited, directionless predecessors, we are getting on with the job of real education reform. The 2008-09 budget is meeting, with the difficulty that the world crisis presents, our promised election commitments and helping out with schooling and learning at all levels. We want Australians to reach their high potential and we are investing in our future. We want Australia to reach its high potential and we are investing in our future. The $19.3 billion investment delivers at all ages, from early childhood to primary schools and from high schools to vocational education, training and higher education.

The education tax refund is a refundable tax offset of 50 per cent of eligible expenses for children undertaking primary and secondary school studies. Hereafter parents can
more readily afford to see their children properly taught. Under the plan, eligible families will be able to claim 50 per cent of school expenses, up to $750 for each child undertaking primary school, to provide a maximum tax offset of $375 per child per year. For children undertaking secondary school studies, parents will be able to claim up to 50 per cent of their eligible expenses, up to $1,500 per child, to gain a maximum tax offset of $750 per child per year. Eligible expenses will include laptops, home computers, printers, paper, education software, school textbooks and associated materials and trade tools. In addition, the expenses of establishing and maintaining a home internet connection are included. The refund plan began on 1 July 2008, so I recommend that eligible parents start keeping receipts for their 2008-09 income tax return. Indeed, those not paying tax because of low income should lodge a separate form, available from the tax office, at the end of the current financial year.

This will assist the great schools in my Maribyrnong electorate—schools like Rosehill Secondary College, formerly Niddrie Secondary College, a proud school where principal Anne Fox is working hard to give the school its new, developed image; Essendon-Keilor College, led by David Adamson, a school with a long history of excellence, with its great heritage buildings that reflect the grandness and a century-old dream of a decent education; and Sunshine Secondary College and St Albans Secondary College, led by Tim Blunt and Kerrie Dowsley respectively. They are schools that have a vibrant culture and innovative programs. Other schools and staff include Mrs Olwen Bell, Principal, Ave Maria College; Mrs Carolyn Grantskalans from Lowther Hall Anglican Grammar School; Mr Tony Larkin from Penleigh and Essendon Grammar; Mr Frank Fitzgerald from St Bernard’s College, who is retiring this year; Ms April Honeyman from St Columba’s College; Mrs Julie Williams from Kealba Secondary College; Ms Christina Utri from the Catholic Regional College; Mr Mark Vodell from Gilson College; Mr Tony Tartaro from Buckley Park Secondary College; and Mr Andrew Williamson, CEO and Principal of the Australian Technical College Sunshine.

I know that all these talented, hardworking, dedicated and passionate education teachers and leaders believe that better education is the cornerstone of a decent society. In fact, for Labor, better education is the cornerstone of a decent society. It is the lodestone and the talisman, the guardian angel and the bankable guarantee of a better society that we are striving for. Education is for us in Labor, and always has been, the light on the hill to which our eyes are ever turned and our efforts ever directed. Through our budget measures, through this legislation and through the great efforts of the Minister for Education, the Rudd government is striving to combat economic and social disadvantage—and this, I suggest, in Labor terms, is getting on with the job. This is what we are here for; this is our task. In this first way we create and sustain a fair Australia where the pursuit of happiness is available to all and a larger, more abundant life within the reach of those who seek it. I commend the legislation.

Ms HALL (Shortland) (6.03 pm)—It is with great pleasure and some pride that I stand to speak on the Tax Laws Amendment (Education Refund) Bill 2008, because this is evidence of the Rudd government’s commitment to the education revolution. This reflects the Rudd government’s determination to see that each and every child in Australia can afford the resources they need to attend school. This is very important legislation—legislation that I know will be welcomed in my electorate. In fact, since people living in my electorate have heard of this
legislation they have been keen for it to be introduced so that they can access the benefits that will accrue to them under it.

This bill proposes to introduce a 50 per cent education tax refund aimed at assisting families with children at primary or secondary school to meet school education costs by assisting with certain education expenses, the kinds of education expenses that have put in place barriers that prevent young people from lower income families being competitive. It is okay for young people to be able to attend school and to use the resources of the school but, when it comes to things like home computers and internet access, if a student does not have these things then they will not be competitive with students who do have a home computer and access to the internet. It is also very important that the other things that are covered in this legislation, which I will get to a bit later, are made available to all students.

The education refund comes in the wake of several reports over a number of years. These reports have highlighted the difficulties of schooling costs for low-income families. For instance, the 2007 education cost survey by the Brotherhood of St Laurence found that 72 per cent of the respondents could not afford items that would improve the education experience of their children, and two-thirds did not have a home computer with internet access. This is why the legislation we are debating here in the House tonight is of such vital importance. It is imperative that all children, no matter what their parents’ income is and no matter what their level of advantage is, have access to the resources they need to achieve good educational outcomes.

The Brotherhood of St Laurence report also showed that 60 per cent of those who responded to the survey had difficulty paying for books, and half of the parents said they had difficulty paying for equipment that their children needed when they were attending school. I know that this legislation will be welcomed by not only low-income earners in my electorate but also middle-income families who are struggling to pay for all the competing expenses that they have each and every day. It is expensive for children to attend school and it is expensive for children to get a decent education, and that is why the Rudd government has made the commitment to ensure that each and every child can access a quality education and have access to the things that they need to achieve that education.

Under the refund, families who are eligible and approved will be able to claim 50 per cent of the refundable tax offset each year for up to $750 of eligible expenditure for each primary school child—that will equate to a significant refund—and a 50 per cent refundable tax offset each year for up to $1,500 of eligible expenses for each child undertaking secondary school education. As I mentioned earlier, I have been contacted by students in my electorate who are very keen to be able to access this particular scheme (Quorum formed) Before returning to the text of my speech, I acknowledge that the member for Paterson called that quorum on me; and I must say that in another parliament I did the same to him. On that occasion he abused me mercilessly, but I understand the way that the parliament works and I acknowledge his right to call a quorum. I accept the rules of the House and I hope that the member for Paterson in future will be able to show the courtesy to observe the forms of the House in a way that he could not when he was on this side of the House. I will now return to the text of my speech, but I believe that the member for Paterson did deserve some special comment.

Eligible families will be families in receipt of family tax benefit part A in respect of one
or more children undertaking primary or secondary school education. Parents with one or more children who would be eligible for family tax benefit part A but for the fact that they or the child receive certain payments or allowances such as youth allowance, the disability support pension or Abstudy living allowance are also eligible. Students undertaking primary or secondary school studies and receiving the independent rate of income payments may also be eligible in respect of their own expenses. For families with shared care who are eligible for family tax benefit A or shared receipt of family tax benefit A the refund will be shared. So both parents or both carers will receive part of family tax benefit A. For families in receipt of other payments, similar arrangements for sharing the education tax refund between the parents will occur.

Students entering or leaving school in any school year can claim half the refund attributable to the half of the financial year they attended school. Families with homeschool students may also be eligible for the refund. Eligible expenses—and I think this is very important—include the purchase, lease, hire or hire-purchase costs of laptops and home computers and associated costs; printers and paper; educational software; and school textbooks, materials and prescribed trade tools. In addition, expenses associated with establishing and maintaining a home internet connection are eligible.

In this debate I have heard previous speakers on the other side argue that school fees should attract this refund. For any member to argue that shows a complete lack of understanding of what this legislation is about. It is about providing access to the tools that will enable students to compete and to access the knowledge that is available through these tools. It is not about alleviation or making school fees any cheaper. It is about providing students with the opportunity to learn. That is very important.

There is a significant difference between what we on this side of the parliament are about and what those on the other side of the parliament are about. We are about giving each and every child the opportunity—an equal opportunity wherever possible—to learn. We are about making education accessible and making the tools of education accessible to all students. We are not about setting up a system where some students can benefit and some students cannot. This is about equity of access and equity within education.

This is legislation that, as I said earlier, will be particularly welcomed by low-income families. It focuses in the main on information technology and communication because that is vital to educational success. It is the revolution of the 21st century. For students to encompass all their learning goals, they need to have access to digital information. That is part of this government’s digital education revolution, which will be providing $1.2 billion over five years for information technology in schools.

The members on the other side of this parliament really need to embrace Labor’s education revolution. They need to acknowledge the benefit that all the students that attend their schools are obtaining from the computers that Labor is putting into their high schools. They need to acknowledge the benefit of the trade training centres, the fact that Labor is taking education into the 21st century and that Labor is about ensuring that each and every student has the opportunity to succeed.

I believe around 1.3 million families will be eligible for the refund. There was $4.4 billion included in the budget to create the education tax refund to assist these families. That is very important and of course was a
Rudd government election commitment. The refund will apply to eligible expenses incurred from 1 July 2008. Eligible people should keep their receipts from 1 July 2008 to claim the tax offset in their 2008-09 tax return. I emphasise that point: it is imperative that receipts are kept so that families can claim this refund. Keep your receipts and put them in a safe place so that when it comes time to do your tax refund you will know exactly where they are.

Education, as I have said, increases productivity and participation, builds prosperity and offers hope in breaking intergenerational cycles of poverty. As I have already said, if you do not have access to the tools that give you the knowledge then you are going to find it very, very difficult to obtain a quality education and the skills that you will need to get jobs in the workforce that open the door to prosperity. No-one can deny that education is the key that unlocks the door to success in people’s lives.

It is very, very important that this legislation gets through the parliament in a timely fashion. It is very important that people within the Australian community know that, come tax time next year, they will be eligible for this allowance. I applaud the minister for putting this legislation to the parliament and the Rudd government for its foresight in acknowledging the importance that information technology plays and acknowledging the fact that education is the key to success and that to obtain that education you need to have the resources. That is why the education tax refund will be of such vital importance to all those people who are in receipt of the benefits that I highlighted earlier—those low- to middle-income families that need to obtain the tools for their children to succeed in education.

Mr Anthony Smith (Casey) (6.21 pm)—I want to briefly take the time of the House to address the Tax Laws Amendment (Education Refund) Bill 2008 and, as previous speakers before me have done in this debate, some of the broader education issues related to it. As speakers on this side have made clear, the coalition will be supporting this measure; however, as we have also made clear, we think it is too narrow. It is no secret that at the last election we had a broader policy, both in items covered and in families covered. We think this policy that has been put forward is too narrow—we have said so—but we acknowledge that it will be of assistance to those parents who are eligible in the narrow field of items that are covered.

The previous speaker, the member for Shortland, mentioned the digital revolution, as it is called by those opposite, which many other speakers from the government side have lauded. Those opposite in their heart of hearts know that there is great scepticism about the so-called education revolution. The hollowness is now coming to the fore. We have heard the computers in schools policy lauded by those opposite, but they know that, as we approach the one-year anniversary of the election of this government, many will look back to those first few days after that election when the first COAG meeting was held to set out the new deal with the states and to end the blame game. The first thing that was going to happen on that agenda back in December was that all of the costs for the computers in schools were going to be worked out. But, no, that was deferred until March and deferred again until July. We had the Treasurer saying in the days before that July COAG meeting that everything would be sorted out. New South Wales has since refused to participate in the computers in schools policy.

We have had parents complaining across all of our electorates. We know that members opposite have had the same thing across their electorates because as the detail has come to...
the fore it has become quite obvious that this program was not thought through properly and that the cost of putting computers on the desks of every student in years 9, 10, 11 and 12 had not been thought through. What has happened is that the states have said they are not going to pay the bills. Julia Gillard, the Minister for Education, has put her head in the sand all year on this issue and, as we have warned from this side of the House right through this year, parents are now being hit with the bill. We have the extraordinary situation where we have the members opposite saying how important it is to assist parents—and we agree with that—but ignoring the fact that now parents are being hit with a new Rudd government computer tax. In my electorate of Casey—

Mr Shorten interjecting—

Mr ANTHONY SMITH—The member for Maribyrnong might learn something here. He might find that he is going to have a similar situation in his electorate. I have had parents inform me that they will need to pay an annual levy of between $150 and $300 every year—it has just come out to the parents this week—to fund the computers in schools policy. The school has had to impose this levy to pay for all of those on-costs that are obvious to anyone installing a computer anywhere, obvious to anyone except the minister. I would not go so far as to exclude those opposite from that. I think that they would realise that, if you buy a computer and you actually want to make it work, you need to plug it into something, you need to connect it to the internet—

Mr Shorten—Who told you that?

Mr ANTHONY SMITH—Not Julia Gillard, not the Minister for Education. Now the parents at Lilydale High School have been told that they will have to pay an annual levy of between $150 and $300 a year. This is about to be repeated in numbers of high schools across Australia if they want to make the computers work. If they are prepared to leave the computers sitting in boxes, gathering dust and not making use of them, perhaps they will not have to charge a levy, but high schools as a result of combined federal and state Labor incompetence—as a result of one year of talk and no action—are having to charge parents to implement this Rudd Labor government policy. This has been happening all year; it has been obvious to anyone wanting to see.

I do not know what happens at these COAG meetings. Perhaps somebody has the secret remote control that they pointed at the Treasurer last week when they hit ‘mute’ and for 80 seconds he sat there unable to speak. Perhaps that is what happens every time computers in schools are mentioned at COAG; perhaps there is just silence. But now this new Rudd tax will be imposed on the parents of Lilydale High School students and other high school students across Victoria and Australia.

It was with great fanfare that the policy was announced at the last federal election—a computer on every desk—but I tell you what was not in the policy. What was not in the policy was that every parent would have to pay a fee or a tax to actually make the computers work. The other thing parents across Australia, particularly at primary schools, have realised is that the Investing in Our Schools Program has been abolished. The Investing in Our Schools Program, which enabled schools to pick the projects they wanted, has been abolished.

Mr Shorten interjecting—

Mr ANTHONY SMITH—I persist in light of unfair interjections—

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr S Sidebottom)—Do not be incited. Order!

Mr ANTHONY SMITH—Those opposite will do everything they can to defend the
indefensible. Before the last election, if you go back to the computers in schools policy, nowhere did the Prime Minister say, ‘I will impose a tax of $150 to $300 on the parents of high-school students.’ This has been announced by Lilydale High School. There will be other schools that will do the same thing. They are forced to do this because of the complete and utter incompetence of those opposite.

As we approach the anniversary of the last election, two weeks away, parents will reflect on the great gap between what was promised and what is actually being delivered. What is being delivered today in this legislation—we say it is too narrow, we say it should be broader—is only possible because the previous government left a budget in surplus, left a budget able to fund precisely these sorts of programs, like the Investing in Our Schools Program, across the education area. As those opposite speak on this bill, they should consider the computers in schools policy. It is not good enough to talk about just the rebate and the new computers in schools policy in tandem without acknowledging the fact that parents right across Australia are now starting to be hit with fees and levies in order to actually make the computers work.

Mr Gray (Brand—Parliamentary Secretary for Regional Development and Northern Australia) (6.30 pm)—On Tuesday last week I visited a school in my electorate, Mandurah High School, to officiate at the opening of an Investing in Our Schools project. It is an excellent project. It was the construction of a sporting oval and also included funding for facilities in the canteen. When the principal, Alfred King, pointed out to me that in my speech I had given praise to the former government for the Investing in Our Schools Program, I also pointed out that in fact the former government had closed that program in January 2007. Long before the federal election, the money had run out, the program had ended and it was time to move on. A good program had served its purpose and, as we say, it was time to move on. But what do we then move on to? Investing in education is important for many reasons. It empowers those who are going through the education process. It enables our kids to grow. It gives them opportunities. Education is so fundamental to the lives of young Australians—and older Australians too—and it is important to the young people in my electorate as they go about preparing for their way in life.

It was instructive that in 2006-07, when many of the debates were taking place in the House and throughout the country in the run-up to our election, the funding of education became an issue of great importance, not just because it was about how much money each side was putting into education but because of what it was about. It became apparent in 2006 that Australia was not slowly but rapidly slipping down the OECD tables for attainment, achievement and spending in education. We have had noted in this place that in pre-primary education funding we had slipped from a respectable position in the OECD to 25th out of the 26 countries that were surveyed.

We know that education relates to opportunity. We know that education relates to how prepared for work our kids and our young adults will be. We know that education relates to how productive our economy will be and how productive our workplaces will be. But we also know that over the last decade national investment in education has been falling. It has been falling both as a proportion of GDP and when measured against those countries with which we like to compare ourselves. We would never say that the former government did not spend on education, but we would say they did not spend enough and we would say that on many occasions the programs that were in
place were spending 25c or 26c rather than fixing real problems.

The Tax Laws Amendment (Education Refund) Bill 2008 is not just about education but about families. It is a bill about supporting education and supporting parents. It is a $4.4 billion education tax refund. It joins key elements of our tax system with the education needs of young families. It is targeted at those families who are in receipt of family tax benefit part A and who have kids in primary school or secondary school. It is estimated, as we have been told, that over 1.3 million families with 2.7 million children or students will receive this benefit. As we have heard many times, it is to cover eligible expenses such as laptops, home computers, printers, paper, internet access and the rest.

It is a good initiative—it is an excellent initiative—but it is an initiative that comes in the context of a range of other measures taken by the government, and the former government, to improve school performance. An important initiative in this area is to properly assess school performance, to look at the indicators that allow parents to understand how well their schools are performing and therefore to understand within the assessment process how well their children are doing in reference to not just their own school population but the school population of the state. The WALNA test in Western Australia and the national school testing processes are simply invaluable. My own children have been subject to these tests, and when we get the results back they form an illuminating view of not just how well our children are doing but also how well our public education system is performing. It performs because we have quality teachers. It performs because we have people who dedicate their lives to teaching and to ensuring that our children are given the best possible start.

In my own life, the teachers who made the biggest impact on me throughout my primary and high school years, as I have said on many occasions in this place, are Bruce Wilton, Dale Doderidge, Miss Knight—the headmistress of my school, Whyalla High School—and Ken Harrington. They all had a big impact on me as I grew up.

When I look at the teachers and the schools in my electorate of Brand, I see some truly outstanding examples of educators working with tremendous skill to perform the task of bringing our kids on in life. We have in the middle of my electorate a language development centre. It is almost unique. It allows the teachers to have optimal resources to both understand and provide education for kids with various disadvantages—often a speech delay, sometimes a central processing difficulty. Sometimes the kids are autistic. Sometimes the kids come into that school with parents so frustrated at not being able to teach their children. A wonderful atmosphere has been established by principal Judy Smailes and Fiona Forbes, her assistant, in putting together an education program for kids who otherwise would face the most crushing educational hurdles. They would certainly not be able to obtain the benefit of education were it not for the great effort put in by the teachers at the Fremantle learning centre in my electorate.

In the course of the past few weeks, I have had cause to attend half a dozen end-of-school functions, including ones at Gilmore College, Safety Bay Senior High School and Hillman Primary School. They are functions which allow you to see the kids in their own environment and, even more important than that, the pride on the face of the teachers as they watch their kids graduate from school. In my electorate I have some outstanding schools and some outstanding teachers. At Charthouse Primary School there is Stephen Yates. At Baldivis Primary School, John...
Worthy is working in a small community developing wonderful programs that cover a broad spectrum of education but with a particular focus on the kind of cultural environment that is best suited to the children from the Baldivis area. John does a wonderful job. At Kolbe Catholic College a few weeks ago I had the pleasure of attending the first handover of computers under the computers in schools program, which we have had quite a bit of a discussion on in the course of this debate. The computers in schools program at Kolbe Catholic College is something that Caroline Payne, the principal, had been enthusiastic about. When I looked at the children logging on to their computers and engaging in education and learning through computer technology, I knew that the government’s initiative was not just at the right time: it was the right initiative with the right amount of financial resources behind it to make it work.

At Hillman Primary School, Wayne McKay runs an excellent school in a pretty tough part of town, where the kids are enthusiastic and the teachers are even more enthusiastic. Up at the Peter Carnley Anglican College, Peter Martin runs a school which is brand new. He struggles often because the school is so new, but the wonderful facilities that are there and which are working create the best possible environment for those children as they go through their primary and secondary school education. Down at Mandurah Senior College last Friday week I opened the school oval and the new facilities in the canteen. Again, it gave me exposure to the good things that are happening not only in the education system in Western Australia but also in Australia. At Gilmore College, we saw the opening just a few weeks ago of a $65 million brand new high school, primary school and preschool—an integrated facility that will be working to bring the children of Kwinana through an education process that is not just the best available in Kwinana but the best available in the most modern school.

At Calista Primary School in Kwinana, which I visited just a few weeks ago, Glenn Edwards has been working on his teaching programs and taking such care of his children as they get to the end of the current school year. He enthusiastically attended the graduation ceremony at Gilmore College which his primary school kids will attend next year. You see teachers all the time—and principals in particular—working above and beyond the call of duty. They are working not just at a job; they are working at a calling that they enjoy and which has a massive and positive impact on the children whose lives they affect.

I come back to the core of the bill that we are debating here today. It delivers on a pre-election promise. It acknowledges the costs of living that families face and it acknowledges that technology and education play a role together in the lives of our children in schools and at home. It takes action to respond to the community need to ensure that our children can, at home, get access to the same excellent technology that now they will get access to at school. We know that this new initiative is one that sets our government apart from all predecessors and sets our children up in their schools for the most wonderful education experience.

We have heard much about the former government’s programs. I am the first to acknowledge there was much good that they did. But I do point out that the Investing in Our Schools Program was wound up in January 2007. I would also point out that in my electorate of Brand, throughout 2007, many former government ministers, including the former Prime Minister, campaigned to establish an ATC in Rockingham—not because there was an educational need for an ATC in Rockingham but because the school
was to be the beneficiary of pork-barrelling in the seat of Brand in order to target the former member, Kim Beazley. When the current government refused to fund that ATC—I had campaigned against the funding of that ATC—it seemed to come as some surprise to people that the best teaching system throughout the southern suburbs of Perth was already there. It is a TAFE system, the Challenger TAFE system, which is an outstanding system for trades training and apprenticeships throughout Western Australia. It seemed to be not just a waste of taxpayers' money to put $20 million into an ATC but also an affront to the outstanding teaching and the resources that have been put into TAFE teaching in Western Australia.

What we have here today is an Australian government using not just the instruments of government to fund computers in schools; this bill brings together both instruments available to government and the parliament to help families. It is where tax rebates and education policy meet. It amends the Income Tax Assessment Act and allows it to be used for educational purposes. We have talked in this place about how the computers in schools are such an effective initiative and how additional funding for technical training in our high schools is so critically important. We have also come to the conclusion that the education refund bill will not only positively affect the ability of all families who are the recipients of family tax benefit part A to ensure that their children have excellent computing capacity at home to match the excellent computing capacity that we will be putting into schools but also recognise the costs that families face and goes some way to assisting in ensuring that all children get the best possible opportunity from our education system. I commend the bill to the House.

Ms Kate Ellis interjecting—

Mr SIDEBOTTOM—Well, there you go! There has always been a terrific demand for members to support our local champions and this will go a long way, Minister, to helping us support them. I do thank you very much and I know the House will be appreciative of your excellent work there.

Little could be more important in our education revolution than providing a means for parents to provide for their children's education needs. I share with many thousands of Australian families the cost of education, with two sons currently completing their university studies, but I have not forgotten the additional financial demands made during the early and middle years of education. Unfortunately, additional assistance as intended in this legislation was not available when my sons, William and Julian, were at the Forth Primary School, Ulverstone High School and then The Don College, the local senior secondary college. But, with two teachers for parents, the importance of investing in our children's education was very clear in our household.

The Tax Laws Amendment (Education Refund) Bill 2008 is the result of an election promise and, like nearly every other piece of legislation brought before this House in 2008, is clear, practical proof of a government honouring its election commitments to Australian families. It is a $4.4 billion commitment over four years from the Rudd government to help make it easier for parents about education, in particular the education of young people. While I have the opportunity, may I recognise the Minister for Sport, who is at the table, for her excellent initiative announced during the election campaign and in the budget, the local sporting champions grants, which were announced today. I hope I have not pre-empted anything, but I know that there has been a great demand—
and encourage them to provide for their children the best they can to keep them engaged in school. It is an important financial commitment and needs to be passed through the parliament as soon as possible to allow time for its promotion to parents around the country so that they can keep the records they need to substantiate a claim come tax time next year. Indeed, like a number of members in this place, I have already commenced a public awareness campaign in my electorate encouraging parents to keep their receipts in relation to eligible education expenses.

I would add that this is no small measure, with an estimated 1.3 million families and some 2.7 million students expected to be eligible for the benefits. The refund is available as a tax offset of 50 per cent of eligible education expenses. This might be for laptops, home computers, printers, paper, education software, school textbooks and associated materials and trade tools. The expenses for establishing and maintaining a home internet connection are also included, sensibly. Today, this is an important part of education support. Indeed, education does not begin and end at school.

It surprised me to read the results of the Brotherhood of St Laurence’s 2007 Education costs survey. It has been quoted by many members of this House through the Bills Digest, but I think it is worth reiterating, particularly for those who may be listening to this debate. It found that 72 per cent of respondents could not afford items that would improve the education experience of their children. It also concluded that some 60 per cent had difficulty paying for books and that almost half reported difficulty paying for equipment. The same report revealed that two-thirds did not have a home computer with internet access.

That survey was directed at lower income folk, but its conclusions are disturbing. While it is hard to believe, we cannot let it continue. Being without the internet in this day and age is like being locked out of the library. While it does have its pitfalls, it can also be hugely important and valuable, particularly when coupled with an inquiring young mind. Those of us who are a little longer in the tooth may be a little wary of the research benefits of the internet, but the younger generation have grown up with it and know how to navigate through the reliable and less reliable sources in cyberspace. The education tax refund should help by providing support to upgrade computers or providing a high-speed internet connection for the first time to some households. Indeed, one member—I think it was my colleague the member for Deakin—pointed out that one can purchase parts in order to make a home computer. I would find that a very productive activity and an expense that one could claim would give an excellent result.

I acknowledge that there is a case for extending the refund to include other items such as assistance to pay for school uniforms, textbooks, excursions and sports experiences, for example, and this would be well and good. However, unlike the opposition and their 12-year track record of providing little to no assistance to families in relation to education expenses, this government is specifically assisting families to offset ITC centred information learning or trade skills expenses, or at least seeking to encourage families to invest in these contemporary tools of teaching and learning. This refund initiative is just one of an array from this government to strengthen the education of all Australians—and I stress again: of all Australians. Despite the criticisms of some, we are not interested in playing favourites. We want to give support where it is needed.

I would like to repeat some of the extensive and generous plans that are part of what we deem to be an education revolution. Con-
trary to what some may believe and you may read in the media, this is in fact an education revolution. Revolutions begin in small ways, are resourced in small ways and grow, and that is what is happening with education. We have some opposite, and some unkind to our education revolution, who would see it all happen within six or seven months. This is a group of people who had 12 to 13 years to do something about it but now they expect it to be done in 12 to 13 months. Revolutions do not just happen overnight. This is a $19.3 billion effort in the education sector, a major indicator of just how serious this government is about supporting our schools. It includes the digital education revolution to improve the number and quality of computers in schools across the nation. I have already seen the benefit of this with schools in my electorate among those to benefit from the first round of the scheme.

We are also working toward the development of a quality national curriculum, despite those opposite wishing to personally attack some of those that are constructing our curriculum. Why am I surprised? It is something that will be important in preparing our students for the 21st century. It includes more to improve school infrastructure and maintain what schools already have in place. A national action plan on literacy and numeracy will also be important to ensuring the basics are put in place to give young people their best chance at life. And with $2.5 billion over 10 years we will see schools across the nation set up trades training centres to enable young people with practical skills and aptitude to hone these skills in their early school years to come out ready to address the massive skills shortage we have and to ensure we do not have it again.

The Tax Laws Amendment (Education Refund) Bill 2008 amends the Income Tax Assessment Act 1997 to introduce the education tax refund or the ETR. The ETR will provide a 50 per cent refundable tax offset for eligible education expenses up to a maximum of $750 for children undertaking primary education studies and $1,500 for children undertaking secondary education studies. Under the plan eligible families will be able to claim 50 per cent of eligible education expenses up to $750 for each child undertaking primary school studies to provide a maximum tax offset of $375 per child per year. For those children undertaking secondary school studies, families will be able to claim 50 per cent of their eligible expenses up to $1,500 per child to give a maximum tax offset of $750 per child per year. It is a refundable tax offset and therefore will apply to eligible applicants regardless of their tax liability. That is, it will also be paid if the person has no tax liability. Taxpayers who are entitled to the ETR include those in receipt of family tax benefit part A payment for a child; taxpayers and/or their child who receive other payments that preclude them from receiving family tax benefit A3; or taxpayers who are independent students and receive payments such as youth allowance, disability support pension or Abstudy living allowance.

The ETR will apply to eligible expenses incurred from 1 July 2008 and will be claimable when income tax returns are submitted. Therefore, the ETR will be claimable from 1 July 2009, and that is why it is important to reiterate that families wishing to claim the refund should collect and keep their docket and so forth. Eligible expenses for the ETR include the purchase, lease or hire purchase of computers and computer related equipment such as printers and disability aids and associated costs, a home internet connection, computer software, school textbooks and other paper based school learning material, including stationery and course prescribed tools of trade. If a child transitions from primary to secondary education during a finan-
cial year, the ETR will apply at the secondary rate for the entire year and education expenses in excess of the taxpayer’s offset limit for a financial year can be transferred to the subsequent income year.

I am very pleased to support this Tax Laws Amendment (Education Refund) Bill 2008. Before I finish altogether I would just like to acknowledge the number of schools in my electorate that I have had the privilege of visiting recently, and I hope to use another occasion to more extensively discuss what I was able to do and what I was able to experience in those schools. I would like to acknowledge the following schools and the work of their leadership teams, their teachers in particular, the students themselves, and their parents and friends associations. In particular there is the Yolla District School, Burnie High School, Parklands High, Reece High School, Cooe Primary—a great name—along with Penguin Primary—another good name—East Ulverstone, the Moriarty Primary—another interesting name and a magnificent little school—the Nixon Street Primary School, the Oakwood Brethren School at East Devonport, the North West Christian School, at Penguin and my old stamping ground of 25 years, The Don College, which is going through some fundamental changes in the next year in Tasmania with post grade 10 education. And there are many other schools that I am looking forward to seeing particularly in their break-up nights towards the end of the year. It gives me great pleasure to support the Tax Laws Amendment (Education Refund) Bill 2008.

Mr MARLES (Corio) (7.00 pm)—I rise to speak in support of the Tax Laws Amendment (Education Refund) Bill 2008 but before I get into the substance of the bill I would like to welcome a number of people from my electorate who are in the building tonight to attend the inaugural FedCats annual dinner. FedCats is, of course, the parliamentary support group for the Geelong Football Club. It is very appropriate that I am making this statement, with the Minister for Sport in the chamber. Of course, the Minister for Sport supports a club of different coloured hoops, being the member for Adelaide, but she is, as the Minister for Sport, an honorary FedCat and we very much welcome that.

We have tonight Frank Costa, the President of the Geelong Football Club, Mark ‘Bomber’ Thompson, the Coach of the Geelong Football Club, and Brian Cook, the CEO of the Geelong Football Club, all attending the annual dinner. I remember my time at the ACTU and talking to Bill Kelty, the former Secretary of the ACTU who himself is an AFL commissioner. He said to me back in 2000 that those three people represented the strongest leadership trio of any team within the AFL, and he was absolutely right. As difficult as the event six weeks ago was, which we shall not mention, we will have a great night tonight with all those people here. They are very much welcome to this House. I should also say that attending the dinner tonight are a number of civic leaders from Geelong who will be in the parliament over the next few days raising a number of serious issues concerning the Geelong region with a number of ministers, and I very much welcome them here as well.

The Tax Laws Amendment (Education Refund) Bill 2008 is a bill to amend the Income Tax Assessment Act 1997 with consequential amendments to the Taxation Administration Act 1953, A New Tax System (Family Assistance Administration) Act 1999, the Social Security Administration Act 1999 and the Student Assistance Act 1973. It is a bill for the purpose of introducing the education tax refund, which will assist eligible families with children enrolled in both primary and secondary schools in meeting...
the schooling costs and other related educational expenses associated with their children’s education. It does this simply by providing a 50 per cent refundable tax offset for eligible education expenses up to a maximum of $1,500 for each secondary school child and $750 for each enrolled primary school child. As the Treasurer noted in his second reading speech in relation to this bill, that covers about 1.3 million families and 2.7 million students who will be eligible for this fund.

The bill and the associated fund is another instance of the Rudd government meeting the commitments and the promises it made in the election which has given rise to this term of parliament, and it contributes to the government’s overall education revolution policy agenda where government does mean, step by step and in a steady progressive way, to completely change our education system and to inject some robustness into it. The Rudd government sees that education is the cornerstone of social cohesion and that a strong education system lifts our national prosperity. Education assists our nation by increasing workplace participation, productivity and our nation’s wealth, and for every individual it also offers the ability to break the cycle of intergenerational poverty. It is the single most important aspect of creating opportunity within our society. As I said, the Rudd government has a plan to improve the state of our nation’s education system and step by step, very steadily, we are working towards that.

That stands in stark contrast to the efforts of the former, Howard government. Their efforts were defined by a litany of counter-productive policy measures and ineptitude, both in power and now in opposition. We can see this through a range of OECD statistics about education and the place where Australia stands, if you like, on the international league tables in a number of respects in relation to education. Recent OECD education reports spanning the final years of the Howard government ranked Australia 19 out of 28 developed nations on overall education spending, and second last only to Belgium on investment in public education institutions. Just 0.1 per cent of GDP was being spent on pre-primary institutions. That compared to an OECD average of 0.4 per cent. Indeed there were some countries, such as Israel, Denmark and Hungary, spending around 0.8 per cent of their GDP on pre-primary institutions.

Ours were the most crowded classrooms. Whereas you had countries like Hungary with on average 20 students per classroom, the Slovak Republic with 20 students per classroom, Estonia with 19, Slovenia with 18 and the Russian Federation with 16, Australia had on average 24 students per classroom. The effects of this neglect could be seen in a range of test results which showed an adverse result in terms of our educational system. For example, a 2005 study indicated that one in five children in year 7 were not meeting the benchmarks for numeracy and around one in 10 were not meeting reading and writing benchmarks. That was a national disgrace. That is exactly the reason why we need to have an education revolution in this country.

The tertiary sector fared little better. Again according to the OECD, the Howard government spend in this area towards the end of its term was only 1.1 per cent of GDP—again well below the OECD average. Australia ranked on the lower rungs of the OECD in terms of its spend on tertiary education. Only Russia, Brazil, Japan, Italy, Korea and Chile were spending less public money on their tertiary education as a proportion of GDP. Throughout the entirety of the Howard government, Australia was the only country in the OECD that reduced its spending as a proportion of GDP on tertiary education dur-
ing those years. That is as appalling a legacy as exists of the Howard years.

In 1999 the former Prime Minister promised that there would never be $100,000 university fees under his government, and yet the Good Universities Guide 2008 notes that there are more than 100 degrees listed by public universities that cost in excess of $100,000. Now that they are in opposition, we see this same policy of ineptitude continuing and a continued policy of getting it wrong in relation to education.

In this regard we have seen recent Liberal Party press releases from the new shadow education minister, the member for Sturt, which make very interesting reading. For example, on Sunday, 5 October he said:

If Labor’s figures of 116,000 new computers being delivered Australia-wide are to be believed, then just this first round could cost taxpayers as much as $600 million.

When those of us on this side of the House first heard this figure, there were many raised eyebrows indeed. But what came next was completely unbelievable. On Tuesday, 21 October the shadow minister for education said:

116,000 new computers mean a potential $3 to 4 billion out of the states bottom line.

This is hyperbole spiralling out of control. We have extravagant rhetoric which is inversely proportional to the efficacy of the coalition’s action on this area of policy.

By contrast, the Labor Party has a very proud and strong history when it comes to education policy in this country. We on this side of the House actually do know how our sums add up and we know how to apply that to the public purse. Through this bill we are building on a very strong Labor Party legacy in relation to education. It was the Chifley government that introduced university scholarships, established the Australian National University and reorganised the nation’s science research institutions into the CSIRO. It was the Whitlam government that increased education funding, abolished university fees and established the Schools Commission to oversee educational expenditure. It was the Hawke-Keating government which boosted recurrent funding for schools, expanded university places through the introduction of the Higher Education Contribution Scheme, upgraded the national traineeship and apprenticeship scheme and raised school retention rates to their highest ever levels, with almost eight in 10 students at that time completing their secondary studies. Now it is the Rudd government building on that legacy, working to correct the failings of the Howard years and advance our nation’s education system.

In doing that, we are committed to providing our nation with an education revolution. We have budgeted for this, and the centrepiece is, of course, the government’s $11 billion Education Investment Fund, the key priority of which is capital works expenditure. But we see in a range of other areas within education as well: $533 million over five years for universal access to early childhood education; $1.6 billion over four years to raise the childcare tax rebate; and $126 million over four years for early educator training. In relation to schools there is $2.5 billion over 10 years for the Trade Training Centres in Schools Program, $1.2 billion over five years to provide for the digital education revolution component of the government’s policy agenda and $577 million over four years for literacy and numeracy support. In tertiary education there is $238 million over four years for new scholarship programs, $562 million to encourage students to study in the fields of mathematics and science, $99 million to fund new nursing places and $249 million to compensate universities and replace full-fee-paying courses with Commonwealth supported courses. In addition to that is specific funding for the ad-
vancement of Indigenous education and other specialised capital works. And on top of all that is $4.4 billion in funding that will create the new education tax refund, which is the subject of this bill.

As I said at the outset, the education tax refund will provide eligible families with a 50 per cent refundable tax offset per year in relation to primary age children for up to $750 per child—that represents a $375 refund—and a 50 per cent refundable tax offset per year for every secondary school age child for up to $1,500 per child, which represents a $750 refund. Eligible families are those in receipt of family tax benefit A and those who would be eligible to receive family tax benefit A were their child not already in receipt of other payments such as the youth allowance, disability support pension or Abstudy. Enrolled students directly receiving an independent rate of income support payment may also be eligible.

There are other provisions associated with this bill: for those parents who are in shared arrangements for the raising of their child, the education tax refund will be shared between the parents according to the applicable division of the family tax benefit A; students who are enrolled for only part of a year will be eligible for half the applicable payment; students who are transitioning between primary and secondary school in the same financial year will be eligible for the secondary school rate of the refund; and home schooled students will also be eligible if they are registered with the relevant state or territory authority. The eligible expenses that can be claimed under the refund include the purchase, lease or hire-purchase of computers or computer related equipment, internet connections, computer software, text books and stationery and course prescribed tools of trade. Those eligible for the refund will be able to claim it in their 2008-09 income tax return. I, along with many of my colleagues who have spoken in this debate, would encourage parents in my electorate to make sure that they hold on to their receipts so that they can claim all of these benefits come tax time next year.

In my electorate, there are currently 11,478 families receiving family tax benefit A. That means over 20,000 children in the electorate of Corio stand to benefit as a result of this bill. I know that these funds will assist the people of my electorate, ensuring that their children receive the tools they need to engage successfully in the education process. I am absolutely sure they will welcome the government’s approach to reforming our nation’s educational system. Labor in government, both past and present, is proud of its policies and achievements in the field of education. We have always been about serving the national interest. We have been driven by a desire to increase social cohesion and productivity in our nation through educating our people. That is very much at the heart of the bill which is before the House this evening.

Conversely, those opposite have a legacy when it comes to education of ineptitude. They seem determined to maintain the approach that they had in government in opposition as well. The Rudd government has a nation-building agenda. Ensuring a well-maintained and functioning education system is absolutely at the centre of that nation-building agenda. We are working to bring to this country an education revolution to arrest the years of decline in education standards and funding that were endured under the Howard government. This bill is an important part of building that and I very much commend it to the House.

Ms OWENS (Parramatta) (7.16 pm)—Before I speak to the bill, I too welcome the Bay Cats to parliament, but point out to the member for Corio while the Minister for
Sport is in the House that everybody knows that the most significant sporting event in Geelong is in fact the Bay Crit—five days of elite cycling which takes place in early January. I look forward to spending seven days in your electorate in a couple of months time.

I am very pleased to rise to speak on the Tax Laws Amendment (Education Refund) Bill 2008. It is strongly supported by the people of my electorate. I am not surprised by how incredibly welcome it is. Education is an area that is close to my heart and to that of my electorate. Education stands at the very core of a fair society. Labor believes that education is the cornerstone of opportunity. It increases productivity and participation, it builds prosperity and it goes a long way to breaking the intergenerational cycle of poverty and hardship. More than the productivity of the nation and more than the earning capacity of an individual, education opens up the world, improves the ability to relate to a broad range of people and circumstances and allows us to experience the joy in understanding and the awe in things incomprehensible. It is very much about quality of life, quality of relationships and the very quality of our life experiences. I, like so many people in my community, am the first in my family to get a university education. Quite frankly, I cannot imagine what my life would be like if that were not the case.

In my new redistributed electorate of Parramatta, the bell curve of average household income is quite flat. We have large group of people who are quite comfortable. We have a very large group of people who live with significant disadvantage. I see far too many people disadvantaged at the youngest of ages—at the very beginning of their lives—because the natural curiosity of the child and the incessant concentration that supports the rapid learning curve of the infant have not been converted into a love of learning. We are not doing as well as a nation as we should when it comes to education.

I would like to make it quite clear here that I am not criticising schools or teachers, particularly those in my electorate. We have great teachers, great parents and some extraordinary schools. Schools such as Westmead Public, Lynwood Park and Wentworthville Public are extraordinary examples of schools doing remarkable jobs in areas of relative disadvantage. While as a nation we have been reducing our expenditure on education as a percentage of GDP, the teachers in these schools have been holding our systems together. We have not been doing well as a nation and we have not been doing well for quite a while.

In Western Sydney, that poor record as a nation is showing. For me, one of the starkest indicators of that neglect over at least a decade is that university enrolment rates are significantly lower in Western Sydney than they are Sydney wide. In fact, about three per cent of our people enrol in university, whereas Sydney wide the figure is 5.2 per cent. And that difference has widened over the last 10 years. Nationwide, retention rates have stagnated over the last decade and around one in five teenagers are not finishing high school. At a time when everybody knows that competing globally means improving our skills, one in five of our teenagers are not finishing high school. And that figure has stagnated for over a decade.

When capacity constraints were putting upward pressure on inflation, we still did not invest in education as a nation. In economic terms, that is hard to believe; in social terms, it is quite shameful. We think of ourselves as an egalitarian society, but there is still far too much correlation between income of parents and the education level of their children. That is not the case in all countries of the world but it is in ours. I know that for many
of the little kids that I see down at the shopping centres with their mums the only way out of poverty is education. That is why we committed prior to the last election to an education revolution.

After so many years of neglect, it is a hard thing to change a nation and bring about an education revolution. But our teachers have been carrying far more of the weight of education than they should. Families have been wearing the increased costs of providing education for their children, not just at school through excursion fees and other extras but in providing a learning environment for their children at home. It is that particular area—the providing of a learning environment at home—that this bill is aimed at.

The bill is another example of Labor delivering on its election commitments. This bill and a range of other policies will move this nation from a paper world to the digital one, preparing our children for a world of technology that we cannot even imagine. In this day and age, that means access to computers and the internet. We all know that children who have access to computers at a young age learn very quickly. We probably all have nieces, children and neighbours who, even at the age of four and five, can find their way around a computer far better than we can as adults. I was down at Pendle Hill Public School last week for one of their open days and I watched children in the very early years of primary school making computer animation which was quite sophisticated and very clever, working with quite sophisticated PowerPoint presentations and using interactive whiteboards quite comfortably in the classroom.

It is astonishing what an advantage it is for children to have access to computers at a very young age. It is well overdue that we equip with computer technology both our schools and, where possible, children’s homes for the future. We have the computers in schools program and we have a commitment to a national broadband to increase the speed of access around the nation. This bill is about helping parents meet the cost of educating their children in that world of computers. This bill is about setting up the home as a place where a child’s school education can be supported.

We would all know of children who do not have that kind of environment at home, who have a computer but no internet connection or who do not have access to computers at all. So let us look at who is eligible for this tax refund. Parents and others who are entitled to family tax benefit part A and who have children at either primary or secondary school will be eligible to claim this refund. In addition, those who would be eligible for family tax benefit part A but for the fact that they or their child is in receipt of other payments such as youth allowance, the disability support pension or an Abstudy living allowance will also be eligible. Students who are living independently of their parents may also be eligible to receive the education tax refund for their own expenses. When a student moves between primary school and high school during the financial year, their parents will be able to claim expenses at the secondary school rate of up to $1,500.

About 1.3 million families, with about 2.7 million students, will be eligible for the refund. In the Parramatta electorate there are over 12,000 families receiving family tax benefit part A and, again, I know how welcome this refund is for them. For those eligible families, the education tax refund will provide a 50 per cent refundable tax offset for eligible education expenses up to a maximum of $750 for children at primary school and $1,500 for children at secondary school. This means that parents will be able to recoup up to $375 of the costs incurred on eligible items for each primary school stu-
dent and up to $750 for each high school student. Because it is a tax offset, those without a tax liability will also be able to claim that amount.

Eligible expenses under this bill include: the purchase, lease or hire purchase of computers and computer related equipment such as printers and disability aids and their associated costs, a home internet connection, computer software, school textbooks and other paper based material such as stationary, and course prescribed tools of trade. I was talking to some parents about this the other week and they related to me the cost of their internet connection and the computers which they had bought specifically for their children. Of course, they will be looking to upgrade them shortly as their children get older. For many parents in my electorate this refund will be extremely welcome. I am incredibly pleased to see that purchase, lease and hire purchase of such equipment is included. This is a substantial contribution to the education of our children and a very welcome offset for working families that need it most. This bill helps parents meet the costs of giving their children the best education possible.

The opposition has made the claim that the bill does not cover a range of things such as fees, uniforms and extracurricular activities—and it does not. It covers specifically the items that I have referred to. In 12 years the now opposition had the opportunity to introduce tax refunds for those items and did not. They were apparently going to do it in their 13th year. In Julie Bishop’s speech in the second reading debate she said:

This bill reveals the government’s true colours, because it takes away choice from parents. It is dictating to parents what they must spend their money on.

This is nice emotive language but it gives far too much power to government and is, of course, laughable. People all over the country spend money on things that are not tax deductible. Holidays are not tax deductible; people still spend money on them. Tax law does not dictate what people must spend money on. We are really just not that powerful. But in helping parents meet the costs of textbooks, stationery and computer equipment there will be a flow-on effect in the family budget which may free up money for other items, such as those that the opposition is so concerned about.

This is a good, strong initiative. It has been warmly welcomed by the people in my electorate. I, like so many other members in the House, urge everybody who is eligible for this tax offset to keep their receipts this financial year so that they can make their claim after June next year.

Ms JACKSON (Hasluck) (7.27 pm)—I am pleased to rise to support the passage of this legislation before the parliament. The Tax Laws Amendment (Education Refund) Bill 2008 gives effect to another Rudd Labor government election commitment and provides for the implementation of another plank in Labor’s education revolution. One of the Labor Party’s enduring values is that a person’s opportunities in life and their standard of living are related to their educational opportunities. It is well accepted that the long-term social and economic outcomes of a nation’s people are greatly influenced by that nation’s investment in education. This government was elected because of, among other things, its stated desire to bring significant reforms to Australia’s education system based upon principles such as that all children have the right to high-quality education so that they can live fulfilling and rewarding lives. It is the responsibility of government to protect that right.

Government must increase investment in raising standards at all levels of education
and improving our participation and retention rates. Government must ensure that there is fairness in the allocation of education resources and also monitor educational outcomes. Government has the responsibility to ensure that all students have access to quality teaching. And, of course, education systems need government support so that they can meet the challenges and opportunities of the 21st century. The Rudd government has been unequivocal and clear that it will support the strategic development of information and communication technologies for the benefit of all to avoid our education system contributing to the widening gap between the information rich and the information poor.

The criticisms expressed by those opposite in this debate have unfortunately at times been trite and petty, failing to comprehend the breadth and scope of the reforms underway in our education system: the funding of Australian schools, which is the subject of legislation currently before the parliament; the new national partnerships with state and territory governments on quality teaching, a national curriculum and school transparency and accountability, which are the subject of current Council of Australian Governments negotiations for the new education funding framework; the investment in trade training centres in our schools; the billion-dollar investment in the rollout of computers in our schools; the substantial investment in the early years of a child’s education; and, of course, the universal education for four-year-olds—just some items in what is a huge agenda of reform underway in Australian schools.

On this particular piece of legislation, as the Treasurer said in his second reading speech, a key part of the education revolution is helping parents meet the everyday costs of their children’s education. This year’s budget included $4.4 billion over the next four years to create the new education tax refund. It is estimated that about 1.3 million families, with 2.7 million students between them, will be eligible for the refund. The education tax refund is a refundable tax offset of 50 per cent of eligible educational expenses for children undertaking primary and secondary school studies. Under the plan, eligible families will be able to claim 50 per cent of eligible education expenses up to $750 for each child undertaking primary school to provide a maximum tax offset of $375 per child per year. For children undertaking secondary school studies, families will be able to claim 50 per cent of their eligible expenses up to $1,500 per child to give a maximum tax offset of $750 per child per year. The eligible expenses for the purposes of the education tax refund include laptops, home computers, printers, paper, educational software, school textbooks and associated materials and trade tools. In addition, the expenses of establishing and maintaining a home internet connection are also included.

The refund will apply to eligible expenses incurred from 1 July this year. I and many other members of this House, especially on the government side, have been urging families in our electorates to start keeping receipts to allow them to claim the tax offset in their 2008-09 income tax return from 1 July 2009. Those who are not required to lodge an income tax return will be able to access their entitlement to the offset through the Australian Taxation Office by lodging a separate form at the end of the 2008-09 financial year.

I have been meeting with parents, schools, training providers and teachers in my electorate to discuss Labor’s education revolution in public and private schools, high schools, primary schools and special education facilities. I have to say there is a thoughtful discussion occurring across the community about Labor’s education revolution as well as many of the other issues that are alive in our education systems. There is
one area that attracts strong support from all quarters, and that is the importance of digital education for the future. There is a recognition that computers, smart boards and digital learning are the way of the future for the 21st century. Indeed, I participated in a meeting with some of the training providers in my electorate of Hasluck and was shown a demonstration of what is now commonly in vogue in many areas around the world: virtual skills training—a computer based operation that shows the person how to weld. They put on goggles, it sounds as if they are welding, it looks to them as if they are welding and yet it is being done in a classroom setting in a computer laboratory. It is likewise with spray painting. Whilst I accept that, ultimately, for a full and rounded education these people will need to demonstrate these skills in a practical workplace setting, nevertheless the opportunity to be exposed to detailed skills training via computers is quite something. It does not stop there. The learning opportunities and capabilities were extraordinary.

It was really brought home to me at one of my local primary schools—a lovely school in my electorate of Hasluck called Orange Grove Primary School. It is a tiny public school in my electorate, nestled in the foothills. It has approximately 120 children and fewer than 10 teachers. I was incredibly impressed when I visited the school earlier this year, especially when the principal, Pat Nottle, told me that from the commencement of 2008 the school had achieved a student-laptop ratio of one to one for years 4 to 7. I told them that they were ahead of the game, because we are still trying to get a ratio of one to two or one to one in most of our high schools, and that I was incredibly impressed to see this already implemented at a primary school. She explained to me that this innovation had not just come out of nowhere—that the school had been engaged in a ‘conversation’, as she described it, with teachers and parents, as well as students, about how best to prepare their children for the 21st century future. The discussion about resources and requirements for their school went for six to 12 months. As she explained to me, their vision was ‘good old-fashioned teaching, combined with the best that new technology has to offer’. It truly is extraordinary to see these children arriving each day at school with their laptop computers and, equally, taking them home again. It is an interesting transition between the work they do at school and the work they are able to do at home.

These children are incredibly advanced in their digital education, and I encourage those of you who surf the net to visit the Orange Grove Primary School’s website and to have a look at some of the work being produced by the children on their Podkids Australia site, which is a series of podcasts of lessons prepared by these particular students. Not only have the children been involved in innovative work at their own school but many of them have been involved in collaborative projects internationally and nationally through the resource of the internet. It truly is an extraordinary achievement for the school, and I know that it is in great part the responsibility of some wonderful teachers who have driven the process at the school.

When I was visiting there I was concerned about how parents in the local area had been able to cope with the potential costs associated with resourcing one computer per student throughout the primary school. I understand that some 20 per cent of parents were identified as requiring some financial assistance. As well as financial assistance for those parents there was an opportunity for people to lease their computers, to pay them off on a periodic basis or to purchase them outright. I will never forget speaking to a group of mothers from the P&C who were—surprise, surprise!—working in the school
canteen on the day. They talked to me about how important they saw the future of communication and information technology being in the school. One mother described it to me. She said that in her day her parents had scrimped and saved for the monthly copy of the *World Book Encyclopedia* and that she saw the lease payment she was making on her child’s laptop as today’s equivalent of that. I have to say that it was an analogy that really rang true to me as I also recall my family scrimping and saving but still having the money for the *World Book Encyclopedia* and, of course, the regular update that you had to buy each year to keep your encyclopedia reasonably current. I absolutely agree with her that today’s equivalent of having access to encyclopedias is allowing your children to have access to computers and to the internet.

So, unlike the member for Canning, who said in his speech that he saw Labor’s emphasis—and indeed their funding—as a kind of narrowing along a digital highway for schools, I think the future lies down the pathway of digital education. It is a considerably important part of the education revolution. That was a view confirmed to me by the discussions that I have been having with teachers and parents in public and private schools throughout my electorate. And, yes, we know that such an expansion into digital education requires great support and resources. That is why I am proud to be part of Labor’s team that has seen a significant rollout of computers in schools—a program that I know will continue. And that is why I am proud of this particular initiative that will allow parents to claim some of the costs of investing in their own children’s education. These are things of which we can be incredibly proud. I commend the legislation to the House.

Mr CRAIG THOMSON (Dobell) (7.41 pm)—I rise to support the Tax Laws Amendment (Education Refund) Bill 2008. The bill will provide extra assistance to families to meet the costs of educating their children. This government proposes to introduce a 50 per cent education tax refund aimed at assisting families with children undertaking primary or secondary school studies to meet the costs of school education through assistance with certain education expenses.

You cannot talk about this piece of legislation in isolation—without talking about the education revolution. I want to spend a little bit of time talking about that and the alternative policies that were put by the former government. In last year’s election campaign the education revolution featured very prominently, with our now Prime Minister and all Labor candidates reaching a contract with the voting public of Australia. The people of Australia, including those on the Central Coast, knew that while our schools were good they could be doing better. People were fed up with our schools and our kids being used as political footballs in a corrosive blame game between the federal and state governments. We had a Liberal federal government at the time that had raised its hands in surrender over reforming our creaking, dated education system. They had gone down the easy road, opting to write media releases blaming state governments rather than embarking on any real reform in educational policies.

We had a lot of talk through the years of the Howard government but precious little action on education direction. The government did not strike up a national conversation about how our schools would teach children in a digital world or about the fact that Australia was slipping substantially in world standards in maths and science and that funding was not giving all Australian kids a fair go. In education the only reforms the Liberal Party seemed interested in were the so-called culture war issues. Instead of addressing a brain drain that was seeing our brightest go
overseas and add to other countries’ economies and instead of properly resourcing our tertiary education systems to give our kids a competitive advantage in a globalised world, the Liberals shirked these challenges and instead reverted to their obsessions from their Young Liberals days—like voluntary student unionism and ideological positioning on how history is taught. In fact, the major contribution that the Liberal Party made to education in primary schools was in insisting that they had flagpoles. This is a government that was there for 12 years, and that was their contribution to the education debate!

Not surprisingly, due to their inaction, Australia was falling further behind in world education standards. The former government did an incredible disservice to a generation of young people and to our nation. Our scorecard during their term in office was nothing short of embarrassing. We were ranked 18th in terms of percentage of gross domestic product invested in education. Australian maths and science was ranked 29th in the world. Public investment in universities fell by seven per cent during the Howard years compared with an OECD average of a 48 per cent increase.

Imagine, for a second, instead of gold, silver and bronze medals, that the very best swimmers in the country were only reaching 18th or 29th in the Olympics. Australians would be outraged—and rightly so. We would demand that sports departments invest more in swimming programs from the earliest years. We would demand that our children be encouraged to become the best swimmers so that that would be a matter of national pride. We would not allow ourselves to lose a competitive advantage in swimming and slip behind the US, China and—God forbid!—the United Kingdom. Similarly, Australians are not happy with the way things are going in schools. They may not be worried because of statistics or because of any particular data, but when I speak to mums and dads in my electorate they tell me that more should and must be done.

In 2007 Kevin Rudd brought change to a debate that had been stale and too obsessed with ideological positions rather than with what was in the best interests of our kids and our nation. The Labor Party gave the common-sense argument that there is an undeniable link between the strength of our economy and the strength of our educational systems. In a time of greater economic uncertainty and upheaval it has become clearer that Australia must make real reforms to our education system.

We have promised to improve access to early childhood education; to ensure that our schools focus on achieving higher standards, greater accountability and better results; and to invest up to $1.5 million for high schools to create trade training centres in all of Australia’s 2,650 secondary schools and up to $1 million per high school to allow every Australian student in years 9 to 11 to have access to their own school computer, with the aim of lifting school retention rates from 75 per cent to 90 per cent by 2020.

Nothing strikes a chord more in my electorate than the issue of retention rates. In the electorate of Dobell, retention rates sit at a dismal 44.3 per cent. We are just over 30 per cent behind the national average, let alone the 90 per cent. What parents in my electorate are telling me is that without proper investment in education the kids from Dobell are not going to get an even chance or have the same opportunities as kids from richer areas. Therefore, keeping them in school is absolutely vital and that is one of the key parts of this education revolution.

We have also invested over $1 billion in providing an additional 450 skilled training places over the next four years to help lift the productive capacity of the Australian econ-
omy and fight inflation. We have encouraged students to study and teach maths and science by halving their HECS and halving it again if they work in those fields after graduation. And, to keep our best and brightest in Australia, we have doubled to 88,000 the number of undergraduate students receiving a Commonwealth learning scholarship and provided 1,000 new Future Fellowships for mid-career researchers.

In the broadest terms, we believe that the higher levels of knowledge, education and skills right across our population will lead to higher productivity, prosperity and social progress. It is a belief backed up by evidence. Figures from credible world organisations such as the OECD have shown a strong correlation between school completion and higher per capita gross domestic product. The current economic boom may be in the minerals and mining area, but we believe the next one will be built on our knowledge and skills—but only if we increase investments and ensure that investment is well directed.

As I have touched on, the government was elected last year with a central pledge to create an education revolution by raising investment, lifting standards and insisting on rigour from early years to PhD programs. The federal budget earlier this year delivered on those promises. The government’s major commitments comprise an unprecedented $19.3 billion in new investments to create an education revolution that aims to secure our economic future and create an inclusive society.

It is true that Australia ranks highly in terms of test results, but we can and should do better. Worryingly, there is evidence of slippage in our performance at a time when we know that standing still is equal to falling behind. One of the ways we can avoid this is by improving equity in relation to education. The best education systems leave no-one behind. If we continue with an education system that leaves people behind then the children of Dobell are doomed to the sorts of low-socioeconomic jobs that we currently have in my electorate. An education revolution is vital for seats like Dobell.

We need to recognise failure and address it. We need to have a similar psychology towards underperformance in our education and training systems. In other words, we must refuse to accept that low socioeconomic status makes it okay for poorer children to fail at school. The answer is not simple. While higher levels of investment in struggling schools and low-socioeconomic school communities will help, that is not the whole answer. A whole suite of solutions is required—most importantly, investing in early learning, accelerating literacy and numeracy programs, attracting high-achieving graduates to teaching, rewarding quality teaching and arming teachers with an improved national curriculum which provides more effective classroom instruction methods, better facilities and good school leadership.

According to last year’s *It’s crunch time* report by the Dusseldorp Skills Forum, around half a million Australians between the ages of 15 and 24 are neither in full-time work nor in full-time education. Every year they are joined by another 45,000 to 50,000 early school leavers who should be on the path to becoming skilled tradespeople, para-professionals and professionals but who are ending up drifting through casual jobs, often unable to attract a partner or have a supportive network of friends. These young people will not be in a position to buy a home. We know that this work and personal insecurity contribute to homelessness, substance abuse and other tragedies for the individuals involved. Our society as a whole is the loser.
The imperative for getting this right is moral and economic. It has been estimated that the failure of young people to make a smooth transition to the world of work is costing our economy some $1.3 billion per year, and the cost of failure is only going to increase if we do nothing. In the modern economy we simply cannot afford to have around one in five young people not contributing. On the Central Coast, in my electorate, we have just over 20 per cent youth unemployment. We have over seven per cent unemployment there already. Clearly, this is linked to the fact that we have only 44.3 per cent of our students going on from year 10 to year 12.

Fewer skilled workers as a proportion of an ageing population in a knowledge and skill intensive economy will mean declining national productivity. The benefits from success, however, will be substantial. Access Economics has estimated that increasing the proportion of young people completing school or an apprenticeship to 90 per cent would boost annual GDP by 1.1 per cent by 2040—$9.2 billion, or $500 for every household in the country.

We need to start from the position that it is simply unacceptable for teenagers not to have the life and work skills necessary for getting and holding a job. Dropping out or being left behind cannot be an option. So what is the answer? Ultimately it is to keep more young people engaged in education and training to enable them to gain a post-secondary qualification. Today there are five million working aged Australians without a qualification at certificate III level or above.

Some critics have argued that education and training rarely helps people on welfare find jobs and that all we have to do is lower the minimum wage. They are wrong. We saw that type of approach adopted by the former government in their approach to industrial relations and the dreaded Work Choices legislation. We know that at age 24 only 68 per cent of early school leavers are in employment or higher education and training compared to 90 per cent of those with year 12 or its equivalent. This higher level of unemployment for those without year 12 or its equivalent continues throughout life. This is why, through COAG, we have adopted the goal of 90 per cent year 12 attainment by 2020.

The starting point to improving transition is coming to grips with the pattern of change in the economy and pinpointing where the new jobs are emerging. To guide us through this we have established a new body, Skills Australia, and reinvigorated existing industry skills councils. To help us meet the demand they identify for non-professional skills, we are significantly increasing the nation’s trade training effort, including by providing $2.5 billion to existing trade training centres in our secondary schools with facilities that meet industry standards in both traditional and emerging industries and 630,000 new training places, including 85,000 new apprenticeships, with the majority at the crucial certificate III and higher levels. Creating pathways to these training places and professions begins with giving every young person a firm foundation of key learning skills like literacy and numeracy, information and communication technology use and a broad knowledge base across key academic disciplines from maths and science to literature, history and geography.

But, to make the transition to post compulsory education and the world of work, students also need direction, motivation and skills. For that reason, we are supporting a range of initiatives, including $5 billion over four years to encourage mentors for students, $84 million to enable interested secondary school students participating in vocational education and training to access one day a
week on the job training for 20 weeks a year, and a job ready certificate for those students to ensure their training includes a range of employable skills that will enable them to move into the workforce. Providing these additional programs will go some way to making a difference, but we also recognise the need to build capacity in the careers advice sector. Over time, we expect these measures to help lower school dropout rates.

Today a number of simultaneous facts—like severe skills shortages, our ageing population and the growth in importance of higher level skills and knowledge based work—mean that the days of turning a blind eye to failure at the bottom are over. The Rudd government is determined to do something about it. We are investing in early learning, improving teaching in our schools, raising standards overall and assisting young people make the transition to adulthood by helping them find a pathway to post compulsory education and employment.

Any help that can be offered to encourage Australians to better educate their children is most welcome, particularly in times of tough financial pressures. A key part of the education revolution is helping parents meet the everyday costs of their children’s education. That is why the budget included $4.4 billion to create the new education tax refund which is proposed in this bill. The education tax refund is a refundable tax offset of 50 per cent of eligible education expenses for children undertaking primary and secondary school studies. About 1.3 million families with 2.7 million students will be eligible for the refund.

Let us recap how Australian families stand to benefit from these changes. Under the plan, eligible families will be able to claim 50 per cent of eligible education expenses—to a maximum tax offset of $375 per child per year. For children undertaking secondary school education, families will be able to claim 50 per cent of their eligible expenses—up to $1,500 per child—to get a maximum tax offset of $750 per child per year. Eligible expenses for the purposes of the education tax refund are laptops, home computers, printers, paper, educational software, school textbooks and associated materials and trade tools. In addition, the expenses of establishing and maintaining a home internet connection are also included.

The refund will apply to eligible expenses incurred from 1 July 2008. Those eligible for the education tax refund need to start keeping receipts to allow them to claim the tax offset in their 2008-09 income tax return from 1 July 2009. Those not required to lodge an income tax return will be able to access their entitlements to the offset through the Australian Taxation Office by lodging a separate form at the end of the 2008-09 financial year. In addition, consequential amendments will be made to allow effective data sharing about education tax refund recipients between Centrelink and the Australian Taxation Office to enable the ATO to administer and monitor the take-up of the education tax refunds.

Let me remind the House that, for Labor, better education is the cornerstone of a decent society. Education increases productivity and participation. It builds prosperity and it also offers the hope of breaking the intergenerational cycle of poverty. While our predecessors spoke of improving Australia’s education system, we are getting on with the job of real education reform. Part of that reform is to help families better meet the costs of educating their children. That is what this bill does. That is why I support it and commend it to the House.

Ms COLLINS (Franklin) (7.58 pm)—I rise tonight to speak in favour of a tax law
amendment that will create the new education tax refund. The Tax Laws Amendment (Education Refund) Bill 2008 is tax reform that will help working mums and dads with the cost of educating their children. It is about lending a hand to help working families. Creating this tax reform will help families meet their schooling costs and it will ease the cost-of-living pressures for Australia’s working families.

The Rudd Labor government is delivering on its election commitment by providing this education tax refund. Around 1.3 million Australian families will be eligible for this education refund. The initiative is investing $4.4 billion in financial support to help working families meet the growing costs of educating their children. It will put money back into the pockets of the many Australian families with school aged children. As a parent, I know how important it is to give your kids the best possible start in their education. I am sure that the eligible parents of the 50-odd schools in my electorate will appreciate being able to claim this rebate. In fact, it is estimated that this measure will help the families of around 2.7 million school aged children meet the costs of their education.

As children progress through primary school to secondary school, the cost of equipping them for schooling over those years is certainly a significant one. The delivery of education has changed dramatically in recent times, and we all know that technology plays an important role in how our children are educated. Computer technology is one such example. As the Prime Minister has said on several occasions, computers are the toolbox for the 21st century. The internet and computers link both primary and secondary students to a global world. Computer and internet technologies continue to evolve at a fast pace, and we must ensure that the education of Australia’s children keeps up to speed with this constantly changing environment. To be left behind is not an option. Australian children must be computer literate. The digital economy is a fundamental component of every aspect of business and of our daily lives.

The education tax refund is one measure that could be used to help children keep pace with information and communication technology changes. Eligible families would be able to recoup the cost of purchasing laptops and home computers. The other costs that are refundable under this education refund are home internet connections, printers, educational software, prescribed trade tools for use at school, school textbooks and stationery. Families who receive the family tax benefit part A, or would do so if they were not in receipt of other payments such as youth allowance or the DSP, will be entitled to this new education tax refund for eligible education expenses. Eligible parents will be able to claim a 50 per cent rebate every year for up to $750 of education expenses for each child attending primary school—that is, a refund of up to $375 per student per year. For each child attending secondary school, eligible parents will be able to claim a 50 per cent refund for up to $1,500 of educational expenses—that is, a tax refund of $750 per student in high school per year. I take this opportunity to remind parents to start keeping their receipts for when they lodge their tax returns next year. Those who do not lodge tax returns, as others have said, can get a form from the ATO.

This investment of $4.4 billion is financial support to help over a million working families. It was an integral part of this government’s working families package, which was announced in the budget in May this year. It is part of the $55 billion support package for working families to take the pressure off the household budget. The package also included $46.7 billion worth of personal income tax cuts for working Australians. These cuts will
mean that an average family is around $50 a week better off since these tax cuts began in July this year. There was also $1.6 billion to increase the rate and frequency of the childcare cash rebate to help families meet the costs of child care. We have increased the childcare cash rebate for parents with children in approved care from thirty per cent to fifty per cent. The government is also going to make this payment quarterly and, from last month, on an ongoing basis. I know many families in my electorate of Franklin who received this payment in the last fortnight are really pleased to be receiving it quarterly. We have also increased the yearly limit claimable for a child under the childcare tax rebate from around $4,300 per child in care to $7,500 per child. All of these measures will provide families with a benefit of between $500 and $2,500 for an average family with one child in child care.

The package in the budget delivered assistance to working families under financial pressure and will also help prepare Australia for its future economic challenges, and today we face one of the biggest economic challenges. Since the budget the world has changed, and just a couple of weeks ago the Rudd government announced an Economic Security Strategy. This decisive action will provide $10.4 billion to strengthen the Australian economy and to support Australian households during the global financial crisis. The Economic Security Strategy will help ensure our economy emerges in strong shape so that we can provide quality jobs and security for working families into the future. More tax relief will be delivered to families who receive family tax benefit A through a one-off payment of $1,000 for each eligible child in their care as at 14 October this year, to be paid from 8 December over that fortnight. We strengthen our economy and support working families through measures such as these and the education tax refund. We are providing additional relief right now when families need it most, but we also have a plan to ensure we continue to support working families well into the future.

This government committed to an education revolution in the lead-up to the election campaign in 2007. It was an election promise that the Australian people embraced and supported. The Rudd government is delivering on the education plan—the education revolution—which provides for a range of measures. This tax refund is just a part of that. Quality education is one of the greatest gifts we can give our young Australians because it allows our students to achieve personal success and contribute to national strength and our prosperity. To be globally competitive we need a world-class education system, and we believe that every Australian child deserves a world-class education and that this should start at the very beginning. The education revolution has a strong foundation. It is Australian kids that are the focus of the revolution.

An important measure that is critical to delivering the education revolution is around our integrated early childhood initiatives. The Rudd government will invest $2.4 billion over the next five years in integrated early childhood measures alone. Early childhood education and the childcare sector are a critical component in preparing all children for learning and for life. Over the next four years the Australian government will invest over $126 million to train and retrain a high-quality early childhood education workforce. We will also establish up to 260 additional early learning and care centres across Australia by 2014. We are committed to making a difference.

Improving the literacy and numeracy of primary school students is also high on the list for the Australian government. In the lead-up to National Literacy and Numeracy
Week I was fortunate enough to pay a visit to Warrane Primary School, which is situated in the electorate of Franklin, along with the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Education. I was really pleased to hear the Deputy Prime Minister announce that the Rudd government will contribute $4 million in funding to expand the Raising the Bar and Closing the Gap pilot program in Tasmanian schools. This pilot program provides targeted support to schools like Warrane Primary to increase the number of children finishing their primary education with functional literacy and numeracy skills. It is a great program and has been well supported by the Tasmanian state Labor government also.

Overall, the Rudd government will invest over $40 million in 29 literacy and numeracy pilot projects in schools across Australia. The pilot program is all about getting the basics right at school so we can give our kids a helping hand to reach their full potential. Education measures like this, combined with the education tax refund, go a long way to help Australian families and their children.

The Rudd government is also determined to improve results for those in the secondary school system. The Australian government is committed to lifting the numbers of Australian children completing year 12 or equivalent to 90 per cent of all students by 2020. In Tasmania our retention rates are very low, and I know that the state Labor government is also working hard to meet targets.

As I have said previously, computers and the internet are part and parcel of our daily lives. For students, computer technology and access to the internet are key components of the delivery of education in most Australian classrooms at senior secondary level. This is why the Rudd government has put such an emphasis on digital technology and investing in a digital education revolution. The Fibre Connections to Schools initiative to facilitate high-speed broadband is also progressing. A $100 million funding package has been allocated to this initiative. From this funding the government has allocated $32 million over two years to supply students and teachers across Australia with online curriculum tools and resources. Assistance will also be available to make the best use of information and communication technology, with the development of support mechanisms. This will receive funding of $10 million over three years. In addition, $11.25 million will be directed through state and territory governments for professional development in information and communication technology. Another commitment in the education revolution is the Local Schools Working Together initiative, which will provide over $62 million over four years to construct shared facilities between government and non-government schools. This will increase education options, particularly in growth areas where infrastructure is under strain.

We are investing $1 billion over four years in the digital education revolution to improve secondary school students’ access and to equip them for the jobs of the future. The Rudd government believes there is a need to upgrade ICT in our schools through the digital education revolution. We want our children to have the education tools for the 21st century. More access to computers in schools, combined with tax relief, could also be used to assist children to access computers and the internet from home. As I talk to my constituents across the seat of Franklin, I know the sacrifices that many parents make to ensure the best possible outcomes for their children’s educations. They want them to have access to a home computer and they want them to have access to the internet. Parents are often forced to juggle their responsibilities and their household budgets to pay for the education costs, which have been on the rise over past years. Families are facing a range of cost pressures, including...
mortgage repayments, petrol prices and grocery bills. When you add the growing cost of education to the household budget, you can understand why these financial pressures exist.

If Australia is to continue to succeed economically, there is no doubt that our Aussie kids who are attending an early childhood learning centre, a primary school or a secondary school today will be an integral component of this nation’s success. We know that education provides these individuals with the opportunity for success. I believe quality education will help prosper this nation. It will also help prosper our children, who will be the next generation to take Australia forward. To achieve this, we need to give Australia’s working families all the extra help we can. If part of this includes easing the burden on their household budgets by removing some of the financial pressure as a way to assist then this is something I fully support. I commend this bill to the House.

Mr CHEESEMAN (Corangamite) (8.10 pm)—I very much enjoyed the contribution made to the debate by the member for Franklin. Education is fundamental; it is the basis of a peaceful society, of a prosperous society, of a productive society and of a humane society. The hope for a better world, of course, is in education. The hope to bridge the gap between the haves and have-nots is in education. The hope that we will solve the wars that Australians are currently involved in is in education. The hope that Australia can maintain a country with strong employment is in education. The hope that all Australians can have at least equity and opportunity is in education. The hope for Australians to be healthier and live longer is in education. The hope for Australia to move from being one of the world’s worst polluters per head is in education. The hope that we can solve the mess that we have made of our planet is in education. ‘Education’, in my view, is another word for ‘hope’. That is why Labor’s education revolution is so important.

That is why the Tax Laws Amendment (Education Refund) Bill 2008, as one of the major planks in Labor’s education revolution, is critical. Our future workforce will be dominated by high-value skills and knowledge based industries. Australian manufacturing will be a specialist, knowledge based manufacturing economy. Our employment base in traditional manufacturing and primary and heavy industries has been declining. We need to equip our children with the right skills for these future industries. Today this is an enormous challenge. Of the many failings of the previous conservative government, perhaps the greatest of all was the massive skills black hole that they left behind. Not only is there a huge deficit in the skills and traditional trades; there is also a deep and widespread skills shortage for future industries. As usual, the task of rebuilding the education and skill base of our nation has fallen back to a Labor government—this time a Rudd Labor government. This legislation is an important part of the Rudd Labor government’s commitment to an education revolution. The commitments in this bill seek to increase the attainment level of Australian students across the board and provide better education for our children. The Tax Laws Amendment (Education Refund) Bill 2008 is aimed at assisting families with children undertaking primary and secondary school studies to meet the costs of school education through assistance with a wide range of education expenses.

This legislation proposes an education tax refund for 1.3 million families with children undertaking primary and secondary school education. It allows these families to claim a 50 per cent tax offset each year. This will provide significant financial assistance to families to help meet the costs of educating their children. Under the education tax re-
fund, eligible families and approved care organisations will be able to claim a 50 per cent refundable tax offset every year for up to $750 of eligible expenses for each child undertaking primary school. This refund equates to a tax offset of up to $375 per child per year for educational expenses incurred. Families who have children undertaking secondary school studies, including vocational education and training courses, will be able to claim 50 per cent of eligible expenses up to $1,500 per child, which equates to a $750 tax offset each year. As a part of Labor’s education revolution, we will also be better supporting teachers and the further development of school curriculums. We are providing a massive boost to the availability of technology in schools as well through our More Computers in Schools program and our support for continuous integration of information technology into education.

This legislation, and Labor’s education revolution, is about providing better opportunities for all Australian children. It is about making sure that all Australian children are better prepared for the challenges of our future. Education and training play an important role in increasing the productive capacity of our economy. School attainment is positively linked to higher levels of employment and labour force participation. The effect of greater school attainment flows into consequently lower unemployment and higher productivity of those in work. This has the effect of allowing higher levels of economic growth without increasing inflationary pressures in our economy. It is a triple whammy: lower unemployment, higher productivity, and economic growth without inflation. That is the equation that the Howard government never got. It is the equation that the Turnbull opposition still do not get.

School attainment assists labour force entry and re-entry and has direct correlation with higher levels of productivity, which has the ongoing effect of providing higher wages. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, in 2006 the unemployment rates for people aged 25 to 64 with no post-school qualifications were 2.9 and 1.3 percentage points higher than for those with post-school qualifications. For those people with a degree or higher, the difference in unemployment rates were even greater. Participation rates for those with post-school education have also been found to be consistently around 15 percentage points higher than for those with no post-school education. The statistics on educational attainment and the impacts on employment and productivity are absolutely clear, and they have been for a long time. By providing financial assistance to families to offset the costs of educating children, we will increase participation rates and increase the level of school attainment.

This legislation ensures families who get family tax benefit part A and who have one or more children undertaking primary or secondary school studies are still eligible for the education tax refund. Those parents with one or more children who would be an eligible child for the purposes of family tax benefit A but for the fact that their child receives certain payments and allowances will also be eligible for the education tax refund. These allowances include youth allowance, disability support pension and Abstudy living allowance. Students undertaking primary or secondary school studies and receiving an independent rate of income support payments may also be eligible for the education tax refund with respect to their own expenses. For families eligible for family tax benefit part A who have shared care arrangements or shared receipt of family tax benefit A, the education tax refund will be shared just as the family tax benefit A is shared between the parents. For those families in similar arrangements that are in receipt of other payments, a similar arrange-
ment for sharing the education tax refund between eligible parents will occur.

In this modern age, the importance of access to the internet for students is paramount. The internet provides an endless resource for students accessing material. Through internet usage students develop improved all-round knowledge and IT skills which are fundamental to the modern workplace. It is significant that a part of this bill is the inclusion of rebates for home computers and associated accessories. This bill recognises the fundamental importance of home computers as an education tool. This bill, through these home computer subsidies, will again help to boost educational attainment across the board. It will also help to address one of the barriers to education for lower socioeconomic groups. Whilst there is obviously extremely widespread acceptance of home computers—and certainly the uptake of broadband in Australia has been enthusiastic, to say the least—it is often the lower end of the socioeconomic spectrum that goes without this key study resource. In 2006 to 2007, 64 per cent of Australian households had home access and 73 per cent had access to a home computer.

The Australian Bureau of Statistics publication Household use of information technology, Australia, 2006-07 found that, overall, 61 per cent of people aged 15 years and over accessed the internet at home during 2006-07 financial year. Personal or private was stated as the most popular purpose for internet use at home, with 98 per cent of those using the internet at home doing so for this purpose, followed by education or study, which was 53 per cent of users. Whilst the proportion of Australian households with access to the internet is quite high, the Australian Bureau of Statistics points out that high-income earners and people with higher levels of educational attainment register relatively higher levels of broadband access.

Ensuring better access to the internet and IT skills for every Australian is absolutely essential for Australia’s future and for bridging the educational opportunity gap.

The growth in the IT sector in providing employment is very marked. Federal and state Labor governments have been both supporting and driving this industry as part of our key regional development opportunities. In my seat of Corangamite there have been a number of federal and state government initiatives that have benefited local communities. Over the past nine years the Brumby government has facilitated the development and expansion of programs such as the Ballarat Technology Park precinct, which constituents in the northern part of my electorate have benefited from immensely. Recently the Labor state government relocated the Transport Accident Commission headquarters to Geelong. This will generate 850 jobs, providing a welcome boost to the local economy. Many of these are IT jobs. In April of this year Deakin University’s corporate education arm, DeakinPrime, announced a deal with giant Indian IT company Satyam to build a $75 million, 10-hectare complex at Geelong which will, in the future, employ 2,000 people.

Another new technology park is now being planned in the new city of Armstrong Creek sitting within my electorate between Geelong and Torquay. The future employees of initiatives such as the Ballarat Technology Park, the TAC in Geelong and DeakinPrime in Waurn Ponds are going to require the technology skills. That is what this legislation is all about.

This government is conducting broad education reform, providing assistance to families to increase the minimum levels of support available to our children. This legislation goes to the fundamentals of what the Australian Labor Party and the Labor gov-
ernments are all about. We are the party of opportunity. We are the party that has always provided opportunity for all. We are also the party that thinks ahead for future generations. The conservatives have always been about the benefits for a few, the party of the survival of the fittest or, more accurately, the survival of the most privileged. I often wonder how the Leader of the Opposition could so easily walk away from the values of the communities he grew up in, the communities of his childhood.

This legislation is about providing opportunity, as I have said. It is good for our community. It is good for our environment and it is good for our economy as well. It provides better access to current IT resources. It will raise the breadth of skills for our future economy. It recognises and harnesses the educational role of computers in the home and the role they can play in the education of primary and secondary students. There is a specific provision for computer related expenses that can be claimed against the education tax refund covering purchase, lease, hire or hire purchase costs of laptops and home computers. This includes associated costs of printers and paper, educational software and school textbooks. In addition, the expenses associated with establishing and maintaining a home internet connection are also eligible expenses.

This bill also provides for students to undertake vocational education and training programs which by their nature can sometimes be quite expensive. Prescribed trade tools are expenses that can be claimed under this legislation, which will assist students who wish to undertake vocational education and training programs. This is part of a coordinated effort by this government to increase the retention rates of students to year 12 or equivalent.

In summary, this bill will have a broad educational impact and effect. It recognises a range of things that are important in supporting and fostering educational participation and attainment. It fosters our community. It fosters our economy. Legislation for this measure needs to be in place by 30 June 2009 to allow for individuals to claim the education tax refund in their 2008-09 income tax returns from 1 July 2009. For those who are not required to complete an income tax return, a separate form will be available from the Australian Taxation Office to assist those families access these benefits. Individuals who do not pay tax will still benefit from this important reform. As the education tax refund is a refundable tax offset, any part of the offset that cannot be used to reduce an individual’s tax liability is paid out to the taxpayer. As potential recipients are required to begin keeping receipts for eligible expenses it would be preferable to have the legislation in place as soon as possible. This would enable the ATO to begin providing advice to potential recipients.

In conclusion, I would like to bring attention to the current instability in world markets and the importance of investing in productivity and growth. The most effective way of building productivity and growth is to invest in human capital. This bill is one of our important investments in human capital or, in simpler terms, this bill is about investing in people and investing in all Australians. In the May budget the Labor party included $4.4 billion to create the new education tax refund. This is a real education reform. It is a part of Labor’s education revolution and I commend this bill to the House.

Ms NEAL (Robertson) (8.27 pm)—I rise in the House tonight to speak in support of the Tax Laws Amendment (Education Refund) Bill 2008. The Rudd Labor government is in the process of creating an education revolution in Australia. This bill before
the House is another fundamental building block that will underpin that revolution.

I recently spoke in support of the Schools Assistance Bill, another of the government’s education initiatives which came before this House. That bill will provide uniform funding measures for the $28 billion that the Rudd Labor government will allocate to non-government schools in general and recurrent grants across Australia in the next four-year funding period. So I am delighted to be able to speak about another government initiative that strengthens Australia’s education sector and provides much needed financial support to parents putting their children through their years of schooling.

The Tax Laws Amendment (Education Refund) Bill contains measures that introduce an education tax refund, or ETR, for Australian families. To achieve this goal the current bill will amend the Income Tax Assessment Act 1997 as well as other pieces of legislation dealing with family assistance, student assistance and other social security measures. The ETR will provide a 50 per cent refundable tax offset for eligible education expenses up to a maximum of $750 for children undertaking primary education studies and $1,500 for children undertaking secondary education studies.

The establishment of refundable tax offsets for educational expenses was a 2008-09 budget measure that fulfilled a 2007 election policy commitment to the people of Australia. The measure will be funded through a $4.4 billion allocation of federal government money over four years. The ETR will offer a framework of valuable financial assistance through a valuable tax offset to all parents with kids studying in schools across the country. It is anticipated that approximately 1.3 million families with approximately 2.7 million students will be eligible for the education tax refund. This is a level of practical support that will go a long way towards defraying the rising expenses of education for a significant number of Australian families. If Australia is to prepare its students for a rapidly changing world, then assistance for parents to meet these expenses is essential.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Ms S Bird)—Order! It being 8.30 pm, the debate is interrupted in accordance with standing order 34. The debate is adjourned and the resumption of the debate will be made an order of the day for the next sitting. The member will have leave to continue speaking when the debate is resumed.

PETITIONS

Mrs Irwin—On behalf of the Standing Committee on Petitions, and in accordance with standing order 207, I present the following petition:

Age Pension

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

This Petition Of Certain Citizens Of Australia Draws the attention of the House to the inadequacy of the Age Pension to provide a decent standard of living for older Australians. Older Australians need sufficient income to enable them to live healthy lives as active members of their communities.

We therefore ask the House to increase the Age Pension to guarantee a decent standard of living for those whose total income is inadequate to meet today’s costs of living.

by Mrs Irwin (from 27 citizens)

Petition received.

Responses

Mrs Irwin—Ministerial responses to petitions previously presented to the House have been received as follows:
Sunshine Coast: Palliative Care and Hospice Facilities

Dear Mrs Irwin

Thank you for your letter of 4 September 2008 to the Minister for Health and Ageing, the Hon Nicola Roxon MP, regarding a petition recently submitted for the Standing Committee’s consideration regarding palliative care and hospice accommodation. As Minister with executive responsibility for palliative care, I am responding on behalf of the Australian Government.

In recognition of the needs of terminally ill patients, the National Palliative Care Strategy is continuing to improve the quality, range and coverage of palliative care services for all Australians. The Australian Government funds a range of projects nationally to support improved palliative care. However, it has no funding to support the ongoing operations of local palliative care services.

The States and Territories are generally very active in palliative care and provide a range of integrated services through acute care settings and community health. Primary care, especially general practitioners, also makes a significant contribution to palliative care. The Australian Government mainly funds primary care through the Medicare Benefits Schedule and the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme.

While the Australian Government and the States and Territories are committed to working together to improve palliative care services, specific palliative care services are provided by the States and Territories as part of their hospital and community health service provision. I appreciate you writing on this matter.

from the Minister for Ageing, Mrs Elliot, to a petition presented on 1 September by Mrs Irwin (from 37 citizens)

Nursing Homes

Dear Mrs Irwin

Thank you for your letter of 4 September 2008 to the Minister for Health and Ageing, the Hon Nicola Roxon MP, enclosing a petition about a benchmark for the minimum ratio of personal care assistants to residents in aged care homes.

Your letter has been referred to me as the Minister for Ageing.

The people working in aged care homes are an important part of the care that is provided. The presence of an appropriately skilled and motivated workforce in aged care is a key part of providing the high quality of aged care that older Australians deserve.

Under the Aged Care Act 1997 aged care providers are responsible for using Australian Government subsidies to ensure that there are adequate numbers of appropriately skilled staff to meet the individual care needs of residents. Providers must have in place arrangements for the ongoing development of staff skills to ensure quality of care continues to be delivered.

The relationship between staffing in aged care homes and the quality of the care delivered is complex. Currently, there is considerable diversity in staffing arrangements across accredited homes. This suggests that it is not clear that there is a single optimum staffing level and mix, and that rather, there may be many sets of arrangements that in response to their particular circumstances provide quality aged care.

This Government implemented the new Aged Care Funding Instrument (ACFI) on 20 March 2008, which replaces the Resident Classification Scale as the means for providing Government subsidy to aged care homes. The Government is committed to reviewing the impact of the new ACFI including examining staffing levels in aged care homes to ensure they are based on the care needs of residents.

To assist in the provision of quality care, the Government has announced an additional 450,000 vocational education and training (VET) places as part of the Skilling Australia for the Future program. In March 2008, the Council of Australian Governments agreed to deliver, over three years from 2008-09, up to 50,000 of the additional VET places for areas of national skill shortage in health occupations. Some of these places will go to training additional personal care workers. Increased qualification rates among personal care workers will contribute to improvements in the quality of aged care services.
I trust that the above information is of use.

from the Minister for Ageing, Mrs Elliot, to a petition presented on 1 September by Mrs Irwin (from 15 citizens)

Mr Renerio Arrogante III

Dear Mrs Irwin

Thank you for your letter dated 4 September 2008 conveying the terms of a petition about the murder of an Australian citizen, Mr Renerio Arrogante III, in the Philippines.

I acknowledge the anguish this matter has caused to the family of Mr Arrogante and others close to him and sympathise with their desire for justice. While the Australian Government has no authority to intervene in a criminal investigation or prosecution in the Philippines, the Australian Embassy in Manila has written to the Philippines National Bureau of Investigation, the high-level body overseeing the investigation, to demonstrate the Australian Government’s strong interest in the case.

The Arrogante family should be assured that, at my request, the Embassy will continue to take a close interest in the investigation of Mr Arrogante’s murder and the eventual trial of those considered accountable for it.

from the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Mr Stephen Smith, to a petition presented on 1 September by Mrs Irwin (from 2,188 citizens)

Mr Richard Manthorpe

Dear Mrs Irwin

Thank you for your letter of 4 September 2008 concerning a petition requesting leave to apply for permanent residence for Mr Richard Manthorpe and his wife.

In his petition Mr Manthorpe indicates that he and his wife are residing in Australia on the Retirement (Subclass 410) visa. I would like to clarify that Mr Manthorpe and his wife, and other Retirement visa holders are free to apply for one of Australia’s many permanent visa categories. An individual’s circumstances are taken into account in assessing eligibility.

Australia’s Migration Program aims to strike the best possible balance between a range of economic, social, humanitarian, international and environmental interests and obligations. The Australian Government has a responsibility to manage current and future demands for permanent migration. In doing this, consideration is given to the impact that an ageing population has (and will continue to have) on Commonwealth, State and Local Government resources.

Concerns about the Retirement visa have been raised with me by a great number of people. In particular they have expressed the view that these visa holders should automatically be entitled to permanent residence. Currently, these visa holders are able to remain in Australia indefinitely, using the generous roll-over provisions allowing for subsequent visa grants. However, as temporary residents they are not entitled to access many benefits that would be available to them if they were granted a permanent visa.

I have indicated to Retirement visa holders and their supporters that I am sympathetic to their claims and support the proposal to provide a pathway to permanent residence for retirees who have chosen to make Australia their home. I intend to pursue options that may allow the Government to make a pathway available in the future.

Thank you for bringing this matter to my attention.

from the Minister for Immigration and Citizenship, Senator Chris Evans, to petitions presented on 1 September and 20 October by Mrs Irwin (from 4 citizens)

Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation: Merbein Staff

Dear Mrs Irwin

Thank you for your letter of 17 September 2008 concerning a petition submitted for the consideration of the Standing Committee on Petitions regarding the closure of the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO) research centre at Merbein.

CSIRO has advised me that it recognises the contribution that its science at Merbein has made to industries in the Sunraysia region. However, in light of a range of budgetary and strategic planning issues, in May 2008 CSIRO announced it
could no longer afford to operate its research facility at Merbein. Associated with the closure, CSIRO also decided to move all wine related research to Adelaide, and to phase out research on table grapes, dried grapes and citrus.

Subsequent to that announcement, senior staff of CSIRO (including the Chief Executive, Dr Geoff Garrett, the Deputy Chief Executive, Mr Mike Whelan, and the Agribusiness Group Executive, Dr Joanne Daly) met on several occasions with representatives of affected industries, as well as the Mayor of Mildura, and the Chair of the Sunraysia Consultative Committee, to discuss the implication of these changes. I understand that these discussions have been productive, with industry requesting an opportunity to develop an alternative strategy that would see the continued functioning of the Merbein facility.

CSIRO agreed to the request from industry, and was due to receive an industry submission by 3 October 2008. In these discussions, CSIRO has clearly articulated the need for the plan to include additional financial resources.

CSIRO will consider the industry submission on its merits to determine whether there is a viable alternative to CSIRO’s current intention to close the Merbein site. I expect that a final decision in relation to the site will be made in the near future.

I can assure you that the Rudd Labor Government understands the importance of research and will ensure that our public research contributes appropriately to national goals and the long-term economic growth of Australia.

Thank you for taking the time to bring the petition from concerned citizens of Sunraysia to my attention.

from the Minister for Innovation, Industry, Science and Research, Senator Carr

In response to the petition, I would note that the Australian Government committed nearly $1.1 billion over the next five years towards land transport infrastructure in South Australia during the 2007 election. The Australian and South Australian governments have commenced discussions on the project timing and funding arrangements for the land transport investment program for 2009-10 to 2013-14.

Responsibility for the King Street Bridge rests with the local council, the City of Holdfast Bay. The Australian Government, for its part, provides a significant level of financial assistance to local governments to assist them in upgrading and maintaining their local road systems. Funds are provided under the Roads to Recovery, Strategic Regional and Black Spot programs, as well as through Untied Local Road and General Purpose Financial Assistance Grants. In 2008-09, the City of Holdfast Bay will receive some $1.4 million from the Australian Government. The City of Holdfast Bay is free to use some of this funding to upgrade the King Street Bridge.

Thank you for raising this matter.

from the Minister for Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Local Government, Mr Albanese

Pedestrian Crossing: Athelstone

Dear Mrs Irwin

Thank you for your letter dated 17 September 2008 about a petition for improvements to a pedestrian crossing on Gorge Road, Athelstone, South Australia.

As Gorge Road is a state road, the issue raised by the petitioners is primarily a matter for the South Australian Government. I have therefore referred your letter to the South Australian Minister for Road Safety, the Hon Carmel Zollo MLC, for consideration.

The petitioners could consider the possibility of funding through the Australian Government’s Black Spot Program, which provides for the cost effective treatment of hazardous road locations with a record of casualty crashes. In general, sites must have a history of at least three casualty

from the Minister for Innovation, Industry, Science and Research, Senator Carr
crashes over a five-year period, although up to 20 per cent of funds may be used for works recommended on the basis of a road safety audit.

Nominations for Black Spot funding are invited from state and territory governments, local councils, community groups and associations, road user groups, industry and individuals. Information about the program, including the official nomination form, is available on the website: <http://www.auslink.gov.au>.

Thank you for raising this matter.

from the **Minister for Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Local Government, Mr Albanese**, to a petition presented on 15 September by **Mrs Irwin** (from 194 citizens)

**Whaling**

Dear Mrs Irwin

Thank you for your letter dated 4 September 2008 about a petition concerning whaling.

The Australian Government is firmly committed to securing better protection for all whales. We strongly support the global moratorium on commercial whaling and believe there is no credible justification for the hunting of whales for so-called 'scientific' purposes.

Our first objective remains to persuade Japan to cease lethal 'scientific' whaling in the Southern Ocean. I have initiated talks with Japanese ministers on this issue and the Government will continue this dialogue in the coming months.

The Government has also made it clear that Australia intends to lead the global debate about improving whale conservation, research and protection. At the June 2008 annual meeting of the International Whaling Commission (IWC) in Chile, Australia's delegation, led by the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and the Arts, the Hon Peter Garrett AM MP, presented new proposals for international whale conservation, which would give the IWC a central role in improving the conservation status of whales across the world.

The first proposal was for conservation management plans for vulnerable whale populations and species, and bring countries together to address new threats to whale species. This approach would be a major shift from the IWC's earlier practice of setting quotas for whale hunting.

New whale research partnerships will improve international cooperation for genuine whale science. Unlike the current practice of 'scientific' whaling, where an individual country allocates its own permits to take whales in the name of research, these partnerships will bring together scientists from many countries to obtain the information we need to know about whales, and they will gather data using only non-lethal research techniques.

Australia has received strong support for our proposals and we are working with other IWC members to develop and implement the proposals. Australia will lead the group developing the IWC's first conservation management plans, and will host an international scientific conference in early 2009 to develop a research plan for the Southern Ocean partnership.

Some of the Government's actions are producing results in the short term, such as the $1 million funding boost to the Hobart-based Australian Marine Mammal Centre, which leads Australian whale research. The Government has also released the Global Cetaceans Snapshot report (see http://www.environment.gov.au/coasts/publications/cetacean-snapshot.html), which provides important data to support the international case for whale conservation. Other actions, such as modernising the IWC - a large organisation comprising countries with diverse interests and views - will require a sustained effort over the long term.

The Government's measures provide a comprehensive set of actions to counter Japan's so-called 'scientific' whaling. Pursuing a diplomatic solution is our first priority, however international legal action remains under consideration.

Australia regulates whaling activities in accordance with our international legal obligations. The Commonwealth's Environment Protection Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999 prevents the entry into an Australian port of a foreign whaling vessel without the written permission of the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and the Arts. The Act provides an exception for unforeseen
emergencies, prescribed agreements and official directions. The Australian Government does not, as a matter of practice, enforce its legislation against foreign nationals or foreign vessels in Antarctica or Antarctic waters. Because of differing views over sovereignty in Antarctica and the assertion of associated maritime rights, it is the accepted practice that States exercise jurisdiction only over their own nationals in Antarctica.

With regards to safety of life at sea, Australia fulfils its international legal obligations faithfully. Under the Convention on the Safety of Life at Sea and the Search and Rescue Convention, Masters of Australian flagged vessels are required by international law to render assistance to any persons at distress at sea. The Australian Government has responsibility for a Search and Rescue Region covering a substantial portion of the Southern Ocean - from 75 to 163 degrees East. The Government has made repeated calls for all parties operating in the Southern Ocean to respect and implement the principle of safety at of life at sea and all laws and conventions governing conduct at sea. Refusing to assist any vessels in distress would put human life at risk and would be a serious breach of our international obligations.

Thank you for bringing this petition to my attention.

from the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Mr Stephen Smith, to a petition presented on 1 September by Mrs Irwin (from 696 citizens)

Statements

Mrs IRWIN (Fowler) (8.32 pm)—The world of communications is changing rapidly and the growing use of email and other forms of online communication presents a challenge to parliamentary representatives around the world. As I indicated in an earlier report, I have recently returned from a series of visits as part of my overseas study entitlement which focused on the responses of parliaments to online communication and in particular e-petitioning.

My study took me to the Scottish Parliament, where e-petitioning has been in operation for four years; the House of Commons, where its Procedure Committee recently tabled a report into e-petitioning; and to the United States Congress, where online communication has emerged as a critical tool in presenting petitions and communicating with members as well as an efficient campaign tool.

I would note from the outset that the approach of one of the newest parliaments, the Scottish Parliament, was significantly different from two of the oldest parliaments, the House of Commons and the US Congress. As the Petitions Committee of the Australian House of Representatives—and I know, Mr Deputy Speaker Adams, that you are a member of that committee—draws on the Scottish model, it was valuable to discuss experiences and developments with their Public Petitions Committee and, by chance, to see one of the best examples of a petitions committee in practice.

My visit to Edinburgh coincided with only the second full debate on the tabling of a report by the Public Petitions Committee. The subject of the report and the progress through the committee make an excellent case study in petitioning. The petition sought to allow the National Health Service to continue to provide treatment where a terminally ill patient had provided cancer treatment drugs at his own expense. This is a complex issue and one which is, as members will appreciate, highly emotive.

The report of the Public Petitions Committee was presented by the committee convenor, Mr Frank Macaveety, and responses were made in the parliament by the health minister, the Leader of the Labour Party, the Chief Minister of the Scottish National Party government and the Leader of the Conservative Unionist Party. It was by all descriptions a full and frank debate and one which demonstrated the approach of the convenor that
petitions and the petitions committee can be, in his words:
the public gateway to the parliament, and;
a means to engage with those least engaged.

By contrast, the House of Commons Procedure Committee, which has a report before the House recommending some changes to petitions, appears reluctant to go as far in opening the system of petitioning. The clerk to the committee, Mr Mark Hutton, press said that while the Scottish model was meeting the public’s expectations in Scotland he was concerned that a similar approach in the House of Commons would raise expectations to a level which could not be met. He referred to the large numbers of online petitions submitted to the Prime Minister’s petitioning system and the difficulty in satisfying the expectations they may have raised with the public. Their report therefore recommends retaining the role of the constituency member in facilitating petitions and excludes a specific petitions committee, with the Procedure Committee retaining an oversight role in the system.

The nature of the US Congress as a legislative body determines the individual role of members, according to Mr John Sullivan, the ‘parliamentarian’ or what we would refer to as the Clerk of the Congress. The right to petition is covered in the first amendment and, as no form is prescribed, any petition, including online petitions, is valid.

Mr Sullivan advised that petitions are referred by his office to the relevant committee. A key consideration of committees and congress members is the number of signatories to petitions. For this reason, there is concern that electronic signatures cannot be easily verified and online petitions will be more effective when signatures can be authenticated.

Mr Sullivan’s comments were supported at my meeting with Mr Tim Hysom, Director of Communications and Technology Services of the Congressional Management Foundation. The foundation provides advice and training to staff of members and senators in handling communication with constituents. Each year it awards the ‘Gold Mouse’—a funny name—for the best websites on Capitol Hill. Mr Hysom pointed out the rapid growth of online communication and commented that during the passage of the financial bailout legislation, which had passed a few days prior to my visit, the volume of online traffic was so great that the Capitol Hill servers went down. He said that this was an indication of the future volume of online communication.

These are just a few details arising from my study. I will, in due course, set out the full detail of my discussions, which I trust will assist the Petitions Committee in our own inquiry into e-petitioning. At the time of my discussions with the Scottish parliament I suggested that we might arrange a teleconference between our two committees, and I am pleased to announce that the conference will take place later this month.

Along with those I have mentioned in this speech, I would also like to thank Mr Fergus Cochrane, Clerk of the Scottish parliament’s Public Petitions Committee, and SNP committee member Mr Nigel Dunn. I would also thank Mr Grahame Wear, liaison officer of the Scottish parliament, Ms Sue Pamphlett of the House of Commons and Mr Chris Ben-scher of the Australian Embassy in Washington for their assistance. They did a wonderful job.

DELEGATION REPORTS
Parliamentary Delegation to the 54th Commonwealth Parliamentary Conference, Malaysia, and to Thailand

Mr DANBY (Melbourne Ports) (8.39 pm)—I present the report of the Australian Parliamentary Delegation to the 54th Com-
monwealth Parliamentary Association Conference in Malaysia and to Thailand from 4 to 15 August 2008. The report I have tabled reports on the parliamentary delegation, of which I was the deputy leader, to the 54th Commonwealth Parliamentary Association annual conference in Malaysia and a bilateral visit to Thailand in August this year. The delegation’s visit was very successful and I thank my fellow delegates: Senator the Hon. Alan Ferguson, who was still President of the Senate at the time, and was leader of the delegation; Senator the Hon. Bill Heffernan; Mr Barry Haase MP; and Mr Graham Perrett MP. I also thank my then senior adviser, Gerard Martin, and the delegation secretary, David Elder, who is one of our very competent clerks.

The delegation commenced with attendance at the 54th Commonwealth Parliamentary Association conference hosted by the Malaysian parliament. The theme of the conference was ‘Expanding the role of parliament in global society: environment, development and security’. The conference plenaries and workshop sessions provided the opportunity for our delegates to contribute to the sessions and to learn from other delegates about issues within their countries and parliaments. The conference also provided us with the opportunity to engage with parliamentarians from other Commonwealth countries on a more informal basis.

While I think it is fair to say that the delegation found aspects of the conference and its format a little frustrating, overall the conference was well organised and the delegation extends its congratulations and thanks to the Malaysian parliament for the success of the conference and the election of a Malaysian as head of the CPA. I also thank the Australian High Commission in Kuala Lumpur, led by the High Commissioner, Ms Penny Williams, for briefing the delegation and assisting the delegation during its visit.

The delegation’s visit to Thailand was both very worthwhile and very informative. The delegation’s visit provided the opportunity to strengthen Australia’s already strong ties with Thailand. There is scope to improve the people-to-people ties—I kept noting with the Speaker that we have nearly one million Australian tourists visiting Thailand every year. The delegation explored both that and our trading relationship. The visit, in particular, strengthened relationships at the parliamentary level, and it is hoped that this foundation can be built on in the future. Since visiting Thailand I have some doubts about the benefits for Australia of the Thailand-Australia Free Trade Agreement, which are set out on my website.

Thailand continues to undergo considerable political turmoil as it struggles to ensure that democracy achieves a firm foundation in Thai political culture. We met Prime Minister Samak Sundaravej, who—not because of our presence!—was forced from office soon after we had left. The delegation was able to be briefed on a number of defence, law enforcement and immigration issues that are of mutual concern to Australia and Thailand. In particular, we had important meetings with TACHIN, the Thai-Australian Collaboration in HIV Nutrition, and I commend the Australian government, AusAID, the two very dedicated Australian doctors who work long-term with TACHIN and the great work that TACHIN does. We also had a very important meeting with the Thai Bomb Data Centre, which is their primary anti-terrorist organisation.

Finally, the delegation had the opportunity to visit a number of key sites on the Burma-Thailand railway, on which a large number of prisoners of war, including thousands of Australians, worked during World War II. The delegation visited such famous sites as the bridge on the River Kwai and Hellfire Pass. To hear the very moving narration of
Sir John Carrick, a former senator of this parliament, and Tom Uren as you go through Hellfire Pass was one of the most interesting experiences I have had internationally. I urge all Australians who visit Hellfire Pass to participate in that audio program. It is very moving, and the museum that Australia has set up there is well worth seeing by all Australians. The visits were a very moving experience for all the delegation, and we gained at least some appreciation of the suffering and sacrifice of so many prisoners of war.

I would like to thank the Thai parliament for hosting us, and in particular the Speaker of the House of Representatives, His Excellency Mr Chai Chidchob, and the President of the Senate, His Excellency Mr Prasobsuk Boondech. I also thank the staff of the Australian Embassy in Bangkok, led by our very capable ambassador, Paul Grigson, for their excellent assistance during the visit.

CLIMATE PROTECTION BILL 2008
First Reading

Bill and explanatory memorandum presented by Mr Windsor.

Mr WINDSOR (New England) (8.45 pm)—The Climate Protection Bill 2008 is essentially the people’s climate protection bill. I say ‘the people’s climate protection bill’ because many people and organisations right across Australia are very committed to doing something about climate change and protecting not only the Australian climate but the global climate, and many people are concerned that the government and the opposition, although paying lip-service to this particular issue, do not seem to be inclined to pursue the issue to the full extent.

This particular bill before the House has certain objects, which I will read to the House. The objects of the bill are: to ensure a substantial reduction in human derived greenhouse gas from Australia; to set mandatory targets for reducing human derived greenhouse gas emissions from Australia, with the first being a reduction by at least 30 per cent below 1990 levels by 2020 and the second being a reduction by at least 80 per cent below 1990 levels by 2050; and to ensure that Australia meets these targets.

The bill substantially increases the percentage of Australia’s energy being sourced from renewable energy sources. It also assists with global efforts to stabilise and reduce human derived greenhouse gas concentrations in the atmosphere. It assists developing nations to adjust to a carbon constrained world and to mitigate the impacts of climate change. It also implements ecologically sustainable development and contributes to the conservation of materials used in the manufacture of goods within Australia. It also assists with the avoidance of greenhouse gas emissions from landfills and facilitates the utilisation of the energy embodied in manufactured goods through material recycling.

The bill also embraces a number of other issues, particularly ones to do with the soil carbon debate that many in this House have heard me talk about in the past. The soil carbon issue raises an interesting point. There are many things that will not necessarily fit within an emissions trading scheme. Even though this legislation calls for either a carbon tax or an emissions trading scheme, there are many things that will not necessarily fit in a priced market but could, and would in my view, be part of reducing the problem that we are talking about. Vegetation sinks, soil sinks, soil carbon and recycling would in fact make a contribution to the overall problem of emissions reduction.

As I said earlier on, this bill is the people’s bill. I particularly thank the 65 environmental groups that have gone to a lot of
trouble to assist with the drafting of this legislation. I also thank the many other individuals right across Australia who have highlighted the importance of this and Australia’s leadership role in relation to climate change and climate protection. What this bill does, irrespective of whether it passes through the parliament—and I sincerely hope that it receives the endorsement of both sides of the parliament—is bring to the parliament the people’s voice on this issue. Australians are concerned about the legacy that they will leave in terms of climate, given the substantial scientific evidence before us that there are problems looming and problems currently in the world in relation to emissions, not only of carbon dioxide but nitrous oxide, methane and other global warming gasses. I would encourage all members of parliament to take notice of this legislation and, very importantly, take notice of what the Australian people are saying in relation to it.

Bill read a first time.

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

PRIVATE MEMBERS’ BUSINESS

Housing

Mrs MOYLAN (Pearce) (8.51 pm)—I move:

That the House:

(1) recognises the serious state of housing availability and affordability in the public, not for profit and private sector in many cities and towns in Australia and the hardship it causes those on low and fixed incomes;

(2) notes that:

(a) it is having a serious impact on many in the community including those on low and fixed incomes, pensioners, disability pensioners, veterans, young families and students;

(b) the situation has been exacerbated by the dereliction of duty of State governments in failing to maintain adequate stocks of public rental properties, with unacceptably long waiting lists for public housing;

(c) in Western Australia (WA), for example, it has been reported that there are 16,000 families on the Homeswest waiting list in May 2008, with similar trends in other states;

(d) there has been a contraction of approximately 30,000 public dwellings, which, factoring in population growth over the last decade, amounts to a loss of 100,000 dwellings in the public sector;

(e) this dereliction of duty is increasing the reliance on the private rental market, where housing is in short supply, new building approvals are plummeting and rental vacancy rates are at the lowest levels in 20 years;

(f) Commonwealth Rent Assistance (CRA) is not adequately addressing the gap between the high level of rent being paid and what is affordable and that in many areas there are few, if any, housing choices available;

(g) despite the twice yearly adjustment of CRA to the Consumer Price Index of 4.3 per cent, the average rental increase has been 7.1 per cent;

(h) the median weekly rent of three bedroom houses has increased on a nationally weighted average by 46.75 per cent and, in fact, from June 1998 to June 2007 rents increased by 93.55 per cent in WA and by 105.88 per cent in the Australian Capital Territory (ACT);

(i) rent assistance as a percentage of median weekly rent in WA has dropped from 31.8 per cent in June 2001 to 20.4 per cent in June 2007 and in the ACT from 25.6 per cent in June 1998 to 17.4 per cent in June 2007;

(j) overall, renting has become less affordable nationally even for those in receipt of CRA;
(k) according to national figures from the Australian Government Housing data set in June 2006, over one-third of CRA recipients pay more than 30 per cent of their income on rent, after CRA is factored in; and

(l) public housing approvals plummeted to 131 new council approvals in March 2008, well short of the Australian Bureau of Statistics' decade average of 350 new public housing approvals monthly; and

(3) calls on the Federal Government to:

(a) work with State governments through COAG to urgently address the national shortage of public, not for profit and private housing including delays in local government development approvals;

(b) urgently review the adequacy of CRA paid to those on low and fixed incomes;

(c) investigate making CRA or similar payment available to eligible recipients who are purchasing their own homes and who are experiencing severe mortgage stress, with the aim of keeping people in their own homes and taking some of the pressures off the public and private sector rental market;

(d) consider changing the CRA formula to reflect the lack of choice and the increasing cost of rent beyond inflation, by linking CRA to actual rent using the highest median rent in each area;

(e) target a proportion of assistance for development of housing in high employment growth areas, in recognition that for those looking for work in areas of high labour demand, high rents are acting as a disincentive for some people to escape the poverty cycle; and

(f) pay particular attention to development options for multi-dwelling supported accommodation models to provide for those with disabilities who may formerly have been housed in institutions.

I am very pleased to put forward this motion and I have great hopes that members on both sides of the House will join me in acknowledging the serious state of housing availability and affordability in not only the not-for-profit sector but also in the private sector. I thank the member for Forrest for seconding this motion.

This is a problem of enormous dimension. Some may even call it a crisis, as people in the cities and towns of Australia face great hardship, particularly those on low and fixed incomes. It is probably a good idea to reiterate the words of University of New South Wales professor Julian Disney—and I have quoted him in the other chamber—who said recently:

Lack of affordable housing strikes at the heart of our lives, our communities, and Australia's future prosperity. It impoverishes people, erodes families, destroys jobs, weakens the economy, and damages the environment.

Many of us here have heard the anecdotal evidence from our own electorates about housing availability and affordability. Statistics alone prove that problems of unaffordable housing have worsened alarmingly over the last 10 to 15 years. For example, average house prices relative to household income have almost doubled and average monthly payments on new loans have risen by more than 50 per cent. Mercifully, we have seen this fall slightly in the last couple of weeks. The proportion of first home buyers has fallen by about 20 per cent, the proportion of low-rent homes has fallen by at least 15 per cent and opportunities to rent public housing have fallen by at least 30 per cent. These are very disturbing figures.

It has been reported that there is a shortfall of some 30,000 houses in the public sector alone. In a majority of areas, it has been difficult to rent housing in the private sector even if you can afford rents of $500 to $600 a week. This has forced people in big cities recently to agree to pay six months rent up-front plus a bond to agents just to get to the
front of a long, long list of applicants for rentals. This has left many families and individuals living in temporary accommodation—hiring caravans, living in cars or on the streets or, as I said, moving from one household to another. I have to ask: what sort of situation is this for families with children to be in? The situation is particularly dire for those on low and fixed incomes, as I said, such as people on pensions—whether they are age pensions or disability pensions—veterans and those who have little opportunity to increase their income stream. Those who rely on private rentals, which are scarce, expensive and continuing to increase in price, are under real stress.

There are many reasons for the housing shortage and the high prices, which are out of the reach of many people. They can be resolved with proper management and with political will. One of the big failings, as I have also talked about before, is the dereliction of duty of state governments in providing public housing now for several years. In Western Australia, I think there are about 16,000 people on the waiting list for public housing. That is why I am calling on the government today to work with the state governments through the COAG process to address the national shortage of public, not-for-profit and private housing. This includes addressing the long delays in local government development approvals.

Commonwealth rent assistance must also be urgently reviewed as to what benefit it can offer low- and fixed-income families as well as how it can be utilised. The fact is that Commonwealth rent assistance is indexed to CPI twice a year, which is just a touch over four per cent, but the rentals have gone up in the corresponding period by about seven per cent per annum. The CRA formula needs to reflect the lack of choice and the increasing cost of rent beyond inflation by linking CRA to actual rent using the highest median rent in each area.

In areas of high labour demand, high rents are acting as a disincentive for some people to escape the poverty cycle. In recognition of this, those looking for work should be a target of a proportion of assistance for the development of housing in high employment growth areas. We should pay particular attention to development options for multidwelling supported accommodation models to provide for those with a disability who may formerly have been housed in institutions. Many groups have made their voices heard on these issues over the last few years. Now is the time to show them that we in this place are taking responsibility and are listening to their pleas.

Mr BUTLER (Port Adelaide) (8.56 pm)—This very extensive motion on housing raises an issue which our side of the House has taken very seriously—first of all, with the appointment of a housing minister, something not done by the previous government, and also, more substantively, with a range of measures that I will outline in the short time I have before the House. As well-intentioned and well-argued as this motion might be, those opposite wear like an albatross around their neck 12 years of neglect in the area of housing. This is another example of the creationist approach that they have to policy challenges being confronted by our side of the House—that on 24 November some higher being created the world and it had an existing housing affordability crisis, about which I see absolutely nothing in this motion.

We know that under the previous government there were cumulative cuts of almost $4 billion in real terms to the Commonwealth-State Housing Agreement. There was a cut of $50 million in the 1997-98 financial year. There was a four per cent efficiency
dividend the same year. There was an ongoing one per cent efficiency dividend per annum. There was the removal of GST compensation in 2003-04, a year in which the housing agreement funding was cut by $100 million. There was no indexation by the previous government between 1996 and 2004-05. This trashing of the public and social housing sector under the previous government is taking some considerable time to unravel, which is why the government and the various state and territory governments are still in the process of finalising the National Affordable Housing Agreement.

It was not only to the area of social housing that the former government paid such little regard. At the same time as the agreement funding was being cut to such a degree, with almost $4 billion in real cumulative funding cuts over the 10 or 12 years that the last government was in place, there was no serious effort whatsoever to respond to dramatic developments in the private rental market. We know that after the dotcom bust, with a whole range of cheap interest rates and cheap money available, private money flooded into the housing sector leading to the biggest asset bubble in human history, worth in the developed world some $30 trillion, or 100 per cent of the combined GDP of those countries. We know that the Australian housing bubble was right at the top of the list. We know that Australia’s price-rent ratio, the best way of valuing the housing market, by the end of 2005 was 70 per cent higher than the 25-year average. Unsurprisingly, as the member opposite has indicated, private rents went up. That is what happens when the price-rent ratio gets so far out of kilter with the historic average. In the September quarter this year, private rents increased by 2.2 per cent, with an annual increase of about nine per cent. In my own electorate of Port Adelaide, 38 per cent of private renters are suffering from rental stress, paying more than 30 per cent of their income on rent.

We also know that vacancy rates across the country, as the member opposite has indicated, are at very low rates—in my city of Adelaide, at around one per cent, which is the lowest ever seen in South Australia. So what is the government doing about this? First of all, we appointed a member of the executive with particular responsibility for dealing with housing—the Minister for Housing, the member for Sydney—and she has started to fill a space left completely vacant by the previous government. Principally, in terms of the matters covered by this motion, that involves boosting the supply of affordable rental properties through $623 million of incentives over four years to increase supply by 50,000 rental properties rented at 20 per cent below market rates. If demand is still high, which I suspect it will be, there will be a further 50,000 rental properties from 2012.

This motion raises very important issues and raises them in a very eloquent written way. However, it does not get away from the fact that in 12 months this government has done more around housing, particularly affordable housing, than the previous government did in 12 years. (Time expired)

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Hon. DGH Adams)—Is the motion seconded?

Ms MARINO (Forrest) (9.01 pm)—I rise to second the motion by the member for Pearce. I call on the House to recognise the very serious state of housing availability and affordability in the public, not-for-profit and private sectors in many cities and towns in Australia and the extreme hardship it causes those on low and fixed incomes, pensioners,
disability pensioners, veterans, young families and students.

An article in the South Western Times on 9 October by Kate Murnane states:

Women and children are returning to lives of domestic violence because they cannot afford to meet the rising cost of rent. South West Refuge manager, Barbara Payne, said staff had difficulty finding suitable and affordable accommodation for mothers and children escaping domestic violence.

Mrs Payne is quoted as saying:

It’s difficult to break the cycle unless you have somewhere to go. People will remain or go back to an abusive relationship because they cannot find a house or cannot afford one.

I ask what modelling the government has undertaken on the effects of the doubling of the first home buyers grant for existing homes and the effect that will have on renters right across Australia. Will this put further upward pressure on rents, thereby increasing the numbers of Australians living under rental stress?

A further example of badly researched government policy which will impact on the availability of affordable rental properties is the National Rental Affordability Scheme. An Australian Taxation Office ruling jeopardises the participation of the charitable, not-for-profit sector in the scheme and the bill is the subject of a Senate inquiry due to report. The tax implications for the not-for-profit sector should have been covered in the drafting of the legislation. How many charitable organisations have already developed projects ahead of the first funding round? How many potential affordable rental properties are impacted by this drafted legislation? And how will tenant eligibility provide a pathway to homeownership? Income thresholds should be raised for those trying to save to buy into private housing, otherwise renters under this scheme will remain on welfare and rental assistance for longer than is necessary.

I have received a letter from the Tenants Advice Service Inc.—a not-for-profit community legal centre which protects tenants’ rights—seeking my support for increased Commonwealth funding for the existing system of social housing because it is unlikely that those providers will be able to increase their supply of dwellings without additional Commonwealth funding assistance and, secondly, seeking my support on another major problem with the National Rental Affordability Scheme. They believe this will not assist the supply of community housing—that is, affordable rental housing owned and managed by not-for-profit organisations. Why? Because dwellings assisted with the NRAS incentives may not have ownership or title vested in community housing organisations. It is of course the ownership of the title that assists the not-for-profit organisations to finance new dwellings. There are other community groups which provide housing for people with special needs; however, that is also precluded from the NRAS.

Australian families simply cannot afford to have their problems made far worse because the Rudd government has failed to do its homework. The situation has been exacerbated by the dereliction of duty of state Labor governments in failing to maintain adequate stocks of public rental properties, with unacceptably long waiting lists for public housing. My office was recently told by a local office of the Western Australian Department of Housing and Works, regarding supplies of public housing in Western Australia, that it was acceptable for applicants to pay up to 60 per cent of their Centrelink pension in the private rental market. I have had constituents in my office who are paying 65 per cent of their pension in rent, and we all know that 30 per cent is considered to be rental stress.
Figures show rent assistance as a percentage of median weekly rent has dropped from 31.8 per cent to 20.4 per cent in June 2007. Current rental rates would significantly increase this differential. The demand for rental properties in Western Australia is amongst the highest in Australia, with rents expected to increase by 10 per cent over the next six months. The waiting list for public housing has blown out to many years. Public housing for one-bedroom requests date back to 2004—a four-year waiting list. Two-bedroom housing applicants have been waiting since 2002 and three-bedroom applicants have been waiting since 2005. Similar and longer waiting periods are being experienced all over the south-west.

In my electorate of Forrest, over 6,200 people receive rental assistance from Centrelink. According to the *West Australian*, 18,000 Western Australians were in the queue for public housing at the end of August. Clearly there was not enough Labor state government investment in public housing during the booming economic years in Western Australia. *(Time expired)*

Ms HALL (Shortland) (9.06 pm)—I must say that I think the members on the other side of the House who have spoken to this motion should hang their heads in shame, because the decline in public housing and the blow-out in rental affordability did not happen under the Rudd Labor government, which has taken tangible steps to address the issue, unlike under the 12 long years of the Howard government. That was 12 long years of money for housing being pulled out of the states. I think it is an absolute disgrace that the previous government slashed $3.1 billion from the public housing budget—a 30 per cent cut in real funding.

I was actually a state member of parliament when the Howard government was elected. At the time of its election there was a waiting list for public housing, but within 12 months that waiting list had doubled. The severe cuts in funding by the Howard government have meant that social housing stock has not kept up with the growth in population. In my electorate there is a 13-year wait for public housing. That has been the case for a very long period of time, and it occurred under the Howard government. And then members on the other side of this House come in and sanctimoniously move motions condemning the Rudd government for the shortage of public housing. It did not happen over night.

One of the things this government has done is work with the states and territories. The Rudd government will bring together all funding for affordable housing under the new affordable housing agreement. The new agreement will at least maintain the funding levels of the program that is in place—something that did not happen under the previous government.

I notice that another part of the motion that has been put to the parliament by the members opposite calls for rental assistance to be increased. Simply increasing rental assistance in this climate will do nothing to address the supply problem. It is likely that the money would go straight into the pockets of the landlords.

In the electorate of Shortland, which falls within the Lake Macquarie area, there is currently a two per cent vacancy rate. One of the previous speakers from the other side said that a three per cent vacancy rate was thought to be a tight market, so you can just imagine how difficult it is for people to find accommodation within the Lake Macquarie area. And this situation has developed under the previous government. The Rudd government recognised the fact that there was a real problem with housing in Australia, and that is why we introduced measures such as the
National Rental Affordability Scheme. That legislation was debated in this House in the last sitting week.

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

Zimbabwe

Mr DANBY (Melbourne Ports) (9.10 pm)—I move:

That the House:

(1) congratulates Mr Morgan Tsvangirai, leader of the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), on his appointment as Prime Minister of Zimbabwe, which is a just recognition of his long struggle for democracy and reform in Zimbabwe;

(2) acknowledges the courage of the people of Zimbabwe in defying the thuggery and intimidation of the Mugabe regime in voting for a change of regime at the Zimbabwe elections of March 2008;

(3) condemns the Mugabe regime for instituting a reign of violence and intimidation which forced Mr Tsvangirai to withdraw from the second round of the presidential election, despite his clear lead in the first round;

(4) calls on the international community, and particularly Zimbabwe’s African neighbours and its fellow members of the Commonwealth, to maintain pressure on the Mugabe regime to ensure that it carries out the terms of the power-sharing agreement between the regime and the MDC; and

(5) calls on the Australian Government to render every assistance to Mr Tsvangirai in carrying out the reforms urgently needed to restore democratic elections, good government and economic prosperity to the long-suffering people of Zimbabwe.

Notice of this motion was given on 13 October, when there were at last some grounds for optimism about the situation in Zimbabwe. In the month since then, unfortunately, the situation has reverted to its previous state—if not quite a state of hopelessness, for we always have hope, then at least a state in which no escape from the impasse is immediately in view.

The motion congratulates Morgan Tsvangirai, leader of the Movement for Democratic Change, on his appointment as Prime Minister of Zimbabwe. Sadly, that appointment has not come to pass, because President Mugabe has reneged on key elements of the agreement which was brokered by former South African President Thabo Mbeki. President Mugabe has unilaterally appointed members of his own ZANU-PF party to the key ministries of foreign affairs, defence and internal affairs, a move which would leave Mr Tsvangirai as no more than a figurehead prime minister. Quite rightly, Mr Tsvangirai has refused to accept office in those circumstances. Indeed, Mr Mugabe has denied Mr Tsvangirai travel permission; that is an unbelievable situation for a prime minister of a country.

This is a piece of arrogant bad faith by Mr Mugabe. I remind the House that the only reason Mr Mugabe is President of Zimbabwe today is that he unleashed a campaign of violence and intimidation against the people of Zimbabwe so that it became impossible to hold the second round of the presidential election. Mr Tsvangirai had a clear lead in the first round and there is no doubt that he would have won the second round had it gone ahead. The majority of the people of Zimbabwe wanted to be rid of the Mugabe regime. This was shown in the parliamentary elections, in which the two factions of the MDC between them won a majority of seats.

Mr Tsvangirai showed great statesmanship by deciding to withdraw from the second round although he would have won it, because he felt he could not ask his supporters to go on losing their lives in the face of the
reign of terror unleashed by the ZANU-PF thugs across the rural areas of the country. Mr Tsvangirai made this sacrifice in the hope that the international community would respond by insisting that Mr Mugabe would resign, or at the very least agree to a power-sharing arrangement.

President Mbeki brokered a deal on which Mr Mugabe and Mr Tsvangirai shook hands in September. Under this deal, Mr Tsvangirai would be Prime Minister, and the MDC would get 16 cabinet posts and the ZANU-PF would get 15. This deal at last offered the long-suffering people of Zimbabwe some prospect of respite from the economic chaos, the international isolation and the lack of security to which they have been subjected as a result of the incompetence, corruption and lawlessness which have come to characterise the Mugabe regime.

The establishment of a power-sharing regime would have allowed the lifting of international sanctions against Zimbabwe. It would have brought aid and investment back to Zimbabwe. It would have allowed a reversal of the ruinous economic policies that have bankrupted a once prosperous country, devalued its currency, destroyed its agricultural export industries and driven hundreds of thousands of skilled and educated people into emigration. All this has been put at risk by President Mugabe’s blind determination, at the age of 84, to cling to power and to preserve the shell of his regime in the face of all the disasters he has inflicted on the people of Zimbabwe.

Although the first part of this motion has sadly been overtaken by events, the other parts remain highly relevant. In the words of the motion, this parliament should most urgently call on the international community to maintain pressure on the Mugabe regime to ensure that it carries out the terms of the September agreement. The people of Zimbabwe have shown great courage in defying the Mugabe regime’s thugs and voting for a new government. It is time the international community, and particularly the countries of Africa, and also Australia, came to the aid of the poor people of Zimbabwe.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Hon. DGH Adams)—Is the motion seconded?

Ms Parke—I second the motion and reserve my right to speak.

Ms LEY (Farrer) (9.14 pm)—I thank the member for Melbourne Ports for introducing this important private member’s motion in the House. The coalition has a strong record of opposing Robert Mugabe’s undemocratic regime. In August 2007 Prime Minister John Howard met with opposition Movement for Democratic Change, MDC, leader Morgan Tsvangirai. Prime Minister Howard told Mr Tsvangirai that the coalition supported the Zimbabwean opposition and hoped for true democratic change of regime in their elections. The coalition government delivered targeted sanctions against Mugabe’s corrupt regime in order to send a strong message that they were against the brutalities of the regime. But, politics aside, it is important to look at the human aspect behind the President Mugabe’s violent regime. Behind the politics are real people experiencing a brutal day-to-day existence that has left their lives shattered and has caused many to flee to neighbouring countries.

Robert Mugabe’s party, the ZANU-PF, trains and sponsors the National Youth Service, also known as the Green Bombers due to the military style uniforms they wear and their reputation for violence. The US Department of State describes the Youth Service as a group of ‘undisciplined child soldiers used by the ruling government to suppress political dissent through overt acts of state terrorism’. The child soldiers are responsible for many acts of politically motivated vio-
ence and are often under the influence of government issued narcotics. Former recruits to the youth camps have spoken about a horrific training program that breaks down young teenagers before encouraging them to commit acts of violence.

After the 29 March 2008 elections, Patrick—not his real name—was beaten with iron bars in the northern Mashonaland Central Province. Patrick, a schoolteacher, described how the ZANU-PF Party youths attacked him, wanting to know why his school, which was used as a polling station in the elections, recorded a high number of opposition votes. Patrick has three broken ribs, a bandaged right arm and is barely able to sit up. In hospital he had a drip attached to his stomach. Teachers are often the backbone of the country’s electoral process, acting as polling officers on election day since Zimbabwe gained independence in 1980. However, in rural areas, several schools have been shut down because of political violence that has been rampant since the March polls. More than 5,000 teachers have been beaten, approximately 600 hospitalised and 231 teachers’ houses burnt down.

Mugabe’s youth militias are increasingly well trained in torture techniques, which they use on civilians. Lyn, an 86-year-old farmer, was supporting her family with food grown in her fields. She was assaulted in July 2008 for not attending ZANU-PF meetings. Her back was injured and her arm broken by ‘war veterans’. She said: ‘I am now disabled. I can’t work in the field … I want my attackers to be brought to justice.’

No-one has been held accountable for the gross human rights violations, including beatings and torture, that occurred in the context of the elections, despite the fact that the attackers are identifiable. The police also refuse to investigate the abduction and beating by ZANU-PF youth of thousands of MDC supporters. This lack of accountability for mistreatment in Zimbabwe remains entrenched despite the signing of the power-sharing agreement on September 15, as mentioned in this motion. Police continue to detain accused persons beyond the 48-hour statutory limit, show contempt for court rulings and frequently deny detainees access to legal representation or relatives. Several former detainees have reported to Human Rights Watch that police officers frequently beat or mistreat those in custody.

The Mugabe government’s disastrous policies have crippled a once thriving economy, leaving Zimbabweans enduring hyper-inflation. Over 80 per cent of the population are unemployed and living below the poverty line, and Zimbabweans have the lowest life expectancy of any country in the world. Sadly, in Zimbabwe female life expectancy stands at 34 years, while for males it is 37 years. It is concerning that human rights have not been at the centre of the negotiation processes that have happened recently. The negotiations should be about providing justice and relief to people, not just about politics. The Zimbabwean people are now living on a knife edge and they cannot afford to wait for the political bickering to end.

My state colleague, the member for Albury, Greg Aplin, spent a considerable amount of time in the then Rhodesia and keeps in touch with people in this troubled country. He told me this evening that everything we see on the television and the photos we see are all completely accurate. In fact, the situation is worse. It is an anomaly that this man, Mugabe, has run the country into the ground since 1980. No African leader has managed to hang on for so long. Why has he not been removed? He is surrounded by vested interests and those interests are obviously served by keeping him there. I congratulate the people of Zimbabwe for the
courage they are showing in the face of this incredible adversity.

Ms PARKE (Fremantle) (9.20 pm)—I commend and support the statements made by the speakers to this motion—in particular, by the mover of the motion, the member for Melbourne Ports. The motion rightly deplores the situation in Zimbabwe, condemns the corrupt and violent Mugabe regime, and calls for both assistance and strong diplomatic pressure from the international community, particularly Zimbabwe’s southern African neighbours, and from the Australian government. It is disturbing in this context that on 11 July 2008, when the United Nations Security Council voted on a draft resolution which would have imposed further sanctions on Zimbabwe, including an arms embargo, the resolution was vetoed by China and Russia.

In June, I joined a number of members in discussing a motion in this place on the subject of Zimbabwe. At that stage we contemplated the impending run-off election of 27 June, an electoral process that was a farce. Since that time we have seen the bright prospect of improvement in Zimbabwe, through the MDC commanding the majority of seats in the Zimbabwean parliament, through the appointment of Morgan Tsvangirai as Prime Minister and through discussions concerning power-sharing arrangements between the MDC and the ZANU-PF. However, for the time being an improvement is illusory. The real power—and the blatant misuse of that power—continues to rest with the Mugabe regime. Human Rights Watch reported last week that ‘Zanu-PF’s institutions of repression remain intact, and there has been no change in their abusive conduct and attitude’.

Overnight, the leaders of the Southern African Development Community were meeting in Johannesburg to try and end the deadlock over the power-sharing issue. They recommended that Mugabe and Tsvangirai share control of the important home affairs ministry. This proposal was rejected by Tsvangirai, who noted that his dispute with Mugabe is not only about the ministry of home affairs but about striking a fair balance of power in the unity government. In a recent *New Yorker* article Tsvangirai was quoted as saying:

In an ideal world, in such negotiations, you have an honest partner, not a dishonest one. Mugabe has been dishonest … What I am trying to get is a good deal with a bad man.

Indeed, one could hardly blame Tsvangirai for not wishing Mugabe to share power over Zimbabwe’s police and security forces, given the role of these forces in the state sponsored violence and intimidation during the election campaign.

As this year draws to a close, it is part of human nature to reflect on the kind of year it has been, to consider on different levels how the year might be characterised. It began with the opening of the 42nd Australian parliament and, among other things, a bipartisan commitment to begin each new parliament with a welcome to country ceremony. It also began with an apology to Australia’s Indigenous peoples by the national parliament and for me these powerful and significant gestures of recognition, healing and national maturity will always mark 2008 as a special year. I have no doubt that the year will also be remembered for the global financial crisis which has dominated our national and international focus in the second half of the year, and it will be remembered for the arrival of a new and transformational president in the United States of America.

But I will also think of 2008 as a year in which African conflict in countries like Zimbabwe, Sudan and the Congo continued, intensified and came to seem intractable. The death toll and the abject misery in those
countries are sometimes hard to contemplate. But let us confront some sharp facts in the context of this motion about Zimbabwe. I take the following numbers from the 27 October article in the New Yorker: inflation in Zimbabwe is officially at 11 million per cent, although some analysts put it as high as 230 million per cent; unemployment is at 80 per cent; approximately two million Zimbabweans rely on international aid agencies for food in the face of chronic malnutrition and spreading starvation; and 20 per cent of the population is estimated to be infected with HIV-AIDS. Tragically, as the member for Melbourne Ports mentioned in this place in June, the life expectancy for people in Zimbabwe has nearly halved in the last decade.

Of course, to the numbers we add the stories—and they are terrible stories. I note that Human Rights Watch has reported on the violent suppression of a peaceful demonstration by the Women’s Coalition of Zimbabwe and the Zimbabwe National Students Union on 27 October. Demonstrators were beaten and tear-gassed. Authorities arrested 42 women, and at least 35 demonstrators were treated for injuries. The demonstration was calling on the country’s leaders to address the severe food shortages in the country. The National Coordinator of the Women’s Coalition of Zimbabwe was quoted as saying, ‘We are dying of hunger—people have no food.’ This is in a country that was once the breadbasket of Africa. There appears to be no limit to the degree of suffering the Mugabe regime will inflict on the people of Zimbabwe in order to retain its power and privilege. I join my parliamentary colleagues in supporting this motion and in calling for renewed international focus and action in Africa in the strongest terms. (Time expired)

Mrs MOYLAN (Pearce) (9.25 pm)—I have now spoken on motions and brought motions in relation to Zimbabwe several times over the last few years. I have to say that it saddens me to think that we are again debating this issue in this chamber, but I thank the member for Melbourne Ports for once again raising the matter. When I spoke on this in 2005—and I had spoken on it three years earlier than that—I said that it was terrible to think that in 2005 there were still what I call tin-pot dictators running around countries like Zimbabwe, treating their citizens appallingly. What has also been appalling is the way in which the leaders of the African continent have fed the ego of this particular tin-pot dictator, Mr Mugabe. They have done that while millions of innocent men, women and children have suffered the most appalling deprivation, needlessly, purely for the sake of ego for someone who has stayed too long. It should be a matter of great shame for that continent that they have continued to support this individual in the way that they have.

By contrast, we have seen Mr Tsvangirai, the man who was elected as president but who has been unable to act fully and take control of that country in the way that he was elected to do, demonstrate amazing courage to the world. I do not know of too many people who would have the courage to continue to fight for the people of Zimbabwe in the way that he has. It is incredibly moving when you think that every day his life has been threatened and that now, having been properly elected in democratic or so-called democratic, difficult elections, he is unable to start ruling that country in a way that diminishes the terrible suffering that these people have had to face in these last few years.

It is a human disaster of monumental proportions. The unwillingness to act is very hard to fathom in a country that now has the world’s lowest life expectancy, the highest inflation and in excess, as the member for Fremantle said, of perhaps 1½ million orphaned children with AIDS, with AIDS now
killing an estimated 3,500 people a week in Zimbabwe. How can the leaders of the African continent continue to support a leader who has presided over such appalling human suffering? It is a human rights tragedy of monumental proportions, and it is a disgrace that so far we in the democratic countries of the world have not been able to take effective action to prevent the ongoing tragedy which unfolds before our very eyes. When I spoke in 2007, I made a comment that over the past 10 years Mugabe, in seeking power for power’s sake, has brought his people to their knees.

I then read out the statistics on inflation, which of course are much worse now than they were then, and the fact that gross domestic product at that time had dropped to $5 billion, almost half of what it was seven years earlier. Ignoring the rule of law and legitimate democratic processes, the despot Mugabe has driven white farmers from their land and is now ruling through brutality and fear. These misbegotten policies have seriously eroded food production and employment opportunities—and this in a country that was the food bowl of Africa. It is unbelievable, as I said, at this time that we can continue to countenance the kinds of things that are happening in Zimbabwe today.

ADJOURNMENT

The SPEAKER—Order! It being 9.30 pm, I propose the question:

That the House do now adjourn.

Remembrance Day

Mr ZAPPIA (Makin) (9.30 pm)—Yesterday I attended the annual luncheon of the Salisbury RSL, of which I am a patron. On 11 October I attended a similar luncheon at the Tea Tree Gully RSL. Both were enjoyable occasions where I was able to catch up with many long-time friends. I was particularly pleased yesterday to catch up with Jimmy Drummond, the oldest veteran I know. Jimmy, who is about 96 years old, is an original and probably the last of the legendary Rats of Tobruk. Jimmy has the best sense of humour of any veteran I have ever met. He can barely walk, he is quick witted and he always looks at life from the bright side. I was also able to pass on my personal support and good wishes to the Tea Tree Gully RSL through their president, Michael Sherlock, and to the Salisbury RSL through their president, Paul Serella, for the Remembrance Day services they will hold tomorrow. As with other members, I will be in Canberra tomorrow and therefore will be unable to attend the Remembrance Day services in my electorate of Makin. I will, however, be represented at the Tea Tree Gully RSL service, the Salisbury RSL service and the Banksia Park School and Modbury School services by my wife, Vicki, and by staff from my electorate office.

I take this opportunity to express some personal reflections about Remembrance Day and the people who serve and have served Australia in our defence forces. There are many characteristics which one identifies with Australia: our unique animals, such as the kangaroo, the emu or the platypus; our sunburnt land with its rugged beauty; our Indigenous people with their rich culture; and the easygoing, ‘she’ll be right, mate’ Australian trait. I believe, however, that the one characteristic which best defines Australia is Australia’s persistent ability to perform above expectations of us. There is no better example of that than in the gallantry of those Australians who serve in our defence forces. From the Boer War through to the present conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq, Australian defence personnel have defined Australia as a nation of courage, valour, professionalism and mateship. They have brought admiration and respect to all Australians and enabled all of us to hold our heads high amongst the people of the world. For that alone, if for
nothing else, we owe them a great deal of gratitude. Historically, Gallipoli was without doubt a defining battle for Australia. The Gallipoli tradition, however, continued in World War II, in Malaysia, in Korea, in Vietnam and in the Middle East, as well as in Australia’s peacekeeping missions. Today in Australia we live the fortunate life that we do, we have the opportunities we have and we enjoy the freedom we have because of those who served and continue to serve for us.

Good men do not seek out war and nor do they celebrate killing, but neither do good men stand back and allow others to mercilessly destroy the lives of innocent people. It was interesting to hear the last debate, with the speakers from both sides talking about what is happening in Zimbabwe right now. Sadly, military intervention is sometimes necessary, and Australia has always responded to the call. It has come, however, at a huge cost. Since Federation, over 102,000 Australians have lost their lives serving our country. Even more were left physically or emotionally injured, and many families have lived with the heartache of having lost family members or dear friends. In fact, all of us in this House, I am sure, can relate to such families or to members of our own families who have served and either lost their lives, been injured or been taken as prisoners of war. It is something that truly touches the heart and home of each and every one of us. So tomorrow, at the 11th hour of the 11th day of the 11th month, it is right that the nation stops for one minute to remember the fallen. We should never forget them.

Dr Bernhard Moeller

Mr FORREST (Mallee) (9.34 pm)—I do not think it is appropriate for the House to adjourn until a senior minister of the government comes down to this chamber and explains on the public record, to my constituents and to a whole host of other Australians who have been in touch with me, the appalling decision made by the Department of Immigration and Citizenship with regard to the physician in Horsham Dr Bernhard Moeller. It is an appalling decision, and I have not met anybody yet in Australia or overseas—given all the phone calls I have received—who does not agree with that sentiment about how appalling it is. Dr Moeller came to Australia in March 2006 with his wife, Isabella, and his three children, Sarah, Felix and Lukas. Young Lukas is a delightful little fellow of 13, but the Department of Immigration and Citizenship have deemed that, because he has Down syndrome, this precludes Dr Moeller and his family taking up residency as citizens of our country. It just beggars belief that, whilst it is not lawful for any of us as Australians to discriminate on the basis of disability, apparently it is for the Department of Immigration and Citizenship. It staggers me that as a result of the incredible amount of media coverage that this issue has attracted right around the world—some of which I have with me—it also affects the decisions of nurses, teachers, engineers and other people we desperately need, particularly in rural Australia.

With regard to Dr Moeller, we have good strategies out there in my part of the world. We so value these professional people that we gather around them and give them immense support. I said over the phone to the Minister for Immigration and Citizenship, Senator Chris Evans, that of all the communities in Australia to pick on Horsham is well supported with disability support services. They actually celebrate disability with a week-long festival called the Awakenings Festival. It is a celebration of disability and a performing arts festival. All of the performing artists are people with disability, many of them with Down syndrome.
So I am challenging the government to come down here to this chamber. Maybe Mr Bill Shorten, the Parliamentary Secretary for Disabilities and Children’s Services, could come down. Maybe the Minister for Health and Ageing could come down here herself and explain why there is not a whole-of-government approach to addressing the challenge that we have of attracting good physicians, good medical doctors like Dr Moeller. Perhaps Laurie Ferguson, the Parliamentary Secretary for Multicultural Affairs and Settlement Services, could come down here—or maybe the Attorney-General himself. Somebody needs to come down here and explain how the Department of Immigration and Citizenship are able to make an appalling decision such as this.

When the Moellers made the decision to come to Australia, supported by the Wimmera Health Care Group on a section 457 visa, they explained to me that they were leaving Germany because of the lack of support for young Lukas because of his debility. They are now alarmed to find that, because of this law that the Department of Immigration and Citizenship can hide behind, Australians are not the fair-minded, decent people that he thought they were. My deep fear is that a well regarded and highly qualified physician like Dr Moeller—who has made the decision to come to Australia and commit to Horsham because of the enormous support that he and his family received from the community—might decide to leave in order to find some future security for his profession and his family. It is not good enough for the Department of Immigration and Citizenship to explain to me that he and his whole family have residency in accordance with his 457 visa until 2010. This professional person needs certainty about his professional future and certainty with regard to the raising of his children.

As I have said, young Lukas is a delightful little fella. He goes to Horsham West Primary School. Yes, he has a teacher’s aide and, yes, he needs resources. But I believe the Australian community think that is okay. Any person with a disability has a right, I think, to achieve their potential. Certainly across the Wimmera, there are many support services available, and that particular region of Australia has indicated it is willing to support. There are wonderful support services: the Wool Factory, Karkana, Cooinda, Woodbine and Murdoch House. I want someone from the government to come down and explain this terrible decision. *(Time expired)*

Blaxland Electorate: Remembrance Day

Mr CLARE (Blaxland) (9.39 pm)—One of the great privileges of this job is meeting extraordinary people, people like Dick Payten—a good man, as honest as the day is long. I first met Dick Payten selling Legacy badges last year in Bankstown. We worked together that day selling badges for that great Australian charity that looks after ex-service men and women and their families. Dick is a soldier himself, in more ways than one. He is 87 years old, but you would never know it. He never stops. The other day when I spoke to him he was very upset. The doctor had told him he had to get a pacemaker. He told me: ‘I don’t have time for an operation. I’ve got too much to do.’ What he was doing was organising the dedication of a monument to the 7th Division. As well as working for Legacy for the last 20 years, Dick is also the President of the 7th Australian Division AIF Association, ‘the silent 7th’.

The 7th Division did not receive much recognition during World War II and not enough since. We are more likely to recognise the places they served: Tobruk, Kokoda or Milne Bay. But the story of the 7th Division is a story worth telling. They were a force of 40,000 volunteers who signed up to
defend Australia in our darkest hour, the time of our greatest peril and our greatest generation. They fought throughout the war. They were the first flown into the battle at Nadzab in September 1943. They were the last to make an amphibious landing at Balikpapan on 1 July 1945. They were willing, strong and well trained. Many of their best were left behind. More than 6,500 were killed or wounded—one in six. Their efforts were rewarded with five Victoria Crosses. In 1942, Prime Minister John Curtin told this parliament:

"Today as in 1915 men are dying so that the nation may live. There will come a new dawn, bringing with it peace and freedom for the peoples of the world, but we can reach it only by striving bravely through the storm and the blood and the grief of war.

These are the men who marched through this storm and these are the men whose deeds we have a solemn duty to remember—not just tomorrow on Remembrance Day but every day.

Straight out of training, Dick Payten was sent to a faraway land and a distant war. But, in February 1942, when Dick boarded the USS Mount Vernon at Suez, he had no idea where he would land next. He joked to me that he felt like a mushroom, ‘kept in the dark’. What he did not know was that a fleet of ships carrying him and the 7th Division across the Indian Ocean was charting a course into Australian history, a course set by Prime Minister Curtin. Against the wishes of Churchill, Curtin ordered the 7th Division home to defend Australia. And that they did.

Last month the memorial to the 7th Division was dedicated on Remembrance Drive-way at Bass Hill. It is a monument that speaks for the silent 7th. It would not be there without Dick Payten. He was the driving force behind getting the memorial built and dedicated. Even the prospect of a pace-maker could not stop him. It is right that this place pause tomorrow to remember men like Dick Payten. And it is right that my local community has a place to remember the service of the 7th Division. It is a memorial that is long overdue, as is the recognition in the proceedings of this House of a good man like Dick Payten.

**Australian National Academy of Music**

Mr JOHNSON (Ryan) (9.44 pm)—The 22nd of October 2008 will be remembered by all musicians in Australia, and certainly by all musicians in the Ryan electorate, as a black day in the history of classical music in our country. Why is that? It is because the Rudd government, and Minister Garrett in particular, have decided to axe some $2.5 million of funding for the Australian National Academy of Music. This is an absolute disgrace, and I want to highlight it here in the parliament because in the Ryan electorate I have been contacted by many musicians and, indeed, by other constituents who have found this decision completely unwarranted.

I want to remind the people of Ryan about the National Academy of Music. It holds a unique place in our country. The Australian National Academy of Music is a very special institution for training Australia’s finest classical musicians. With an emphasis on the individual growth through tailored programs, the academy is committed to supporting talented musicians in refining and strengthening their individual musical voice, thereby empowering them to address the exciting challenges and possibilities of a life in music in the 21st century.

I would say that, of all members of parliament, the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and the Arts in particular, with his background, ought to be batting for the musicians of Australia, especially those young musicians who have an opportunity to develop their talents. Yet his role in this parliament and his role in this saga is a very sad
one indeed. The statement by the Australian National Academy of Music sets out its version—and I think it sets the record straight—of the regrettable saga of a lack of communication, exchange and consultation and of what is very much an imposition of a unilateral decision by the minister in cutting this funding.

I want to remind anyone who might have a love for and an appreciation of music to go to the website of the Australian National Academy of Music and see its record and its version of how the exchange has taken place. Let us pause for the moment and note the significant eight board members of the academy, because these members are no fools. They are very distinguished Australians with business records, with community service and with expertise in the industry. They are people who give their time to make a contribution to a very important institution, yet this axing of some $2.5 million is going to end the rich history of the National Academy of Music.

If the government took some time to go to the site and to go to the Facebook site, they would see that there are several thousands of Australians, just today, who have expressed their absolute contempt for the decision of Minister Garrett. I have a sneaking suspicion that if the Labor government and Mr Garrett in particular had any support from them, they will now not be receiving a Christmas card from those thousands of people—in fact, it is almost approaching tens of thousands. I know that the wiser heads in the Rudd government will realise that tens of thousands of very angry musicians might not come out in the streets, take their clothes off and protest in contempt of a government decision. But, rest assured, they will express their views in a very significant and profound way come the next election. Several hundred people alone who have contacted me in the last couple of days with their very deep concern and deep anxiety over this decision will make it very well known in the Ryan electorate how they feel about Minister Garrett.

In response to the letter of 27 October 2008 advising the academy that it would no longer be in receipt of the $2.5 million of taxpayers’ money supporting a great institution, the academy said:

As widely reported, this letter came as a shock to the Academy ...

I am no star musician, but I appreciate music. And, as someone who tries to give opportunities to young Australians to develop their talents, I want to express on the record on behalf of the Ryan electorate how terribly disappointed I am. In less than one year, the true colours of the Rudd government really are coming to the fore.

These young Australians deserve support. It is not a lot of money. The government can find money for the Essendon Football Club. I have no qualms about Essendon Football Club receiving, I think, some $1½ million. I know a lot of people like football, but why can the $2.5 million not be continued? I am dismayed—(Time expired)

Schoolies Week

Ms REA (Bonner) (9.48 pm)—I rise tonight to share the nervousness that often occurs in the month of November for all of those families and households out there who have young school leavers in their final year of school. It is a nervousness which is often overshadowed by nervousness about the end-of-year exams. It is about their young school leavers going off to that well-known institution that we call schoolies week, which will be occurring later on in the month.

Of course, in the electorate of Bonner and in the suburbs of Brisbane, we are very near to the mecca of that tradition, which is the Gold Coast. Tonight I would like to pay tribute to an organisation called Red Frogs. It is a group of young volunteers based at the city
point church in Mansfield in the electorate of Bonner. A youth worker called Andy Gourley has over 10 years developed a group of young volunteers who make their way to various locations where schoolies gather to try and offer some comfort, some support and, at times, some very much needed assistance when the celebrations of that week get a little bit too much.

We know that it is the right of every young person to celebrate the end of school. It is a significant time in people’s lives, and that week afterwards is often seen as a rite of passage from being a schoolkid to moving on to young adulthood. Unfortunately, though, in this day and age it is often seen as an excuse to live to excess and, indeed, to often put yourself in quite severe physical and sometimes moral danger because of the temptations that occur in that particular week.

Red Frogs developed when Andy Gourley, some 10 years ago as a youth worker, went to schoolies week on the Gold Coast to visit a friend and saw the trouble that many young people get into when they are often away from home for the first time and when they are sampling some temptations—probably for the first time—and doing so in an atmosphere where excess is seen as the norm. It is called Red Frogs because they are the means by which the volunteers approach young people who they believe are in need of assistance to try and tempt them into sitting down, having a chat and perhaps taking the advice and the assistance of the volunteers.

Red frogs have been seen as the most successful lolly that young people respond to. Over the years they have tried many different kinds but, for some reason, red frogs seem to be the best icebreaker and have become a tradition. Ten years ago, when Andy first started, he handed out 80 kilos in the first year that Red Frogs volunteers went to the Gold Coast. This year they will distribute some nine tonnes of red frogs, and I think that is an indication of how successful this program has been.

I had the privilege of visiting with Andy a local high school, Mount Gravatt High School, in my electorate last week. Andy does a tour of schools throughout Brisbane, talking to the year 12s about the possible troubles or dangers they may face when they go down to schoolies week. He offers very practical and sensible advice about how to survive the week and, indeed, how to enjoy it.

I wanted to offer my support because, as we know, the issue of teenage binge drinking is something that is very much at the forefront of the government’s attention and that of the broader Australian community. Here we have an organisation that has had major success in walking young people home, protecting them from possible danger and picking them up off the streets when they are often semiconscious or even unconscious. Indeed, the organisation has even been successful in talking young people out of suicide. Often these are young men with a little bit too much drink or illegal substances in their bodies who find that life is a bit overwhelming, and they are in a position where they may seek that very dramatic last resort to end their depression and their fears. The Red Frogs people at the drop of a hat, at the phone call of a friend, will come to the aid of that person, sit and talk with them, offer them lots of red frogs and sympathy, and often they receive many accolades from young people now living very successful lives who ring to offer their thanks for the support they received at that time. (Time expired)
of the House the worsening of the drought in South Australia. For once I will not be talking about the Murray but about the devastating effects the drought is having on the cropping regions of South Australia. Some of those cropping regions have received less than 50 per cent of their annual rainfall as we approach the last few weeks of the year. This is an unpredictable, almost unimaginable state of affairs. For the third year in a row—and for some, five years out of seven—we have seen the season totally fail. Certainly on my farm that is the case.

There is one shining light in this, in that modern farming methods have assured us that we have not seen the dust bowls of the past—the forties, the sixties and the eighties—when much of our fertile topsoils blew away. But what is happening is that the good long-term operators in the industry are under serious threat. Good operators that have adopted modern farming practices—no till, satellite guidance, night spraying, variable rate seeding technology, integrated systems management and advanced marketing skills—are under severe pressure. These are just the people we cannot afford to lose out of our communities and out of our industries. But the pressure keeps building—drought, record prices for fuel, fertiliser and chemicals, shortages of labour and certainly a shortage of money to pay labour.

The mental state of farmers and rural businessmen is as fragile as I have ever seen. I say of my friends and colleagues that I farm with them if they are not financially exhausted, and many of them are, certainly are mentally exhausted. Exceptional circumstances is one of the only things keeping some of them on their farms. But the EC package needs reform. Farmers have been encouraged to invest off-farm to diversify their business so they can withstand these hard times. The current EC guidelines actually encourage people to get rid of those profit-making parts of the enterprise so they can qualify for the funding to keep them on their farms. There are a number of problems with exit grants. The take-up has been very low and there are problems there that need to be addressed.

We ignore rural Australia at our peril. It is still a major employer; it is still a major exporter for Australia. Some may begrudge the support that rural Australia receives but it pales into insignificance when compared with the plan announced today to support the car industry. This industry is vitally important to Australia’s future. It has been the
backbone of our past. The recommendations of the drought task force were delivered last time we were here in Canberra. Now, we need action. But the big fundamental question facing Australia is: do we want a rural Australia? And that is the question that will need to be answered in this next 12 months.

Question agreed to.

House adjourned at 9.59 pm

NOTICES

The following notices were given:

Ms Plibersek to present a Bill for an Act to amend laws in order to provide economic security strategy payments, and for related purposes. (Social Security and Other Legislation Amendment (Economic Security Strategy) Bill 2008)

Mrs Hull to move:
That the House calls on the Rudd Government:
(1) to deliver greater transparency and accountability as it moves towards the development of a Basin wide management plan by 2011 for the Murray-Darling Basin; and
(2) specifically to ensure that:
   (a) community impact statements are prepared as part of the Basin plan process and that these statements are prepared in consultation with affected communities and are made publicly available when completed;
   (b) scientific data (such as the CSIRO sustainability studies) are assessed along with these community impact statements in finalising Basin wide and catchment targets;
   (c) due recognition is given to the community and individual impacts of a new water management regime as well as the ongoing effects of the current drought; and
   (d) affected communities are provided with adequate resources to develop long term options and that Government assistance is provided to allow communities to deliver against these options.

Mr Georgiou to move:
That the House:
(1) reaffirms its commitment to the right of all Australians to enjoy equal rights and opportunities and be treated with equal respect regardless of race, colour, culture, creed or ethnic origin;
(2) reaffirms its commitment to maintaining an immigration policy wholly non-discriminatory on grounds of race, colour, culture, creed or ethnic origin;
(3) reaffirms its commitment to the process of reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, and to closing the gap that lies between us in life expectancy, educational achievement and economic opportunity;
(4) reaffirms its commitment to multiculturalism and to maintaining Australia as a culturally diverse, tolerant and open society, united by an overriding loyalty to our nation, obedience to its laws, and commitment to its democratic beliefs and institutions; and
(5) denounces intolerance in any form on the grounds of race, colour, culture, creed or ethnic origin as incompatible with the kind of society we are and want to be.

Mr Bruce Scott to move:
That the House:
(1) reaffirms the definition of ‘Veteran’ as set out by the Department of Veterans’ Affairs;
(2) endorses the ‘Continuous full time service determination’ signed on 28 August 1998 by the Minister for Veterans’ Affairs enabling
members of the Citizen Military Forces (CMF) who served in Vietnam to meet the definition of ‘Veteran’;

(3) encourages the Department of Veterans’ Affairs to:

(a) recognise claims by CMF members from that date; and

(b) take appropriate measures to contact servicemen and women to whom the determination applies with a view to retrospective payment.

Ms Ley to move:

That the House:

(1) supports long term viability of regional and rural medical practices, hospitals and services;

(2) notes with concern the failure of state governments to provide adequate health services for Australians living in regional, rural and remote areas, particularly in relation to cross border health;

(3) acknowledges the Royal Flying Doctor Service and the significant contribution it makes by providing aeromedical emergency and primary health care services to people who live, work and travel in regional and remote Australia;

(4) calls on the Australian Government to eliminate inequality in healthcare access and services experienced by those living in rural and remote areas by:

(a) increasing the recruitment and retention of rural medical practitioners and health care professionals;

(b) assisting Australians who live in regional, rural and remote areas with the cost of travel to specialist medical appointments in capital cities and regional centres; and

(c) providing adequate funding to maintain and expand small rural hospitals and health services and their maternity and other procedural services.
The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Ms AE Burke) took the chair at 4 pm.

COMMITTEES

Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Local Government Committee

Report

Debate resumed from 20 October, on motion by Ms King:

That the House take note of the report.

Mr RANDALL (Canning) (4.01 pm)—I rise to support the motion tabling the report on Australia’s coastal shipping industry, Rebuilding Australia’s coastal shipping industry: inquiry into coastal shipping policy and regulation, recently completed by the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Local Government. The report was commissioned by the Minister for Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Local Government, the Hon. Anthony Albanese MP, on 12 March 2008 to inquire into and report on coastal shipping policy and regulation by October 2008. The committee has thoroughly investigated this matter in accordance with the relevant terms of reference, receiving 81 submissions from 66 interested parties. Public hearings were held in Brisbane, Canberra, Perth, Adelaide, Launceston, Melbourne and Sydney in which 78 witnesses appeared before the committee.

The report makes a series of recommendations in accordance with the terms of reference on ways to enhance the competitiveness and sustainability of the Australian coastal shipping sector. These recommendations include the further examination of an optional tonnage tax, the reimplementation of accelerated depreciation requirements, enhanced skills recognition and training coordination, and a number of recommendations to improve the competitiveness of vessels operating under licences under part IV of the Navigation Act, as opposed to vessels operating under single voyage or continuous voyage permits. Many of the stakeholders in the Australian shipping industry that have been consulted list these issues as being at the forefront of the challenges facing the Australian coastal shipping industry. As such, it is extremely important that they are addressed to enhance the competitiveness of the Australian shipping industry and to reinvigorate and revive the industry.

As a new member of the Standing Committee on Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Local Government, I look forward to a continuing dialogue with a number of stakeholders in this area to develop many of these issues further. I commend the committee members on their thorough approach in conducting this report, particularly the committee chair, Catherine King MP, and the deputy chair, Paul Neville. I thank the House.

Mr SULLIVAN (Longman) (4.02 pm)—I support the tabling motion for this report and welcome the member for Canning. As a member of the committee, he will find that it is a committee that works as parliamentary committees are expected to work: towards a common goal and without concern for the political allegiances of its members. I acknowledge the very good work of our chairperson, Catherine King, and our deputy chairperson, Paul Neville, and all the other parliamentary colleagues on the committee. I also acknowledge the great amount of work put into this inquiry by the inquiry secretary, Michael Crawford, and the secretariat and staff who have been engaged in the inquiry throughout. They include the committee sec-
retary, Janet Holmes, who has moved on to other pastures and has been succeeded by Richard Selth; our researcher, Katie Ellis; and our administration officer, Emma Martin, who has also moved on and has been succeeded by Jazmine Rakic. I acknowledge the Hansard staff who travelled with the committee, through the extensive itinerary referred to by the member for Canning, to record evidence that was taken.

In opening my comments about the report, let me say that it was quite wonderful to see both sides of the shipping industry argument, if we can characterise it as that. Both the union and the shipowners have had a very positive response to the report that has been brought down by the committee. As the deputy chairman would appreciate, serving two masters is never easy, but being able to do that means to me that the committee has done very good work. The Maritime Union of Australia, for example, has indicated that if these recommendations are followed then the shipping industry ‘is set for massive revitalisation’. Similarly, the Australian Shipowners Association has said that if these recommendations are followed it will ‘improve, streamline and invigorate the coastal sector of the Australian shipping industry’.

We cannot separate coastal shipping from international shipping in any real context, particularly with the way things are going now. The comments of the ASA also go to the fact that, if implemented, these committee recommendations will have an outstanding effect on the Australian shipping industry in its entirety. There is information in the report about how the number of Australian-flagged vessels has been in decline in recent years. This is something that has been a concern for all of us in government in Australia. Simply put, the purpose of the exercise that we were asked to undertake was to look at ways in which we could increase the coasting trade’s share of the Australian domestic freight market. Typically this would involve cargoes that are not time-critical—cargoes that do not need to be carried by air or, in many cases, by road or, to a lesser extent, by rail. We have seen that there are a number of advantages in each of the forms of transport that are operating in the country today; similarly, there are a number of disadvantages.

Sea transport has a great environmental advantage in what we now commonly consider to be a carbon constrained future. It has advantages in the cost of infrastructure required to support it: the ocean surface does not need rescaling every so often or new sections of it to be laid. If we are able to move some of our freight onto the sea lanes, it will relieve significant congestion that currently exists on our highway and rail networks. Road transport also has advantages. In particular, it has transit time advantages over sea freight. It has a significant convenience advantage. Somebody shipping by road transport can back their truck up to the loading dock at a particular business in Brisbane, for example, fill the truck up, drive it to a loading dock in Sydney and unload. It has convenience and handling advantages in that you load and unload only once. In the current circumstance, road transport has schedule certainty that sea transport is not able to provide. Rail transport has some advantages over road transport, particularly environmental advantages. Rail transport relocates congestion from the road to the rail. That is an advantage if you happen to be a road user—which most of us in Australia are.

We have three—if we leave out air transport for the really critical stuff—forms of transport. Each has some advantages and disadvantages. Significantly, our report has been able to create a set of recommendations which, if they are followed, will create a situation where sea transport, which has carbon, infrastructure, cost and congestion advantages, will get a greater share
of the market. Currently sea transport accounts for about 24 per cent of the domestic freight in Australia. Significant proportions of that are carried in bulk cargo supply chain operations. A good example is the transporting of bauxite from the mine site at Weipa to the Boyne Island smelter. We carry most of the heavy lift cargo by ocean. These are the sorts of items that would be untenable on either railway line or road. But there are very few scheduled, regular shipping movements by Australian-flagged vessels on the coast. Most of the containerised and general cargo carried on the coast is carried on permit vessels from foreign-flagged nations. The results of this are that services are difficult to market to shippers and that shipping cannot really, because of the lack of fixed scheduling, get out to compete for cargoes in the marketplace. The permit system simply does not allow that to happen.

We on the committee were, of course, very mindful of the fact that we needed to protect employment for Australian seafarers who are protected by cabotage arrangements but not nearly as thoroughly as those arrangements in place in the United States of America. We were mindful of the fact that operating costs are substantially higher with Australian crews and—although the MUA is living in the real world in relation to matters like smaller crews, and in the dealings that they have undertaken with Canada Shipping Lines or CSL for crewing the Australian-flagged ships in its fleet—it is still cheaper to crew a ship with non-Australian ratings, although permit ships are required to pay Australian equivalent wages while they are operating on the coast in the coasting trade for that portion of their voyage. Most of our coasting trade occurs on interstate legs of foreign ships’ voyages.

We have taken a number of approaches. In the couple of minutes I have left to me, I will say that I think the support we have been given by both the union and the shipowners has been wonderful. The shipowners, of course, are quite impressed by the fact that they will have the option of opting for a tonnage tax in place of the tax regime that exists now—an option that has been used overseas quite successfully to revitalise registers—and they are happy with the return of the accelerated depreciation facility which was discontinued in 1996, which will make our shipping fleet into a much younger fleet. We have been deteriorating that way for a while.

We felt that port infrastructure needed to be given priority in the development of national infrastructure. We also thought that we need to establish a national maritime training authority—and I know that my colleague, the member for Forde, will have a lot to say about that; he is particularly keen on that area. That will give rise to employment opportunities for Australians who desire a seafaring career.

We have also recommended that this and, I guess, future reform of the shipping industry be overseen by a reform implementation group to be established within a re-established Australian Maritime Group. These, we believe, will stand the country and our shipping industry in good stead into the future, and I look forward to seeing the government’s response to this report and its implementation.

Ms PARKE (Fremantle) (4.12 pm)—I welcome the tabling of the report of the inquiry by the House Standing Committee on Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Local Government into coastal shipping policy and regulation. The report’s title, Rebuilding Australia’s coastal shipping industry, is in itself a good summary of my position on the subject, for I believe the industry needs rebuilding. I am strongly of the view that it is in Australia’s interests that a national policy to increase the coastal shipping share of the domestic freight task—

MAIN COMMITTEE
and, in particular, to support and increase the role of Australian-flagged coastal shipping—be
developed and implemented as soon as practicable.

The inquiry report cites clear evidence that sea freight has lost ground against other modes
of domestic freight transport over the last 10 years and that, while the total demand for coastal
shipping services has grown, this has been accommodated by cargo shipped under permit,
which grew 56.4 per cent between the years 2005-06 and 2006-07, rather than by Australian-
flagged vessels. There is no doubt that Australia’s coastal shipping industry has fallen away
over the last decade and that this has been to our detriment in a number of significant areas.
Chief among these are the deterioration of employment and training opportunities; the in-
creased pressure upon other modes of domestic freight and the resulting social, economic and
environmental costs of this pressure; and the negative transport security ramifications of a
coastal shipping mix in which the Australian-flagged share of the task is both too small and
declining.

I was pleased to make a submission to the inquiry and it was only appropriate that I should
do so, as a representative of Fremantle, an electorate which includes the historic and eco-
nomically vital Fremantle Port. As I noted in my submission, Western Australia is our leading
export state when it comes to sea freight, with one-third of national exports by value and one-
half by volume. Fremantle Port is the largest and busiest general cargo port in Western Austra-
lia. It handles 83 per cent of all seaborne imports and 25 per cent of all seaborne exports by
value. The total value of trade through Fremantle Port in the financial year 2006-07 was $24
billion.

In remote parts of Western Australia, coastal shipping is not just the preferred mode of
transport; it is the only effective mode of transport. It is for this reason that Seacorp, a coastal
shipping line that operates through Fremantle Port, holds a long-term state government con-
tract to provide coastal shipping services to link a range of smaller north-west ports with both
Fremantle and Darwin. This shipping service runs on a regular 17-day cycle, sailing from
Fremantle via Dampier, Port Hedland, Broome and Wyndham on its way to Darwin. It carries
14 per cent of the total amount of freight by road and sea within the Perth-Darwin corridor. Its
newest vessel, the MV Kimberley Rose, has delivered a further 20 per cent cargo capacity and,
in addition, contributes to both the national Coastwatch program and the Weather Watch pro-
gram. The Kimberley Rose is utilised for pilot training, and it carries three maritime trainees
on each voyage, one from each of the maritime unions.

The benefits of a strengthened and rejuvenated coastal shipping industry are numerous, but
I want to mention a few of them. There are significant environmental benefits to shifting
freight from road to sea transport. While shipping meets 24 per cent of Australia’s total freight
task, it contributes only four per cent of total freight emissions. The inquiry report notes that freight
transport accounts for six per cent of the total of Australia’s carbon emissions. This is not in-
significant. I support the report’s recommendation that the CSIRO study and report on ship
emissions. I share the report’s concern about the effect that an emissions trading scheme
would have on the competitive position of Australian-flagged vessels versus permit vessels.
An emissions trading scheme is likely to improve the cost-competitive position of shipping
vis-a-vis other modes of transport. I would hope that any negative impact on the competitive
position of Australian-flagged vessels per se would be ameliorated under the proposed Carbon
Pollution Reduction Scheme.
As the member for Fremantle, I acknowledge that the movement of freight through the port of Fremantle, particularly container freight, is in turn sustained by road transport. Truck movements in and out of Fremantle have been an understandable cause of community concern for some time. In this context, I am pleased to say that the Gallop-Carpenter state government made significant progress in moving freight out of Fremantle Port by rail instead of by road. In May this year, the Western Australian Minister for Planning and Infrastructure announced a 1,200 per cent increase in the number of containers moving through Fremantle Port by rail since 2002. This increased transport of containers by rail would otherwise have required an estimated 65,000 annual truck movements through the port. The rail container freight share has now risen to 14.5 per cent of total container freight through Fremantle. I hope this effort to move container freight from road to rail will continue to be supported by the Barnett government.

I also welcome the provision in the 2008-09 budget of $1.3 million for investigation and implementation of network intelligence infrastructure and freight traveller information on Leach Highway between Kewdale and Fremantle. This project will improve the efficiency of freight movements by providing freight vehicles with real-time information to allow them to meet allocated time slots at port.

Another positive outcome of a rejuvenated coastal shipping industry would be the national and transport security benefits inherent in a greater role for Australian-flagged vessels. Many other countries, including the United States, recognise these benefits and set their policy accordingly. Few of them have the coastal security challenge that confronts Australia. As I noted in my submission to the inquiry, the United States has traditionally supported and protected its domestic shipping industry to a much greater degree than Australia. Section 27 of the US Merchant Marine Act 1920, known more commonly as the ‘Jones act’, requires that all water transportation of goods between US ports be on US built, owned, crewed and operated ships. ‘Jones act’ ships constitute a large and service-ready merchant marine and they maintain a pool of well-trained maritime personnel. While this is a degree of regulation that would not be contemplated in Australia—it would not be appropriate for a range of reasons—it remains the case that a return to the intention, spirit and objectives of the Navigation Act, especially where it concerns the granting of permits and special licences, would encourage the rejuvenation of coastal shipping by Australian-flagged vessels. A return to the intended function of cabotage in Australia, with the addition of the appropriate administrative structures, could deliver the dual benefits of supporting coastal shipping in general while also increasing Australia’s latent defence and peacekeeping capabilities. Any increase in coastal shipping by Australian-flagged vessels would certainly provide an increase in the degree of transport security.

Domestic freight in Australia is projected to double in the next 10 to 15 years. It is important that this growing freight task be shared appropriately between the various modes of domestic transport, and in my view this will require a significant growth in the share held by coastal shipping. I endorse the purpose and conduct of the inquiry by the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Local Government, and I support the report’s recommendations, particularly the recommendations that go to the review of the Navigation Act and to the creation of the reform implementation group.
Mr RAGUSE (Forde) (4.20 pm)—I rise today to speak on the report *Rebuilding Australia’s coastal shipping industry*. This follows the inquiry into coastal shipping policy and regulation. The House of Representatives Standing Committee on Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Local Government was given the task of inquiring into coastal shipping policy and regulation in Australia in order to make recommendations on ways to enhance the competitiveness and sustainability of this sector. We are an island nation, and our economy relies on the shipping trade. Almost all of our export trade is moved by ship, and shipping plays a significant role in fulfilling Australia’s domestic freight task, carrying 24 per cent of the total freight task in 2004-05. While this is a significant contribution from the shipping industry to the national freight network, there is still room for improvement and growth in Australia’s coastal shipping industry. This report is specifically about our coastal shipping as a domestic effort, quite apart from our international effort, which in itself is very, very significant.

It had always puzzled me that, although we are an island nation surrounded by extraordinary coastline, our coastal shipping industry had been slowly sinking. The Australian coastal shipping industry has been in decline for some time. In 2005-06, the Australian registered trading fleet consisted of 46 vessels. In 1996, some 12 years ago, it stood at 75. There has been an increase of foreign vessels employed to carry goods around the Australian coast, at the cost of the Australian coastal shipping fleet. For all sorts of reasons, that permit system has been allowed to exist, and this report was very much about getting an inside view of why these arrangements were working, if they were working, and whether it was beneficial to our country to support such a scheme.

During the inquiry, as a member of the standing committee, I attended many of the hearings. The feeling and sentiment from many in the Australian maritime industry was that Australia would benefit from a revived and expanded coastal shipping sector. A revived and expanded maritime industry in Australia would complement and benefit intermodal freight transport, to name one area of industry. Containerised cargo and significant movement of domestic trade freight would certainly benefit. My electorate of Forde, while very much a landlocked electorate, is very, very dependent on its access to the ports through normal freight, through road and through rail.

There are many arguments for reviving the coastal shipping industry, and the strongest one, of course, is economic. If we revitalise the coastal shipping industry, we can free up the land transport bottlenecks, infrastructure constraints and environmental impacts that are felt in many parts of the country, including my own electorate of Forde. In this chamber I have spoken many times about the electorate of Forde and about the fact that we have very limited infrastructure in terms of rail and road and the ability to move freight around. I will talk later in my speech today about the opportunities that exist within my electorate and about why coastal shipping certainly has some major benefits for electorates like mine that are landlocked. The economic argument, of course, is really about how we improve the shipping industry. The creation of jobs, which will have wide-reaching effects beyond the shipping industry and ports, will also contribute to the growth of maritime services and associated services. In the current economic climate, anything that will stimulate and create jobs will have a net benefit. Other areas that will also benefit from a revived and expanded shipping industry are Australian defence, maritime safety and security.
I listened to the member for Fremantle and the member for Longman, who challenged me to talk about education today, and I will talk about the education and training aspects of this review of coastal shipping. But I will say a little bit more about the importance of having a well-established transport freight network, which includes road, rail and certainly coastal shipping.

If you look at the electorate of Forde, the area of Bromelton is a greenfield site for the development of industrial and freight intermodal transport. I have mentioned Bromelton many times in this House. It is an area that is within 70 kilometres of the Brisbane port. It is not currently very well serviced by road but it has the standard freight line running right through it. This facility at Bromelton was just recently named by the state government in Queensland as a state development area because of its significant value and its significant contribution to the ability to deal with and move freight. With this in mind, it is not just about rail and it is not just about road; it is also about the connection to that wonderful opportunity that we have with our coastal highways.

I said that the member for Longman challenged me to talk about education and training today, because during our discussions about coastal shipping my concentration was on the ability to train people adequately in all of the processes involved with shipping. It appears that the emphasis in the industry and the coastal shipping effort is on not only the ability to encourage people with certain skills into the industry but also the ability to train. It is interesting that there is confusion amongst many about how this training should occur. There is misunderstanding about the notion of competency based training.

I have often spoken about the need for adequate, appropriate and industry linked training and outcomes. It is also important to recognise prior learning. There is concern that it might take a number of years to train certain operatives within coastal shipping. Having a lot of people leave the industry and having the fleet diminish over time means that we lose opportunities for on-the-job training—the ability to give people competencies within a particular field. As far as I am concerned, for the industry to have the ability to revive itself, the education and training aspects are very important. The recommendations within the report look at a number of ways for us to provide adequate and appropriate training that will stimulate the industry. I have made my views known in this House before about the role that education and training plays in most industry sectors. The coastal shipping sector is one that can hugely benefit from some concentrated effort in education and training.

Of course, though, there are challenges for the shipping industry. It will need to compete. I have just talked about road and rail. While it needs to compete on timely service, reliability and competitive pricing, it probably owes its future to the fact that we can complement road and rail transport through that very process. It is very much about having a complete, overall freight movement plan for this country which will significantly involve coastal shipping.

There have been infrastructure constraints at the ports, and this has constrained the industry’s competitiveness. For this country and this government to make a commitment to coastal shipping means that infrastructure needs to be a major part of that commitment. While the processes at the ports that we observed around the country are very good and very efficient in so many ways because of our international shipping effort, there seems to have been over a period of time a lack of deliberate links to the domestic freight task. That is something that I think this report deals with very well in the detail of some of the recommendations. With
these issues now presented in the report and with the recommendations in the report also, I am sure that the minister will be able to make some very good decisions about our way forward.

Recommendation 9 suggests that Infrastructure Australia create a national port development plan, which I will just mention, to address current and potential capacity constraints in the ports. This plan would then be used to direct funding to critical port infrastructure projects in Australia to address not only export capacity but also the ability to respond to the potential growth in coastal shipping. It is critical for the shipping industry to get back on its feet, and it needs port infrastructure suitable for the current and potential capacity of Australian ports. Infrastructure is directly related to providing services and boosting productivity. It is necessary to improve the policy framework for the shipping industry.

Those water highways are there. We know that a lot of Australia’s history was built on a lot of freight movement prior to our road and rail infrastructure being established, and it is clear that we now have an opportunity to link what we have established as major infrastructure in this country with coastal shipping lanes—old is new again—to support the growth of industry in this country. Certainly, it will bring an economic stimulus and an ability to commit to major infrastructure related to ports.

Although my electorate of Forde is landlocked, this push to increase our port capacity and port movements will bring huge opportunities to this country. Bromelton will be the largest intermodal port in this country. Irrespective of whether coastal shipping occurs or not, it just makes so much sense that we move forward and establish the infrastructure to support our coastal shipping efforts.

Debate (on motion by Mr Hayes) adjourned.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs Committee

Report

Debate resumed from 20 October, on motion by Mr Marles:

That the House take note of the report.

Mr ROBERT (Fadden) (4.30 pm)—Small business is the core of Australia’s economy. Three-quarters of a million Australian small businesses employ 4.1 million Australians. There are 1.1 million non-employing small businesses, many of them independent contractors who are former employees and may eventually take on employees of their own. These businesses deserve our support—and, indeed, Indigenous Australians deserve our support to start their own businesses. As the Open for business: developing Indigenous enterprises in Australia report states:

In 2006, six per cent of employed Indigenous people indicated they worked in their own business. This compares with 17 per cent of employed non Indigenous people.

The proportion of employed Indigenous people who worked in their own business ranges from seven per cent in major cities to two per cent in remote areas.

Business involves risk, as do all endeavours, and, while the research clearly shows that only one-third of small businesses make it to the 15-year mark, without them Australia would be in significant economic trouble. Small business is, as they say, the engine room of the nation. As you would know, Madam Deputy Speaker, the electorate of Fadden joined with those of Moncrieff and McPherson represents the small-business half of the nation. As the founder of my own business, and after nine years growing it into a truly national firm, I understand the
risks and I certainly understand the rewards that come from a successful small business. I also understand that founding and developing a business and going through the challenges, meeting the risks and dealing with the red tape and all of the issues that business confronts you with is difficult. It demands tremendous risk-taking, it demands resourcefulness, it demands courage, especially in the early days, and it demands an enormous amount of hard work. It demands patience, it demands great levels of communication and skill and, at the end of the day, it demands the perseverance to keep going when all around may tell you to stop.

Across the nation there are a great range of Indigenous businesses and Indigenous people behind them keen to build those businesses, keen to take advantage of strengths and look to the future, with a resolve to face the hardships, face the risks and persevere until they have achieved what they set out to do. Indigenous self-employment and participation in the ownership of Indigenous enterprises enable individuals, families and ultimately communities to reduce reliance on government assistance and to improve their overall sense of self-sufficiency. To see members of their community striving to succeed in the business world can only help to provide additional role models for young people, as it does in the broader community. Despair breeds despair; success lifts all around it. Likewise, successful Indigenous enterprises help to strengthen employment, improve the local economy and help local people develop their skills.

I can testify to this personally, having lived for 12 months in the Torres Strait and worked throughout all of the 12 Torres Strait Islander communities on the 11 inhabited islands of the Torres Strait. I can see the many Indigenous enterprises thriving, and the men and women driving those enterprises seeing the success and the fruit of their labours. Many Indigenous businesses already have a head start in various industries—the competitive advantage some Indigenous communities already enjoy include culture based industries, the tourism sector or industries that are location or land based such as land and resource management, and of course a range of service opportunities around the mining sector.

The aim of increasing and strengthening Indigenous businesses is certainly a noble one and may be a key to partly addressing Indigenous disadvantage, which the parliament is so acutely aware of. There are opportunities out there that with the right support could and should flourish. With the right support Indigenous businesses need not just solely be not-for-profit, community owned or government subsidised. With the right support we could and should see a huge diversity of Indigenous businesses not only servicing other Indigenous areas, communities or people but the broader community as a whole.

While many Indigenous business remain not-for-profit, community owned or government subsidised there is no reason that this must be the case and that Indigenous businesses could not be supported and encouraged to operate in the normal free market as other businesses continue to do. Indigenous businesses should be supported, especially to become for-profit based. The coalition supports those recommendations that will lead to wider awareness of Aboriginal business successes and especially the recommendations which aim to create more for-profit business for Aboriginal people whether they be sole traders, members of partnerships or individual shareholders.

The coalition members of the committee did share some reservations about recommendations which might restrict free negotiations involving Aboriginal people. Running a business should not primarily be about going to meetings or securing program grants. It is about seeing
an opportunity, seizing that opportunity, developing skills, taking risks, reaping the rewards of providing a service to the community, and getting out there and making things happen.

Ms REA (Bonner) (4.36 pm)—I want to thank the committee for its report. I would like to rise as a member of the Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs who was closely involved in developing the Open for business report into Indigenous businesses. As a newly elected member of parliament I was certainly aware of the work that was done having seen many question times on television. I was certainly keen to be involved in the amazing work that happens in an electorate that is done by all hardworking members of this House but I think for any new member the real unknown is in fact the incredible amount of detailed work, investigation and policy analysis that occurs at the committee level. Over the last 12 months as a newly elected member, it has been my activities and involvement in the various standing committees that I am a member of that has brought a lot of interest and satisfaction to my role as a member of this parliament.

There is probably therefore no greater honour than to be addressing the chamber on a report that, as a member, I have been involved in and which I have actually seen come to fruition in the form of a fairly thick document with quite significant recommendations. Indeed this particular report does contain some very significant recommendations for the government, for industry and indeed for the Indigenous people of this country.

We know that Indigenous people face significant challenges in attaining the quality of life that they deserve and aspire to. We have heard many times—particularly over the last 12 months as a result of the Prime Minister’s apology and continuous commitment to implementing practical initiatives—of the disadvantage that exists within Indigenous communities in remote rural areas but also within our urban areas and our major cities. We know of the gap that exists between non-Indigenous communities and Indigenous communities regarding life expectancy and associated other health problems. We know that, as a government and as a community, we have a moral responsibility to try and deal with the underlying issues that have created that gap and to look at practical ways in which we can improve the quality of life of Indigenous people in our country. That is why I am very pleased to be talking on this particular report.

The committee travelled across the country—to most of the capital cities and to other areas such as Kununurra and Cairns. We received submissions from a wide variety of individuals and organisations and heard directly from a wide variety of Indigenous and non-Indigenous people who have a passion in this particular area. It will not surprise anyone in this chamber or indeed elsewhere to hear that we heard about the challenges that many Indigenous people face, such as the issue of dealing with racial discrimination and prejudice and the difficulties that arise from social isolation and alienation. We certainly know that there are some real challenges in remote communities regarding self-worth, self-esteem and indeed the strengthening of the family unit.

What was most heartening was to also hear of the many and very diverse positive stories that are out there in the Indigenous community. We might have thought at the beginning of this inquiry that small business and Indigenous people did not necessarily go together, except in the case of people working in an artists co-op or in the cultural industry. I can assure the chamber that that is not the case. There are an enormous number of Indigenous people within this country who are working in all sorts of different enterprises, who are running small busi-
nesses that employ people and who are contributing significantly both to their own financial independence and also to that of the communities in which they live.

We heard of and visited some incredible artists and people involved in the cultural industry. We met with a number of Indigenous corporations that, as a result of working in partnership and agreement with the mining sector, have seen employment, small businesses and contracts increasing. We also spoke to people in our cities who are running mechanics workshops and car detailing workshops and all sorts of different small businesses. It was very heartening to see the level and breadth of enterprise that is out there in Indigenous communities.

There are 14 recommendations in this report and all of them are quite significant. As a result of the hearings and analysis of the submissions, there are three main planks in the committee report. One is that we need to get better at collecting data. As I have already said, there are a significant number of existing enterprises out there, and we simply do not have the data to identify the breadth of Indigenous business that already exists in this country. It is very important that we can measure the amount of activity and develop the statistics. Also, we heard from many Indigenous small business people who said that they had their business established but for one reason or another needed a bit of support and some resources to take them to the next level—maybe an individual businessperson running a small business from home with some support and resources both from the private sector and from government that has the capacity to move into office premises and employ a couple of people. So it is not just about finding out what is out there; that data can lead us to targeting programs that will help existing businesses as well as develop new ones.

In that vein, the second plank of the report is really about easy access to information and support services. Many Indigenous people, particularly those running their own businesses in remote communities, identified that there are many different programs within government, outside government and across the country that would be of some assistance to them in building up their businesses. But how do you find out about this plethora of programs and resources? It is very important that we find some way of creating a one-stop shop or one port of call, whether virtual or physical, where somebody who is starting a business or who has just started a business and is ready to go to the next level can go for easy information and find out about all of the support services that are out there for them.

Of course, the last plank in a sense is that of procurement. This leads to the heart of the report and some of the most significant recommendations within the report, the first being the idea that as a government we commit—and hopefully encourage state and territory and local governments as well—to examining the possibility of a percentage of our procurement being given to Indigenous businesses. As a very large procurer of a whole range of goods and services, it would be a wonderful initiative if the government were able to identify Indigenous businesses from which it was able to procure some part of its needs. Imagine the opportunity that would give to Indigenous people and the encouragement that would give to others to start up their business.

In the same way, the committee recommends the development of an Indigenous supplier development council, which is modelled on the minority business council that has been a very successful model in the United States for the past 40 years. Indeed, we met with representatives of that council recently when they came here on a visit. I was talking to an African-American woman who runs a labour hire business and was about to recognise a turnover of $1
billion—something that she has been able to do as a result of being a member of the National Minority Supplier Development Council. She said how incredible it would be to see Indigenous people in this country reaching that level of economic independence and financial contribution to the broader economy.

I strongly recommend that members of this parliament look closely at these recommendations and endorse them. There is an acknowledgement in the report of the already very successful agreements that exist around Indigenous land use agreements, but I draw the attention of members particularly to the recommendations to strengthen support both on a financial and legal level to Indigenous organisations so that negotiations with sometimes very significant multinational mining companies can be done on a more equal footing and we can see more support going back into Indigenous communities as a result.

I offer my congratulations to the committee secretariat under the very skilled guidance of Pauline Brown. I am pleased that this report is here. Pauline is expecting her first child and was able to see this report put before the parliament just before going on maternity leave. We all wish her well. I congratulate the committee chair, Richard Marles, the member for Corio, who like me is a new member to this parliament and who was able to so skilfully guide this report to fruition. I think he deserves being commended for it. I congratulate all the committee members. It was certainly, as a committee goes, a very fruitful discussion carried out in a very good spirit. I do believe that everybody who was involved in the committee from both sides of the House contributed well and that, as a result, we have seen some significant recommendations coming out of it.

As a result of this report we will see emerging in this country even stronger Indigenous businesses. We will see the private sector through the establishment of an Indigenous supplier development council contributing significantly to the support of Indigenous business in this country. We will see enterprise expand and, as a result, I hope we will see the social disadvantage that is faced by Indigenous people within our country diminish because we will be contributing to their financial and economic independence. We know that that is the best way of creating a greater sense of self-worth and of giving people the opportunity to make a meaningful contribution to the community and to receive appropriate remuneration for it. We know that is a way in which we can address so many other areas of individual and social disadvantage. I hope that what we will also see as a result of this report is Indigenous people strengthening their skills and, through the contribution that they have made to our country over many thousands of years, support for further cultural activities and business. We should also look at their incredible knowledge and understanding of the land and the opportunities that will result from their incredible wisdom when it comes to caring for this land. I hope we will see carbon reduction enterprises coming out of the use of their talents and skills in ways that will improve our natural environment and contribute to the diminishing of greenhouse gases. This may be a small report, but there are a lot of good ideas in it and I look forward to seeing them come to fruition.

Debate (on motion by Mr Hayes) adjourned.
Debate resumed from 23 October, on motion by Ms Owens:
That the House take note of the report.
Debate (on motion by Mr Hayes) adjourned.

Debate resumed from 23 October, on motion by Mr Melham:
That the House take note of the report.

Mr SULLIVAN (Longman) (4.51 pm)—It is a pleasure for me to support the Advisory report on the Commonwealth Electoral Amendment (Political Donations and Other Measures) Bill 2008 by the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters. This bill was referred to the committee by the good senators. I would like to say how much I appreciate the work that has been done by the committee secretariat in relation to this bill. You will find it is a bill about which there have been some differences of opinion based across the political divide. However, as it turns out, the chairman, Daryl Melham, has been able to negotiate a fairly decent outcome in terms of the recommendations and the modest dissension that has come with this report.

In the first instance, I will mention a little bit of historical information. Political donations are not a matter that we have argued about just in recent times; it has been around for as long as I can remember. In particular, I note that colleagues who were on the joint standing committee in the previous parliament put in a dissenting report quoting Senator Ray back in 1983. One sentence encapsulates it all. Senator Ray said:

I believe that the public has a right to know who is donating to political parties.

I think that all of us would expect that to be the case. We should be open with our communities as to who is giving us the money that we use in order to attract their vote. A good friend of mine, Michael Lavarch, was on a committee of the parliament in 1989, which is when I think the report called Who pays the piper calls the tune was presented. I think that is what the community believes: who pays the piper calls the tune—who is sticking the money in the hands of the political parties is who, if not to get their way, gets to have influence over government.

As a Queensland MP I am very familiar with the process that led up to the 1988 Fitzgerald inquiry regarding the legendary brown paper bags of money that passed hands in Queensland at that time. The whole country has come a long way since then and political processes have matured somewhat, but it is still the case that, in almost any survey of the public that is taken, MPs rate at the lower end of occupations of Australian workers—because, of course, we are Australian workers—that are trusted by the community. We share that status with a couple of other professions, like used-car salesmen and journalists.

We are open to that kind of lack of regard by our community. If we are seeking to hide from them the sources of the money that we use to campaign then we are playing into the hands of that kind of opinion. They should see, as I do, members of both sides as honourable people who are striving to see to it that the values system that they support is the one that is
driving the country for the moment. The report that the committee has brought down is simply about that. It is about openness and accountability. It is about the restoration of public confidence in the political process. And while the dissenting report suggests that these matters should be delayed until the green paper of the full review of electoral legislation comes through, I believe that openness, accountability and the restoration of confidence are not matters that we as members of parliament should be seeking to delay. I believe that this is what we should have been offering up to our community not now but years ago. I think the increase that occurred in non-disclosable donations in the course of the last parliament was a blight on our political process.

There are some fairly interesting matters that are also covered in here aside from the disclosure threshold, which we are looking to bring down from $10,900 and indexed, as it is now, down to $1,000 and non-indexed. I know that in Queensland we have an issue that my colleague, the member for Melbourne Ports, has been very vocal about over a number of years—that is, the use by certain individuals of public electoral funding to gain an income over some years and, by dint of, shall we say, celebrity, being able to acquire many more votes and much more money than they need to expend in order to acquire those.

Mr Georgiou—Mike was one of them.

Mr SULLIVAN—He is a major celebrity in our quadrant in the parliament. The issue is: is it an appropriate use of public money to pay people in excess of what they spend to conduct an election? I believe that it is not, and I am yet to find any of my constituents who think that it is. They figure they work hard enough in paying their taxes and if they want to make a donation to an individual politician over and above what he spends, they would prefer that they be given the option to do that themselves rather than the government doing it on their behalf. I note there have been people who have been elected to this parliament in the past who fall into the category of people who receive more than they spend, and they have then in turn donated that to community groups. I commend them for doing that but, again, if my constituents are contributing to the money that those members get, I suspect that they would like to know that it is going to community groups in their electorate.

One of the other major issues here—I do not believe that it has been a significant problem in Australia; it certainly has not bothered me in the five or six elections that I have contested—is the issue of donations from overseas. In essence, the provisions that are included in the bill are simply to shut a door before a horse bolts. I think we all accept that that is, in itself, a reasonable view. There have been some significant donations that have flowed into Australia from overseas from time to time. It is not a regular occurrence, but it is not something that we ought to encourage happening in the future. The support for that provision is appropriate.

We then have a look at anonymous donations. Again, the dissenting members of the committee have not taken issue with the matter itself, but they have suggested a slightly higher threshold for anonymous donations. The committee has recommended that anonymous donations of less than $50 be acceptable. That really means that somebody who attends a local party function and buys a few raffle tickets does not have to have their name recorded and reported ad infinitum. I can tell you that the greatest amount of my campaign money that does not come out of my own pocket comes out of the pockets of my branch members who pay $10 to come to a barbecue—and hopefully we will get $15 out of them for raffle tickets. I
noted at a recent function of one of our state MPs that he sold at least 107 $5 tickets for a bottle of wine signed by the local councillor. I am not sure that the bottle of wine cost him more than $6.

Mr Georgiou—It wasn’t vinegar?

Mr SULLIVAN—It was not vinegar but I do not think it was wonderful.

The northern outskirts of Brisbane and the adjacent area, where we come from, are really tough country to raise money. We do not have big businesses, so none of this is going to bother me terribly much at all. But I think that $50 is reasonable, although I could be convinced that it might be $100. But the majority of the committee said $50. Some members think a couple of dollars more than that is fair. That is okay that they should think that.

We have also talked about increasing the capacity of the AEC to follow up complaints and to ensure compliance, and we have talked about increasing the penalties for people who miss their time lines or seek to indicate something that might be misleading.

At the end of the day, what this bill is about—and what the committee’s report supports—is simply openness with the community: let the community know that it is not a great difficulty for us to think about the fact that they deserve to know. As Robert Ray said in 1983, they actually have a right to know who is supporting us. It is not something we should hide from them. Heaven forbid that we should end up with an electoral system the same as that of America—which we like to laud, and they themselves particularly like to laud, as the greatest democracy in the world—where Barack Obama was able to raise, I understand, US$600 million. That is a substantial amount of money. If those sorts of funds came flowing in our direction, graduated down to the relative size of our population it would be $60 million of public money that could be raised—and $60 million can buy a lot of access. That is the purpose of major companies donating, of course. They want access—not necessarily influence but the ability to put their case.

I am delighted to have the opportunity to support the report. I am delighted with the work that the committee has done. As I say, despite the fact that we have different political views, this committee works fairly well. To my mind, the fact that the dissenting report has been modest—on a sensitive area of the work we do—is a testimony to the way that the committee, particularly the chair, Mr Daryl Melham, and the deputy chair, Mr Scott Morrison, have been able to work together to overcome those issues as best we can. We will never actually see eye to eye on these matters, I suspect, but if we can go a long way towards doing that then I think that the people of Australia are well served.

Mr DANBY (Melbourne Ports) (5.04 pm)—In speaking on this report of the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters, the *Advisory report on the Commonwealth Electoral Amendment (Political Donations and Other Measures) Bill 2008*, I want to commend the committee’s chair, the honourable member for Banks, for his firm conduct of this inquiry; he was collegial but he was firm. I thank other members of the committee for their contributions. I also acknowledge the secretariat’s work to support the committee’s deliberations.

Some of you will know that I am not sure that the issue of political donations is the most important issue in the area that the electoral matters committee looks at—the democratic reform of Australia. In particular, I would have thought that issues emerging from the last government’s regressive legislation, issues of provisional voting and early closure of the roll, are
just as important. It is my contention that, in the area of provisional voting, the changes that the previous government wrought to the electoral legislation probably affected three or maybe four seats at the last federal election in a way that disadvantaged the current government.

Having said that, I do not really think that this inquiry, in another sense, was necessary. It was forced on us by the Senate when the government did not have a majority—and it still does not have a majority. The Rudd government has a clear mandate for this piece of legislation. At the time the Howard government foreshadowed the legislation which this bill overturns, we said we would oppose it. When the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters conducted its inquiry into the Howard government’s legislation, we exposed many of its deficiencies and the Labor members of the committee wrote a minority report saying why we would oppose it. During the last election campaign, the then opposition pledged to overturn this harmful, regressive and undemocratic legislation, and now that we are in government we are carrying out that commitment.

The opposition members of this committee, led by the deputy chair, the honourable member for Cook, have presented a dissenting report to the committee’s report. This is, of course, their right. But they cannot claim that this legislation came as a surprise to them. We said all along—and I personally said many times in this House before the election and publicly—that we opposed the Howard government’s damaging changes to our electoral laws and that we would repeal them as soon as we had the opportunity to do so. So opposition members are entitled to go on arguing the case for discredited legislation but they cannot deny that we have a mandate to overturn it. Opposition members said in their dissenting report:

A responsible government would adopt a holistic, broad, bi-partisan view of the issue and most importantly, consider what is in the best interests of the community and our democracy.

I am delighted to see that the opposition has been converted to the principle of bipartisanship now that they are out of government. I am entitled to ask how much bipartisanship the previous government showed when it rammed electoral laws through both this House and the Senate in 2006.

Mr Georgiou—You were deputy chairman, so you should know we have done consensual reports with no dissents, so don’t try and—

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Ms AE Burke)—The member for Kooyong will not disrupt.
The member for Melbourne Ports has the call.

Mr Georgiou interjecting—

The DEPUTY SPEAKER—The member for Melbourne Ports will be heard in silence.

Mr DANBY—Well, to be fair, we issued a dissenting report with the last report, for the 2004 election—maybe not when the member for Kooyong was chair of that committee.

The opposition also used a lot of evidence adduced from recognised experts in the area, Brian Coster and Emeritus Professor Colin Hughes, that was simply ignored. Maybe the member for Kooyong was a secret dissenter, as he was a dissenter on other issues, from the then minister, Senator Abetz.

The bill the committee has just examined is part of a fulfilment of Labor’s commitment to, as I say, undo these regressive changes to our electoral laws by the former government. It reverses the decision by the Howard government which made it easier for individuals and corporations to give money to political parties without disclosure—a decision that was widely
seen as a device to put more money in the coffers of the Liberal Party. The Howard government’s change to financial disclosure arrangements, most notably lifting the disclosure threshold from $1,500 to more than $10,000, allowed large sums to be donated to the Liberal Party without being disclosed, and, of course, that was the intention of the legislation. The delay in the publication of disclosures made above this higher threshold has meant that up to one year and three months could elapse after a donation had been made before it was made public. That is quite unacceptable.

The days when the Liberal Party can rewrite our election law to suit their own partisan fundraising needs I hope have now ended for good. I have particular hope that this bill will reduce the likelihood of a repetition of the events we saw in the seat of Indi in 2004, which I drew to the attention of the House at the time, when tobacco interests used an entity called the Friends of Indi to channel money without disclosure to the honourable member for Indi. After an inquiry that lasted for most of 2007 the Australian Electoral Commission found in November last year that the Friends of Indi was an associated entity of the Liberal Party and either the Liberal Party or the honourable member for Indi had a disclosure obligation in relation to gifts of the kind provided by the Friends of Indi.

The Liberal Party then lodged an amended return for the 2004 financial year disclosing $23,514 in additional total receipts and $16,158 in additional detailed receipts. I do not think Australians in Indi or elsewhere like the idea of members of parliament being in receipt of secret donations, especially from organisations as controversial as the tobacco lobby. If honourable members want to take money from the tobacco lobby, that is their right but they should do so in the light of day so that their electors can see what they are doing. It has not been disclosed whether the tobacco lobby demanded action or response from the member for Indi. Perhaps she will tell the House one day, but it is clear that the previous government’s legislation made it easier for interest groups like this to buy influence by giving money under the threshold to members of parliament. The Rudd government’s legislation will make it harder for them to do so. I think I know which approach the Australian people will support.

The bill which is the subject of this report will do a number of things. Firstly, it will reduce the disclosure threshold from more than $10,000, indexed to the CPI, to $1,000, not indexed. Next, the bill will require people who donate to political parties during election campaigns to furnish a return within eight weeks of the polling day. Next, the bill will require people who make gifts and others to furnish twice-yearly returns. Next, it will close a loophole which allows people to donate to each state branch of a political party and claim each donation as a separate donation.

Finally, the bill will close what I call the ‘Pauline Hanson’ loophole, which allows a person who is a well-known name to nominate for the Senate, appear on Dancing with the Stars, poll four per cent of the vote without doing any campaigning and then automatically receive public funding. In the 2004 election the former One Nation leader, Pauline Hanson, a person who that year—I am sure it will depress the member for Kooyong to be reminded of this—was a guest at the Liberal Party’s 60th anniversary celebrations, pocketed almost $200,000 of public funding while spending only $35,000 on her campaign. This was the person described by the honourable member for Mackellar as a ‘political prisoner’ when she was convicted for fraud in 2003. The law will now limit public funding to actual expenditure incurred by the party or candidate. Since I used a series of speeches and articles to draw attention to this abuse of the
public funding provisions of the act that were used by Ms Hanson in the 2004 and 2007 elections, I think I can claim some small amount of credit for the provisions of this bill.

I said earlier that I did not think this inquiry was necessary. That is not to say that nothing useful has come from it. As a result of our deliberations we have recommended two amendments to the bill, which I hope the minister will take on board. The first is that definition of electoral expenditure be expanded to allow reasonable administrative expenses related to campaigning. This will ensure that minor parties are not disadvantaged by the proposed closing of the Hanson loophole. The second proposal is that anonymous donations below $50 be allowed since we recognise that a complete ban on anonymous donations might create a situation where, for example, a party could not sell a raffle ticket or accept small cash donations at public events.

As the member for Longman said, I think the government remains reasonable on this issue. Fifty dollars may not be the appropriate level. It may be slightly higher, as the dissenting report demands. If the minister feels that small lunches or dinners that some individual candidates have are going to be wrapped up in this legislation if anonymous donation is set at that level, he may feel that that would be administratively impossible to deal with. I think that other members of the government would go along with him. This report is another stage in carrying out the Rudd government’s commitment to electoral reform. We have a mandate for these reforms. They are in the interests of Australian democracy and we intend carrying them through.

Debate (on motion by Mr Hayes) adjourned.

Sitting suspended from 5.16 pm to 6.38 pm

STATEMENTS BY MEMBERS

Indonesia: Orangutans

Mr BRUCE SCOTT (Maranoa) (6.38 pm)—I rise tonight to bring to the attention of the parliament a concern raised by one of my young constituents. Twelve-year-old Jack Jones from Mitchell in western Queensland has written to me about the threat to Indonesia’s orangutans, whose forest homes are being destroyed in the pursuit of palm oil, which is used in soaps, detergents, biscuits and biofuels. I certainly share Jack’s concern. I have been lucky enough to witness these beautiful creatures in their natural native habitat, and it would be a tragedy if we were to wipe them out through deforestation.

I believe Jack has bipartisan support for taking action to protect Indonesia’s orangutans. Last year, the Liberal-National Party government announced the $200 million Global Initiative on Forests and Climate to improve sustainable forest management. We also committed $10 million to help reduce greenhouse gas emissions from deforestation and promote sustainable forest management in Indonesia.

In September this year the Greens’ Senator Bob Brown tabled a petition which called for all products containing palm oil to be appropriately labelled for consumer information. However, the Labor Party seems peculiarly silent on this issue since coming to government. I call on the Minister for Climate Change and Water, Penny Wong, and the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and the Arts, Peter Garrett, to continue the work of the former Liberal-National government to ensure the protection of the forests of Indonesia and their unique inhabitants, the orangutans.
Ms PARKE (Fremantle) (6.39 pm)—I welcome the historic and momentous election last week of Senator Barack Obama as the 44th President of the United States of America. I have been a fan of Barack Obama since I first heard him speak at the Democratic convention in 2004, while I was working at the United Nations in New York. This election result is a victory for reason, for calm and dignified leadership and for hope in the face of serious national and global challenges. I also pay tribute to the noble and gracious words of Senator John McCain in his concession speech. In honour of the occasion I would like to read a poem from Nobel laureate Seamus Heaney, from *The Cure at Troy*:

Human beings suffer,
they torture one another,
they get hurt and get hard.
No poem or play or song
can fully right a wrong
inflicted or endured.

The innocent in gaols
beat on their bars together.
A hunger-striker’s father
stands in the graveyard dumb.
The police widow in veils
faints at the funeral home.

History says, Don’t hope
on this side of the grave.
But then, once in a lifetime
the longed for tidal wave
of justice can rise up,
and hope and history rhyme.

So hope for a great sea-change
on the far side of revenge.
Believe that a further shore
is reachable from here.
Believe in miracles
and cures and healing wells.

Call the miracle self-healing:
The utter self-revealing
double-take of feeling.
If there’s fire on the mountain
Or lightning and storm
And a god speaks from the sky
That means someone is hearing
the outcry and the birth-cry
of new life at its term.

Upwey and District Community Bank

Mr WOOD (La Trobe) (6.41 pm)—On 18 October I had the pleasure of joining the Upwey and District Community Bank for their 10th birthday celebrations. The bank has been doing an amazing job supporting local residents. Ten years ago the Upwey community lost their last remaining bank branch when the Commonwealth Bank closed its doors. Fortunately the Upwey community bank was established, with the great assistance of Peter Marke, the chairman, who has been doing an amazing job since its inception; Jean McLennan, the deputy chairperson; and Devendra Desai, the treasurer-secretary. They have shown great leadership and initiative over the 10 years since they established the bank. I would like also to thank the board of directors, including Karel Coxhill, Peter Jones, Tony Thompson, Dot Griffin, John Paull, Graeme Turpin and Alison Burr. They have been doing an amazing job.

Just to give you an insight into what Upwey Community Bank have done for the local community: over that 10-year period they have donated in excess of $531,000 to the local community, including $96,000 this year alone. Some of the recipients of their generosity include Tecoma Primary School, Selby CFA, Kallista Kindergarten, Upwey-Tecoma Bowls Club, Dandenong Ranges Music Council and Fernlea House. Fernlea House in particular has received $45,000 in funding. Again I congratulate all those involved in the Upwey community bank, who have been doing an amazing job over the last 10 years.

Casey Electorate: Croydon North Primary School

Mr ANTHONY SMITH (Casey) (6.43 pm)—I rise this evening to pay tribute to the Croydon North Primary School, in the electorate of Casey. I recently celebrated with several hundred people the 130th birthday of the school, which was founded in 1878. It was founded at a time when Melbourne was a different place, when Australia was a different place. It was founded at a time when Victoria was a colony and the dream of a federated nation was just that. It was founded at a time when pioneers were still settling new towns and Croydon very much was a new country town, markedly different from the suburban area that it is today. At that time, I think Ned Kelly was still on the loose in another part of Victoria.

To have a school celebrate its 130th birthday is truly wonderful. There were generations of past students there. As you would expect—and members here would know of similar situations in their own electorates—there were many cases of grandparents, parents and kids having all attended that one school and still living in the area. It was a great occasion for all. I want to pay tribute to the school principal, Rhonda Box, and to the school council president, David Pockett. (Time expired)
Page Electorate: Tabulam Picnic Races

Ms SAFFIN (Page) (6.44 pm)—On Saturday, I attended the Tabulam Picnic Races. It is an annual event, an annual meet, to which people come from near and far for a day of fun and goodwill and a few bets here and there as well. I won a few dollars and lost a few, too, as did everyone else, but it was a good day out. The cup was sponsored by the Casino RSM and it attracted a good field. So, you see, in Page we have our gala events and, yes, there was lots of finery and weird and wonderful dress-up, but it was all good fun. The industry, because of equine influenza, has had a downturn over the past period, so it was good to see everybody there. Also there were lots of local sponsors, and I would like to pay tribute to the Tabulam Racing Club—all volunteers—and particularly to the secretary, Milton King, who put a lot of effort into making this a big day out.

Before the race meet, I also met with some locals who talked to me about the local issues, not only in Tabulam but also in the upper Clarence area, and emerging issues. One of those was the national plantations and the corporate plantations that are operating in our area—specifically, some of their practices. They also raised with me a number of other issues, which I will raise at a later date.

Remembrance Day

Swan Electorate: Australian Defence Force Medals

Mr IRONS (Swan) (6.46 pm)—Tomorrow at the 11th hour of the 11th day of the 11th month we will come together as a nation to mark Remembrance Day. This year will have special significance as the 90th anniversary of the signing of the armistice that ended the First World War. When we stand together in silence tomorrow we shall remember the nearly 7.5 million people from all nations who lost their lives during the conflict. In particular, we shall remember the servicemen who fought for Australia. In 1914 Australia’s population was just under five million. Of that number, 416,809 men enlisted for service overseas, 330,000 saw active service, 60,000 were killed, 82,000 were wounded in battle and a further 88,000 returned ill or injured. We owe these people a lasting debt of gratitude for their defence of freedom.

Tomorrow, we will not just remember those who were prepared to lay their lives on the line in World War I; we will also think of our service men and women currently risking their lives for the cause of freedom in Afghanistan, Iraq and elsewhere in the world. I recently had the pleasure of awarding Australian Defence Force Medals to six members of my electorate in Swan: Tracy Brandis, Richard Evans, Robert Jones, Julie-Anne Monaghan, Roger Reynolds and Anthony Schofield. It was wonderful to witness the service men and women receive their awards in front of their proud family members at the Belmont RSL. Like all those who have defended our nation, they are to be commended for their selfless commitment to Australia and should be remembered tomorrow. Lest we forget.

Fremantle Electorate: Palmyra Primary School

Ms PARKE (Fremantle) (6.47 pm)—Today I rise to congratulate Palmyra Primary School on recently being awarded the Troy Cook Youth Award from the Western Australian Department of Indigenous Affairs. The school received this award in recognition of its work in promoting and enacting reconciliation within the school community. The school took up the challenge of promoting reconciliation following the historic apology to the nation’s Indigenous
populations on 13 February 2008. The school’s first action was a Sorry to the Stolen Generations and Acknowledgement of Country Assembly held in March. At that event they sang *Sorry Song*, written by Fremantle local Kerry Fletcher. Since this assembly, the school community has incorporated an acknowledgement of country into their assembly program, created a six-seasons Noongar garden which provides bush tucker year-round, explored the local area’s Indigenous heritage with artist Toogar Morrison and the students’ choir has sung at the Willagee Community Centre and the City of Fremantle’s Sorry Day event. As one of the students, aged seven, said, ‘The whole school sang *Sorry Song* and I wished that it never happened to you and I feel sorry for you’. The students will be singing again this weekend at the Wardarnji Aboriginal Cultural Festival, to be held at the Fremantle Esplanade. I would like to congratulate the students at Palmyra Primary School and the staff at the school—in particular, Kathy Stevens, the school’s music teacher; Mark Simmonds, year 7 teacher; and Hugh McCracken, the school principal.

**Cowan Electorate: Banksia Grove**

*Mr SIMPKINS (Cowan) (6.49 pm)*—In the north of the Cowan electorate there is the suburb of Banksia Grove. It is unique insofar as it is split in half by a major road, Joondalup Drive. On one side of the road is the state primary school; on the other side there is the Catholic primary school. Joondalup Drive is a major thoroughfare—trucks and a lot of other traffic all make it very difficult for children to cross. At times a crossing guard is there, but young people and children also cross the road at other times, so it is a very dangerous location. Before the last election the then opposition promised $1 million for a footbridge over the road. I do not believe that is enough money, and I do not believe that would be the right use of that money. However, the then opposition promised that. We want to see that money so that the local people can work with the council to determine whether traffic lights or some other traffic measure is the appropriate response. These things are expensive—$1 million is required, it has been slow in coming and it needs to come now to get the job done and to keep the children of Banksia Grove safe.

**Shortland Electorate: Community Events**

*Ms HALL (Shortland) (6.50 pm)*—I would like to share with the House three community events that involved residents of the Shortland electorate over the last two weeks. The first event I would like to share with the House is the biannual Hunter Valley Porcelain Art Society exhibition, which was held at Club Macquarie and displayed porcelain art from Hunter and Central Coast artists, but many of the members and organisers of the exhibition live in the Shortland electorate. I would like to congratulate the artists on the fine work. It was an outstanding exhibition. You could see the many hours of work that those who put together that exhibition had put not only into organising it but into the art that was visible on that day.

The other two events I would like to mention are two breast cancer morning teas I conducted within my electorate. One was at the Gwandalan Bowling Club and had the support of the Gwandalan Lionesses, and other one was at the Windale-Gateshead Bowling Club. Those morning teas raised in excess of $1,000. I thank all the guest speakers who spoke at those morning teas, including outstanding representatives from Central Coast Area Health; Professor Forbes, a leader in the treatment of and research into breast cancer; and also members of the Hunter Breast Cancer Foundation. They were outstanding mornings. *(Time expired)*
Mr ROBERT (Fadden) (6.52 pm)—Yesterday I was fortunate to be present at the dedication ceremony for the Southport Surf Lifesaving Club for the coming year and to join the community to pray for safety not only for lifesavers but for all visitors to the pristine beaches of the Gold Coast. It is not an easy or especially safe vocation to risk your own safety on a regular basis for the welfare of others, but summer after summer these brave local volunteers give of their time for others, whether they be from around the corner or indeed from around the globe. According to the Surf Lifesaving Association, since its inception 493,000 lives have been saved throughout the nation—including more than 94,000 lives in Queensland—and, in the 2006-07 season, more than 11,500 people were rescued from the surf. As we enter the summer season, we should reflect on what the surf lifesavers will do. This summer they will rescue more than 3,000 people, they will administer first aid to more than 11,000 people, they will treat more than 8,000 people for marine stings, and more than 230,000 people will benefit from preventative action. Lifesavers brave conditions not of their choosing and circumstances not of their making to save lives in peril not of their causing, because they are who they are and they sacrifice their time accordingly. These incredible volunteers simply say, ‘You enjoy your time at the beach, stay between the flags and we will watch over you.’ It demonstrates that the spirit of sacrifice is alive and well. All of these volunteers give their time freely. They should be commended. (Time expired)

Mrs Henia Ptasznik

Mr DANBY (Melbourne Ports) (6.54 pm)—I want to mourn the passing of Henia Ptasznik, mother of a dear constituent of mine, Dr Ronnie Ptasznik. She was the eldest of five children of an observant family in Poland. She left school in Proshevitz at 15 and was employed sewing shirts in Krakow. On Jewish New Year in 1942 she, along with her parents, was ordered by the occupying Nazis to assemble in the town square in Proshevitz. She was in charge of her 10-year-old brother, Reuven. Fortunately for her, a Polish policeman took pity on her and enabled her to save herself by jumping off a wagon; he said that he would return her brother later. The policeman returned later without the boy. Mrs Ptasznik suffered lifelong anguish for having unwittingly left her little brother alone with the policeman, because all of those assembled were taken to Belzec death camp.

She smuggled herself back into Plashov work camp to be with her sisters and she witnessed incredible cruelties there. When Plashov was liquidated in 1944, she was sent to Auschwitz. From Auschwitz she and her sisters managed to get themselves to what they thought was a work camp near Koeningsberg. Four thousand people were sent on a death march, 3,000 of them women. In January 1945 at midnight in freezing temperatures, 4,000 of them were machine-gunned in a shooting that lasted for hours. Henia Ptasznik was one of only two survivors. Her survival, life and children are adornments to Australia. (Time expired)

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Hon. AR Bevis)—Order! It being approximately 6.55 pm, in accordance with standing order 192A the time for members’ statements has concluded.
Debate resumed, on motion by Mr Hale:

That the House:

(1) commends the Australian Government for its Economic Security Strategy initiative in the face of a global financial crisis;

(2) supports the extra assistance to sustain economic growth and the cost of living pressures for rural and regional Australia;

(3) acknowledges the Government’s efforts to ensure that pensioners, seniors and carers are included in this strategy while the Harmer Committee of Inquiry continues to ensure long term issues related to the most vulnerable in our community are properly assessed; and

(4) acknowledges the Government’s efforts to help families receiving ‘key family payments’.

Mr HALE (Solomon) (6.56 pm)—On 14 October the Prime Minister and the Treasurer announced the $10.4 billion Economic Security Strategy to deal with the challenges of the global financial crisis, to support continued positive growth in the Australian economy and to provide practical support for households. The Rudd government prepared well ahead for this crisis by ensuring the budget provided a strong buffer for the future.

There are no easy solutions or quick fixes to the global financial crisis. The strategy builds on the government’s decision to guarantee bank deposits to all Australians and addresses the challenges we face in five key areas. Firstly, Australia’s four million pensioners, carers and seniors will share in a $4.8 billion immediate down payment on long-term pension reform. Almost 5,000 pensioners, carers and seniors have been doing it pretty tough in Solomon. I have felt their pain when they have told me about having to cut back on things like food, medicines and trips to the shops. The feedback I have been getting about the down payment has been outstanding. It will definitely relieve some of the financial pressures our seniors and carers have been feeling.

The second measure is a $3.9 billion payment that supports low- and middle-income families. About 3.8 million Australian children will receive the one-off payment to their families. In my seat of Solomon, over 16,000 children and over 8,000 families will benefit from this payment. I spoke to some friends of mine; they are pretty typical of a lot of families I know. They struggle with the cost of day-to-day living expenses, they do without many luxuries and, like so many people I know, they live from pay to pay, week to week. I asked them what impact the government strategy will have and what it will mean to them. They simply said, ‘It is massive.’

The money spent in the local shops around Darwin and Palmerston will be welcomed by the business community. I have spoken recently to small business owners in Solomon and, like so many small businesses in rural and remote Australia, they are doing it tough. This injection of cash will stimulate economic activity.

The third measure is a $1.5 billion investment to help first home buyers to purchase a home. In consultation with industry and others, the government decided to act decisively in the housing sector. The first home owner grant will increase from $7,000 to $14,000, and $21,000 is available for first home owners who decide to build a new home. This will support activity in the housing sector, because the housing sector is critical to the economy. I know
this measure is fantastic news for the people of the Territory. The assistance will be welcomed not only by first homeowners but also by businesses associated with the housing industry. Only last week it was reported that the NT’s Housing Industry Association expects a recovery in new home approvals during the next few months—just the news my mates in the building game wanted to hear.

Furthermore, the government is going to provide $187 million to create 56,000 additional new training places in 2008-09. From now until the end of the financial year, the number of productivity training places will double from 57,000 to 113,000. Having a son in his final weeks of year 12, I understand the importance of training opportunities. The fifth measure is for the government to bring forward the implementation of the nation-building agenda, bringing greater employment opportunities and stimulating economic activity.

Recent figures make it very clear that our economy was crying out for a boost, provided by the ESS. Had we not acted decisively, economic growth would have been much weaker than currently forecast, with flow-on impacts for employment. The strategy is expected to result in a boost to the level of real GDP of between half a per cent and one percentage point. It will help create up to 75,000 additional jobs over the coming year. The strategy will immediately improve the lives of thousands of Australians who are finding it really tough at the moment, like the pensioners in Darwin, small business operators in Palmerston and farmers and their families in Humpty Doo. When the Prime Minister announced the measures, he called it ‘an economic security strategy to help underpin positive economic growth into the future and to provide practical support for households’.

In the interest of all Australians, I support the Prime Minister and the government for their decisive, responsible early action.

Mr HARTSUYKER (Cowper) (7.01 pm)—I find it quite extraordinary that we are here in this House tonight being asked to commend the government for its performance on the economic playing field. When a crisis hits, Australians look to their elected leaders to provide strong leadership and to make the right decisions. We saw recently the performance of the Treasurer as he bumbled and bumbled for 90 seconds—on national television—trying to find the inflation figure somewhere in the MYEFO documents. Did he have it at his fingertips? No, he did not. Did he know where to find it? No, he did not. It was an embarrassment to the people of Australia. It was of concern to the people of Australia that our nation’s Treasurer did not know what the forecast for inflation was.

With regard to the financial crisis that is spreading round the world and is certainly having its impact on Australia, the government claims it has taken decisive action to provide the solutions that this country needs. But was it decisive or was it a result of the needs of the media cycle? Why didn’t the Prime Minister consult with the Governor of the Reserve Bank on the day he made the decision? Why didn’t he have representatives from the Reserve Bank, ASIC and APRA in the room when the decision was being made? They had a media deadline. They had to cut to the six o’clock news with a solution, so they rushed the decisions and got it wrong. As a result, we have very substantial dislocation in our financial markets—dislocation related directly to the ineptitude of this government, the failure of this government to take the time to get it right, seek the right advice and make the right calls for the Australian people.

Because of that, we have Australian retirees unable to access their funds—people who never thought they would have to depend on the welfare system potentially having to do so as a result of this government’s failure of economic management. We see that there is the poten-
tial for many, many people to be in very difficult circumstances as a result of their funds being frozen due to the ineptitude of this government. The government is very focused on attempting to avoid a recession. That is very good policy indeed, but there is a $10.4 billion stimulus package. Why not $12 billion? Why not $7 billion? We do not know. Where is the modelling that underpins this decision? Is this another decision made in order to meet the media cycle, or is this a decision made on the basis of sound economics, sound thinking and careful research? The modelling that underpins this decision is very much one of the unanswered questions. I think the people of Australia are rapidly coming to the conclusion that the Prime Minister is not levelling with them and cannot be trusted, and it is of grave concern to them.

It is interesting that finally the government has got around to taking an interest in pensioners. We on this side of the House have been saying that pensioners, particularly single pensioners, urgently need assistance, but it took the global financial crisis for Mr Rudd to come around to that conclusion and to make some provision for those people. I know that many pensioners in my electorate have been in desperate straits, struggling with the cost of living.

During the 2007 election campaign, Mr Rudd and Mr Swan wandered the countryside, telling everyone that they were going to act on the cost of living. They were going to provide cheaper petrol. They were going to provide cheaper groceries. They were going to make housing cheaper. There was no element of the cost of living that they were not going to address. But, on coming to government, the first thing they did was forget about those promises. On fuel, they have the discredited Fuelwatch scheme. On groceries, they have the discredited GroceryWatch scheme or GROCERYchoice, whichever way you want to look at it, and they have a very minimalist approach to putting downward pressure on the cost of housing, when Labor state governments around the country put so much upward pressure on the cost of housing. The people of Australia deserve better leadership in the financial field than they are getting from this government. They are beginning to see the fact that Mr Rudd is not levelling with them and that the economy will suffer due to the incompetence of this government.

Mr RAGUSE (Forde) (7.06 pm)—It is good to hear an impassioned speech by the member for Cowper. I understand the concerns that we all have as members representing our constituencies in this House. It is interesting that he suggests that this global financial crisis was something that caused our government to respond. Of course it did. It is a global financial crisis. He wonders about whether we should have had $20 billion or $7 billion and asks those questions, but the reality is that if the opposition were in government they would still be trying to make the decisions. You have to take decisive action when you have to take decisive action.

Twelve years of neglect is their record. They talk about housing affordability. We talk about housing affordability, and we have done something about it. They did not have a housing minister. We have our housing minister. They solely relied on the resources boom. It is a wonderful thing and a wonderful opportunity that this country has had, and—dare I say it—it has been squandered. We are in a situation now where the economic circumstances might mean that we cannot rely as much on that resources boom. However, the Rudd government is making all sorts of plans to secure our future. I commend the member for Solomon for putting this motion forward, because the reality is that these are the sorts of actions that we need to take when the circumstances mean we must take action. The decisive nature of the now opposition
when they were in government is clear. This government is undertaking the changes that it needs to take.

Concentrating a little bit on the stimulus package, I want to make comment about the fact that the stimulus package will help people who have been hurting, those people who have been feeling the cost pressures. From 8 December this year, people will start to realise some relief of some concerns that they have all had and that we have had as members—getting relief to the people who most need it. Of course, the strategy is a good one. Where else would you want to stimulate the economy than with those people who are really feeling the pinch? I and others have made speeches in the House. In fact, I put a submission in to the Harmer review on the very basis of some of the things that we are now able to deal with simply because this government has committed at the time when there is this so-called global financial crisis at our doorstep.

The member for Cowper gave an impassioned speech. I understand that he is wondering about this and wondering about that and suggesting that we might have taken a little bit more time to consider our requirements a little bit further. Can I tell you: we acted before the other countries started to make the same commitments that we are making right now. It is clearly obvious that on this side of the House is a government, the Rudd government, that can make decisions when the decisions are necessary.

I will talk a little bit about my electorate, because that is really why I am here today. This package has certainly delivered and will deliver, in my electorate alone, to 11,500 age pensioners, 5,235 disability support pensioners and 4,333 carers. There is also the stimulus to provide opportunities for training—so more training places. But, more importantly in an electorate like Forde, our availability of rental space is down to as low as 1.8 per cent, which is an extreme low right across this country for all electorates but certainly for the electorate of Forde. I know the member for Fadden, with the massive growth that he has experienced in his electorate, would be having similar problems.

This is the sort of package that will allow us to deal with some of those issues, to get young people committing to buying homes—the $14,000 direct payment that they will get or the $21,000 payment to build a new home. Building new housing stock is what we need to increase the availability of rental properties and make those properties affordable. That is the sort of thing we need. That is what the Rudd government has committed to. The interesting thing is that we all—on both sides of the House, I am sure—have received lots of emails and letters about this. People are saying, ‘This is a wonderful opportunity. Thank you very much to the Rudd government for providing this bailout to stimulate the economy.’

Mr Simpkins—A bailout?

Mr RAGUSE—I see the opposition questioning the bailout. Essentially this is about giving people the opportunity to get themselves out of the low spot that they have had. It is about making housing affordable and getting the economy going again. In closing, I want to commend the member for Solomon again. His electorate is a tough electorate. The fact that it is in regional Australia also means that there are added problems, as there are in parts of my electorate. People in some of those regional areas, the people out in the rural centres, really are welcoming this package that is going to support them in so many ways.
Mr ROBERT (Fadden) (7.11 pm)—I must say that this motion on the Economic Security Strategy is an extraordinary and audacious motion from the member for Solomon. Frankly, I would have thought that he would know better. The question must be asked: what is this so-called Economic Security Strategy all about? Is it about helping Australia in the face of a global financial crisis? Is it about assisting struggling families? The member for Solomon’s motion would claim that it is both. The stark reality is that the government’s strategy has not adequately addressed either problem. In absolute deference to the member for Forde, I have to say that a lot of the strategy has come too late.

Under the guise of the Economic Security Strategy, the government has introduced a social and political bandaid. The pressure for the government to properly address the problems and hardships that pensioners are facing is certainly off for a little while because pensioners and carers are getting some relief. But where is the long-term solution? Once the money the government has provided has dried up, what do struggling pensioners do then? What is the government’s next step? Will it be addressed in the next budget? Maybe. May is a long way away for $1,400 to last. The pensioners in my electorate have made themselves clearly heard. I have received almost 1 1/2 thousand pieces of correspondence from pensioners in Fadden asking me to pass on their views to the Prime Minister. Their views are simple: they need a long-term solution to their continual struggle, regardless of what the announcement has been.

Along with this bandaid for pensioners, there is the political bandaid for the government itself, to make it appear that the government understands the global financial crisis and is doing something about it. It is patently clear that the government does not understand. As it was, even before the fall of Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac, business and consumer confidence in this country and indeed in my electorate of Fadden, on the Gold Coast, were at record lows. Seemingly, the government is determined to beat that record.

The claim by the member for Forde that the government has moved quicker than the governments of other nations is an absolute nonsense. The US, over seven months ago, put in $125 billion as a stimulus package—over $1,000 per taxpayer to re-stimulate the economy. The fallout from the global economic crisis was seen as long ago as 2006, when $2 trillion of money was lent for residential mortgage backed securities. Twenty-five per cent of that money was lent to people in the subprime space. Why? It was because a Democrat congress wanted people with no income, no jobs and no assets to own homes.

The coalition saw it coming. We warned, before the election, of the storm clouds gathering. The Rudd government did not care, it would seem. It is no wonder the government seems to be on track to reach this goal. The economic stimulus package should have given Australians some confidence in the economy, considering the package totalled one per cent of GDP. This is no small undertaking. But any chance of that was seemingly shot when the basis for the package was revealed, because there was no basis—or certainly none with any figures or evidence for it. The package was announced without any analysis. There was no modelling. There was no financial regulatory statement that went with it. There was no evidence to back up the government’s position. It appears that the Reserve Bank governor was not even in the room and was not even consulted. Nor was the head of APRA. The government simply looked to Dr Henry and asked, ‘Is this consistent?’ Australians reward action but not blind action or action without any justification.
Then of course there is this irresponsible one-upmanship that created a run on managed funds and other non-bank investments. Seemingly not wanting to be outdone by the UK, the US and the French, who introduced capped deposit guarantees, or our own Leader of the Opposition, who on 12 October mooted a $100,000 cap, our Prime Minister, our Captain Courageous, announced—which no other government on the planet has done—an unlimited guarantee that simply distorted the entire market and missed out foreign banks that are regulated by APRA, and simply meant that 13 of the 20 large cash and property management accounts have frozen redemptions. This has not been seen in any other country, only here, because our Prime Minister wanted to do something. Well, all he ended up doing was beating up small investors: mums and dads, retirees and others who needed access to funds.

The government refuse to address the problem, as doing that would mean admitting they made a mistake—a backdown that would serve the nation but hurt them politically. This was an important decision, one made with little consultation and one that was wildly irresponsible. Bumbling performances by the government do not help confidence. Standing up and doing the right thing, admitting mistakes, leading—those things help confidence. That is what the government should be doing.

Mr TREVOR (Flynn) (7.16 pm)—I commend the Australian government for its Economic Security Strategy initiative in the face of the global financial crisis. I rise to support the motion in its entirety. I commend the member for Solomon, Mr Hale, for his motion.

The Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, is taking decisive and early action to protect the Australian economy from the global financial crisis which started in the United States of America and has infected every other continent across the world. The Australian economy is sound, but we all know that we will not be immune from the global slowdown and the real possibility of a global recession. This is going to be, unfortunately, a long, drawn-out crisis which will have a real impact in Australia, leading to slowing economic growth and increased unemployment.

The Rudd government, my government, has injected $10.4 billion as part of the Economic Security Strategy to stimulate economic activity and protect vulnerable groups in our society, especially pensioners, carers, disabled people and low-income families. The government’s Economic Security Strategy provides lump-sum payments totalling $4.8 billion to assist age pensioners, veterans, disability support pensioners and carers. I welcome my government’s assistance to pensioners and I look forward to more in the future. Self-funded retirees are also doing it tough.

Who will be assisted, Mr Deputy Speaker? The answer to that is: over four million recipients. Among pensioners, carers, CSHC holders and other eligible allowance recipients, singles will receive $1,400 and couples will receive $2,100, and, in respect of the carer allowance, there will be $1,000 for each eligible person being cared for. These payments will be an enormous boost to the Australian economy from December. In addition, my government, the Rudd Labor government, is fast-tracking the nation-building agenda in key areas of education and research, health and hospitals, and transport and communications.

The Rudd Labor government’s Economic Security Strategy will be of enormous benefit to my community of Flynn, particularly small rural and regional areas. Only on Friday of last week, I spoke to Noel Thompson, a shopkeeper in the main street of Eidsvold, a small bush community in my vast electorate of Flynn, and he reaffirmed what a huge boost the Economic Security Strategy would be to his community.
The global financial crisis has thrown up many challenges. We are meeting those challenges. There will be more to come. The Rudd Labor government is rising to these challenges, rising to them admirably. I congratulate the Prime Minister for his outstanding leadership in these very difficult and worrying times for all of our fellow Australians.

In the face of the global financial crisis, I call on all governments, including my government, to fast-track the proposed LNG projects for my home town of Gladstone to insulate further the town of Gladstone and my electorate of Flynn generally from the global financial crisis, which is worsening. I call upon all those in my community who are opposed to the proposed LNG plants to lay down their swords in the interests of the Gladstone community and the Flynn community generally, and in the national interest.

Mr IRONS (Swan) (7.20 pm)—When I first saw this private member’s motion, I saw that it had the honourable member for Solomon seeking endorsement for the Rudd government’s economic performance since November 2007. I know the member is a team player and a good bloke, but he is really sticking his neck out with this motion and I hope the rewards are worth it. I will show that, after 12 years of economic prosperity in Australia, it has taken less than 12 months to expose the Rudd government’s claim that they are economic conservatives—

Mr Hale interjecting—

Mr IRONS—I know that—and will manage the economy successfully. The Rudd Labor government is out of its depth in dealing with the global financial crisis, now called the GFC. It does not deserve the commendation which the member for Solomon seeks to give it with this motion. The coalition’s disciplined, focused and systematic approach to economic management meant that the Rudd Labor government inherited one of the strongest economies in the developed world. The coalition government put the budget back in the black, eliminated government debt, restored Australia’s AAA credit rating, delivered more jobs and achieved lower inflation, lower interest rates, a lower tax burden, higher wages, more productive workplaces, higher pensions, better living standards, more funding for health, education, defence and transport, more funds for state governments and economic resilience that was the envy of the developed world.

The Rudd government inherited not only a strong economy but also a strong financial regulatory system. The Australian economy that the Rudd government inherited was therefore as well placed as it could be to withstand an external shock. However, the government’s actions since they came to power meant that they were unprepared and unfit to face the crisis sparked by the collapse of Lehman Brothers in September. If they had been prepared for it, as they claimed, why were they so surprised? It is quite clear that, despite the contention of the Prime Minister and the Treasurer, the Rudd government failed markedly to anticipate what we now refer to as the GFC. Wayne Swan’s initial fixation with the ‘inflation genie’ served to raise inflationary expectations and to gently prompt the Reserve Bank of Australia to put up interest rates. This rhetoric was a shameless attempt by the government to somehow find fault with the exceptional economy which they had inherited.

While we are on the performance of the Treasurer and the government, how could we commend a Treasurer who cannot even answer the question: what is the outlook for inflation? His effort in bumbling around to find his chart was laughable.
In early February, when the government should have been encouraging economic growth, it was instead talking down the economy, threatening business and consumer confidence and growth. This is a perverse way of anticipating a GFC! Meanwhile, the opposition was talking up the economy and warning, given the poor global economic data, about the potential impact of a global financial crisis. Sadly, the Labor government failed to take heed of this advice.

When the crisis hit in September, the government panicked.

Panic is invariably accompanied by poor decisions. The most notable of these was the bank guarantee debacle. On Friday, 10 October, the coalition called on the Rudd government to take three immediate steps to further strengthen the Australian economy in response to the international financial crisis. One of these was for the government to increase the proposed government backed deposit guarantee scheme to cover deposits of amounts from $20,000 up to $100,000. The coalition said that the initial proposal by the Rudd government for a $20,000 cap per person was less than adequate and out of line with similar schemes in the rest of the world.

The debacle commenced on Sunday, 12 October, when the Prime Minister announced the introduction of an uncapped guarantee for deposits in Australian banks, building societies, credit unions and Australian subsidiaries of foreign banks and for wholesale term-funding. Although, when he announced the guarantee, the Prime Minister said that he had sought the advice of our financial regulators, it later transpired that he had not asked the Governor of the Reserve Bank, who is the regulator responsible for Australia’s banking system. This oversight caused chaos, resulting in the freezing, for thousands of Australians, of savings held in investment funds, as well as a massive distortion in financial markets that continues to cause problems. This is underlined by the fact that Westpac and the Commonwealth Bank have called for the government to amend the guarantee. The government made a mistake with the unlimited bank guarantee. It should put in place a cap much lower than the $1 million cap it eventually put in place to stop the dislocation of the financial markets.

The government’s anticonsultative approach seems to have been repeated in the economic stimulus package rushed out on 14 October that cut the budget surplus in half. Incredibly, the Prime Minister and the Treasurer have admitted that they announced this package without any economic analysis from the Treasury. What I have described should not be commended, as the member for Solomon asks for in this motion; it should be loudly condemned.

However, whilst the government may not be functioning, its spin machine certainly is. The picture of the Prime Minister with his sleeves rolled up must have been a great comfort to all the aged self-funded retirees and also anyone who had money in non-APRA regulated institutions. In closing, all I can say is I condemn this motion as a bit of self-praise, which is certainly no recommendation.

Mr SIDEBOTTOM (Braddon) (7.25 pm)—I like the member for Swan very much, but I have a few words of advice: get over it. Cocky was an egg once. You can talk about the past as much as you like. Get with the present. Get real. Just for your information, the latest, hottest Essential Research poll clearly indicates that this government is rated by 56 per cent of respondents as very good to good at keeping interest rates down. With respect to economic management, which you have just spent five minutes trying to trash, 54 per cent say very good to good and, for controlling inflation, 49 per cent—up 11 per cent since the last few polls. Get with it. Cocky was an egg. Your day is done. Get used to it. Start to think again.
Mr SIDEBOTTOM—For your information, Mr Deputy Speaker, as well as for the members in this chamber, I would just like to add that, in addition to all those other things that we have tried to incorporate in our Economic Security Strategy, you might like to know that 730,000 part-rate pensioners will receive a boost to their pension because the deeming rate as of Monday, 16 November shall drop from four to three per cent for the first $41,000 of single pensioners’ financial investments or $68,200 for a couple. It will cut from six to five per cent for the balance of financial investments over these amounts. That is one more additional piece of assistance to families.

In my beautiful electorate on the north-west coast of Tassie the Rudd government’s $10.4 billion Economic Security Strategy will ensure that some 25,000 pensioners and carers receive lump sum payments to help ease the financial pressure they are currently under while also boosting my local economy. The 9,905 north-west families receiving family tax benefit A will receive a $1,000 payment for each eligible child in their care. In real terms this will help something like 18,659 local children while easing the financial burden on parents in the lead-up to Christmas. When we also factor in the uptake of the increased First Home Owner Grant in my electorate, the direct injection into the Braddon economy as a result of this excellent Economic Security Strategy will be worth more than $62 million. That is $62 million going into my local economy to help support families at a time when things are tough. There is $19 million—and I know you are very interested in this—for north-west families who are eligible, as I mentioned, for the family tax benefit A. They will receive a one-off $1,000 payment for each dependent child and families whose dependent children receive youth allowance, Abstudy or a benefit from the Veterans’ Children Education Scheme payment will receive a one-off $1,000 payment for each eligible child as well.

How the member for Swan and the member before that, the member for Fadden, could say that this was irresponsible is beyond belief. I challenge the member for Fadden to show me the 1,000 signatures that he said he received from pensioners who were unhappy with this government. I would love to see that petition and I bet you he did not receive it after the announcement of this excellent package to assist families and pensioners in particular.

It is worth keeping in mind some of these figures in my electorate. Thirteen thousand age pensioners will benefit. There will be payments to 3,494 carer allowance recipients, 5,646 disability support pensioners, 887 Commonwealth senior healthcare card holders, 113 wife and widow pensioners and bereavement allowance recipients, 1,550 veterans service pensioners and 638 eligible war widows. These are real people receiving a benefit at a time when they need assistance. We are helping real people with a real strategy to overcome what is a financial crisis for our globe.

Dr JENSEN (Tangney) (7.30 pm)—I would dearly love to stand before you today in support of the motion that Mr Hale brought forward—

Mr Hale—You can.

Dr JENSEN—I cannot. The Leader of the Opposition in fact offered full bipartisan support, including roundtable talks, to work with the government on the best solution. These offers were rejected. The Prime Minister and his bumbling, incompetent, so-called Treasurer
went full steam ahead with a package they thought was right—once again, policy on the run—not looking forward to the possible ramifications, for example, of the freezing of the funds of thousands of people. The Treasurer advised them just to pop down to Centrelink. What a joke the Treasurer is and what a joke that statement is. All that shows is utter contempt for Australians. When the government were asked in parliament to release details of their so-called strategy, time after time they refused. If they did know the details, why did the Prime Minister continually avoid the questions? Some questions were as simple as requiring a yes or no answer but he still could not do it. Australians deserve to have these questions answered in full. I put it to you that the Prime Minister did not know the answers to the questions on his quickly-thrown-together economic security strategy. The strategy has been rushed and bungled from the very start, and it is already showing signs of being a complete disaster. With their unlimited bank deposit scheme the government again did not want to have talks with the opposition or listen to valid suggestions such as a cap on those guarantees. Even more reprehensible, they did not even bother to hold discussions directly with the Governor of the Reserve Bank. Why? Because apparently they know it all. Well, clearly they do not, and we are in a mess with our surplus dwindling by the minute.

I really must ask this, because I am sure there are a lot of people who would love to know. What would the Prime Minister have done? What would his strategy have been if the Howard government had not paid off the $96 billion of debt left by the last Labor government? What would he have done without the healthy surplus the government inherited to use for his answer to the global financial crisis? We fought for the government to increase the pension by $30 a week. The Prime Minister and his ministers freely acknowledged that they could not survive on the pension yet argued the point and flatly refused to increase the pension until another one of the Prime Minister’s reviews was complete. Even though he promised prior to the election that he would reduce the price of fuel and reduce the price of groceries, what did he do? He watched the price of fuel go up and he watched the price of groceries go up. Older Australians were really struggling and yet he still refused to take immediate action until he needed to spend some money to stimulate the economy—and, bang, he used pensioners and announced one-off payments for them. Whilst supporting this measure, short term as it is, I am sure the pensioners of Australia are cynical as to the motives when only a couple of weeks before he and his Minister for Health and Ageing stated that there would be no increase in the pension until his review was completed next May.

The global financial crisis is huge and there are many reports that it is by no means over. The government had an opportunity to prove they could handle the economy. I think that the rushed, uninformed, go-it-alone attempt at their rescue package shows that Australia is in real trouble with these clowns at the wheel.

Ms LIVERMORE (Capricornia) (7.34 pm)—I am just wondering what the members of the opposition are going to say when the outcomes of the G20 summit come out on the weekend from Washington, because world leaders are gathering there later this week to discuss the united, collective response to the current global financial crisis, and talking about the sorts of regulation and stimulus packages that the Australian government got out of the blocks on very quickly on 14 October this year, in a very comprehensive and immediate response to the gathering global financial crisis. So, after listening to the opposition members be so incredibly critical of the government’s response, it would be very interesting to hear what they actually
say when the G20 countries gather to determine similar responses in their countries to the one that the Labor government has implemented here in Australia.

I want to join with my colleagues on this side of the House in commending the member for Solomon on this motion and to join with them also in commending the government on its response to this global financial crisis with the economic security package that was announced almost a month ago now. Since that time the bad news has continued to come out about the outlook for the international economy. Just last Friday we had another update from the International Monetary Fund of its World economic outlook—and this is the second time it has been revised in the space of a month, so you can see how quickly this crisis is unfolding. But the latest global growth projections from the IMF are now in the order of 3.7 per cent for 2008 and down to 2.2 per cent for 2009. So the whole idea of the package announced by the Prime Minister on 14 October is to stay ahead of the global economic meltdown, to cushion Australia against the impact of this slowdown in the global economy.

As I said, the economic security package is comprehensive and far-reaching. I want to focus on a couple of points out of that package that I know have been greatly welcomed by people in my electorate. The major one is the $4.8 billion down payment on our package for pensioners. The member for Tangney was again very critical of this particular measure and was lauding the opposition’s policy for pensioners. But, again, that was leaving out over two million pensioners in Australia. By contrast, the payments that pensioners will receive from the government on 8 December go to every category of pensioner and they will go a long way to assisting pensioners to meet some of the cost of living pressures that they face.

On that point, I was actually quite shocked earlier this year when I read a speech by the Minister for Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs when she referred to OECD data that has been released on income distribution and poverty. I was shocked to see in that speech that Australia has the fourth highest relative income poverty rate for people aged 65 and over in the OECD. It shows that the gap between our aged citizens and the rest of the population is amongst the widest in the world. For singles over 65, the income poverty rate in Australia is 50 per cent—and this is the third highest in the OECD compared to the average in the OECD of 25 per cent.

The government has acknowledged that something needs to be done about pensions. As we say, this is a down payment on what we know must be addressed as a result of the Harmer review which is currently underway. The government is sticking by its commitment to pensioners that this will be addressed in the upcoming budget, and that promise has been restated even in the face of the greatly deteriorating economic situation that we face in the coming months and into next year. The government’s action in response to the global financial crisis has been immediate, it has been decisive and it will keep this economy strong. (Time expired)

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

**Market Concentration in the Grocery Sector**

Debate resumed, on motion by Mr Forrest:

That the House:

(1) notes with concern the high level of market concentration in the retail grocery sector;

MAIN COMMITTEE
(2) notes this is a situation that the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission describes as ‘workably competitive’ and that this is not a term found in competition law; and
(3) calls on the Government to address the issue of market concentration in the grocery sector and to implement policies to achieve improved outcomes for consumers, food manufacturers and producers.

Mr FORREST (Mallee) (7.39 pm)—This issue is dear to the hearts of my constituents from two points of view. In regard to the first issue in the motion, my concern is about the high level of market concentration in the hands of a few, which opens the door to market manipulation and anticompetitive practices in the retail grocery sector, with consequential impacts on the fresh food sector. There are two sections of people I represent down in Mallee who will be disadvantaged by this scenario. The first group is the people who run small family owned grocery businesses. Many of these are the only retail grocery facilities in the small towns in Mallee and indeed around the closer settlement associated with Sunraysia, where there are a series of family owned stores on both sides of the river around Mildura. The second group are the thousands of suppliers of fresh fruit, vegetables and other products who can be held to ransom by inequitable market forces.

Excessive market power impacts on consumers, other retailers, processors, manufacturers and, in particular, those people at the start of the supply chain—the primary producers. Our farmers are in many cases at the bottom of the chain and are forced to be price takers because of the perishable nature of what they grow. Mr Deputy Speaker, you need to imagine hundreds or even thousands of family farmers all trying to sell their products to just a handful of major supermarkets. This is what is happening in Australia and it is not sustainable.

Nobody disagrees with healthy competition. The ACCC appears unable to appreciate or provide solutions about how the whole grocery and fresh food sector can move forward, remain profitable and be able to invest in even more efficient production. The ACCC seems content with comfortable oligopolies. In fact, it seems the commissioner is more determined to pursue the smaller independents because of their wholesale purchasing practices. They have little choice on that matter—there is only one significant independent wholesaler in the whole nation.

You can screw down your suppliers and prevent them from making a profit—and then suddenly they are less competitive compared to imported grocery items, which are often produced from cheap labour. The end result is that Australia will lose another producer, employer and valuable industry, especially in rural Australia. When the Australian dollar goes up to the recent high levels we saw several months ago, our food exporters have great difficulty competing with other Southern Hemisphere nations. When the dollar goes down, our producers can do well overseas, but they get a beating from cheap food imports into Australia. These sectors need better margins and more market stability. They need that to have the certainty to grow in the future.

I long for the day the ACCC realises that market share, market power and competition are already out of balance in Australia with respect to grocery retailing. Successive governments have tackled this issue over a long period of time, and my belief is the ACCC has the legislative power to take stronger action than it actually does. The ACCC describes the Australian grocery market as ‘workably competitive’, as the second part of the motion refers to. I wonder what the ACCC thinks that that term means when many of us wonder if the two major super-
markets are as competitive against each other as they say they are. The term ‘workably competitive’ is not recognised in competition laws. I wonder what it means.

Complacency, a relaxation of the competitive nature of retailing, and higher prices across the board are ultimately possible if you are up against only one competitor with whom you share, according to the ACCC’s estimates, 70 per cent of the packaged market. Woolworths and Coles actually have a higher concentration than that, as maintained by the independent grocery sector, at 80 per cent. Even if you take the ACCC’s figures, with the independents having 17 per cent of the market and Franklins and Aldi having a few per cent between them, that leaves 80 per cent. It is simple arithmetic. But that is a semantic issue. Even at 70 per cent, this lack of attention is already starting to have its impact.

We need to know what the definition of a ‘workably competitive’ market is and we need to have it more clearly defined, as other nations have in fact done. What constitutes a smaller store in direct competition with a major? I see this happening around Mildura, with the big supermarkets present and the small family-owned independent competitor trying its best to compete and getting very little assistance out of the government’s GroceryWatch program. It defies logic to argue that there is anything but market dominance and huge market power when we have two players so dominant in the grocery-retailing market.

The ACCC does not appear to address this issue or suggest any regulatory measure that might bring fundamental change, including fair trading in line with world’s best practice. It is true that we cannot regulate to the point of telling a shopkeeper or service station in either Canberra or outback or remote Australia how much they should charge for their food and their fuel. However, everybody has a right to make a decent living, and we have to make a stand to prevent the abuse of market power. Sometimes we should pause and wonder if Australia and the ACCC are on the right track in an equation that seems to favour the big boys, an equation that ultimately will impact adversely on consumers—and their cost of living—in the long run.

The other issue is the general creeping acquisition by supermarket majors, which is shrinking the space in which smaller supermarkets operate. The ACCC does not seem to be concerned about this erosion of competition because it occurs by a series of small acquisitions which go under its radar. However, in aggregate it is a substantial erosion. The issue of market concentration must be addressed on a number of fronts to achieve improved outcomes for consumers, food producers and retailers in general. To halt further concentration, the act needs to be amended to require the notification of acquisitions, however small they are, by dominant corporations in concentrated population areas. Such acquisition notifications should include an assessment of the impacts of that acquisition and take into account previous acquisitions. The competition test needs to be modified to apply to a lessening of competition rather than the current requirement of demonstrating a ‘substantial’ lessening of competition—it has an adjective in front of it. Whatever the erosion, it needs to be taken into account.

I also make an additional point. A review of the practices and culture of the ACCC must be undertaken to ensure there is no barrier to the proper and diligent application of competition tests required for acquisitions under the act. As I said before, my belief is that the ACCC already has underutilised powers to address the issue.

The other big issue is the definition of ‘unconscionable conduct’ under the Trade Practices Act, where, despite concerns, few cases have ever been successfully prosecuted. There are a number of reasons why that occurs, but there are a number of things that should be done. A
clear definition of ‘unconscionable conduct’ must be developed and included in the act. There must be better recognition by the regulator and the courts of the potential for damage to competition in the Australian economy through unconscionable conduct. Regulators must be more willing to address unconscionable conduct. Guidelines as to what constitutes unconscionable conduct must be developed, and the ACCC must be prepared to act. There also needs to be an inclusion in the act of guidance to a court on awarding damages and penalties for noncompliance.

Price discrimination must be prohibited and ways developed to ensure a critical mass is maintained and developed in the smaller retail grocers and their suppliers. Some account must be given to their wholesale purchasing practices, rather than the attention by the commissioner that is currently being paid to the fact that almost all of them, no matter what independent banner they come under, deal with the same wholesaler. Quite often, as I have said, these smaller retail grocers service regional Australia, where the market is not large enough to tempt entry by the big majors. I worry about house brands and how the individuality and pride that goes into production, especially of fresh fruit and vegetables, will be lost when they get disguised by a brand that does not recognise that calibre and quality of product. The other thing that the ACCC always argues is that, if a supplier is not complaining about such practices, there is no evidence that they occur. For a supplier who is threatened, even in an unsaid way, by the fact that his future contracts will be affected, that is not an excuse. It is occurring, and those suppliers need protection.

Sure, there are economies of scale, but my concern is that, where the dominance of the supermarket sector continues to grow, the eventual outcome will be rises in prices to consumers, and prices paid for Australian fresh value-added products will reduce. The middleman will reap the cream, Australian producers will all but disappear, and everyone around us will suddenly ask, ‘How on earth did we let that happen?’ It is time for action. Successive governments have made valiant attempts at that, and it is time for the Chairman of the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission to take action on the legislation and more that he already has at his disposal.

Ms HALL (Shortland) (7.50 pm)—I thank the member for Mallee for bringing this motion on the grocery sector to the House. It is an issue that has been of great concern to most members in the House. I am a bit disappointed that it was not dealt with under the last government and that he did not bring a motion to the parliament when the Howard government was in power for 12 years. But the Rudd government does acknowledge and has acknowledged the impact that rising food prices have on Australians.

One of the first acts of the Rudd government was to instigate an inquiry into the competitiveness of retail prices for standard groceries. The report was completed and forwarded to the Minister for Competition Policy and Consumer Affairs. That is the ACCC report that is mentioned in the motion moved by the member for Mallee, which in part 2 says:

… this is a situation that the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission describes as ‘workably competitive’ …

I think we need to have a little look at the report. It says that, but then it makes a statement that there are a number of factors that currently limit the level of price competition. So the ACCC does acknowledge in its report that there are impediments and barriers. It talks about the high barriers to expansion, particularly in relation to the difficulty of finding sites for de-
development; limited incentives for Coles and Woolworths to compete aggressively on prices; and limited price competition between Coles and Woolworths. I think one of the key factors is that 80 per cent of the market is controlled by Coles and Woolworths. That is a problem and it is mentioned by the National Association of Retail Grocers of Australia in their submission to the inquiry. I note that the inquiry solicited some 250 submissions. Of those, about 120 were late submissions, but the inquiry obviously connected enormously with the community.

One of the ongoing concerns that is raised with me as a member of parliament is the issue of increases in grocery prices. This inquiry took place in response to the fact that there is a problem—and I think it is more than a perceived problem; it is a problem—in relation to the prices that are being paid for groceries. It is the people that are on lower incomes, fixed incomes, who are finding that it has the greatest impact.

The problem also impacts on many of the people that the member for Mallee represents in this House. That is identified in the National Farmers Federation submission to the inquiry, which states that agriculture is a key stakeholder in the Australian domestic food supply chain and, as such, has a very strong interest in looking at the supply chain. It argues for transparency of competition and fairness. It talks about farm gate share of the retail market, and retail prices not always reflecting the farm gate price.

I think any member of parliament who has taken the time to go and speak with producers will know that they are paid a very small amount in comparison to what people like me pay in the supermarket. That is a problem. The submission talks about other aspects—the balance between rationalisation and market power—and really reflects the thoughts and the interests of the people that the National Farmers Federation represents.

There is also a submission by the Transport Workers Union of Australia. It talks about the domination of the grocery market by the two major retailers and the significant flow-on effects that that has on other participants in the supply chain. The excessive market power demonstrated by the major retailers in the transporting services and the impact that that has on the workers concerned the Transport Workers Union.

So you have got suppliers, the Transport Workers Union and distributors to the larger supermarkets, and you have the concentration of market dominance in the hands of Woolworths and Coles. That is 80 per cent in relation to groceries and 60 per cent in relation to petrol; the linking of grocery prices to petrol is an expansion even further.

NARGA, in their submission to the inquiry, believe that the question of market share and market concentration is critical to the price of groceries that is paid. All of us in the House represent people who pay these prices—people like the constituents of the member for Mallee and the member for Maribyrnong. It is a very complex issue, an issue that impacts on an enormous number of people. It impacts on us all and it was because of that that the Rudd government took the issue so seriously. It has really put a lot of effort into looking at food prices. With looking at food prices, NARGA pointed out that you cannot remove that from looking at the market share.

I would like to refer to CHOICE. They conducted a survey of more than 1,000 consumers in February 2008 and they found that 83 per cent of the consumers believe that they spend more on groceries compared to three years ago; only two per cent believe they are spending less. They point out that food price inflation has been greater in Australia over the last 10 to
12 years than in any other developed country and has increased by 43.6 per cent since 1996. CHOICE suggested the introduction of a food consumer price index that would be published by the Australian Bureau of Statistics each quarter.

I would like to mention that earlier this year, in legislation that was introduced where the utilities allowance was increased, the pension basket—the average goods that a pensioner purchases—was changed. It was either average male weekly earnings or looking at that basket. That, in itself, was acknowledging the impact that rising food prices have.

CHOICE suggested that food is part of the overall CPI index. The figures in relation to the prices of food have been masked by the significant increase in the volatility in food and grocery markets. CHOICE said that Australia has one of the most concentrated supermarket grocery sectors in the world. They went on to say that Woolworths and Coles have considerable market share. The supermarkets have the potential to bring cheaper prices through economies of scale but they also reduce competition in the sector, and I think that that is what the member for Mallee is pointing out.

I would also like to put on the record another issue for the supermarket sector, the phenomenon of creeping acquisitions, which has been identified by CHOICE and in other submissions to the ACCC, and its impact on market share and competition in the sector. I think that this is a very complex issue. We on this side of the House are committed to looking at and resolving the issue and bringing cheaper prices to Australians—(Time expired)

Mr BRUCE SCOTT (Maranoa) (8.00 pm)—I rise tonight to second the motion by my colleague John Forrest, the member for Mallee, who is calling on the House to note with concern the high level of market concentration in the retail grocery sector which the ACCC rather inappropriately calls ‘workably competitive’. Talk about bureaucratic doublespeak. It is a classic example of the ACCC’s work so often being about doing nothing but bringing forward reports. Here is an opportunity for them to do something about the duopoly that is impacting on small grocery retailers—yet they see the market at the moment as ‘workably competitive’. I also want to support the member for Mallee in his call for this Labor government to address the issue of market concentration in the grocery sector and to implement policies to achieve improved outcomes for consumers, food manufacturers and producers.

Medium sized and family owned grocery stores are the lifeblood of many small towns in my electorate of Maranoa. IGAs are often the only large grocery stores in town. FoodWorks stores are also present. They are so often family run, with a family investing their life savings and work and effort into that business. Locals rely on these stores, often run by someone they know very well, to provide them with their daily bread, fruit and vegetables, not to mention other very important non-perishables.

So I share my colleague’s concern for the fate of many small to medium enterprises in the retail grocery sector. The evidence showing that Woolworths and Coles share almost 80 per cent of the market is particularly disturbing, very much so as their dominance extends out to petrol, hardware, clothing and now even liquor. Yet more people—and this is an interesting point—across Australia are employed by independent grocery retailers than the large supermarkets. In fact, 57 per cent of full-time employees in the retail grocery sector are employed by independent retailers, compared to 43 per cent employed by Woolworths, Franklins, Coles and Aldi.
As we know, Woolworths, Franklins and Coles, and Aldi to some extent, cherry-pick the markets into which they will go. They go in aggressively, with the intent to capture the dominant share of a market which so often is a position that has been occupied by a smaller grocery supplier in the past. Should these smaller grocery retailers be eventually squeezed out, I would be very worried about how this will impact on not only the stores but also the employees, because those smaller retailers are still the majority employers, in percentage terms, in the grocery sector across Australia.

But my concern also extends beyond the success of independent grocery retailers in my electorate to the future of farmers in my electorate, and the farmers of the Mallee electorate—I am very concerned about them—who supply this country with clean, green food, so often taken for granted in this nation. It is clean and green and it is some of the most affordable food in the world, and of course it has always been available so it is taken for granted. Australian producers are already battling cheaper imports. I particularly point to the impact of the importation of pork, fish and other seafood on local producers here in this country. And then of course they have to deal with the power of the Coles-Woolworth duopoly, which, if it continues, may see many farmers forced out of business—because of the power in the market share of those two major retail grocery chains.

Food security is another important issue, and some countries are already experiencing a food crisis. The 6 November media release of the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation states:

World agriculture is facing serious long-term challenges, including land and water constraints, low investments in rural infrastructure and agricultural research, expensive agricultural inputs ...

relative to farm gate prices—

and little adaptation to climate change.

FAO estimates that to feed a projected world population of more than nine billion people by 2050 ...

global food production must nearly double.

(Time expired)

Mr GEORGANAS (Hindmarsh) (8.05 pm)—I welcome this motion and congratulate the member for Mallee for bringing such an important issue to the parliament. It is very important because we should all be concerned about the high level of market concentration in the retail grocery sector. As we heard from previous speeches on both sides earlier, depending who you listen to the two big supermarkets control anything between 70 and 80 per cent of the entire grocery market. That is not a good position for us to be in.

I am also very pleased that one of the first acts of the Rudd Labor government, which has been in office for less than 12 months, was to implement significant pro-competitive reform—with more to come. We have recognised that there are increasing cost-of-living pressures for all Australians, and we are addressing these issues. When you look back, the opposition had 12 years to address these issues, but not much was done about market competition in those 12 years. One of the first things we did when we won government was ask the ACCC to look into the competitiveness of the grocery sector and the impact it had on prices. The ACCC report, as we all saw, highlighted the positive impact on grocery prices of greater competition from supermarket chains like Aldi. Where there is greater competition, as we all know, we all benefit.
The government’s plan for the grocery sector includes introducing a nationally consistent unit price regime for major supermarkets and using COAG to help ensure state and local planning laws are used to boost competition between supermarkets. We have seen how some of these big chain supermarkets use their local planning laws to slow down the process of more competition coming into their area, so that is a very important initiative. We are also introducing a creeping acquisitions law to keep up competition in local areas and setting up GROCERYchoice to give consumers a quick and easy way to see which supermarkets sell a basket of goods at the cheapest price. For example, in my electorate, in the suburbs of Mile End, Torrensville, Hilton and Cowandilla we have a choice of Foodland, Woolworths and, further down the road, another independent grocer. GROCERYchoice gives to the people living in that immediate area the opportunity to have a look at who sells the basket of goods at a better price, giving them the choice to buy where the cheaper product is.

The Rudd government’s plan comes on the back of other important reforms as well: strengthening the Trade Practices Act to target the abuse of market power by larger companies; relaxing the restrictions on foreign supermarkets to develop new sites, allowing more competition; and introducing jail terms for serious cartel behaviour, a very serious offence. The government’s action plan for the grocery sector is an important step in driving and promoting competition to the benefit of the consumer. Contrast that with a coalition that had 12 years to do something but did nothing except argue that working families had never been better off. This government is committed to encouraging new entrants to the market, whether at the retail or the wholesale level, and has already relaxed restrictions that have prevented foreigners from buying vacant land to build new supermarkets.

The government also welcomed the ACCC’s plan to review more cases so that restrictive provisions in leases between supermarkets and shopping centres that prevent or delay the entry of other supermarkets into a centre are, where appropriate, prohibited under the Trade Practices Act 1974.

The government is also fulfilling its election commitment, made by the then Leader of the Opposition in July last year, to set up a dedicated website that gives consumers a snapshot, as I said earlier, of local grocery prices. The GROCERYchoice website became active in August this year. The website, as I said, provides a consumer guide to the cheaper supermarkets in their region. Consumers will then be able to make their choices, based on customer service, convenience and other factors.

Unit pricing is also important. Unit pricing will allow consumers to more easily compare the price of different sized products and get the best value for their dollar. Comparative pricing is the display of the price of goods per unit of measure—for example, per 100 grams, per kilogram, per litre or per item. (Time expired)

Ms LEY (Farrer) (8.10 pm)—I am delighted to support my colleague and neighbour the member for Mallee on this very important motion. I would like to quickly respond to comments made by the member for Hindmarsh that we as a coalition government did nothing during the time we were in power and to remind government colleagues that the coalition established a horticulture code of conduct. We kept pharmacies out of supermarkets, which was absolutely critical, and we had an ongoing program of support for the agricultural sector, which meant that small family farmers could supply produce to supermarkets. We are now in danger of seeing a lack of supply, so our support for the agricultural sector was a critical com-
ponent of keeping competition, particularly for fresh fruit and vegetables in the farm sector. And we had the diesel fuel rebate—which, I might add, is under threat from the present government—which, effectively, kept the transport costs of grocery goods down.

Looking at our landscape, we do have the highest concentration of retail grocery in the OECD. Our two major grocery chains have a large share of the markets for petrol, liquor, hardware, merchandise and clothing. Anyone who says that this high concentration of ownership does not lead to high prices for consumers is kidding themselves. A supplier will charge what the market can bear, and that is what we are clearly seeing happen with our largest supermarket chains—an effective duopoly, Coles and Woolworths. I do not want to turn this into a Coles and Woolies bashing exercise. They are good companies, they often employ Australian kids and they provide a service. It is not a personal issue; it is about providing sufficient competition to keep prices as low as possible. It is also about supporting the independent grocery sector.

In the small towns of the Farrer electorate—and my colleague the member for Mallee has alluded to the Sunraysia district where we have small supermarket chains—the Fisher family supermarkets are, in many cases, the only choice available to people, unless they want to travel, with higher petrol costs, to larger centres. So it is not just about saying, ‘We’ve got Coles and Woolworths and now we have Aldi.’ These options are not always available. We have to ensure that those who live in small towns, although they obviously do not have the range of choice and probably not the level of price that you would find in Coles and Woolworths in the nearest regional centre, still have meaningful options, that they can still shop locally and still have a range of choice and be supplied with what they need. I would like to see the government implement measures to stop these creeping acquisitions. They are not caught by the Trade Practices Act and they are a prohibition on price discrimination.

I was delighted to see the ACCC recognise the drought in their report, because I very rarely see the ACCC acknowledging an understanding of the drought. They actually recognise that one of the factors of high food prices is the duration of the drought, lack of stored water, our adverse weather conditions and local supply disruptions due to quarantine restrictions. So a big bunch of roses for the ACCC for recognising the realities of farming in our difficult landscape at the moment.

I want to highlight the fragility of the supply chain for fresh food in this country and make the point that it is about more than the factors mentioned by the ACCC in its report. It is far more serious for suppliers than consumers, because for consumers it might just be a decision not to buy a certain product on a certain day because the price is a bit too high. But it can actually affect the viability of a farm business. I do not know how we can explain this to consumers, but I think they would be receptive to the message that we do not want to see price fixing, we do not want to see guaranteed returns for farmers, but we do want to see guaranteed supply of farm produce over time. What we are seeing is family farmers being wiped out, squeezed out, because basically they have no bargaining power against big supermarkets. My concern is that we are going to lose them completely and our options for supplying fresh food are going to narrow. Ultimately, that is going to be bad for consumers. More producers will go out of business, more food will be imported, more family farms will go under. Anyone who has dealt with growers will hear the stories about market power being exercised openly and also subtly as an implied threat: only selecting selective grower supplies, forcing some suppli-
ers into secondary markets; and coercive demands, otherwise you are excommunicated, for example through the quality systems, the packaging, the delivery—not really relevant to what you are doing, but something that is beyond your control. (Time expired)

Ms OWENS (Parramatta) (8.16 pm)—I rise to speak in support of the motion, although I would like to comment that it does include one of my pet dislikes—that is, statements in particular that call on an action imply that there has been no action, so in calling on the government to address the issue, there is the implication that there has not been any action. Of course there has, and I will cover some of that later in this speech.

It seems a general view that there is extreme concentration in the grocery industry. It is perhaps not as bad as the independents make out. They tend to use the figures for packaged groceries, which are of course quite high—over 70 per cent. In the areas of fruit and vegetable, fresh meat, bakery, dairy products, deli products and eggs the figure is closer to 50 per cent—still a substantial market share when you are talking about two major supermarket chains, Coles and Woolworths. In Australia we are also not as bad as some international comparisons—for example, New Zealand and Canada—yet we in government do believe that there is the need for real reform in the grocery sector. That is why, upon our election, we acted almost immediately. One of the first acts of the Rudd government was to commission an ACCC inquiry into the competitiveness of retail prices for standard groceries. The ACCC reported back to government, stating that Australian consumers would benefit significantly if Coles and Woolworths faced more competitive threats that encouraged more aggressive pricing strategies.

The ACCC made a number of recommendations that would improve competition. The ACCC report showed that prices are lower when there is a major competitor or Aldi within one kilometre and recommended changes to zoning and planning laws to have specific regard for the likely impact on competition for new retail development applications. In implementing that recommendation, the government has referred the anticompetitive impacts of state and local zoning and planning laws to COAG, and this is very much about getting more competition in more communities to put downward pressure on local food prices.

The ACCC also expressed concern about creeping acquisition. Creeping acquisition has been seen as an issue for several years. In fact the 1999 report of the Parliamentary Joint Select Committee on the Retailing Sector, the Baird committee, made reference to it, as did the Dawson review in 2003, and the Senate Economics reference committee in 2004 noted that, ‘as a matter of logic’, creeping acquisitions in concentrated markets must, over time, substantially lessen competition. So the need to act in this area has been well known since at least 1999. The Rudd government issued a discussion paper calling for public comment on the best way forward for creeping acquisitions law on 1 September this year, and several models are being investigated and legislation will follow soon. On 23 April this year, the government announced changes to foreign investment rules to make it easier for the likes of Aldi to set up more shops and create more competition in the market.

We have also acted in the area of trade practices reform. During the last session of parliament the government introduced the biggest package of reforms to the Trade Practices Act in 22 years, including provisions to strengthen predatory pricing laws that will ensure that powerful companies—including the major supermarket chains—do not have the ability to persistently sell below cost and run small competitors out of the market. The ACCC also recom-
mended that a mandatory nationally consistent unit-pricing regime be introduced for standard grocery items both in store and in advertising and the government have indicated we will be rolling out a mandatory consistent unit-pricing scheme, helping consumers determine value for money when it comes to different sized packages. It should be noted that Aldi has been using a unit-pricing scheme since November 2007, and the European Union introduced its legislation in 2002.

The member for Mallee is right to be concerned about a lack of competition in the grocery sector. Consumers are losers when concentration of ownership is high; prices are lower when there is competition in the market. Growers and suppliers are losers when concentration of ownership is high and there are few buyers for their products. But communities also are losers when we lose the small shopping centres that provide outlets for community interaction. We lose something much greater than just a place to buy our milk. We are right to be concerned and we are right to continue to act. The government have been acting all year on this, and we will continue to do so.

Dr STONE (Murray) (8.21 pm)—I rise to strongly support the motion moved by my neighbour the honourable member for Mallee. He, like me, has some of Australia’s greatest food producers in his electorate. The concentration of ownership in grocery retailing in Australia is therefore of enormous importance to our two local economies. No other country has such concentration of ownership in the retail grocery sector. Australia is unique in this regard. Woolworths and Coles have close to 80 per cent of the retail grocery sector. These two chains also have a large share of the clothing, fuel, liquor and hardware sales in the country.

While it is well known that concentration of ownership erodes price competition, there are other major impacts of such concentration that concern me and should also concern this government. My electorate is still, despite the prolonged drought, the food bowl of Australia. We have the greatest concentration of food manufacturing compared with any other region in the country. This processed food includes dairy commodities and retail-ready production, processed fruits and vegetable products and an assortment of meats and wines. We have a stable, skilled local workforce, and the rail or road transport to the ports and domestic warehousing is fast and efficient. The fresh product is grown literally within sight and sound of the factories and processors. You could not think of a more ideal environment for growing and manufacturing great, clean and green Australian foods for local and international consumption.

But this is now in jeopardy—not because of the prolonged drought and not because of the pipeline that will take the food producers’ water to Melbourne. That pipeline is not yet built. That threat is yet to be delivered. The problem right now is the power of the grocery retailers to dictate terms to the food manufacturers and producers. Food producers nationwide are under extreme pressure from the two big grocery retailers to supply their home brands. These home brands compete directly with the companies’ own branded products and are produced in grades to mimic premium and low-cost branded options. They sit on the shelves beside the branded product. The home brands generate a far higher profit margin per unit for the supermarket than do the differently branded products, whose prices include marketing, product research and development costs.

The food manufacturing company is pressured to provide the contents of the home brand at a substantially lower price than the company’s own branded equivalent. They come to compete head-on with the same contents packaged differently, with a more competitive price on
the home brand. There is no identification on the labelling to show who has supplied the product content, hence there is no customer loyalty to the food producer anymore. This gives the retailer enormous leverage over the supplier, who can be replaced with the next-lowest-priced supplier should they baulk at the extremely thin margins and the intense competition with their own branded product. Imported product can readily be switched with the locally grown produce in the home brands—that is, in the cans, the jars and the plastic packs—with little understanding from the shopper, who is very used to seeing most Australian foods sold with a label that says ‘Made from local and imported ingredients’.

Why am I so concerned if the shopper says, ‘Well, we’ve still got the choice between home brand and the branded product’—the icon brand sometimes—‘on the same shelf just a few centimetres apart’? The problem is that, if you knock out Australian producers’ viability, if they are squeezed so hard that they become unviable, you have to ask: what supplier of this nation is then going to look after the environment? Who will be the stewards of the land and water resources, the providers of the environmental services that deliver to all of us the fresh air and the water supply? The nutritious foods themselves are of extreme importance, but Australia’s primary producers are also the stewards of our country and they provide the ecosystem services.

If the big two retailers make it too hard to get proper margins to stay in business then we are looking at a situation such as we have right now where citrus growers are struggling, where pork producers are just about out of business—yes, there will be a shortage of ham for Christmas—and where berry producers say it is just too hard. We in Australia will in the future go from product to product and say: ‘It’s not ours anymore; we cannot be food producers in this country because the big two have simply switched and swapped. Their home brands are full of imported ingredients and the shopper does not really know.’

Mr TREVOR (Flynn) (8.25 pm)—I rise to speak on this motion—and I thank the member for Mallee for it; it is an excellent one. My government, the Rudd Labor government, believes that there is real reform to be had in Australia’s grocery market. So do I. In my opinion, big business has too much market share. In its report to government, the ACCC states: ‘Australian consumers would significantly benefit if Coles and Woolworths faced more competitive threats that encouraged more aggressive pricing strategies.’ The first move the government made was to relax foreign investment rules to make it easier for the likes of Aldi to set up more shops and create more competition in the market. In addition, during the last session of parliament the government introduced the biggest package of reforms to the Trade Practices Act in 22 years. That included provisions to promote competition and protect smaller retailers from predatory pricing.

The government is moving on the key recommendations in the ACCC report into the price of groceries. The government will implement its action plan in response to the ACCC inquiry as a matter of urgency, namely referring the anticompetitive impacts of state and local zoning and planning laws to COAG, considering the best way to introduce a mandatory nationally consistent unit-pricing regime in consultation with industry and consumer groups, working with the horticulture industry on improvements to the horticulture code of conduct and implementing a creeping acquisition law following feedback on a discussion paper to gauge the best way forward.
Also, for the benefit of consumers and to put added pressure on retailers, the government has fulfilled its election commitment to set up a dedicated website that gives consumers a snapshot of local grocery prices by launching, on 6 August 2008, the GROCERYchoice website. I commend my government on these initiatives. After 12 years of neglect, the Rudd Labor government has taken, and is taking, positive steps to address the effects of a high level of concentration of market ownership in the retail grocery sector. We must ensure more vigorous competition in the retail grocery sector, and the Rudd Labor government has shown commitment to that. I look forward to seeing some more. I look forward to seeing more developments in this area so that consumers are given a fair choice, a fair deal and a fair price for their goods purchased at our supermarkets. After all these years of neglect, all Australians deserve that. The farmers and independent retailers, in my opinion, also deserve a fair go. I do not believe they are getting a fair go. I also note with interest that recently the price of fuel in my hometown of Gladstone was significantly higher than 20 to 30 kilometres down the road. I cannot comprehend why this is so. It beggars belief. I will ask the Petrol Commissioner to visit Gladstone to establish whether market share is influencing unfair market prices and forcing them upon the people of Gladstone.

I also want to comment tonight on GROCERYchoice, which I spoke about earlier today. The government announced that it will be working with retailers and consumer organisations to further enhance the GROCERYchoice website with additional information and applications in coming months. GROCERYchoice provides consumers with practical grocery price information, which was not previously available to consumers, that will assist them to compare general price levels for a large number of products in different regions. Allowing consumers to make more informed purchasing decisions will promote more vigorous competition between supermarkets. It is the increased competition between supermarkets which may put downward pressure on grocery prices. The website publishes price information for seven typical baskets of goods, including basic items such as meat, fruit, vegetables and dairy products, which reflect weekly grocery choices by the average Australian household.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr S Sidebottom) — Thank you to all members who contributed to that debate. It being 8.30 pm, the debate is interrupted in accordance with standing order 41. The debate is adjourned and the resumption of the debate will be made an order of the day for the next sitting.

GRIEVANCE DEBATE

Debate resumed from 20 October.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr S Sidebottom) — The question is:

That grievances be noted.

Mental Health

Mrs VALE (Hughes) (8.30 pm) — For many members in this place, the personal and social concerns of the families in our local communities take up the majority of our time and effort within our electorates. Such social issues become even more acute when our economy is not as strong and robust as it has been in the past, because it is those families at the lowest levels of our society who suffer the most. The ill and the infirm, the unemployed and the disadvantaged within our communities have no buffer against adversity and are the most vulnerable of our citizens. Like many members, I regularly meet with constituents to hear their concerns.
and try to assist them with their issues. From time to time there is one issue which keeps cropping up as the real dilemma for many of my constituents and which over the years seems to be getting worse rather than better—that is, the issue of how we look after and care for those fellow Australians who suffer from a mental illness.

Although the delivery services for the mentally ill is a matter for state governments, the reality is that we have an increasing number of Australians who are suffering from mental health issues and who are not getting the care, the support and the protection they need. Many are left homeless and unprotected by a health system that operates on the policy that simply provides mentally ill people with a prescription for their medication and a Centrelink payment on a regular basis. But providing prescriptions and Centrelink payments does not address their very real need for care, shelter, protection and appropriate supervision. In many cases, the families of mentally ill patients are at a loss to know how to properly care for them. Indeed, their families do not have the qualifications or the capacity to offer the constant professional support their mentally ill family member requires on a continual basis. Those that try often crumble under the weight of such relentless responsibility and, as a consequence, many mentally ill people are homeless and without shelter.

Recently in my electorate office I received a visit from a constituent, Ms Colleen O’Neill, whose older brother has suffered from a mental illness for many years and now appears to have been abandoned by the state health services and left in the too-hard basket. Ms O’Neill has since written an open letter expressing her concerns about her brother’s situation for me to read to the parliament so that the very real issues that face families who have to deal with such a dilemma can hopefully be understood by the parliament and the members of this place. Ms O’Neill says:

I write this letter in particular to you Prime Minister Kevin Rudd as leader of our country and also Malcolm Turnbull (Leader of Opposition) because I think both of you are united in your belief of providing better conditions for our mentally ill and homeless people.

I have a brother who is a few years older than me and is now 49, he was diagnosed with Schizophrenia when he was approx. 21 years of age and sectioned at the time to Rozelle Psychiatric Hospital. A couple of years after that time, I travelled overseas and was abroad approx. 15 years. When I returned to Australia some 9 years ago I learnt my brother had been discharged from Rozelle Hospital and placed in a self contained unit through the community housing facility with periodic visits by medical staff regarding his condition, and the medication being taken.

As time went on, it became clear he was not able to manage on his own, as his medication was left to him to maintain and if he didn’t want to open the door to medical teams he didn’t, all of which ensured his decline. As a consequence, his home unit became flooded and derelict and eventually after family and State Housing intervention it was assessed as unsafe and he was evicted. While he was offered alternative accommodation at the time based on his previous dwelling, he felt he could not cope on his own and was not willing to take up this offer.

My brother decided he had no other option open to him at the time but to live in a local park. My parents are elderly and I am a single mother working full-time, and we are not in a position to look after him. The main message I get from him is that has no pressure and responsibility anymore, living in the park, and felt he could cope better. I understand this feeling of not coping is a part of his illness, but I fail to understand how the health system (which served him better some 25 years ago with the basic necessities of food, clothing, shelter and medical staff) has somehow forgotten him and others like him. Sydney had the Olympic Games in the year 2000, which I thought were fantastic for Australia. It showed the world what a great country Australia had become in the way of a modern multicultural soci-
ety and thriving economy, embracing change and moving in the direction of embracing its history of the past through reconciliation. With all this progress being made, why have Australians forgotten the mentally ill and the homeless, and why are we not striving to make their world a better place?

When a criminal goes to jail, they are provided with food, clothing and shelter. It may not be 5 star accommodation but nonetheless they are given the necessities which my brother and others like him are not. The mentally ill and the homeless are not criminals but why are they treated like social outcasts and worse than criminals?

Australia is concerned about climate change, which of course is of real concern to our existence, but we need to look also at what is happening now, what is real, what is right in the here and now.

My letter to both you gentlemen is to ask for something to be done collectively for these people to make their quality of life better. I suggest a Medical Village, similar to the model of a retirement village for the elderly, whereby there is a communal dining room; a lounge area; an activity area so they can do some sort of craft or woodwork; their own room so if they want to retire from people they can; and surrounding grounds for them to go for walks in a garden that will help them thrive to the best of their potential through a nurturing based environment.

Some of the money that my brother receives from Centrelink each fortnight goes to his GP and the Pharmacy for his medication and the rest he has to live on is for food. Knowing how expensive essentials are at the moment for normal householders, I don’t know how he survives.

If there was a Medical Village for my brother, he wouldn’t need Centrelink payments each fortnight, as food, clothing, shelter and medical necessities would all be at the village for him. In the long run the social cost to the country has to be offset by a better system set up to care for the mentally ill and centralized with these types of medical villages throughout the country. I understand that the state of New South Wales is hugely in deficit and that hospitals are greatly under resourced.

My brother has rights like you or me and whilst he is not in an ideal situation, unless he is hurting himself or someone else, he cannot be forced to leave the park where he is living to be placed in a better environment. We have to remember that he is mentally ill, so why is our health system not protecting him?

The thing I am asking the government to consider implementing is an amendment to legislation to give family members or medical staff the power to move people in my brother’s situation to a better environment, but before this can happen the government needs to find a suitable model to care and protect people like my brother.

I work full-time and pay taxes like everyone else, and I want to see my taxes going towards a better future for people with a mental illness. I know how fragile life can be as I’m sure many Australians do, so when members of parliament are privileged enough to work in a position where they can bring about change for the better, they should try to make a difference for people like my brother and for all the people in Australia who suffer from a mental illness and are homeless, which is what I am trying to do: make a difference.

Thank you for your time in listening to this letter.

Yours truly
Colleen O’Neill.

I think we can all identify with the distress of Mrs O’Neill and her parents about the situation of her brother and, particularly, that there appears to be nothing the current system allows her to do to assist him. Once upon a time, shelter, protection and care were provided to people suffering from a mental illness. But, with the advent of the Richmond report back in the 1980s, state government health departments were in an inordinate rush to close down such places and send vulnerable patients forth into the world armed with a prescription for their
medication and a fortnightly welfare support payment as the only tools for a precarious survival. While many former institutions were not operated appropriately, and many did have an adverse impact on many people, the current situation of indifference and abject neglect is also just as morally untenable in a wealthy nation like Australia.

While we may be going through a tough economic time, those Australians with a mental illness who are homeless deserve much better from the lucky country. I urge this government and all members on both sides of the House to address this issue. The solutions are there. They just take commitment and the political will to deliver, and I do believe there are many politicians, many parliamentary representatives on both sides of the House, who actually have that commitment and that political will.

**Wakefield Electorate: Mallala Museum**

Mr CHAMPION (Wakefield) (8.40 pm)—It was my great pleasure to attend the opening of the *Time of Conflict* exhibition at the Mallala Museum yesterday, Sunday. It was a wonderful event that honoured all of those who served both the nation and the town and district of Mallala. Mallala is a lovely town. It is a town of about 800 or so. It is famous, I think, for its World War II flying base and for its motor sports facility which is situated on the site that the Air Force base was on.

The *Time of Conflict* exhibition really highlights the service of the townspeople who served in the Boer War, World War I and World War II, Malaysia and Vietnam. It particularly focuses on the role of No. 6 Service Flying Training School, which trained many of the pilots in World War II, particularly those on bombers and in antisubmarine warfare, and it has something in common with the Edinburgh air base, which now has the P3 Orions, which also do antisubmarine warfare.

The exhibition features many medals, documents, souvenirs from conflict zones, uniforms and the honour boards from the local institutes and local schools. Those honour boards often tell a story in themselves. There was one individual who was named who had served in both the Boer War and World War I, which is quite a tremendous service. The exhibition also has portraits of soldiers in their uniforms prior to their deployment overseas. Nearly all of these have been donated by local families or rescued from local areas, from the institute or whatever. I am always struck by the portraits and the honour boards—just at the number of names from these small towns and the magnificent contribution of these small rural communities that gave up their young farmers, shearers and bush workers, who volunteered to serve to protect not only this nation’s liberty but of course the liberty of others.

The statistics are quite staggering. During the First World War, 421,809 people enlisted and 331,781 of them served overseas. In the Second World War, 993,000 enlisted and 575,799 served overseas. Those are unbelievable figures in terms of people answering the call to war. In relation to casualties, during the First World War there were nearly 60,000 deaths, 137,013 wounded in action, 16½ thousand gassed, 3½ thousand or so prisoners of war and 109 prisoner of war deaths. In the Second World War, there were 19,235 deaths, 20,000 non-battle deaths, 23,477 wounded, 28,000 prisoners of war and nearly 8,000 deaths of prisoners of war. Those are staggering figures, terrible figures—especially from a nation with such a small population: five million at the time of World War I—and when you go to these country towns, like Mallala, and you go to these exhibitions you really do see the terrible personal cost to these small rural communities and the families behind the figures.
In the exhibition there are 10 portraits of young men who were lost in World War I, which is a terrible cost for a town like Mallala. In World War II two young men were lost. One was from the Cameron family. The Cameron family sent five sons, out of 12 children, to serve in World War II. The son that was lost was killed at Buna in the last days of the battle of Kokoda. So it was a terrible loss for the town and it was not their only loss; they also lost a young man called Max Peters. He was one of three brothers to serve and he was lost on HMAS Sydney. It is in these personal stories that the terrible cost to the nation and to these towns by those who either fell in battle or returned wounded or damaged by war really becomes apparent. I think it is true to say that Australia would be a far different place today had they not been called to make that sacrifice. We would be a far different nation today.

I would like to thank the Mallala and District Historical Committee and all the volunteers and local businesses who participated. In particular I want to thank the Mallala and District Historical Committee with Councillor Marcus Strudwick as the chair, Gwenda Griffiths as the secretary, Margaret Tiller as the treasurer, Lois Wasley, Chris Boril, Maureen Heath, Roger Davies, Ray Earl, Jim East, Brian Verrall and last but not least Mark Wasley. All of those individuals have put together a very good museum and an excellent exhibition. We should also acknowledge the local businesses that were involved. There was Peter Templeton of Peter Templeton Designs and the District Council of Mallala. In terms of World War I service records there were Trevor Maynard and Maria Leonard of Another Kitchen, and John Mueller, an electrician. In terms of painting there was DB and VE Veitch and T Redden. The carpet was given by Barry Stone’s Carpet and Vinyl. The building was done by Irvine Smyth, paving by Robert Bushell, ceilings by David Knight and David Gameau also made a contribution.

This is really a labour of love for this little town. It is a tremendous display. Tomorrow at the museum there will be a Remembrance Day service which will feature the service personnel of RAAF base Edinburgh from No. 1 Airfield Defence Squadron; the Uniting Church minister, Reverend Geoff Graetz of Gawler; and of course all the school children of Mallala will be present and will assist with the service. So it will be a fitting acknowledgement of all those who served and of those 10 young men whose portraits hang in the gallery who were lost in the fields of France and other World War I battlefields. It really does touch the heart.

On the front page of the November-December Christmas edition of the Dublin Dispatch is a picture of the Long Plains Soldiers Memorial Hall. The fundraising for this town hall began in 1913, was suspended during the war and the hall finally opened in 1923, obviously fittingly dedicated to those who fell. It was opened at the 11th hour of the 11th day in 1923. There is a terrific picture of about 200 townspeople out the front of the hall for the opening. It is a tremendous bit of local history in the Adelaide Plains, the towns of Mallala and also Long Plains. I want to thank the editor of the Dublin Dispatch, Pat Thompson who is a great local historian, a person who has a lot of passion about our local history. I would like to commend all those who were involved.
Mr KEENAN (Stirling) (8.49 pm)—I rise to grieve about a matter that I have spoken about many times before in this place and one that I find deeply frustrating in my electorate of Stirling. It is a problem that I had considered that I had solved in the past, but every time we get very close to finding a solution there is a change in the political landscape that seems to rob us of that progress. I am talking about the building of the much-needed overpass at the intersection of Mirrabooka Avenue and the Reid Highway—one of Western Australia’s worst black spots.

The Reid Highway went through my electorate some years ago and sadly, due to a lack of funding at the time, it was interrupted at various other main roads by traffic lights where there should have been overpasses on what is a freeway. This creates an exceptionally dangerous situation and people are continually killed and injured at this intersection. It is something I have campaigned on extensively since I won the seat and prior to that and one that I had the former government commit money towards. But, sadly, the state government has failed to live up to its responsibilities to date, although I am hoping that is about to change.

My constituents need to be safe when using the roads in their community. I have lobbied very hard for federal funding to build the overpass at Alexander Drive and Reid Highway, which is an intersection slightly farther on down the Reid Highway from the Mirrabooka Avenue intersection. I am pleased that the federal government has committed that funding. Prior to the last election the former WA state Labor government committed $17 million towards the $34 million cost of the construction of an overpass at the Alexander Drive-Reid Highway intersection, which Labor determined was a higher priority than the Mirrabooka Avenue overpass, with the promise that they would consider funding for the second overpass.

I had previously secured a $20 million promise for federal funding from a re-elected coalition government, and the Labor candidate, as he did with all our promises, matched that promise and secured unconditional funding under AusLink 2 from an elected Labor government. Following on from this Labor commitment, I wrote to the federal Minister for Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Local Government, Anthony Albanese, after the election to ask what steps he had taken to ensure that the commitments made by federal and state Labor were going to be honoured. I received correspondence from the minister confirming that discussions between the two governments had commenced and that funding arrangements under the AusLink 2 program for the 2009-10 year and the 2013-14 year would be finalised as part of the process.

Since receiving that letter, there has been a change of state government, so I subsequently wrote a further letter to Minister Albanese requesting him to advise me at what stage the discussions were and if they were going to be ongoing with the new Liberal state government. I have also written to the newly appointed state Minister for Transport, the Hon. Simon O’Brien, asking him to advise what the state government now plans to do and inviting him to come with me to visit the Mirrabooka Avenue intersection so I can impress upon him the urgent need for this overpass to be built.
We must have an overpass at the Reid Highway-Mirrabooka Avenue intersection, as we must build overpasses over all of these intersections. They are manifestly unsafe. Every year the costing for these overpasses goes up. Initially, about a decade ago, I think they would have cost about $2 million each. They are now costing up to $35 million each. The longer we delay, the worse the problem gets and the more expensive it becomes to resolve.

I wanted to take the opportunity in this grievance debate to update the House on a project that I am very pleased about, and that is the closed-circuit television cameras that have been installed in the Nollamara shopping centre in my electorate. If I could provide the House with some background, late one night last year a customer at the Commonwealth Bank ATM was violently attacked with an axe. Luckily, the person did survive this attack, although he suffered terrible injuries. Together with the City of Stirling, the local council within my electorate, we applied to the previous, Howard government to have closed-circuit television cameras placed at the Nollamara shops to help prevent a heinous attack of this nature from ever happening again.

The funding was secured through the National Community Crime Prevention Program, a tremendously effective program which was set up by the previous government and a wonderful initiative. Unfortunately, this program has been cut by the current Rudd Labor government and there are no future grants like this available for communities such as mine. Nevertheless, on 21 November, together with the Mayor of the City of Stirling, Councillor David Boothman, I will have great pleasure in turning on the camera at the Nollamara shops at an event aptly called ‘Be seen at Nollamara shops’.

On another matter of grievance: I have been working to implement an upgrade for the closed-circuit television cameras at Scarborough Beach. Scarborough Beach is a wonderful part of my electorate, but unfortunately every summer it becomes something of a hoon magnet. People, apparently from all over Perth, come in and behave in an antisocial way that is deeply unappreciated by the local community. With summer upon us again, people from all over Perth and Western Australia will want to continue to enjoy Scarborough, which is a magnificent beach, and in doing so support the local businesses there.

We had an example of antisocial behaviour last month, when a group of drunken louts attacked surf-lifesavers who were trying to resuscitate somebody who had passed out drunk. This behaviour is totally and utterly unacceptable and has been condemned by everybody in my community. I expressed to the new WA Minister for Police, the Hon. Rob Johnson, my strong support for any extra policing measures being considered at Scarborough Beach during summer. Like everybody in my electorate, I was appalled by the recent violence of a few. Violence directed towards hardworking community lifesavers is really quite extraordinary and unacceptable.

The former Howard government actually committed to an upgrade of the CCTV cameras at Scarborough Beach to the tune of $150,000, in an effort to combat this problem. I still consider this to be an exceptionally worthwhile project, worthy of consideration by the new government for funding. These funds were provided under the National Community Crime Prevention Program, which I mentioned earlier and which, I repeat, the current government has seen fit to discontinue.

Whilst cameras are a very useful tool in a holistic approach to maintaining law and order, I firmly believe that there is no better deterrent than the physical presence of police on patrol,
especially in places where large crowds gather. The new member for Scarborough, Liza Harv-
ey MLA, has a strong association with Scarborough Beach and the surrounding community and local businesses. Together with Liza, I have had discussions with the Scarborough police to offer whatever assistance I am able to give in order to help them work to keep Scarborough one of the safest, most family-friendly beaches in Perth throughout the busy, hot summer months. I have written to the Minister for Police to support a proposal to provide local police with two quad bikes which could be used for beach patrols during summer. This would be an innovative and cost-effective way to maintain order on the beach by having a highly visible but non-intrusive police presence along the beach strip.

Scarborough Beach is an amazing beach, full of life. It is a wonderful place for families and tourists. Scarborough has also been a recent recipient of a litter prevention award in the national Keep Australia Beautiful beach awards. The surf-lifesavers there provide a vital service on a voluntary basis. As I have done in the past, I would like to acknowledge the hard work and dedication of these people. Today in my office I received a letter from Surf Life Saving Australia outlining their achievements over the past 12 months. They completed an extraordinary number of rescues and saved countless lives, as they do every summer, and they logged over one million volunteer hours watching over the millions of Australians who visit our beaches every year. I am very lucky and very proud to be patron of the Scarboro Surf Life Saving Club, vice patron of the Trigg Island Surf Life Saving Club and vice patron of the Western Australian Surf Life Saving Club. I congratulate Surf Life Saving Australia on the wonderful year that has gone by and I wish them all the best for the summer ahead.

In the brief seconds that are left to me, I would like to record also that I spent a wonderful Sunday at the Maccabi sportsgrounds in Yokine, part of the Carmel School and the Jewish Community Centre, for the annual Yokine Community Fair. The fair is organised by Here 2 Help, a not-for-profit organisation which does valuable work to help disadvantaged groups in the city of Stirling. The fair was a fantastic family fun day and there was a great display of community pride on show. I would like to congratulate the organisers, Here 2 Help, for their wonderful work in helping community organisations in Stirling. I commend them heartily for the efforts that they have put in. (Time expired)

Petrie Electorate: Youth

Mrs D’ATH (Petrie) (8.59 pm)—I rise to talk about my concern—and the concern of par-
ents and young people in the electorate of Petrie—about the perception in way too many cur-
rent reports that our young people are hoons, louts, and selfish and materialistic. I respect the comments that have just been made by the member for Stirling, that from time to time, unfortu-
nately, we do see behaviour that is unacceptable—although I think we, both in this chamber and out in the broader community, could all accept that bad behaviour is not limited to our young people from time to time. I want to clearly put forth my position that the proposition that the young people of today are materialistic, selfish and out for themselves and no-one else is fundamentally flawed. I have just spent the last 2½ weeks visiting 28 schools in my electorate, and I see nothing but inspiration from the students that I meet, both primary and secondary school students.

There are young boys in primary school who are getting motivated to join choirs and form boys groups, which I think is fantastic. At Aspley State School they have just formed their first boys choir, and I congratulate the young boys for their fantastic singing. One other
school, Norris Road State School at Bracken Ridge, has just formed a young, all-boys dance
group. They are now singing, dancing and performing for visiting people like me, and their
first performance the other day was absolutely fantastic. I look forward to seeing many more
of those events.

There are children who are doing so much in the broader community. One of my other
schools, Mueller College, recently had the opportunity to take a team of 30 students and
teachers over to Vanuatu. With them they took two tonnes of school equipment and re-
sources—including textbooks, science experiment equipment and teaching resources—the
money for which they had raised themselves. The students that they went to visit lived on two
incredibly remote islands called Malakula and Ambae. The principal of one of the schools on
these islands said that, in the 80 years that the school had been in operation, not once before
had they had a visit from anyone, black or white. They also said they had never been provided
with any kind of support like the kind they had received from Mueller College. The students
from Mueller gave drama and music presentations to the schools, and they talked about be-
aviour, values and attitudes. For those students, it was a life-changing trip. I am sure it was
for the students of Vanuatu as well. We now have 30 more students in our local community
who really understand what is going on not only outside their local community but outside
their own country and who understand what they can do to help.

As those students and many others have seen through their broader connections, whether it
is through World Vision Australia or a whole range of groups out there, the smallest bit of
assistance can help. That takes me to Everton Park State School, which recently had one of
their teachers go over to Tanzania for a month. They helped raise funds for that teacher to take
some resources over with her. The grade 2 and grade 7 students raised $850, and that bought
an incredible number of textbooks and writing books for the students in Tanzania, who had
never seen these sorts of resources provided before. In addition to that, the year 6 and year 7
students had just completed the 40 Hour Famine and raised $2,800 for World Vision. They
have been doing this for the last three years. This is just a small sample of the fantastic efforts
of our students.

Having said that, I certainly do not look at my community or the broader community with
rose-coloured glasses and think that every student is a role model student who wants to go out
and do volunteer work in the community and beyond. When I talk about our fantastic stu-
dents, I am not talking about our duxes and those getting all the academic awards, who their
parents and teachers and I are very, very proud of. These students are doing equally as well in
other areas, and we need to acknowledge their fantastic efforts.

In saying that, like in many other areas of Australia, I have in my electorate young people
who are unemployed, who are homeless, who are disengaged from the education system, who
are suffering from drug and alcohol abuse or who are suffering from abuse themselves in the
home. Instead of criticising these young people, who may turn to crime or to other activities
that the general society considers are inappropriate, what we should be doing is looking to
those young people as representatives in our community, in our society, and asking: ‘What is
it that we can do to support these people? What can we do to help them identify their true po-
tential?’ They all have a lot of potential, but they need self-esteem and they need support. If
what they see is reports in the media and reports generally in the community saying, ‘The
youth of today don’t care, they show no responsibility, they’re hooligans, they’re louts,’ if we
keep using this terminology to label our youth generally out there, then of course they are going to have difficulties in getting that self-esteem and confidence that they really need, especially those who are facing really difficult circumstances in our local community.

My speaking tonight has come about, again, from the inspiration of talking to a couple of senior students and the school captains at Craigslea State High School this year, who are very much immersed in exams at the moment. They just said they are tired of being labelled by society. They are tired of being labelled by the media. They do have hopes and dreams. They do want to achieve so much in society and want to contribute to society, and that is the way we should be looking at our youth of today. They have potential. We should not be judging them. We should be respecting them, supporting them, encouraging them in all that they want to do, truly listening to them and engaging with them.

That brings me to my final point, which is to say how immensely proud I am of the Hon. Kate Ellis, Minister for Youth, and this government for establishing the Australian Youth Forum. This Youth Forum is new. It is dynamic. It is well and truly needed. It is something that young Australians have been craving. They are grappling with so many pressures in our society. Whether we want to accept it or not, things have changed. We have our young people leaving school with phone plans and credit card debt, facing financial pressures. We have all seen financial pressures, as have our parents and our grandparents, but the youth of today are looking and asking: ‘Will we ever be able to afford a house? What can we do to look after the environment that is our future and that is for our own grandchildren? What are our job opportunities? What are our opportunities generally to move forward and to contribute?’ This Youth Forum really does give them a voice. It will foster national dialogue between young Australians and the government, and I am happy to say that I am doing my part in making sure that I am embracing that need for dialogue with my local students of all ages.

I take absolute pleasure in visiting my schools. These students really do have amazing ideals. When you hear grade 6 students sitting down discussing the merits of fossil fuel versus clean energy, you know that we have a lot of hope for the future, when these kids are our future. I would just like to thank the students and all of the youth in my electorate for contributing so much, and I look forward to continuing to have that dialogue with them and working for a better future for all.

Immigration

Dr STONE (Murray) (9.09 pm)—I want to talk about my concerns about the government’s activities and lack of activity in the Immigration and Citizenship portfolio. We have a Minister for Immigration and Citizenship, Senator Chris Evans, who I am sure is well meaning but we have had a series of disasters in the last 12 months which are making a number of Australians wonder what happened to us as a humane society and what is going on as they imagine piles of files on the minister’s desk waiting for some sort of decision. These piles do not just represent paperwork and bureaucrats tinkering at the edges; they have in fact embedded within them people’s lives and people’s futures.

For example, every minister of immigration over the years has exercised their discretion or, if you like, their intervention powers which are enshrined in the acts that are associated with immigration policy. This minister is very nervous about exercising his discretion. He has made it public, earlier in his time as minister, that he does not really want to have any discretion or intervention powers. He has called on a special report, which has now been completed.
by Elizabeth Proust, to look at the whole business of government intervention. He seems to want the bureaucrats to be able to handle every case strictly according to a set of rules and regulations with no capacity to actually make decisions on a case-by-case basis, which in the case of immigration is absolutely essential.

No set of regulations or rules can take on board all the nuances, all the variations and contexts of an individual’s circumstance—for example, if they have a disabled child and want to migrate to this country. Or if they are in this country and they applied for permanency under conditions, for example, like putting $100,000 up into state Treasury bonds. They apply with goodwill and meet the criteria on the table only to find the rules change and then, 12 months later, they are left in limbo. Some 5,000 individuals—overseas students, skilled workers in the country and offshore—have their $100,000 Treasury bonds in their hands. They properly applied and in 12 months nothing has happened to resolve their cases.

In the case I mentioned of disability, amongst the files stacked up on the minister’s desk, I presume, or in a dark corner, there is the case of the midwife in Western Australia—she does not want her family name to be mentioned—who has a daughter with Down syndrome. Their case has been waiting for ministerial discretion, having reached the end of the whole business of ministerial tribunal reviews for a very long time now. This is extremely unfair. You can imagine the stress on the family and on the child. They are a skilled couple. The mother of the child with Down syndrome is in an occupation in great demand in Australia—she is a midwife—they are of exemplary character and I think it is plain unfair that they, as in the well-known case of Dr Bernhard Moeller, are being treated as a statistic and something bureaucracy should deal with.

The minister is too slow, or perhaps has his priorities elsewhere, to act and resolve these cases. I ask Minister Evans to urgently look at the Elizabeth Proust review, the one that identifies where he should go with his ministerial discretion or intervention powers. She recommends that he should continue to exercise these powers. I urge the minister to release his response to that review which has been, like the other material, sitting on his desk for quite a long time now.

Then we have the Migration Legislation Amendment (Worker Protection) Bill 2008. It comes into the Senate tomorrow and will be in the House of Representatives on Thursday to be debated. This migration worker protection bill actually has a quite solid framework embedded within it. It is of course a framework that has evolved from the creation of the first 457 visa category which the coalition government put into place in 1996-97. We do not have a problem with the framework. It talks about greater compliance, covering more of the costs associated with sponsoring a skilled migrant, better education and information flow. The problem with the bill is that the regulations, which of course will contain the detail, are not yet ready. The report of the Barbara Deegan review, which was commissioned to inform the regulations, is on the minister’s table. We have not seen that report. We have had a Senate inquiry take place without the benefit of the information from that Deegan review. The bill comes into the House this week. It will be debated. We do not know what the regulations look like. We are told that the regulations will probably be tabled some time next year.

That is simply not good enough. It is asking us to buy a pig in a poke. The 457 visas are very serious business. We want protection for all of our workers in Australia, whether they are temporary or Australian born and bred. I was amused or amazed—perhaps a bit of both—by a
full-page advertisement in the Sydney Morning Herald today from a number of unions saying, ‘Shock horror, 457 visa workers are being monumentally exploited.’ The statistics I can get from the department say only about 1.7 per cent of cases of 457 visa holders are exploited. I have asked for more details on that ratio, but you have to wonder why the unions—which, after all, put this government into power—are showing such exaggerated concern. The bill is coming in this week. There are no regulations and the unions are saying, ‘What can we do about the 457s?’ I wonder if there is some other agenda on their plate. Perhaps they want to become the agents recruiting the 457s in the future. After all, one of the proposed regulations is that the costs of associations or other memberships associated with employment in Australia will be met by the employer. I ask the minister most urgently to get his act together and get into place the regulations for the worker protection bill.

And then there are the guest workers. ‘Guest worker’ is a new visa category. It is perhaps the biggest change to migration policy this country has seen for half a century. This introduces temporary, unskilled workers to do harvest labour. These workers are coming from the Pacific. They are to come here for seven months. It is a trial, a pilot, for three or so years and 2½ thousand workers are meant to be on their way. In fact, they are meant to be here right now, at the beginning of this harvest labour season. We have still not identified the three pilot areas in Australia. We have been told one may be Swan Hill, one may be Griffith and one may be Stanthorpe, but also we have been told, ‘Don’t get your hopes up for your areas because we haven’t quite decided yet.’ We have been told, ‘Oh, yes, it’s probably going to be PNG, Vanuatu, Kiribati and Tonga who will supply the workers, but the MOUs are not signed yet.’

In this case we do have the regulations—just three. They are so loose and obscure you could drive a truck through them. They only tell us that there will have to be a secretary approved organisation to be involved in the identification and employment of the workers, that families cannot come and that these people have to apply from offshore. That is it. We have not been told yet, no-one knows, exactly who is going to be responsible for what costs—for example, their airfares, their medical insurance, their accommodation, their transport to and from the nearest town—once these workers come into the country or who is going to manage their shifting from property to property if they are not able to be employed for the full seven months by one orchard. The workers themselves no doubt are seriously worried. There has been built up in the Pacific an expectation that there would be about now a New Zealand type guest worker program. There will be huge embarrassment for us in the Pacific if this government’s bungling and inefficiency means that we do not have these guest workers delivered before Christmas. Indeed, they should have been here for fruit thinning, which began a month ago in Swan Hill.

Meanwhile, the horticulturalists in the harvest sector have been led to believe that there will be workers coming to support them this year. They too are already beginning to believe that it is not going to happen. What an embarrassment. What a cause of great concern for the efficiency of the Department of Immigration and Citizenship, or DIAC; of the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, or DEEWR, which I understand is a lead agent; and of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, or DFAT. None of those these agencies has been able to get themselves together to deliver a guest worker program. All they had to do was copy New Zealand, basically. New Zealand has been doing this for a little while now. They have had lots of consultations with New Zealand and they tell us they are follow-
ing New Zealand’s model, but they have not been able to get their act together and deliver. So I repeat what I said at the beginning: I am seriously concerned with the way immigration policy and practice is going in this country, with the way it has been going for the past 12 months. I have not even mentioned the debacle of four groups of unlawful arrivals heading towards Australia because they have had mixed messages about new border law and border security protection from this government. That is of great concern. I was in Indonesia 48 hours ago and they are concerned too. (Time expired)

Forde Electorate: Planning and Infrastructure

Mr RAGUSE (Forde) (9.19 pm)—I rise to raise a number of concerns I have about planning within the electorate of Forde. You might have heard the speeches I have made in this and the other chamber about the rollout of infrastructure and about how this government has committed to major infrastructure investment. How we implement the rollout of infrastructure on the ground will be interesting. I will give you some examples of why I have concerns about this. South-East Queensland has been undergoing massive growth. Each week there have been 1,500 people net coming across the border from other states. That is the net migration into South-East Queensland. In fact, it almost appears that people come over the border to South-East Queensland, put down their cases, look around and say, ‘This is a nice place to stay.’ Essentially, that has been very good for the economy for a whole range of reasons, but it has put enormous pressures on everything else.

People would be aware of the drought conditions in Queensland. While those drought conditions are very much a part of our concerns about climate change and rainfall generally around this country, the issue for South-East Queensland is that our population has been growing at a massive rate. In fact, just over two years ago the Queensland population hit the four million mark. When you leave the Brisbane airport, which I do on a regular basis, you will see the counter that continually counts the increase in population. Two years ago it was four million. Today the figure is about 4.3 million. In just two years 300,000 more people have made Queensland their home. As I said, that population increase puts enormous pressure on general infrastructure. Water particularly has been of great concern. At one stage the combined total of the dams in South-East Queensland was about 30 per cent. With no likelihood of rain during our dry period, that was of major concern.

We hear quite often the opposition, particularly opposition members from Queensland, bagging the government in Queensland—under Beattie and more recently under Bligh—for its spend on infrastructure. It is a commitment that governments have to make. It is not popular for governments to take on large amounts of debt to fund infrastructure, but we in the Rudd government understand the importance of doing that. South-East Queensland and Queensland generally have benefited from the building of infrastructure. The water pipeline which is now complete connects those dams to each other and the availability of water has increased to over 42 per cent. That figure is still critical in terms of the needs of South-East Queensland, but given that we are moving into what is normally our wet season we will probably be better served by the end of that.

But water is only one thing. Look at the effect of population growth on the roads and the road network. Anyone travelling from the airport to any part of Brisbane or towards the Gold Coast frequently gets involved in traffic jams. Only two years ago the capacity of those roads was quite good. There was a difference between the Gold Coast and the Brisbane Airport of...
maybe an hour and a quarter. That can be three hours now. It is a case of the overloading of our roads and the ability of governments to churn out and build infrastructure as quickly as it can. The Bligh government in Queensland has committed to that. I applaud the fact that those decisions have been made, but the building of that infrastructure puts enormous pressure on the implementation stage.

I will go back to the notion of planning. Good town planning is essential. We all understand that. Town planning is sophisticated today, given that we also look at sustainability and at how we develop in a sustainable way. The reality is that the demand on planning services in Queensland is also very high. In fact, we have such a shortage of planners in Queensland that they are coming not only from other states but where possible from other countries. They are coming in under 457 visas, which give us the opportunity to bring in people with a particular skill. You have to have planning in place before you start to make decisions about rolling out infrastructure.

Going back to my electorate of Forde, I have spoken many times in this House about the fact that we have no infrastructure of any note. It covers 3,100 square kilometres. It is not a large seat by rural standards, but given that it is Gold Coast hinterland and it sits behind three federal seats, each of which averages 70 or 80 square kilometres, it covers quite a large lump of ground. Because of the regional and rural nature of the electorate and also the high-density urban nature of some of the northern end of the electorate, we simply do not have the adequate road infrastructure or transport structures, and our water infrastructure is also poor. In fact, most of the people who live in the former Beaudesert Shire Council, which is now known as the Scenic Rim Regional Council, are on tank water. There is nothing wrong with tank water if it is provided and delivered the right way, but those communities live on tank water simply because they do not have any other options. It all comes back to the need for adequate planning. The concern that I have is that, if we do not look at how we are going to put more planners on the ground, particularly in an area like South-East Queensland and my electorate of Forde, we are going to have many hold-ups when it comes to delivering that infrastructure.

I note that as a federal government we have made road infrastructure commitments in Queensland in particular, and certainly the member for Petrie, who is sitting next to me, has had some commitments in her electorate. While those construction projects have been planned in the past and can go ahead, we are in a dilemma in South-East Queensland right now about getting people to plan in a sustainable way to prepare us for the future. Tamborine Mountain is in my electorate and is serviced by tank water. There is no reticulation of water and there are 8,000 in that community. While the general community are comfortable, there are instances of giardia and other problems with the groundwater, so it is something that has to be managed very well.

An issue for Tamborine Mountain that people have raised with me recently is that a drug rehabilitation centre is to be established there. We all understand the need for these sorts of services and we also understand the need to have them appropriately placed. This community on Tamborine Mountain have simply heard rumours that there is going to be a rehabilitation centre built within their community. There is no problem with those centres, but people on the ground want to have some understanding of what planning has occurred. When people buy into an area and make decisions about whether they stay there, move on, expand or renovate,
they want to know what their community is going to be like. In the area I am talking about on Tamborine Mountain, people are outraged not because there is a centre proposed for the area but because they did not have the choice. Also, the planning did not adequately indicate that that sort of centre could be built within the region. It is something that I am continuing to work on. The Gold Coast rejected this centre so it is to be restated on Tamborine Mountain without appropriate planning, and communities are under pressure and are concerned. The central issue in planning is that the people who live in these communities have to have a say in how their communities are planned. If we are going to build infrastructure, we need to ensure that people are aware of the infrastructure, that they have some say in the way the infrastructure is provided and that they can say whether they want the type of infrastructure that is being proposed.

Those in this chamber have heard me talk about Duck Creek Road, the lodges at Binna Burra and O’Reilly’s guesthouse. They are in an area that has not been adequately planned and where people are having decisions made on their behalf. If you are going to build a community, communities need to be serviced by water, power, roads and public transport. We are in an age now where we are talking sustainability, global warming, climate change and the need to reduce our carbon footprint. Yet we are still not planning appropriately when it comes to our communities. Public transport without a doubt is the way for the future, and it does not matter whether or not you live in a high-density area. Although the numbers will say that that is where it is most appropriate and more affordable, the reality is that all our community development has to be considered with the issues of planning and sustainability in mind.

It is wonderful that the government at the federal level is making major decisions about infrastructure rollout, but the state and local governments need to get their acts together. I am hoping that, when the Australian Local Government Association meets with federal ministers, there will be some decisions about how this will all be coordinated on the ground. Without appropriate planning, sustainability and adequate services, communities will fall into disrepair. I am concerned that without those things the seat of Forde will not be well serviced.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Ms AE Burke)—Order! The time for the grievance debate has expired. The debate is interrupted in accordance with standing order 192B. The debate is adjourned, and the resumption of the debate will be made an order of the day for the next sitting.

Main Committee adjourned at 9.30 pm
QUESTIONS IN WRITING

Public Works Projects
(Question No. 163)

Mr Melham asked the Minister for Finance and Deregulation, in writing, on 25 June 2008: Since March 1996, what public works have been the subject of an order by the Governor-General under section 18(8) of the Public Works Committee Act 1969, and, for each case, when was the order made.

Mr Tanner—The answer to the honourable member’s question is as follows:
Since March 1996, the following public works projects have been subject to an order under subsection 18(8) of the Public Works Committee Act 1969*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Proposal</th>
<th>Date Authorised</th>
<th>Section/ Provision</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Defence Imagery and Geospatial Organisation, Defence Building-Refit, Russell, ACT</td>
<td>6/11/03</td>
<td>18(8)(C) Defence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special Forces Training Facilities for the Tactical Assault Group (East) Holsworthy, NSW</td>
<td>27/5/04</td>
<td>18(8)(C) Defence</td>
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<tr>
<td>Extension to the Joint Electronic Warfare Operational Support Unit Facilities, Edinburgh, SA</td>
<td>10/6/04</td>
<td>18(8)(C) Defence</td>
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Job Vacancies
(Question No. 207)

Dr Southcott asked the Minister for Employment and Workplace Relations, in writing, on 26 August 2008:
(1) How many jobs does the Government forecast will be created over the 2008-09 financial year.
(2) How will her department measure job vacancy data over the 2008-09 financial year.
(3) Will the Industry Skills Councils have access to the Australian Bureau of Statistics Jobs Vacancy Data over the 2008-09 financial year.

Ms Gillard—The answer to the honourable member’s question is as follows:
(1) I refer the honourable gentleman to the reply to a Treasury Question on Notice (bet 101) containing the Government’s forecast of the increase in the overall number of employed persons from the June quarter 2008 to the June quarter 2009, which is posted on the following website:
(2) The Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) measures and publishes job vacancies listed on the Department’s Australian JobSearch (AJS) website. DEEWR also produces the Skilled Vacancies Index and the Information and Communication Technology (ICT) Vacancy Index. It also assesses skills in demand at the national, State and Territory, and regional levels.

The Department also analyses job advertisement data from ANZ Bank, SEEK, Olivier and other private sector agencies.

(3) ABS will not be producing its Job Vacancies series in 2008-09.

National Action Plan
(Question No. 210)

Mr Georgiou asked the Minister representing the Minister for Immigration and Citizenship, in writing, on 26 August 2008:

In respect of the Government’s National Action Plan (NAP) to build on social cohesion, harmony and security: (a) what specific activities are currently being conducted under NAP’s (i) consultation and research to inform the direction of activity, (ii) projects run by various Australian Government agencies, including the Department of Immigration and Citizenship, (iii) partnership projects between State and Territory governments and the Australian Government, and (iv) community projects; (b) who is undertaking these activities; (c) what is the budget for each of these activities; and (d) when is each project scheduled to be completed.

Mr McClelland—The Minister for Immigration and Citizenship has provided the following answer to the honourable member’s question:

(a) to (d)—

(i) A series of round tables are currently being held in states and territories associated with the mid term evaluation of the National Action Plan to Build on Social Cohesion, Harmony and Security (NAP). The budget for these consultations is $10,000 and they will be completed by June 2009.

Research activities currently being scoped for 2008-09 have a budget of $500,000. Most will be completed in the next twelve months. In addition, a Department of Immigration and Citizenship (DIAC) commissioned research project entitled Inequality, Discrimination and Social Cohesion: Socio-Economic Mobility and Incorporation of Australian Born Lebanese and Turkish Background Youth is in progress. Being undertaken by the University of Sydney at a cost of $117,770, it is due for completion in 2008.

(ii) The Integrating Muslim Australians initiative being undertaken by DIAC was allocated a budget of $4.26 million for 2008-09. This budget includes research, consultation, State and Territory Government partnership and community grant activities.

Other Australian Government initiatives which are being undertaken under the NAP and continuing to the end of the 2009-10 financial year are:

- the National Centre of Excellence for Islamic Studies Establishment Project being undertaken by the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR), with a budget of $8 million for four years,
- the Improving Crisis Management for the Muslim Community initiative being undertaken by the Attorney General’s Department, with a budget of $2.9 million for four years, and
- the Community Partnerships for Human Rights Program – Working with and for Muslim Communities initiative being undertaken by the Australian Human Rights Commission, with a budget of $4.4 million for four years.
The Australian Government is also conducting three year pilot programs due for completion in 2008-09. Centring on Lakemba and Macquarie Fields in New South Wales, they are:

- Community Employment Coordinators and associated employment projects, a Mentor Market Place Extension project and a Promoting Interfaith and Intercultural Understanding in School Settings project. These are all being undertaken by DEEWR, at a cost of $3.27 million over the three years, and
- the All Australian Sporting Initiative being undertaken by the Australian Sports Commission, at a cost of $1.94 million over the three years.

Further information about these Commonwealth initiatives can be obtained from the agencies involved.

A number of NAP state and territory partnership activities are due to be completed in 2008-09. These are:

- the Young People and the Internet Project with the NSW Ombudsman, involving a DIAC contribution of $50,000,
- the Intergenerational Mediation, Post Disaster Planning Strategy Phase 3 and Muslim Leadership – a New Generation projects with the Victorian Multicultural Commission, involving a DIAC contribution of $138,000,
- the Community Relations Commission Partnership with the New South Wales Community Relations Commission, involving a DIAC contribution of $100,000,
- the Integration and Inclusion Program with the Western Australian Office of Multicultural Interests, involving a DIAC contribution of $100,000,
- the Muslim Employment Worker Project Extension with the Queensland Department of Employment and Industrial Relations, involving a DIAC contribution of $20,000,
- Justice of the Peace Training with the Queensland Department of Justice and Attorney General, involving a DIAC contribution of $15,000,
- the Intercultural Outreach Program Year 3 project with the Australian Capital Territory Office of Multicultural Affairs, involving a DIAC contribution of $20,000, and
- the Multicultural Youth Project with Multicultural Tasmania, involving a DIAC contribution of $10,000.

Further project proposals from states and territories for partnership projects are being considered. These are to be completed in 2008-09 and 2009-10 and involve a DIAC contribution of $959,000.

(iv) Expressions of Interest were called from community organisations for 2008-09 NAP Community Grants funding. Applications are currently being assessed. The budget for 2008-09 grants is $520,000. Most projects will be completed by the end of the 2008-09 financial year. In addition, projects from the 2007-08 funding round will be finalised in the coming months. Further information on NAP community grants may be found on the DIAC website.

**Carbon Offset Credits**

(Question No. 211)

Dr Jensen asked the Minister representing the Minister for Climate Change and Water, in writing, on 26 August 2008:

(1) Will Australian companies which grow trees for the purposes of carbon sequestration be able to sell carbon offset credits to other companies that are covered by the scheme.
(2) Will those companies referred to in question (1) be able to produce and sell carbon offset permits from: (a) within the new scheme (i.e., covered); and (b) outside the new scheme (i.e., uncovered).

(3) What process will a forestry company have to go through to sell a tree based carbon offset credit into the CPRS.

(4) What are the potential advantages for a forestry company which chooses to “opt into” the scheme if it is in the business of growing trees for the purposes of carbon sequestration.

(5) Can existing tree plantations or forests be used to produce carbon offset credits if they are grown before the introduction of the new scheme.

(6) By what date does a tree plantation or forest have to be planted to be eligible to supply carbon offset credits to the new scheme.

(7) Will international carbon offset credits generated by projects in other countries be able to be sold into the Australian CPRS; if not, why not.

(8) Will the current accreditation provided to carbon sink companies by the Department of Climate Change be suitable for companies wishing to sell tree related carbon offset credits into the new CPRS.

(9) Will the acquisition of one tree based carbon offset credit by a carbon emitting company covered by the scheme be the equivalent to the acquisition of one Government produced carbon permit and will the acquisition of that carbon offset credit be sufficient to allow that emitter to emit one tonne of carbon.

(10) What percentage of free carbon permits will be allocated to each of the following groups: (a) trade exposed companies; (b) energy intensive companies; (c) energy producers utilising coal to produce energy; (d) mining companies; (e) oil and gas companies; and (f) any other types of companies not covered above.

(11) Is the Government considering allocating more than the stated 30 per cent (in the Green Paper) of free credits to some industries; if so, how will this work.

Mr Swan—The Minister for Climate Change and Water has provided the following answer to the honourable member’s question:

(1) and (2) The Government’s preferred approach outlined in the Carbon Pollution Reduction Scheme Green Paper is that owners of eligible Australian forests who opt into the scheme would be able to generate carbon pollution permits. One permit would be issued for every tonne of carbon dioxide (CO2) sequestered. Permits could then be sold to liable entities to help meet their scheme obligations or to parties outside the scheme who wish to voluntarily surrender the permits.

(3) The Government is currently consulting with stakeholders on design details for coverage of reforestation under the Scheme. The Government will outline its decisions on scheme design in a White Paper to be released in late 2008.

(4) Forest owners that opt into the scheme would receive permits for net sequestration that is counted towards Australia’s international climate change commitments. Forest owners would also be required to surrender permits for net emissions from the forest, should emissions exceed sequestration. Under this approach the financial benefits for forest owners will be dependent on factors including forestry activity type, changes in the carbon price and final scheme design details.

(5) and (6) To be included under the scheme a forest must be established after 1 January 1990 on previously cleared land as defined for the first commitment period of the Kyoto Protocol. Scheme permits will only be issued for sequestration that occurs after scheme commencement.

(7) The Government’s preferred position is that the scheme would be designed to link with international markets and schemes, with restrictions only introduced to ensure 1) the stability and ongoing credibility of the scheme; 2) the environmental integrity and effectiveness of the scheme; and 3) the
scheme's consistency with international objectives and obligations. In relation to emission reductions from international forestry projects the Government proposes that at this time the scheme only accept 'removal units' issued by another Kyoto party.

(8) The Australian Government’s voluntary Greenhouse Friendly initiative currently approves abatement projects, including forestry offsets. The rules applying to carbon sequestered in forests under the Carbon Pollution Reduction Scheme will not be the same as those that apply under Greenhouse Friendly.

(9) The Government’s preferred position is that the scheme regulator issue only one type of domestic permit, referred to as a carbon pollution permit. Permits issued for reforestation will be the same as the permits held by other scheme participants. Each permit will have a unique identification number.

(10) The Government’s preferred position in the Carbon Pollution Reduction Scheme Green Paper is that up to around 30 per cent of Australian carbon pollution permits would be freely allocated to emissions-intensive trade-exposed (EITE) activities. At the outset of the scheme, agricultural emissions are proposed to be excluded from scheme coverage. This would mean that free allocation at the beginning of the scheme would require up to around 20 per cent of total permits inclusive of any emissions.

The Government has not proposed separate allocations to individual groups but eligibility for EITE assistance will be determined by the emission intensity of an activity rather than the industry.

(11) The proposed 30 per cent of freely allocated permits is to be applied to the economy as a whole. It is not proposed that this is divided on an industry basis.

Final discussions on the EITE thresholds and the rates of assistance will be based on further information provided through the Green Paper consultation process to ensure that the total quantum of assistance is limited to around 30 per cent of permits (inclusive of agricultural emissions). This is to ensure an equitable scheme by:

• sharing the burden of any emissions reduction effort between EITE industries and other areas of the economy; and
• reflecting the need to use scheme revenue to assist households and other businesses.

Eligibility for EITE assistance is proposed to be based on the industry-wide emission intensity of an activity or process being above a threshold of about 1,500 tonnes carbon dioxide equivalent (CO2 e) per million dollars of revenue.

Initial assistance is proposed to cover around 90 per cent of emissions for EITE activities that have emissions intensities above 2,000 tonnes CO2 e per million dollars of revenue and around 60 per cent of emissions for EITE activities that have emissions intensities between 1,500 and 2,000 tonnes CO2 e per million dollars of revenue.

RAAF Townsville Museum: Mustang Aircraft

(Question No. 212)

Mr Lindsay asked the Minister for Defence, in writing, on 26 August 2008:

(1) Is he aware that the RAAF Townsville Museum currently performs restoration using recognised curatorial practices with controlled air conditioning and constant humidity control and in a building that is encapsulated to avoid sunlight damage.

(2) Is he aware that a Mustang aircraft A68-137 scheduled to be sent to the RAAF Townsville Museum is being held at RAAF Point Cook Museum pending confirmation that the RAAF Townsville Museum is able to: (a) complete the aircraft’s restoration; and (b) provide an appropriate display facility.
(3) Is he aware that the current Director of the RAAF Point Cook Museum refuses to consider requests for loan of memorabilia even though the Mustang aircraft A68-137 came from the Townsville community.

(4) Does he believe it is important that Australians have opportunities to access various museum collections through loaning arrangements; if so, will he intervene to facilitate the loan of memorabilia and the Mustang aircraft A68-137 to the RAAF Townsville Museum.

Mr Fitzgibbon—The answer to the honourable member’s question is as follows:

(1) No, as the RAAF Townsville Museum is not owned or run by Defence. The museum is owned and run by North Queensland Military Aviation Museum Inc.

(2) (a) and (b) Yes.

(3) Yes. The Air Force intends to retain the aircraft at RAAF Point Cook Museum until a suitable and secure environment for it can be guaranteed by RAAF Townsville Museum and a decision is reached as to its restoration.

(4) Yes. The aircraft will be loaned to RAAF Townsville Museum once a suitable and secure environment for it can be guaranteed by the museum.

2020 Youth Summit
(Question No. 215)

Mr Farmer asked the Minister for Youth, in writing, on 28 August 2008:

(1) In respect of the 100 delegates to the 2020 Youth Summit:
    (a) has she made contact with them since its conclusion; if so, how; and
    (b) did she provide them with a response to their communiqué submitted on 13 April 2008, if not, will she, and when.

(2) In respect of written submissions for the 2020 Youth Summit:
    (a) were members of the public allowed to submit; and
    (b) were unsuccessful applicants given the opportunity to provide written submissions; if so, were they considered.

(3) How many times has she communicated with each of the 89 youth delegates who were not chosen to attend the Australia 2020 Summit.

Ms Kate Ellis—The answer to the honourable member’s question is as follows:

(1) (a) Yes, I have contacted Youth Summit delegates by email. In addition, the Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) has written to the 100 youth delegates on my behalf.

    (b) I will be responding to the youth delegates regarding the communiqué’s top 10 ideas by the end of 2008.

(2) (a) Yes. Members of the public were allowed to make written submissions.

    (b) Yes. Applicants not selected as a youth delegate to the Youth Summit were encouraged to make a written submission. DEEWR considered all submissions and developed a summary of the key issues. The submissions and summaries were provided to the relevant topic groups to consider as part of their discussions over the Youth Summit weekend.

(3) Twice, as outlined at 1(a) above.
Active After-School Communities Program
(Question No. 217)

Mr Farmer asked the Minister for Sport, in writing, on 28 August 2008:

In respect of the Active After-school Communities program: (a) how many children are currently participating in the program; (b) what primary schools currently offer the program, and what electorates are they in; (c) what Outside School Hours Care services currently offer the program, and what electorate are they in; (d) do vacancies exist; if so, how many; (e) are schools or Outside School Hours Care services currently on waiting lists for the program; if so, (i) what regions are they in, and (ii) how many children are on the lists in each region; and (f) have the parameters of the program changed since 2007 for the current call for expressions of interest; if so, how.

Ms Kate Ellis—The answer to the honourable member’s question is as follows:

(a) Accurate participation numbers are calculated through the acquittal forms collected at the completion of each term. At this stage only data for the conclusion of Term 1 2008 is available. During Term 1 2008, 148 898 children participated within the Active After-schools Communities (AASC) program, averaging 47 children per site. As there are 3 192 sites participating in Term 3 2008, it is anticipated that 150 000 children would participate during Term 3 2008.

(b) There are over 3,000 Schools & Outside School Hours Care services (OSCHC) that participate in the Active After Schools Program. A list of the number of Schools & OSCHC by electorate participating during Term 3 2008 is at the end of this answer.

(c) See answer to (b).

(d) In Term 4 2008, there are currently 3 150 sites accepted within the program. This leaves a vacancy of 100 sites nationally. This number fluctuates regularly, particularly at the end of the year, as sites review their commitment to the program and/or have any change of staff/ownership.

(e) (i) and (ii) See the summary table at the end of this answer for a list of the number of Schools and OSCHCS within the AASC program and also on the pending list.

(f) 2008 Selection of Sites:
All schools and OSCHCs participating within the program during Term 3 2007, were invited to submit an Expression of Interest (EOI) for their involvement in 2008. These forms were collated and assessed against the program criteria, and where schools/OSCHCs met the criteria were offered a place in 2008. Only those schools/OSCHCs that returned an EOI were considered for involvement in 2008.

After the completion of this first round of EOIs, vacancies were then identified within the various regions. Invitations were then sent out to every school and OSCHC within each region that had a vacancy. All EOIs submitted during this stage were equally assessed against one another, and the successful sites notified of their selection. All other sites were placed on a pending list.

2009 Selection of Sites:
Postcards have been sent to every primary school and Child Care Benefit approved out of school hours care service nationwide, inviting them to express interest in participating in the program in 2009. The database of mailing details was supplied by the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations.

All schools and OSCHCs currently participating within the program are guaranteed places in 2009, should they wish to continue their involvement. They are required to indicate their intent by notifying their respective Regional Coordinator, prior to the relevant closing date within their state. They are not required to resubmit a full EOI.
Any site currently on the pending list, has been contacted and requested to confirm their intent to be considered for vacancies that may arise during 2009.

All new expressions of interest received, will be equally assessed against those sites on the pending list, to fill vacancies within the respective regions.

Schools and OSHCS Participating in Active Afters Schools Program Term 3 2008

Below is a summary by electorate of the breakdown of schools and OSHCS participating during Term 3 2008 and, as of 1 September 2008, are on the pending list. At this point in time, there are 74 schools and OSHCS on the pending list that have not been allocated to an electorate.

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Transition to Independent Living Allowance
(Question No. 220)

Mr Farmer asked the Minister for Youth, in writing, on 28 August 2008:

1. Did she increase the funding in 2008-09 from the previous year for the Transition to Independent Living Allowance.
2. How many young people were assisted by the Transition to Independent Living Allowance in 2007-08.
3. What additional funding or support is she providing to reach the 2008-09 estimate of 1600 young people accessing the Transition to Independent Living Allowance.

Ms Kate Ellis—The answer to the honourable member’s question is as follows:

1. TILA funding in 2008-09 year remained unchanged from the previous year at $2.56 million.
2. The total number of young people who were assisted by the TILA program in 2007-08 year was 1,504.
3. The funding of a single national TILA provider is expected to increase the take-up rate for the Allowance. In line with the terms of their funding agreement, the contracted service provider is required to promote the program widely and develop an enhanced data collection system. Since sign-

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ing the contract in 2007, Southern Youth & Family Services has already introduced a number of improvements, including:

- working with key stakeholders to increase awareness and proper use of the program;
- developing a website advertising the program (www.tila.org.au); and
- streamlining the approval processes (including modifications to the application form).

**Australian Youth Forum**

*(Question No. 222)*

Mr Farmer asked the Minister for Youth, in writing, on 28 August 2008:

In respect of the Australian Youth Forum:

(a) what date did she first call for submissions;
(b) when did submissions close;
(c) how many submissions were received;
(d) will she respond to all submissions;
(e) who will review the submissions; and
(f) has she read any of the submissions.

Ms Kate Ellis—The answer to the honourable member’s question is as follows:

(a) On 17 March 2008 a public consultation period commenced for the Australian Youth Forum, including the call for submissions.
(b) The consultation period, including the acceptance of submissions, closed on the 30 May 2008.
(c) The total number of written submissions received was 54. 51 face to face consultation meetings with young people were held, attended by approximately 800-900 young people. In addition, 140 organisations participated in meetings with stakeholders held in all capital cities and Alice Springs.
(d) A detailed summary of the consultation outcomes, including written submissions, was published on thsource.gov.au website on 4 August 2008.
(e) The submissions were reviewed and analysed by officers from the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations as part of consultations and development of the AYF model.
(f) Yes, as well as reading the complete summary of consultation outcomes, the full reports from youth consultations and youth sector consultation meetings.

**Youth Policies and Programs**

*(Question No. 223)*

Mr Farmer asked the Minister for Youth, in writing, on 28 August 2008:

(1) Does she seek to:

(a) identify opportunities for better integration of policy and program settings across the Government; and

(b) monitor the impact of these on young people; if so, has she established formal processes to achieve this; if so, what are they.

(2) What formal processes have been implemented to ensure the Government’s investment in young people is evidence based, strategic, coherent and effective.

(3) What other departments has she consulted with on youth policy development.
Ms Kate Ellis—The answer to the honourable member’s question is as follows:

(1) (a) Yes, I am seeking to identify opportunities for better integration of policy and program settings across the Government.

(b) Yes, I am seeking to monitor the impact of these policies and programs on young people.

We have established the Australian Government Office for Youth (the Office) as a dedicated unit within the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) that reports to the Deputy Prime Minister, the Hon Julia Gillard MP and me.

The Office has commenced work on scoping, negotiating and establishing formal processes to monitor the impact of Australian Government policies and programs on young people.

(2) To ensure the Government’s investment in young people is evidence-based, strategic, coherent and effective, the Office will identify areas and interventions the evidence indicates will deliver the greatest results. Evidence and research will be sourced from various academic institutions and government agencies including, for example, the Australian Clearing House for Youth Studies, Australian Bureau of Statistics, and National Youth Affairs Research Scheme.

(3) Formal processes to support the work that the Office will undertake across the whole of government on youth issues and policy development will be determined on a case by case basis. The Office has already worked and will continue to work closely with those agencies with the greatest involvement in youth affairs for example the Department of Health and Ageing, the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, the Department of Immigration and Citizenship and the Department of Broadband, Communications and the Digital Economy.

YouthLinx Program
(Question No. 224)

Mr Farmer asked the Minister for Youth, in writing, on 28 August 2008:

In respect of the YouthLinx program:

(a) has she changed the amount of funding for the program in 2007-08 from the previous year; if so, by how much;

(b) for both 2007 and 2008, what is the difference between the estimates on the:

(i) amount of contact with young people through YouthLinx activities,

(ii) number of families engaged through YouthLinx family support activities, and

(iii) number of young people engaged through YouthLinx family support activities;

(c) did she or her department consult with YouthLinx providers before devising the estimates for 2008 on the number of contacts with young people through YouthLinx activities;

(d) which YouthLinx activities has she visited in the 42nd Parliament; and

(e) what support is she or her department providing YouthLinx providers to reach their expected increase in reported positive outcomes from contact with YouthLinx for family support activities.

Ms Kate Ellis—The answer to the honourable member’s question is as follows:

(a) YouthLinx funding in 2007-08 has not changed from the previous year.

(b) The difference from the 2007 estimates to 2007 Est Actuals and 2008 Estimates is as follows:

(i) 48,441 and 50,000

(ii) 3,359 and 3,500

(iii) 19,891 and 20,000

QUESTIONS IN WRITING
The increase was derived from the actual figures that were provided through an enhanced reporting process which commenced in 2007. The 2006/07 FaHCSIA Annual Report (the Department which previously administered the YouthLinx program) notes that their PBS Estimates were not reflective of the current environment and that the estimate would be revised in the future.

(c) State and territory offices were consulted in 2007 regarding the enhanced reporting process. As stated in (b), the increased estimates are more reflective of actual engagements.

(d) I am due to visit a range of YouthLinx services prior to the end of the year.

(e) As stated in (b), the increased estimates are more reflective of actual engagements. Therefore, operating under the same level of funding, the Department will continue to working closely with service providers to ensure the ongoing delivery of the YouthLinx Program.

Local Sporting Champions Program
(Question No. 225)

Mr Farmer asked the Minister for Sport, in writing, on 28 August 2008:
In respect of the Local Sporting Champions program: (a) how many (i) athletes, and (ii) teams will be assisted under this program; (b) will funding be provided to individuals or to their associations or clubs; (c) how will the funding be acquitted; (d) who has responsibility for approaching corporate sponsors for matched funding (Budget Paper 2 page 228); (e) what corporate sponsors have been approached to match this funding; (f) how much funding will be sought from each corporate sponsor; (g) what will the corporate sponsors receive in return for their sponsorship; and (h) will their sponsorship be tax deductible.

Ms Kate Ellis—The answer to the honourable member’s question is as follows:
The Local Sporting Champions Program is an initiative of the Australian Government designed to provide financial assistance to young sportsmen and women aged up to 18 years of age, participating in significant or specialist sporting competitions or events.
Grants of $500 will be available for successful individual applicants and up to $3,000 for successful team applicants. The grant is to support travel, accommodation, uniform and/or equipment in the nominated competition or event.
The launch of the Program is imminent and further details of the program will be released through that process.

Work Experience Placement Program
(Question No. 239)

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 Job 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 29 August 2008, 809 job seekers in Job Network participated in WEP. Of those job seekers, Job Network providers recorded that 137 accepted an offer of employment with their host organisation as a result of WEP.
Personal Support Program
(Question No. 244)

Dr Southcott asked the Minister for Employment Participation, in writing, on 28 August 2008:
In respect of the Personal Support Program: what is the average duration between referral and commencement of job seekers for (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:
In the year to 30 June 2008, the national average duration between referral to the caseload of a service provider and commencement in the Personal Support Programme (PSP) was 15.6 days. This does not include the time participants may spend on the waitlist prior to referral to a PSP provider. The requested information by priority level is not readily ascertainable, and to provide the requested answer would require an unreasonable diversion of departmental resources.

Productivity Places Program
(Question No. 247)

Dr Southcott asked the Minister for Employment Participation, in writing, on 28 August 2008:
In respect of phase 1 of the Productivity Places Program:
(a) how many of the 13,718 enrolments have withdrawn from their course;
(b) how many have withdrawn for employment opportunities;
(c) how many have completed their course;
(d) how many have failed their course;
(e) what are the measured employment outcomes for those who have completed their course; and
(f) what are the employment outcomes by age and gender for those enrolled in this phase.

Mr Brendan O’Connor—The answer to the honourable member’s question is as follows:
(a) 787 have voluntarily discontinued training.
(b) Some of these participants may have withdrawn because of employment opportunities, however employment outcomes are being examined as part of the program evaluation and precise data is not currently available.
(c) 4,388 participants successfully completed their training, with 7,934 participants still in training.
(d) 146 participants failed to participate satisfactorily.
(e) Comprehensive employment outcomes are being examined as part of the program evaluation and are not currently available.
(f) Comprehensive employment outcomes are being examined as part of the program evaluation and are not currently available.

MV Al Kuwait
(Question No. 251)

Mrs Moylan asked the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry, in writing, on 1 September 2008:
In respect of your response dated 30 May 2008 to my constituent about the investigation into samples taken from MV Al Kuwait: (a) what is the nature of the samples collected onboard MV Al Kuwait during its voyage from Portland, Victoria, in September 2002; (b) in total, how many samples were col-
lected; (c) how many, and what types of tests were performed on these samples; (d) what is the name of the laboratory that analysed the data; and (e) is a copy of the final report available to the public; if so, what is its title and from where is it available.

Mr Burke—The answer to the honourable member’s question is as follows:
There is no record in the Ministerial Workflow Management System of the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry of a response dated 30 May 2008 being prepared or sent to your constituent regarding samples taken on board the MV Al Kuwait in September 2002.

Sport Funding
(Question No. 252)

Mr Farmer asked the Minister for Sport, in writing, on 2 September 2008:
In respect of the 91 sport and recreation facilities to receive funding in the 2008 Budget: (a) under which Portfolio Budget item was this appropriation made; (b) for every project, what date was each organisation first notified it would receive funding; (c) how was each organisation notified; and (d) to date, how many organisations have (i) been notified they will receive funding, (ii) accepted a funding offer, (iii) received funding, and (iv) commenced the capital works.

Ms Kate Ellis—the answer to the honourable member’s question, as at 1 October 2008, is as follows:
(a) 2008-09 Budget Appropriation Bill 1, Outcome 15, Sport and Recreation Facilities – contribution to funding.
(b) The organisations were notified on the following dates:
19 June 2008:
Batemans Bay Rugby Club
Bunbury - Hands Oval
Champion Lakes Recreation Site
Clontarf South West Football Academy
Eurobodalla Netball Association
Mallacoota Pathways Project
Perth Football Club
Redlands United Soccer Club
26 June 2008:
Dolphins Football Club
7 July 2008:
Croydon Little Athletics Club
Geelong - feasibility study into regional soccer club
Glen Park Sporting Facilities
Quay Lights Project
Walker Park Gymnastics
8 July 2008:
Bathurst Rugby Union Club
Bathurst Rugby Union Cricket Club
Bathurst Soccer Club
Beauty Point Recreation Ground
Binnalong Park, Old Toongabbie
Blackstone Park Development
Bridport Walkway
Bungendore Swimming Pool Upgrade
Campese Oval and Taylors Park, Queanbeyan
Cataract Gorge Walkways
Cygnet Gymnasium
George Town Feasibility Study
Helensburgh Netball Club
Helensburgh Tennis Club
Hidden Valley Motorway
Jindabyne Sports Field Upgrade
Kingsborough Lions United Soccer Club
Lapstone Netball Complex
Lithgow Hockey
Low Head to George Town Recreational Trail
Mallabula Equipment for Rugby League Club
Morisset Police Citizens Youth Club Outreach Centre
Nabiac Pool
Oberon Recreation Facilities
Parramatta Cycle-ways Project
Port Huon Sports Centre
Rokeby Cricket Club
Scottsdale All Weather Green
Smithton Little Athletics Club
Somerset Soccer Facilities
Sportsground at Smiths Lake
Surf Lifesaving Education Program, NSW Central Coast
Tamar Rowing Club
Tea Gardens Skate Park
Tuncurry Foster Football Club
WIN Stadium and Entertainment Centre
Windsor Park Football Club
9 July 2008
Aspley Hornets Sports Club
Biloela - Rainbow St Sporting Fields
Bundaberg Cricket Association
Burpengary Jets Junior Football Club

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Caboolture Snakes Rugby League Club
Caboolture Sport Softball Grounds
Dennis Park, Tannum Sands
Forrestfield United Soccer Club
Gladstone Hockey Field
Gosnells Bowling Club
Les Hughes Sporting Complex - Pine Central Holy Spirit Rugby League Football Club
Les Hughes Sporting Complex - Police Citizens Youth Club
Macedonia Park
Moore Park Community Hall
Mt Gravatt Youth and Recreation Club
Palm Island Community Sports Field
Pine Rivers Lightning Baseball Club
Pine Rivers United Netball
Toohey Road Bikeway and Forest Guide
Townsville and District Junior League Club
Townsville City Netball Association
Women’s Sport Facilities – Stirling
10 July 2008
Adelaide North East Hockey Club
Blackwood Football Club
Gawler Soccer and Sports Club
Golden Grove Central Districts Baseball Club
Ingle Farm Amateur Soccer Club
Onkaparinga Rugby Club
Para Hills West Junior Soccer Club
Sturt Baseball Club
Tea Tree Gully Football Club
15 July 2008
Cook Park Soccer Grounds
Jamison Park Netball Courts
Penrith Waratah Rugby League Club
16 July 2008
Marion Sporting Club
22 July 2008
Penrith Valley Regional Sports Centre
19 August 2008
West Traralgon Sports Complex
Corio Bay Rowing Club
21 October 2008
Redcliffe Police Citizens Youth Club
Undated
South Barwon Football and Netball Club
(c) The organisations were notified in writing.
(d) (i) 91 projects. (ii) Two. (iii) Two. (iv) Two

**Professor Scott Holmes**  
*(Question No. 255)*

Mr Baldwin asked the Minister for Defence, in writing, on 2 September 2008:

In respect of the C-130 trip from the Gulf Country to Tarin Kowt (return) which Professor Scott Holmes attended: (a) what level of personal protection equipment was the professor required to wear while in Tarin Kowt; (b) what was the itinerary for the visit to Tarin Kowt; (c) what arrangement was in place in the event that the professor became injured or was killed during the visit to Tarin Kowt; and (d) what would the total sum of compensation or liability have been should the professor have been injured or killed during the visit to Tarin Kowt.

Mr Fitzgibbon—The answer to the honourable member’s question is as follows:

(a) Professor Scott Holmes was issued with a Kevlar vest, or ‘flak jacket’, and a Kevlar helmet for the visit. This is standard-issue equipment to any person travelling to Iraq or Afghanistan to protect against small arms fire and fragmentation injuries.

(b) Professor Holmes was a member of my travelling party. We made an unscheduled trip from Turkey, where I was an official guest at the Anzac Day ceremonies, through a country in the Gulf to Afghanistan before returning via a country in the Gulf to Australia.

(c) In the event of Professor Holmes being injured or killed on the trip, he would have been afforded the same treatment and care as any other member of my travelling party. The aeromedical evacuation system would have been activated to transfer Professor Holmes to the nearest medical facility and he would have been evacuated in accordance with current Australian Defence Force and International Security Assistance Force evacuation procedures.

(d) It is not possible to answer this hypothetical question, given that any issue of potential compensation or liability would have depended on the specific circumstances and details. It is not the case, however, that the Australian Government would necessarily have been liable had some incident occurred.

**Job Seekers**  
*(Question No. 280)*

Dr Southcott asked the Minister for Employment Participation, in writing, on 2 September 2008:

For each month from January to August 2008 (inclusive): how many job seekers have had a ‘Failure to Attend a Provider Appointment’ recorded against their name.

Mr Brendan O’Connor—The answer to the honorable member’s question is as follows:

The following number of job seekers had a ‘Failure to Attend a Provider Appointment’ recorded against their names for each month from January 2008 to August 2008:
Job Seekers

(Question No. 281)

Dr Southcott asked the Minister for Employment Participation, in writing, on 2 September 2008:

For each month from January to August 2008 (inclusive): how many job seekers have had a ‘Failure to Attend a Job Capacity Assessment’ recorded against their name.

Mr Brendan O’Connor—The answer to the honorable member’s question is as follows:

The following number of job seekers had a ‘Failure to Attend a Job Capacity Assessment’ recorded against their names for each month from January 2008 to August 2008:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Month</th>
<th>No of Jobseekers who failed to attend Job Capacity Assessment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>January 2008</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>February 2008</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 2008</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 2008</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 2008</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 2008</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July 2008</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>August 2008</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

** Data extracted from Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations Participation Reporting Data. A job seeker could appear in more than one month.

Job Seekers

(Question No. 282)

Dr Southcott asked the Minister for Employment Participation, in writing, on 2 September 2008:

For each month from January to August 2008 (inclusive): how many job seekers have failed to attend a Work for the Dole appointment.

Mr Brendan O’Connor—The answer to the honorable member’s question is as follows:

The following number of job seekers had a ‘Failed to attend a Work for the Dole appointment’ recorded against their names for each month from January 2008 to August 2008:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Month</th>
<th>No of Jobseekers who failed to attend a Work for the Dole Appointment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>January 2008</td>
<td>408</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>February 2008</td>
<td>434</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 2008</td>
<td>414</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Month No of Jobseekers who failed to attend a Work for the Dole Appointment **
April 2008 408
May 2008 388
June 2008 361
July 2008 377
August 2008 297
** Data extracted from Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations Participation Reporting Data. A job seeker could appear in more than one month.

Job Seekers
(Question No. 283)
Dr Southcott asked the Minister for Employment Participation, in writing, on 2 September 2008:
For each month from January to August 2008 (inclusive): how many job seekers have had a ‘Failure to enter into an Activity Agreement’ recorded against their name.

Mr Brendan O’Connor—The answer to the honorable member’s question is as follows:
The following number of job seekers had a ‘Failure to enter into an Activity Agreement’ recorded against their names for each month from January 2008 to August 2008:

Month No of Jobseekers who failed to enter into an Activity Agreement **
January 2008 205
February 2008 249
March 2008 209
April 2008 194
May 2008 160
June 2008 145
July 2008 147
August 2008 114
** Data extracted from Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations Participation Reporting Data.

Job Network
(Question No. 286)
Dr Southcott asked the Minister for Employment Participation, in writing, on 2 September 2008:
In respect of job seekers transferred to new Job Network providers: to date, how many were due to (a) job seeker dissatisfaction with their Job Network provider, (b) job seeker relocation, and (c) other reasons.

Mr Brendan O’Connor—The answer to the honourable member’s question is as follows:
Over the course of ESC3 there have been 1,696,713 job seeker transfers between sites. Of these 350 are recorded as being due to an irretrievable break down between jobseeker and Job Network Member. The remaining transfers are due to job seeker relocation. Job seeker relocations are either electronically generated by a job seekers lodging a change of address with Centrelink 1,124,440 or by agreement with the relevant Job Network provider prior to the job seeker relocating 571,923.
Better Connections Workshops
(Question No. 288)

Dr Southcott asked the Minister for Employment Participation, in writing, on 2 September 2008:

Will the Department continue to offer Better Connections Workshops for mature age job seekers; if not, will the Better Connections Workshops be replaced with an alternative program.

Mr Brendan O’Connor—The answer to the honourable member’s question is as follows:

Better Connections workshops were held over three years commencing on 1 July 2005 and concluding on 30 June 2008. There is no commitment to continue the Better Connections Workshops.

The objective of the workshops was to improve labour market effectiveness by addressing local labour supply and skill shortage issues, increasing labour market participation, particularly of disadvantaged target groups and reducing unemployment.

Better Connections Workshops were not targeted to any specific disadvantaged groups, the workshops aimed to improve the employment outcomes for all unemployed including disadvantaged groups, in the local labour market.

Better Connections Workshops were a necessary part of the existing employment services system to enhance links between employment service providers and local industry.

From 1 July 2009, employment service providers in the new employment services will be required to have better connections with other employment services agencies and other government services. Employer Brokers will also assist employment service providers to have stronger linkages with employers, employer groups and industry associations in areas of skills and labour growth. Therefore, there is no requirement to continue the Better Connections Workshops.

Job Network
(Question No. 291)

Dr Southcott asked the Minister for Employment Participation, in writing, on 2 September 2008:

(1) For every State and Territory, how many Indigenous job seekers are on the Job Network caseload.
(2) Of these job seekers, what proportion are classified as:
   (a) highly disadvantaged; and
   (b) Very Long Term Unemployed.
(3) How do these figures compare with the non-Indigenous Job Network caseload.

Mr Brendan O’Connor—The answer to the honourable member’s question is as follows:

The number of Indigenous job seekers on the Job Network active caseload, including the proportion of those job seekers that are classified as Highly Disadvantaged and Very Long Term Unemployed, in comparison with non-Indigenous job seekers is shown, by State and Territory, in the following table. Figures are as at the end of August 2008.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>Indigenous Australians</th>
<th>% Indigenous and Highly Disadvantaged</th>
<th>% Indigenous and Very Long Term Unemployed</th>
<th>% Non-Indigenous and Highly Disadvantaged</th>
<th>% Non-Indigenous and Very Long Term Unemployed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ACT</td>
<td>352</td>
<td>63.1%</td>
<td>35.8%</td>
<td>18.3%</td>
<td>29.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NSW</td>
<td>21,458</td>
<td>76.2%</td>
<td>40.8%</td>
<td>21.8%</td>
<td>31.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NT</td>
<td>14,554</td>
<td>95.5%</td>
<td>55.7%</td>
<td>25.4%</td>
<td>28.4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
State | Indigenous Australians | % Indigenous and Highly Disadvantaged | % Indigenous and Very Long Term Unemployed | % Non-Indigenous and Highly Disadvantaged | % Non-Indigenous and Very Long Term Unemployed
--- | --- | --- | --- | --- | ---
QLD | 19,991 | 71.6% | 37.2% | 15.4% | 27.5%
SA | 4,773 | 83.0% | 41.8% | 23.4% | 31.0%
TAS | 1,496 | 67.0% | 37.9% | 22.0% | 37.3%
VIC | 3,862 | 74.2% | 37.0% | 22.3% | 30.4%
WA | 12,848 | 82.4% | 39.8% | 20.5% | 24.9%
Total | 79,334 | 79.7% | 42.3% | 20.7% | 30.2%

Please note that the figures in these categories are not necessarily mutually exclusive. For example a job seeker may be both highly disadvantaged and very long term unemployed and appear in both counts.

**Community Development Employment Projects**

(Question No. 313)

Dr Southcott asked the Minister for Employment Participation, in writing, on 2 September 2008:

Up until the rollback of Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP), how many CDEP Placement Incentives had been paid for the previous financial year.

Mr Brendan O’Connor—The answer to the honourable member’s question is as follows:

There were 3704 placement incentives in the financial year 2006-2007. For the financial year 2007-08, there were 2426 placement incentives for the period 1 July to 31 December 2007.

**Naltrexone Clinic**

(Question No. 332)

Dr Jensen asked the Minister for Health and Ageing, in writing, on 16 September 2008:

Will the Government provide funding for Doctor George O’Neil’s Naltrexone clinic in Perth; if so, when and how much; if not, why not?

Ms Roxon—The answer to the honourable member’s question is as follows:

Naltrexone implants are unapproved and unregistered therapeutic goods. As part of the registration process, the Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA) will consider the safety, efficacy and quality of naltrexone implants. To inform this process the TGA will consider the results of a range of naltrexone implant trials, including a clinical trial and associated research into the use of naltrexone implants, manufactured by Dr O’Neil’s Go Medical Pty Ltd, carried out by the University of Western Australia. This trial was funded by the Australian Government through the National Health and Medical Research Council.

Should naltrexone implants be approved and registered as a therapeutic good, they will be eligible for prescription in Australia.

The Department of Health and Ageing separately provides funding of $618,180 to Dr O’Neil’s Fresh Start Recovery Program under the Non Government Organisation Treatment Grants Program (NGOTGP) for the period 2008/09 2010/11. The purpose of this funding is to employ a counsellor, occupational therapist, social worker and psychologist to support the recovery of clients post detoxification, by providing a range of services including professional counselling, education and training, and information and referral to other services that will offer support to the client’s re-entry into the community.
The Fresh Start Recovery Program also receives a further $160,000 under the Australian Government’s Amphetamine Type Stimulants (ATS) Grants Program to June 2009. This funding is for the development and implementation of staff training to better equip the program to meet the needs of ATS users. Neither of these grants provides funding for the use of naltrexone implants.

**Emissions Trading Scheme**

*(Question No. 341)*

Mr Ian Macfarlane asked the Minister for Trade, in writing, on 22 September 2008:

(1) Is he aware of the report in The *Australian* on 22 August 2008 by Lenore Taylor titled “Carbon plan ‘a company killer’”, outlining the view of the President of the Business Council of Australia that the proposed introduction of the Government’s Emissions Trading Scheme would have significant unintended consequences for business, such as sending Australian businesses offshore.

(2) What is he doing to ensure the proposed emissions trading policies of the Rudd Government are not responsible for exporting jobs from Australia’s trade-exposed industries.

Mr Crean—The answer to the honourable member’s question is as follows:

I am aware of the article by Lenore Taylor and the report prepared by Port Jackson Partners for the Business Council of Australia. The Government is committed to addressing the competitive challenges facing business, particularly emissions-intensive trade-exposed (EITE) industries, once the Carbon Pollution Reduction Scheme is introduced in 2010. We recognise the need to assess the impact of the introduction of a carbon price, particularly if it is ahead of effective international action. For this reason, the Government has signalled its willingness to provide transitional assistance to EITE industries that will be most affected by the introduction of a carbon constraint.

Following the release of the Carbon Pollution Reduction Scheme Green Paper in July 2008, my Cabinet colleagues and I have been holding discussions with business representatives on how the Scheme may impact on business profitability and trade. These consultations are still proceeding and are an essential part of the process leading to the release of a White Paper later this year.

**British Nuclear Tests in Australia**

*(Question No. 352)*

Mrs Bronwyn Bishop asked the Minister for Veterans’ Affairs, in writing, on 25 September 2008:

In respect of the Australian Participants in British Nuclear Test (Treatment) Act 2006:

(a) would he provide detailed information to explain why the drafters of this Act define the test area for Monte Bello Islands as being within 10 kilometres of Main Beach on Trimouille Island in the Monte Bello Archipelago; and

(b) does he feel that this distance is appropriate given the first nuclear test performed at Monte Bello Islands on 3 October 1952, Operation Hurricane, required all ships to be withdrawn to 10 miles at the time of the explosion.

Mr Griffin—The answer to the honourable member’s question is as follows:

(a) This definition was based on the Study of Cancer Incidence and Mortality in Australian Nuclear Test Participants concluded by the University of Sydney’s Scientific Advisory Committee.

The definition of a nuclear test participant and the radii contained in the description of a nuclear test area, were made with regard to the findings of the Australian Participants in British Nuclear Tests in Australia, Dosimetry and Mortality and Cancer Incidence Study 2006, The Report of the Royal Commission into British Nuclear Tests in Australia (The McClelland Report) and other related research.
In each of the locations (including that for the Monte Bello Islands) the radii definition is based on the distance between the explosion point and the furthest possible point of contamination. Maximum fallout contamination levels were recorded after each test, based on a number of different factors. The definitions of possibly contaminated radii that appear in the description of a nuclear test area are based on the most generous upper limit of these scientific boundaries. They are designed to include all personnel in the area who may have been exposed.

In the case of the Monte Bello Island tests, the evidence obtained and opinion provided by the Committee pointed to a 10 kilometre radius for maximum fallout contamination in the water environment of those particular tests.

(b) The requirement for naval ships to withdraw a minimum of 10 miles at the time of the actual test explosion is explained in the McLelland Report under 5.5 “Safety of Servicemen”.

The report states:

“It should be noted that the Hurricane Trial Order No. 161 specified that all ships were to be withdrawn a distance of at least 10 miles from Ground Zero at H-Hour … no Royal Australian Navy vessel was close enough to the blast to have been in any danger. Nor it seems were any of the ships in the path of the fallout from the blast. The ships were located at the time of firing so that the personnel on board were not in danger and that any exposure suffered must have occurred during the recovery and post firing phases of the operation.”

The decision to withdraw to the 10 mile limit was a precautionary measure, whereas the 10km radius is based on scientific analysis of the site following the explosion. The distinction must also be made that the minimum distance of 10 miles is equal to 16 kilometres. Therefore the ships involved in Operation Hurricane were required to pull back six kilometres further than the Committee concluded was the applicable radius for exposure risk.

Based on this evidence and the recommendations of the committee, the 10 kilometre radius is considered appropriate.

Job Seekers

(Question No. 354)

Mr Andrews asked the Minister for Employment Participation, in writing, on 25 September 2008:

In respect of his answer to a question without notice from Mr Marles (Hansard, 2 September 2008, page 17), where he provided statistics from 1999 and ‘now’ on the duration of unemployment of job seekers on unemployment income: for 1999 and ‘now’, (a) how many job seekers were on unemployment income, and (b) how many job seekers on unemployment income were very long term unemployed, and (c) what specific dates for 1999 and ‘now’ do his answers to (a) and (b) relate.

Mr Brendan O’Connor—The answer to the honourable member’s question is as follows:

(a) In 1999 there were 778 700 job seekers receiving unemployment benefits, of which 75 800 were very long term unemployed.

(b) In 2008 there were 464 600 job seekers receiving unemployment benefits, of which 106 800 were very long term unemployed.

(c) Data for 1999 are at 21 May 1999. Data for 2008 are at 16 May 2008.