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FORTY-THIRD PARLIAMENT
FIRST SESSION—SECOND 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—Hon. Peter Neil Slipper MP
Second Deputy Speaker—Hon. Bruce Craig Scott MP

Members of the Speaker’s Panel—Ms Anna Elizabeth Burke MP, Hon. Dick Godfrey Harry Adams MP, Ms Sharon Leah Bird MP, Mrs Yvette Maree D’Ath MP, Mr Steven Georginas MP, Ms Kirsten Fiona Livermore MP, Mr John Paul Murphy MP, Mr Peter Sid Sidebottom MP, Mr Kelvin John Thomson MP, Ms Maria Vamvakinou 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. Christopher Maurice Pyne MP
Deputy Manager of Opposition Business—Mr Luke Hartsuyker MP

Party Leaders and Whips

Australian Labor Party

Leader—Hon. Julia Eileen Gillard MP
Deputy Leader—Hon. Wayne Maxwell Swan MP
Chief Government Whip—Hon. Joel Andrew Fitzgibbon MP
Government Whips—Ms Jill Griffiths Hall MP and Mr Christopher Patrick Hayes MP

Liberal Party of Australia

Leader—Hon. Anthony John Abbott MP
Deputy Leader—Hon. Julie Isabel Bishop MP
Chief Opposition Whip—Hon. Warren George Entsch MP
Opposition Whips—Mr Patrick Damien Secker MP and Ms Nola Bethwyn Marino MP

The Nationals

Leader—Hon. Warren Errol Truss MP
Chief Whip—Mr Mark Maclean Coulton MP
Whip—Mr Paul Christopher Neville MP

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## Members of the House of Representatives

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<td>Wyatt, Kenneth George</td>
<td>Hasluck, WA</td>
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<td>Zappia, Tony</td>
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**PARTY ABBREVIATIONS**

ALP—Australian Labor Party; LP—Liberal Party of Australia; LNP—Liberal National Party;
CLP—Country Liberal Party; Nats—The Nationals; NWA—The Nationals WA; Ind—Independent;
AG—Australian Greens

## Heads of Parliamentary Departments

- Clerk of the Senate—R Laing
- Clerk of the House of Representatives—B Wright
- Secretary, Department of Parliamentary Services—A Thompson
GILLARD MINISTRY

Prime Minister
Hon. Julia Gillard MP

Deputy Prime Minister, Treasurer
Hon. Wayne Swan MP

Minister for Regional Australia, Regional Development and Local Government
Hon. Simon Crean MP

Minister for Tertiary Education, Skills, Jobs and Workplace Relations and Leader of the Government in the Senate
Senator Hon. Chris Evans

Minister for School Education, Early Childhood and Youth
Hon. Peter Garrett AM, MP

Minister for Broadband, Communications and the Digital Economy and Deputy Leader of the Government in the Senate
Senator Hon. Stephen Conroy

Minister for Foreign Affairs
Hon. Kevin Rudd MP

Minister for Trade
Hon. Dr Craig Emerson MP

Minister for Defence and Deputy Leader of the House
Hon. Stephen Smith MP

Minister for Immigration and Citizenship
Hon. Chris Bowen MP

Minister for Infrastructure and Transport and Leader of the House
Hon. Anthony Albanese 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 Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities
Hon. Tony Burke MP

Minister for Finance and Deregulation
Senator Hon. Penny Wong

Minister for Innovation, Industry, Science and Research
Senator Hon. Kim Carr

Attorney-General and Vice President of the Executive Council
Hon. Robert McClelland MP

Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry and Manager of Government Business in the Senate
Senator Hon. Joe Ludwig

Minister for Resources and Energy and Minister for Tourism
Hon. Martin Ferguson AM, MP

Minister for Climate Change and Energy Efficiency
Hon. Greg Combet AM, MP

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

Minister for the Arts                      Hon. Simon Crean MP
Minister for Social Inclusion            Hon. Tanya Plibersek MP
Minister for Privacy and Freedom of Information Hon. Brendan O’Connor MP
Minister for Sport                        Senator Hon. Mark Arbib
Special Minister of State for the Public Service and Integrity Hon. Gary Gray AO, MP
Assistant Treasurer and Minister for Financial Services and Superannuation Hon. Bill Shorten MP
Minister for Employment Participation and Childcare Hon. Kate Ellis MP
Minister for Indigenous Employment and Economic Development Senator Hon. Mark Arbib
Minister for Veterans’ Affairs and Minister for Defence Science and Personnel Hon. Warren Snowdon MP
Minister for Defence Materiel              Hon. Jason Clare MP
Minister for Indigenous Health             Hon. Warren Snowdon MP
Minister for Mental Health and Ageing     Hon. Mark Butler MP
Minister for the Status of Women          Hon. Kate Ellis MP
Minister for Social Housing and Homelessness Senator Hon. Mark Arbib
Special Minister of State                  Hon. Gary Gray AO, MP
Minister for Small Business               Senator Hon. Nick Sherry
Minister for Home Affairs and Minister for Justice Hon. Brendan O’Connor MP
Minister for Human Services                Hon. Tanya Plibersek MP
Cabinet Secretary                         Hon. Mark Dreyfus QC, MP
Parliamentary Secretary to the Prime Minister Senator Hon. Kate Lundy
Parliamentary Secretary to the Treasurer  Hon. David Bradbury MP
Parliamentary Secretary for School Education and Workplace Relations Senator Hon. Jacinta Collins
Minister Assisting the Prime Minister on Digital Productivity Senator Hon. Stephen Conroy
Parliamentary Secretary for Trade         Hon. Justine Elliot MP
Parliamentary Secretary for Pacific Island Affairs Hon. Richard Marles MP
Parliamentary Secretary for Defence       Senator Hon. David Feeney
Parliamentary Secretary for Immigration and Multicultural Affairs Senator Hon. Kate Lundy
Parliamentary Secretary for Infrastructure and Transport and Parliamentary Secretary for Health and Ageing Hon. Catherine King MP
Parliamentary Secretary for Disabilities and Carers Senator Hon. Jan McLucas
Parliamentary Secretary for Community Services Hon. Julie Collins MP
Parliamentary Secretary for Sustainability and Urban Water Senator Hon. Don Farrell
Minister Assisting on Deregulation and Public Sector Superannuation Senator Hon. Nick Sherry
Minister Assisting the Attorney-General on Queensland Floods Recovery Senator Hon. Joe Ludwig
Parliamentary Secretary for Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry Hon. Dr Mike Kelly AM, MP
Minister Assisting the Minister for Tourism Senator Hon. Nick Sherry
Parliamentary Secretary for Climate Change and Energy Efficiency Hon. Mark Dreyfus QC, MP
SHADOW MINISTRY

Leader of the Opposition
Hon. Tony Abbott MP

Deputy Leader of the Opposition and Shadow Minister for Foreign Affairs and Shadow Minister for Trade
Hon. Julie Bishop MP

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

Leader of the Opposition in the Senate and Shadow Minister for Employment and Workplace Relations
Senator Hon. Eric Abetz

Deputy Leader of the Opposition in the Senate and Shadow Attorney-General and Shadow Minister for the Arts
Senator Hon. George Brandis SC

Shadow Treasurer
Hon. Joe Hockey MP

Shadow Minister for Education, Apprenticeships and Training and Manager of Opposition Business in the House
Hon. Christopher Pyne MP

Shadow Minister for Indigenous Affairs and Deputy Leader of the Nationals
Senator Hon. Nigel Scullion

Shadow Minister for Regional Development, Local Government and Water and Leader of the Nationals in the Senate
Senator Barnaby Joyce

Shadow Minister for Finance, Deregulation and Debt Reduction and Chairman, Coalition Policy Development Committee
Hon. Andrew Robb AO, MP

Shadow Minister for Energy and Resources
Hon. Ian Macfarlane MP

Shadow Minister for Defence
Senator Hon. David Johnston

Shadow Minister for Communications and Broadband
Hon. Malcolm Turnbull MP

Shadow Minister for Health and Ageing
Hon. Peter Dutton MP

Shadow Minister for Families, Housing and Human Services
Hon. Kevin Andrews MP

Shadow Minister for Climate Action, Environment and Heritage
Hon. Greg Hunt MP

Shadow Minister for Productivity and Population and Shadow Minister for Immigration and Citizenship
Mr Scott Morrison MP

Shadow Minister for Innovation, Industry and Science
Mrs Sophie Mirabella MP

Shadow Minister for Agriculture and Food Security
Hon. John Cobb MP

Shadow Minister for Small Business, Competition Policy and Consumer Affairs
Hon. Bruce Billson MP

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

Shadow Minister for Employment Participation
Hon. Sussan Ley MP

Shadow Minister for Justice, Customs and Border Protection
Mr Michael Keenan MP

Shadow Assistant Treasurer and Shadow Minister for Financial Services and Superannuation
Senator Mathias Cormann

Shadow Minister for Childcare and Early Childhood Learning
Hon. Sussan Ley MP

Shadow Minister for Universities and Research
Senator Hon. Brett Mason

Shadow Minister for Youth and Sport and Deputy Manager of Opposition Business in the House
Mr Luke Hartsuyker MP

Shadow Minister for Indigenous Development and Employment
Senator Marise Payne

Shadow Minister for Regional Development
Hon. Bob Baldwin MP

Shadow Special Minister of State
Hon. Bronwyn Bishop MP

Shadow Minister for COAG
Senator Marise Payne

Shadow Minister for Tourism
Hon. Bob Baldwin MP

Shadow Minister for Defence Science, Technology and Personnel
Mr Stuart Robert MP

Shadow Minister for Veterans’ Affairs and Shadow Minister Assisting the Leader of the Opposition on the Centenary of ANZAC
Senator Hon. Michael Ronaldson

Shadow Minister for Regional Communications
Mr Luke Hartsuyker MP

Shadow Minister for Ageing and Shadow Minister for Mental Health
Senator Concetta Fierravanti-Wells

Shadow Minister for Seniors
Hon. Bronwyn Bishop MP

Shadow Minister for Disabilities, Carers and the Voluntary Sector and Manager of Opposition Business in the Senate
Senator Mitch Fifield

Shadow Minister for Housing
Senator Marise Payne

Chairman, Scrutiny of Government Waste Committee
Mr Jamie Briggs MP

Shadow Cabinet Secretary
Hon. Philip Ruddock MP

Shadow Parliamentary Secretary Assisting the Leader of the Opposition
Senator Cory Bernardi

Shadow Parliamentary Secretary for International Development Assistance
Hon. Teresa Gambaro MP

Shadow Parliamentary Secretary for Roads and Regional Transport
Mr Darren Chester MP

Shadow Parliamentary Secretary to the Shadow Attorney-General
Senator Gary Humphries

Shadow Parliamentary Secretary for Tax Reform and Deputy Chairman, Coalition Policy Development Committee
Hon. Tony Smith MP

Shadow Parliamentary Secretary for Regional Education
Senator Fiona Nash

Shadow Parliamentary Secretary for Northern and Remote Australia
Senator Hon. Ian Macdonald

Shadow Parliamentary Secretary for Local Government
Mr Don Randall MP

Shadow Parliamentary Secretary for the Murray-Darling Basin
Senator Simon Birmingham

Shadow Parliamentary Secretary for Defence Materiel
Senator Gary Humphries

Shadow Parliamentary Secretary for the Defence Force and Defence Support
Senator Hon. Ian Macdonald
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<td>Dr Andrew Southcott MP</td>
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<tr>
<td>Shadow Parliamentary Secretary for Regional Health Services and Indigenous Health</td>
<td>Mr Andrew Laming MP</td>
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<tr>
<td>Shadow Parliamentary Secretary for Supporting Families</td>
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<td>Shadow Parliamentary Secretary for the Status of Women</td>
<td>Senator Michaelia Cash</td>
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Monday, 21 March 2011

The ACTING SPEAKER (Hon. Peter Slipper) took the chair at 10.00 am, made an acknowledgement of country and read prayers.

PETITIONS

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

Road to Recovery Scheme
To the Honourable the Speaker and Members of the House of Representatives
This petition of:
Residents of Tasmania in particular Sorell, Tasman, Glamorgan, Spring Bay Municipalities
Draws to the attention of the House that:
The road infrastructure in the Sorell municipality is totally inadequate and by 2015 the situation will be unsustainable and the only effective solution will be the By-Pass/Diversion and that Sorell is on the direct route to the World Heritage Port Arthur Site and gate way to the East Coast of Tasmania.
We therefore ask the House to:
Fund the ‘Sorell By-Pass/Arthur Highway diversion under the ‘Road to Recovery Scheme’ or under ‘Heritage Funding’ or any other associated funding within 5 years’.

by Mr Murphy (from 590 citizens)
Petition received.

Responses

Mr Murphy—Ministerial responses to petitions previously presented to the House have been received as follows:

Asbestos

Australia has taken active steps to prevent the use of asbestos in the workplace. Asbestos carries a terrible human toll in Australia and the Government is committed to doing what it can to ensure that asbestos management arrangements in Australia minimise the risk of avoidable exposure.

As noted in the petition, Australia has prohibited the use of all forms of asbestos except for a small number of permitted circumstances, such as bona fide research. The prohibition on the use of asbestos in Australia is supplemented by the Customs (Prohibited Imports) Regulations 1956 and the Customs (Prohibited Exports) Regulations 1958 which respectively prohibit the importation and exportation of products containing asbestos.

I have recently announced the formation of the Asbestos Management Review. This review will look at current activities in the area of asbestos management and research and make practical recommendations for the development of a national strategic plan to improve asbestos awareness, management and removal.

As part of the harmonisation of occupational health and safety legislation, model asbestos regulations are being developed which will provide, for the first time, a uniform framework for the minimisation of exposure, the removal of asbestos, and the management of asbestos materials in workplaces.

I have also recently announced the Australian Government’s intention to ratify several International Labour Organisation treaties, including the Asbestos Convention, 1986 (Convention 162). In ratifying this convention, Australia will ensure that its national laws prescribe the measures to be taken for the prevention and control of, and protection of workers against health hazards due to occupational exposure to asbestos.

In my view, there is merit in the idea of an international ban on trade in asbestos. I am advised, however, that there remains an active global trade in asbestos, and this increases the difficulty of achieving international agreement on this issue.

The Government will, however, continue to support efforts to limit international trade in asbestos, and relevant Ministers are considering whether there are any additional steps that Australia might
take to achieve an international ban on trade in asbestos.

In relation to the teaching of business ethics, Australian universities are autonomous, self-accrediting institutions. They have responsibility for determining the nature of their course offerings within broad profiles agreed with the Government and in light of student and employer demand. Universities are also responsible for course curriculum and may consult with industry and professional bodies to inform their decisions on curriculum content and design. While the Government provides substantial funding to universities, it respects the autonomy of institutions and generally does not seek to intervene in these matters. I note, however, that many universities devote resources to ethics related matters.

I have forwarded a copy of this letter to the Hon Dr Craig Emerson MP, Minister for Trade; the Hon Kevin Rudd MP, Minister for Foreign Affairs; the Hon Tony Burke MP, Minister for Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities; and the Hon Nicola Roxon MP, Minister for Health and Ageing; as their portfolios may also have an interest in this issue.

I trust the information provided is helpful.

from the Minister for Tertiary Education, Skills, Jobs and Workplace Relations, Senator Evans

Statement

Mr MURPHY (Reid) (10.01 am)—Mr Speaker, I am pleased to have the opportunity to today to speak in a little more detail about matters relating to petitioning. Over the last few months at this time on a Monday I’ve discussed the role of the House Petitions Committee in processing petitions and facilitating responses by Ministers. I have also discussed the formal aspects of petitions that are required under the rules of the House and the role of technology in petitioning.

Today I will refer briefly to the petition and to the Ministerial response to a previous petition that I have just presented. I will do this to demonstrate something that those who are interested in engaging with the House and with government will find heartening.

The petition refers to inadequate road infrastructure in the Sorrell municipality in Tasmania and asks for the House to facilitate funding for a diversion under Commonwealth schemes. It is signed by 590 people. Now that the petition has been presented, I will be writing to the Minister for Infrastructure and Transport, on behalf of the Petitions Committee, and asking the Minister to respond to us regarding the matters raised in the petition.

I don’t know what the Minister’s response to this petition will be. However, I do know that the Minister will make a response, that it will be presented to the House, passed on to the principal petitioner, and published on the Committee’s website. Of course the Committee would hope that a Minister will be able to respond positively in some way to the various requests made in petitions but, realistically we know that is not very likely.

I will now refer to the Ministerial response that I presented this morning. It is from the Minister for Tertiary Education, Skills, Jobs and Workplace Relations and it refers to a petition that was presented last year. That petition called for the prevention of mining and export of asbestos and for promotion of the teaching of business ethics.

I am not sure what the principal petitioner will think of this response. But I am sure that the response sets out what, in the Minister’s views, are the relevant activities of government on these matters and the constraints on those activities by government. The Minister also notes that he is passing on his letter to a number of other Ministers who may have an interest in the issues raised.

Of course, the petition and the response I presented are each unique, addressing different matters, and presenting different information. What they demonstrate is that the
House and the Australian people are committed to the historic principles of petitioning and that we have also moved ahead in terms of engaging with people who bring their concerns and interests directly to the House.

When we think of the history of petitions, Mr Speaker, we need to go back to the traditions of the United Kingdom parliament and our inheritance from there of the right to petition the parliament. That traditional right, as far as Westminster is concerned, can be traced back to the 13th century when people had the right to petition the King and later the House of Commons to seek redress of their grievances.

So far as this House is concerned, those rights were inherited by us in 1901. I think they took on a new lease on life in 2007 when the House Procedure Committee presented its report on petitioning and began a process that resulted in new arrangements for petitioning and the creation of the Petitions Committee. The Procedure Committee considered that it was bound by six principles of petitioning and it is worth reminding ourselves of them.

The principles that Committee took on board were that:

1. Petitions belong to the public. Underlying this belief is the capacity of members of the public to communicate directly with the House. The Committee knew that petitions can increase a sense of unity and purpose within a community and that is demonstrated in a very public way when the petition is presented to the House.

2. Petitions sent to the House should be addressed by the House. The Procedure Committee considered that the establishment of a Committee devoted to petitions was the most effective way for the House to operate in relation to petitions. By this the Committee did not mean that petitions would be debated and considered by the House. Rather, those views would be aired through the gathering of petitions, and perhaps strengthened. And the House and government would be informed of them.

3. Governments should respond. The Procedure Committee wanted to encourage government Ministers and their departments to respond to the issues that are raised in petitions and to do that in a timely way. I don’t think for a minute that the Committee expected that Ministers would frequently agree to what petitioners sought. But what it was aiming for, I believe, was to increase the effectiveness and democratic potential of petitions, by enabling issues to be aired, brought directly to the House, and responded to directly by government. I can say that the Petitions Committee now refers most petitions to Ministers –unless they are covering matters that have already been responded to. I can also say that Ministers have been very diligent in terms of responding to the Petitions Committee’s requests for responses to petitions.

4. The Procedure Committee’s fourth principle was that involvement by Members should be enhanced and streamlined. The Committee recognised the role of Members in raising and debating the issues the petitions address. In the last Parliament the standing orders were changed to make it easier for all Members to present petitions to the House.

5. The Procedure Committee wanted the rules relating to petitions to be relevant and fair, to encourage a process that still emphasised the significance of petitions but that was easier for petitioners. Again, the standing orders were changed in the last Parliament to streamline the petitions process and, from the feedback we have received, I’d say those changes have been quite successful although we are always monitoring the sys-
tem and seeing where improvements might be made.

6. Finally, the Procedure Committee wanted more effective use of information technologies. It wanted the process to be brought up to date with modern technologies.

Mr Speaker, I’d be interested to know what those Procedure Committee members think of the progress made in the last 3 years or so. I hope they would agree that many of the principles they adopted have been embedded in the new arrangements for petitioning. I think that is demonstrated particularly in the responsiveness of Ministers, and in the establishment and ongoing operations of the Petitions Committee. Thank you.

Petitions received.

Statement

Mr MURPHY (Reid) (10.02 am)—I am very pleased this morning to have the opportunity to speak in a little more detail about matters relating to petitioning. Over the last few months at this time on a Monday I have discussed the role of the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Petitions in processing petitions and facilitating responses by ministers. I have also discussed the formal aspects of petitions that are required under the rules of the House and the role of technology in petitioning.

Today I will refer briefly to the petition and to the ministerial response to a previous petition that I have just presented. I will do this to demonstrate something that those who are interested in engaging with the House and with the government will find heartening. The petition refers to inadequate road infrastructure in the Sorell municipality in Tasmania and asks for the House to facilitate funding for a diversion under Commonwealth schemes. It is signed by 590 people. Now that petition has been presented I will be writing to the Minister for Infrastructure and Transport on behalf of the Petitions Committee and asking the minister to respond to us regarding the matters raised in this petition. I do not know what the minister’s response to this petition will be. However, I do know that the minister will make a response, that it will be presented to the House, passed on to the principal petitioner and published on the committee’s website. Of course, the committee would hope that a minister will be able to respond positively in some way to the various requests made in petitions but, realistically, we know that is not very likely.

I now refer to the ministerial response that I presented this morning. It is from the Minister for Tertiary Education, Skills, Jobs and Workplace Relations. It refers to a petition that was presented last year. That petition called for the prevention of mining and export of asbestos and for the promotion of the teaching of business ethics. I am not sure what the principal petitioner will think of this response, but I am sure that the response sets out what in the minister’s views are the relevant activities of government on these matters and the constraints on those activities by government. The minister also notes that he is passing on his letter to a number of other ministers who may have an interest in the issues raised.

Of course the petition and the response I presented are unique, addressing different matters and presenting different information. What they demonstrate is that the House and the Australian people are committed to the historic principles of petitioning and that we have also moved ahead in terms of engaging with people who bring their concerns and interests directly to this House.

When we think of the history of petitions we need to go back to the traditions of the United Kingdom parliament and our inheritance from there of the right to petition the parliament. That traditional right, as far as
Westminster is concerned, can be traced back to the 13th century when people had the right to petition the King and later the House of Commons to seek redress of their grievances. So far as this House is concerned those rights were inherited by us in 1901. I think they took on a new lease of life in 2007 when the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Procedure presented its report on petitioning and began a process that resulted in new arrangements for petitioning and the creation of the Petitions Committee. The Procedure Committee considered that it was bound by six principles of petitioning and it is worth reminding ourselves of them.

The principles the committee took on board were that, firstly, petitions belong to the public. Underlying this is the belief that the capacity of members of the public to communicate directly with the House is important to our Australian democracy. The committee knew that petitions can increase a sense of unity and purpose within the community and that is demonstrated in a very public way when the petition is presented to this House.

Secondly, petitions sent to the House should be addressed by the House. The Procedure Committee considered that the establishment of a committee devoted to petitions was the most effective way for the House to operate in relation to petitions. By this the committee did not mean that petitions would be debated and considered by the House. Rather, those views would be aired through the gathering of petitions, and perhaps strengthened, and the House and government would be informed of them.

Thirdly, governments should respond. The Procedure Committee wanted to encourage government ministers and their departments to respond to the issues that are raised in petitions and to do that in a timely way. I do not think for a minute that the committee expected that members would frequently agree to what petitioners sought. But what it was aiming for, I believe, was to increase the effectiveness and democratic potential of petitions by enabling issues to be aired, brought directly to the House and responded to directly by government. I can say that the Petitions Committee now refers most petitions to ministers unless they are covering matters that have already been responded to. I can also say that ministers have been very diligent in responding to the Petitions Committee’s requests for responses to petitions.

The Procedure Committee’s fourth principle was that involvement by members should be enhanced and streamlined. The committee recognised the role of members in raising and debating the issues the petitions addressed. In the last parliament the standing orders were changed, as you know, to make it easier for all members to present petitions to the House.

Fifthly, the Procedure Committee wanted the rules relating to petitions to be relevant and fair, to encourage a process that still emphasised the significance of petitions but that was easier for petitioners. Again, as you know, Mr Deputy Speaker, the standing orders were changed in the last parliament to streamline the petitions process. From the feedback we have received, I would say that those changes have been quite successful—although we are always monitoring the system and seeing where the improvements might be made.

Sixthly and finally, the Procedure Committee wanted more effective use of information technologies. It wanted the process to be brought up to date with modern technologies. I would be very interested to know what the Procedure Committee members think of the progress that we have made in the last three years or so. I hope that the members of the Procedure Committee would agree that many
of the principles they adopted have been embedded in the new arrangements for petitioning. I think that is demonstrated, in particular, by the responsiveness of ministers and the establishment and ongoing operations of the Petitions Committee.

MAIN COMMITTEE

Private Members’ Motions

The ACTING SPEAKER—In accordance with standing order 41(g), and the determinations of the Selection Committee, I present copies of the terms of motions for which notice has been given by the Members for Leichhardt, Page, Fowler, Greenway, Calare, Hindmarsh, Werriwa and Fremantle. These matters will be considered in the Main Committee later today.

COMMITTEES

Social Policy and Legal Affairs Committee

Statement

Mrs MOYLAN (Pearce) (10.11 am)—On 14 December 2010 the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Social Policy and Legal Affairs resolved to conduct an inquiry into the regulation of billboard and outdoor advertising. Earlier this year the committee resolved to widen the scope of this inquiry to consider not just billboards and large outdoor signage but all types of advertising that can be viewed from public spaces and to which the public cannot control their exposure. This includes advertising in train stations and bus shelters, on and in buses and taxis, in shopfronts and windows and even on blimps.

Advertising is currently self-regulated by the advertising industry. The committee has held private and public meetings with the Advertising Standards Bureau to examine its self-regulatory system. The committee has also met with the national Classification Board and the Australian Consumer and Competition Commission for a comparison of regulatory bodies that fulfill a similar overseeing role in protecting the public from such advertising.

The committee is holding public hearings in Canberra on Thursday, in Sydney on Friday and in Melbourne on 4 April. Witnesses at the hearings will discuss the efficacy of the current self-regulatory system, the process of making complaints, the impact of sexualised images on children, the role of alcohol advertising in underage and unhealthy alcohol consumption and the domination of public space by images that objectify and degrade women. A common observation is that some images in advertising would be considered a form of sexual harassment if they were displayed in the workplace, yet they are perfectly legal in public spaces.

To date, the committee has received 44 submissions to the inquiry. Many submissions reflect the level of community concern about images in the public arena that are detrimental to children or reinforce negative stereotypes. Some submitters have suggested that the application of prevailing community standards is not the most appropriate for outdoor advertising due to that kind of advertising’s unavoidable nature. The concern about some of this material is that people simply have no choice as to whether they view it or not. The material is not always in places that you would expect it to be. There have been reports of this material sometimes being near schools and other places where young people congregate. There is no opportunity to switch the off switch for many people who do not wish to view this material. Children are confronted by larger-than-life images in public places—as I said, sometimes in those places that are unavoidable for large numbers of young people.

I know that many people in the community welcome this inquiry, and they will be
interested to see whether there is scope, when advertising is found to be offensive, to improve the response time to remove the offending material—which clearly, in many cases, breaches the advertising standards. I would like to acknowledge the excellent work of members of this committee, particularly the member for Moreton, who is the chair of the committee, for bringing this inquiry to the House. I am sure that, as I said, many people in the community will welcome the opportunity to present before the committee.

Standing Committee on Infrastructure and Communications

Statements by Members

Ms BIRD (Cunningham) (10.15 am)—On behalf of the Standing Committee on Infrastructure and Communications I wish to make a statement updating the House on the committee’s current work and inquiries. In my capacity of Chair of the House Standing Committee on Infrastructure and Communications, and in accordance with standing order 39(a), it is my intention to provide the House with a further update on the current activities of the committee. Members may recall that, on 28 February, I provided some information to the House on the committee’s work, in particular, at that point in time, the committee’s inquiry into the role and potential of the National Broadband Network. I will come back and give some further update on that particular inquiry shortly.

However, I also want to provide to the House some information on further inquiries that the committee is currently working on. On 3 March, after a request from Minister Albanese, the committee agreed to inquire into the ratio of cabin crews to passengers on Australian aircraft. The minister invited the committee to report on this matter by the middle of the year. By way of background, the Civil Aviation Safety Authority is currently considering a regulatory proposal that addresses the assignment of cabin crew members to aircraft that require carriage of cabin crew. Under the current arrangements, operators of Australian domestic aircraft carrying more than 15 but not more than 216 passengers are required to carry at least one cabin crew member for each 36 passengers or part thereof—that is, a ratio of one to 36.

Since 2006 the Civil Aviation Safety Authority has permitted a number of Australian operators to operate certain aircraft with a ratio of one cabin crew member to a maximum of 50 passenger seats. CASA has proposed to implement the one-to-50 cabin crew to passenger seat ratio for aircraft configurations of between 20 and 216 passengers, with the gaining of approval conditional upon an operator having in place a CASA approved safety management risk plan. The committee has therefore been asked by the minister to inquire into five aspects of this and to report to the minister: firstly, the current aviation safety regulatory system for aircraft operators in relation to the application of the cabin crew to passenger ratio, including current exemption provisions; secondly, the role of cabin crew in managing both passenger safety and security; thirdly, the factors that determine the cabin crew to passenger ratio; fourthly, domestic and international practice in respect of cabin crew to passenger ratios; and, finally, measures to enhance aviation safety that may be considered in future requirements on aircraft operators for a safety risk management plan covering the cabin crew to passenger ratio. The committee has invited submissions and will be arranging hearings in coming weeks and months. As is our usual practice, all information will be posted to the committee’s website as it becomes available.

Secondly, we have a standing reference on smart infrastructure. Members may recall that the previous committee, during the 42nd
parliament, commenced an inquiry into smart infrastructure. As part of this, a major conference was held in Parliament House, gathering delegates from around Australia for a broad and productive discussion. The inquiry has now been re-referred to the committee and we are keeping a watching brief on issues relating to smart infrastructure. We have also stayed in contact with people who were involved and engaged in the inquiry during the previous parliament, and we are looking forward to being able to devote more time to this inquiry’s activities when the current two inquiries are in their final stages.

Finally, to update the House on the National Broadband Network inquiry which was referred in November last year, to date we have received 210 submissions. Public hearings have been held in Canberra on Friday, 4 March; Launceston on Thursday, 10 March; Hobart on Friday, 11 March; Ballarat on Thursday, 17 March; and Melbourne on Friday, 18 March. In coming weeks we will also head to Brisbane, Townsville, Adelaide, Victor Harbor, Wollongong, Sydney, Geraldton and Perth. The committee has been pleased to date to hear from a wide range of community groups, government departments and small businesses during the process of this inquiry, and we look forward to both the additional hearings and the inspections in the coming weeks.

Mr FLETCHER (Bradfield) (10.20 am)—I am pleased to rise to speak briefly about the House Standing Committee on Infrastructure and Communications, following the remarks of the chair. I would like to speak in a little more detail about the inquiry which is presently underway in relation to the National Broadband Network. The terms of reference for this inquiry essentially ask us to investigate the things that the National Broadband Network might facilitate, under such headings as ‘education’, ‘health’, ‘economic development’ and so on. There is also a term slipped in at the very end which asks the question: what is the optimal technology for the National Broadband Network? This is clearly an important question. An equally important question to ask, when you are considering the benefits that might follow from the construction of a network and when you are considering the things that the network is going to be assisting you to deliver, is: what is the cost of the network, and what is the cost of the particular mode of construction that has been chosen? Unfortunately, this has not been included in the terms of reference. In my view that is a missed opportunity as a committee of the parliament is looking at the National Broadband Network. It is a missed opportunity to ask: what is the cost of this network we are building, and how is that cost to be weighed up against the benefits?

The principle of using cost-benefit analysis to determine which areas the Commonwealth ought to invest in, where the finite funds of taxpayers ought to be allocated, is an important principle. It is a principle to which the Rudd-Gillard government is apparently committed. Their stated principle for Infrastructure Australia is that it will use the methodology of cost-benefit analyses. So it is unfortunate indeed that this government has explicitly failed to conduct a cost-benefit analysis for what we are constantly told is the largest infrastructure project in Australia’s history and it is a matter for particular regret that this committee, which would have offered an opportunity to pursue this approach, has not been given a term of reference to conduct a cost-benefit analysis.

Nevertheless, there are important questions this committee can ask. As people from all walks of life and from many different backgrounds come before the committee and talk about broadband and the uses to which they propose to put it, this committee offers an important opportunity to ask: what pre-
cisely are the applications which are to be delivered over this network and what precisely is the speed that is required? That is a very important public policy question because when you are thinking about building a telecommunications network you have many choices. You can build a fibre-to-the-home network, as this government proposes, which costs approximately $5,000 per premise. That is how we end up with the overall taxpayer commitment approaching $50 billion, which is now contemplated. There are alternative and less expensive approaches; for example, this government’s previous policy—until it was abruptly changed in April 2009—was to build a fibre-to-the-node network which would have involved public expenditure of vastly less, $4.7 billion.

A fibre-to-the-node network can deliver speeds reliably of 30 to 40 megabits per second depending upon exactly which design configuration you propose. The previous government policy was to achieve a uniform 12-megabits per second with fibre-to-the-node. You might well say that was an appropriate balance. This is a question which ought to properly be tested by weighing up the cost versus the benefits. We have heard very interesting evidence about, for example, distance education and distance learning applications. Those are obviously important and beneficial but the important question is this: do you need 100-megabits per second? Could you achieve very substantial benefits by having ubiquitous but lower speeds of, for example, 12-megabits per second?

Let there be no doubt that we on this side of the House are strongly committed to the notion of upgrading Australia’s broadband infrastructure. We are also strongly committed to the notion of reforming the telecommunications sector to deal with the problem of poor competition in the fixed line sector due to Telstra’s historical vertical integration. But we do think there are exceptionally important questions to be asked, which are: what is the most efficient and cost-effective way to do this and what is the proper role for the private sector as balanced with the public sector? It is unfortunate that those issues can not be fully canvassed through this inquiry.

(Time expired)

HOME INSULATION PROGRAM
(COMMISSION OF INQUIRY)
BILL 2011
First Reading

Bill and explanatory memorandum presented by Mr Hunt.

Mr HUNT (Flinders) (10.25 am)—In rising to address the Home Insulation Program (Commission of Inquiry) Bill 2011 I do so with a great deal of sadness. This bill should never have been necessary. This program should never have been allowed to have commenced. This program should never have continued. This program should never have been allowed to have wrought the damage which it did not only to homes and to businesses but also, above all else, to Australian families. This program should never have been allowed to have gone untested for so long and to have been effectively whitewashed to this point in time.

Let me begin with the problems inherent in the Home Insulation Program. These problems were identified right from the outset, from February 2009. The problems were identified by industry as the risk of fraud, the risk of fire and the risk of fatalities. All warnings needed were delivered. All warnings needed were ignored. All warnings made, sadly, it came to pass, had a human reality. The Home Insulation Program is a source of disgrace for this government. On its own it should have been enough to have seen this government lose office. In every possible respect of due diligence, in every facet of ministerial and governmental accountability there was failure. Everything
which came to pass was foreseen, forewarned and recognised in advance. And everything which came to pass was conveniently ignored by the government.

Let me continue with the destruction that this program brought. We know that there were approximately 200 house fires as a consequence of an Australian government program. I have no knowledge in the treasury of my own memory bank of anything which compares to this as an example failure of governmental policy in Australian history. Beyond that though there were over 1,500 potentially deadly electrified roofs and approximately 60,000 houses which were insulated with foil and which had to have that foil either ripped out or subject to electrical interceptors. Beyond that, approximately 200,000 houses had dangerous or dodgy insulation installed in some form or another. One and a half billion dollars were effectively wasted on the Home Insulation Program and the best part of another billion dollars has been allocated to clean up the program—$2½ billion dollars of waste.

But all of this pales into insignificance by comparison with the human loss of the four young lives lost in association with this program. Each of these losses of life was subject to warning in advance. Master Electricians Australia made the warnings. The National Electrical and Communications Association of Australia made the warnings. The state and territory authorities warned of fires and fatalities months prior to the first of these tragedies. And the government ploughed ahead. The essential group of four key coordinating ministers, one of whom is now the Prime Minister of Australia, another one of whom is now the Deputy Prime Minister of Australia, another one of whom has been promoted to education minister—these critical ministers plus Minister Garrett ploughed on in the face of overwhelming evidence. These tragic and irresponsible decisions have never been brought to account. Those most responsible for the worst decisions in Australian policy history have been promoted. That is the culture of responsibility which exists under the current government.

In those circumstances and against that background it is time for a full judicial commission of the inquiry into the Home Insulation Program, its failures of design, its failures of delivery and its failures of accountability. This bill, the Home Insulation Program (Commission of Inquiry) Bill 2011, is designed to go where no inquiry has been allowed to date. It begins at the top: what were the warnings and advice on the Home Insulation Program received by ministers from industry, from Commonwealth agencies, from state and territory agencies, from unions, from members of the public? What were the decisions by a minister to reject such warnings or advice? What did the Home Insulation Program require of Commonwealth officers and agencies, state and territory governments and agencies, and contractors? But, above all else, the Auditor-General was prevented, in terms of his remit, from examining the decisions, the processes and the nature of conduct by ministers and ministers’ officers. That was conveniently placed beyond the reach of the Auditor-General of Australia, and it is a matter of profound shame not just for this government, not just for the Labor Party, but particularly for the four critical ministers engaged plus the then minister for the environment and the now promoted minister for education.

It cannot be that in a system of governance which preaches responsibility, transparency and sunlight that ministers of the Crown responsible for this program are allowed to escape without any investigation. It is a dark stain on public policy and transparency in Australia. Against that background, this bill seeks to institute a judicial inquiry which asks for nothing more than the truth
and the facts to be made available to the public as to how a program with such catastrophic human consequences, with such tragic material consequences and with such extraordinary financial consequences could be conceived in the first place, could be delivered in the face of warnings and could be continued in the face of damning evidence.

The federal opposition first called for an Auditor-General’s inquiry on 27 and 28 August 2009. The program continued—in the face of such manifest public evidence; in the face of the calls from the federal opposition—through September and October and November and December 2009, all the while with the now Prime Minister saying: ‘It’ll be fine. It’s all okay. We’ve got it in hand.’ It then continued through January and February 2010, until it was finally suspended after the fourth of the human tragedies. This process is unacceptable, extraordinary and an indictment upon the governing culture present in the current Australian government. How can it be that after the first tragedy the program was not stopped, after the second tragedy the program was not stopped, after the third tragedy the program was not stopped, and it took until the public outcry after the fourth tragedy before this program was stopped?

This is a dark stain upon this government, upon the party responsible, upon the ministers responsible. I also say to this parliament, because we in the opposition tried but obviously we were not successful, that I apologise to all those families involved on behalf of the federal opposition. Even though we carried the torch we were not successful in going further. I wear that consequence every day, that we were not able to execute pressure on the government. So this bill should be passed and ministers should be held accountable. I turn to the Independents in this chamber: I respect your position. This bill is about transparency in terms of the greatest failure this parliament has seen for many decades. I commend the bill to the House.

Bill read a first time.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Hon. BC Scott)—In accordance with standing order 41(c) the second reading will be made an order of the day for the next sitting.

AUDITOR-GENERAL AMENDMENT BILL 2011

Consideration resumed from 28 February.

Second Reading

Mr OAKESHOTT (Lyne) (10.36 am)—I move:

That this bill be now read a second time.

I note the contribution of the previous speaker, the member for Flinders, about the Home Insulation Program and I would hope that he also recognises the opportunity for future programs, regardless of who the government is, in this Auditor-General Amendment Bill 2011. The bill allows for a broadening of the scope and jurisdiction of the Auditor-General to follow the money trail through to all areas of taxpayer expenditure—including areas of business such as contractors—which would have allowed the Auditor-General to go through in detail the Home Insulation Program and related programs to establish fact from fiction in the debate. I would hope that is a signal of support for this important amendment to the Auditor-General Act that allows the Auditor-General to do his or her job on behalf of all Commonwealth taxpayers.

Any business in this country knows that they would be letting themselves down as a business if they did not allow audits to be done of all areas of their business. The Commonwealth cannot say that today. We have restrictions and boundaries placed on the scope and jurisdiction of the Auditor-General and their ability to follow the money trail—from taxpayer money collected
through to taxpayer money distributed to various programs on the ground. This bill tries to address that. It is based on the work of the Joint Standing Committee of Public Accounts and Audit, in its report 419, which made a very strong and unanimous recommendation to expand the jurisdiction of the Auditor-General to allow the money trail to be followed.

There are three areas that I think are of particular interest to this parliament in a political context. The first is government business enterprises. Currently, the Auditor-General is limited in their scope to conduct audits within and around GBEs, government business enterprises. This is at a time when we are about to do the biggest rollout of information and communication technology that I am aware of in this country through the establishment of a GBE in NBN Co. Parliament would not be doing its duty if it did not allow the Auditor-General to regularly and freely audit all aspects of the NBN rollout and in particular NBN Co. Likewise, as I mentioned before, there are currently limits placed on the Auditor-General’s ability to audit government contractors. The Home Insulation Program, which the member for Flinders just discussed, is a very good example of where the Auditor-General’s inability to do basic audits led to, arguably, lesser outcomes in program delivery.

I would also mention, though, regardless of the current parliament, the ongoing work and the ongoing problems of defence contracting. DMO, for example, has an annual budget of roughly $9 billion a year. It is a problematic area of government program delivery, and allowing the Auditor-General to explore in an unfettered way all aspects of contracting in that area would lead to much greater value for money and much greater efficiency outcomes for taxpayers’ dollars, something I hope all members of this parliament would strongly support.

The other area, which I think will surprise many people, is in regard to agreements reached with state agencies and other levels of government. Building the Education Revolution has been a topic in this parliament for some time. Allowing the Auditor-General to distinguish fact from fiction and go into state agencies, such as the New South Wales Department of Education and Training, to establish just what has gone on, where and why would be an important change in law for taxpayers.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Hon. BC Scott)—Is the motion seconded?

Mrs D’Ath—I second the motion and reserve my right to speak.

Mr ROBB (Goldstein) (10.41 am)—The main purpose of the Auditor-General Amendment Bill 2011 is to extend the powers of the Auditor-General to audit not only government entities and agencies but also, critically, contracting third parties. While the coalition may support the intent of this legislation, unfortunately, given the circumstances, we cannot support this bill for a number of reasons. Firstly, it is an increase in the regulatory burden. This bill would require any supplier to any government agency to be prepared to undergo a full investigation by the Auditor-General at any time. This would place an added cost and compliance burden on business. I put it to you, Mr Deputy Speaker Scott, that under Labor over the last three and a bit years we have seen the greatest growth of government in our lives—and that includes the Whitlam era. If supported, this bill would just further increase that burden for any business doing work with the government.

The reporting requirements today for many hundreds of thousands of small and mid-tier businesses are becoming a major impost, a major cost and a major factor in the poor profitability of so many of those com-
panies. There has to be a point where we start to turn this flood backwards. There have been literally thousands of new regulations in the last three and a bit years. This government’s whole rationale is to make decisions on behalf of others in the community. In this case, it is making decisions on behalf of not only other government instrumentalities but also the many hundreds of thousands of small businesses the intent of this legislation would extend to. In doing so, it will create a very significant impediment to many of these companies doing business with the government. I am sure this is not the intent of the bill mover in any way and I do respect the clear intent of this legislation.

With the level of scrutiny and intrusion that would come about with a study by the Auditor-General of businesses’ practices, many small- and medium-sized businesses will choose not to do business with a government agency as a consequence. Therefore, only the biggest companies with the resources available to prepare and comply with an Auditor-General investigation may be willing to tender for contracts under these circumstances. This legislation will, I suspect unwittingly but very quickly and in a very major way, provide a significant impediment and discouragement for so many businesses to continue to seek government business.

This legislation could lead to greater cost of government services. Many of these businesses would face the prospect of an Auditor-General inquiry sometime in the future—and it would be a real prospect when you look at the myriad programs that have wasted thousands of millions of dollars in the last three and a bit years under this government. The programs these businesses were in good faith seeking to do work for could well end up being the subject of an Auditor-General inquiry, given the record of this government and its total incompetence in terms of wasting public moneys and mismanaging so many programs. As a consequence, many of these contractors and others will build into the tender price increased costs to cover the potential audit requirements.

So, on so many fronts, this is simply an addition to the reporting requirements. Also it will chase the waste of taxpayers’ money after the event, after the horse has bolted. The proposition by the coalition for an office of due diligence is the way to go. We oppose this bill. (Time expired)

Mrs D’ATH (Petrie) (10.46 am)—I am pleased to speak on the Auditor-General Amendment Bill 2011 both as the Deputy Chair of the Joint Committee of Public Accounts and Audit and on behalf of the government. I congratulate the member for Lyne for bringing this bill before the House. The original Audit Act of 1901 was the fourth act to be passed by the first federal parliament. That bill was replaced in 1997 by the Auditor-General Act 1997.

The functions performed by the Auditor-General continue to be a matter of great significance to this parliament today. It is important that the Auditor-General has the appropriate powers to respond to the audit chal-
It was a unanimous decision, as the member for Lyne has stated, in relation to Report 419 handed down by the current committee in the 43rd Parliament. Much of the work on that inquiry was actually done by the 42nd Parliament’s Joint Committee of Public Accounts and Audit. I acknowledge the hard work by the then chair, Sharon Grierson, her committee members and the secretariat in that inquiry.

Report 419 of the Joint Committee of Public Accounts and Audit made a series of recommendations aimed at ensuring that accountability and the role of the Auditor-General are kept current in today’s challenges. The report recommended a range of measures. The most significant recommendations related to amendments to the act to allow the Auditor-General to assess the performance of bodies that receive Commonwealth money when there is a corresponding or reciprocal responsibility to deliver outcomes. In other words, the report recommended that the Auditor-General have the ability to follow the money when Commonwealth money is provided to other bodies, such as state agencies or contractors, for the delivery of Commonwealth outcomes.

This bill is intended to implement the recommendations of the Joint Committee of Public Accounts and Audit report. The government broadly supports the adoption of these measures and intent of this bill. I fore-
The proposed carbon tax is nothing but window dressing designed to make the Prime Minister appear to be doing something and to curry favour with her Greens allies—the green coalition she has. It will do nothing other than create a giant money-go-round. At this rate, the only green jobs this government is likely to create will be in the bowels of the Treasury, administering this ill-conceived carbon tax. ‘Trust me’ is the message, but there is no basis on which to do that from the Prime Minister.

The people of Australia have seen what happens to those who place trust in this Prime Minister. They may be stabbed in the back, as in the case of the now Minister for Foreign Affairs, or they may find themselves burdened by a new tax, despite the assurances they had from the ‘real Julia’ that there would be no carbon tax under a government she led. They may find that the tax summit they were promised in writing would take place in the first half of the year has been delayed until at least October. They may find themselves wondering what happened to the much vaunted processing centre in East Timor for illegal boat arrivals—a solution the Prime Minister promised over eight months ago—

Mrs D’Ath—Mr Deputy Speaker, I rise on a point of order on relevance. The member does not seem to be speaking to the bill before this House at all. I ask that the member be brought to the bill.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Hon. BC Scott)—The member for Petrie makes a point of order. It is a little unusual in private members’ business to make that point, but I will make sure that the member for Cowan continues and speaks to the bill before the parliament.

Mr SIMPKINS—I certainly am speaking to it and will continue to do so, because this is a bill about the accuracy and the accountability of government, which remains a major problem for this government.

Whilst the coalition applaud the spirit of the bill put forward by the member for Lyne, our concern is what it will actually do to stop the waste. As we know, the Prime Minister talked about letting the sun shine in but, in this case, it is only after the fact. Surely, our first duty as parliamentarians is to make sure that the waste is prevented in the first place. The member seeks to widen the powers of the Auditor-General, but this will not prevent the waste occurring at the outset. That is what the problem is. It may be a cliche but maybe this is trying to lock the door after the horse has bolted.

In this case, some classic risk-management principles are required. As has been said, this is a case of ‘we can assess what the waste has been after it has occurred’. The coalition will not support this bill until it has this sort of extra information and extra requirements such as an office of due diligence. This office would properly assess government programs to make sure that waste abuse and mismanagement were not part of a program. It is a classic and very real risk-management proposal that would end up stopping such waste. Without such a front-end assessment to address program failures before they happen, we cannot possibly support this bill.

Mr OAKESHOTT (Lyne) (10.56 am)—by leave—I table the explanatory memorandum to the bill.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER—Order! The time allocated 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.
Mr BANDT (Melbourne) (10.57 pm)—I move:

That this bill be now read a second time.

I have been on the record, as have the Greens, for quite some time now highlighting the necessity for the Commonwealth to take urgent action to remove cattle from Victoria’s pristine high country.

Every day that the cattle remain is a failure of government to protect our National Heritage listed places, our endangered and threatened species and our natural alpine water reservoirs.

So I welcome the decision made by the minister on Friday to demand that the Victorian state government’s decision to reintroduce cattle into the Alpine National Park be referred to the Commonwealth for assessment.

Even though that decision does not bring about a conclusion to this matter and even though the minister was forced to move slowly through the provisions of the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act—far too slowly, in my opinion, and I will come back to the flaws in the act in a moment—he announced clearly to the right direction.

The cattle have been back in the park for three months now—they were introduced under the farcical guise of scientific research by a brand new Victorian Baillieu government determined to meet an environmentally irresponsible election deal.

We have seen a lot in those three months.

We have seen a state government scramble to put some scientific justification behind their rushed decision to reintroduce cattle, only to come up looking foolish.

We have seen hundreds of scientists publicly oppose the grazing trial, and not one publicly supporting it.

We have seen park rangers in the media distressed at having to facilitate the grazing trial at the expense of genuine conservation work.

We have seen National Party members arguing that they have some sort of state mandate from the people to let cattle run loose in the park and trash the environment, and that somehow this overrides our federal law and our international obligations.

And I am sure we are about to hear National Party members make all sorts of justifications in just a moment, and come to the defence of a state government that has managed to destroy any environmental credibility it had within moments of achieving office, but that is all beside the point:

The cattle are doing significant damage now, and it is time they were removed.

One would assume that the legal protection of the environment inside a national park would be a given. Indeed, one might assume that national parks are subject to a higher level of protection. However, given the complications of federal/state division of legislative responsibility, and given the lack of any federal law that specifically lists that which may or may not occur in National Heritage listed places, it is the at times flawed EPBC Act that we turn to to define what is and is not an acceptable impact on the environment—whether the environment is a national park or the middle of a city.

The subjectivity inherent in the act therefore has the side effect of exposing some of our most important and pristine natural
places to all sorts of inappropriate treatment, sometimes without providing an adequate mechanism to urgently disallow it.

That is the situation we find ourselves in here. We have a state government which has the necessary legal resources to advise a particular course of action, knowing full well that the federal repercussions will be slow. The state government knows that the federal minister is required to use the resources of the federal department to investigate the matter at length, and exhaust any legal repercussions, before issuing any directives.

I have no doubt that the federal minister’s intentions are commendable—I have heard him speak about his own views on the alpine grazing issue—but I also realise that we have two well-resourced governments of different political parties fighting over an issue, all in the context of a flawed federal act, and this debate has become one of political grandstanding rather than a question of environmental protection.

We are approaching winter and, temporarily at least, the seasons will do that which the government is too slow to do: the snow season will require cattle to retreat from the high country until late spring.

By then, the minister will need to have worked through the act—but there are many steps involved before the minister is in a position to accept or reject the trial, and the subjectivity inherent in the act prevents any of us from predicting the end result.

We have a small window of opportunity to ensure an end to this environmental vandalism, and we need to keep open the option of a legislative backstop that will unequivocally require the removal of cattle from the Victorian high country.

This bill is that legislative backstop. It deems the minister to have received a referral from the Victorian government, and to have rejected it.

The effect of writing the provisions of this bill into the EPBC Act is to avoid the time-and resource-consuming federal/state stand off, and require the instant removal of any cattle from the park, thus finally putting an end to the practice of alpine grazing.

In concluding, let me reiterate that I am truly hopeful that the minister can get a result before the grazing season starts again. But given the lack of certainty, and given that the future of the beautiful high country is at stake, I encourage government members to leave open the option of supporting this bill in a vote when the House resumes sitting in winter.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Hon. BC Scott)—Is the motion seconded?

Mr Wilkie—I second the motion and reserve my right to speak.

Mr CHESTER (Gippsland) (11.02 am)—I rise to oppose the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation (Abolition of Alpine Grazing) Bill 2011. In doing so, I wish to highlight the absolutely overwhelming hypocrisy of the Greens and the blind subservience of the Australian Labor Party, and in particular the Minister for Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities.

Let us begin with the Greens. The Leader of the Greens is currently parading around Australia calling for better protection of democratic rights for people living in the territories. Senator Brown is all for protecting those rights it seems, particularly if he personally supports the issues such as gay marriage or euthanasia, which may emerge as a result. But the grand hypocrisy is exposed on this issue, where the bill proposed by the member for Melbourne is squarely targeted at removing the right of the Victorian government to take action to assess the strategic use of cattle grazing as a tool to reduce bushfire risk in Victoria’s high country.
Senator Brown is out there right now talking about equal rights for territories and the member for Melbourne is in here today trying to take those rights away from the people of Victoria. The Greens’ defence of democratic rights does not apply to the Victorian government, which, at last year’s state election, won a clear mandate for its policy of returning cattle to the Alpine National Park.

The bitter irony of this bill is the sanctimonious nature of the Greens when it comes to telling country people how to live their lives. Regional Australians have had a gutful of city based Greens when it comes to telling us how to live our lives, what industries we are allowed to have, what jobs we are allowed to have and how our communities should enjoy their particular pastimes. The Greens have never created a job in regional Australia and they are a direct threat to a host of traditional industries, including the agricultural sector, commercial fishing, mining and power generation. It is no surprise that the Greens received just six per cent of the primary vote in the seat of Gippsland during the federal election and the same in the seat of Gippsland East during the state election. We do not vote for the Greens in regional Australia because they simply do not understand us. Within the Greens they do not have any appreciation of the practical realities of living and working in a sustainable way with the environment.

The Greens’ and Labor’s approach to the environment is to lock it up and leave it—to ban anything that offends their view of the world. ‘Lock it up and leave it’ is not an environmental policy; it is a recipe for disaster as we have seen with the recent wildfires that have devastated vast expanses of public land in Gippsland and beyond.

The bill before us today is another prime example of the Greens’ failure to embrace the concept of practical environmental management. It talks about banning cattle in the Alpine National Park because of the claimed significant impact on native vegetation and animals. Member for Melbourne: seriously, give me a break! The current trial involves 400 cattle spread across 26,000 hectares of national park. Even the minister for the environment did more damage when he raced up there in his convoy of four-wheel-drives, and I do not think he even managed to find a herd of cows while on that photo opportunity!

The Greens and the minister are getting all hot and sweaty about 400 cattle but not a word is said about the other environmental issues facing the national park. There was not a word in the member for Melbourne’s address about the thousands of feral horses, which the Parks Victoria website notes have severe environmental impacts such as erosion, damage to bog habitat and soil loss. There was not a word about the wild deer which live in the high country. An estimated 100,000 to 200,000 samba deer are estimated to live in the high country causing damage. There was not a word from the member for Melbourne about wild dogs, which a recent report indicated are costing the community $18 million per year and are feasting on native wildlife every day of the week. There was not a word about the environmental damage caused by the ski fields. But that would probably be something the member for Melbourne supports, because no doubt his constituents are visiting the ski fields on a regular basis. In the Greens’ twisted logic, it is okay to have hundreds of thousands of snow skiers, construction of chalets and the building of ski runs, but heaven forbid if our regional communities seek to graze a few hundred head of cattle to help reduce the bushfire risk.

If the Greens were genuine about their desire to protect the environment they would be knocking on the door of the minister for the
environment and demanding that he reinstate the $11 million he stripped out of Landcare when he was the minister for agriculture.

This is the grand hypocrisy that we have come to expect from the Greens—there is absolutely nothing new about that. But what is also emerging in this debate is the complete subservience of the Labor Party to its Greens masters. The Labor Party may be in government but there is no doubt the Greens are in charge. The member for Melbourne has whistled and, like a faithful dog, the minister for the environment has raced across the chamber to lick his face. Those opposite are just so obedient when the Greens want action. But it is no surprise when more than 40 of the Labor members in this place rely on Greens preferences for their political survival. The heritage, culture and knowledge which have been built up over more than 100 years are assets to our community and the mountain cattlemen should not be vilified by the Labor Party and the Greens in this place. (Time expired)

Ms OWENS (Parramatta) (11.08 am)—National parks have been one of Australia’s great assets, and one that I have enjoyed greatly, and I would like to say to the previous speaker, the member for Gippsland, that they were created and have existed and been protected in Australia long before the idea of the Greens party was a light in the eyes of Bob Brown’s parents. National parks have been around in Australia for many, many decades and we still have an obligation to protect them.

But this is not about state rights, this is about law. If the Victorian government wanted to reintroduce cattle into the Alpine National Park, they were required to refer the matter to the department for environment for assessment under the Environmental Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act. The opposition often spouts about rights and obligations. Well, the Victorian government had an obligation under the law when it came to this matter. The proposal to introduce cattle should have been assessed as to whether it would significantly impact matters of national environmental significance. That is a requirement under the law: one of the obligations of a state government is to adhere to the law. Businesses have to do it and governments are not exempt no matter what their private views. The Victorian government did not do this. They allowed 400 head of cattle into the national park in January, and there are many people around the country, including people in my electorate, who are very concerned about this.

The private members bill introduced by the member for Melbourne, the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation (Abolition of Alpine Grazing) Bill 2011, suggests that we assume that the Victorian government did refer the matter to the government and that the minister has considered it already and rejected it. I would like to say that I would prefer that the Victorian government was made to refer it and that the minister actually did consider it. I find that the precedent of dealing with each of these matters on a one-off basis can go both ways. We could equally have a bill next week that moved that the matter had been referred and the minister had rejected it. When the Victorian government in 2004, the Labor government of the day, announced that it was planning to move a special act to declare it heritage preservation because of the history of the Man from Snowy River. It is a slippery slope once you start moving down a situation where governments of both persuasions start to deal with larger matters of environmental or heritage protection on a one-off basis.
But I do understand the need for speed. I have spent some time in those national parks, and the idea that cattle would be anywhere near a sphagnum moss swamp in particular is alarming not only because of the protection of the vegetation itself, but also because the role that sphagnum moss has in water purification. It absorbs the snow melt and releases it slowly over about 12 months. In fact when the cattle were removed from the Kosciusko National Park back in the sixties, it was because cattle were damaging the purity of the water in the Snowy Mountains. So there are many matters to consider when it comes to cattle in national parks and it is absolutely appropriate that all of them are considered in full.

For the information of the members opposite, I want to refer to the Kosciusko National Park fire management strategy 2008-2013. If they do not know, the Alpine National Park and the Kosciusko National Park meet at the Victorian border. The parks might be governed by two governments but it is the same ecology and what applies to the Kosciusko also applies to the Alpine, except that the cattle were removed from Kosciusko in 1960. I just want to read a little section of this report:

The arrival of graziers and early settlers from about the 1820s saw significant change in the frequency of fire.

It did, it caused a significant change in the frequency of fire.

The overall recorded frequency of fires increased substantially in the late nineteenth century and twentieth century until the 1960s and has decreased since. Evidence as early as the 1890s indicates that the increased frequency of introduce fires during the grazing period resulted in substantial negative ecological impacts—etcetera. In the unplanned fire history you can also see a dramatic increase in the number of fires in that region during the period that cattle were there. All of the research indicates that that is not necessarily due to the presence of the cattle; but was due to the presence of people and introduced fires. It is an extraordinary part of the world. (Time expired)

Mr McCORMACK (Riverina) (11.13 am)—I rise today to speak on the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation (Abolition of Alpine Grazing) Bill 2011. The member for Melbourne has sponsored this bill in response to the Victorian state government’s trial to return grazing as part of a bushfire mitigation study. That same member has described the return of cattle grazing to the Alpine National Park as ‘an act of environmental vandalism’. This comment is ridiculous, as until 2005 grazing was conducted in the Alpine National Park for more than 100 years and played a vital role in the management of fuel loads.

This is a trial using 400 cattle in a very small proportion of the total park, and 400 cattle for four months of the year for the next six years. The cattle will be distributed across six sites over thousands upon thousands of hectares—just one head per many, many hectares of land. Further, the research sites have been selected to avoid or minimise environmental impact and to use only sites where cattle have grazed previously. These cattle will not be tearing up the bush as Labor and the Greens would lead people to believe. The Greens would like to see the national parks locked up and are anti everything Australians love about the great outdoors and hold near and dear to them. If the Greens get away with this bill then our national parks will be locked up and left for feral animals to rule and noxious weeds to spread over. With all the litter left lying around it would take only one spark for Black Saturday to be repeated—and no-one wants to see that again.
The areas and ecosystems the Greens claim will be damaged by grazing cattle in the Alpine National Park are the exact environments where controlled burning is not an appropriate measure to reduce the risk of bushfires, as above a certain altitude the use of this measure is not recommended. In fact, burning can do more damage, and cattle grazing is possibly the only tool which can reduce fuel loads in these areas. To those who claim that cattle will do significant damage to the environment, I say: a bushfire will do far worse. There has to be a balance. If grazing cattle will help reduce the chances of deadly fires then I fully support this measure.

The Greens and others opposed to the grazing have said that the research being conducted in this trial has been compromised. The overseeing scientist, Professor Mark Adams from Sydney University, has dismissed this claim, stating:

… there are plenty of areas where there aren’t cattle, where you can use as a reference for the areas where cattle have been introduced.

Claims that cattlemen are being paid, or paying, to participate in this trial are incorrect. The Mountain Cattlemen’s Association of Victoria supports the measure to allow grazing in the high country again, but they are neither being paid for its support nor paying to be included.

This bill is just further proof that Labor may be in government, albeit a very minor one, but the Greens are the ones definitely in power. Labor is pathetically subservient to the Greens’ agenda. This country was opened up by stout-hearted stockman, the mighty men of the Snowy River, on their horses—brumbies that run free. Do the Greens want the brumbies to go also? What about the hard-hoofed deer? Or do they just have a grudge against cattle because of the methane they produce?

These stockmen have grazed cattle in this area for decades and have managed high country ecosystems over this period. Only recently has it been decided that this should not continue. Why, I ask? Because this Labor government is being kept in power by the Greens and therefore they have to be seen to be doing something on this issue. The Greens are certainly setting the green agenda, but we don’t know what dangers are hidden in their social agenda. One thing is certain: it will be regional Australians who will bear the brunt of costs.

The Victorian government went to the polls on 27 November last year. A mandate was sought for this trial and not one Greens member won a seat in the lower house. People set the mandate: they do not want this bill to be passed. It is about time the Labor government started listening to the people and not the Greens, who govern for nobody.

Mr KELVIN THOMSON (Wills) (11.17 am)—What do a herd of cows with a sense of humour and the Baillieu government both have in common? Answer: they are both a laughing stock. The so-called scientific trial unveiled by the coalition government, with the return of 400 head of cattle to the Alpine National Park in January this year, is intended to run for six years. What sort of trial runs for six years? I know David Hicks waited six years for a trial, but the idea of a trial for six years is laughable.

Scientific research in national parks normally follows well-established processes. You have, first and foremost, priorities for research established by park managers in consultation with scientists. Standard procedures setting up scientific research programs were not followed. There was no peer review of the projects designed, no ethics clearance, no budget priority assessment and, most importantly, no baseline monitoring before cattle were introduced. This makes a joke of the
whole notion of a scientific trial—no baseline data.

The park rangers are concerned that their normal work looking after the park has been falling by the wayside due to the need to monitor the cows. The cows have been fitted with tracking devices, which reminds me: why do cows wear bells? Answer: because their horns don’t work. This ‘scientific’ trial mirrors Japanese ‘scientific whaling’ in that what is described as a scientific study is constructed around a commercial agenda. Indeed, this is a commercial agenda which could expand if the state government accepts the advice of a draft report by the Victorian Competition and Efficiency Commission, which has recommended hotels, restaurants and other facilities be allowed inside Victoria’s national parks. This is a recommendation to a state government that introduced quickly and secretly 400 cattle into the Alpine National Park just a few days before the 2011 cattlemen’s annual get-together, attended by nine coalition parliamentarians. At the time of the reintroduction, according to the *Weekly Times* of 13 January, cattlewoman Christa Treasure said:

Mountain cattlemen had been told to keep the news under wraps until the stock were in the park to prevent any potential Federal Government injunction.

It seems that the Liberal Party has learnt nothing from the Kennett era, when conservation groups had to mount a ‘Hands Off the Prom’ campaign to protect Wilsons Promontory from plans for privately operated tourist facilities. It seems that they have learnt nothing from Point Nepean. I recall as shadow environment minister at the time working with the Victorian Labor government and local residents to force the Howard government to back away from moneymaking proposals for the Defence land at Point Nepean.

The Victorian Competition and Efficiency Commission and the Victorian government should stop eyeing off national parks—which are public assets, public property—and thinking, ‘How can we exploit them and make a private dollar out of them?’ Our national parks public assets bring joy and comfort to the soul of this generation, and they are held on trust for the enjoyment of future generations. They are not for the exploitation and private profit by the friends and supporters of governments or political parties. As Executive Director Matt Ruchel of the Victorian National Parks Association has said:

The core reason for national parks and the reason why people like them is it is about the protection of natural values—not whether you can get a latte there.

I congratulate environment minister Tony Burke on his announcement of Friday last week. This is an announcement which will protect the Alpine National Park. He has given the Victorian government 15 business days, until 8 April, to refer its current cattle-grazing actions for Commonwealth decision. The minister has said:

The Victorian Government was wrong to reintroduce cattle to the Alpine National Park and I have now determined that it needs to be fully scrutinised under national environmental law.

It is extraordinary how little information the Victorian Government has provided.

The referral will allow me to determine whether the impacts of cattle grazing in the Alpine National Park have a significant impact on matters protected under national environmental law.

That is a responsible course of action for the minister to take. I welcome it. It is the right action for the protection of the Victorian Alps which are a magnificent heritage for us all.

Mr COULTON (Parkes) (11.22 am)—I, too, rise to speak against this motion by the member for Melbourne. I would like to draw an analogy, following the speech by the
member for Wills. What do his speech and alpine cattle have in common: a huge amount of methane-infused male bovine excreta—and that is to put it as politely as I can.

Very rarely do we get to deal with levels of such great hypocrisy as we do today in this motion for the second reading of the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation (Abolition of Alpine Grazing) Bill 2011. It is interesting to note the speakers in this debate. We have the member for Melbourne, inner Melbourne; the member for Wills, inner Melbourne; and the member for Parramatta. There are great areas of environmentally pristine alps and grazing in those electorates! And apart from the environmental debate and the common-sense debate, this is about states’ rights. We have heard Bob Brown trying to trample over the Commonwealth, saying that we should listen to the territories about gay marriage and euthanasia. But when a state government goes to an election, gets a clear mandate—the Green party is completely wiped out—and implements what they clearly went with to the election as a promise, we now have the Greens, from the confines of Canberra, trying to trample all over states’ rights.

It is interesting: do we ever hear from the Greens and their followers on the other side, the blind acolytes of the Greens, an environmental proposal that affects one of their electorates? It is always someone else making a change to ease their conscience. And the only benefit from this motion will be to the margin of the member for Melbourne at the next election, as his latte-sipping supporters down there get a warm glow about some part of Australia they have supposedly cured. If we are serious and if the member for Melbourne is serious about protecting the environment, why don’t we restore the Yarra to the condition it was in when John Batman went there? We would only have to remove 40 per cent of the population. We could retrain them in tourism. They could go to TAFE and get other qualifications. That is the language we hear from the Greens and the Labor Party about what we are going to do with regional Australia.

The member for Parramatta talked about the wonderful national parks and was taking great credit for them. It was not the Greens; we did it first. But what about in my electorate? Bob Carr locked up 360,000 hectares in the Brigalow Belt South Bioregion. Two years later, guess what happened? It burnt—koalas barbecued, kangaroos wiped out. The biodiversity was wiped out. Not that it was the first time there had been a fire—it was the first time there had been a fire of that intensity.

The member for Parramatta talked about fire. We are not talking about not having fires in national parks; that is a part of the cycle of life. The parks can get struck by lightning; all sorts of things can start a fire. But it is the intensity of the fire. After what happened in Victoria on Black Saturday after the Green influence on local government planning and state government planning, and after the loss of life and devastation that happened, I am surprised that the Greens could even come in here and show their faces and start talking about legislation that is supposed to give some environmental benefit.

If we were serious about protecting the alpine regions of Victoria, we would be banning skiing. We do not see cows churning straight up a hill, cutting a track 30 centimetres deep in their four-wheel-drives. When was the last time we saw a cow doing that to destroy the environment? But we saw the environment minister do that two weeks ago. His little sightseeing trip to the alpine regions would have done more damage to the environment than the 400 cows would do in a hundred years.

Mr Chester—It was a photo opportunity!
Mr COULTON—Yes, a photo opportunity! This is gross hypocrisy. When are we going to see some fair dinkum environmental policies from the other side and from those behind? When are they actually going to do something about the environment and not just shore up their margins in inner urban areas? The closer that people live to the environment the less they vote for Labor and the Greens. This is about shoring up support in concreted bitumen jungles. The only time they ever think about the environment is when they tick the box on election day to vote Green. They get a warm glow, go and have a latte and think what a great job they have done. But someone in regional Australia always pays the price. And it is not just the people in regional Australia who pay the price but the environment which pays the price.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Hon. BC Scott)—Order! The time allotted for the 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.

ABOLITION OF AGE LIMIT ON PAYMENT OF THE SUPERANNUATION GUARANTEE CHARGE BILL 2011

Debate resumed from 28 February.

Second Reading

Mrs BRONWYN BISHOP (Mackellar) (11.27 pm)—I move:

That this bill be now read a second time.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER—The member may proceed and I will call for a seconder after her speech.

Mrs BRONWYN BISHOP—Thank you very much. In seeking a second reading for this bill and a vote upon it, I do so based on the reasons that I set out in my speech on the first reading when I made the case very strongly for why 70 years should be abolished as the age limit after which the compulsory superannuation guarantee charge is not payable.

This is a very discriminatory piece of legislation. It sends out messages to people remaining in the paid workforce over the age of 70 that somehow their work is not valued as much as that of those who are under the age of 70. When the superannuation guarantee charge was first introduced, that was on the basis that it represented part of an individual’s salary and that that money was to be regarded as part of their salary. Therefore the discrimination that is put in place by this bill means that that part of their salary is not being paid.

We made this commitment before the last election and, in bringing this bill in we were honouring that commitment. But I am very concerned once again at the attitude that the Labor Party has towards older Australians, whether they are working, pensioners, those seeking to participate in the workforce or simply strong volunteers.

We had an insight into the attitude of the Prime Minister as to what she thinks of older Australians when, courtesy of a cabinet leak, we heard that the Prime Minister had said, ‘Why would we bother with a pension rise because they don’t vote for us anyway.’ The Prime Minister’s hatred for older people is already well established and in not supporting this bill we will see arguments coming forth that will try and knock it out on a technicality—anything to prevent older Australians receiving a message and a signal that their participation is both valued and valuable.

It is interesting when looking at the statistics to see that mature age Australians are remaining in the workforce for longer and longer periods. The Labor Party has decreed that the pensionable age will be raised to 67, but the OECD has commented that reforms
to pension and early retirement systems alone are insufficient to encourage increased participation by individuals in older age groups. It says that tackling age discrimination and negative attitudes towards older workers and job seekers, improving working conditions and flexibility and improving the skills of mature age workers have been suggested as complements to reforms to pensions and early retirement systems. In other words, it is the attitude of the government of the day in seeking a change in attitudes in employers that becomes the defining feature of good policy.

We said prior to the election that we would introduce a system where employers would be paid $3,250 in order to encourage them to employ and keep mature age Australians on for six months—or a proportion of that payment for a lesser time—sending a signal that the mature age worker is a valued part of our working population. All we hear from the government are groans about the ageing of the population—they are responsible for a burden on younger people, they are responsible for increasing the cost of health costs and they are responsible for a deterioration in opportunities in so many areas. Every time the question of mature age workers or pensioners is mentioned there is a groan that comes from the Prime Minister in particular and the Treasurer as well.

What we want to see is recognition in policy that we want a high participation rate of mature age workers and of younger workers in the 16- to 19-year age group. We saw technical arguments put up against the splendid Social Security Amendment (Income Support for Regional Students) Bill 2010 [2011] brought in by the coalition earlier to assist young people to get justice. No doubt we are going to hear similar sorts of arguments trotted out with regard to this bill. I might flag that I will consider amendments to counter these at the consideration-in-detail stage. I would put to the House that this is a very important signal to be sending out to mature age workers, beginning at age 45, that we want to see them remain in the workforce and that we want to see an upgrading of their basic skills so that they can continue to make that contribution.

In my first reading speech I outlined the experiment that had been conducted by BMW in Germany in listening to their workforce in an attempt to retain their mature age workers. By listening to what they had to say and putting policies in place, they saw maintenance of that older workforce and a growth in productivity. There are lessons that can be learned. If the government is willing to get rid of its prejudice and its discrimination against older people in our community, we would start to see a truly inclusive society. We see here lots of phrases bandied around using the word ‘inclusive’ but there is no intention behind the words to actually see it occur.

When we look at the numbers of people who are staying in the workforce—and I will look at the figures for those people who are over 70—we have seen a dramatic increase and yet these people are being denied their compulsory superannuation guarantee charge being paid to them. If the government is fair dinkum about being interested in seeing an ending of discrimination and a truly inclusive workforce and society, it will start to agree with the coalition when we say that it has to be as offensive to act in an ageist manner as it does in a sexist manner or in a racist manner. Only by doing those things will we see real inclusiveness in our society and every individual truly being able to make a contribution in the way they wish to.

The government has said that it will increase the pensionable age to 67 over time but it will not go to the extent of saying that it values older people and their contribution
within our society. This bill is a start. This bill removes that discrimination that is enshrined in legislation and sends a signal to senior Australians that we value the contribution they make at all levels. The OECD says that simply raising the pensionable age does not bring about a greater participation in the workforce—there has to be a change in culture. It is by signals such as this bill sends that we begin that cultural attitudinal change.

There are many other ways it can be done as well and the coalition, which has created the portfolio of shadow minister for seniors, shows that it is fair dinkum about addressing these problems. The government has no minister for seniors. The government tends always to talk about senior Australians in terms of the pejorative. It talks about them as being a burden, a problem, whereas in fact the fact that we are living longer and healthier lives not only is a cause of great celebration and joy but also flows into the economic world. If we are using all of the talents of all of our people, of those people who wish to retrain and remain in the workforce and continue to contribute in that way, we will see a benefit in the growth of individual incomes in this country of ours.

I cited a report done by Access Economics back in 2001 that predicted that incomes would grow if we started to utilise mature age workers and maintain their activity in the paid workforce. I would simply say to the Independents, to the government, to all those people in this chamber that if they are fair dinkum about seeing discrimination removed from legislation, if they are fair dinkum about sending messages to senior Australians about how we value them, if they are fair dinkum about having a truly inclusive society, then there will be nothing but support for this bill and not a citation of the attempted technical hitches or other extraneous arguments that they may try to dredge up to prevent this legislation from having a successful second reading.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr Murphy)—Is the motion seconded?

Mr FLETCHER (Bradfield) (11.37 pm)—I second the motion. Sometimes discrimination can be so prevalent that we do not even notice it. A type of discrimination that we have tended not to notice as much as we ought is discrimination against older Australians. If it were the case that, for example, the superannuation guarantee charge were not payable to workers up to the age of 25 or 30, that would obviously be completely unacceptable to any fair-minded Australian. Why is it, then, that we have a policy today which says that we do permit discrimination against Australians over the age of 70? Under the law as it stands today the superannuation guarantee charge is not required to be paid to employees over the age of 70.

We acknowledge that it is the intention of the government to remove the discrimination in so far as it applies to workers between the ages of 70 and 75. We make this simple and obvious point, which underpins the logic of this bill that we are moving: why stop at 75? If somebody is in the workforce, if somebody is doing a job, then they are entitled to receive the superannuation guarantee charge payment just as workers of younger ages are entitled to receive it. The test as to whether you are entitled to receive the superannuation guarantee charge ought to be simply this: are you in the workforce, have you been employed or do you have a job? If yes, then you ought to receive that entitlement. There is simply no good basis to deny the payment of the superannuation guarantee charge to workers who happen to be over any particular cut-off age you may choose to nominate, be it 70 or 75. If you are in the workforce you are entitled to receive that payment. It is fundamentally an equity issue.
There are, in addition, good arguments based on efficiency, which underpin this legislation, which the coalition is putting forward, the Abolition of Age Limit on Payment of the Superannuation Guarantee Charge Bill 2011. It is well known that our workforce is ageing. It is well known that the demographic changes Australia is experiencing mean that the cohort of workers coming into the workforce at the lower end of the age band is now lower than the cohort of workers who are leaving the workforce. We have a demographic issue. It is clear that one important part of the policy response is to encourage older workers to stay in the workforce and, indeed, to encourage those who may not be in the workforce to return to the workforce, should they be minded to do so. That is an efficient thing to do. We have a stock of well-trained, capable people with many years of experience in the workforce, who today face this disincentive to return to work, the disincentive that if you are above the age of 70 today you do not receive the superannuation guarantee when the person standing next to you, doing exactly the same work, who happens to be aged 69 or 59 or 49 or 29 will be receiving that payment. Is it any wonder that people react rationally to that disincentive and say, ‘Why should I stay in the workforce if all of a sudden, simply by reason of having reached a certain age, I am no longer entitled to receive a payment which others in the workforce right alongside me are receiving?’

We say there is a strong efficiency argument in favour of the legislation we are putting forward. Let us get the best out of our nation’s workforce. Let us encourage people to come back into the workforce or to remain in the workforce. But even more fundamentally, this is about equity. This is about fairness. This is about drawing upon the potential of every Australian, no matter their age. That is why we are putting forward this legislation today.

Dr LEIGH (Fraser) (11.43 pm)—Thoughts of superannuation naturally lead us to thinking about the future. When I think about the superannuation system of the future I think about my one-year-old son, who will probably enter the labour market somewhere around 2030 and work until maybe 2070 or 2080, a year when most of us in this chamber will have shuffled off this mortal coil. Superannuation involves thinking about the retirement savings that my son will accumulate. It involves thinking about the retirement savings that I will accumulate and how that will impact on him and his brother.

Why do we have superannuation? We have it for two simple reasons. The first is that, as a spate of studies from behavioural economics has shown us, human beings have a tendency to undersave. We have a tendency to focus too much on the present and not enough on the future. Therefore, we can make people better off through a system of compulsory retirement savings. The other reason is to reduce the impact on the age pension. We want to encourage Australians to save for their retirement, if they can, so that the public purse does not have to pay for those who can afford to support themselves in retirement.

The history of superannuation reform, therefore, has been in two parts. There have been great reforms brought about by the Labor government, first through the introduction of the superannuation guarantee in 1992 and now through the important package of My Super and the increased compulsory contributions. Then there have been tinkering— and I will go to some of those tinkерings in a moment. The tinkering are the approach that those opposite take to superannuation.

But it is important also to recognise what those opposite do when big reforms are put
up. Those opposite will place themselves in this debate as the friends of older Australians, as supporters of a strong retirement saving system. But that is not the history. Allow me to quote from Senator Bishop, as she then was, addressing the other place on 18 August 1992:

On this side Opposition members argued very logically and meaningfully that the imposition of this compulsory superannuation tax is a de facto federal payroll tax.

They were running their ‘great big new tax’ argument against compulsory superannuation. And then Senator Bishop, as she then was, told the Senate of a conversation with a small business person, who had said:

But now that this compulsory superannuation payment has gone through, yesterday I had to sack a part time employee and turn a full time employee into a part time employee.

The late Senator Peter Cook was moved to interject by this statement that, because the law had not yet come into effect, it was difficult to see how small business people would be affected by it. But Senator Bishop, as she then was, was unmoved. Senator Bishop finished up the 1992 debate as follows:

I heard Senator McMullan say, ‘The difference between our systems on superannuation is that ours is compulsory and theirs is voluntary’. That is very true. That is an essential difference. Our policy is designed to make it attractive for people to provide for themselves in later life whereas this Government’s is designed to penalise business, to regulate it out of existence.

Of course, if you carry on with that logic then the member for Mackellar should today be saying to this chamber that superannuation is penalising business—and, if it is penalising business, why would we want to extend it?

But of course such an argument is nonsense. As we know, superannuation does not penalise business, and that is why the government announced in May last year that we intend to raise the superannuation guarantee contribution age to 75 from 2013. We intend to do that to provide certainty for business in transition and to recognise that there are costs associated with this. An initial upper age limit of 65 was increased to 70 in 1997. There has been an argument by the member for Mackellar that the abolition of the age limit on the superannuation guarantee will encourage older workers to remain in the workforce. However, done in this manner, there is a high chance the opposite will occur. It is possible workers may be enticed to work longer but it is also possible that employers may be less willing to hire older workers. The bill provides no adjustment time for employers, resulting in a $150 million immediate cost to employers of workers over 70 years old. Secondly, the bill requires that the payments of the superannuation guarantee charge are not tax deductible for businesses. It is estimated that corporate profitability could therefore fall by up to $150 million in 2011-12 were this bill to be passed.

The abolition of this age limit may also lead to a push for other limits to be abolished. It is important that there is an age limit on superannuation contributions. This stems from the significant tax concessions from saving through superannuation compared to other forms of saving. The purpose of these concessions is to encourage savings and maximise retirement income from superannuation. Were there to be no age limit, there would be an incentive for people to maximise tax payments through making voluntary superannuation contributions.

We have to be careful of inequity in the superannuation system. The Henry review went to some of these equity issues in superannuation, pointing out that a 15 per cent flat tax on superannuation contributions is one of the few flat income taxes that exist in our system. This tax is much lower than some
taxpayers’ marginal rates—for example, a person earning over $100,000 faces a marginal tax rate of 45 per cent. The consequence, according to the Henry tax review, is that in 2005-06 only five per cent of taxpayers earned over $100,000 but those taxpayers accounted for 24 per cent of concessional contributions to superannuation. On the other hand low-income earners enjoy the least tax concessions. Most face effective marginal tax rates of zero to 15 per cent. That means they receive little or not tax concessions from superannuation. In 2010 over three million low- and middle-income earners did not obtain any tax concession, so abolishing the age limit would only worsen their position.

Another source of inequity is the much lower cap on tax concessions for co-contributions than on salary sacrifice contributions. Although co-contributions provide a higher rate of concession, it only applies to the first $1,000 of voluntary contributions as compared to the $25,000 cap on salary sacrifice contributions. That means that low-income earners still receive much less in tax benefits than high-income earners.

I spoke about the reforms that we on the Labor side implement on superannuation compared to the tinkerings that those on the opposition benches tend to put in place. These tinkerings can have substantial equity implications. I will mention in the context of this debate the changes in 2007, when the Howard government allowed most workers of age 60 and above to withdraw their superannuation tax-free. Retirees who previously earned high incomes were the ones who benefited. In addition, people were allowed to transfer up to $1 million in their superannuation accounts before 30 June 2007. Wealthier people took advantage of this, topping up their accounts with large amounts of funds so they could later be claimed back tax-free. The result was $22.4 billion transferred to superannuation accounts by individuals in the June quarter of 2007—triple the amount transferred in the June quarter of 2006. Many commented at the time that that was doubtless going to lead to a substantial redistribution of income towards richer individuals. So, while the coalition place themselves in such debates as the friends of older Australians, as supporters of the superannuation system, history tells us quite the opposite.

What the government will be doing instead is implementing a package of reforms that builds on our legacy in superannuation. We will be increasing the superannuation guarantee rate from nine to 12 per cent and introducing a new contribution for low-income earners—reforms that those opposite oppose.

The government’s Stronger, Fairer, Simpler superannuation reforms and the reforms flowing out of the Cooper review into superannuation will see an increase in replacement rates for a worker on median wages, who is currently aged 30, from around 71 to 76 per cent. Put in dollar terms, that worker could expect an additional $108,000 in their retirement benefits.

These are reforms which are holistic and which take into account the entire superannuation system. These are not reforms that are opportunistic, that are tinkering or which potentially introduce inequities into the system. These are reforms that reflect Labor’s ongoing commitment to a fair superannuation system for all Australians.

Mr CRAIG THOMSON (Dobell) (11.53 am)—The hypocrisy with which this Abolition of Age Limit on Payment of the Superannuation Guarantee Charge Bill 2011 is brought here is absolutely staggering. If one wants to look at the records of the two parties in relation to what they have done for older Australians, the record is absolutely stark. The fact that it was brought to this...
place by the member for Mackellar absolutely highlights even further the hypocrisy that those on the other side have sunk to.

If the opposition in its history had ever been fair dinkum about older Australians, they would have supported compulsory superannuation in the first place and, of course, they did not. They screamed about the effects it was going to have on business. They went up and down about this being the end of the world—very similar to the sorts of debates we have at the moment about any proper reforms in the economy. They cry time and time again about a big tax. What the Labor government did in 1992 was make sure that older Australians would have money that they would be able to look to in their retirement funds. This was something those opposite opposed.

Right now, the government has a proposal that is going to affect 8.4 million Australians, by raising the superannuation level from nine to 12 per cent. Listening to the member for Mackellar, you would think, ‘Well, of course, the opposition must be supporting this amendment because they are so in favour in making sure that older Australians are looked after in their retirement.’ But this is not the case. This is not the case at all. They are opposing this legislation; they are opposing the move for Australians to have their superannuation rise to 12 per cent. I ask the member for Mckellar: what does she say to the 57,000 people in her electorate who are going to be denied this access to their retirement funds. This was something those opposite opposed.

The member for Mackellar also raised the issue of the pension. Those opposite were in government for 12 years and what did they do for the pension? Absolutely nothing. It took this government to make real reforms, real changes to the pension. It was this government that put the historic increase in the pension through. Again, what did they do on the other side? They blustered. They said, ‘We care for the elderly,’ but they did nothing for 12 years. It was another one of the issues that, apparently in the 13th year, they were going to get to. There is a long list of issues. Gosh, that 13th year of government was going to be a beauty for you guys! This was another thing that you did not do in 12 years of government. It again took the Labor Party to look after older Australians.

The record on this side of parliament is a very strong record. We introduced compulsory superannuation in the first place. We made sure that Australians would be looked after in their retirement by having access to compulsory superannuation. Before we did that, who got the benefits of superannuation? It was generally those who were well-off and those who were men. We found very few women who were able to get superannuation until compulsory superannuation came in. What did the member for Mackellar do when that bill was introduced? She opposed it. She opposed compulsory superannuation. The rhetoric she comes out with about the coalition being the friends of the elderly is merely a front. This is another attempt to try and hoodwink the Australian public.

What the Australian public need to do is look at the record of the two parties, because the two parties have starkly different records when it comes to superannuation. On this side, we support an increase in superannuation. We support making sure that all Australians get adequate superannuation in their retirement. We support making sure that the pension is raised to levels that people can exist on. On the other side, what do we have? We have opposition to compulsory superannuation; we have 12 years of doing nothing for pensioners with no changes in the pension rate. On this side of the House, this gov-
ernment are the friends of superannuation. This side of the House, this government are the friends of older Australians. It is only a Labor government that has ever stepped up to the plate for older Australians, making sure that we look after them when they retire and making sure that those on pensions get proper pension increases. From the other side all we have is opposition, bluster and bravado but no real action in looking after older Australians, ever. This is a bill that fails to deal with the real issues of superannuation. (Time expired)

Mr Van Manen (Forde) (11.58 am)—
It is interesting listening to the last two speakers, the member for Fraser and the member for Dobell, saying they are the friends of super. I remember in the last couple of years they decided that super was not okay for older Australians if they could contribute more than $25,000 or more than $50,000. They have cut the ability to make those contributions right back. Where are the savings there? Where is the benefit to the older Australians where they have capacity to contribute to super?

This Abolition of Age Limit on Payment of the Superannuation Guarantee Charge Bill 2011 is based on the notion that we want equality for everybody in the workforce. In Australia there is a notion of gender and ethnic diversity and equality. Therefore, it is time we embraced equality between the ages. Mature-age workers contribute greatly to our workplaces and society with the skills they possess that are unique to their working environment. With these skills they can teach younger colleagues. The government should be encouraging those with this experience to continue in their profession because this aids businesses in the community as well as the nation’s workforce participation. It will remove this inequity from the system.

Currently, the superannuation guarantee is payable up to the age of 70 and the government promised in the last election that they would raise it to age 75. As the member for Mackellar has pointed out, the purpose of this bill is to abolish that age limit altogether. Retaining an age limit on the superannuation guarantee only succeeds in discriminating unfairly against older workers, forcing them into retirement. (Time expired).

The Deputy Speaker (Mr Murphy)—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.

Mrs Bronwyn Bishop—Mr Deputy Speaker, I would like to make a point on indulgence for the speaker who has been interrupted. You took the speakers out of order, and then it was decided on the clerk’s advice that we would hear the last government speaker instead of hearing the opposition speaker. It was not put to me that it would limit his speaking time, and I think it is really untoward. If there is some way that you could find an extension of time to allow the member for Forde to continue his contribution in light of your earlier error that would be a fair thing to do.

The Deputy Speaker—No, it was not out of order in calling the member for Dobell. The time for the debate has expired.

Referred to Main Committee

Mr FitzGibbon (Hunter) (12.01 pm)—by leave—I move:
That the Electronic Transactions Amendment Bill 2011 be referred to the Main Committee for further consideration.

Question agreed to.
AVIATION CRIMES AND POLICING LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL 2010
CRIMES LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL 2010
LAW AND JUSTICE LEGISLATION AMENDMENT (IDENTITY CRIMES AND OTHER MEASURES) BILL 2010

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

STATUTE LAW REVISION BILL (No. 2) 2010
Returned from the Senate
Message received from the Senate returning the bill without amendment or request.

NATIONAL HEALTH AND HOSPITALS NETWORK BILL 2010
Consideration of Senate Message
Bill returned from the Senate with amendments.
Ordered that the amendments be considered immediately.

Senate’s amendments—
(1) Clause 5, page 3 (after line 7), after the definition of Chair, insert:
   clinician means an individual who provides diagnosis, or treatment, as a professional:
   (a) medical practitioner; or
   (b) nurse; or
   (c) allied health practitioner; or
   (d) health practitioner not covered by paragraph (a), (b) or (c).
(2) Clause 9, page 7 (line 6), after “Note”, insert “1”.
(3) Clause 9, page 7 (after line 7), at the end of subclause (1), add:
   Note 2: Sections 10 and 11 impose consultation requirements on the Commission.
(4) Clause 10, page 8 (after line 16), after paragraph (2)(d), insert:
   (da) carers; and
   (db) consumers; and
(5) Clause 11, page 9 (after line 29), after paragraph (2)(b), insert:
   (ba) carers; and
   (bb) consumers; and
(6) Clause 20, page 14 (after line 22), after paragraph (3)(g), insert:
   (ga) primary health care services;
(7) Clause 20, page 14 (after line 22), after paragraph (3)(g), insert:
   (gb) management of general practice;
(8) Clause 58, page 33 (line 29), before “consent”, insert “informed”.

Ms ROXON (Gellibrand—Minister for Health and Ageing) (12.03 pm)—I move:
That the amendments be agreed to.
These amendments have gone through a detailed process of discussion and negotiation in the Senate. We support all of these amendments, which addressed the issues raised by the Senate Community Affairs Legislation Committee and which were introduced by the Greens in the Senate.

The establishment of the commission as a permanent independent body from 1 July 2011 dedicated to monitoring safety and quality in health care is critical to the government’s health reforms, which are driving greater transparency and accountability of health services to the Australian public.

I am disappointed that the opposition continues to fail to support this bill when the Australian Commission on Quality and Safety in Health Care was established as a temporary body under Mr Abbott’s tenure as the health minister. Not supporting the commission on quality and safety showed, I think, that their strategy in health is just to block everything. There is the opportunity now here in the House, with the Senate hav-
ing agreed to these amendments and the government being prepared to accede to those amendments, for the opposition to show their support for such an important change. The commission, of course, will take a leading role in ensuring that all Australians have a healthcare system that provides safe, high-quality healthcare services. I hope that the opposition will now support this bill.

Mr DUTTON (Dickson) (12.04 pm)—This is a government that put forward on the one hand so-called health reform at the same time as they are pulling money out of important areas like mental health on the other. This is a government which has a minister for health who does not know anything about these reforms because most of them have been drafted out of the Prime Minister’s office—either the current holder of that office or the previous Prime Minister. It is a complete and utter embarrassment for this minister to stand in this place and suggest something that she has had no hand in whatsoever.

This is a government that wants people to believe that reform is taking place in health when really all that they are doing is creating yet another great big new bureaucracy. If it were one new bureaucracy then perhaps you could understand that the government wants to head in a different direction. If it were two new bureaucracies then perhaps you could be generous and arrive at the same outcome. But this government proposes three great big new bureaucracies as what they are putting forward by way of reform. It has to be said that this is nothing more and nothing less than the failed path that state Labor has taken us on in the area of health.

The amendments passed by the Senate that are the subject of this debate do not substantively change the nature of the bill. The coalition have made it clear that we support the work of the Australian Commission on Safety and Quality in Health Care as it currently operates within the department. We do not believe that the creation of a great big new bureaucracy is warranted. The function is currently performed within the department, but this government says that it needs to create another new bureaucracy. It does not take any resources away or reduce the numbers of people within the department to do that function; this is in addition to that.

That is why we believe that this minister is embarrassed from one end of the country to the other, because initially the reforms were driven out of the Prime Minister’s office, probably in ignorance of the fact that this function was already performed by the Department of Health and Ageing and, I suspect, out of callousness by the current Prime Minister, because she does not have an easy relationship with this minister. We know that this is a minister who does not want to be in the health portfolio. Talk to stakeholders around the country; this is a minister who wants to be the Attorney-General, not the health minister. That is why I think the wheels are falling off this reform very quickly. It is exactly the reason that the Australian Medical Association at the weekend
distanced themselves from yet another tranche of this reform—so-called. As you talk to doctors and nurses around the country, they are opposed to this reform, which is not adding up to any change or any betterment in our hospitals or in clinics around the country.

That is why we are taking the opportunity again to say that this is bad policy. Sure, these amendments are benign as proposed by the Senate, but we call again on the Independents to support the coalition, because we believe very strongly that if this amendment goes down then this will be a difficult situation for the government to recover from. If they cannot get agreement in the other place and if we can scuttle these amendments in this place then we will be doing a great service for anybody who wants to see the health system in this country improve.

This is a government that is built on a lie. This is a government that is built on spin, and there is no area where that is more evident at the moment than in the area of health. This is a government that wants to have a situation just like that in New South Wales, where the Labor Party presides over this huge spin machine. It wants the Australian public, now at a federal level, to believe that it is doing something about health when really it is starving clinicians of dollars and putting those dollars into these new bureaucracies.

We certainly stand for significant reform, but this is not significant reform. We oppose these amendments because we want to defeat this bill. We oppose these amendments because we want a better healthcare system in this country. (Time expired)

Question put: That the amendments be agreed to.

The House divided. [12.13 pm]
(The Speaker—Mr Harry Jenkins)

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Mr WILKIE (Denison) (12.20 pm)—I move:

That the amendments be agreed to.

My private member’s bill, the Evidence Amendment (Journalists’ Privilege) Bill 2010, is the so-called ‘shield law’. I add that the bill in essence gives journalists the right to protect an anonymous source’s identity unless a court can prove that the public interest is best served in disclosing the identity of the source—in other words, it would give protection to journalists who publicise information provided by sources choosing to remain anonymous. The bill is based on the premises that everyone has the fundamental right to free speech and that sometimes people need to speak out anonymously, especially when it comes to people blowing the whistle on official misconduct. Importantly, the bill is entirely consistent with the journalism profession’s code of ethics.

The amendments moved by Senator Ludlam in the Senate would broaden the scope of the bill and recognise the rapidly changing face of news, news mediums and the people who deliver it. The amendments would change the definition of ‘journalist’ from—

… a person who in the normal course of that person’s work”, substitute “is engaged and active in the publication of news”.

(2) Schedule 1, item 1, page 3 (line 17), omit “a medium”, substitute “any medium”.

Mr WILKIE (Denison) (12.20 pm)—I move:

That the amendments be agreed to.
Facebook or YouTube to publish news. They too are engaged and active in the publication of news and they too will sometimes be given information by an informant on the condition of anonymity. They too deserve protection, and these amendments would deliver that.

The simple fact is that technology is driving a seismic shift in the way news is delivered nowadays as well as how we consume news information. These amendments would allow the shield law to ride those leaps and bounds and remain contemporary. I would add, however, that the intent of this bill and these amendments is not to offer blanket protection to anybody and everybody out there making public comments—for instance, the many thousands of people posting comments online. Ultimately, the definition of a journalist as somebody who is engaged and active in the publication of news will direct the protection to those who genuinely deserve and require it. If uncertainty arises, the courts can be trusted to adjudicate. Central to Australia’s democracy is freedom of speech and freedom of the press. I believe that this bill and the Senate’s amendments go some way—an important way—to protecting both.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr Murphy)—Is the motion seconded?

Mr Oakeshott—I second the motion.

Mr McCLELLAND (Barton—Attorney-General) (12.23 pm)—I speak in favour of the motion. The government is pleased to support the passage of the Evidence Amendment (Journalists’ Privilege) Bill 2010. The bill will ensure journalists have the confidence to report information that is in the public interest without fear of being held in contempt of court for failing to disclose their sources. It will also encourage a full disclosure of information that is within the public interest by reassuring potential sources that their confidentiality can be maintained. The key element of the bill is the introduction of a rebuttable presumption in favour of journalists’ privilege, based on journalist shield laws in New Zealand. This allows a journalist to refuse to disclose the identity of a source or provide information that would disclose that identity where the journalist has promised to maintain the source’s confidentiality.

However, there will also be circumstances where public interest considerations do demand disclosure. Therefore, the bill permits a court to overturn the presumption where it has been satisfied by a party that the public interest in the disclosure outweighs any likely adverse effect on the informant or any other person, the public interest in the communication of facts and opinion to the public by the press and the ability of the press to access sources of fact. The government considers that this is an appropriate balance and that our courts are well placed to carry out this balancing exercise.

The bill was always intended to ensure adequate protection for journalists and their sources. The amendments passed in the Senate clarify these protections, and the government supports these amendments as the amendments fit within the objectives of the bill and are consistent with the Commonwealth Evidence Act 1995. The definitions in this bill are modelled on the New Zealand journalist shield provisions, as I have indicated. The definitions of ‘journalist’, ‘informant’ and ‘news media’ rely on their ordinary meanings and allow the court to take a case-by-case approach. These amendments clarify the concerns expressed as to whether the New Zealand based definitions are technology neutral and cover all of those engaged and active in the publication of news.

In conclusion, this bill is an excellent example of how all sides of politics can work together in this parliament towards a com-
mon goal. I again thank the member for Denison and also Senator Xenophon for introducing this bill and for their willingness to work with the government on this important issue.

Mr KEENAN (Stirling) (12.25 pm)—The opposition does not support these three amendments proposed by the Australian Greens and supported by the Labor Party, and I support the comments made by the shadow attorney-general, Senator Brandis, in relation to them. In particular, the coalition wishes to express the concern that broadening the definition of 'journalist' and activities that are captured by the Evidence Amendment (Journalists' Privilege) Bill 2010 and removing ‘in the course of that person’s work’ and substituting ‘is engaged and active in the publication of news’ expands it beyond the reach of what a journalist does.

In the opposition’s view, it is appropriate and desirable to protect journalists, as the title of the bill indicates. ‘Anyone engaged or active in the publication of news’ could mean any person who, for example, publishes material on the internet or contributes to a blog—any citizen who, by any medium, publishes something that might be considered newsworthy. Our concern is reinforced by amendment (3), which substitutes for the words ‘a medium’ the words ‘news medium’, being a defined term in the bill the words ‘any medium’.

If these amendments from the Australian Greens were to be adopted, the whole purpose of this bill would be massively expanded beyond its original conception, which is to protect journalists’ sources in defined circumstances. It would not merely protect journalists, and it would not merely protect news media. It would be carte blanche for anyone who wanted to publish anything anywhere that might be considered news.

I ask members to pause to reflect on what this might mean, for example, for the operation of the laws of defamation. There is a case that the opposition has made for several years—before the government or indeed the Greens were interested in this issue—for protecting journalists’ sources. If you break the nexus between the privilege and the work of a journalist, what you then have is a blanket protection, albeit it subject to rebuttal presumptions, for anyone publishing anything anywhere that might be considered to be news, and that is not the purpose this legislation ought to be serving.

It is certainly not the purpose sought for it to serve in the opposition’s alternative legislation. We seek to protect the work of journalists as a profession in the course of their ordinary work as set out in the language of the bill in its existing form. We acknowledge that the protection of sources is, in appropriate circumstances, an acknowledgement of the protection of the legitimate work of journalists. But if we adopt these amendments, particularly amendment (2), then it ceases to be legislation that protects journalists at all. It creates a free-for-all in the publication of anything with no limitation. It would extend a protection meant to facilitate the legitimate work of journalists to anyone engaged in whatever form of opportunistic activities.

We would counsel very strongly against the adoption of these amendments from the Greens. At their most extreme level, they would entirely defeat the purpose of this bill, which is a narrow and specific but important public policy purpose—that is, to protect journalists going about their legitimate business. We would urge the House not to consider massively expanding this bill to enshrine basically anybody publishing anything anywhere at any time.

Question put:
That the motion (Mr Wilkie’s) be agreed to.
The House divided. [12.33 pm]

(The Speaker—Mr Harry Jenkins)

| Ayes | 72 |
| Noes | 70 |
| Majority | 2 |

Question agreed to.

**AYES**

- Adams, D.G.H.
- Bandt, A.
- Bowen, C.
- Broadbmann, G.
- Byrne, A.S.
- Cheeseman, D.L.
- Collins, J.M.
- Crean, S.F.
- Danby, M.
- Elliot, J.
- Ferguson, L.D.T.
- Fitzgibbon, J.A.
- Georganas, S.
- Gray, G.
- Griffin, A.P.
- Hayes, C.P.
- Jones, S.
- King, C.F.
- Livermore, K.F.
- Macklin, J.L.
- McClelland, R.B.
- Murphy, J.
- O’Connor, B.P.
- Oakeshott, R.J.M.
- Parke, M.
- Plibersek, T.
- Rishworth, A.L.
- Roxon, N.L.
- Saffin, J.A.
- Sidebottom, S.
- Smyth, L.
- Swan, W.M.
- Thomson, C.
- Vamvakou, M.
- Windsor, A.H.C.

**NOES**

- Broadbent, R.
- Chester, D.
- Ciobo, S.M.
- Coulton, M.
- Dutton, P.C.
- Fletcher, P.
- Gambaro, T.
- Griggs, N.
- Hartsuyker, L.
- Hockey, J.B.
- Irons, S.J.
- Jones, E.
- Kelly, C.
- Ley, S.P.
- Marino, N.B.
- Matheson, R.
- Mirabella, S.
- Moylan, J.E.
- O’Dowd, K.
- Prentice, J.
- Ramsey, R.
- Robb, A.
- Roy, Wyatt
- Scott, B.C.
- Simpkins, L.
- Smith, A.D.H.
- Southcott, A.J.
- Tehan, D.
- Tudge, A.
- Van Manen, B.
- Washer, M.J.
- Abbott, A.J.
- Andrews, K.
- Billson, B.F.
- Bishop, J.I.
- Broadholz, S.
- Christensen, G.
- Cobb, J.K.
- Crook, T.
- Entsch, W.
- Frydenberg, J.
- Gash, J.
- Haase, B.W.
- Hawke, A.
- Hunt, G.A.
- Jensen, D.
- Keenan, M.
- Laming, A.
- Macfarlane, I.E.
- Markus, L.E.
- McCormack, M.
- Morrison, S.J.
- Neville, P.C.
- O’Dwyer, K
- Pyne, C.
- Randall, D.J.
- Robert, S.R.
- Ruddock, P.M.
- Secker, P.D.
- Slipper, P.N.
- Somlyay, A.M.
- Stone, S.N.
- Truss, W.E.
- Turnbull, M.
- Vasta, R.
- Wyatt, K.

**PAIRS**

- Gillard, J.E.
- Mitchell, R.
- Ellis, K.
- Forrest, J.A.
- Schultz, A.
- Baldwin, R.C.

* denotes teller

Question agreed to.

**COMMITTEES**

Joint Standing Committee on the National Broadband Network

**Appointment**

The SPEAKER—I have received a message from the Senate informing the House that it concurs with the resolution of appointment of the Joint Standing Committee on the National Broadband Network, subject to the Senate’s proposed amendments. Given their length, I do not intend to read the terms of them. They will
be recorded in the *Votes and Proceedings* and incorporated in *Hansard*.

Ordered that the amendments be considered immediately.

**Senate’s amendments**—

1. Omit paragraph (4), substitute:

   (4) that participating members may be appointed to the Committee. Participating members may participate in hearings of evidence and deliberations of the Committee, and have all the rights of a member of the Committee, but may not vote on any questions before the Committee;

2. After paragraph (7), insert:

   (7A) that the Committee elect a member as its Deputy Chair who shall act as Chair of the Committee at any time when the Chair is not present at a meeting of the Committee, and at any time when the Chair and Deputy Chair are not present at a meeting of the Committee the members shall elect another member to act as Chair at that meeting;

3. Omit paragraph (8), substitute:

   (8) that, in the event of an equally divided vote, the Chair, or the Deputy Chair when acting as Chair, have a casting vote;

4. Paragraph (9), omit “three”, substitute “five”

**Mr Albanese** (Grayndler—Minister for Infrastructure and Transport) (12.39 pm)—These are largely technical amendments. They simply mean that there will be the appointment of a deputy chair, which is standard procedure when it comes to the creation of committees. It will change the quorum requirement from three to five members. The government believe this is an important committee. It will be chaired by the independent member for Lyne. The committee is very broad in terms of its scope of inquiry, and the government commends the resolution, as amended, to the House.

Question agreed to.

**Joint Standing Committee on the National Broadband Network**

**Joint Select Committee on the Christmas Island Tragedy**

**Appointment**

**The Speaker**—I have received messages from the Senate informing the House that senators have been appointed members and participating members of the Joint Standing Committee on the National Broadband Network and the Joint Select Committee on the Christmas Island Tragedy of 15 December 2010. As the messages are lengthy, I do not intend to read the terms of them. They will be record in the *Votes and Proceedings* and incorporated in *Hansard*.

**The messages read as follows**—

Senators Cash, Crossin, Fielding, Hanson-Young and Marshall have been appointed members of the Joint Select Committee on the Christmas Island tragedy of 15 December 2010.

Senators have been appointed to the Joint Standing Committee on the National Broadband Network as follows, Senators Birmingham, Fisher and Macdonald as members; and Senators Abetz, Adams, Back, Barnett, Bernardi, Boswell, Boyce, Brandis, Bushby, Cash, Colbeck, Coonan, Cormann, Eggleston, Ferguson, Fierravanti-Wells, Fifield, Heffernan, Humphries, Johnston, Joyce, Kroger, Mason, McGauran, Minchin, Nash, Parry, Payne, Ronaldson, Ryan, Scullion, Troeth, Trood and Williams as participating members.

**Treaties Committee**

**Report**

**Mr Kelvin Thomson** (Wills) (12.40 pm)—On behalf of the Joint Standing Committee on Treaties I present the committee’s report entitled Report 115: *Treaties tabled on 28 October and 24 November 2010, and Treaties referred on 16 November 2010 (part 2).*
Ordered that the report be made a parliamentary paper.

Mr KELVIN THOMSON—by leave—
Report 115 of the Joint Standing Committee on Treaties reviews 16 significant and five minor treaty actions.

The committee supports each of the actions considered in this report. In the brief time available today, I will direct my remarks mainly to the World Wine Trade Group Agreement on Requirements for Wine Labelling.

This agreement aims to harmonise wine labelling requirements between member countries. Estimates are that the agreement will save Australian wine makers $25 million per annum, and open new opportunities for trade into major world wine markets.

The committee has supported the agreement, although it recognises there are concerns about inconsistency with Australia's domestic regulations, with potential implications for consumers.

Accordingly, the committee has expressed the view that the National Measurement Institute should bear these concerns in mind as it amends and implements the National Measurement Regulations to support the agreement.

Turning briefly to the other agreements in the report, the committee has supported binding treaty action with the European Union on classified information security, on double taxation with Turkey, on social security with Austria, and for provision of air services with seven nations.

The report also reviews treaties addressing mobile satellite communications and postal services and clarifies liability limits for compensation claims arising from incidents involving ships.

Finally, and important given the recent and tragic events in Japan, the committee has endorsed a cross-servicing agreement which will assist Australian defence and Japanese non-defence forces to provide disaster and humanitarian relief more efficiently and well, through reciprocal provision of defence supplies and services.

I commend the report to the House.

SCHOOLS ASSISTANCE AMENDMENT (FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE) BILL 2011

Second Reading

Debate resumed from 3 March, on motion by Mr Andrews:

That this bill be now read a second time.

Mrs ANDREWS (McPherson) (12.44 pm)—I rise to speak in support of the Schools Assistance Amendment (Financial Assistance) Bill 2011. This bill seeks to amend the Schools Assistance Act 2008 to extend the existing funding arrangements, including recurrent funding arrangements until the end of 2013 and grants for capital expenditure until the end of 2014, for non-government schools. I begin by putting on the record what I believe is the importance of education. Education is a process of imparting skills and knowledge. It provides access to information and the opportunity to acquire deeper knowledge. It enables and extends practical experience and interacts with technology to enhance productivity. From pre-school kids to adult learners, participants in education have greater opportunities to build their self-awareness and confidence. Education helps to develop resilience and to secure a stable family income. Education is a building block of innovation—it inspires creativity and enlivens passion. Education connects our community and helps us build a better world for the next generations.

The Gold Coast, where I come from, is fast becoming an education city. In my elec-
torate of McPherson on the southern Gold Coast, we have two universities. At the southern end of the electorate we have Southern Cross University and in the north of the electorate we have Bond University. We have TAFE facilities and several training colleges, including some that are privately owned and operated. We also have over 30 schools, including the private schools and faith based schools of Somerset College, Marymount College, Marymount Primary School, St Andrews Lutheran College, St Augustine’s Parish Primary School, St Vincent’s Catholic Parish Primary School, Kings Christian College, Hillcrest Christian College, Gold Coast Christian College and All Saints Anglican School.

I consult widely with principals, teachers and parents throughout the electorate, and a couple of issues are consistently raised. Firstly, parents want a choice of schools for their children. Secondly, they want the opportunity to send their children to an independent school and not to be penalised by the government for making that choice. As I have indicated already, there is a significant number of independent and faith based schools in my electorate, and parents appreciate having the choice of sending their children to those schools. Many of the independent and faith based schools have significant waiting lists, and this demonstrates that there is a strong demand for independent and faith based education on the Gold Coast, particularly on the southern Gold Coast.

I take this opportunity to speak about one of the schools in my electorate, St Andrews Lutheran College. I recently had the opportunity to speak to the principal, Mr Tim Kotzur. Whilst our initial discussion was regarding the Ride2School program, we also spoke about funding arrangements for independent and faith based schools. Mr Kotzur subsequently wrote to me specifically about the issues that were relevant to St Andrews.

By way of background, St Andrews is a prep-to-year-12 coeducational school providing Christian education in the Tallebudgera and Burleigh areas of the Gold Coast. Since its establishment in 1993, the school has grown rapidly to a stage where it now educates approximately 1,100 students. St Andrews comprises three subschools: a junior school, which is for prep to year 6; a middle school, which is for years 7 to 9; and a senior school, which is for years 10 to 12.

The junior school, using the International Baccalaureate’s Primary Years Programme—the PYP—as its framework, places a strong emphasis on developing both the fundamentals of numeracy and literacy and higher-order inquiry skills. The middle school has a diverse vertical electives programme, and year 9 students experience an extended outdoor education and service-learning program. Senior school students select a pathway that reflects their academic and vocational needs and provides what is most appropriate to their postschool aspirations. Information and communication technologies are integrated across the curriculum for all year levels.

St Andrews values a holistic approach and encourages students to develop values that enrich the intellect, nurture the spirit, develop social responsibility and create healthy lifestyles. It is a school that seeks to provide an environment where each student is valued and is challenged to discover, develop and use their unique gifts and abilities for personal growth and service to others.

St Andrews, like other faith based and independent schools, strives to keep its fees accessible to the families in the community. Ninety per cent of the St Andrews families come from the local area. To continue to provide affordable, accessible quality education, St Andrews and other non-government schools need stable and guaranteed funding.
to enable them to financially plan for the future. All students, regardless of where they are educated, should receive a basic funding entitlement. Providing for the education of all Australian students is a fundamental responsibility of a democratically elected government, as it ensures that all Australian students have the opportunity to be educated to recognised standards and to world’s best practice. Parents with children attending St Andrews and other independent schools maintain their effort in contributing to the education of their children, and I congratulate them for continuing to do so.

Access to capital funding to plan for new buildings and facilities and to refurbish current ones is also required if the faith based and independent schools are to continue to provide excellence in education. I commend St Andrews Lutheran College on its strong academic, sporting and extracurricular records and look forward to assisting them, along with many other schools in my electorate of McPherson, in the future.

The population of South-East Queensland has been growing rapidly in recent years, not just from births but also from former residents of the southern states relocating for the lifestyle offered, particularly by the Gold Coast. Many of those relocating are families with school-age children, some of whom who have already started school in Victoria or New South Wales. As these families assess which school would be most appropriate for their child, they deserve certainty from the government.

A school student’s education can well last 13 years. The attitudes of the Gillard government and the minister do not just offer uncertainty to the sector but to the parents and students. This bill extends the funding arrangements for schools based on the previous coalition government’s socioeconomic status, or SES, funding model, and I support it. The SES funding model is vastly superior, despite the Prime Minister’s previous criticism of this more equitable and fair model in comparison to the previous Labor government’s Educational Resources Index. The Prime Minister is on the record claiming this model is ‘flawed and unworkable’, which of course has partly contributed to the uncertainty surrounding in particular the non-government education sector. I note that the minister for education initially refused to confirm the SES model would be extended through to 2012, contributing to the problem.

This bill extends the arrangements until 2013. While this is only two years away, at the very least there is some element of certainty extended to the sector through this bill, despite the Gillard government’s dubious support to this approach in the long term. As this bill today only extends the funding for two years, and this is done in recognition of an election promise the Prime Minister made under pressure, parents would be asking themselves: ‘We can afford to send our children to this particular school for now, with the current fees and in acknowledgement of increases in fees vaguely in line with inflation, but will we be able to continue to send our children here until they graduate?’

A four-year funding agreement for a non-government school can be $1.3 billion. If this funding were stripped out of our schools, some would have no choice but to raise fees in order to maintain the quality of their facilities and the education they provide. This model does not take into account school resources or fees, which raises concerns regarding the government’s motivation behind the recent additions to the MySchool website. We know, historically, that the Labor Party has been critical of non-government school funding, arguing that this funding reduces the funding available for government schools while ignoring the fact that the bulk of this funding comes from the states. The
small concession to parents, students and schools offered through this bill does not offer the full certainty they require. I call on the government to commit to take any alternative model they may introduce that will rip funds out of our non-government schools to an election so that the electors can make up their minds whether it deserves support.

Because the SES model distributes according to need, the schools serving our communities in most need of assistance receive the greatest assistance. In the electorate of McPherson this will be schools at the south of the electorate, including St Andrews Lutheran College. What this means in practice is that parents, irrespective of their income levels, have a realistic opportunity to decide the most appropriate schooling for their child, including independent or faith based education. In addition, it creates incentives for non-government schools to branch out and assist students from lower socio-economic backgrounds as there will be a financial benefit.

As has already been stated, the most seemingly well-equipped schools have student populations that are not necessarily comprised of our most economically advantaged students. Many parents make enormous sacrifices to send their children to the school of their choice, and their choices in this regard can be shaped by a variety of factors. It could be that their child has a talent for music or sport and the school of their choice offers special programs in these areas that are not offered by their local state school. It could be that, due to behavioural or learning difficulties of a student, the parents select a non-government school which offers programs that they believe will make a long-lasting difference to their child. Additionally, we should support parents who wish for their child to receive a religious education at a religious school in the spirit of acknowledging the importance of choice and religious freedom. It must also be acknowledged that many of our so-called advantaged schools supply numerous scholarships and assistance for underprivileged students, and this model encourages this behaviour to continue.

Schools are not discouraged from fundraising through the SES model. Of course, school communities should be encouraged to support their own schools through fundraising. Indeed, there are not only financial benefits available in this regard. Fetes, working bees, fundraising committees and school events all add to the sense of a true school community and build relationships between parents, and all of this has a flow-on effect that is positive for the students.

I support this bill and support the SES funding model as a superior model. The SES model encourages choice, acknowledges that non-government schools deserve support and sensibly distributes Commonwealth education funding. It encourages positive behaviours by schools and parents and it ensures that those schools that nurture our most disadvantaged receive the most support. It is on that basis that I support the bill.

Mr BANDT (Melbourne) (12.58 pm)—The Schools Assistance Amendment (Financial Assistance) Bill 2011 provides for the existing federal funding system for non-government schools to be extended by a further one year until the end of 2013. It is the implementation of an announcement made by the Prime Minister during the election campaign year. The Greens said at the time, through our education spokesperson, Senator Hanson-Young, that this bill adds yet another year to the growing delay in tackling inequities in Australia’s school funding system. It means that any reform to the current system will not be implemented until at least 2014, over six years since this Labor government was elected.
The current SES funding model was introduced by the Howard government in 2001. The model links the residential addresses of students enrolled at a school to census data to produce a socioeconomic profile of the school community and its ability to support the school. Under the SES model, funding is allocated according to the socioeconomic status of the community the school is located in. A school’s SES score determines its per-student general recurrent funding rates as a percentage of the average government school recurrent costs, thus ensuring increases in funding to public schools are passed on to non-government schools. The funding model incorporates a guarantee that schools will not be worse off, leading to large numbers of non-government schools receiving more funds than they would be entitled to by strictly applying the SES formula.

This current model has been widely acknowledged to be flawed and unfair by public school advocates, the Australian Education Union, educational academics, the government while it was in opposition and an internal report on the model commissioned by the opposition when they were in government. The fact that this government has initiated a review into funding for schooling is an acknowledgment that the current model needs reform.

The Greens have stayed consistent in our view that this current model for funding non-government schools requires fundamental change and that public education must be central to any new funding model. The government while in opposition shared the concerns of the Greens and others with the Howard government funding model—in fact, the Prime Minister was one of the most vocal critics in outlining the flaws in the model. And yet in government not only did the Labor Party keep the inequitable Howard model for another quadrennium of funding from 2008; it is now extending it for another year. It is no surprise that this bill has opposition support.

In 2008, in the debate on the legislation for the current quadrennium of funding to non-government schools, Senator Milne moved amendments to limit the funding to two years, until the end of 2011. It was the Greens’ belief that the review promised by the Labor Party prior to the 2007 election would be undertaken in the two years from 2008 and that a new funding formula would be developed by the 2010 election. Instead, it is likely that the Australian community will go through two elections before this government implements a new model for Commonwealth funding of non-government schools.

The Greens welcome the commitment to a review and we are following its progress with great interest. We look forward to an honest, constructive debate on schools funding in our community. We encourage parents, teachers, schools and the broader community to become engaged in the discussion. The education of our children is too important to ignore, and the review is critical in making sure that we utilise government resources effectively to ensure the best education system possible.

We want to see a public school system that sets the standard for education in the nation. To do this, the Greens believe, the public education system needs significantly more investment. We believe that a strong public education system is essential for a robust democratic society—a society that values equity and fairness, that values our children and their futures and that understands the role of education in redressing social inequalities and creating cohesive and strong communities. But we are faced with a terrible legacy of underinvestment in public education by Australian governments of all
persuasions. On OECD rankings, Australia in the bottom half for public funding to public education, when you exclude tertiary, as a percentage of GDP.

Many people in my electorate send their children to non-government schools, and of course they should have the right to do that, but no-one should ever be forced into a situation where the choice is made in part because of declining public standards in public schools. We cannot continue to starve public schools and then be surprised that people are increasingly choosing to send their children elsewhere. That is a vicious circle that will simply reinforce itself and continue the process of declining proportional funding to public schools. I must admit that, when I hear the Prime Minister and others say that they intend to take the market principles that have been developed elsewhere and apply them to our education system, it sends a shiver down my spine. I have grave concerns for the future of public education in this country.

The Greens acknowledge the investments that this government has made in education in the last three years. We have not always agreed with the government on its approach—for example, we continue to have concerns with the MySchool website. However, we supported the Building the Education Revolution as part of the stimulus package bringing much-needed infrastructure investment to schools around the country. But, consistent with our previous positions, we are disappointed that the government is continuing to delay much-needed reform in public schools funding.

Ms Marino (Forrest) (1.04 pm)—As I have said on numerous occasions in this House, education is a priority of mine and I believe that people in Australia should have access to lifetime learning, regardless of where they live. To this extent, I am supportive of the Schools Assistance Amendment (Financial Assistance) Bill 2011, as it provides at least short-term funding certainty to the non-government schools sector by extending the former, coalition government’s funding model for another year. This bill extends the current legislation while the Gonski review of government funding for schooling is being conducted. However, this bill, and the review, reignites the debate about the future of school funding. When announcing the review, the Prime Minister said that school funding “should be based on simplicity, flexibility, stability, equity, value for money, transparency and best practice”.

An article in the Australian earlier this year stated that in dollar terms, taking into account the combination of both state and federal funding, students at government schools receive approximately twice the government funding that is received by students in non-government schools. But it appears that the Labor government may well be seeking to widen this funding disparity. We do know that Labor voted against the Howard government’s socioeconomic status funding model, and we have since heard from a number of Labor members that they are opposed to equitable funding for non-government schools.

This is a stark reminder that the Labor Party is very much still the party of the private schools hit list, in spite of its rhetoric in the run to the last election. This could well turn out to be just the next election commitment given to the Australian people that the Prime Minister breaks—time will tell—just like the deliberately misleading commitment that there would be ‘no carbon tax under a government I lead’. What is irrefutable is that the Liberal Party is the party that supports families having choices in the education decisions they feel best suit the needs of their children, their location or their specific circumstances. During the time of the How-
ard government, many schools in my electorate were encouraged.

It is a choice. This choice includes government, independent, Catholic and other religious schools. History proves our commitment to this through the introduction of SES funding. It is a funding model designed to ensure that education funding actually gets to the right areas irrespective of whether that is a private or a public school. This model is based around the belief that excellence should be achieved and achievable in both government and non-government schools.

The Liberal Party believes in choice for parents and students, as all on the coalition side do. We believe that school communities need to have a greater say in how their schools function within their specific community and what strategic direction their schools should take. That is why, at a WA state level, a Liberal led government is expanding its Independent Public Schools program. It is a very effective program. One in four government schools have submitted expressions of interest, and there are currently 98 independent public schools in Western Australia, representing a wide range from across the socioeconomic spectrum, including primary and high schools, senior colleges, district high schools and education support centres. This initiative empowers principals, teachers and school communities to devise and drive local responses to suit the needs of their students and communities. What better outcome could you want? Clearly, the evidence shows that parents and school communities are embracing this new initiative and find that it allows them to have a greater say in how their schools are run.

When I read this legislation, I noticed the omission of the national curriculum and I was concerned how the government’s proposed national curriculum and time lines may affect independent public schools in WA. The shadow minister for education has had to lead by example by moving an amendment to fix what is unfortunately the latest flawed piece of Labor legislation. The shadow minister moved that the national curriculum be included in the legislation. Last year the government was forced to back away from its original promise to implement the national curriculum by the beginning of this year. In an unfortunate continuing example of the government’s incompetence, the delay was caused by concerns about the quality of the national curriculum and how it was being proposed by the government.

The national curriculum has to be able to demonstrate that it is better than existing state curricula and can be clearly evaluated as an improvement. Labor’s current national curriculum has been labelled in some instances as incoherent, inferior, lacking in quality and clarity, and, if you are a school, this is of particular concern. It has been labelled worse by the state government and education stakeholders. The Labor government has an awfully long way to go in delivering a national curriculum that is not detrimental or inferior to state curricula.

Given the diversity of issues in my electorate, one key aspect of the national curriculum must be provision for local variation. One size does not fit all—this is a message across many portfolio areas that the Labor government simply cannot grasp and continues to fail to grasp. Local principals, staff, parents and communities are in the best position to identify what will and will not work for individual schools as demonstrated by those 98 WA independent public schools as well as our independent and Catholic schools.

The national curriculum must allow schools to continue to capitalise on local knowledge, experience and commitment. What works at a school in Sydney may well
not work in my electorate in places like Brunswick, Donnybrook or Dunsborough. I have absolutely no doubt that principals, staff, parents and the local communities in the south-west of WA know far better what is needed in their schools than the Labor government in Canberra.

This bill is more noteworthy for what it does not address than for what it does. It ignores the fact that the current act requires that non-government schools implement the national curriculum on or before 31 January 2012. This simple administrative issue should have been rectified in the legislation.

One thing I believe should be agreed on in this House is the importance of education. At a recent address to the International Women of Courage Award ceremony in Washington, the Prime Minister said the following:

Perhaps the right of greatest ultimate importance, the right to education. I am passionate about education.

Education is the key to all our opportunities. Education is the one thing no one can ever take away from us.

The Prime Minister said that ‘education is the one thing that no-one can ever take away from us.’ What a slap in the face this statement is for the thousands of rural and regional students and families who are being actively discriminated against by the Prime Minister’s changes to youth allowance. If the Prime Minister has said ‘the right of greatest ultimate importance’ is ‘the right to education’, if she is genuinely concerned, if she is passionate about education and if she genuinely believes what she said in the US, then why has the Prime Minister taken away the option of a tertiary education for some regional and rural students through those changes to youth allowance? Why has the Prime Minister deliberately and repeatedly resisted this parliament and the will of the Australian people to fix the very problem the Prime Minister created?

Prime Minister, I am working for equity of access for rural and regional students and I challenge the Prime Minister to deliver here in Australia what she said she was committed to in the US: ‘the right of greatest ultimate importance, the right to education’. I challenge the Prime Minister to offer that right to students affected by changes to youth allowance—the young people in my electorate and nearly 20,000 around Australia. The Prime Minister cannot continue to say one thing and do another. The Prime Minister cannot continue to mislead the Australian public both domestically in relation to education and internationally. It is time for the Prime Minister to do what the Prime Minister has said she believes in: the right to education, the right that a lot of students who are affected by inner regional classification now cannot access.

This government has a responsibility to the education of students around Australia, and this definitely includes those in rural and regional areas like the south-west of Western Australia. This discrimination should not be allowed to continue, but unfortunately again this demonstrates the contempt with which the Labor government holds rural and regional Australia. I support the amendments and the extension of funding arrangements to non-government schools until the end of 2013, although I place on record my serious concerns about what the government will do next to the choices of parents and students following the current review.

Ms O’NEILL (Robertson) (1.14 pm)—I rise to speak in favour of the Schools Assistance Amendment (Financial Assistance) Bill 2011 and against the amendment moved by the Manager of Opposition Business in the House. This bill confirms the Gillard gov-
ernment’s commitment to ensuring the certainty of investment in all Australian schools. As I have discussed with many teachers in my electorate—many of them former colleagues—the government’s review of funding for schooling is a once-in-a-generation chance to build a community consensus around education needs for our community and our nation.

As the Prime Minister and the Minister for School Education, Early Childhood and Youth have said on many occasions, Labor is all about ensuring that every child has the opportunity to get a great education. The Prime Minister’s words that ‘all children need to be supported in their education, regardless of where they go to school’, ring in my ears as an educator. We understand that as a government we must support all children to learn—no matter what way, shape or form that education may take. With the passage of this legislation, we will be able to continue to provide recurrent and capital funding to non-government schools while the review is conducted. This will provide certainty to Catholic and independent schools to enable them to continue to give their students a good education.

As a teacher with over three decades experience in Catholic education and as a participant in the preparation of teachers for engagement in all education settings, I can tell you how much confidence in continuity of funding is really appreciated. Labor values participation in education, and our credentials are on display for all to see in all of the education initiatives, including this amendment bill. We value participation in democracy and we celebrate diversity—and nowhere is this celebration of diversity of more fundamental importance than in the education sector.

I am mindful of the overarching goals for Australian schooling articulated in the Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians in December 2008. It clearly sets out for us a commitment to promoting equity and excellence, and that is at the heart of this amendment bill. The goal of the Melbourne declaration is for all young Australians to become successful learners, confident and creative individuals, and active and informed citizens. This is the work of Australian teachers, and they need certainty in order to be able to continue to do that.

It is through education that our children learn the principles of democracy and about the choices that they can face as they work and play as part of our wider community. We are a diverse community: multicultural and of many faiths. Families need to be able to choose where they send their children to school and they need to feel comfortable and confident that there is an easy match between the principles they are espousing at home, the language with which they espouse those principles, and the place in which their children take their first steps into a wider community.

We have a fantastic education system in this country. It is a system that has grown over hundreds of years and has developed into the world-class education system that our students experience today. The system itself reflects our diversity; from the very earliest days, Catholic, Anglican and Presbyterian groups ran schools in the new colony. One can only imagine the much better life outcomes our first peoples would have experienced if their spirituality and knowledge had been respected and embedded in a curriculum that honoured and engaged young Aboriginal learners in ways that linked to the discourses and cultural practices of their first community, their families and their local communities.

Regardless of such values in the past, I know from personal experience that right
now there are thousands and thousands of
dedicated teachers out there who are com-
mitted to and excited by the prospect of
awakening in students a deeper understand-
ing of the rich world in which we live. These
teachers work in a huge range of schools. I
know that they teach because they are pas-
sionate people, they care about their stu-
dents, they care about our society and they
care about our schools—all of our schools
and all of our students.

Teachers arrive at tertiary settings from all
schooling sectors and they return to our var-
ied schooling sectors—all of them. These
teachers are teaching in state schools, Catho-
lic schools, independent schools, selective
schools, Jewish schools, Christian schools,
Islamic schools, Steiner schools and, most
importantly, schools in Indigenous communi-
ties. They are teaching the standard curricu-
lum, which is soon to be a standardised na-
tional curriculum. They are doing it in a
range of settings and in a rich range of cul-
tural, religious and philosophical perspec-
tives. Schooling in Australia is reflective of
and embedded in a rich tapestry that is a sign
of a healthy democracy.

I know that there are tens of thousands of
dedicated students who are eager to learn,
eager to participate and eager to engage with
their community. Every day, kids around
Australia get up and go to their school. They
go to schools that are as diverse—perhaps
even more diverse—as the range of indi-
viduals represented in this chamber. These
children go to school not just to learn but to
meet other kids and socialise. We have all
seen just how valuable learning is, how life
changing and transformative a good educa-
tion can be.

Parents want to see their children educated
in the best possible environment; they want
them to learn in a supportive, caring, engag-
ning and exciting atmosphere, and there needs
to be a wide range of schools that offer a
‘best fit’ for unique kids. I know these par-
ents want to see their children growing, de-
veloping and learning about themselves and
about the wide and wonderful world in
which we live. I know parents want to see
their children grow up with aspirations and
dreams. They want their children to unpack
all of their talents, all of their intelligence
and to rise to the talents within their minds
and bodies. They want their children to en-
gege with our society, to have a positive im-
 pact in our community and to contribute in a
great way to our nation. I know this, because
I want all of these things for my own chil-
dren.

To clarify why this bill is so important: the
bill provides the certainty and security that is
so vital to the non-government education
sector. By securing funding for Catholic and
independent schools until 2013, we are al-
lowing these schools to continue their work
of providing a positive and valuable choice
for the education of many students around
Australia with certainty. As a government,
we must provide this certainty, because we
are committed, 100 per cent, to seeing that
each and every student in our nation receives
not just a good education but a great educa-
tion.

We want to be a government that sees
education not as a public cost burden but as a
public investment and a commitment to a
positive future for our youth. Indeed, educa-
tion really is an investment in the future of
our nation. It is an investment in the devel-
opment of our communities and in the devel-
opment of our families and our youths’ fu-
ture careers. It is an investment in the growth
of equality, tolerance, compassion and de-
ocracy.

This bill is so important because it pro-
vides consistency to the education sector in a
time of critical change. There are exciting
things going on in Australia’s education system, including the development and careful delivery of a national curriculum. We must do what we can to take the pressure off schools while these changes occur. Removing the ambiguity around funding is one way we can do that.

This bill is important because it provides a $3.5 million funding guarantee for Indigenous education in 2013. This Labor government has a proven track record of positive engagement with the first peoples of Australia. It is another core value of our party. We welcome opposition bipartisanship, but we are the party that made the apology and we are the architects of closing the gap. This bill continues the long road to recovery; it continues our efforts to see that we make amends for past injustices; and it continues our commitment to reducing the inequality between Aboriginal people of this country and those more fortunate.

Another important aspect of this bill is that it secures recurrent funding support for some of our most disadvantaged students in rural and remote areas. The Labor Party approach Australia’s future with optimism. We approach the office of governance with absolute positive resolve. It is through clarity and collaboration that we can further enhance our education so that it supports all students, no matter how they came to be where they are. By supporting this bill we are supporting the great work of every teacher in every child’s education. We are supporting schools that make an invaluable contribution to our great democracy.

I would characterise the proposed opposition amendment as an unproductive retreat from bipartisanship on education. The proposed amendment removes from the act the implementation date of 31 January 2012 and it replaces it with a date set by the Minister for School Education, Early Childhood and Youth by legislative instrument. It also inserts a clause that requires the date set by the minister to be no earlier than the date before which he or she is satisfied that the curriculum will be implemented in government schools in each state and territory and if it appears that implementation in government schools will not occur by this date, the minister must set a later date. The current act provides that a funding agreement for non-government schools must implement the national curriculum prescribed by regulations for primary or secondary education, or both, as applicable. This requirement must be satisfied on or before 31 January 2012.

Mr Garrett interjecting—
Mr Pyne interjecting—

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Ms K Liv-ermore)—Order! The shadow minister and the minister will have their chance in the debate on the amendment.

Ms O’NEILL—I am sure the minister’s wise words have been very edifying. On 8 December 2010 all Australian education ministers agreed to endorse Australia’s first national curriculum and endorsed the curriculum implementation time line that the Australian curriculum in English, mathematics, history and science be substantially implemented by the end of 2013. All schools—both government and non-government—will, therefore, have in place our first Australian curriculum from foundation to year 10 in these subjects by that time.

I have been assured by the minister that the government has a process in place for resolving this issue in consultation with the sector as appropriate. A careful and respect-ful consultation is a far superior method to that advocated by those opposite. This rushed amendment by the opposition will not deliver anything but alarm and division. The government has no intention of treating government and non-government schools differ-
ently in relation to implementation of the Australian curriculum. We will work constructively with the non-government sector schools to implement a sustainable solution.

There was never an intention or an expectation that this matter would be dealt with as part of this bill, and neither the member for Sturt nor the non-government school sector have raised it with the minister. The only place this issue was raised was in a release by Christian Schools Australia—which, when contacted, agreed that they were happy with the government’s current process and issued a revised statement.

The amendment proposed by the member for Sturt is ambiguous and would result in unreasonable uncertainty for non-government schools, as the schools’ required implementation date will be dependent on the progress of each state and territory. The amendment could require the minister to change the implementation date for the non-government sector irrespective of the time lines agreed by the ministerial council—and that is completely unsatisfactory.

If one state or territory government is dragging its heels in meeting the deadlines set by the ministerial council to implement the curriculum, this could then jeopardise the implementation in all non-government schools across Australia. How careless, how foolish and how short-sighted. This amendment will not give our schools the certainty they need. I commend the bill to the House without amendment.

Ms BIRD (Cunningham) (1.28 pm)—I rise in support of the Schools Assistance Amendment (Financial Assistance) Bill 2011.

Mr Pyne interjecting—

Ms BIRD—I was so moved by the intense and wonderful contributions of my colleagues on this side that I have come to add my contribution to this particular debate. I thank the shadow minister for being so keen to hear me that he has acknowledged my presence in the debate.

There is an important process underway instituted by this government to review the most appropriate mechanism for schools funding. Within the context of that broader consultation that is currently underway with a view to having a report through by late this year, this bill provides ongoing certainty around funding. It will amend the Schools Assistance Act 2008 with the intention of extending the existing funding arrangements, which include the indexation arrangements until the end of 2013 and the grants for capital expenditure until the end of 2014. This is intended to ensure funding certainty for the Catholic and independent schools sectors through the process of the broader review.

I should indicate that part of that broader review currently underway includes the conversation with all sectors, not only the organised sectors but the parents, schools and student bodies that are interested in participating in the review. Like many in this House, no doubt, I have had submissions and interest from local school communities about this most significant and important process. This bill sits within that broader context, with the intention of providing funding certainty during that process that is being undertaken.

Obviously if we acknowledge that the bill sits within the funding review, as has been indicated by some of the other discussion and the nature of the amendments proposed by the opposition, it also sits within a broader educational reform agenda, which includes initiatives such as the Building the Education Revolution, the Digital Education Revolution and the development of a national curriculum. These are all excellent and important reforms in the sector. As a former teacher I think it is well overdue that we have had an opportunity to express our con-
fidence and invest in our education system in the way that those three broad reforms intend to do. In particular for me, having been an English history teacher, it may be a bit surprising but I think the Digital Education Revolution—

Mr Pyne—You’re obviously grasping at straws now!

Ms Bird—which the shadow minister obviously finds something unimportant and not worthy of consideration within this House, should be acknowledged as a particularly important reform. It became obvious to me that as the current generation grew up they would have to have digital literacy skills, which are as significantly important in many ways in a modern society as their broader literacy skills, and that schools would therefore need to be able to provide the sorts of technology we are now seeing roll out in schools. Whilst there is a separate, dedicated funding stream to provide that support into schools, the capacity of schools to provide that is critically important. When I chaired the Standing Committee on Education and Training in the last parliament—the member for Braddon, who is here in the chamber now, was a member of that committee—we had evidence in our inquiry about the issues that will confront young people into the future. We heard from young people that the capacity to be digitally literate and have access to those resources in schools was particularly important for them.

Since this government was elected, with our commitment to education, we have seen a dedicated range of funding streams that have been important to modernising our school system, that have provided the digital literacy skills and technology that schools needed and that have upgraded the infrastructure in schools, which is particularly important. I have been visiting several of my primary schools recently with their new hall facilities in the Building the Education Revolution. Sometimes I think what people miss about the importance of that program is the expansion of the primary school curriculum to include a range of activities that require them to have access to what we would see as fundamental spaces in a modern school area. So the physical infrastructure funding programs have been critically important to those schools, as well as, within the broader context of funding, looking at the mechanisms by which we fund schools on a recurrent basis.

That process is obviously always a fairly contentious one, with a variety of views on that. We are doing that in the most appropriate manner, as the previous speaker on our side indicated, with a full review, full consultation and everybody able to participate and have their say, which is well witnessed by the level of interaction each of us receive in our electorates through the consultation process. We will work towards getting an outcome for that by the end of this year. But within that broad reform agenda, which is significant on capital, on resourcing and on recurrent funding, there is a need for a commitment, which this particular bill does, to give some certainty to the non-government sector over the period of that review.

I also want to go to the issue that is raised in the amendment put forward by the opposition in relation to the national curriculum. Again, this is an area where there has been a call for and a need for reform to develop a national curriculum for a long time. It is always a challenging thing to do when there are various states and there are various views on what should be part of a national curriculum. There are contested arguments from academics in the field and so forth. But in a modern nation it is well worth going through that process in order to get a modern relevant curriculum that is standard across the nation so that young people, whether they move
about or not, can have a common experience through the curriculum. The other reason I think that is particularly important is that—as we develop our connected classrooms and as our technology enables more and more young people to interact beyond their classroom, their school and, indeed, beyond their community into other communities across the nation or internationally—we have to have a national curriculum that allows the development of those resources and supports for schools to be put in place. I think there will be many very exciting developments as we see the technology rolled out across our schooling system and indeed, I would say, into homes so that young people are able to appropriately link into national and international resources developed for the curriculum that is a common experience across the nation. That will be a truly wonderful experience. Already I know that members in this House have been into schools and seen examples of these tremendous programs with professors from universities and specialists from places like Questacon delivering wonderful programs that, because of technology, our students can participate in and that are meaningful to them as part of their curriculum. The development of a national curriculum can only support the further expansion of those sorts of resources and opportunities.

The opportunity to participate in the debate today reflects the fact, I believe, that we do have a true, national reform agenda that is around the infrastructure, facilities and resourcing of our schools. It is about giving every young person the best possible opportunity we can to get a good grounding for their future through the schooling system. It is also a modernisation program. The funding review that is currently underway will be thorough and it will conclude later in the year. But to enable that to continue to progress in the way that has been envisaged, this bill requires passing in order to provide certainty in the meantime. I commend the bill to the House.

Mr SIDEBOTTOM (Braddon) (1.37 pm)—It is a privilege to follow my colleagues on this side, who, to a person, are vitally interested in the educational outcomes for our school students throughout Australia. I am very proud to be part of a government that has made record investment in our schools to benefit all our students, wherever they may be educated. We have a lot more to do; that goes without saying. But the investment that we have made is in terms of the quality programs to support the number of teachers and the quality of teaching that will follow from our current teachers and new teachers with their in-service training; in the better training and quality of training in our institutions for our educators; in programs for the development of curriculum both across the nation and within each of our states and territories; and of course in the absolutely significant contribution to capital expenditure in the form of the Building the Education Revolution.

The BER, I would like to remind my colleagues on both sides, was designed to achieve three things in particular, all associated with having good, effective, transparent outcomes. First and foremost, it was designed to improve teaching and learning facilities for our students and our teachers in all schools throughout Australia, and it is doing that in a tremendous way. I would particularly like to congratulate all the Tasmanians involved in the BER for the fantastic projects that have been rolled out. I know my colleague next to me, the member for Canberra, also has some fantastic projects in her electorate, as do you, Mr Deputy Speaker Slipper, I know, and all those opposite as well. Isn’t it sad that the exception to the rule becomes the headline in the newspaper, to be highlighted and seized upon by those opposite? But they know deep down that the pro-
vision of these BER projects would never have happened in the past and would have been very unlikely to happen in the present without our contribution to making them happen. They know it—they know it deep down, and so do their communities. Of course, it might have gone some way towards people supporting the Labor Party at the last federal election. Those opposite know what a fantastic program it has been. So, first, it is all about fantastic teaching and learning facilities for our students and teachers.

Second, of course, was allowing the community access to those new facilities. There is nothing better than having a good relationship between a school and the community itself. These facilities are specifically designed for the community to use them; that is part of the contractual arrangements for these projects.

Third but by no means unequal in significance to the two other components is the fact that the BER provided jobs—much needed jobs—at the time of the worldwide financial crisis. If you listened to the mob opposite or, indeed, if you read the Australian newspaper, you would never believe we had an economic issue in this country over the last few years; we were not part of the global financial crisis! You read the Australian newspaper to find out what the opposition will be doing in this parliament in question time! That is the silliness of all this. Anything that is associated with the BER that might not be the rule but, rather, the exception gets highlighted by the opposition. The opposition member looking after education comes in and tries to highlight this with all his normal bluster and ‘I’ve got more front than Myer’. But we know what is going on. We know exactly what has been going on: jobs have sustained our economy at a most important time in our development. I congratulate all those who designed this very, very important program.

Mr Pyne—Mr Deputy Speaker, on a point of order: under standing order 76, while a lot of licence is given to members of parliament with respect to subject matter, we are discussing the schools assistance SES funding bill. We are not discussing anything to do with the education revolution, and the member for Braddon is not being the least bit relevant to the subject.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Hon. Peter Slipper)—I would refer the member for Sturt to the words ‘and for related purposes’ in the title of the bill. Regrettably, that does allow a slightly more wide ranging debate than one would normally expect. However, having said that, I would remind the member for Braddon to focus on the particular provisions of this bill.

Mr SIDEBOTTOM—Mr Deputy Speaker, that is why you are the Deputy Speaker. I, too, interpreted the bill in that way. Indeed, I thought this bill was talking about schools assistance. That is what I was talking about. But anyway—

Mr Pyne—It’s about the funding model, you goose! You are a goose.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER—The member for Sturt—

Mr SIDEBOTTOM—For that duck to call me a goose! Honestly. Heavens above! You have the highest pitched quack I’ve ever heard, mate!

The DEPUTY SPEAKER—The member for Braddon will resume his seat. I require the member for Sturt to withdraw the term he used in the direction of the member for Braddon.

Mr Pyne—I withdraw.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER—I now require the member for Braddon to do likewise.
Mr SIDEBOTTOM—I withdraw. Just for the member for Sturt, I will provide a detailed outline of the bill so he gets it firmly in his head.

The Schools Assistance Amendment (Financial Assistance) Bill 2011 will amend the Schools Assistance Act 2008, within currently agreed forward estimates, to appropriate approximately $8.2 billion for 2012-13 and $8.9 billion in 2013-14 for non-government schooling. This includes about $142.1 million for 2012-13 and $144.2 million for 2013-14 so that the government can fund capital expenditure in partnership with the non-government school sector. And I reckon that has something to do with the Building the Education Revolution, because I think that has something to do with capital expenditure, which I think has something to do with building facilities, which I think the non-government school sector does in spades. In fact, while we are at it, I would like to congratulate the non-government school sector in my electorate, particularly the Catholic sector, on two excellent projects, and I was really privileged to be able to attend—

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Hon. Peter Slipper)—Order! It being 1.45 pm, the debate is interrupted in accordance with standing order 43. The debate may be resumed at a later hour and the member will have leave to continue speaking when the debate is resumed.

STATEMENTS BY MEMBERS
Leichhardt Electorate: Marine Wildlife

Mr ENTSCH (Leichhardt) (1.45 pm)—I received an email on Friday that I would like to read to this House. It said:

Last night four dugong were killed and hauled on the beach at Horn Island. The night before eight dugong including two small ones. This was done by Harry Nona and Eddie Mau. Disgusting. When is this going to stop? These animals were more than anybody could possibly need for their own consumption and baby ones for goodness sake.

We have been campaigning for a long time to try to get this government to act to protect these very vulnerable creatures. They have continued to sit on their hands in spite of people like Colin Riddell and even wildlife campaigner Bob Irwin coming on board. We have had to go to the Sea Shepherd group, who have successfully done something about whaling, to get them engaged in this particular campaign. We have Peter Bethune coming up into my region on 31 March in the hope that we can bring some common sense into this.

I have evidence of up to 100 sea turtles being slaughtered in one hit and being sold into the markets in Papua New Guinea. I have contacted the Department of Environment and Resource Management and the only response I get from them is, ‘We’ll have a look at this, but if it is being taken for cultural purposes there is nothing we can do.’ I can tell you if they continue to adopt this sort of attitude, there will certainly be nothing we can do because there will be no more turtles and dugongs left in this region. I think it is absolutely appalling and I call on this government to act. (Time expired)

Greenway Electorate: Regenesis Program

Ms ROWLAND (Greenway) (1.47 pm)—On Friday 11 March, along with the member for Chifley, I attended the Regenesis celebration event and the launch of the Regenesis tool kit at Mujar Bija Reserve in Blacktown which was incidentally featured in Sydney Morning Herald last week. The Regenesis program was championed by Blacktown City Council in partnership with its rural sister city Liverpool Plains Shire Council. It offsets local communities’ carbon emissions through environmental restoration and tree planting.
This program is another example of innovation by Blacktown City Council that consistently places it at the forefront of sustainability policy making. It is a fantastic grass-roots initiative owned and supported by local residents. The Regenesis program is the first of its kind for local councils and has already seen the planting of 33 forests in the Blacktown and Liverpool Plains regions. The forests contain 220,000 native plants on more than 100 hectares and have been grown according to the carbon trading requirements established by the Kyoto protocol.

The Regenesis program engages with communities and businesses to enhance biodiversity, sequester carbon and enable the trading of carbon offset certificates through carbon emissions trading schemes. As Blacktown resident and Regenesis participant Mr Ron Roosen said, ‘My family can buy carbon offset certificates to offset the carbon footprint of our car. How good’s that?’ I could not agree with him more.

I congratulate all the volunteers involved in this program and the Blacktown and Liverpool Plains Shire councils for their efforts to future-proof local communities and help build a sustainable environment. It builds on Blacktown city’s vision of greening Blacktown developed over many decades and I commend the volunteerism of the people of Blacktown that have made it a reality.

Bowen, Mr Craig
Creevey, Mr Steve

Mr VASTA (Bonner) (1.48 pm)—I rise this afternoon to speak in honour of two highly commendable volunteers of Coast Guard Brisbane on the recent announcement that Craig Bowen and Steve Creevey will receive a commendation for brave conduct. The latest bravery awards were officially announced today. Craig Bowen and Steve Creevey have been recommended for this prestigious award in recognition of their selfless conduct. Disregarding the danger to their own lives, Craig and Steve rescued 18 passengers from a dive boat that had been wrecked in rough seas at night on Flinders Reef north of Moreton Island in 2008.

Craig and Steve incredibly undertook this rescue in just a three-metre inflatable and used a torch to locate a narrow channel in the reef. They repeatedly took the small vessel into the high swell breaking over the reef until all passengers were rescued. Their bravery is to be truly commended and it is thanks to people like Craig and Steve and all the members of Coast Guard Brisbane that those of us who enjoy the water off the coast can do so knowing that we have such talented and selfless people prepared to assist if we need it.

Henry, Dr Ken

Dr LEIGH (Fraser) (1.49 pm)—I rise to acknowledge the contribution of Dr Ken Henry to economic policy making in Australia as a major player in Australian economic policy making for 2½ decades and as Secretary to the Treasury for the past decade. Great policy making involves both ideas and advocacy. Like John Maynard Keynes and H.C. ‘Nugget’ Coombs, Ken Henry has been unafraid to engage in pointy-headed discussions with the best economists but also unrepentant about the need to dive into the political process.

As Laura Tingle noted in an article in the Australian Financial Review on 4 March, Dr Henry has been involved in so many important debates in Australian policy making—the GST debate, environmental debates and the debate over fair taxation of the minerals that are the birthright of every Australian. Dr Henry has redefined the mission statement of the Treasury to focus on wellbeing. He has broadened the scope of economic policy making to include issues such as Indigenous affairs and education. Under him the Treas-
ury now brings down regular Intergenerational reports. He produced a major tax review, a seminal document that will influence Australian taxation debates for decades.

Having previously been seconded to Treasury, I can attest how much members of the department will miss him. Perhaps the same is not so true for some of the senators before whom he has appeared. For now, Australian policy making will be poorer for missing Dr Henry’s speeches and I wish him well in the next stage of his career.

Leukaemia Foundation: World’s Greatest Shave for a Cure

**WYATT ROY** (Longman) (1.51 pm)—On Saturday 12 March I participated in the Leukaemia Foundation’s shave for a cure. Blood cancer is the second largest cancer killer and tragically claims someone’s life every two hours of each day. President of the local Leukaemia Foundation branch, Jane McMillan, this year did an outstanding job coordinating the shave for a cure in my local community. Throughout the year Jane and the Leukaemia Foundation worked tirelessly for the 600 patients from my area with blood cancers, supporting them with accommodation, transport and emotional and financial assistance. Shave for a cure is an annual fundraiser organised by the Leukaemia Foundation to raise much needed funds for the support they provide and for research into a cure for this deadly disease.

In support of this great cause on Saturday, 12 March, at Morayfield Shopping Centre I lent my hair to the scissors of the local singer and Leukaemia Foundation ambassador, Sinead Burgess. Along with many locals, I look forward to the release of her album later this year. It is hoped that the valiant efforts of participants will have raised as much as $45,000. I wish to congratulate the many participants in the shave for a cure. I sponsored Kane from Minimbah State School and Kane, along with others from his school, took the brave step to shave. I congratulate Kane and others who have participated and I encourage people to contribute generously to this worthy cause.

**Goss, Mr Matt**

**Ockenden, Mr Eddie**

**Mr LYONS** (Bass) (1.52 pm)—I rise to talk about some outstanding Tasmanian athletes but, particularly, about a cyclist. I also want to mention Eddie Ockenden, who is the TIS Athlete of the Year. He captained the Australian hockey team at one stage during the year.

I congratulate the talented and successful athlete from Tasmania Matt Goss. Recently, Matt powered his way through a top-quality field of cyclists to win the Milan-San Remo classic. He is the only Australian to have won Italy’s biggest annual one-day bike race. Matt, who is 24 years old and was born in Launceston, claimed the 298 kilometre marathon—his eighth win for 2011. He has added this win to an impressive list of victories, including the 2006 world Team Pursuit Championship and a stage win in the Paris-Nice, Tour of Oman and Tour Down Under races this year. Matt is a very talented and dedicated cyclist who has been rightfully labelled by his team mate Mark Cavendish as a legend. I would like to also congratulate Matt on his success in Italy’s biggest one-day race, the San Remo Classic, and wish him all the best for the future. I am sure that, at 24 years of age, there will be many successes to come.

**Murrindindi Shire**

**Mrs MIRABELLA** (Indi) (1.54 pm)—Two weeks ago I had the opportunity of what I hope will be the first of many electorate tours, in the redistributed boundaries of Indi, throughout the shire of Murrindindi. It is home to some of the most beautiful scenery and spectacular surroundings in Australia. Of
course, these changes will not be effective until the next election. It was a great opportunity for me, together with the refreshing and relatively new local state member for Seymour, Cindy McLeish, to speak with locals about their issues of concern and, of course, about the cost of living pressures that are hurting families, individuals and businesses.

In a shire that was devastated—and still continues, in a very real way, to suffer from the impacts of the Black Saturday bushfires—these additional inflationary pressures and cost-of-living pressures are really being felt. Throughout the area of the Murrindindi Shire, people and businesses were shuddering at the prospect of a carbon tax that would further put pressure on local jobs and increase prices. Another theme that was repeated time and time again was the extraordinary amount, still, of red tape hampering reconstruction in the areas that were severely affected by the bushfires. Unnecessary regulation and time responses from officials are really having an impact on the positive outlook for rebuilding in these areas. I call on all levels of government to review and fast-track some of these processes. (Time expired)

Lucre, Mr Charles

Ms BRODTMANN (Canberra) (1.55 pm)—I rise today to pay tribute to the late Charles Lucre, a man much loved in the Canberra community for his generosity of spirit and many acts of kindness. For 37 years, Charles Lucre was a volunteer and dedicated provider of pastoral care services at the Canberra Hospital. The staff and patients were like his family. A long-time member of the congregation of St Andrews, just down here at Forrest, he worked tirelessly to offer care and friendship to patients of all beliefs and backgrounds, particularly those without family support. He offered a smile, a chat, a story and a bit of happiness and company to countless patients over the years.

In 2002 Charles was awarded the Order of Australia medal for services to the community, particularly through the provision of pastoral care services at the Canberra Hospital. Charles was a proud Canberra Hospital Auxiliary member. He was also keen to learn more about medical issues and was made an honorary member of the Infectious Diseases Unit and the only life member of the ACT Wound Management Association. Charles Lucre will be remembered as a gentle man who offered care and kindness to those in need. Early this month he was sent off in true Presbyterian style. His pallbearers were members of the Air Force, everyone was in tartan and his coffin was piped out to Amazing Grace. Vale, Charles Lucre.

Electorate of Mitchell: Transport Infrastructure

Mr HAWKE (Mitchell) (1.57 pm)—I rise today to highlight the state of transport infrastructure in my electorate of Mitchell in north-west and south-west Sydney one final time in the dying days of the New South Wales Labor government. It is the truth that my electorate has the highest rate of car ownership per household of any electorate in the country and there is good reason for that. Since 1999 the state Labor government promised a rail line for north-western Sydney and cancelled it for over 10 years. Ten subsequent announcements—‘Build the rail line’; ‘Cancel the rail line’; ‘Build the rail line’; ‘Cancel the rail line’—have been made since 1999. The long-suffering commuters of Sydney and the north-western suburbs have a lot to hold this Labor government to account for.

I note the Minister for Infrastructure and Transport has come into the chamber. It is great that he has, because the Rudd government considered the north-west rail line and
did not proceed with it, for political purposes. I want to note that the federal government funded a study, for $100 million, into a rail line that just happened to go through the minister for infrastructure’s electorate, which already had a heavy rail line and light rail and is only 20 minutes from our urban areas. The outer suburbs of our major city, south-west and north-west Sydney, desperately need better transport infrastructure. This federal Labor government has sought, in the dying days of a state government, to bind that government not to build transport infrastructure based on the needs of commuters but to build it based on the government’s political interests. In five days, the people of New South Wales will hold federal Labor to account for this.

(Time expired)

Jones, Mr Lachlan

Mr STEPHEN JONES (Throsby) (1.59 pm)—Today, I want to acknowledge the musical achievements of Mr Lachlan Jones, a young Throsby constituent who is the only student from the Illawarra arts unit’s Symphonic Wind Ensemble. I can assure the House that he is a very talented young man, but no relation to me.

The arts unit is part of a specialist program within the New South Wales Department of Education and Training, which delivers programs and services that are beyond the capacity of individual schools and regions. As a member of the Symphonic Wind Ensemble, Lachlan will travel to Europe in April on a 16-day concert tour. Lachlan’s love of music has seen him perform as a member of his high school jazz band, the Southern Stars Orchestra, the Illawarra and south-east region performing ensemble, the pit orchestra for local musicals, the City of Wollongong Brass Band, the Wollongong Conservatorium of Music and the South Coast Big Band. I am happy to have been able to support Lachlan’s fundraising efforts for the European tour and wish him every success for what appears to be a very bright future.

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

CONDOLENCES
Japan Natural Disasters

Ms GILLARD (Lalor—Prime Minister) (2.00 pm)—I move:

That the House:

(1) express its deep shock and sorrow at the earthquake, tsunami and nuclear emergency that have struck Japan;

(2) extend its profound sympathies to the many families whose loved ones have been lost in this tragedy;

(3) express its gratitude and admiration to the Australian emergency response personnel who are assisting in the recovery effort; and

(4) pledge the support of the Australian Parliament and community as Japan comes to terms with the immense nature of this disaster and the long and costly process of reconstruction that lies ahead.

A little bit earlier today the Leader of the Opposition and I went to the Japanese embassy together to sign the condolence book for the people of Japan. Now we will rise together in this parliament to mark our condolences for the people of Japan. On 11 March Japanese rescue workers stood alongside international colleagues in Christchurch offering assistance to that shattered city. Today those very same rescue workers are still working side by side with colleagues from around the world, but this time it is in their own devastated nation. At nine in magnitude, the earthquake that occurred on 11 March was the strongest to ever hit Japan. After-
shocks continue and the outcomes of the serious nuclear situation which followed the earthquake and tsunami are still uncertain, and we continue to monitor that situation closely.

It is hard for any of us to come to grips with the scale of this disaster. For some they will best absorb its scale through the numbers, and the numbers are staggering indeed. The death toll today stands at 8,450, 12,909 people are still missing and a half a million Japanese people are homeless—staggering statistics. For some this will best come home to them through the images we have seen of this disaster: the photograph of a young girl hunched, crouched, crying amongst the ruins; the photograph of a soldier cradling in his arms a baby; the photographs of the determination on the faces of rescue workers as they have continued their work as snow lands on them. This is a huge disaster. For others perhaps the scale of it will best come home through the words of one Australian who is still in Japan and who gave us an insight into the horror of this situation. John Garnaut travelled to a town close to the epicentre of the quake. He wrote in an article for the Sydney Morning Herald:

THE satellite photo tells me there is a town of 17,000 people ahead. It is lying. There’s nothing there at all.

As we have seen during our own recent time of crisis, friends reach out to friends. The Australian government has reached out to Japan. The urban search and rescue team we deployed has completed its work and it will be returning to Australia later today, and I am sure we all join together in thanking them for their commitment to a very difficult task in testing conditions. Unfortunately, they did not recover anyone alive. In what is a very human gesture, they are leaving for the people of Japan much of their own gear—tents, generators—as a mark of friendship. Last week we also deployed Australian Defence Force personnel and an Australian C17 aircraft and crew to Japan. The defence minister has announced that these personnel will remain for another week at the request of the Japanese and United States governments, testament to the crucial role they are fulfilling in moving supplies around.

Today I announced that the Australian government has determined to contribute $10 million to the Australian Red Cross Japan and Pacific disaster appeal to send specialist aid workers to the region to support the work of the Japanese Red Cross and to provide displaced families and their host families with emergency relief equipment and recovery assistance.

Of course the Australian government’s priorities also are assisting our citizens who are caught up in this disaster. So far we have had no confirmation of any Australian deaths, and we hope that the two Australians still unaccounted for will be found unharmed. Our embassy is working on a 24-hour basis to locate all of our citizens and assist them to travel safely. Australian citizens leaving Japan have not only heaped praise on the consular officers but also on Australian airline staff who showed flexibility and compassion with a ‘Let’s just get you home’ attitude. I add my thanks and my admiration for the work of those people. They are great representatives of our nation at this time of crisis.

Returning travellers tell of their admiration for the composure and stoicism of the Japanese people. Theirs is a culture steeped in traditions of courage and honour, and these traits course strongly through the veins of everyday people who are emerging as heroes from this tragedy. They are living the ancient Japanese proverb ‘seven falls and eight rises’. The Japanese people will need great perseverance and resilience to rise from
this fall; Australia will always be there to help as they do.

Mr ABBOTT (Warringah—Leader of the Opposition) (2.07 pm)—I second the motion moved by the Prime Minister. What can anyone say that adequately captures the terror and the horror of the Japanese earthquake and tsunami? Watching this footage prompted millions of Australians, I am sure, to mumble prayers of solidarity and sympathy for the victims, and gratitude that our country has so far been spared any comparable catastrophe.

Australians are united in grief for the people of Japan. The victims of this tragedy are our fellow human beings. They are also the citizens of our best friend in Asia—an ally, a trading partner, a democracy and a bastion of liberal pluralist values. We appreciate the skill of the Japanese people in engineering their country to withstand, to the extent human ingenuity can make possible, the ravages of earthquakes. We admire the courage of the Japanese people, especially their emergency services personnel but also the volunteers who have risked their lives to help in the rescue, recovery and clean-up. We especially admire the selflessness of those working to secure the Fukushima nuclear plant. Most of all, though, we feel for a great people as they rise to meet this crisis and we offer all the help we reasonably can.

The SPEAKER—As a mark of respect, I invite honourable members to rise in their places.

Honourable members having stood in their places—

Debate (on motion by Mr Albanese) adjourned.
The setting was an open air park. The service was attended by almost 100,000 people. I have never seen 100,000 people like that on one flat plain in front of me before. It was truly an astonishing sight. We tend to only see crowds of that size when they are in tiered sporting venues. This was a huge crowd, which had come to pay its respects and to grieve together.

The ceremony was simple and it was moving. More than 300 family members who have lost loved ones were in attendance to grieve with their friends, with their city. The congregation was awash with the Canterbury colours of red and black, and a young performer, a woman who now strides the international stage but comes from Christchurch, Hayley Westenra, sang *Amazing Grace* unaccompanied, and I do not think there was any spine amongst that crowd that did not feel a shiver along it. She was truly remarkable in giving voice I think to the grief and pain on that day. We know that New Zealanders in their own country and around the world stopped to watch that memorial service. Five hundred Christchurch students who have been taken in by the University of Adelaide did so.

I saw more than grief on the faces of the people in that crowd: I saw guts, I saw determination and I saw hope. Christchurch has to be strong, because 166 people have been lost, including two Australians—a remarkable number of lives to lose. Around one-third of the structures in Christchurch’s central business district require demolition. I did have the opportunity to look at the central business district. It is truly eerie to walk through a CBD with no-one else in it and to look at buildings that have stickers: red for demolition, orange for danger. There is so much there to do. The reconstruction will cost between NZ$10 billion to NZ$15 billion. So this is all staggering for New Zealand to come back from, but something that is more staggering indeed is the amount of hope amongst the New Zealand people. New Zealand has hope. A great city has been hard hit, but a great nation is standing tall.

On 22 February shocked and bleeding people were walking around Christchurch literally crying for their city, as one journalist described it. Today those same people are cleaning up and preparing to rebuild. Indeed, a sign which said ‘Rise up, Christchurch,’ floated above the memorial service. That sign said it all, because Christchurch will rise up again better and safer than it was before.

None of us will ever forget the images of that day: of the office buildings crumpled to the ground; of the historic cathedral spire, which was smashed to pieces; and of people walking around with blood running down their faces. But within moments the Anzac spirit did click into place; passers-by began pulling people from the rubble. We saw families take total strangers into their homes, and by sunset Australian rescue teams were already on the ground.

Amid the devastation there were moments of hope, like the rescue of Anne Bodkin from the collapsed Pyne Gould building by a New South Wales search and rescue team. She had miraculously survived after 25 hours under the rubble. Christchurch MP Brendon Burnes described how Aussies and Kiwis stood shoulder to shoulder lifting her down for the last couple of metres.

There was a spirit of stoicism and resolve there that we could have recognised in any Australian community hit by a natural disaster. There was also that same spirit that we have come to know here: a couple interviewed alongside the pile of rubble that used to be their house literally said, ‘We’re okay, there are others who are worse off.’ There has also been a spirit of larrikinism at times, and that is familiar too. A man called Robin Judkins was interviewed and said that the
thing he was craving after many long days was a hot meal, as he had not had one. He finally found a store selling hot pies and, ecstatic, he bought two. He said that a pie had never tasted so good, and added with great enthusiasm that it was an Aussie pie. We are happy to keep providing those!

More than 750 Australian personnel have assisted Christchurch—some of the finest search and rescue teams in the world: paramedics, counsellors, Centrelink officers and rescue coordinators. Generous donations have been made to the New Zealand government’s Christchurch earthquake appeal. This is tax deductible, so if Australians want to make a gift then it can be deducted as a deductible gift.

Perhaps most visibly, 144 Australian police went over to keep the streets of Christchurch safe. We met with some of those police when we were there on Friday—I am sure that the Leader of the Opposition recalls it too. Sgt Stuart Edgell, with a nod to Peter Allen, sang to us. He sang about a bunch of Aussie cops who call Australia home, who have come here together for the Kiwi cops and who now, after a month of living and working amongst the Christchurch community, call New Zealand home.

That is the spirit between our two nations. We saw it on display on Friday and we will continue to see it on display as we join with the people of New Zealand and help them through these very dark days.

Mr ABBOTT (Warringah—Leader of the Opposition) (2.18 pm)—I second the motion. Any disaster in New Zealand is felt in Australia because there is scarcely an Australian home that is not linked in some way with homes across the Tasman. New Zealand is a juridically separate entity, but it is scarcely a foreign country. To almost all intents and purposes Australians are New Zealanders and vice versa.

So it was an honour to join the Governor-General and the Prime Minister at the remembrance service in Christchurch last Friday. I understand that this is the first time that Australia’s head of state, head of government and alternative head of government have joined together in another country in this way, but as the Prime Minister has just observed it was in fact the future monarch who was the star turn on that occasion. I do hope that the representatives of New Zealand’s oldest and closest friends at that service were of some comfort to the bereaved and to everyone who has lost family, friends, homes, businesses and income as a result of the disaster.

It was good to have the chance to meet a large contingent of Australian police who had been helping their New Zealand counterparts, and to observe the unanimity of purpose and action of Australian and New Zealand colleagues. It was also good to meet the New Zealand Prime Minister and Deputy Prime Minister, and to be able to convey personally the solidarity of the Australian people at this sad time. Most of all, though, it was good to see the resilience of the Kiwis; as Prince William observed, they will stay strong.

The SPEAKER—As a mark of respect, I invite honourable members to rise in their places.

Honourable members having stood in their places—

Debate (on motion by Mr Albanese) adjourned.

MAIN COMMITTEE

New Zealand Earthquake Reference

Mr ALBANESE (Grayndler—Leader of the House) (2.21 pm)—I move:

That the order of the day be referred to the Main Committee for debate.
Question agreed to.

QUESTIONS WITHOUT NOTICE
Carbon Pricing

Mr ABBOTT (2.21 pm)—My question is to the Prime Minister. The Housing Industry Association estimates that there are 240 tonnes of carbon dioxide generated building an average house and related infrastructure and, at the rate of $26 a tonne, this would add at least $6,240 to the cost of an average home. So I ask the Prime Minister: how does she propose to compensate first home buyers in Western Sydney, for instance, for this $6,000-plus increase in the cost of housing?

Ms GILLARD—Predictably, the scare campaign continues with the made-up facts and figures, and the Leader of the Opposition does what he always does, which is to seek to cause fear amongst the Australian community, because he has no policies or plans for the nation’s future and he tries to hide that behind a never-ending series of fear campaigns.

Mr Speaker, do you recall the start of this parliamentary session, when the Leader of the Opposition was trying to raise fear amongst the Australian community about the government’s proposed flood levy? Day after day in question time, we came in here and questions were asked and answered about the flood levy. Fear was being raised—

Dr Jensen interjecting—

The SPEAKER—The member for Tangney is warned.

Ms GILLARD—Predictably, the scare campaign continues with the made-up facts and figures, and the Leader of the Opposition does what he always does, which is to seek to cause fear amongst the Australian community, because he has no policies or plans for the nation’s future and he tries to hide that behind a never-ending series of fear campaigns.

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Dr Jensen interjecting—

The SPEAKER—The member for Tangney is warned.

Ms GILLARD—the sense that somehow the future of the Australian nation would be jeopardised if that legislation passed the parliament. We do not hear about that anymore, do we? We do not hear about it.

Mr Pyne—Mr Speaker, on a point of order: in the minute since the Prime Minister has started answering this question, it has been all argument. She was asked a very straightforward factual question about compensation for housing costs. I would ask you to draw her back to the question.

The SPEAKER—The Manager of Opposition Business has resumed his seat. He used the word ‘argumentative’. I indicate that that is allowed by interpretations of the standing orders that still stand, and I look forward to movements in that regard by the House. The requirement is that the Prime Minister be directly relevant to the question. The Prime Minister has the call.

Ms GILLARD—Thank you very much, Mr Speaker. I was making the simple point that already this year we have seen a scare campaign answered and dealt with, and the Leader of the Opposition is too embarrassed to even go back to that scare campaign now. So of course he has to start a new scare campaign, and we are seeing today’s scare campaign on display. But that is all it is: a scare campaign from the Leader of the Opposition, making up figures each and every day—

Mr Pyne—Answer the question, you haridan.

Ms GILLARD—making up figures in order to cause alarm in the Australian community. But the Australian community are smarter than the Leader of the Opposition gives them credit for. The Australian community believes that climate change is real. Yes, that is a substantial difference from the Leader of the Opposition’s backbench, which is populated by sceptics and deniers. The Australian community believes climate change is real, and the Australian community wants to see us in this place providing practical answers to this challenge of climate change, and that is exactly what the government is doing.

Reputable economists tell us that the most cost-effective way of dealing with the challenge of carbon pollution is to put a price on it, and that is exactly what we will do. We will put a
price on pollution—a price that polluters will pay. We will provide generous assistance to Australian families and, because we are a Labor government, the assistance that is provided to Australian families will be fair assistance.

In the meantime, what does the Leader of the Opposition do? It depends. It depends if he is on Alan Jones or in front of a community meeting, in which case he is a climate change denier. Then, if he gets out in front of what he thinks is a more responsible audience, he pretends to believe in climate change. Whether or not the Leader of the Opposition believes in climate change depends on what day you catch him. As the member for Wentworth said, he is the ultimate weathervane in Australian politics: no policies; no plans; no beliefs; no convictions; just slogans and a scare campaign, and that is all we are seeing again today.

Mr Pyne interjecting—

The SPEAKER—Before calling the Leader of the Opposition, I say that, having consulted the definition of the expression, I would have thought that the Manager of Opposition Business would have thought twice about repeating the word. He will withdraw.

Mr Pyne—I withdraw the word ‘harridan’.

The SPEAKER—The member for Sturt is warned.

Opposition members interjecting—

The SPEAKER—I would have thought that members on my left, given that I had indicated that I was giving the call to the Leader of the Opposition, might at least for those seconds sit there quietly. The Leader of the Opposition.

Mr Cheeseman—Pauline Hanson in drag!

The SPEAKER—The member for Corangamite is warned.

Mr Abbott—Mr Speaker, I merely seek leave to table the HIA report showing that a new house will be $6,000-plus more expensive under the government’s carbon tax.

Leave not granted.

Climate Change

Ms SMYTH (2.29 pm)—My question is to the Prime Minister. Why does Australia need to invest in a clean energy nation by making the top 1,000 big polluters pay for the carbon pollution they create?

Ms GILLARD—I thank the member for La Trobe for her question. I know she believes climate change is real and she represents a community that wants to see action. I think she probably represents a community that is also very pleased to see a strong female role model in this parliament representing their community. I think that is the spirit of modern Australia. Sometimes in this parliament we do not see that spirit of equal opportunity on display.

On the question that I have been asked by the member for La Trobe, we need to invest in a clean energy future because we cannot risk being left behind. This nation is at risk of being left behind. Our competitors are investing in low emissions and renewable energy on a massive scale. The United States and Europe are now spending more on clean energy investments than on conventional
investments. That is an important thing to recognise—more on clean energy investments. In 25 years, 80 per cent of America’s energy needs will be supplied by clean energy sources.

China is shutting down one high-polluting, inefficient and unsafe coal power plant every one to two weeks and replacing them with larger and economically and environmentally much more efficient plants. China is also the biggest producer of solar panels and is installing wind turbines at the rate of one per hour. India is taxing coal, reaping half a billion dollars to invest in clean energy. By 2022, they will generate enough power by solar alone to meet almost half of our energy needs. If we do not act now we will cost this country investment and jobs; we will cost this country future prosperity. We need to adapt to a low-carbon future. We are the highest emitter of carbon pollution in the developed world per capita, emitting more per head of population than even the United States.

By pricing carbon under the mechanism the government has proposed, we will ask the 1,000 big polluters in our economy to pay for the carbon pollution they create. At this time when pollution can be put into the atmosphere for nothing we will put a price on it, and because there is a price business will innovate and business will find a lower-pollution way of doing what they do. They will become more efficient; they will generate less carbon pollution. As we do that, because it is a big adjustment, we will generously assist Australian households. We are a Labor government and we will do that fairly. We will assist businesses to make the transition and we will fund climate change programs.

We believe climate change is real; the opposition are caught in denial. We want to make the big polluters pay; the opposition want to reward them. We want to help households; the opposition want to tax them $720 in order to subsidise polluters. We want to invest in clean energy; they want to invest in a scare campaign. We want to be driven and will be driven by the national interest; day after day we see political interest on display from the opposition. Despite their fear tactics, despite their scare campaign, we will get on with the job and price carbon to create a clean energy future for this country.

**Emissions Trading Scheme**

Ms JULIE BISHOP (2.33 pm)—My question is to the Prime Minister. I refer the Prime Minister to her press conference on 24 February where she committed the government to a ‘full cap-and-trade emissions trading scheme’. Is the Prime Minister aware that President Obama has stated that a cap-and-trade scheme will cause electricity prices to ‘skyrocket’? Why is the Prime Minister’s promise of compensation for skyrocketing electricity prices any more believable than her promise that there would be no carbon tax under any government she leads?

Ms GILLARD—I can say to the Deputy Leader of the Opposition I watch Channel Nine too, as it happens. I do have Channel Nine on the TV, I did watch that Laurie Oakes interview and I did watch the segment with President Obama that she is referring to. I do not think it was yesterday; I think it was the Sunday before that went to air. We are seeing the usual degree of research and endeavour by the opposition we have come to expect because of their lazy approach to politics and their lazy approach to policy. Can I explain to the Deputy Leader of the Opposition in answer to the question she asked me that yes, she is absolutely right. I did say before the last election campaign I wanted a full cap-and-trade emissions trading scheme, and we will get a full cap-and-trade emissions trading scheme. I thank the
Deputy Leader of the Opposition for verifying that to the House.

In referring to the segment with President Obama, No. 1, I think she would note that it was some time ago and, No. 2, she would note that President Obama has committed his nation to a clean energy future. President Obama is in a situation where, with the Congress the American people have elected, he is not in a position to legislate an emissions trading scheme.

Mr Robb—So why should we have one?

Ms GILLARD—The member for Goldstein says, why would we have one? The reality is—and let me explain this to the member for Goldstein—I am someone who shows a great deal of admiration for the United States of America. I think that was on display when I recently travelled there, but the member for Goldstein may not realise we are not little Americans; we make decisions for our own country.

Mr Anthony Smith interjecting—

The SPEAKER—Order! The member for Casey will depart from the chamber for one hour under the provision of standing order 94(a).

The member for Casey then left the chamber.

Ms GILLARD—Every economist of any repute is telling us that the least costly way of dealing with carbon pollution is via pricing carbon. So why, as Prime Minister, would I deny this nation the most efficient, least-cost way of dealing with carbon pollution because President Obama has made a different decision? Why would I do that? Of course I would not. This nation deserves to have the least-cost way of dealing with carbon pollution, and that is pricing carbon. That is exactly what we will do, initially through a fixed-price—effectively like a tax—then moving to an emissions trading scheme, as I have outlined on behalf of the government and as I have outlined on behalf of the Multi-Party Climate Change Committee.

On the other side, what do we see as the alternative? What we see, of course, is them taking $30 billion out of the purses and wallets of Australians and giving it to big polluters. On this side, we will take money from big polluters and give it through generous assistance to households.

Ms Julie Bishop—Mr Speaker, I rise on a point of order. The question was about President Obama’s statement that electricity prices will skyrocket. The Prime Minister is now no longer directly relevant to the question and she should be sat down.

The SPEAKER—Order! The Prime Minister has the call.

Ms GILLARD—Thank you very much, Mr Speaker. As I was indicating, the division here is whether you want to put a price on polluters and give assistance to households or whether you want to take money off households and give assistance to polluters. We will put a price on pollution. That price will be paid by polluters. We will generously assist households for the price impacts that they will experience. I have been very upfront about that. What the opposition wants to do is take money off Australian households and give it to big polluters. The opposition should come clean about that. Their price tag for Australians is $720 straight off them, straight out of their purses, straight out of their wallets and straight to a polluter. (Time expired)

Ms Julie Bishop—Mr Speaker, in the event that someone did not watch Channel 9 last week, I have a CD of President Obama’s—

The SPEAKER—Order! The Deputy Leader of the Opposition will resume her place. The Deputy Leader of the opposition
will remove herself from the chamber for one hour under the provisions of standing order 94(a).

Mr Pyne—Mr Speaker, I rise on a point of order. I ask you to reconsider that action, given that all that the Deputy Leader of the Opposition was seeking to do was table a CD, which is like any other document in modern parliaments.

The SPEAKER—The Manager of Opposition Business will resume his place. It would assist in future if the Deputy Leader of the Opposition comes straight to the point that she is seeking leave to table a document. I take the point that the Manager of Opposition Business has made—that the electronic version is permissible as something that can be tabled—but I ask that in future the person approaching the dispatch box for the purpose of tabling a document indicate that straight up. Otherwise, on a testy day such as the one so far, you will understand that the chair will assume that things are not as they appear. Having said that, I withdraw the standing order 94(a) ruling, but I inform people that there is a general warning.

Ms Julie Bishop—Thank you, Mr Speaker. I seek leave to table an electronic version of a speech by President Obama where he speaks about—

Leave not granted.

DISTINGUISHED VISITORS

The SPEAKER (2.41 pm)—I inform the House that we have present in the gallery this afternoon the Minister of Education, Employment and the Family from the Republic of Malta, the Hon. Dolores Cristina. The minister is accompanying the President of Malta, who is visiting Australia as a guest of the government. On behalf of the House, I extend a very warm welcome to our visitors.

Honourable members—Hear, hear!

The SPEAKER—The warmth of the welcome may not be as warm as the reception I am getting from the House, I say to the minister!

QUESTIONS WITHOUT NOTICE
Carbon Pricing

Ms ROWLAND (2.42 pm)—My question is to the Treasurer. Will the Treasurer outline for the House the importance of putting a price on carbon to transform our economy for a low carbon future?

Mr Ewen Jones interjecting—

The SPEAKER—The member for Herbert, my having reminded people that there is a general warning, will leave the chamber for one hour under standing order 94(a).

The member for Herbert then left the chamber.

Mr SWAN—I thank the member for Greenway for her question, because it is imperative that we price carbon to ensure that we have sustainable economic growth. Sustainable economic growth does require a price on carbon because we need the investment to drive the technology to make ourselves much more energy efficient. We need that investment to get the investment in renewable energy so that we can create the jobs for the future. Of course, the economics of this are not seriously contested by many. They certainly are by sceptics on the other side of the House, but the economics of this were accepted widely in this parliament only 18 months ago. The economics of this go back to the report by Lord Stern in 2006.

Opposition members interjecting—

Mr SWAN—There we go: the sceptics opposite are now going to dispute the Stern report, the most fundamental analysis of the economics of climate change that we have seen—

The SPEAKER—The Treasurer will ignore the interjections
Mr SWAN—and which is widely accepted, particularly in Britain, even by conservative politicians, as being the roadmap for the future. What Lord Stern said is that tackling climate change is the only pro-growth strategy for the future—that is, if we do not act on climate change, the damage to our environment and therefore the damage to our economy will be great, and if we wish our economies to grow then we must put a price on carbon. In Australia we are the highest per capita polluters in the world. That makes it even more imperative that we deal with the price on carbon.

Of course, all of these points were made last week by Professor Garnaut—most particularly, the importance of a price on carbon to drive the investment in the technology, particularly in renewable energy, which will create the jobs of the future.

Of course, this was accepted at one stage by all of those opposite. It was only 18 months ago when those on that side of the House all favoured an emissions trading system.

Mrs Mirabella—Don’t lie!

The SPEAKER—The Treasurer will resume his seat. The member for Indi will withdraw.

Mrs Mirabella—I withdraw.

The SPEAKER—The member for Indi will leave the chamber for one hour under standing order 94(a).

The member for Indi then left the chamber.

Mr SWAN—There are many on that side of the House who now clearly do not accept the science of climate change and do not accept the economics of dealing with climate change. We had a conservative politician in the country in the last few days—Lord Deben. Lord Deben described climate change sceptics as ‘oddballs’. The problem the coalition has is that the oddballs have taken over. The oddballs—the climate change sceptics—have taken over on that side of the House but only 18 months ago they did accept the science of climate change. Now they do not. We had the Leader of the Opposition say only in the last week or so:

… the so-called settled science of climate change isn’t always quite what it’s claimed to be.

So there he was, outing himself as a climate change sceptic. We know that he thinks that climate change is crap.

The SPEAKER—The Treasurer will directly relate his material to the question.

Mr SWAN—Mr Speaker, Lord Stern described climate change as the greatest market failure in the history of the world. What we are witnessing in this House is the greatest political failure we have ever seen from the Liberal Party.

Mr Pyne—Mr Speaker, I rise on a point of order in terms of direct relevance. I simply ask how these unadulterated attacks can be regarded as directly relevant to the question.

The SPEAKER—Those who were paying attention to the proceedings rather than indulging themselves in whatever they indulge themselves in during question time will know that I asked the Treasurer to directly relate his material to the question.

Mr SWAN—The climate change sceptics have taken over and that endangers our prosperity and jobs.

Climate Change

Mr TRUSS (2.48 pm)—My question is to the Prime Minister. I refer the Prime Minister to her statement on ABC’s Q&A program last week that if she had won an outright majority at the election she would now be busy implementing an ETS. Has she now admitted that whether she had won the election outright or not she was already planning to break her election commitment to consult on
an emissions trading scheme for at least 12 months through a citizens assembly.

Ms GILLARD—I thank the Leader of the National Party for his question. Let me make the following things very clear to the Leader of the Nationals. I have always believed that climate change is real. That is my belief; that is the belief of the Labor Party. In answer to that belief, we accept the science. The Liberal Party and the Leader of the Opposition has on some days accepted the science and on other days rejected the science. He has accepted it some days; rejected it other days. On Alan Jones he rejects the science. If he is in front of a Canberra press gallery then he accepts the science. He has no belief in these questions because he just does not care about climate change and about this country’s future economic prosperity and future environment.

Mr Hockey interjecting—

The SPEAKER—If the member for North Sydney has a point of order he comes to the dispatch box.

Mr Hockey—I rise on a point of order. It goes to relevance. I ask you to bring the Prime Minister back to the question that she was asked.

The SPEAKER—I will listen closely to the Prime Minister. The requirement under the standing order is that she be directly relevant to the question.

Ms GILLARD—I was asked about matters in the 2010 election. I am making it very clear that in the 2007 election and in the 2010 election Labor contested both elections saying to the Australian people, ‘Climate change is real; we need to price carbon. The best way of doing that is through an emissions trading scheme where you cap the amount of carbon pollution your economy can generate and you allow the market to generate the price.’ We said that to the Australian people in 2007. We said that to the Australian people in 2010. What is interesting about that 2007 election is that Prime Minister Howard said the same thing to the Australian people. He said exactly the same thing. And Prime Minister Howard had the guts to say to the Australian people that this would have price impacts for them. He had the guts to say to the Australian people that he would deal with those price impacts through assistance—that is, he was being honest and clear with the Australian people about the nature of the problem and the required solution.

Opposition members interjecting—

Ms GILLARD—in contrast to that we have the current position of the Leader of the Opposition who says, about climate change, what he thinks the audience is going to endorse, not what he believes in, because he does not care enough about the issue to have any convictions about the issue.

Mr Hockey interjecting—

The SPEAKER—the member for North Sydney will remove himself from the chamber for one hour under standing order 94(a).

The member for North Sydney then left the chamber.

Ms GILLARD—in the 2010 election I said to the Australian people that we needed to price carbon and that we needed to get to an emissions trading scheme—and we will. I also indicated that I wanted to take the Australian people with us—and we will take the Australian people with us. There are mechanisms for the Australian people to engage with this debate, and we invite them to do so.

Mr Van Manen interjecting—

The SPEAKER—the member for Forde will remove himself from the chamber for one hour.

The member for Forde then left the chamber.
Ms GILLARD—The mechanisms for the community to engage in this debate include through the Climate Commission led by Tim Flannery. People will also be able to engage with Professor Garnaut, who continues to make very important contributions to our national debate and our national stream of information about climate change through his papers. The most recent one was released late last week, and I would commend it to people. So my answer is of course that we want the community to come with us on this journey. They understand climate change is real and they want to see action, and we will be explaining that action to them. You, of course, will be mired in denial and fear because that is what the coalition does.

The SPEAKER—Order! The Prime Minister will direct her remarks through the chair.

Defence: Anglesea Barracks

Mr WILKIE (2.53 pm)—My question is to the Prime Minister. Prime Minister, Tasmania occupies a remarkable place in Australian military history. Anglesea Barracks in Hobart is the oldest Army barracks in Australia, and today Tasmanians comprise some eight per cent of ADF enlistments. Despite this, cutbacks have reduced Tasmania to an outpost of Victoria where even critical services like the Defence Community Organisation face the axe. Prime Minister, can you put the widespread concern in Hobart about Anglesea Barracks to rest by today unambiguously ruling out further defence cuts, including specifically the closure of the DCO and the sell-off of the barracks?

Ms GILLARD—I thank the member for Denison for his question. I know that he is concerned about this issue and he has raised the matter directly with me. I say to the member for Denison and to the parliament the following. The government and defence are committed to maintaining the defence presence in Tasmania. It is the case, as the member for Denison is aware, that defence is undertaking a comprehensive review of defence’s basing requirements. No decisions have been made on the future of individual bases included in the review, and that includes the bases in Tasmania. It is expected that the review will be completed mid-year, following which it is planned that a government appointed independent commission will consider defence’s recommendations. It is intended that the commission will conduct public consultation before reporting back to the government. To the member for Denison I say I will not pre-empt the outcome of this process.

The member has asked about the Anglesea Barracks. I can say that there are currently a number of very important defence establishments in Tasmania. In the case of Anglesea Barracks, this is an historic site of immense importance to the Army, defence and the Commonwealth. Anglesea Barracks is the oldest continuously occupied defence establishment in Australia. Anglesea Barracks will be celebrating its 200th anniversary in December this year, and the Anglesea 200 project committee is planning for the celebrations that will recognise the milestone event that this forms in Australia and Tasmania’s military and defence history. I am advised defence has given no consideration to closing the base or to disposing of the base, and I do not expect that to occur in the future. I would expect the government of the day to not agree to any recommendation to take that course.

The member has also asked about the Defence Community Organisation. Defence is committed to providing Defence Community Organisation services in Tassie. I am advised that a Defence Community Organisation workforce review is underway to ensure the Defence Community Organisation offers the best possible service to defence families na-
tionally. But I can assure the member there will be no overall reduction in services to ADF families in Tasmania.

**Climate Change**

Mr **PERRETT** (2.56 pm)—My question is to the Minister for Climate Change and Energy Efficiency. Why is the government committed to taking strong action on climate change, how has this commitment been received and is the minister aware of any recent attempts to gauge community opinion?

Mr **COMBET**—I thank the member for Moreton for his question. Of course, the foundation for a genuine climate change policy is respect for the science, and mainstream scientists are telling all governments internationally that carbon pollution is contributing to warming, and that is related to climate change. The fact of the matter is that the science is overwhelming, and the Australian government respects the science.

There is an interesting opinion piece in today’s *Australian* by John Gummer, a former member of Margaret Thatcher’s cabinet, which said the following:

… in Britain, scepticism is confined to the extremes. The political parties embracing it are way out on the edge of the spectrum with views on most other matters that few of us would embrace.

That is an interesting contribution. One wonders what Mr Gummer would have to say about the comments of the Leader of the Opposition a short period, a week or so, ago in Perth, when he said:

I don’t think we can say that the science is settled here.

… … … …

… whether carbon dioxide is quite the environmental villain that some people make it out to be is not yet proven.

Of course, what we have here is someone who does not respect the science, who is a sceptic about it, who is a denier of the scientific evidence—but who wishes, for politically opportune reasons, to be respected on some level and so rushes out a day or two after making these comments to confirm that he does in fact respect the science. He has had so many different positions on this that it is completely confounding. One day he denies the science, the next day he says it is credible and the next day he takes something off the One Nation website. First he listens to Senator Minchin, and then he pays attention to Senator Bernardi. As the member for Wentworth said about the Leader of the Opposition, on this issue he is a weather vane. Of course, many Australians disagree with Mr Abbott. They accept the science, they respect it and they want action on climate change.

There has been plenty of public debate and assessment of opinion about these issues recently. One poll, led by the Deputy Leader of the Opposition, the member for Curtin, is particularly interesting. On her website last Wednesday night, in answer to the question, ‘Do you support a carbon tax or not?’, 76.6 per cent of respondents poll strongly supported a carbon tax. That was by about 11 o’clock at night. Within 20 minutes—I think after a staffer or someone had had a look at the website—a couple of thousand new entries had been made, bringing the issue back into some balance, and that was immediately followed by the closure of the poll and the website.

This is the quality of contribution that comes from those opposite on all of these issues. Mr Gummer is right to say that those denying the science and opposing action on climate change are at the edge of the political spectrum. Across Europe, mainstream parties on the left and right of politics all respect the science and all support tackling climate change; they do not dodgy up polls about the issues. The coalition’s position on this issue is the crudest opportunism that one could imagine on this issue. Across the world governments respect the science, but not this

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coalition led by the Leader of the Opposition. The responsible position in the national interest of this country is to respect the science and have a credible response to it, something that this leader of the opposition lacks.

The SPEAKER—The member for Stirling has the call. Welcome back, member for Stirling, and congratulations.

Asylum Seekers

Mr KEENAN (3.01 pm)—Thank you, Mr Speaker. My question is to the Prime Minister. I refer to the Prime Minister’s statement on Sunday 13 March in response to the break-out of detainees on Christmas Island that ‘this is a situation which is well in hand’. Within 24 hours of this statement, a series of rolling riots broke out, tear gas and beanbag rounds of fire were used, the facility was set on fire, staff had to be rescued and the Federal Police had to retake the facility by force. Can the Prime Minister guarantee that no asylum seeker that has damaged Commonwealth property or obstructed Commonwealth officers in these riots will be granted a visa?

Ms GILLARD—I thank the member for his question, and I am glad to see that he has replaced the former shadow spokesperson on this issue. On the question that he has asked me about Christmas Island, what I can say to the shadow minister for immigration is as follows. First and foremost, criminal charges can be laid by the Commonwealth Director of Public Prosecutions following a police investigation into these incidents. This kind of violence and destruction is wrong. It is criminal behaviour and, just as we would expect in any other part of the nation, if someone has engaged in criminal behaviour, then the police investigate and charges can follow a proper investigation process.

Under the Migration Act, as the member is probably aware, character is an important consideration in determining whether or not someone should be granted a visa. The minister for immigration has said that this will be considered on a case-by-case basis. As is proper, the Migration Act requires him to consider cases one at a time and to have his decisions turn on the facts of an individual case. But, as the minister has said, as these matters are considered on a case-by-case basis, character considerations will be taken into account for those on Christmas Island who have organised and perpetrated this sort of activity.

I say generally to the member and to the House what I have said publicly and am happy to repeat here: this kind of conduct by individuals on Christmas Island is grossly wrong. This kind of conduct can and should cause criminal charges to flow following a proper police investigation. We know from our ordinary understanding of the law that acts of violence and acts of destruction are criminal acts. This kind of violence and conduct can and will be taken into account under the proper procedures of the Migration Act. What I would say to the member is that, as I have said publicly, no-one who engages in this kind of conduct will profit from it. No-one who does it will profit from it. The minister for immigration has made that absolutely clear, and I am very happy to restate it in this place.

Mr ABBOTT—Mr Speaker, I ask a supplementary question to the Prime Minister. Will she guarantee that the asylum seekers who have been engaging in this behaviour will never get a visa to this country?

Ms GILLARD—I thank the member for his question, and I am glad to see that he has replaced the former shadow spokesperson on this issue. On the question that he has asked me about Christmas Island, what I can say to the shadow minister for immigration is as follows. First and foremost, criminal charges can be laid by the Commonwealth Director of Public Prosecutions following a police investigation into these incidents. This kind of violence and destruction is wrong. It is criminal behaviour and, just as we would expect in any other part of the nation, if someone has engaged in criminal behaviour, then the police investigate and charges can follow a proper investigation process.

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Mr ABBOTT—Mr Speaker, I ask a supplementary question to the Prime Minister. Will she guarantee that the asylum seekers who have been engaging in this behaviour will never get a visa to this country?
The member for Dickson then left the chamber.

Ms GILLARD—The laws of this country actually apply to everyone. That is what happens when you live in a democracy. The member for Dickson might want to study that in his time outside the chamber. The laws of this country apply to everyone. The Migration Act is the law of this country. It requires the minister for immigration to deal with cases on a case-by-case basis. It requires the minister for immigration to look at the facts of each case. But, as the minister for immigration has said publicly and as I have just said in this parliament, in considering questions of character, the conduct engaged in by the individual can certainly be taken into account.

What the Leader of the Opposition is inviting me to do is not in accordance with the Migration Act. It is actually not in the best interests of holding to account the people who have engaged in this conduct. It could arguably give them some legal grounds to contest the decisions that the minister may or may not later make in relation to their visas. So, rather than engage in that kind of silly shenanigan in this parliament, we will continue to go through the process. The police will do a proper investigation; charges may be laid from that investigation; and the minister for immigration will consider visas case by case—as he is required to do by the law—taking into account questions of character. The kind of bad conduct we have seen on Christmas Island can be taken into account in that character determination.

Libya

Mr NEUMANN (3.07 pm)—My question is to the Minister for Foreign Affairs. Will the minister update the House on international efforts to protect civilians and bring an end to the Gaddafi regime’s violence in Libya?

Mr Rudd—I thank the member for Blair for his question. The international community has been justifiably horrified by the brutality meted out by the Libyan regime towards its own people. That is why the international community has welcomed the action agreed by the United Nations Security Council in New York last Friday to protect the Libyan people from the brutality of their own regime, and that is why the Australian government has welcomed the action of the UN Security Council. The Libyan regime has forfeited any claim to international legitimacy because of its murderous behaviour towards its own people. Its actions in this campaign will be recorded as among the more barbarous actions by any state in the world’s modern history.

There are two critical parts to the UN Security Council’s resolution of 17 March 2011. The first empowers member states to use all necessary measures to create a no-fly zone over Libya. The second empowers member states to deploy all necessary measures to protect the Libyan people under threat of attack by the Libyan regime. Further, following on the passage of this by the UN Security Council last Friday, two days later, on 19 March, the US, France and the UK commenced military actions against the Libyan regime in accordance with the provisions and authorisation of UN Security Council Resolution 1973. These actions, we are advised, will be followed by further actions by other states, including Arab states. Had the international community not acted in the manner it has over the last three days, today we would instead be witnessing the butchery of Benghazi, because those citizens would have been left to their own devices.

This will be a difficult military operation. It has been described by the US military
spokesman as phase 1 of a multiphase military operation. The political outcome, of course, will be uncertain. Had the international community not acted in solidarity and support, the people of Libya would have been left to their own fate—having dared to raise their voices in the name of freedom and the rest of the world having joined in and cheered them on as they moved towards Tripoli—and, had the world community started to go silent, we would have learnt nothing from the experiences of Rwanda, Darfur and the Balkans. Instead, the international community did act.

Australia, for its part, is now the third-largest contributor to the humanitarian effort globally, after the United States and after the European Union, in support of those fleeing Libya right now, and we will continue to maintain our effort into the future. The government elsewhere is monitoring closely other developments in the Middle East, across North Africa and in Egypt, as well as in Jordan, Yemen, Bahrain and other Gulf states. On these matters, most recently in Bahrain, I spoke with the Bahraini foreign minister last night expressing Australia’s concern about violence in that particular country.

Australia’s interests remain seized by these events. These events in the Middle East impact the ability of terrorists to operate across the Middle East, they impact on Iran’s freedom of manoeuvre across the Middle East and beyond, they impact on the Israel-Palestine peace process, they impact on the ability to develop pluralist democracies in the Arab world and they impact on the global economy through inflation and the price of oil. For these reasons Australia’s national interests are seized, our values are seized and our diplomacy will remain active.

Ms JULIE BISHOP (Curtin—Deputy Leader of the Opposition) (3.11 pm)—On indulgence: military intervention in another country in most circumstances should be the last resort, but when Colonel Gaddafi ordered the Libyan military to attack his own people, when he brought in foreign mercenaries to kill and terrorise Libyans and when he threatened the people of Benghazi with no mercy, the United Nations Security Council had to endorse action and protect the Libyan people. The coalition supports the United Nations Security Council resolution and we commend Foreign Minister Rudd for his consistent advocacy on this issue.

East Timor

Mr MORRISON (3.12 pm)—My question is to the Minister for Foreign Affairs. Can the Minister for Foreign Affairs confirm that, eight months after the Prime Minister’s announcement of a regional processing centre in East Timor, no country has agreed to host it, no country has agreed to fund it, no country has agreed to send any asylum seekers there and no country has agreed to provide any resettlement places for people processed there? When will the Minister for Foreign Affairs clean up the mess of the Prime Minister’s failed policy for a processing centre in East Timor?

Mr RUDD—I welcome the question from the member for Cook, who seems to have changed portfolio. There seems to have been an ‘accident down at mill’ recently following certain public interventions by the member for Cook on recent developments concerning asylum seekers, and now he seeks to shadow me rather than my friend and colleague the minister for immigration. We will see how the member for Cook’s career evolves in the days and weeks ahead.

The member for Cook refers to the proposals by the government concerning a regional protection framework and within that the concept of a regional processing centre. He specifically asked for progress on these
matters. He should be aware that both I and my colleague the immigration minister have consulted with our counterparts, not just in the region but beyond as well, including both of us with the High Commissioner for Refugees in Geneva, myself most recently only two weeks ago. Furthermore, I would draw the honourable member’s attention to the fact that within the next couple of weeks the minister and myself will be attending the Bali processing meeting in Bali with the Indonesian foreign minister and with foreign ministers and representatives from across the region. That is the proper mechanism through which we determine a regional response to what is a problem not just for the Australian nation, not just for the wider region but in fact for the entire world.

In fact, if the honourable member for Cook reflected for a moment on what is unfolding in the Middle East he would reflect on the fact that political instability there is likely to create further movement of peoples from the Middle East to the countries of Europe and beyond. That is why, rather than engaging in partisan opportunistic interventions in this debate, it would be wiser for any responsible member of this House to contribute productively to what is a global challenge, a regional challenge and a national challenge for Australia, and that is how the Australian government is currently engaged.

**Economy**

*Mr SYMON (3.15 pm)—My question is to the Treasurer. Will the Treasurer update the House on the importance of maintaining a responsible fiscal policy and returning the budget to surplus as planned?*

*Mr SWAN—I thank the member for Deakin for his very important question. The government has in place a very strong fiscal strategy which will see a return to surplus well ahead of our peers. This strategy will mean that we will have some of the strongest public finances in the developed world. This is important because our economy will reach capacity in the years ahead. It is important that we maintain a very strong fiscal strategy.*

This is, of course, despite the awful disasters that we have seen, which will impact on growth as we go forward. We know the impact of the floods and cyclones in Queensland will detract from growth this year, but, to counter that, the underlying fundamentals of our economy are strong. We have very strong employment growth—over 300,000 jobs in the past year and 700,000 jobs over a three-year period. We are still seeing incomes strengthen and we have a very solid investment pipeline, particularly in resources—something like $380 billion. All of this underscores the need for a very strong and tight fiscal policy and the return to surplus.

That is why the government acted responsibly. It is why we put in place the flood levy. It is why we made the savings to finance what we have to do to rebuild Queensland and other parts of the country. It is why we have our two per cent cap on spending growth. It is why we will continue to implement this strategy, to make sure that when the economy is stretched to capacity we have the appropriate fiscal policy. It was appropriate when the global recession came along for us to support our economy. Now it is appropriate for us to step back in these circumstances because of the strength of the employment pipeline.

This has been consistent from day one and stands in stark contrast to the approach of those who sit opposite. Those who sit opposite pretend be concerned about levels of deficit and debt. They do this at the same time that they are blocking something like $5 billion worth of budget savings in the Senate. We hear the Leader of the Opposition and others on the front bench from time to time...
make suggestions about what we can do with spending, but we do not get any suggestions for savings. Indeed, we get the damage and the vandalism to the budget bottom line. On the one hand, they are running around the country saying, ‘Deficits are bad,’ and on the other hand they are saying, ‘How can we make them bigger?’ That is their approach to fiscal policy. It is one that is reckless and it is one that is absolutely irresponsible. That is why people absolutely understand that the economics team on the other side of the parliament is the most incompetent in generations. But we on this side of the House will keep on with responsible economic management and a responsible fiscal strategy.

**Asylum Seekers**

*Mrs BRONWYN BISHOP* (3.18 pm)—My question is to the Minister for Immigration and Citizenship. I refer the minister to the advertisement in today’s *Australian* seeking applications for an additional six public affairs and media officers paying between $56,000 and $117,000 per year for the Department of Immigration and Citizenship. Is the government’s answer to out-of-control borders and detention centres really just more spin doctors?

*Mr BOWEN*—I thought the member for Stirling was the new shadow minister from immigration; it appears it is now the member for Mackellar. It is really getting better with every question.

The government’s answer to the issues facing us with asylum seekers is an international solution for an international problem; unlike the opposition, whose answer is a detention centre at Nauru and another on Christmas Island. We saw last week the real shadow minister for immigration slipping and sliding on the issue of whether 90 per cent of the people who are processed at Nauru ended up in Australia. He slipped and slid on it because it is a fact—it is the truth.

Their policy is a complete fraud. We also heard about the policy of temporary protection visas, which saw the number of asylum seekers go up after its introduction. Most particularly, we heard the shadow minister’s policy of allowing visas for the first 3,750 people to arrive in Australia, creating a scramble to come to Australia.

We remain focused on the only sustainable policy, which is an international solution to an international problem.

*Honourable members interjecting—*

**The SPEAKER**—Order! There is a general warning and a number of people are fortunate that they were not sent out under standing order 94(a) because they transgressed standing order 65(b), which relates to audible interruptions. They were saved because the Minister for Immigration and Citizenship could not be overridden in decibel terms.

*Mr Morrison*—Mr Speaker, I seek leave to table the advertisement for the six new positions that are going to cost $600,000 a year.

**The SPEAKER**—The member for Cook will resume his seat. I indicate, and I do not think that during question time we should allow anybody coming to the dispatch box to table documents willy-nilly. That was what the member for Boothby did an hour or so ago. I remind people.

**Indigenous Communities**

*Ms O’NEILL* (3.22 pm)—My question is to the Minister for Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs:
what action is the government taking to reduce antisocial behaviour and improve living conditions in Alice Springs?

Ms MACKLIN—I thank the member for Robertson for her question because, as she knows, this government is committed to transforming Alice Springs and the town camps into safe places to live and bring up children and into places that are part of the economic and social life of Alice Springs. This government has invested $150 million through the Alice Springs Transformation Plan to reduce overcrowding in the town camps and to improve the services, something that has needed to be done in Alice Springs for a very, very long period of time. It is being done by this government and was certainly never done before.

It is the case that the town camps in Alice Springs have been ignored for too long, leading to appalling living conditions for women and children in particular. I can assure the House that I am resolute in my commitment to the people of Alice Springs, and particularly to the people who live in the town camps, that we intend to turn this around. Where Mal Brough and the previous Liberal government walked away, we have persisted. They walked away from the people of the town camps, and we have persisted. When my action was challenged in the Federal Court, we persisted and we won. Despite the enormity of the transformation task, we intend to persist until change is delivered.

I welcome the Leader of the Opposition’s recent interest in this issue—and it is recent. I am very concerned that his actions overnight have put this issue into a political frame—rather than commit himself to the bipartisan approach that I thought we had. I understand that the Leader of the Opposition had raised the issue with the Prime Minister a couple of times, most recently on Friday, and I understand that at that time the Leader of the Opposition and the Prime Minister agreed to meet and discuss the matter further. Unfortunately, the Leader of the Opposition then decided to release his letter to the Prime Minister to a newspaper. He had decided that rather than behave in a bipartisan and constructive manner he of course wanted to take this into politics. He decided he wanted to behave as always and make this issue a political issue rather than treat it as the very serious issue that it is.

This government will continue to work in a bipartisan manner with the shadow minister for Indigenous affairs, who has treated this issue seriously, unlike the Leader of the Opposition. We have been meeting. We have agreed on what needs to be done in Alice Springs. Most recently we announced around 10 days ago: improved lighting in critical areas in Alice Springs; extra places for Work for the Dole; improved housing support—all agreed with the shadow minister, but of course this Leader of the Opposition is always out to play politics rather than take these issues seriously.

The matters that were addressed in the most recent announcement agreed to by the shadow minister build on the enormous task that we have already started. We have already built many houses, rebuilt houses, put in alcohol rehabilitation services; all this is happening and all the Leader of the Opposition wants to do is play politics. (Time expired)

National Education Standards

Mr SLIPPER (3.26 pm)—My question today is to the Prime Minister. I refer the Prime Minister to her very sensible comments yesterday when she said it was impossible to understand Western literature without understanding the Bible. Could the Prime Minister therefore indicate where in the government’s draft national curriculum the Bible is mentioned?
Ms GILLARD—Thank you very much and it will not surprise you, Mr Speaker, when I say I have not brought the national curriculum with me. Of course the national curriculum is available through the website of the Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority. What you will find when you look at the national curriculum, whether you look at the literature stream, whether you look at any part of it, is that it is conveying to students what has made our civilisation, what has made Western civilisation, including the values that guide us, the democratic structures under which we live, the rule of law under which we live, what brings us together, what explains our history as a nation, what explains our history with Indigenous Australians. As you would imagine, at different levels, as children grow, learn and are more capable of critical assessment, they are asked to reflect on these things, to analyse them, to comment on them and to discuss these questions, which is exactly the kind of education I had as a child.

As well as having a great state school education as a child, which challenged me to think about the great moral concepts of our age, I also had the benefit of a very rigorous grounding at Mitcham Baptist Church, which included endless committing to memory of catechism. I was a prizewinner at it, and it served me in good stead. I have been known to joke with the Leader of the Opposition in the past that one day we will go head to head on our ability to recite sections of the Bible by rote. I think I could back myself in for some large slabs of it.

Mr Pyne—Mr Speaker, on a point of order: the Prime Minister was asked where in the national curriculum she could point to the Bible being mentioned. If she does not know the answer, perhaps she could take it on notice and get back to the House.

The SPEAKER—The Prime Minister is aware that she has to be directly relevant. That is the standing order. It does not mean, and it cannot be interpreted as, a direct answer as the person who posed the question would believe. This answer is, I believe, sufficiently directly relevant to the question to go beyond the sort of relevance rule that we saw in the last parliament.

Ms GILLARD—My point was simply this: with a great education, which includes developing your critical faculties as well as your understanding of moral concepts, you are equipped as an adult to make your own decisions. I have made mine, in good conscience as an adult. They are not the same as others in this place; that is to be expected. We live in a democracy which values free conscience and free thinking. That is the kind of education I want for Australian children. That is the kind of education I believe the national curriculum is aimed at.

Mr Slipper—Mr Speaker, to assist the Prime Minister, I seek leave to table a copy of the draft Australian curriculum.

Leave not granted.

Alpine National Park

Mr KELVIN THOMSON (3.31 pm)—My question is to the Minister for Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities. Will the minister update the House on recent developments concerning the Victorian government putting cattle into the Alpine National Park and the reasons the Victorian government has provided for its actions?

Mr BURKE—I thank the member for Wills for the question. Members might be aware that, as a result of decisions taken at the end of last week, the cattle that the Victorian government have sent into the Alpine National Park have to be out by 8 April. The very simple basis is that, unlike the views of the Liberal and National Party in Victoria,
most Australians do not wander into our national parks and say, ‘Oh, it’s a pretty nice place. All it needs to improve it is some cattle.’ The argument that came from the Victorian government was that somehow these cattle were required to reduce bushfire— notwithstanding that, of the Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission’s 67 recommendations, seven dealt with land and fuel management and none of them suggested that cattle should be reintroduced. The member for Goldstein said, ‘It’s about our heritage,’ wanting to refer to the *Man from Snowy River*. They were brought there in a truck! This was not the Man from Snowy River going up on horseback.

The argument then came from the Victorian government that it was all about science, about so-called scientific grazing. In wanting to find out what the scientific research was about, we heard from a member of the Victorian parliament by the name of Donna Petrovich. She said that people in those areas have an intrinsic knowledge of their environment, and so do the livestock. She said, ‘In many respects, we are quite lucky that there are still a few remaining lead cows in those herds that know the areas that are being trialled. If we did not have that, we would have an environmental problem. Those cattle stick to the areas and the tracks, and they teach the other cattle the appropriate way to move through that country.’ So the line from the Victorian government is: 400 cattle walk into a national park; the calves want to go to the endangered wetlands; but the lead cow says, ‘Oh no, that is listed under the EPBC Act. You can’t go there.’

Then we got the official information from the Victorian government, and it was no better. I asked the Victorian government to provide the Australian government with the documents that caused them to make a decision in January. They gave us a document dated March. For the reason that they made a decision in January, they gave us a document that was dated 15 March 2011. It provides the next layer of the scientific research. In year 1, the placement of cattle in the selected sites was required to enable the cattle to develop and demonstrate high site fidelity and site familiarisation with these sites. High-fidelity cattle is what this trial is allegedly going to provide us with! You can almost see JB Hi-Fi: you have got the high-fidelity speakers and the high-fidelity system; they can now introduce the cattle as well, courtesy of the Victorian government.

We were promised that this would be a scientific university study, but it would not pass as high school science homework. We were promised that there would be science involved; the Victorian government have given us nothing but satire. Make no mistake: when you change the government from a Labor government to a coalition government, you get a worse environmental outcome.

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

JAPAN NATURAL DISASTERS

Mr Rudd (Griffith—Minister for Foreign Affairs) (3.35 pm)—On indulgence, for the benefit of the House, we have just been advised by the crisis centre of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade that they have now contacted or otherwise confirmed the safety of all those whom we had on our list of Australians who were unaccounted for in the affected area. I would also say to the House that it should be noted that it is possible that more names may emerge as a result of further work by the consular team or further information coming to hand from family and friends. But, in terms of the current unaccounted-for list, that number has now been reduced by officials to zero. I commend publicly the work of our consular officials who
have worked around the clock for the last 10 days in the most arduous of circumstances.

Ms JULIE BISHOP (Curtin) (3.36 pm)—On indulgence, that is extremely good news and we are delighted that the Minister for Foreign Affairs has kept us fully briefed on the situation in Japan as it unfolds. Our thoughts and prayers are still with the Japanese people who are suffering so much under this devastating crisis that has unfolded, but we thank the minister for keeping us briefed on this.

DOCUMENTS

Mr ALBANESE (Grayndler—Leader of the House) (3.36 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:

Innovation Australia—Report for 2009-10.
Snowy Hydro Limited—Financial report for the period 5 July 2009 to 3 July 2010

Debate (on motion by Mr Hartsuyker) adjourned.

COMMITTEES

Migration Committee

The SPEAKER—I have received advice from the Chief Government Whip that he has nominated Mr Georganas to be a member of the Joint Standing Committee on Migration in place of Mrs D’Ath.

Mr ALBANESE (Grayndler—Leader of the House) (3.37 pm)—by leave—I move:

That Mrs D’Ath be discharged from the Joint Standing Committee on Migration and that, in her place, Mr Georganas be appointed a member of that committee.

Question agreed to.

SCHOOLS ASSISTANCE AMENDMENT (FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE) BILL 2011

Second Reading

Debate resumed.

Mr GARRETT (Kingsford Smith—Minister for School Education, Early Childhood and Youth) (3.38 pm)—in reply—I am happy to stand and provide a summing-up on the Schools Assistance Amendment (Financial Assistance) Bill 2011, which provides the legislative authority for the government’s financial assistance for non-government primary and secondary education from 2009 to 2012. This bill amends the act to extend the existing funding arrangements, including the indexation arrangements for grants for recurrent and targeted expenditure until the end of 2013 and for grants for capital expenditure until the end of 2014.

This bill will provide funding certainty to the non-government school sector until the Australian government has had the opportunity to consider the findings of the review of funding for schooling and determined how schools will be funded into the future. That review is due to report to the government in late 2011. This will be one of the most substantial reforms to the way national education is delivered in this country’s history. This is a once-in-a-generation chance to really examine school funding arrangements—putting all of the options on the table and identifying what changes may be required.

The member for Sturt, the shadow spokesman, has become extremely and increasingly hysterical on this issue. We saw that in the speech that he made to the House—trapped in a public school versus private school argument that this government rejects entirely. The comments that he has made on school funding have been both divisive and inflammatory. The fact is that we understand very clearly the necessity to pro-
provide adequate funding to all schools. We are talking about funding schools; we are not talking about an either/or debate, which the shadow minister, the member for Sturt, is stuck in. This is about achieving a funding system which is transparent, fair, financially sustainable and effective in promoting excellent education outcomes for all Australian students, no matter which school they are at. It is not at all about taking money away from schools.

We are investing some $64.9 billion in our schools over 2009-12 to provide Australian students and parents with modern infrastructure, high-quality teachers, a national curriculum and unprecedented transparency on the performance of our schools. I commend the bill to the House.

Question agreed to.

Bill read a second time.

Message from the Administrator recommending appropriation announced.

**Consideration in Detail**

Bill—by leave—taken as a whole.

**Mr PYNE (Sturt) (3.40 pm)—** I move opposition amendment (1):

(1) Schedule 1, after item 3, page 3 (after line 17), insert:

3A Subsection 22(2)

Omit “31 January 2012”, substitute “a date set by the Minister by legislative instrument”.

3B After subsection 22(2)

Insert:

(3) The Minister may not set a date for subsection (2) that is earlier than the date by which he or she is satisfied the national curriculum will be implemented in government schools in each State and Territory.

(4) If it appears that the national curriculum will not be implemented in government schools in each State and Territory by the date that has been set for subsection (2), the Minister must set a later date.

I will not delay the proceedings of the House very long. I simply wish to point out to the ‘packed’ House taking such an interest in the Schools Assistance Amendment (Financial Assistance) Bill 2011 that this bill contains a provision that the non-government schools sector be required to implement the proposed national curriculum in January 2012. Why is that significant? It is significant because it clearly indicates that the Minister for School Education, Early Childhood and Youth and his office have completely missed the fact that the ministerial council on education has already decided that the national curriculum will not be introduced until January 2013. In other words, while government schools will not be implementing the national curriculum until January 2013, when it may be ready, the law will be requiring that non-government schools implement a national curriculum from January 2012 which will not have even been completed. It is an absurdity.

It took the opposition to pick up this error in the government’s bill and to move an amendment to fix that date—in other words, to push the date out to a time set by the minister by legislative instrument. I therefore call on the House to fix the error that occurs in this bill, rather than allow to be passed through this House a bill that absurdly requires the non-government sector to implement a national curriculum a year before the government sector and a year before the national curriculum is even ready.

I understand from the Greens that the minister has assured them that he accepts that the bill is flawed in this respect but has said to them: ‘Don’t worry about it; we’ll fix it all later.’ Quite frankly, Minister, that is not good enough. What is required of ministers is to actually understand the detail of the
bills that they are taking through the House of Representatives. Without wishing to be churlish, I would have thought that, given this minister’s record on detail as the Minister for the Environment responsible for the home insulation debacle, the sustainable assessments program and the solar panels program—for which he was required to be removed from his portfolio and placed in the very important schools portfolio—the minister would have learnt his lesson about getting the detail right.

It is more in sorrow than anger that I have to stand at the dispatch box and point out that the minister for schools has brought to the schools portfolio the slipshod and sloppy approach that he brought to the environment portfolio and that it behoves the opposition to fix a technical defect in the government’s bill. I call on the House to vote in favour of the opposition’s amendment to fix the technical flaw that occurs in this bill, and I ask the crossbenchers to accept the wisdom of using common sense to ensure that the non-government schools sector is treated exactly the same way as the government schools sector—and that requires this amendment to be passed.

Mr TUDGE (Aston) (3.45 pm)—There is a core principle in relation to school policy that has been adhered to by successive governments, and that is when determining new policies that impact on schools we do not distinguish between the government and the non-government school sectors in the application of those policies. When you look through the various policies which have been enacted over the past 10 or more years you see that the application has been very consistent. The same policies apply to the government sector as do to the non-government sector. For example, the national testing regime applies equally to each sector, school starting ages apply equally to each sector, the National Safe Schools Framework applies equally to each sector, and there are the My School requirements and the literacy programs—and I could go on. The only area, of course, where we do distinguish between the sectors is in relation to school funding.

The policy of treating the schools sectors similarly is not necessarily a formally stated policy as such, but it has become a convention of successive governments and, indeed, has become an expectation of both the government schools sector and the non-government school sector. The purpose of the amendment to the Schools Assistance Amendment (Financial Assistance) Bill 2011, which the Hon. Mr Pyne has just moved, is basically to ensure that we abide by this policy. Without this amendment the national curriculum will apply differently to the Catholic and independent school sector from how it applies to the government school sector. The government schools would not have to introduce the national curriculum until 2013 or beyond, while the non-government schools would have to introduce it next year at the very beginning of 2012. This amendment is quite a straightforward and simple amendment. It would simply ensure that non-government schools would have until 2013 or beyond to implement the national curriculum in the same way as the government school sector has.

This amendment is not just important in adhering to the principle which I just articulated but there are also real issues at stake here. You would be aware, Mr Deputy Speaker, that the Ministerial Council of Education Ministers met at the end of last year and agreed to defer the implementation of the national curriculum to at least 2013 because there were so many issues which had to be addressed. It strikes me therefore as ludicrous that, if the actual national curriculum will not be completed until 2013 at the very earliest, one school sector should be required to implement an incomplete na-
tional school curriculum. And it is not just a requirement that is in legislation; it would be a requirement tied to their funding. Potentially billions of dollars are at stake in relation to this particular requirement.

Why did the education ministers decide to defer the timing of the implementation of the national curriculum? They did so for many legitimate reasons, including, as they outlined, that the draft curriculum covered too much content, it was overly prescriptive and it lacked clear achievement standards. These are very important principles which need to be looked at seriously and which need to be corrected. State ministers clearly recognised the need for more time to get the national curriculum right. We support those ministers, and support the government having more time to get the national curriculum right so that it can be enacted in 2013 or beyond. Equally, the non-government schools sector should have that additional time as well. It is simply ludicrous that they are required to implement the national school curriculum at the beginning of next year when it simply will not be completed, and when the government school sector does not have to implement it as such.

Question put:

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

The House divided. [3.54 pm]

(The Speaker—Mr Harry Jenkins)

| Ayes .......... | 69 |
| Noes .......... | 71 |
| Majority ...... | 2 |

AYES

| Abbott, A.J. | Alexander, J. |
| Andrews, K. | Andrews, K.J. |
| Billson, B.F. | Bishop, B.K. |
| Bishop, J.J. | Briggs, J.E. |
| Broadbent, R. | Buchholz, S. |
| Chester, D. | Christensen, G. |
| Ciobo, S.M. | Cobb, J.K. |
| Coulton, M. | Crook, T. |
| Entsch, W. | Fletcher, P. |
| Frydenberg, J. | Gambaro, T. |
| Gash, J. | Grggs, N. |
| Haase, B.W. | Hartsuyker, L. |
| Hawke, A. | Hockey, J.B. |
| Hunt, G.A. | Irons, S.J. |
| Jensen, D. | Jones, E. |
| Keenan, M. | Kelly, C. |
| Laming, A. | Ley, S.P. |
| Macfarlane, I.E. | Marino, N.B. |
| Markus, L.E. | Matheson, R. |
| McCormack, M. | Mirabella, S. |
| Morrison, S.J. | Moylean, J.E. |
| Neville, P.C. | O'Dowd, K. |
| O'Dwyer, K | Prentice, J. |
| Pyne, C. | Ramsey, R. |
| Randall, D.J. | Robb, A. |
| Robert, S.R. | Roy, Wyatt |
| Ruddock, P.M. | Scott, B.C. |
| Secker, P.D. | Simpkins, L. |
| Slipper, P.N. | Smith, A.D.H. |
| Somlyay, A.M. | Southcott, A.J. |
| Stone, S.N. | Tehan, D. |
| Truss, W.E. | Tudge, A. |
| Turnbull, M. | Van Manen, B. |
| Vasta, R. | Washer, M.J. |
| Wyatt, K. | |

NOES

| Adams, D.G.H. | Albanese, A.N. |
| Bandt, A. | Bird, S. |
| Bowen, C. | Bradbury, D.J. |
| Brodtmann, G. | Burke, A.E. |
| Burke, A.S. | Butler, M.C. |
| Byrne, A.M. | Champion, N. |
| Cheeseman, D.L. | Clare, J.D. |
| Collins, J.M. | Combet, G. |
| Crean, S.F. | D’Ath, Y.M. |
| Danby, M. | Dreyfus, M.A. |
| Elliot, J. | Ellis, K. |
| Emerson, C.A. | Ferguson, L.D.T. |
| Fitzgibbon, J.A. | Garrett, P. |
| Georganas, S. | Gibbons, S.W. |
| Gray, G. | Grierson, S.J. |
| Griffin, A.P. | Hall, J.G. * |
| Hayes, C.P. | Husic, E. |
| Jones, S. | Kelly, M.J. |
| King, C.F. | Leigh, A. |
| Livermore, K.F. | Lyons, G. |
| Macklin, J.L. | Marles, R.D. |

CHAMBER
Monday, 21 March 2011

McLelland, R.B.  Melham, D.
Murphy, J.  Neumann, S.K.
O’Connor, B.P.  O’Neill, D.
Owens, J.  Parke, M.
Perrett, G.D.  Plibersek, T.
Ripoll, B.F.  Rishworth, A.L.
Rowland, M.  Roxon, N.L.
Rudd, K.M.  Saffin, J.A.
Shorten, W.R.  Sidebottom, S.
Smith, S.F.  Smyth, L.
Snowdon, W.E.  Swan, W.M.
Symon, M.  Thomson, C.
Thomson, K.J.  Vamvakinou, M.
Wilkie, A.  Windsor, A.H.C.
Zappia, A.

PAIRS
Baldwin, R.C.  Gillard, J.E.
Schultz, A.  Mitchell, R.
Forrest, J.A.  Ferguson, M.J.

* denotes teller

Question negatived.
Bill agreed to.

Third Reading

Mr GARRETT (Kingsford Smith—Minister for School Education, Early Childhood and Youth) (3.59 pm)—by leave—I move:

That this bill be now read a third time.
Question agreed to.
Bill read a third time.

DEFENCE LEGISLATION AMENDMENT (SECURITY OF DEFENCE PREMISES) BILL 2010
SCREEN AUSTRALIA (TRANSFER OF ASSETS) BILL 2010
CORPORATIONS AND OTHER LEGISLATION AMENDMENT (TRUSTEE COMPANIES AND OTHER MEASURES) BILL 2011
HEALTH INSURANCE AMENDMENT (COMPLIANCE) BILL 2010

Returned from the Senate
Message received from the Senate returning the bills without amendment or request.

AUSTRALIAN CIVILIAN CORPS BILL 2010

Consideration of Senate Message

Bill returned from the Senate with amendments.
Ordered that the amendments be considered at the next sitting.

FAMILY ASSISTANCE LEGISLATION AMENDMENT (CHILD CARE REBATE) BILL 2011

Second Reading

Debate resumed from 23 February, on motion by Mr Garrett:

That this bill be now read a second time.

Ms LEY (Farrer) (4.01 pm)—I rise to speak on the Family Assistance Legislation Amendment (Child Care Rebate) Bill 2011. The coalition went to the last election committing to pay the childcare rebate weekly in order to ease the upfront cost of child care for families and to ensure that child care remained affordable. We listened to and heeded the pleas of Australian families struggling with mortgages, the rising cost of groceries and their battle to find affordable, accessible child care. Fortunately the Labor Party has now listened to families and to our arguments and has put forward this bill.

The bill seeks to pay the childcare rebate either weekly or fortnightly depending on the frequency at which the childcare centre reports their childcare occupancies. Information provided by the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations indicates that, as the majority of childcare centres report weekly, there will be provision to pay the rebate on a weekly cycle. Where the providers report their attendance data on a fortnightly basis, parents or the centre will be paid every two weeks.

In addition to increasing the frequency of payment, the bill enables the rebate to be paid directly to the childcare provider. Given
that a number of providers have raised concerns with me about parents defaulting on childcare payments this will certainly assist providers. Parents may still elect to receive the rebates directly and this will be the default mechanism if they do not advise otherwise. The coalition certainly welcome the decision by the Gillard government to copy our lead and offer weekly or fortnightly payments of the rebate. However, this leads me to address the real reason why this legislation is so necessary.

The Gillard government has sought to decrease the childcare rebate from $7,778 to $7,500 a year while ceasing indexation. Whilst this bill is yet to be passed, Centrelink has already enacted the reduced rebates slashing the amount paid to thousands of parents. This is a clear sign of the sheer arrogance of this government. Despite evidence suggesting the legislation will not pass, they are intent on pushing forward with it, like a bull at a gate, to push through these changes—all this from a government that went to the 2007 election promising Australian families that it would make child care more affordable. Remember, the government committed to an additional 260 childcare centres, but alas child care has increased in cost and the promise to end the double drop-off with the building of those 260 childcare centres has been whittled down to 38.

Now the government claim they need this $86.3 million in savings from cutting the childcare rebate to help fund their national quality framework. Considering the wasteful spending of this government to date I am amazed they are not asking the nation’s children for interest-free loans from their piggy-banks. Yet the real issue here is that once again this is poorly designed, haphazard policy much like the pink batts debacle, the Building the Education Revolution fiasco and the hideously wasteful National Broadband Network.

The government want every childcare worker to be qualified. They want to increase the staff-to-child ratio. These sound positive measures. However, if you want to enact policy measures such as these, they need to be realistic. Given the current critical shortage of qualified workers, exemptions will need to be offered left, right and centre to ensure that childcare centres can even keep their doors open. This is an industry which has a very high staff turnover and many qualified staff opt instead to use their qualifications in early-school-years teaching where the pay rates are higher and the holidays are longer.

In today’s Age, the critical shortfall of childcare workers is made very clear. Hundreds of centres are desperately searching for qualified staff. However, there is a chronic shortage. Three out of every 10 childcare workers in Victoria have no qualifications, according to the workplace survey undertaken by the government in 2010. I question the intent in forcing through these changes that, quite frankly, cannot be met and will lead to further shortages in the number of childcare places available as providers decide to reduce vacancies if they cannot find or afford additional staff. Particularly in rural and regional areas the shortages of skilled staff will see a real two-tiered system develop, and country areas will be made to feel like the poorer cousins compared with the cities.

The problems will not be confined just to rural areas. There will need to be a substantial increase in infrastructure nationwide. More childcare workers will need to be trained and providers will need to negotiate issues, such as additional car parking, with local councils. I come back to the article in today’s Age mentioning that there are some 29,000 childcare workers in Australia who are unqualified. The Minister for School Education, Early Childhood and Youth in-
sults those unqualified childcare workers by suggesting that our children in the nation’s childcare centres are somehow at risk from unqualified staff. I take great exception to that.

As we in the coalition know and understand, you can have workers in childcare centres supported by adequate qualified staff and high-quality systems that are in place that can balance the needs of every child in that centre. To suggest to those 29,000 workers that they should be made redundant, that they should get qualifications quick smart and that they have to meet a new framework says that something about the skills and the passion that they bring to their job every day are not worthwhile. We strongly resist that suggestion. Whilst I strongly support improving quality in the childcare sector, we do need practical, realistic goals. We need to re-examine the current auditing process to weed out the few providers who are not making the grade. We need to recognise that, whilst many childcare workers may not have formal qualifications, their years of experience on the job give them an understanding that no classroom can teach.

Instead, with the release of some quality statistics last week from the national childcare association which indicated that only 87 per cent of childcare centres were meeting all of the high-quality ticks in the boxes and the measures that are used when those auditing visits are done, the minister reacted, assuming that parents across Australia would be horrified at the lack of hygiene and the lack of quality in the centres that were highlighted by this report. The point is that if, as a school child, you brought home a report that said you were 87 per cent across the line, your family would be happy with that. I think, likewise, that the nation’s parents should be very happy with the quality of childcare that we receive in our centres, and the minister needs to remember that she is the minister for child care, not the minister whose job it is to offend, insult and denigrate Australia’s hardworking, viable and, in a world measure, very high-quality childcare centres.

The report that was released last week—and there were some headlines as a result of that report, and the minister insisted that the nation’s parents would be horrified—does not give parents the assurance that they should be getting from the minister for child care that our Australian child care is very good and parents should have confidence in it. The last thing we want is for parents not to have confidence in their childcare centres and in childcare generally. Certainly, where there are issues, as the accreditation process indicated, then the accreditors, the state agencies and the numerous people who are constantly sticking their nose into every childcare centre—and we accept that that is necessary—need to work with those who run the centre, with the parents and with stakeholders and make sure that the standards are met. Instead, the minister’s response has been that they should be named and shamed, that they will be appearing on the My School website in a few months time and that parents can go on there and perhaps see their local childcare centre named and shamed.

It is very important that we make a distinction between indicators that demonstrate genuine shortfalls and genuine failings in how a childcare centre is operating and indicators that perhaps do not demonstrate those. I notice that one of the accreditation criteria was that children should have a positive experience while toilet training. Maybe there is not a tick in the box every time that that happens. There were some indicators that hands were not washed as frequently as they should have been before eating food and that children did not get as much sleep as they perhaps should have. But I say to you, Mr Deputy Speaker, that if you went into any household there would be days when those things
might happen. It is quite difficult for every toileting experience to be positive. It is quite difficult for a harried mother to manage to meet every single tick in the box, so we accept that that happens in households.

Again, I am not suggesting that our childcare centres should suffer any lack of standards. I know that things should be done properly, but we have to be realistic. I come back to that: we have to be realistic. Another of the criteria mentioned was that children should be given an opportunity to appreciate the expressive arts. Finger painting, potato painting, hands in water—they are all expressive arts. But maybe there are some days when the opportunity to appreciate the expressive arts is not as good as it is on other days, and maybe they get fewer ticks in the box as a matter of course because of that. All of these indicators lead to a set of circumstances where, as I said, the accreditors and the agencies need to work with centres that are almost making the grade and make sure that things are fixed up. Instead, we have the minister noting that families must be horrified and centres will be named and shamed. That is an appalling response from a minister who should be supporting the childcare sector in this country. I am very proud of it. The centres that I meet have much to offer and are offering much to the nation’s children.

Australian families are really struggling to meet the cost of childcare as it is. The government has reduced the rebate and is intent on bringing in this national quality framework agenda, which will further exacerbate the pressure on families because they will have to cover the increased overheads of business required by this model. It is estimated that around 20,700 families will be affected by this reduction in the childcare rebate cap and will suffer financially as a result. The government, however, has been quick to dismiss these concerns, playing down the financial impact on families. Yet research undertaken by the Childcare Alliance shows that 74 per cent of parents surveyed would have difficulty meeting additional costs of $13 to $22 a day. For a couple of children over a year of working, that is a significant additional impost on any family. If both parents are working fulltime, with one child in formal care for 40 hours or more a week, it may cost $140 a week after the federal government’s childcare benefit and childcare rebate. This is a huge additional burden to families already struggling to pay mortgages and put food on the table.

Many parents have to question whether it is finally worthwhile for one parent to return to the workforce when they consider the costs of care for their children. In all likelihood, it would be the mother who stays home to care for young children, possibly losing the opportunity to re-enter the workforce for a number of years. We have to remember: it is not just a childcare issue, important though that is; it is a productivity in the workplace issue, and you cannot look at any newspaper or report today in any state or territory jurisdiction across Australia that does not mention the skills shortage and the need for workers. Many skilled workers come from overseas. We cannot possibly meet the shortfall in Australia. But we have here a significant demographic of working women who we need to support and encourage in their family and childcare choices so that when they are ready to go back into the workforce—and many of them are skilled when they step out of the workforce to have children—they have all of the support that they need. But it will come down to budgets; it will come down to payments. Additional costs of childcare could make the difference between them staying at home or going back to work.

Lack of access and increasing costs will undoubtedly force many parents to either withdraw their children from childcare or
seek alternative, less attractive care options. If parents have no choice but to work in order to meet their mortgage repayments or pay off their car, they may resort to placing their child in backyard care. That is not scaremongering. The other type of care that I must mention is care with grandparents. Another report in today’s press showed that the proportion of child care being done by grandparents has increased quite dramatically since 2002. Those grandparents do a magnificent job. I salute every one of them. It is not always easy when your own health is not what it was when you were a younger mum and you have very energetic toddlers and babies to look after, but you do it to help your children—to help them pay the bills and, of course, because you love to see your grandchildren. But sometimes it gets just a little bit too much and sometimes it is quite a burden that families are asking their parents to take on in looking after the grandchildren.

We have seen an increase, as I have said, in grandparents assuming those caring responsibilities, and the recent Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia survey indicates that approximately 47 per cent of grandmothers look after grandchildren for at least one day a week. Certainly, grandparents are willing to assist but many, due to geographic separation or their own employment, would be unable to care for their grandchildren on a regular basis, meaning that child care is the only viable option for parents. These difficulties bring stress to families. It really is important that with the lifestyles that we are living today we try to remove as many of those sources of stress as we possibly can—all of the balls young parents have to have in the air when there are jobs, mortgages, payments, bills and family issues to deal with and when there are young children in child care. Our job, as policy makers, should be to try to make those choices easier and to try to support the options that parents have.

The rollout of the National Quality Framework will further increase financial pressure on families, with many industry groups predicting increased costs of $12 to $22 a day—costs which, for the most part, will inevitably be borne by families. So, whilst we welcome the government’s decision to introduce weekly or fortnightly payments of the child care rebate, this is just one small positive in a sea of negative decisions. If this government is truly serious about helping Australian families source affordable child care it will reconsider its national framework and reinstate the indexation of the childcare rebate immediately.

Ms ROWLAND (Greenway) (4.17 pm)—I rise to speak in support of the Family Assistance Legislation Amendment (Child Care Rebate) Bill 2011. This bill is a timely reform and of extreme importance to many young families in my electorate of Greenway, balancing both the financial and non-financial challenges that are part and parcel of raising children. In a moment I will get to the hide of the member for Farrer, who just spoke, when it comes to our respective records on child care when in government. Firstly, I would like to talk about some of the rationale for the bill.

This bill is another realisation of this government’s commitment to Australian families, and child care in particular. In July last year, the government announced that families would be able to receive their childcare rebate payments more regularly from 1 July 2011, so that assistance may be provided when childcare fees are incurred. This bill delivers on this commitment. It is a direct response to an issue which has been consistently raised with me by many families in my electorate whom I meet and listen to on a regular basis. I congratulate the form minis-
ter Jenny Macklin and the current responsible minister, Kate Ellis, for championing this initiative and for being so responsive to the issues of constituents I have raised with them.

I have always believed that child care is a basic right for all families. Governments have an important role in ensuring that families are able to access quality and affordable childcare services. This government is committed to making positive changes for all families, including those with young children. We can see this commitment in amendments such as this one, and other legislation such as our landmark paid parental leave scheme, which has been enthusiastically welcomed by my constituents.

I am a passionate believer that government has a role in directly assisting families with child care, and the positive externalities that flow from this. The great thing about improving childcare legislation—which is what this amendment does—is that it facilitates at least two other major developments.

Firstly, a flexible and affordable childcare system allows our children to have access to early education. And early education allows for enhanced social development and learning opportunities at a young age. According to the *Child care and early education in Australia* report from 2009:

Children who did not attend a formal early childhood program had lower scores for receptive vocabulary than children in pre-year 1 and preschool programs.

Quality child care is therefore an integral stepping stone to prepare our children for the new environment that is primary education. I am reminded of this on a daily basis as I go to and from work and I drive past the Lalor Park Preschool Kindergarten, which I attended as a child. The second benefit that child care affords to families is workplace participation, particularly for women. This amendment makes it easier for parents to be afforded the dignity of re-entering the workforce and receiving the economic benefits that employment provides.

With around 690,000 Australian families eligible for childcare rebate payments, it is clear that a more flexible system is necessary to handle the myriad of different needs associated with such a vast number of families. Recently we celebrated International Women’s Day, a time to highlight some of the issues surrounding women. Of course, child care, access to work and access to other opportunities for women was an issue that was raised during many of these forums and discussions. I participated in many of these and at the forefront was the issue of managing the work-life balance. While we can never completely fix everyone’s challenges in this regard we can always work to make improvements to individual circumstances. This bill will work to increase flexibility and help the process of balancing the often competing responsibilities of employment and child care.

I would like to turn to some of the main provisions of this bill. In bringing forward this legislation the government has injected over $42 million into child care. The option of weekly or fortnightly childcare rebate payments will directly ease the pressures associated with child care, and is indicative of this government’s commitment to reforming what could be, for some, inflexible legislation, and amending laws to better suit the individual needs of families.

It is clear that a one-size-fits-all method of administering childcare rebate payments is not optimal. Not all children receive the same amount of childcare hours and not all children attend the same type of childcare provider. This bill will allow for a much more dynamic approach to managing childcare payments.
As there is no blanket method we can throw over all families, this bill will allow for a range of different options that families can use to achieve their childcare rebate payments. Families will have the option that operates now—that is, of receiving payments on a quarterly basis—as well as the option of payments going fortnightly into their bank accounts or to the childcare provider and the option of receiving an annual lump sum payment. This amendment to the act will allow families more freedom to decide when they receive this essential payment and where they want it distributed.

As a safeguard, families who choose to receive the fortnightly payment will see 15 per cent of their rebate withheld. This will ensure that overpayments do not accumulate throughout a financial year and clashes with childcare benefits do not occur. The balance of the funds withheld will be reconciled after the final quarter of the financial year to help balance out any changes in childcare benefit entitlement that might arise through families underestimating their income or through changes in circumstances.

I want to turn to the issue of council provided childcare services, specifically those of Blacktown City Council. Costs related to raising a young family are something felt by many in my electorate. Greenway—and west and north-west Sydney as a whole—is a rapidly growing area. Many of my constituents are hardworking young families who know the pressures of raising young children. The local government area of Blacktown, which falls across most of my electorate and across that of the member for Chifley, is the most populous in New South Wales and the fifth most populous in Australia. With 23.3 per cent of people in the Blacktown local government area aged between zero and 14, child care is a vital issue. According to the 2006 census, 12 per cent of families in Blacktown are single-parent families with children aged zero to 14. As I have said in this place on a number of occasions, it is for this reason that I often refer to Greenway as Australia’s nursery. The numbers speak for themselves. Flexible and affordable child care is critical. The rapid expansion, facilitated by new housing developments and other factors, has seen Blacktown’s population explode. With this comes the inevitable demand for increased community services.

Given the circumstances, I want to put it on record that Blacktown City Council has done an admirable job in trying to accommodate the rapidly growing need for child care. With around 25 childcare facilities in the Blacktown area operated by the council, the needs of many families are being very well met—although, due to economic constraints, it is impossible for local councils such as Blacktown to carry the weight of all childcare provision in our communities.

As Blacktown council has openly acknowledged, hardworking Australian families are still being adversely affected by the overhang from the childcare cuts of the last coalition government, the Howard government. Local councils have been left with the job of filling the void created by the coalition’s historic lack of funding when in office. Recently, the former member for Greenway, Mr Frank Mossfield, contacted me to discuss his concerns about long-term provision of childcare services in our area. His concern was about something he saw coming when he was Greenway’s local member. He was very perceptive. He knew during the coalition’s time in government what damage they were doing to the childcare sector and to families and what the result would be in the future. Speaking in this place in 2004, Mr Mossfield attributed the poor state of child care in this country to:

… a problem that has existed in Greenway since the first year of the Howard government. In the 1996-97 budget, there was an $820 million cut in...
child care, which led to increased fees, reduced child-care assistance and the closure of several services.

This is what the coalition did to child care in this country. Whatever way you cut it, it was a blatant disregard for Australian families. The 69,000 young people living in Greenway and Chifley using childcare services are still paying for it.

Not only were childcare services devastated by the Howard government’s cuts but employment opportunities for women were adversely affected as a result. I was on council from 2004, and during this time every local council throughout New South Wales, regardless of political make-up, agreed that local councils were not equipped to handle the unmet demand for childcare services that was a direct result of the Howard government’s cuts. Local government conferences were rife with discussion and motions of concern about the viability of childcare services in local government areas.

Due to the closure of childcare facilities and the increase in fees, many families could not afford child care. Consequently, many parents, including females, were forced to withdraw from the workforce. To give you an example, from 1996 to 2000, women’s employment participation in Fairfield and Liverpool, areas close to my electorate, fell from 49.9 per cent to 47 per cent. This bill is to redress the adverse affects of the former government’s actions. It represents this government’s commitment to child care and to supporting hardworking families.

I want to talk about some of the challenges we need to face and hurdles we need to get over to improve childcare services in this country. Flexibility and affordability are key concerns for this government. This bill is specifically targeted at improving these two aspects of child care for families. After the historical harm done to child care in this country by those opposite when in government, this government is committed to improving services for young families. The flexibility that this bill creates builds on this government’s reforms in the past, such as the 2008 increase in the childcare rebate. By providing more freedom to choose when childcare payments are received, families can better manage their budgets and thus better cope with the economic pressures associated with raising a young family.

I would like to take this time to mention an associated development in young children’s care and education. Today marks the beginning of National Playgroup Week. It was announced today that this government is providing $5 million as part of the Helping Children with Autism package to deliver playgroups that support children with autism spectrum disorder and their families. I thank the minister for this initiative. As I have mentioned a number of times in this place, including in my maiden speech, disability support in education is something that I feel very strongly about. As I mentioned, quality child care provides the necessary stepping stones for social development and academic success, and disability specific child care is no different—in fact, I believe it to be even more crucial. Today’s developments on this issue provide another example of how this government is supporting families with young children with disabilities. This bill will fundamentally improve affordability and flexibility for Australian families and make managing child care an easier task. That is why I strongly support this bill.

Mrs PRENTICE (Ryan) (4.29 pm)—Child care provides an important service to our society. It allows children to interact with their peers and become more independent from a young age, and it gives parents flexible options with regard to work and family arrangements. It is vital that child care be easily accessible. The bill before us, the
Family Assistance Legislation Amendment (Child Care Rebate) Bill 2011, goes some way towards supporting that.

The coalition agrees with the measures taken to pay the childcare rebate in weekly arrears. Indeed, we took that promise to the last election ourselves. Such a step, although it will make no difference to the budget bottom line, will make a significant difference to families by reducing their upfront costs by up to half—from $220 down to $110 in some cases. It is reported that up to 630,000 families will benefit from this change. This will also mean that childcare centres will have more certainty in receiving fees. Currently, up to 25 per cent of fees are going unpaid as parents wait for the quarterly rebate payment.

The benefits of such a simple change are clear. The benefits that this change will provide are also necessary. Child care is becoming more and more expensive for families. The myriad changes implemented by state Labor governments are putting increased pressure on both the sector and the families it supports. In my home state of Queensland alone, proposed changes to the DECKAS funding arrangements have caused the largest provider in the state, C&K, to advise its affiliates that they will need to increase their prices. Most are now looking at charging $25 to $28 a day. This is a sharp increase on the current daily out-of-pocket expense and may well price many families out of early education altogether.

These increases are not confined to Queensland. Changes to staff-to-children ratios regulations introduced by the New South Wales Labor government in anticipation of the proposed national reforms have resulted in some Sydneysiders paying up to $100 per day for child care. There have been reports of families being on the waiting lists of childcare centres for up to two years, and the industry fears that these waiting list times will balloon even more under the new staff-to-children ratio changes. Whilst all would welcome improvements to the childcare industry, we must ensure that the industry is not left under-resourced as a result of these rather questionable changes. With no additional funding yet announced, I fear this is what will happen, and that would make it increasingly difficult for families to access child care.

We have heard a lot of debate recently about the number of women in boardrooms. It has been reported that 40 per cent of families believe that child care is so expensive that it is not worth their while to work but that only 12 per cent say they do not need it. Perhaps factors such as the increasingly difficult access to child care need to be taken into account when analysing why there are so few women in senior positions within our companies.

It is worth noting that there have been no new announcements of funding for child care, particularly considering all the hype surrounding child care in the Kevin07 federal election just over three years ago. In fact, other than the steps taken—which only address the timing of payments, not the amount of payments—in the bill we are debating today, the only announcement made on childcare funding has been about a funding cut.

It is fair to say that, when it comes to child care, the Rudd and Gillard governments have both been failures. This was as true when Mr Rudd was opposition leader, then Prime Minister and when Ms Gillard was Deputy Prime Minister and minister responsible for child care as it is now that Ms Gillard is Prime Minister. Yes, it is hard to keep up to date with who is in charge of what area in the Labor government, but it does not matter which minister or Prime Minister we are...
speaking about—Labor has failed when it comes to child care. They have let down the very working families they always seek to claim as their own.

The government announced under last year’s budget that the childcare rebate would be decreased by $279 per child per year. At a time when the industry and families were expecting to receive at least some compensation for the significant increase in cost that the COAG ratio reforms are causing, this cut was at best disappointing and at worst potentially priced many families out of childcare and early education services.

When you are working full time and child care is costing you huge amounts every week, you quickly reach the $7,500 rebate. Additionally, the national quality framework that is currently being proposed by the government is expected to increase costs from $13 to $22 a day, despite the fact that the 11 per cent of families using childcare services at present are already paying more for child care than they earn.

Indeed, this cut of almost $300 a year is not merely an announcement; after the legislation that provided for the cut passed through the House of Representatives last year, Centrelink adjusted payments to families immediately, so reducing childcare rebate payments before the legislation had passed through the Senate. Should this legislation fail to pass through the Senate, the government will have to reimburse hundreds of Australian families who have unfairly had their payments cut before their time. Additionally, should this legislation not be passed, the government are reportedly facing an $87 million hole in their budget. This tells us a lot about just where ‘government savings’ are coming from: with one hand cutting assistance for services families use while, with the other hand enforces new taxes on them, causing rising basic costs of living.

You would think that, after scrapping the building of 222 new childcare centres around the country and so breaking another Labor promise, the government could redirect some of that $390 million saving towards alleviating cost-of-living pressures on Australian families, particularly in relation to child care. Instead, the government has done the opposite—it has tried to decrease the childcare rebate paid to families and to freeze indexation, which could cost families up to $1,000 per year and result in 72,000 families receiving a lower subsidy by 2014, according to the Australian Childcare Alliance’s President, Gwynn Bridge.

This shows just how out of touch this Labor government is and how they genuinely do not understand how much Australian families are hurting. It is becoming increasingly clear that this Labor government do not care about Australians but care only about political infighting and succumbing to the demands of the Greens.

Let me give you two examples of this. If Labor cared so much about helping families with their living costs, they could have put this weekly payment option into place in June last year. As Dr Sharman Stone said at that time, ‘With Labor support, parents could have had the money in their pockets from July 1, 2010, but will now have to wait a full 12 months to receive this fee relief.’

Why was this amendment not passed last year? The proposal was debated in the winter sitting—in the last week of the winter sitting, in fact. To be exact, the government could have passed this amendment on June 24 last year, but I guess Labor members had other things on their minds that day. Who could forget that on June 24 last year Labor knifed a first-term Prime Minister, replacing the Member for Griffith with the then responsible minister—and now Prime Minister—Ms Gillard. Clearly, the then minister was too
busy with internal party fighting to worry about the relief such legislation could have provided for Australian families. This is just another example of how Labor cares more about what is happening in their own political family than about what would actually help Australian families.

There is another interesting aspect to this bill. In June last year, newly appointed Prime Minister Gillard refused to cave in to demands to make the childcare rebate payable weekly. However, the Greens then said, and continue to say today, that they will only support the government’s slashing of the childcare rebate in exchange for a higher frequency in the payments. Lo and behold, here we are speaking about a higher frequency for childcare rebate payments. This is of particular significance now, given that Centrelink has already begun deducting payments from families. So, does Prime Minister Gillard really believe that this is the right thing to do for Australian families, or is she just, once again, succumbing to Green demands so she can cling to power?

The coalition certainly believe it is the right thing to do. That is why we took this promise of weekly payments of the childcare rebate to the last election. Childcare services in Australia provide a vital service for society and our economy; however, the rising costs are beginning to seriously jeopardise its value. Paying the childcare rebate weekly goes some way to relieve upfront costs for parents and families, although there is a lot more that can be done.

I support the bill before the House, but I wish to place on record my extreme disappointment with this government and the Labor Party. Right from the day Labor was elected in November 2007 they have shown no interest in child care and, sadly, that seems set to continue. I commend the bill to the House.
hearts, they know they failed. We were the ones in 2008 who raised the childcare rebate from 30 per cent to 50 per cent. Did I ever see a private member’s motion from those opposite at any stage during the whole period of the Howard government in relation to raising the rebate from 30 per cent to 50 per cent? Did we ever see that? Did they go into the 2007 election campaign arguing that? No. They did not argue that it all. It took a Labor government to raise it from 30 per cent to 50 per cent. We effectively saw a maximum rate of $4,354 per year per child under the Howard government raised to $7,500. That is a massive increase for families. Under the coalition it was $4,354 per child per year; Labor got into government and increased it to $7,500 per child per year. That is real money. This is the reality—not the fiction perpetrated and perpetuated by those opposite. The real situation is that, when Labor got in, they increased the assistance to families in that regard. Those opposite forget the fact that we have cut taxes for the last three years. That is three years of tax cuts for those opposite to enjoy, for us on this side to enjoy and for the Australian community to enjoy. Those tax cuts put more money in people’s pockets so that they can spend money.

If those opposite want to talk about assistance to household budgets, let’s have a bit of a look at their record. That is the party of Work Choices, which drove down wages. That is the party that made child care more difficult by inflicting Work Choices into the workplaces of this country. That is the party that went to the last election proposing a Woolworths and Coles tax, effectively, which meant that $6 billion of tax would be foisted onto the retail sector. That would have put more cost-of-living pressures on working Australian families. So they should not come into this place and give us lectures about how their so-called affection has always been there for working Australian families, because they did not have it when they were in power.

What did they do with respect to education? There were cuts to education. What happened to health care? There were cuts to health care. They even fessed up, just before the 2007 election, with respect to health care. That is so important in the area of child care as well. They fessed up that it went backwards under them. The now Leader of the Opposition fessed that up when he was health minister in 2007, just before the election. They ripped $1 billion out of the health system. So it was not just health and education, and it was not just Work Choices; it was child care as well. Those opposite failed miserably. They come in here and give their sanctimonious and self-righteous nonsense on child care. The truth is that under our policies we have massively increased child care assistance—$14.9 billion to help 800,000 Australian families annually with the cost of child care through the childcare benefit and the childcare rebate. That includes $8.7 billion over four years to 2013-14.

We are effectively reducing childcare fees and reducing the household burden with $6.2 billion to assist working families with out-of-pocket childcare expenses under the childcare rebate. That is the reality; I am not making it up. It is in the budget papers—it is on record. Those opposite can perpetuate their fiction. We will talk about the facts over here with respect to child care. We have a good record on child care. Those opposite have a 1950s perspective on families.

In this legislation we are giving people options. We are enabling families to access the childcare rebate at least on a fortnightly basis. That means about 700,000 Australian families across the length and breadth of this country, from the Torres Strait to Tasmania.
and from Perth on one side to Palm Beach on the other, are getting access to the kind of crucial help that they need to meet their childcare fees each day.

I have some fantastic childcare facilities in my electorate. The member for Ryan talked about our record with respect to childcare fees. She can come to the Yamanto Early Learning and Care Centre, which ends a double drop-off situation by being located at the new Amberley District State School. It was a $1.6 million election commitment which we made. It means that about 75 local kids can get the benefit of attending the learning centre and going on to the Amberley District State School next door. Minister Ellis opened it with me on 22 April 2010. That is the fulfilment of our election commitment with respect to child care in my electorate of Blair.

We have eased the burden of taxation on families. Those opposite are the ones who, in the Senate, have stalled the kinds of savings that we need to ease the burden on working families. They keep attacking our budget commitments and measures and knocking them off in the other place. They say we are not spending enough money on child care and certain things, but then, inconsistently, they lop off the very measures we are trying to implement to get the budget back into surplus. They always criticise us by saying we are creating a burden with respect to child care and tax. In the mid-2000s, when in government those opposite had a tax-to-GDP ratio of 24.1 per cent under their beloved leader, the Hon. John Howard. This year ours is 20.9 per cent, easing the burden on the Australian community and on working Australian families with respect to taxation. We are cutting tax, increasing childcare rebates, making sure that people have more money in their pockets and getting rid of Work Choices. That is our record. They are the facts over here, not the fiction over there.

This is good legislation because it enables families to have a better and more flexible arrangement with respect to child care. They can elect to have their CCR paid via their childcare services by way of fee reduction; 98 per cent of childcare benefit customers elect to have their payments made this way so as to receive fee reductions.

I want to diverge for a minute and pay tribute to a number of the childcare facilities in my electorate, which played a great role in the flood crisis in South-East Queensland, particularly in places which were affected. I mean places like Bush Kidz in Brassall. Brassall, in Ipswich, is the suburb in my electorate with the highest population. My electorate office is actually in the Brassall Shopping Centre. Bush Kidz and a number of the other childcare facilities in that area looked after kids at this time while their mums and dads were out there volunteering and cleaning up after the floods in the dozens and dozens of homes which are affected in Brassall. Community childcare facilities around Riverview did the same thing for those people around Duncan Street in Riverview who were also inundated by water. I pay tribute to the Riverview Neighbourhood House for the great work they did during this period.

In fact, I was at Riverlink Shopping Centre on Saturday and had someone praise the childcare centre and the Riverview Neighbourhood House for the work they did during the flood. A guy came up to me and tapped me on the shoulder while I was at Mister Minit getting a watch fixed and told me that. Childcare facilities did a great job during the flood time. We saw that at places like One Mile, Leichhardt, Churchill, Yamanto and other places. Childcare facilities enabled mums and dads to go out there and work in the flood relief, mitigation, recovery and reconstruction. Whether it is Cribb Street Child Care Centre, the one at the great One...
Mile and Leichhardt Community Centre, Bush Kidz at Brassall or any one of the many, many childcare facilities in my electorate, I want to thank them very much for the work that they did during the flood crisis. They played their role and I know that the mums and dads in my electorate were very appreciative of what they did.

As I said before, this legislation introduces more frequent childcare rebate payments for families from the first Monday in July 2011, either through the childcare services on behalf of the parents or carers as an immediate fee reduction directly or by way of a payment to a nominated bank account. That is a good, flexible way. They are still able to receive the CCR quarterly or on an annual basis, should they so wish. This is important legislation.

I also want to mention the number of options that they have, because I think it is worthwhile for those who may be listening to know that there are a number of options people can claim. I want the people of my electorate of Blair to understand that. From July this year you can have a choice with respect to receiving the childcare rebate. You can have the childcare rebate payment made to your childcare service—for example, the Yamanto Early Learning and Care Centre—weekly or fortnightly as a fee reduction, subject to the provision by your service of a childcare usage report on your behalf. As I said before, nearly 100 per cent of people choose to do that. Or, if they want, they can receive their childcare rebate payment directly to the bank account weekly or fortnightly, subject to the provision by their service of childcare usage reports. Or, as some people have in the past, they can have their childcare rebate paid to their bank account quarterly. They can do it annually if they wish to, but I do not think it is likely too many people would do it annually.

The annual payment is another point which brings me to those opposite. Under the Howard coalition government, families had to wait until the end of the year to receive this important assistance. That was their policy—that is what they did when they were in power, not what they said in this chamber or to various childcare centres, groups and communities across the country. Look at what they did. You had to wait and claim it on an annual basis. It took us being elected in November 2007 for important reforms to take place in this area. When it comes to improving affordability of child care across the country, for those opposite it is fiction; for us it is fact.

Overall, we have committed, as I have said, over $18 billion over four years to make early childhood education more affordable to mums and dads and carers across the country. The thing that those opposite never say is: that is twice the amount they ever put in in the last four years in their forward estimates and their budget measures under the John Howard coalition government. We have put twice as much in as they did with respect to early childhood education. Those opposite in 1996 ripped a billion dollars out, paid it annually, only $4,300-odd; we increase it to $7,500, pay it weekly or fortnightly, make it more flexible and make sure that we put in more resources—twice as much as those opposite across the four-year cycle. Fiction from them; fact from us.

Ms BRODTMANN (Canberra) (4.53 pm)—I rise this afternoon to support the government’s Family Assistance Legislation Amendment (Child Care Rebate) Bill 2011. Before I talk about the bill, I would like to thank my colleague and commend him for his kind words about the construct of families and the 1950s view that those opposite have on what a family today looks like.
I find it quite offensive, coming from a single-parent family. I said in my first speech that my father left us when I was 11 and my mother did a fantastic job of bringing up my sisters and me on her own. She worked very hard to get us educated and to put food on the table. She worked a number of jobs to do that. She came from a tradition of working-class matriarchs, as I call them, who also did the same for their families. I commend my colleague for his comments on what actually makes up a family. What actually makes up a family is a loving parent, grandparent, aunt or uncle who loves the children that are within that family. I commend him for expanding the view on what a family can be, so thank you.

As I said, my mother worked very hard to put us through school, secondary school and tertiary education and she was greatly assisted by a number of Labor schemes that supported us financially during secondary and tertiary education. Those Labor governments were deeply committed to easing the burden on working families as is the Gillard government.

I can cite so many examples. My colleague has mentioned a number of them: first of all, there is the reduction in income tax to reduce the tax burden on working families; the education tax refund to reduce the burden on working families; and paid parental leave, which has been a huge hit. I understand that 22,000 families have now applied for the scheme and 2,000 are already signed up for the scheme—a long overdue initiative that women, particularly the feminist movement, have been fighting for for years. We introduced it, and congratulations to us for that—all designed to ease the burden on working families. We have also got plans for the resources tax to, again, cut income taxes for working families and also plans to boost superannuation for working families to secure their retirement futures.

We have also introduced, most importantly, workplace conditions so that working families are protected in their workplaces, so they do not have to fear draconian conditions. That is another way that we are easing the burden. Most importantly, we saved this economy from recession as a result of our economic stimulus package, which meant that working families continued to be able to work. Their jobs were saved. The economy was saved. That is a major achievement and it underscores our deep commitment to easing the burden on working families.

I also want to talk today about National Playgroup Week. I attended the launch this morning with the Minister for Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, the Parliamentary Secretary for Community Services and the Parliamentary Secretary for Disabilities and Carers. National Playgroup Week is designed to draw attention to and celebrate the need for children to play in an unstructured way with building blocks or whatever to get their imaginations stimulated, get them physically stimulated and to enjoy the benefits of play. I commend the minister and the parliamentary secretaries for launching this week, which was conducted at the Parliament House childcare centre, which has been a long overdue and much-awaited development. How old is Parliament House? Twenty-five years old, I think, and everyone has been waiting for the last 25 years for this childcare centre to be developed.

All the parents I spoke to today, both the mothers and fathers—most of them work—were absolutely delighted with the childcare service, with the quality of service that their children are getting and the quality of support they, as parents, are getting. It is another major development and, again, it underscores our commitment to child care.
This legislation gives effect to a pre-election commitment to make accessing child care easier for Australian working families to ease the burden. This legislation will enable working families to receive their childcare rebate in a number of ways. A family may elect to have their childcare rebate paid to them via a fee reduction from the childcare service provider. We know that 98 per cent of families chose to receive the rebate this way, and I imagine that that will continue. A family may also elect to have their childcare rebate payments paid directly into their bank account on a fortnightly basis, and anyone who has gone from a fortnightly to a monthly pay would realise the flexibility benefits of fortnightly pay, so I think this is a great development. Families may also elect to have their rebate paid to a nominated bank account on a quarterly basis or to have their rebate paid to them as an annual lump sum. In order to enable this, the government has made available just over $42 million for the provision of fortnightly rebate payments.

This legislation will provide some much-needed flexibility to the childcare rebate scheme and continues a long legacy of this government and previous Labor governments ensuring that access to childcare is easily available and affordable to all Australian families. This current proposal builds upon previous changes from the government to increase the rebate from 30 per cent to 50 per cent of out-of-pocket expenses. That is nearly double the rebate for out-of-pocket expenses; it is a significant development. This government has also increased the maximum annual rebate to $7,500. Under the previous government, families could claim only $4,354 a year. We have provided nearly 40 per cent more than what the previous government provided. As a result of this change, the out-of-pocket costs for a family with one child in childcare and earning $55,000 a year have dropped from 13 per cent of disposable income under the previous government to seven per cent in 2010.

Overall, the government has invested $6.2 billion to assist with out-of-pocket expenses through the childcare rebate. However, these changes, while positive, will ultimately remain unutilised if parents and working families cannot access their rebate when they need it most. It is a reality that most Australians live from pay period to pay period, from fortnight to fortnight. It is therefore of little use to many that they receive their rebate on a quarterly basis, or each year as was the case under the previous government. This legislation recognises the fact that families are living from pay period to pay period and provides the flexibility for them to receive their payments in a time frame and manner that best reflects their needs. This legislation will potentially benefit almost 700,000 families. This legislation will also assist providers who are concerned by the issue of unpaid fees. It is anticipated that, by increasing the frequency of payments, families will be in a better position to meet the costs of their child care on a more regular basis.

Most importantly, the government consulted widely when developing this legislation and it received broadly positive views from the various peak bodies in the sector. I also note that the department has worked hard with the industry to answer its concerns and to provide information to providers and families.

As I have said, this legislation builds on a proud history of this government and previous Labor governments in assisting working families. The Gillard government is investing massively in improving the affordability and access to early childhood education and care. We have invested $8.7 billion over four years to help 800,000 families with the cost of child care through the childcare benefit. We are also professionalising the workforce in
childcare centres and improving standards to give parents peace of mind, and we are reducing staff-to-child ratios.

In the second reading speech the minister labelled this legislation an ‘ambitious agenda’ and was unapologetic for that. I would like to thank the minister for agreeing to engage in this agenda and I join in the sentiments. In my own electorate I have heard so many stories of working families who have challenges with the cost of child care. Canberra has a large number of families where both parents are in the workforce and a number of families where the grandparents live interstate—so there is not that support network where the grandparents can look after the kids. For many families in my electorate it is simply not an option for one parent to remain at home to look after the children.

We need to recognise the reality that many families simply cannot afford child care, which is why this is such a great development. Canberrans pay the highest rate in the nation for child care and have some of the longest waiting lists. It is a common story in Canberra to hear of families who have had to add their unborn children to waiting lists. The Productivity Commission reported this year that Canberrans paid $60 more than the national average for child care. However, this government recognises these costs both for Canberrans and for the nation. We are deeply committed to rising to the challenge of costs of childcare and doing all we can to assist those families and ensure their children have access to high-quality and affordable child care—child care where the teachers of the children are actually professionalised and committed to quality education.

We are committed to ensuring that families have the flexibility to choose the work-life balance that best suits their families—whether that be through the eradication of antifamily workplace legislation or the introduction of Australia’s first paid parental leave scheme or, in this case, enhancing access and affordability of child care. The Gillard government’s reforms have already reduced the out-of-pocket expenses of Canberra families by seven per cent. I am proud to serve in the Gillard government. It recognises this need and is acting to improve the situation. I am proud to serve in a government that is determined to make the lives of these families easier and I am proud to serve in a government that has made child care a priority.

Before closing, I would also like to commend my ACT Labor colleagues for the work that they have been doing on child care. Since the ACT Labor government was re-elected in 2008, an additional 1,200 childcare places have been licensed, bringing the total to a historic high of more than 15,500 places. There are now 245 childcare service providers, employing about 2,200 staff. A number of centres opened last year and more are expected this year. So there have been major developments on the childcare placement front here in Canberra over the last three or four years, and I commend my ACT colleagues for the work that they have been doing in that area, as I commend the support that the Gillard government has given to the childcare issue. I commend this bill to the House.

Ms O’Dwyer (Higgins) (5.06 pm)—I rise to speak about the Family Assistance Legislation Amendment (Child Care Rebate) Bill 2011. I would like to start by pointing out that a recent Yellow Pages Sensis study ranked the suburb of Malvern, in my electorate of Higgins, as the best place to raise a family. According to the study there are a total of 277 family friendly business listings, including baby and children’s wear retailers, schools, doctors and baby accessories stores. Most suburbs have between 40 to 60 listings.
The ability to care for and raise a child is of great importance to the people of Higgins, as it is for all families throughout Australia. But it is not just the availability of clothing retailers and doctors that matters; the availability and affordability of childcare centres are also of vital importance. Often the largest difficulty faced by families raising children is the ability to sustain an adequate income. This requires one or both parents to be working regularly in order to provide for their family. This is why the availability and affordability of a range of childcare services is so very important for our society, whether it be for after-school care, occasional care or long day care. This legislation will make it easier for families to access child care, primarily by giving them the choice of having the childcare rebate paid fortnightly rather than quarterly or annually. This will have clear benefits for those eligible for the childcare rebate. However, the coalition is concerned that the government is not doing all it can to assist families, as we will soon see when this government introduces legislation in the coming weeks to cap the rebate at $7,500.

The coalition’s record on assisting families with the costs of raising and caring for a child is very strong indeed. It was the coalition that implemented the most significant childcare reforms, including the 30 per cent childcare rebate. From 1 July 2000, we introduced a new childcare benefit that replaced two existing forms of childcare subsidy—the childcare assistance and the childcare cash rebate. The benefit provided for significant increases in assistance for families, particularly for low-income families, and greatly simplified arrangements for claiming assistance.

In 2005 we introduced the childcare tax rebate, which was the most significant childcare reform introduced in Australia—and one that has enjoyed strong community support as well as bipartisan support since its inception. The purpose of the childcare rebate was to ensure that parents who worked fewer than 15 hours a week continued to be eligible for the childcare tax rebate. The Welfare to Work package introduced a requirement that a taxpayer must work, train or study for at least 15 hours a week, or 30 hours over two weeks, to meet the childcare benefit work-training or study test. This meant that those who were in genuine need of childcare assistance could receive the rebate and continue to engage in work or study and contribute to our economy.

These reforms, by assisting families with the cost of approved child care, have built on the childcare benefit system and family assistance packages, such as the family tax benefit, which were set up by the coalition. They remain central to Australia’s social policy framework today.

The baby bonus, implemented in 2004, provided one-off payments to families to assist them in making the necessary changes to work and family arrangements required after the birth of a child. The greater flexibility provided by the baby bonus increased fertility, with the number of babies born per woman rising from the average of 1.77 to 1.81 in 2005 and breaking a 40-year decline. These reforms have ensured that families with children can remain productive, even if faced with significant childcare costs.

We know that access to affordable child care is one of the most important determinants of whether a family is able to remain working, whether it is access to long day care, family day care or after-school care. The coalition in office implemented this important reform that has allowed so many families the benefit of affordable child care, giving them greater choice, flexibility and, more importantly, the chance to sustain their income and continue to build Australia.
spite Labor’s claims that what they have delivered is landmark social reform, what they have in fact done is continue with longstanding coalition policies.

Where to from here? When the coalition went to the last election, we had a set of policies to improve the access to and affordability of child care. We went to the election with a policy of reintroducing indexation of the childcare rebate. For those parents receiving the maximum amount of childcare rebate, this would have provided a benefit of around $300 per year for every child in care.

We went to the election with a policy to reinstate $12.6 million of occasional-care funding cut by Labor. Occasional care offers flexible part-time places or emergency care when a parent needs it, whether they are visiting the doctor, commencing study, seeking work or attending to an unforeseen crisis. This measure would have provided funding to help ensure parents were able to access childcare at times of greatest need. We went to the election with a policy that would have seen the childcare rebate paid weekly direct to childcare providers to ensure that families have sufficient cashflow to meet the costs of care. This was to allow parents to pay childcare providers immediately, reduce the potential for fraud and eliminate unnecessary red tape.

This bill will make payments fortnightly and parents will have the option of having the payments paid directly to the childcare provider or continuing to receive the payments themselves, which of course gives parents choice and flexibility. The coalition is supportive of these measures. We know that caring for children can involve not only upfront costs of care but also transport costs and costs involved with locating an appropriate provider. These are not insignificant burdens on families, and any additional help that they can receive through more-flexible policy arrangements is a most welcome development. The ability of childcare providers to receive the rebate on behalf of families is a very beneficial outcome, and 98 per cent of families currently choose to receive their childcare benefit through this method.

However, despite these welcome improvements, this government will be introducing another bill to the House in the coming weeks that will reduce the childcare rebate to $7,500. As parents with children in full-time care would know, Labor’s $7,500 cap will easily be reached and the inevitable extra costs of care will have to be met out of their own pockets. It is a huge disincentive for parents wanting to return to work or to remain in the workforce. What is more, Labor’s removal of indexation of the childcare rebate during the last budget has forced up the cost of child care by up to $300 per child per year. This is how Labor operates when it comes to policy—give with one hand but take more with the other.

It is interesting to hear Labor talk of all the good that they are doing for Australian families, because any success we have had in improving the lives of families has of course very little to do with this Labor government and their changes. Unfortunately, this government refuse to face up to their failure to deliver on their promises. This is a massive problem for everyone, but families in particular were promised a very great deal when it comes to child care and, sadly, they have been let down by this government. It is not due to the efforts of this government that we are seeing greater choice and opportunity for Australian families. Insofar as we have been successful in creating positive outcomes for child care, it is because this government have continued the policies of the previous coalition government. But we have also seen significant missed opportunities and an attitude from the current government that their under-delivered promises do not matter—that they can promise and not deliver.
Before the 2007 election Labor promised to build an additional 260 childcare centres. Then the government scrapped this idea and instead decided to build only the 38 that they had actually started. This was one of the Rudd government’s many broken promises, something which this current Prime Minister was supposed to fix—although we all know how that has worked out. This broken promise was particularly bad for families facing rising childcare costs, which are significant and a significant impediment to continued work and sustainable incomes.

In response to the government’s failure on childcare centres, Julia Gillard, in a rare display of contrition said:

We can always do better. There’s always more to do.

This, of course, is the closest we could ever hope to get for an admission by this government of failure—very telling indeed.

The coalition continues to prove its commitment to advancing the economic position of women. Our paid parental leave policy is in every respect superior to Labor’s, which fails to meet the financial needs of families. Our policy provides maximum social benefits, whereas Labor’s scheme falls short on delivering real outcomes. The government’s reckless spending and deficits are having a real effect on families, especially those with children. This is having a negative impact on the financial freedom of families, including their ability to access child care. Previously, the government tried to use the quick political fixes of GroceryWatch and Fuelwatch, both of which were unmitigated policy failures. Meanwhile, the price of petrol, electricity, groceries, housing and medical services continues to rise. The government is concerned about affordability for families but at the same time they are proposing a new carbon tax that will increase the cost of all goods and services throughout the economy.

Labor’s claim that it will continue to reduce the taxes in order to pay for the carbon tax is false, and Labor has proved well and truly that it is unwilling to lower taxes but it is all too willing to raise them or to create new ones. Whether it is the mining tax, the flood levy or the most recent carbon tax, Labor has proved that it is in capable of offsetting these new taxes by lowering or abolishing others. This means that prices continue to rise, putting more pressure on families and reducing their financial flexibility.

This government talks about helping families to meet the extra cost of raising a family while at the same time it caps the childcare rebate and introduces new taxes that force up the cost of living. This is the great lie that Labor is living. It talks about helping families but it is failing to get even the basics of economic management right.

Ms O’NEILL (Robertson) (5.17 pm)—I rise to speak in support of the Family Assistance Legislation Amendment (Child Care Rebate) Bill 2011. This bill represents another important step by the Gillard government to support Australian families as they try to juggle their important participation in the Australian workforce while maintaining the joy and lifetime responsibility of caring for their children.

My electorate of Robertson has a high proportion of families with young children, and the childcare rebate is already delivering for many of them. At last count, there were 5,333 Central Coast families in the seat of Robertson who were availing themselves of the government’s childcare benefit and childcare rebate across 100 services. According to those latest figures, that adds up to almost $5½ million in support for 7,230 children—no small achievement. That is a proud contribution by this Labor government to family life on the Central Coast.
Many of these families rely on childcare services, and rely on them being accessible. Indeed, I am often reminded as I meet people in my community of the need for more childcare places and the need for greater accessibility. Our work in making sure parents and providers meet at the point where our kids get the best possible learning and social growth experience continues.

I was particularly reminded of the importance of child care, during last year’s election campaign, when I ‘walked a day in the shoes’ of the childcare workers at ABC Green Point with the Minister for Early Education and Child Care. It was a great event organised by the United Voice union. We danced, we sang and we nearly got to participate in dress-ups. As a professional educator from the secondary and tertiary sector it was also a great experience on that day for me to be among fellow professionals in the early childhood sector and to more deeply understand in their context the very valuable work that they do.

In the previous government, Labor took great steps to improve access to childcare for Australian families. Indeed today’s bill follows up on previous legislation arising out of the 2008-09 budget, which raised the childcare rebate from 30 per cent to 50 per cent. What a difference that made for people in my electorate and across the nation. This investment in early years learning stems from our fundamental belief as a party of working people that access to child care is not just a necessity for Australian families, it is a right that enhances family living and certainly enhances experiences of learning for the very young. The Commonwealth government has a very vital role to provide assistance to ensure that child care is accessible, affordable, and of a quality that will set our kids up not just to be learners but happy, confident learners as they enter more formal schooling settings at primary and infants school.

Because we are a Labor government we continue to support working families, and today in this legislation we seek to build on what we have already achieved. In providing for more flexible options with regard to how the childcare rebate is paid, this bill increases the flexibility and the accessibility of this rebate to very many families. Also, this bill provides much needed flexibility with regard to how this rebate is to be paid.

In my opinion, the most important provision of this bill is the ability it gives to families to elect to have their childcare rebate paid on a weekly basis direct to their childcare provider. This option enables the childcare rebate to come in the form of a fee reduction when paying for the childcare expenses. The provision of this option also enables far greater certainty in regard to the payment of this rebate. Firstly, it offers certainty to the parents in that the rebate is paid and fee reduction offered on a weekly basis and when the usage report of a child’s attendance is due. For childcare operators, it provides the benefit of the childcare rebate being paid directly to them, and that is an efficiency improvement. This reduces the transaction cost and provides for a more efficient allocation of payment.

Whilst this option has been provided, I also support this bill because of the increased range of choices it provides parents. Parents who still wish to receive their childcare rebate directly to their bank account have that option. They can have it paid either weekly or fortnightly into their accounts according to when the attendance report is due. There also remains the current option of having the rebate paid directly to the parent’s bank account on a quarterly or yearly basis.

This flexibility is in stark contrast to the situation that existed under the Howard government, when parents had to wait until the end of the year to receive the assistance, with
no other options. We get it. We on this side of the House understand diversity and the diverse needs of parents across Australia. This legislation makes it absolutely clear that Labor listens to the people. Labor is the party of paid parental leave. We continue to legislate the changes necessary to support families and our young people, including our very youngest, who have their first experiences of sharing in a larger community than their family in early childhood settings. I recognise that some parents may prefer the yearly lump sum payment, but many more parents have made it clear that the direct payment of the rebate to the childcare provider is an option that is far more appropriate and is a means of administering this rebate that they are happy with.

This legislation will benefit all areas of the Commonwealth similar to mine—areas that have a high proportion of young families. In my region, the New South Wales Central Coast, we have a very high proportion of young families, mainly because this is a regional area not far from Sydney that offers a great quality of life. But it is an area where many young families have moved away from the network of support of extended family and friends in Sydney and moved to the coast, where mum, dad and a couple of kids really have to manage amongst themselves. In that sort of context, while the Central Coast is an ideal place to bring up a family because of its natural beauty, healthy environment and warm and welcoming community, there is still the pressure of trying to have support for the care that you are undertaking while you are continuing to work and participate in the national economy.

One additional feature that puts pressure on families in places such as the seat of Robertson is that many people commute for their work, either to Sydney or to Newcastle for employment. Indeed, around 30,000 workers on the Central Coast make a daily journey down the F3 Freeway or on the CityRail train service to employment away from the coast. They are willing to do so because they love living on the Central Coast, they love its environment and they love the people. They also love the opportunity that they are providing for their children to enjoy all of the amenity of where we live. As a result of our particular geography, we have families with young children and with mum and dad both commuting daily. For these families, access to reliable, quality childcare is absolutely critical. We do need more families to access this benefit, and clearly we can continue to improve in this area. But this bill will make a difference and it will make the childcare rebate far more accessible to families with young children.

The Australian Labor Party will always be the party for affordable, accessible and quality child care. Let us not forget that this government has had to undertake change and reform to the childcare sector due to the terrible mismanagement by the previous Howard government. The mismanagement included but was not limited to allowing an unsustainable monopoly to dominate a quarter of the childcare market. Let us not forget the unsustainable situation brought about by those opposite, which caused so much stress to so many parents and childcare workers, when they were uncertain whether their childcare provider or their workplace would remain open. The previous government’s actions—or inaction as the case may be—resulted in this market situation where child care was often unaffordable and inaccessible to many Australian families. Child care is too important to allow a situation where one company is allowed to dominate and then collapse.

The contrast could not be clearer between this government and those opposite, who presided over the whole ABC mess. The
member for Indi knows well that the Prime Minister brought the industry back from the edge of the precipice to which the member for Indi and her colleagues in the late unla-mented Howard government pushed it in a fit of free market ideological zealotry—lest we forget the incompetence and indifference to Australian working mums and dads of the ideologues opposite. By contrast, this government’s reforms will continue to provide a stable base for the childcare industry to benefit both providers and parents.

I understand the immense importance of early childhood education. As a former educator I know that early identification and early intervention in childcare contexts provides an important opportunity in addressing learning and behavioural concerns that are identified in children. Early intervention improves the prognosis for children with learning and behavioural difficulties. Early education providers have a fundamental role in preparing children for the next stage of schooling and identifying any issues that individual children might face in transition. Whatever the issue, it is certain that support and identification is enhanced when early childhood carers and parents share their concerns and support our kids in early education settings.

If child care is hard to access or unafford-able, children miss out on an important foundation for their future life and learning. The provision of quality education for all children and young people has always been a fundamental Labor value. As the member for Robertson, I will always fight for quality education for our kids. A quality early childhood education is essential for our young Australians. It needs to be accessible to all the children in Australia. This bill achieves this and I commend it to the House.

Mr ZAPPIA (Makin) (5.29 pm)—I welcome the opportunity to also speak in support of the Family Assistance Legislation Amendment (Child Care Rebate) Bill 2011. This bill builds on the government’s previous measures to assist families with childcare costs. After the 2007 election, the government increased the childcare rebate from 30 per cent to 50 per cent. The government increased the annual cap to $7,500 and gave families the option of having the rebate paid quarterly.

Under the measures in this bill, as from July 2011 families will have the choice of four options for receiving the childcare rebate. It can be paid weekly or fortnightly directly to the childcare service provider, it can be paid weekly or fortnightly directly into their bank account, or it can be paid into their bank account quarterly. Families will retain the existing option to receive the childcare rebate annually as a lump sum paid into their bank account. The childcare sector has grown over the last couple of decades as, more and more often, both parents remain in the workforce in order to meet their cost of living. Increasing the frequency of payments will assist families and childcare centres with their cashflow.

The childcare industry has become very competitive and, not surprisingly, providers under competitive pressures may be cutting costs, resulting in centres not meeting accreditation standards. This was exposed in a report released by the National Childcare Accreditation Council only last week. That report revealed amongst other things that 29 per cent of the centres failed to implement effective and current food, safety and hygiene practices. Whilst many centres were doing well, too many failed to meet basic standards. The proposal to establish a public rating standard for childcare centres next year should lift standards and help parents with their choice of childcare provider. Non-compliance with standards, I believe, highlights the pressure and demands childcare
workers are under—work pressure for which childcare workers are inadequately valued and remunerated.

Over the years, I have visited numerous childcare centres and spoken with childcare centre operators and their staff. On 10 August last year I participated in the United Voice—formerly the Liquor, Hospitality and Miscellaneous Union—Big Steps in Childcare national campaign aimed at reforming the childcare sector. On that day I went to the Golden Grove Bubble ‘n’ Squeak Child Development Centre in my electorate of Makin. For almost 2½ hours I walked in the shoes of a childcare worker by working as a childcare worker. I was very thankful that I had a terrific crew from Bubble ‘n’ Squeak to guide and assist me on the day. I not only thank them for allowing me to work with them and making my time there so pleasant but also commend them for how well they all went about their tasks and for the relationships they had developed with the children.

The experience provided me with an insight into the skills, the responsibilities, the professionalism and the physical and mental demands of the work required to care for infant children, each with their individual personality, behaviour and needs. It requires an extraordinary ability to be a childcare worker. Their duties and skills include but are not limited to: caring for the children; tending to the children’s emotional and physical needs; teaching them; keeping track of how the child is growing, learning and behaving and discussing any needs with their parents; helping children with their dressing, eating, sleeping and toileting; having first aid knowledge and attending to any injuries, illness or medication that is required; and organising activities that stimulate children’s physical, emotional, intellectual and social growth. In addition to all that they have to provide children with healthy meals and ensure that they are kept in a safe and clean environment. It is a huge responsibility.

The childcare workers I have met have all been committed to delivering the highest quality care and ensuring that the professional standards of the industry are met. The children’s wellbeing is upmost in their minds, but they too need to be better supported with better wages and upskilling opportunities if they are in turn to comply with all of the standards expected of them and if they are to stay in the industry. We must ensure that we do not place them—that is, the staff—under more pressure by expecting higher standards without providing them with the support they need. We entrust into their care our precious infant children. We expect them to have relevant qualifications, we expect them to comply with extensive public standards, but then we ask them to work for low wages and inadequate upskilling opportunities.

Given the level of responsibility of childcare workers and the remuneration and career advancement pathways available to them, it is little wonder that there is a shortage of childcare workers and that they exit the industry in the numbers that they do. The shortage will only be exacerbated if we want them to lift their qualifications without a commensurate lifting of their wages. It is expected that by 2013 there will a shortage nationally of around 7,300 childcare workers. It is not surprising that, given the range of compliance standards that apply to the industry and the excessive demands on workers, standards are not always being met. United Voice are to be commended for their campaign in support of childcare workers, and I am pleased to add my voice to their campaign and to their efforts on behalf of childcare workers throughout Australia.

Over the four years to 2013-14, the government will be providing $14.9 billion to
help 800,000 Australian families with the cost of child care. This is made up of $8.7 billion from the childcare benefit and $6.2 billion from the childcare rebate. Overall the government has now committed more than $18 billion over four years to early childhood education and child care, which is more than double that provided by the Howard government in its last four years in office. This is one of a number of measures that the government has taken to assist families in raising their children.

In 2008, the government introduced the education tax refund, which allows families to claim 50 per cent of eligible education expenses. To preserve its value, the education tax refund is linked to the consumer price index. For the 2010-11 tax year, the maximum refund is $794 for high school children and $397 for primary school children. Eligible expenses include the cost of buying, establishing, repairing and maintaining any of the following items: home computers and laptops; computer related equipment such as printers, USB flash drives and disability aids to assist in the use of computer equipment for students with special needs; computer repairs; home internet connections; computer software for educational use; school textbooks and other printed learning materials, including prescribed textbooks, associated learning materials, study guides and stationery; and prescribed trade tools for secondary school trade courses. From 1 July this year, it will be extended to include school uniforms bought in the new financial year.

The Medicare Teen Dental Plan was also introduced in 2008. It provides a voucher for a preventative dental check for eligible teenagers each calendar year. By the end of October last year over one million dental checks had been provided to teenagers under this scheme. Under the Medicare Teen Dental Plan eligible families can claim up to $159.85 for teens having a preventative dental check consisting of an oral examination that may include X-rays, a scale and clean, fluoride treatment, oral hygiene instruction, dietary advice and fissure sealing.

The government also delivered its third round of tax cuts in 2010, as promised in the 2007 election, providing further assistance to help families with living costs. For example, these tax cuts will mean that a family with two young children—where one person earns $60,000 and their partner earns $27,000—will be $40.38 per week, or around $2,100 a year, better off.

As a number of other speakers have pointed out—and it is perhaps the most important thing that the government could do for child care in this country—there was also the introduction of 18 weeks paid parental leave. I understand that some 148,000 families per year are expected to be eligible for that 18 weeks of paid parental leave. If we want to support children, I do not think that anyone would disagree that the best thing that we can do is ensure that their parents are able to be with them, particularly in the early months after their birth. I could go on with other examples of how this government has assisted families, whether it be in health, in education or in housing. This is simply another measure with which the government has made a clear differentiation between this government and the previous Howard government in showing its respect for families.

There is another group that will also benefit as a result of having quality childcare services available to parents, and that is grandparents. One of the realities of today’s society is that many parents leave their children with grandparents to care for them because both parents work. Sometimes it is a case of single parents who have no choice other than to leave them with grandparents if they do not have access to a quality childcare centre.
in close proximity or if they cannot afford one. There is no question at all that grandparents are increasingly taking responsibility for the care of infant children. By ensuring that we have an affordable and quality childcare service available, I believe that more parents will place their children in the care of an accredited childcare centre. This in turn, I believe, will free up the lives of the grandparents who are otherwise having to devote their lives to assisting their children. So there are benefits all round in having quality childcare services available.

I started by saying that this is one a number of measures that the government has implemented in order to assist families with the cost of living. I believe the amendments in this bill do that, and for that reason I commend the bill to the House.

Mr BANDT (Melbourne) (5.41 pm)—I rise to speak on the Family Assistance Legislation Amendment (Child Care Rebate) Bill 2011. I am struck with that same sense of déjà vu that other members of the House have spoken of, in part because this bill does precisely that which the Australian Greens have tried to do since June last year, when we moved amendments to the relevant bill. Instead of facilitating quarterly payments to parents, the bill allows parents to access the rebate in fortnightly payments. This brings the childcare rebate into line with other similar payments, and this a healthy move. There are still unresolved questions in the legislation itself about the lack of indexation and also about the government’s commitment to fund child care commensurate to its importance, about which I will say something in a moment. Moving to fortnightly payments will have the effect of helping make child care more affordable for parents. It is a way of helping parents budget with reliability and regularity in the context of increasing childcare costs.

I cannot stress enough to the House the extent to which people in my electorate of Melbourne view the importance of accessible, affordable and quality child care. It is vital, especially if we are serious about women’s participation in work, particularly after they have had children. In the electorate of Melbourne there certainly was a sense of relief and excitement when there was a proposal from the government to expand the number of childcare centres and especially community childcare centres. There was a similar sense of disappointment when 222 childcare centres that were slated to be built were no longer to be built. Part of the reason that was given at that time was that the government would wait and see how the market sorted itself out after the collapse of ABC Learning and the incorporation of GoodStart Centres into the electorate.

Also at the time the astounding claim was made—which came as news to many parents in my electorate—that vacancy rates for children between zero and two in major capital cities in Victoria were in the order of 92 per cent. We conducted a survey in the electorate, because this simply did not gel with parents’ experience, and found that at community centres in the capital city and in the electorate of Melbourne the vacancy rate for children between zero and two was somewhere in the order of 10 to 20 per cent and that the waiting lists were, on average, around 18 months, with some well over two years. What we also found was that a number of parents were preferring to wait and not send their children to private centres, because they wanted the quality and accessibility that comes with having your children in a community centre.

This bill is an important step towards making child care more affordable, but there is no point in having money in the pocket if there is no place to send your children to or you have to go onto an exorbitant waiting list.
to get them in there. I know that there are many community childcare centres in my electorate which would dearly love to have an immediate grant of funds to enable them to expand their infrastructure, their capital and, basically, their buildings so that there would be more space for them to take on the large number of children who are already on their waiting list. I hope that in the context of the upcoming budget the government considers our proposal to allow community childcare centres to have access to a pool of money for capital expansion. We have had expansion of schools and we have had money put aside for expansion of universities. It is time to do the same for child care. Capital expansion would go a very long way to making child care more accessible, more affordable and of greater quality.

So, in closing, we support the bill. Fortnightly payments help families manage the increasing costs of child care and we especially support it given that the government is adopting, wholesale, the Greens amendments.

Ms KATE ELLIS (Adelaide—Minister for Employment Participation and Childcare and Minister for the Status of Women) (5.45 pm)—in reply—It is my great pleasure to commend the Family Assistance Legislation Amendment (Child Care Rebate) Bill 2011 to the House and to thank the members of the House for their contributions to the debate today. This is very good legislation. It is very important legislation and it is legislation which will help the lives of families right across Australia. This bill will, for the first time, enable families to access the childcare rebate no later than fortnightly. This bill delivers upon our pre-election commitment taken to the families of Australia just last year, 2010. As a result of this bill we know that around 700,000 Australian families will be able to receive this essential assistance at the time that their childcare fees are due.

Importantly, many families will be able to receive this payment weekly because the majority of childcare centres submit attendance information weekly. From July this year families will have the choice of four options for receiving the childcare rebate. Families will be able to elect to have their childcare rebate payment made to their childcare service fortnightly, at a minimum, on their behalf as a way of fee reduction; they will be able to elect to receive their childcare rebate payments direct to their bank account fortnightly at a minimum; they will be able to elect to have their childcare rebate made into their bank account quarterly, or they will be able to have their childcare rebate payment made annually as a lump sum payment.

By providing families with these choices the Australian government is ensuring that families have significantly more flexibility to manage their childcare costs within their family budget. For the first time childcare services will be able to receive the rebate on behalf of families, delivering a direct fee reduction for those families that elect this method of payment. We know that families will welcome this option—98 per cent of families currently choose to receive childcare benefit this way.

To ensure that families do not accumulate any unforeseen debts as a result of overestimating their income, this bill also contains amendments to temporarily withhold 15 per cent of each rebate payment for families receiving a higher than zero rate of childcare benefit. This is consistent with the current arrangements for quarterly childcare rebate payments, where the final quarterly payment can be used to offset any childcare payment debts incurred by a family.

The measures outlined in this bill today build on the government’s impressive record of improving the affordability and quality of
early childhood education and care. We have committed more than $18 billion over four years in funding for early childhood education and child care. This is more than twice the amount provided in the last four years of the Howard government. In 2008 we delivered on our election commitment to increase the childcare rebate from 30 to 50 per cent of out-of-pocket costs—from a maximum of $4,354 to $7,500 per child per year. Under the Howard government families could only claim a maximum of $4,354 per child per year—some 72 per cent less than under the Gillard Labor government. What this means is that since 2004, out-of-pocket costs for families earning $75,000 have reduced from 13 per cent of their disposable income to seven per cent of their disposable income in 2010.

We have also increased the frequency of childcare rebate payments to families from yearly to quarterly. Under the Howard government, families had to wait until the end of each year to receive assistance with their childcare fees. Overall we are providing $14.9 billion to help 800,000 Australian families annually with the cost of child care through the childcare benefit and the childcare rebate. This includes $8.7 billion over four years to 2013-14 to reduce childcare fees for low-and middle-income earners under the childcare benefit and $6.2 billion to assist working families with out-of-pocket childcare expenses under the childcare rebate.

When it comes to improving the affordability of child care our record stands head and shoulders above all others. Our government understands that child care is an essential enabler to parents—and particularly to women’s participation in the workforce—but we also know that when parents drop their children off at care they need to know that they will be safe and that they will be well looked after during the day. That is why we are working with the states and territories to roll out the national quality framework, which will deliver better staff-to-child ratios so that each child gets more individual care and attention. And it will boost the staff qualification requirements so that our dedicated childcare workers can better lead activities that help kids to learn and develop.

These are major reforms which will have a dramatic impact on the future health, learning, and social development outcomes of children right across the country. However, we also recognise that parents needs to be able to manage their care costs in what are, for many, very tight family budgets. We have already made massive inroads to ease this pressure and through this measure outlined in this bill we will give 700,000 Australian families real assistance with child care at the time that they incur those childcare fees.

The Australian government has an unapologetically ambitious agenda to improve access to affordable, quality early education and care for Australian families. This bill represents another massive step towards achieving this worthwhile goal and I commend it to the House.

Question agreed to.

Bill read a second time.

Message from the Administrator recommending appropriation announced.

Third Reading

Ms KATE ELLIS (Adelaide—Minister for Employment Participation and Childcare and Minister for the Status of Women) (5.52 pm)—by leave—I move:

That this bill be now read a third time.

Question agreed to.

Bill read a third time.
HUMAN SERVICES LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL 2010
Replacement Explanatory Memorandum
Ms COLLINS (Franklin—Parliamentary Secretary for Community Services) (5.52 pm)—For the information of honourable members I present a replacement explanatory memorandum for the Human Services Legislation Amendment Bill 2010.

CORPORATIONS AMENDMENT (IMPROVING ACCOUNTABILITY ON DIRECTOR AND EXECUTIVE REMUNERATION) BILL 2011
Replacement Explanatory Memorandum
Ms COLLINS (Franklin—Parliamentary Secretary for Community Services) (5.52 pm)—For the information of honourable members I present a replacement explanatory memorandum for the Corporations Amendment (Improving Accountability on Director and Executive Remuneration) Bill 2011.

OFFSHORE PETROLEUM AND GREENHOUSE GAS STORAGE REGULATORY LEVIES LEGISLATION AMENDMENT (2011 MEASURES No. 1) BILL 2011
Cognate bill:
OFFSHORE PETROLEUM AND GREENHOUSE GAS STORAGE REGULATORY LEVIES (CONSEQUENTIAL AMENDMENTS) BILL 2011
Second Reading
Debate resumed from 24 February, on motion by Mr IAN MACFARLANE:

Mr IAN MACFARLANE (Groom) (5.53 pm)—I rise to speak to the Offshore Petroleum and Greenhouse Gas Storage Regulatory Levies (Consequential Amendments) Bill 2011 and to say from the outset that the coalition will be supporting this legislation. It is important that we do everything we can to ensure that we have ample resources to oversee the operation of the offshore oil and gas industry. This legislation is in direct response to that and also ensures that we learn the lessons from, particularly, the Montara incident up in the Timor Sea, which I will come back to in a moment. The coalition will support this legislation and will treat it as non-controversial.

The Offshore Petroleum and Greenhouse Gas Storage Regulatory Levies Legislation Amendment (2011 Measures No. 1) Bill 2011 seeks to impose a cost recovery levy on holders of offshore petroleum titles in respect of oil and gas wells and well related activities in those title holders’ title areas. This is to ensure that the people who own the title to the well, and therefore own the well and the contents of the reservoir it exploits, pay their way in terms of the overall monitoring of this industry.

The levies will recover the costs of the National Offshore Petroleum Safety Authority, otherwise known as NOPSA, in undertaking its assessment, monitoring and enforcement functions in relation to—and this is particularly important—the structural integrity of wells and well operations over their lives. Obviously, a well comes into being when an exploration licence is executed and the well is spudded, as they say in the industry. From that time on, the operation of the drilling exercise needs to be carefully monitored. The well needs to be monitored in particular by the company that has the responsibility of drilling it, the operator, but the owner of the title also has the responsibility to ensure that correct procedure is followed. The industry had an impeccable record for 25 years before, unfortunately, the Montara incident occurred off the coast of...
Western Australia. Due to poor practice and a lack of supervision, hydrocarbons, particularly light crude oil, escaped from that well, and it took a great deal of time to recover that situation.

We in the coalition will support the government on this bill. It is important to collect levies to ensure the complete operation of NOPSA and to ensure that those levies are collected right across the board, in terms of the title holders of the wells as well as the company operating the drilling platforms. Once oil, gas or both have been discovered and a well is capped, that well needs to continue to be monitored. Primarily that will be done by the company that owns the title, but NOPSA will also have an overseeing role. The main bill and the levy that goes with it will facilitate that oversight being performed to a high standard.

The cognate bill contains consequential amendments to the Offshore Petroleum and Greenhouse Gas Storage Act 2006, which seems to be a recurring dream in this building. The act comes back to this chamber regularly for a minor tweaking here and there. The amendments to the act will enable NOPSA, which is funded on a cost recovery basis, to raise levies from the offshore petroleum industry to recover costs associated with undertaking its augmented integrity and other well related functions. We want to see this done properly, and in a way that ensures that there is no repeat of the Montara incident.

Amendments to the Offshore Petroleum and Greenhouse Gas Storage Act came into force in November 2010, augmenting NOPSA’s functions to include regulatory oversight of non-occupational health and safety structural integrity issues relating to wells and well related equipment and clarifying title holder duty of care in relation to wells and well related equipment. To give full effect to these augmentation legislative functions, regulatory functions and powers relating to management of well operations under part 5 of the Offshore Petroleum and Greenhouse Gas Storage (Safety) Regulations will be transferred to NOPSA in 2011.

As NOPSA is funded partially on a cost-recovery basis, levies imposed by the Offshore Petroleum and Greenhouse Gas Storage (Safety Levies) Act are required for NOPSA to carry out its functions and responsibilities. Current levies imposed by the Offshore Petroleum and Greenhouse Gas Storage (Safety Levies) Act are not appropriate in terms of either their purpose or the entities from which they are collected, and these bills ensure that NOPSA is able to collect levies relating to their augmentation well functions from the correct entity—in this case, the titleholder.

We have seen a very unfortunate incident off north-western Western Australia. The industry is now working hard with government, and in cooperation with experience from around the world, to ensure that well integrity and the exploration of petroleum resources in offshore Australia is done at the very highest of world standards. It is worth noting that, whilst for Australia the Montara well failure was a disaster, we were fortunate that there was no environmental damage. But from what happened next in the Gulf of Mexico we got an insight into just how serious a malfunction in a well can be. I do not think anyone will forget those graphic images from BP’s well in the Gulf of Mexico in which oil and hydrocarbons escaped uncontrollably and, unfortunately, were all washed up onshore, particularly on the southern shores of the United States. We need to learn from those events. There was a very significant environmental cost in that exercise, and a number of lessons can be learned from it.
I know that my colleague sitting to my left, the member for Dickson, occasionally accuses me of cooperating too much with the Minister for Resources and Energy, but the reality is that the consultation process enables the minister’s experience, his department’s experience and my experience as the minister for resources for six years to be used to ensure that we put in place processes that are not overly onerous and are still more than sufficient to do the job. The coalition supported the Minister for Resources and Energy when he asked that the Montara Commission of Inquiry into the uncontrolled release of oil and gas from the Montara wellhead platform in the Timor Sea be put in place, and that process has been pursued to its completion. Of course, there is still some more work to be done there, and the industry and the industry association, APIA, are working to ensure that the correct set of guidelines is put in place.

I should say that there will be more to come in relation to this issue, but we need to ensure that the oil and gas industry has the confidence of the Australian community as it goes about the challenge of recovering those resources in offshore situations. The community must have confidence not only that we have in place the right set of rules but also that those rules are overseen in a way that ensures that the rules and regulations are followed. I believe that, as we move forward on this issue, we will be able to do that. If we do not do that, the industry will become beset with uncertainty. This industry is not merely beset but besieged with uncertainty from the Gillard government.

This is one of those industries which produces in particular liquefied natural gas and exports it to the world. For every tonne of CO2 emitted securing LNG, we save around eight tonnes of CO2 from the replacement of a coal fired power station in China. So this industry is incredibly important when it comes to reducing carbon emissions. Yet we know that, here today and in previous weeks, the LNG industry is under threat from this government through the imposition of a very poorly thought out carbon tax. I was involved in a negotiation to try to ensure that the LNG industry was protected from the economic impact of the previous scheme—the CPRS—which the current Prime Minister abandoned for fear of a voter backlash. But yet again we see that none of those lessons have been learned and that this government is hell-bent on placing an impost on the liquefied natural gas industry which will make that industry uncompetitive in comparison to the rest of the world.

I do not know why the government is embarking on this role. Why would it impose a carbon tax against an industry that reduces emissions eightfold? It makes no sense to us, and it creates another area of uncertainty for this industry which has already been subjected to changes in government policy and increases in taxes. We saw several years ago the imposition of a tax on condensate—which is a product that comes out of gas wells—on this industry. All we have seen from this government is a series of legislative and regulatory changes causing further uncertainty.

We will work with this government to try to create some certainty for the industry as to where the regulatory process will go. We do not want to go down the extreme path that the government’s alliance partners want to go down—that is, basically to shut down the fossil fuel industry in Australia. The Australian Greens would be quite happy to see the coal industry shut down tomorrow, followed by the oil and gas industry. They are partners in government. Some would say that Senator Bob Brown is in fact the Prime Minister—that he is the one who is actually in power and that, while the Gillard government may be the government, the Greens are control-
ling the agenda. That level of uncertainty and regulatory potential is scaring the daylights out of the oil and gas industry. We want to make sure that we can produce legislation that gives the community confidence without letting the Greens control so much of the agenda that this industry ceases to exist.

As we learn from the experiences of Montara and read carefully the Commission of Inquiry’s report, we realise that there will potentially need to be further changes to the structure and operation of NOPSA. I have spoken in this chamber about that before. The Liberal and National parties support in principle the establishment of a national offshore petroleum regulator that includes the oversight of environmental impacts, but we see that only in the context of it being a national body, not a federal body—that is, it is a national regulator, not a federal regulator, made up of a partnership between the federal government and the various state governments represented on the Ministerial Council on Mineral and Petroleum Resources. We want to see a partnership formed. In saying that, there are concerns being expressed by my colleagues in Western Australia—more particularly by the Western Australian Minister for Mines and Petroleum, Norman Moore. I intend to have some further discussions with Minister Moore and I also intend to talk with my colleagues, as I am talking with the minister for resources, to ensure that we can move forward on a process which satisfies the Western Australians and the other states in Australia, for that matter. I hate to tell Western Australians, but Western Australia is not the only state with offshore gas, but it is the major state. We need to look at a process whereby we not only fund the current operations of NOPSA but actually expand NOPSA to NOPSEMA, the National Offshore Petroleum Safety and Environmental Management Authority.

We have a challenge in front of us. We need to ensure that we produce an optimal outcome that has the confidence of the community in how we regulate, how we monitor and how we ensure safety in terms of occupational health and safety and, just as importantly, the environment as this industry continues to produce not only the jobs and the exports that we need but also the raw materials that we use every day in operating our motor vehicles, heating our houses and running our power stations. Gas is becoming an increasingly important energy source in Australia and we need to ensure that we maintain our self-sufficiency.

One of the things that will also help in bringing certainty—and I would be remiss to not mention it in this speech—is of course the need for an energy white paper. Member for Dickson, where I differ very strongly with the Minister for Resources and Energy is the fact that the Gillard government, like the Rudd government before it, has failed to give any energy certainty to Australia. It has failed to deliver on an energy white paper and it has failed to give this industry any road map moving forward about where Australia is going to source its energy. In relation to offshore greenhouse gas storage legislation, we have also seen a complete halt in confidence and progress in relation to carbon capture and storage. In fact, we have seen a number of exercises aimed at getting a 30-second story on the news at night, but, in terms of actually offering a path forward for the coal industry to capture carbon and store it, we are seeing nothing from the government.

In conclusion, the opposition will continue to work with the government whilst ever reasonable proposals are put forward and whilst ever the industry is consulted on those proposals before they are brought to this chamber. It is important that we not only have the confidence of the community but
also have a regulatory process that works—a regulatory process that is practical, allows all responsible parties to pay their way in terms of the operation of that oversight and ensures that, as we do that, we do not choke the industry with regulation to a point where the industry no longer has the confidence to invest in Australia. The reality is that, while Australia has a very stable geological structure, there are plenty of countries in the world that have oil and gas. We want that investment here. We want the billions of dollars that are currently being invested by Woodside, Chevron, Shell and BHP—the whole raft of companies that invest—to continue here, but we want it to continue on a basis where it is properly regulated and correctly overseen and where the community has confidence in the overall process.

Ms O’NEILL (Robertson) (6.12 pm)—I am very pleased to speak today to the Offshore Petroleum and Greenhouse Gas Storage Regulatory Levies Legislation Amendment (2011 Measures No. 1) Bill 2011 and related bill which will ensure safer petroleum and gas operations off our coastline. For those members of the Australian public who are listening and might have cause to be a little alarmed by some of the comments of the member for Groom, let me just put on the record a contrasting and more accurate view about a carbon price and its impact on this industry. The Prime Minister has made it very clear, unlike the indications we have just heard from the member for Groom, that putting a price on carbon, and our plans for that, will make sure that the dollars that are raised from making the polluters pay will go to climate change programs that will engage young Australians in looking at innovative ways to change our practices with regard to our carbon impact on our environment.

In contrast, in such important industries as our minerals, coal and gas industries, claims for certainty cannot be guaranteed in any way by those from the opposition who one day are climate change deniers and the next day are its proponents, depending on the context of the conversation. To demonstrate that we all know that Mr Abbott is a climate change denier, his policy is complete nonsense. Despite his best efforts to convince people that he really does accept the climate science, we know that he has not changed his view and that he has always talked about climate change as being ‘crap’. The uncertainty of this flip-flopping from one position to another is exactly in opposition to certainty, the importance of which the member for Groom has indicated.

Having cleared that up a little, to make sure listeners have no misunderstanding about the importance of our agreement on this element of the bill, I would like to move forward and talk to the bills in question: the Offshore Petroleum and Greenhouse Gas Storage Regulatory Levies Legislation Amendment (2011 Measures No. 1) Bill 2011 and the Offshore Petroleum and Greenhouse Gas Storage Regulatory Levies (Consequential Amendments) Bill 2011. Put simply, these bills impose levies on offshore petroleum titleholders to recover the operational costs for the augmented safety regime carried out by NOPSA, the National Offshore Petroleum Safety Authority.
The new levies include three elements: a new well investigation levy, an annual well levy and a well activity levy. What can one say but ‘Well, well, well’? I think the usual rejoinder of British bobbies in comedies of a certain area was, ‘Well, well, well—what have we here then?’ To stretch the metaphor a little further, what we have here is a means for the safety regulator, NOPSA, to marshal sufficient resources to effectively perform the augmented integrity and regulatory functions that were granted by the parliament last year.

By way of background, the Offshore Petroleum and Greenhouse Gas Storage (Safety Levies) Act currently imposes safety related levies relating to offshore petroleum and greenhouse gas facilities which are payable by the operator. At the moment, though, these safety related levies do not extend to NOPSA’s well related regulatory functions and powers. Importantly, the new and revised provisions place obligations on titleholders, not facility operators. This assessment and monitoring goes to the structural integrity of wells and well operations for the life of the well. The safety benefits of these measures should be pretty obvious. They are essential for NOPSA to effectively and fully do its job of determining the integrity and safety of wells and minimising risks to people at or near those wells.

This is particularly important in light of the issues arising from the Montara oil spill incident in August 2009, and I am pleased to say that the member for Groom gave a very fair representation of Australia’s general deep concern about the impact on the environment of that spill. As commissioner David Borthwick noted in his report of the Montara Commission of Inquiry in June last year, the magnitude of the blow-out from the Montara wellhead platform was one that Australia had not seen the like of in 20 years. While the risks of such an incident are low, the results could have been catastrophic—and the government have taken that on board. I note that the commission of inquiry recommended enforcing requirements of the Offshore Petroleum and Greenhouse Gas Storage Act and the regulations as they relate to well integrity, and clearly we are following through.

There are a couple of noteworthy aspects of these levies that I should mention. A well investigation levy is only imposed on petroleum titleholders where the reasonable costs incurred by NOPSA in conducting an inspection into a breach or suspected breach of the OPGGS Act exceed $30,000. That threshold is high and it reflects the purpose of imposing the well investigation levy separately from the annual well levy and the well activity levy. The imposition of the well investigation levy, coupled with it being triggered by a threshold, is to avoid an unacceptable level of cross-subsidisation between titleholders whose activities require a high level of investigatory activity by NOPSA and those whose activities do not require such a level of activity.

As a result of the measures, consequential amendments to the OPGGS Act are required to enable the effective calculation and collection of the new well levies. The amendments provide that the new levies become due and payable at a time specified in the regulations. In addition, the amendments ensure that each of the well related levies payable under the regulatory levies act are credited to the national offshore petroleum safety account.

The consequential amendments we are debating here today also provide for a late payment penalty to be payable by a titleholder where one of these new levies imposed on the titleholder remains wholly or partly unpaid after the day it becomes due and payable. This penalty is naturally designed to encourage and ensure that levies
are paid on time. Given the importance of NOPSA’s function in regulating safety and integrity matters for the offshore oil and gas industry and the fact that it is funded through levies, it is critical that the industry pays these levies in a timely fashion.

Separately, the government is working on a proposal to establish a national offshore petroleum safety and environmental management authority, NOPSEMA, and a national offshore petroleum titles administrator, NOPTA, by 1 January next year. I am advised that the minister is looking to introduce amendments to the act to establish these two new bodies in the first half of this year. I look forward to speaking to the debate when that legislation comes before the House. In the meantime, I commend these bills to the House.

Mr RANDALL (Canning) (6.20 pm)—I am pleased to speak on the Offshore Petroleum and Greenhouse Gas Storage Regulatory Levies Legislation Amendment (2011 Measures No. 1) Bill 2011 and the related bill. As a Western Australian, I am obliged to talk to these bills because they have such an effect on our state. I noticed that the member for Groom and the shadow minister tried to make some sort of flippant comment that other states were relevant in this debate. I understand Queensland is heading towards coal seam gas in a big way and we know about Santos in South Australia and Bass Strait and these sorts of issues, but let’s understand the accepted figures: 67 per cent of petroleum produced in Australia comes from Western Australia and 80 per cent of the reserves are in Western Australian waters, generally. It tends to put our bona fides out there.

It would be remiss of me to allow the member for Robertson to leave without censuring her for trying to somehow connect the CPRS and the tax on carbon dioxide to this bill. It is like the Greens saying that climate change has something to do with the tsunami and earthquake in Japan. It is totally irrelevant and misses the point. A new staff member that knows something about writing on legislation might be handy for the member for Robertson so she stays relevant to the bill.

It is true that this bill imposes three levies. The purpose of the bill is to help discharge its regulatory functions and it will indicate a widening of its ambit to include levies relating to wells as has been said before. Again, to get it on the record, this bill will strengthen the legislation that came into effect on 1 January 2005. The National Offshore Petroleum Safety Authority is an independent statutory authority created under the Petroleum Act. It is jointly administered by the Australian government and state and Northern Territory ministers, who have the responsibility for the offshore petroleum industry et cetera.

The three levies, I will point out early in the piece, which have also been mentioned, are the annual well levy, the well activity levy and the well investigation levy. As I said, it has been pointed out earlier that this is heading towards full cost recovery for the administration and oversight of these operations. That is interesting in itself because one of the parts of the explanatory memorandum to this bill is that anything over $30,000 will trigger a levy. Can you imagine anything in an offshore area being under $30,000? It would probably cost you $30,000 to get a helicopter and a team of guys out there to do an inspection. In other words, they are going to qualify in just about every aspect of investigation. Interestingly, some of the jury is out on whether this is a tax or a levy, and there is a fair bit of discussion as to whether it qualifies as a tax or a levy because a tax is uncapped and a levy is capped. The work on these inspections and monitoring is open-
ended. You can continue to collect a levy for a whole range of activities and see it grow and grow as to the sort of work that is being done in relation to that.

Everybody keeps talking about this being a response to the Montara well head platform blow-out which occurred. I heard the minister say it was off Western Australia; it was actually off the Northern Territory, I understand. That is why it came under the jurisdiction of the Northern Territory regulators. In fact the Northern Territory Department of Resources was found not to be diligent after the commission of inquiry. I wonder why they were not diligent. I understand only three people work in the department and one of them seems to be on leave much of the time, so two people from the Northern Territory department are trying to monitor and control what happens in their jurisdiction. The existing legislative regime needs to be adjusted to make sure it covers any of those contingencies.

I am concerned, particularly as a member from Western Australia, because we need to be careful about the centralisation of powers to Canberra. We need a national approach but we do not need a Canberra-centric or centralist approach. We have seen this before. I want to make a comparison that may be a little bizarre but I will point it out in any case—I see my colleague Senator Back from Western Australia entering the chamber and he will understand this very well; dare I say it happened under our watch under the Howard government—when we created the Environmental Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act under Senator Hill as environment minister, we did not realise what a can of worms we were opening for individual states and jurisdictions. Lo and behold: we now have someone in Canberra—and I will give you an example from my electorate—who decides whether you can have a development in a particular area because there might be black cockatoos on the land. This is relevant to the bill because it shows what happens when you centralise powers to Canberra. You have some hairy pitted, kaftan-wearing, bead-wearing person in the department saying, ‘You can’t have development on that land because we’ve found some black cockatoos or Carnaby’s cockies on that particular bit of land.’

I had one of my businesspeople in the electorate trying to expand a simple sandpit. They did a $10,000 survey and found there were no birds there but, because birds might have been there, they were not allowed to expand. The Dawesville Catholic Primary School was not allowed to expand its sporting oval because it might have been a potential habitat for black cockatoos. This is what comes out of Canberra. When you are 3,000 miles away in Western Australia and you have got somebody in a department in Canberra telling you how you are going to run the show on the west coast, it is not very relevant.

This is why not only me but other members are concerned about some elements of this bill. It is correct: yes, we support the intention of the bill but we are flagging some of the issues that could be a problem. For example, we have not had any bad incidents over the 40-odd years that it has been administered by the Western Australian state government over a number of state governments—not just the coalition government; certainly, the previous government was Labor. The only one I can think of was the Varanus Island blow-out but that was dealt with immediately. It was when the Apache Corporation allowed some of the materials to be run down and it caused a problem with gas flow to Western Australian industry and houses. To say that this needs to be done because of the Montara blow-out is, I suspect, an overreaction and a potential power grab from Canberra. We are not satisfied totally as
a state government in Western Australia that the arrangements today are the best option for our state and the industry in general.

The federal Labor government is intent on centralising power and diminishing the role of the states. We have seen this in Western Australia in terms of our services. Western Australia is seen as almost too far away and a great cash cow. You only need to look at the way they view us in terms of the GST: 68c in the dollar at the moment, and going to 72c, while Queensland is 91c and New South Wales is 93c. We are sick and tired of being used as the cash cow for Australia. Most of the resources, not only oil and gas but the mineral industry, are centralised in Western Australia. They wanted to give us a mining tax. They want to give us a tax on carbon dioxide so that we can export jobs and pollution offshore. We are getting sick and tired of Canberra dictating to us about how much good they are going to do for us 3,000 miles away.

These centralist initiatives are all too common, particularly from the Rudd and Gillard governments. This is being driven by the coalition of the Gillard-Brown government. We need to make sure that it is understood that this is not the Gillard government; this is the Gillard-Brown government that is now deciding that it is going to impose a whole lot of social and environmental measures on us that would not have been done before, because the green tail is wagging the red dog.

The Western Australian state mines minister, Norman Moore, is very concerned that some of the powers in Western Australia will be taken away from his department. Not only that, but $15 million will now be taken out of the Western Australian state budget. The full cost recovery of levies for this oversight will now be sent to Canberra and it will be administered from Canberra, and Western Australia will be left out. The Western Australian Premier, Colin Barnett, opposes Mr Ferguson’s plans to set up a single national offshore petroleum regulator. He said it was a mistake made by the Northern Territory department of resources and it would not have occurred in Western Australia. We do not mind if you go and have a look at the Northern Territory; after all, it is a territory, not a state. They might need some help in terms of resources. They are undermanned in their department in any case. We realise that there needs to be a national approach, but those on the ground in Western Australia—with a magnificent track record—need to be kept in the loop. I understand that there is no company that is involved in exploration or production in Western Australia—with a magnificent track record—need to be kept in the loop. I understand that there is no company that is involved in exploration or production in Western Australia that wants to see this measure taken into account. I know that Woodside have not been out there pushing for it, and they are probably our most high-profile company at the moment.

Norman Moore, in a letter to the editor, has said that oil and gas projects cross boundaries between state borders, islands and mainland areas—and they do. There are a whole lot of boundary jurisdictions around who is responsible and how far out the zone goes. It is not a line like the offshore economic zone, which is 200 kilometres. It varies depending on the continental shelf and other factors, and islands and all those sorts of things. As he said, ‘I’ve had no-one knocking my door down to do anything about this.’

The Western Australian minister, Norman Moore, went further and said that to strip this regulatory responsibility from Western Australia and hand it to Canberra was something that he did not agree with. States would act as designated authorities and administer regulations regardless of whether the offshore operations were in Commonwealth or state waters. The current system is not broken and it has worked well for 50 years.
Coming to a conclusion, to demonstrate why we are concerned about this issue: there was meant to be consultation after a Senate committee, and I understand that the consultation has not been as forthcoming as it should have been. In talking to industry bodies today—this needs to be verified but it is information I have received from them today; we even talked to APIA today—to placate the territories and states, particularly Norman Moore, there appears to be some move towards saying that the minister in the state had the final say. If this is a move towards a resolution to this, that is good. But I would like to see it in the bill, I would like to see it in any part of the memorandum so that it can be referred to and held to account for any future contests in this area. As much as we support a strong national regulation—rather than a Canberra regulation—and the states having a proper say in this area, we support the bill.

Mr CHEESEMAN (Corangamite) (6.36 pm)—I too rise to speak on the Offshore Petroleum and Greenhouse Gas Storage Regulatory Levies Legislation Amendment (2011 Measures No. 1) Bill 2011 and the Offshore Petroleum and Greenhouse Gas Storage Regulatory Levies (Consequential Amendments) Bill 2011. These bills will play an important role in future development of industries in Australia and industries in my electorate of Corangamite. They have implications for jobs, the environment and future investment. They are about the Australian government putting down a regulatory framework for good governance and good corporate citizenship.

These bills impose levies on the offshore petroleum titleholders to enable the National Offshore Petroleum Safety Authority to recover costs associated with undertaking its assessment, monitoring and enforcement functions. That is very important work in ensuring that we are able to exploit these gas reserves in a way that is sustainable and safe for the environment and in a way that enables us to invest in this important economic opportunity for Australia and of course for my region. It is important that regulatory action is undertaken to ensure safety and good governance take place within this environment.

These bills change the Offshore Petroleum and Greenhouse Gas Storage (Safety Levies) Act 2003—the safety levies act—to impose levies on offshore petroleum titleholders to enable the National Offshore Petroleum Safety Authority to recover the costs associated with undertaking regulatory functions in relation to wells and well-related equipment, which of course is critical to exploration. Importantly, the bills also make consequential amendments to the Offshore Petroleum and Greenhouse Gas Storage Act 2006 to enable effective calculation and collection of the new well levies. The imposition of these levies will ensure that NOPSA—which is funded on a cost-recovery basis from levies raised from the offshore petroleum industry—has sufficient resources to effectively perform its functions.

This legislation is about Australia and the Australian government not only making sure that this industry is well regulated in order to protect our environment but also ensuring that there is a suitable environment for investment as we go forward. It would be very easy to not regulate in this area, but of course that would have substantial consequences,
particularly in light of the many offshore accidents that have occurred throughout Aus-
tralia’s history and in many other countries 
that have been able to exploit their environ-
ment for gas and other petroleum-related 
products. These bills are another important 
cog in the wheel of policy that the Gillard 
government is moving to address.

This industry has the opportunity to create 
many jobs and future investment opportuni-
ties throughout our nation. It is important 
that we look at this in the context of many 
areas like Corangamite, where there is a very 
substantial resource that we will be able to 
exploit in the years to come, particularly as 
we move from baseload energy—being 
largely derived in Victoria from brown coal—to being able to take up the economic 
opportunities that come from offshore gas. 
The Otway Basin, in my electorate, has been 
developed in recent times and I am sure that, 
as we place a price on carbon, there will be 
further investment in this field, creating jobs 
in my local area, enabling us to reduce our 
carbon footprint in Victoria and providing 
investment opportunities and wealth for our 
nation and for my region. It is important that 
we put in place the necessary regulatory 
steps so that this industry can develop safely 
and so the financial community has certainty 
that we can exploit these resources in a way 
that enables investment to flow and opportu-
nities to be taken up.

Getting this framework right is important 
and will also flow to other bills that this par-
liament will debate in the months to come in 
terms of putting in place the necessary steps 
to set a price on carbon. It is important that 
we take these steps. In recent times we have 
seen many examples where things have gone 
drastically wrong, creating uncertainty here 
in Australia—as other speakers have alluded 
to—and in many other jurisdictions around 
the world where incidents have occurred. In 
many regions in Australia and around the 
world it is true to say that we are drilling at 
distances further from the coast at depths 
greater than what we have been able to drill 
to historically. But, with that, comes some 
very substantial risks. That is why it is im-
portant that we put in place the necessary 
mechanisms to ensure that it is done safely 
and that there is proper oversight. We of 
course want to exploit these resources but we 
need to make sure that we do it in a safe way.

For many years whilst I was at university I 
studied geology. I am probably one of the 
very few people in this place that has a con-
nection to the earth sciences. Certainly, there 
are very substantial investment opportunities 
right throughout this nation. In my electorate 
we have the Otway Basin off my coast that 
has huge opportunity for us in Victoria, but 
there are many other parts of Australia where 
there are huge opportunities for investment, 
opportunities to create jobs and export a re-
source to the rest of the world that will help 
them reduce their carbon footprint as they 
hopefully migrate from coal and other more 
heavy carbon footprint products to gas.

In my region in recent times exploration 
has taken place. It is true to say that there are 
huge investment opportunities that will take 
place in the months and years to come. But 
we need to make sure that we have proper 
regulatory oversight in place. We do need to 
make sure that there is a cost-recovery 
mechanism put in place so that the regulator 
has the necessary resources to ensure that 
this industry is undertaken and developed in 
a way that is sustainable and, importantly, 
safe.

There is no doubt in my mind that with 
the gas industry being further developed we 
can substantially reduce our carbon footprint. 
Of course, we do know that many areas such 
as mine do have a large carbon footprint. 
Any mechanism, any industry that is devel-
oped that assists in reducing our carbon foot-
print is something that people in my electorate of Corangamite, and I am sure in the electorate of the member for Corio, certainly will embrace.

Within our region we do have very substantial low-lying coastal communities. When I talk to those communities they certainly encourage me to raise these issues within the parliament, and I certainly take every opportunity to do that where I can. We have areas such as the Great Ocean Road, the Surf Coast and the Bellarine Peninsula which will be at threat of coastal inundation with sea level rise. It is for those reasons that I take every opportunity to encourage the development of a future gas industry off my coastline because I believe that it can play a very substantial role in reducing our carbon footprint.

As I said earlier in my speech in this debate, it is important that we do have proper regulatory oversight and that it is done in a way which goes to cost recovery. In a broad sense that is what these amendment bills do, and I therefore commend these bills to the House.

Mr ADAMS (Lyons) (6.48 pm)—The Offshore Petroleum and Greenhouse Gas Storage Regulatory Levies Legislation Amendment (2011 Measures No. 1) Bill 2011 and the associated bill help to bring together the regulatory regime which has been put together along with all the other legislation which has taken several years. I have been pleased that during that time the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Primary Industry and Resources was able to bring down the report, Down under: greenhouse gas storage as a start for the minister’s legislation and we have moved on to where we are now.

These bills deal with the cost recovery of having a proper process by bringing titleholders and title areas into being to carry the cost for the National Offshore Petroleum Safety Authority. That authority’s role is to have the skill base to carry out the work to ensure that everything is done in the proper and correct way. To achieve that there are several different parts of these amendment bills. I understand there is some urgency to make sure that the resource management and administrative regulations commence in April this year, which is only a month away, so it is certainly appropriate that these bills are passed soon.

When we did the Down under report we found that the public need to feel reassured that there is a regime in place that they are comfortable with, that they have confidence in, and that they will give full support to. We are all aware that what occurred in the Gulf of Mexico a short time ago disrupted the lives of thousands, probably millions, of Americans and brought disruption to their economy in parts of the country.

This legislation introduces a cost-recovery mechanism. We need to have that to make sure that the right people are paying for safety. Safety does cost; regulations do cost. To have a proper regulatory regime in place will give us the right processes so that this industry continues to play a significant role in this country. I certainly support the bills.

Mr MARTIN FERGUSON (Batman—Minister for Resources and Energy and Minister for Tourism) (6.52 pm)—in reply—I express my appreciation to the members for Groom, Canning, Robertson, Corangamite and Lyons for their constructive contribution to this debate. As has been evidenced by the debate to date, those who have contributed understand the importance of the petroleum industry to Australia. They also appreciate the need for government to be decisive, to ensure that we have the best possible regulatory regime in place as part of our commitment to proper practice with respect to both
environmental and health and safety related issues. It is for those reasons that the Offshore Petroleum and Greenhouse Gas Storage Regulatory Levies Legislation Amendment (2011 Measures No. 1) Bill 2011 and the Offshore Petroleum and Greenhouse Gas Storage Regulatory Levies (Consequential Amendments) Bill 2011 were brought forward.

The bills amend the Offshore Petroleum and Greenhouse Gas Storage (Safety Levies) Act 2003 and make consequential amendments to the Offshore Petroleum and Greenhouse Gas Storage Act 2006. These important amendments impose well and well related activities on petroleum titleholders to ensure that the National Offshore Petroleum Safety Authority can recover the costs associated with undertaking its regulatory functions in relation to structural integrity and the safety of wells and well related equipment. I remind the House that the operation of NOPSA is a full cost-recovery model, hence the expansion of responsibilities to do with wells and well related activities requires additional revenue to be raised.

I also acknowledged that the bills underscore the Australian government’s commitment, which is very much supported by the opposition, to ensuring that NOPSA has sufficient powers and capability to effectively regulate all aspects of occupational health and safety for the offshore petroleum industry, including in relation to the operation and integrity of wells. The collection of these levies will ensure that NOPSA is adequately resourced to carry out its well related functions under the Offshore Petroleum and Greenhouse Gas Storage Act 2006 and associated regulations.

I will briefly respond to a couple of issues raised by the member for Canning, for the purposes of correcting the record. Firstly, I indicate that this legislation applies to Commonwealth waters only. Obviously, much of the petroleum industry is off the coast of Western Australia. Constitutionally it is clearly a Commonwealth responsibility. That is not questioned. I also indicate that, contrary to the member for Canning’s suggestion, 80 per cent of the petroleum activities off the coast of Western Australia are actually in Commonwealth waters, not Western Australian waters. I note also that the existing safety investigation levy is exactly the same threshold as the proposed well investigation levy. The levy is not necessarily triggered every time there is an investigation.

I further remind the member for Canning that there have been a number of reports, other than the Montara Commission of Inquiry, recommending the transfer of structural integrity to the National Offshore Petroleum Safety Authority, including the 2009 offshore petroleum regulatory inquiry and the 2008 NOPSA operational review. In essence, there are now three separate reports recommending that the Commonwealth further strengthen the role of NOPSA in view of the need to establish a single national regulator with additional health and safety and environmental responsibilities. This change is perceived as being potentially of great benefit to industry from a regulatory point of view and, from a productivity point of view, represents the opportunity to make considerable savings over time in the cost of operations of this industry.

Hence, I can indicate to the House that industry largely supports these changes—contrary to the member for Canning’s suggestions. Industry understands that, given the Macondo incident in the Gulf of Mexico and our own Montara accident, we have to go out of our way to ensure that industry’s social licence to operate is understood and accepted within the Australian community. From an economic point of view this is exceptionally important to Australia. Firstly, at the mo-
ment, in petroleum products we have a net trade deficit of $16 billion per year that will potentially blow out to $30 billion by 2015. I also indicate that in terms of the strength of the economy the petroleum sector is very much underpinning a pipeline of investment from an Australian perspective. This has taken us close to capacity in our ability to supply skilled labour to support these projects in Australia. Be it on the west coast, with projects such as Gorgon, the biggest ever single investment Australia’s history, be it INPEX in the Northern Territory, or be it the recent approval for a new industry on the east coast of Australia, the coal seam methane industry, the pipeline of investment for Australia represents a tremendous economic opportunity.

I also remind the House that the wages and conditions applicable to workers in this industry are exceptionally good. In actual fact, many workers in other industries are envious of the rates of pay and conditions of employment applicable to this industry.

I will say a few words about the overall importance of this debate. Firstly, the issue of well integrity was actually thrown up in previous reports for the government to attend to. We have acted; hence the cost-recovery processes have kicked in. Secondly, the Commonwealth remains committed to putting in place, as a result of these three reports, a single national regulator with additional responsibilities relating to not only health and safety but also appropriate environmental matters. I say that because I am reminding you that if you have an accident it has the same potential ramifications from an environmental as from a health and safety point of view—hence the need for a strong national approach to regulation. This is supported by industry very rigorously and supported by all states and territories, with the exception of Western Australia.

I remain committed to trying to reach, one way or another, an outcome with the Western Australia government that suits all our needs. Western Australia is a huge beneficiary of economic activity conducted in Commonwealth waters off the Western Australian coast. They should appreciate that, given Macondo in the Gulf of Mexico, and Montara, the Australian community is not prepared to accept a failure by the Commonwealth to act to ensure that we have the best possible regulatory regime in place to match the economic importance of this industry and its environmental significance. I commend the bills to the House.

Question agreed to.
Bill read a second time.

Third Reading
Mr MARTIN FERGUSON (Batman—Minister for Resources and Energy and Minister for Tourism) (7.00 pm)—by leave—I move:

That this bill be now read a third time.

Question agreed to.
Bill read a third time.

OFFSHORE PETROLEUM AND GREENHOUSE GAS STORAGE REGULATORY LEVIES (CONSEQUENTIAL AMENDMENTS) BILL 2011

Second Reading
Debate resumed from 24 February, on motion by Mr Martin Ferguson:

That this bill be now read a second time.

Question agreed to.
Bill read a second time.

Message from the Governor-General recommending appropriation announced.

Third Reading
Mr MARTIN FERGUSON (Batman—Minister for Resources and Energy and Min-
FAMILIES, HOUSING, COMMUNITY SERVICES AND INDIGENOUS AFFAIRS AND OTHER LEGISLATION AMENDMENT (ELECTION COMMITMENTS AND OTHER MEASURES) BILL 2011

Second Reading
Debate resumed from 10 February, on motion by Ms Macklin:
That this bill be now read a second time.

Mr ANDREWS (Menzies) (7.04 pm)—I rise to speak on the Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs and Other Legislation Amendment (Election Commitments and Other Measures) Bill 2011. Through this bill the Gillard Labor government is seeking to legislate to give effect to some of its election commitments. One assumes that these are commitments it is happy to uphold, unlike the fraud the Prime Minister perpetrated on the Australian people when she, together with her government alliance partner the Greens, announced a carbon tax, a massive assault on Australian families and their household budgets. I was of the view that the faceless men of the Labor Party wielded the power, but in this new paradigm it seems that it is not them at all; it is the Greens.

When the Prime Minister lost her majority and lost her legitimacy after the 2010 election, Australians might have been forgiven for thinking that she would have the integrity to stand by her promise not to introduce a carbon tax, but she chose not to. The Prime Minister chose to betray the Australian people. She chose to put her alliance with the Greens before the interests of the Australian people. It is a decision for which she will be held accountable. It is a decision for which she will be judged by all Australians.

This bill seeks to amend the Social Security Act 1991, the Veterans’ Entitlements Act 1986, the A New Tax System (Family Assis-
tance) Act 1999, the A New Tax System (Family Assistance) (Administration) Act 1999, the Income Tax Assessment Act 1997 and the Social Security (Administration) Act 1999. In seeking to amend the Social Security Act 1991 and the Veterans’ Entitlements Act 1986 the bill seeks to give effect to proposed changes to the work bonus to exempt the first $250 per fortnight of employment income from the income test and introduce an employment income concession bank to enable pensioners to accrue any unused amounts of the $250 fortnight exemption, to a maximum of $6,500, whilst also offsetting future assessable employment income.

The bill seeks also to increase incentives for age pension recipients and veterans’ affairs income support pensioners to work by enabling them to keep more of their pension when they are working. The coalition raised the issue of pensioners who worked in various seasonal employments, for example, as Santas and school exam supervisors. They were having their pensions cut or reduced as a result of the short-term income that they were receiving. There was a well-known case here in Canberra where a man who, like many others in the Christmas season, worked for a few weeks in a department store receiving income as a Santa Claus, holding children on his knee and having photographs taken with these young children. Because of that increase in income over a short time, he was then penalised in his pension as a result of that short-term work. Surely in this country an incentive for people to work even on a seasonal basis, on a part-time basis or on a temporary basis, ought to be encouraged rather than discouraged by legislation.

The Gillard government has finally acted, but pensioners should be wary. They should be wary of a government that launched a solar panel rebate scheme and then decreed that any rebate pensioners received from selling additional electricity generated by their solar panels back into the grid was income and thus impacted on their pension. The government approach is to tend to give on one hand but to claw back on the other. The Labor-Greens carbon tax will also hit pensioners. There will be higher electricity prices, higher grocery prices and higher petrol prices, which, of course, flow through into the prices of almost every good and service in Australia.

The coalition welcomes the changes to work bonus—changes it called for and changes which it proposed. The amendments to the family tax benefit part A were taken from the recommendations of the Henry review, which argued that family payments should be the main focus of assistance for children aged up to 18 years or until the completion of secondary school in the year a person turns 18. The proposed amendments will raise the payment rates for each eligible child aged 16 to 19 so that they are the same as for those aged 13 to 15. These amendments will have flow-on effect in rent assistance as the increased rates for older children will make them eligible to be considered a ‘rent assistance child’. Currently, rent assistance cannot be claimed in respect of children aged 16 and over.

The bill will position FTB part A as the primary form of assistance offered to young people undertaking secondary education or the vocational equivalent. The proposed measures are also intended to ensure that families are not put in a position of attempting to calculate which payment is best for them. I had hoped that this bill might reverse the contempt this government has shown for rural and regional students, but I will return to that later.

It seems that it is more important for Labor to tinker with programs that have failed rather than to try and help students in need. The latest program failure is the matched
savings scheme. This scheme was introduced by Labor in 2009. The scheme matches dollar-for-dollar savings up to $500 for persons on compulsory income management. At present the matched savings scheme starts automatically for all who start a money management program. This change will shift the onus onto the individual to claim the MSS. The matched savings scheme is nothing more than a Labor smokes-and-mirrors policy. The program has been a total policy failure. On 16 March, the Australian newspaper reported on just how much of a failure this program has been. Patricia Karvelas reported:

Only one person has received the full $500 available under the Gillard government’s $53 million matched savings scheme for welfare recipients launched last July.

Indeed, Maree O’Halloran, President of the National Welfare Rights Network, said the scheme seemed to be ‘untied, untested and unpopular’. She went on:

The revelation of a next-to-zero take up comes as no surprise to Welfare Rights. The scheme is both complex and misguided. It fails to recognise the reality of such low levels of payments and the proven levels of deprivation that social security recipients experience.

Even among the most thrifty and frugal there is limited capacity to save.

It is disappointing that rather than tackling the problems with the program, the government, in this legislation, is now merely tinkering around the edges.

The Prime Minister let the cat out of the bag last week. She said the Greens were extremists. On this side of the parliament we have always known that, but the question for the Prime Minister is: if the Greens are extremists, why has she formed an alliance with them? Why has she formed government with them? Why is she allowing the leader of the Greens to call the shots?

Mr Stephen Jones—Because they are not as extreme as you!

Mr ANDREWS—That is an interesting interjection, which ought to be placed on the parliamentary record. The Greens, according to the member opposite, are ‘not as extreme as’ the opposition and yet his leader has gone in the national media to the public of Australia and said just last week that the Greens are extremists. The question remains: if the greens are so extremist, why do we have this formal alliance which props up the person who sits in that chair at question time—namely, the Prime Minister of this country—and which props up her position in government and her position in the Lodge?

Mr Keenan—She is a social conservative.

Mr ANDREWS—As my honourable friend here reminds me, she is also now a social conservative. But the question remains. The leader of the Greens receives regular briefings from the Prime Minister’s office—more than, I suspect, the honourable member opposite who interjected just recently. He, the leader of the Greens, Senator Bob Brown, is dragging the Labor Party along as he pursues his extremist agenda. The reality is that the Labor Party has lost its way. They are no longer representing mainstream Australia. They are no longer the great party of the working class of this country. They are pandering to fringe elements and pursuing fringe issues. There is no better example than their contempt for rural and regional Australia.

What this bill does not do is to help regional students. In her last-minute deal, the Prime Minister did a deal with the Independents to avoid an embarrassment on the floor...
of this place. And in doing so, Labor and the Independent members of this place have voted to kill off the Independent Youth Allowance Bill. Last year all crossbench members, except the Greens, supported a motion which sought to make the independent youth allowance criteria fair for all regional students. But when it actually came to supporting a bill that would make these changes, the members for Denison, Lyne, Kennedy and New England voted against the coalition’s bill. Indeed, the member for Lyne seconded a motion in support of the bill proceeding and spoke in favour of it, but then, at the last moment, voted against after a meeting with the Prime Minister. The coalition welcomed the support of the member for O’Connor and even the Greens member for Melbourne in supporting a debate on the coalition’s bill.

Labor’s commitment to Independents to bring forward a review of youth allowance, to report by 1 July this year, does not address the problem now—and there is a real problem for many students in regional areas of Australia right now. It is months before we have a review to report on 1 July. In the meantime there are students in many parts of regional Australia who are suffering deprivation, in our view and in the view of them and their parents and many communities around the country, because the government are not prepared to act now—regrettably, with the support of so many Independent members of this House. The coalition’s bill sought to do that: to get action now.

Nor does Labor give any firm commitment to fixing the independent youth allowance issue, although in the current context it is probably better they have said nothing, as we have learned that the Prime Minister cannot keep her promises and just cannot be trusted. The Prime Minister’s promise of a review should be weighed against the many broken deals, bundled programs and hopeless mismanagement of youth allowance over the last few years. This Labor government promised no carbon tax, but now is drafting one; it promised a national takeover of hospitals, but scrapped the idea; it promised a national curriculum to begin in 2011, but it has now been delayed at least until 2013. And the list goes on and on and on.

It is time this government did what was right. Stop breaking promises. Stop taking decisions that hurt Australian families. Admit your position on youth allowance is wrong and support the amendment that I have circulated in my name, which I now move:

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

“whilst not declining to give the bill a second reading, the House require the government:

(1) urgently to introduce legislation to reinstate the former workplace participation criteria for independent youth allowance, to apply to students whose family home is located in inner regional areas as defined by the Australian Bureau of Statistics instrument Australian Standard Geographical Classification; and

(2) to appropriate funds necessary to meet the additional cost of expanding the criteria for participation.”

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Ms K Liviermore)—Is the amendment second?

Mr Keenan—I second the amendment.

Ms ROWLAND (Greenway) (7.18 pm)—I am very pleased to support the Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs and Other Legislation Amendment (Election Commitments and Other Measures) Bill 2011. It is always very satisfying to speak on bills such as this one. This is another example of this government’s delivery of some very important election commitments and another example of this government’s focus on the future. Legislation such as this reinforces the responsive, positive and progressive nature of this government and I thank the Minister for Fami-
lies, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs for her commitment to delivering for families and seniors, particularly, of course, those in my electorate of Greenway.

This bill gives effect to three election commitments and two non-budget measures. All of these commitments will operate to greatly improve the lives of many Australians. This bill will deliver on our plan to expand the existing seniors work bonus, provide better access to family payments for families with a teenager aged 16 to 19, and deliver on our commitment to improve the provision of the baby bonus for eligible families. As a result, many seniors, families with teenagers and families who have just had a baby or are thinking about having a baby will be better off. I am extremely glad to support this bill because it will greatly improve the financial and personal circumstances of many of my constituents.

Firstly, this bill will expand on the seniors work bonus introduced in 2009 and continue to fulfil the work of the secure and sustainable pension reform package. This reform package contains some of the most significant changes to the pension since it was introduced some 100 years ago and is a vital investment in preparing Australia for the future. This bill will ensure that the first $250 earned in a fortnight will not be treated as income for social security and veterans’ affairs income tests. This bill will make certain that seniors can still receive the benefits they are entitled to in their respective pensions, but can also still enjoy the dignity that employment can provide. It does this by increasing the amount of income a pensioner may earn before their income is affected in any accessible fortnight. This bill also enables pensioners to roll over any unused fortnightly work bonus between fortnights, to a maximum of $6,500. As the Prime Minister noted prior to the election last year:

“Many age pensioners take on part-time and occasional work and should be encouraged and rewarded for these valuable contributions to our community.

“A re-elected Gillard Labor government will introduce a new, more generous work bonus for age pensioners from 1 July 2011.

“Hard-working pensioners will now be able to keep up to $6,500 of the money they earn from part-time work each year. This benefit can be ‘annualised’ to especially help with seasonal work.

It is for this very reason that this bill is so important. It will allow seniors the opportunity to participate in the workforce without worrying about forgoing their pension entitlements in the process.

This is a very important development for many seniors in my community, an electorate where some 15,000 people are of qualifying pension age. According to the 2006 census in Blacktown, the age group which is increasing the most is the 80- to 84-year-old age bracket. This is reflected in the amount of correspondence and representations I have had with seniors in my electorate who are concerned that their one-off work—often helping a community organisation—has resulted in them earning too much income and consequently seeing their pension decreased. This has caused much stress for many elderly people in my community. These are people who want to keep active and still enjoy the dignity of work but may have been stung by the unintentional consequences that have existed until now. This bill will restore some common sense, be responsive to those concerns and ensure that seniors on the pension can still contribute to the community in this way.

In guaranteeing people the security to participate in the workforce on a casual basis without the fear of losing their pension, we can help stimulate the community and put seniors’ minds at ease. There have been a
number of instances in the past where senior citizens who have taken up the seasonal work, including as a department store Santa Claus, have had their pension reduced, such as 80-year-old Mr Ted Carver. As was reported in the media early last year, Ted worked six weeks of the year as Santa and was understandably concerned about being worse off financially as his pension was reduced under the old rules on earnings. This bill will directly remedy this issue and in effect become our work bonus Santa clause.

Some seniors in my electorate have also raised concerns regarding their ability to receive their pensions while still being able to devote a few weeks of the year to supervising exams at their local high school. These constituents are doing a fantastic community service in facilitating exams for local students and they were in effect being punished for enriching the lives of students in Greenway. This bill will ensure that any fears they had with respect to losing their pension will no longer impact on them.

As we prepare to celebrate Seniors Week in my electorate, which is of course this week, we take the time to praise seniors for their valuable contributions to the electorate of Greenway. This bill is a well-timed gift to those seniors who contribute to our community through the avenue of casual paid work. In an electorate where some 13,000 residents are over the age of 65, I believe we have a special obligation to provide them with suitable services to ensure they can live a happy and healthy life. Indeed, in this place only a short while ago today, I commented on how my electorate is often referred to as Australia’s nursery because of its very young population; but it is also a population that is getting older and living longer. As our population ages, there will be increased economic and social challenges that we must meet. It is our job to ensure that seniors are treated with the dignity and respect they deserve, and we can achieve this by providing them with the right services and care, as well as sound public policy, which is why this bill is so important.

The second election commitment this bill will deliver on will significantly improve the situation of many families in my electorate. As parents will tell you, the cost of raising children is not cheap and it does not lessen when they become teenagers. The financial burden of trying to provide every opportunity for young people weighs heavily on the shoulders of many families, and this bill will alleviate some of that financial burden for the benefit of parents and their children. In the past, when a child turned 16, the maximum rate of family tax benefit part A dropped from $208 per fortnight to $51 per fortnight. It is no wonder then that this sharp drop in financial assistance during such an important time in a student’s life was complained about as extremely counterproductive. This bill is a direct response to that. It will increase family tax benefit part A by around $160 per fortnight for teenagers aged 16 to 19 who are in secondary school or the vocational equivalent. This bill has consequently aligned the 16- to 19-year-old rate with the 13- to 15-year-old rate, greatly extending the benefits for our young people up until the time they finish school. In doing so, this government has delivered on its promise made during the last election to provide better access to family payments for families with teenagers.

Providing all the social benefits we can to our young people is a very important obligation, and the most important benefit, I believe, that we can provide and must provide is a quality education. As I have said a number of times in this place, education is the great enabler. This bill will make paying for an education and the costs associated with that education a more manageable task for families. Over the next five years, this bill
will benefit the families of around 590,000 teenagers who will receive up to $4,000 a year in additional assistance. This is a big step forward for Australian families and our young people.

The third election policy this bill will deliver on is improvements to the baby bonus for eligible families. This measure will assist families with the upfront costs of having or adopting a new baby. While the total amount of the baby bonus will remain the same, parents of new babies will receive more in the first fortnightly instalment than in the 12 subsequent fortnightly instalments. What this means for new families is that more money will be available to them in the often difficult first stages of welcoming a child into the family. Many of my friends and constituents who have recently started families have in fact told me how difficult they have found the early stages of raising a child. Not only does the arrival of a new child create added pressures and sleepless nights, it undoubtedly hurts the hip pocket. While this bill will not help new parents get a full night’s sleep, it will put many minds at ease and it will allow the expensive initial transition stages to run more smoothly as more income is made available.

I am also very satisfied about mentioning the two nonbudget measures given effect by this bill. In 1957, thalidomide was introduced on the Australian market and was soon prescribed to pregnant women to combat morning sickness. It was due to the research of Australian clinicians that thalidomide was discovered to be responsible for thousands of children being born with horrific abnormalities around the world. As part of this bill, 36 Australians affected by the morning-sickness drug thalidomide will receive annuity payments from British company Diego PLC. Ordinarily, such payments would be assessable as income for social security and veterans’ affairs purposes, and for income tax purposes. Under this bill, these annuity payments will be excluded from the above-mentioned purposes. These payments are not compensation payments but ex-gratia payments negotiated outside the civil law system that recognise the tragic plight of thalidomide survivors. This bill also makes minor amendments to income management measures. These measures will assist those on compulsory income management to improve their financial literacy and to encourage savings.

The benefits of this bill are great. They stand to benefit the people in my community who really need them. These investments are a reminder of this government’s commitment to policy delivery and to investing in the future. It is a fantastic endeavour by the minister, on which I congratulate her—and I thank her for her ongoing interest in my electorate of Greenway. It delivers on some very important election promises that will positively affect the full spectrum of people in our community, from our senior citizens to our young families and children. I am very pleased to support this bill.

Mr Alexander (Bennelong) (7.28 pm)—I rise to speak on the Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs and Other Legislation Amendment (Election Commitments and Other Measures) Bill 2011, which includes a compilation of amendments across a range of legislation. These include variations to eligibility parameters within the family tax benefit scheme for secondary school students aged 16 to 19, together with changes to the youth allowance parental income test, which was covered in great detail earlier by the shadow minister for families, housing and human services. Other changes in this bill allow for a larger baby bonus instalment to be paid upfront to assist with the costs faced by families with newborn children, and an amendment to ensure that the beneficiaries...
of the Thalidomide Australia Fixed Trust are able to have their payments exempted from income tax and welfare tests.

The particular changes within this bill on which I wish to focus my attention, are the amendments to the Social Security Act 1991 and the Veterans’ Entitlement Act 1986. These will affect changes to the work bonus scheme, which was introduced by the Rudd government in September 2009. Shortly after its implementation it quickly became apparent that the legislation was not achieving its intended outcomes, as it did not take into account the nature of the work actually being undertaken by many of those eligible. Many pensioners perform seasonal work or have temporary jobs such as being school exam supervisors or Christmas Santas. They were effectively being penalised by the new system that was supposed to reward them for their initiative.

In February 2010, only months after the passage of this legislation, the coalition raised these concerns directly with the minister and in the media, followed by detailed questions in budget estimates. After sustained pressure from the coalition, leading to an obvious fear of electoral backlash from the significant pensioner community, the new Gillard government finally adopted these changes as part of its election policy. Now, more than 12 months after the coalition first highlighted the problems with this legislation with the minister, we find ourselves here today to speak on the amendment.

This amendment will make changes to the pension work bonus to exempt the first $250 per fortnight of employment income from the income test and enable pensioners to accrue any unused amounts of the $250 fortnightly exemption to a maximum of $6,500 and to offset future assessable employment income. In simple terms this will increase incentives for age pension recipients to work by enabling them to keep more of their pension when they are working. It is important in a society where welfare dependence is far too common that the government provides these incentives for people who want to extend their time as participants in the workforce, particularly as we understand our changing demographics and the evolving needs of an ageing population.

However, it is also essential for government to follow this up with incentives for businesses to employ those who are of or approaching pension age. It is no surprise to hear of the cynicism that many of my older constituents express about government strategies to keep older people in work as their experiences show that companies are generally disinclined to provide them with opportunities for this employment in the first place.

In reply to an email I sent on this bill last week one such constituent claimed that whilst she supported the idea of this legislation she found it to be, in her words, ‘mainly academic’. The quote continues: You can’t increase the incentive for older people to work if there is no work available for them—apart from, as you mention, working as Father Christmas once a year.

She went on to say: I think that the Government should consider incentives to EMPLOYERS not just employees. Maybe if there were some financial benefit to employing older people, companies may consider it. There are loads of other benefits—we have experience, we tend to be more reliable, we don’t get pregnant, we tend not to miss work on Mondays because of hangovers etc etc. The problem is getting the employers to recognise these!

Whilst I will not go so far as to sully the image of non-pension-age employees as generally unreliable or around the corner from pregnancy or a hangover—hopefully, not both at the same time—I believe that this constituent has a very valid point.
It is for this reason that the coalition went into the 2010 election with a policy to provide real incentives to help unemployed Australians to re-enter the workforce, stating in our policy that:

The Coalition is determined to ensure that people aren’t abandoned to a lifetime of welfare dependence but are engaged in work if they are reasonably capable of it.

The coalition’s policy for real action on employment participation included the introduction of a $3,250 seniors employment incentive payment for employers that hire workers aged 50 or older. This one-off payment was designed to help overcome the initial reluctance of some employers to appoint mature job seekers. This policy recognised that finding work becomes increasingly difficult for those over 50, not because of a reduced desire to work, a reduction in skill levels or ability to contribute but because many employers prefer to give job opportunities to younger workers. Therefore, the incentive built into this bill may be positive but it is all but a toothless tiger in attacking the problem of mature age employment participation unless it is coupled with a program to provide incentives for the employer to offer these people jobs in the first place.

These incentives would serve to encourage those looking for work, and also to motivate many of those who are currently ignored in the official unemployment rate as they have given up hope and simply stopped looking, and therefore do not even present as a statistic in our unemployment data.

According to a pre-election submission by the National Seniors Association:

In 2009 almost 60,000 Australians aged over 55 counted as discouraged workers, that is: they wanted to work but had stopped looking because no one would employ them. The main reason cited was ‘being considered too old by employers’.

The incentive payment offered by the coalition was worth $250 a fortnight to the worker for a total subsidy for six months of $3,250. That is roughly equivalent to half the cost of the current Newstart allowance. The incentive payment would have been paid in a single lump sum directly to the employer after six months’ continuous employment by the eligible worker.

According to analysis performed by the National Centre for Social and Economic Modelling, approximately 900,000 people aged between 50 and 65 could be eligible for this form of incentive payment. The uptake of this incentive by even a small amount of those eligible would lead to considerable savings to taxpayers through reduced benefits and increased taxation revenues, as well as the obvious positive impact on both the community and the individual through increased levels of employment.

On this broader issue of employment participation, the statistics make it patently obvious that Labor has comprehensively failed to help unemployed Australians to get off benefits and back into the workforce. Since 2007, the number of long-term unemployed Australians has gone up. Mutual obligation has been watered down to be all but unrecognisable, and as a result the number of penalties for breaches has been drastically reduced. I urge this government to balance the incentive in this bill for the older job seeker to find or maintain employment with a strong incentive to the job provider to hire from this important, reliable, industrious and growing segment of our society. In not opposing the overdue amendment in this bill, the coalition adds the disclaimer that we in this place still have much work to do to achieve real outcomes on this important issue.

Mr Hayes (Fowler) (7.38 pm)—I also rise today to support the Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs...
and Other Legislation Amendment (Election Commitments and Other Measures) Bill 2011. That is a very big name for a bill, Mr Deputy Speaker Kelvin Thomson, but it does a heck of a lot. You and I and many on this side of the House would have gone through our electorates, up hill and down dale, campaigning on these issues before the last election.

What is contained in this bill is, quite frankly, what defines us as being a caring government. The bill does a range of different things. There are five specific matters—five schedules—that are contained in the bill. One deals with work bonuses for seniors. A second increases family tax benefits for children or certain teenagers undertaking secondary studies and living at home. Another deals with the baby bonus, and another with non-budgetary matters relating to thalidomide payments. The final one, schedule 5, deals with income management.

Mr Deputy Speaker, the government recognises the pressures that people are under. Families experience these things week in, week out. You know that; I know that. Anyone who actually bothers to doorknock their electorate will be hearing that in droves. The government recognises the importance that the family unit has, and this bill is designed to alleviate some of those financial pressures in order to help maintain families as cohesive and central to the lives of all people. So the first part of this bill is very important.

During the election campaign, the government committed to expanding the existing seniors work bonus, which allows working aged pensioners to keep working and keep more of their pension when they undertake paid work. Interestingly, I recall very vividly that when we were in opposition there was an employment committee inquiry. We heard from a number of people who described themselves, for want of a better term, as ‘grey nomads’. We heard how they had plenty to offer provided they were not prejudiced in still receiving their pension. I think that is pretty right, and I am sure it makes more sense to speak that way the older and greyer we get.

When passed, this bill will allow pensioners to earn up to $250 a fortnight before their pension is affected, and that is pretty important for them. The schedule will commence on 1 July. The work bonus will provide incentives for receiving extra earnings before the earnings are assessed as income. If a pensioner earns less than $250 in a particular fortnight, they will accrue the credit to their new employment concession, banking up to the value of that $250 in that fortnight. The income bank will then be able to be built up to a maximum of $6,500 and can be offset against the employment income earned at a later period of time.

For anyone who sees what seniors do in our community—working a part-time job or even in semi-paid volunteering work—this is quite significant for all those areas of activity out there where people who see themselves as having time and ability are involved. But they certainly do not want to jeopardise their pension in providing these services. This is something that is very welcome. We know that, because this is what we campaigned on in the last election.

In my federal seat of Fowler I have 23,500 pensioners. They play a really important role in our community—one which should be encouraged. This goes in some measure to rewarding some of their valuable contribution. It is an encouragement and it allows people to continue in paid work at the pace that they elect and in a manner that will not prejudice the application of their pension. As I was alluding to, you cannot put a price on that sort of experience, and this will be a reward for older Australians for using their
experience and deploying that experience within our community.

The second matter, again, is a very, very important matter. Apart from the 23,500 pensioners, I have wall-to-wall families in my electorate. This matter is very important for those who have teenage kids in high school. The second part of this bill addresses the issue of supporting families with teenagers. The bill delivers on another key commitment: to increase family assistance to $4,200 a year for teenagers in secondary study. This will be a significant help to families with older children and, at the same time, encourage teenagers to stay at school. Oddly enough, that is a matter I spoke about a little earlier: the issue of school retention rates. Mine is very much a working class suburb, and I see the pressures that families are under. There are certainly pressures on older children, teenagers, to leave school. This bill will help to keep kids in study; it will help families to encourage that, and that is something we need for the future—to increase the school retention rate and help these kids through their training and education to become more job ready and more malleable in a rather dynamic and ever-changing employment market, such as we see around the countryside.

This increase will be a significant help to families with older children. As a parent of three and now a grandparent of five, I am glad to report, I certainly know firsthand—and now see with my children—about financial constraint placed on expanding families and those with older children. We all love our kids, but we have to be realistic that they can be expensive. With today’s pace of life and the pressures we all work under plus the demands our kids make, this bill is aimed directly at taking that financial pressure off families with kids in their teenage years.

Under the existing system, many teenagers opt to leave school early to assist the family. As I said, this has happened to some parents in my own electorate where families experienced financial difficulties. The government recognises that we must assist families with teenagers aged between 16 and 19 who are in full-time secondary study or vocational education. The maximum rate for family tax benefit part A will increase from around $160 a fortnight for teenagers aged between 16 and 19 who are undertaking or engaged in secondary school or vocational education through TAFE or other providers who are exempt from this requirement.

The rate will align to the rate applicable to 13- to 15-year-olds and ensure that government assistance for families does not fall away when children aged 16 and older decide to remain at school. This recognises that with kids turning 16 there is a disproportionate cost, in my humble view—at least there was if I recall my own kids at that magical moment. If anything the costs exponentially start to rise from there on in. It is estimated that this increase will benefit 590,000 families over the next five years. In addition to this increase and family tax benefit part A, families will also be eligible for rent assistance. Currently, when a child turns 16, rent assistance ceases. However, these reforms will provide rent assistance for families with children aged between 16 and 19 who receive more than the base rate of the family tax benefit part A.

Also as a result of these changes, single income families may become eligible for family tax benefit part B if the child moves from youth allowance to the family tax benefit part A. There are some considerable benefits for families. It gives a greater degree of flexibility and, if anything, it is designed to help ensure that families are in a position to encourage kids to stay at school. Families on family tax benefit part A with three or more
children may also benefit from the large family support of $295 per annum.

Youth allowance will continue to be available to teenagers aged under 18 years who meet the independence criteria and who need to live away from home in order to attend full-time study or who are not in full-time study or do not meet other eligibility criteria. This bill will include the changes to the youth allowance parental income test to protect the entitlement of youth allowance recipients with a sibling aged between 16 and 19 who remains in or transfers from the family tax benefit system as a result of these new measures.

Another aspect that was campaigned on assiduously before the last election was the baby bonus, the third part of this bill. Another election commitment is being delivered to assist families to support the upfront costs of a new baby. As you are aware, currently the baby bonus is paid in 13 fortnightly instalments. If this bill is passed, from 1 July 2011 the first payment will be $500 more than the other 12 instalments. This will help parents meet upfront costs associated with the arrival of a new baby. Mr Deputy Speaker, as you know, my fifth grandchild was born six weeks ago, so I know the price of baby protection items for cars and the new stroller that does many other magical things as well. These costs are significant, particularly car-carriage arrangements which in today’s society are so essential. I feel for my daughter paying for these although I suspect her mother helped her out greatly. Being able to access that additional $500 payment upfront will be significant.

The other two areas I mentioned at the outset are non-budgetary measures. I have probably left myself too little time to talk about them. One concerns a thalidomide payment. I know the parents of many kids of my generation were introduced to thalidomide. It was a treatment once used as a cure for morning sickness, particularly in the fifties and early-sixties. However, as we know, it has caused an enormous amount of heartache because of birth defects. This bill makes changes to the income tax and social security laws to ensure that these annuity payments are not taken into account or treated as income. Particularly for those who live day in, day out with the effects of thalidomide treatment for their mother, this is something that will certainly be regarded as a welcome relief.

Schedule 5 of the bill deals with the minor changes that the bill will make around income management arrangements. It will clarify when the qualifying period begins for matched savings schemes for payments. It will also clarify the role of the nominees under the income management arrangement and will provide debt recovery arrangements in circumstances where Centrelink has issued a cheque or an income management arrangement on a customer’s behalf. I commend the bill to the House. I think it is something that we should all be proud of, and it was worthwhile having that long campaign. (Time expired)

Dr STONE (Murray) (7.53 pm)—I rise to speak on the Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs and Other Legislation Amendment (Election Commitments and Other Measures) Bill 2011, and I also refer to the opposition’s amendment tabled at the time our opposition spokesman was speaking. Before the election the government made three significant commitments, as they call them. In a move most unlike this government, they are now actually following through on those commitments and they are seeking to have these announcements converted into legislative changes with this bill. They are the three significant commitments. There are other changes embedded in the bill as well.
The first commitment was in relation to expanding the work bonus, which was introduced as a part of pension reforms in late 2009. The work bonus allows age pensioners to continue to work part time without losing quite so much of their earnings. It is incredibly important for the wellbeing of people on a pension to be able to work for as long as they can, but sometimes it is a token of love, given a lot of that extra income they earn is clawed back. So I commend this change. In fact, what it will mean is that from 1 July 2011 the work bonus, as it is called, will see the first $250 of employment income earned in a fortnight excluded from the income test, regardless of the total amount earned by the person in that fortnight. This will be on a dollar-for-dollar basis up to $250, rather than the 50c in the dollar reduction up to $500 under the current rules. This is a better system for rewarding pensioners for the work they choose to do. Given our skills shortage in this country and the significant number of Australians who are over the retirement age these days, it is an important thing that we do in that amendment.

The second significant issue was to change the current situation where, when a child turns 16, the family tax benefit part A drops from $214 per fortnight to just $53 per fortnight. Rent assistance also stops when a child turns 16, and families may lose eligibility for family tax benefit part B, the large family supplement and multiple birth allowance. Clearly the expense of raising a child does not substantially diminish the day the child turns 16, especially if they are still a dependent child in that family household, so this is a sensible change. What it will do is increase assistance for families with teenagers aged between 16 and 19 who are in full-time secondary study or a vocational education equivalent. We will see the maximum rate of family tax benefit part A increasing by around $160 per fortnight for teenagers aged 16 to 19 who are in secondary school or a vocational equivalent or who are exempt from this requirement. This will align with the 13- to 15-year-old rate and ensure that government assistance for families does not fall when an older teenager in full-time study turns 16. Again, it is a sensible change.

In addition to the increase in family tax benefit part A, families will also be eligible for rent assistance. As I said, rent assistance currently cuts out when a child turns 16. We are not against those amendments at all, but I have to say that this statement in the explanatory memorandum is rather extraordinary:

"This initiative supports the Gillard Labor government’s objective to improve year 12 or vocational equivalent completion rates and meet our target of achieving a 90 per cent year 12 attainment rate by 2015."

What we wonder is why this government has not then continued its thinking and said, ‘We want to see rural students be able to step through that year 12 attainment into tertiary education, which may have to take place in a city somewhere distant from home.’ Of course, while we support this notion of the child continuing to be given substantial support beyond the age of 16, we as the opposition are most concerned that the independent youth allowance—and it is 12 months today since its change—is cutting out the chances of rural students, especially those designated or zoned as inner regional. It is cutting them out from being able to successfully complete the gap year requirements that are listed in the criteria, and I will come back to that point.

The third significant change in this set of amendments is to do with the baby bonus. From 1 July 2011, parents of new babies who receive this bonus on or after that date will receive more of their payment upfront. Many in this House will recall that when we, the coalition government, introduced this
baby bonus, all of the payment was paid up- front unless the parent had a significant prob- lem with money management, and that was negotiated with Centrelink. This government chose to have the baby bonus paid in 13 fort- nightly instalments. It now understands that you do need a little more money upfront in the first payment, so $500 of the baby bonus will be in the first payment and that will be more than the amount paid over the other 12 instalments. Again, this is a sensible change. I cannot see why it was not foreseen. Blind Freddy could have seen that it was important to make sure that you have more, in that first instalment at least, for those early expenses for families—buying new baby equipment such as car seats, bassinettes and clothing, and paying for hospital expenses and so on. Finally the penny has dropped and that change has been made, I am very pleased to say.

In this bill there are also some measures to do with making sure that those who suffer from disability related to their mothers taking Thalidomide all those years ago will be better supported in the future.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr KJ Thomson)—Order! It being 8 pm, the debate is interrupted in accordance with standing order 34. The resumption of the debate will be made an order of the day for the next sitting and the member for Murray will have leave to continue speaking when the debate is resumed.

PRIVATE MEMBERS’ BUSINESS
Carbon Pricing

Mr STEPHEN JONES (Throsby) (8.00 pm)—I move:
That this House:

(1) agrees that putting a price on carbon is an essential step in reducing carbon pollution and transforming our economy to achieve a clean energy future;

(2) notes that in many manufacturing regions in Australia, business, unions, government and community organisations are already working to develop green jobs and clean energy production processes; and

(3) agrees that governments must work with the manufacturing industry and communities to assist their transformation to meet the challenge of a carbon constrained future.

We know that greenhouse gas levels are one- third higher than before the Industrial Revo- lution. We know that global temperatures have risen 0.7 degrees Celsius over the past century. We know they continue to rise. We know that the last decade was the world’s hottest on record. We know that globally 2010 was the equal warmest year on record. We know that 2010 is the 34th consecutive year with global temperatures above the 20th century average. We know that climate change and global warming are real.

We know the consequences are real and we know that climate change will change our lives in real and practical ways. It will change the way we work and it will change the way we live. It will change our economy and our industries. This change is inevitable. The way that this nation responds to this change is not inevitable. It requires political leadership. That is why the Gillard Labor government has committed to taking action on climate change—action to transform our economy into a high-skill, low-carbon economy; action to transform existing jobs; action to reskill workers for the future. We are not sitting on our hands. We are not denying that the future will be different but we are taking real action now to transform our economy. We are taking action to create new job opportunities in a clean energy generation and taking action to help Australia’s trade-exposed emission-intensive industries. That is why the Gillard Labor government is already working with trade exposed employers to support jobs, like those jobs in my
electorate at BlueScope Steel Australia at Port Kembla in the Illawarra.

Around the country organisations are already rising to this challenge—organisations like Green Jobs Illawarra. In 2009, Regional Development Australia Illawarra launched their Green Jobs Illawarra project and, with the assistance of the federal and state governments, started along the road to transforming our economy. Green Jobs Illawarra brings businesses, unions, innovators and community organisations together to help create the conditions to develop sustainable green jobs to power a future low-carbon economy. With project areas now including Wollongong, Kiama, Shellharbour, Shoalhaven and Wingecarribee, Green Jobs Illawarra has grown from a good idea to a positive force for change. Some of their current activities include a green streets project, showcasing the best practice in sustainable construction, design and technology; the retrofitting of iconic public buildings; a wind power industry project; a transformation of the manufacturing and engineering industry; green jobs in Aboriginal community projects; and the establishment of a green technology and innovation advisory service for small to medium sized businesses across the electorate.

A clean energy future will open up opportunities that we are only just now beginning to imagine, but in order to kick-start this vital transformative work across the region we need simply to put a price on carbon. Recognition of the need for action on climate change is not new and it is not without precedence in this place. Despite this, the disgraceful fearmongering on public display quite recently by the Leader of the Opposition and the member for Gilmore, who last week found her way to the BlueScope steelworks in my electorate, has really been quite appalling.

It is beyond question that the Gillard government is not prepared to see jobs go offshore as a result of our transition to a low-carbon economy. Nor do we want to see the emissions that come with those jobs go overseas. That is not the solution that we are working towards. Labor has a commitment that all funds raised by a carbon price will go to assisting households and businesses to transition and to programs to tackle climate change. That is why the opposition’s fear campaign is both baseless and debasing.

When you listen to those opposite talk in this area you see a combination of denial of the science and a complete abandonment of hope—an abandonment of hope that a great country like Australia has it within itself to face the challenge of the future. Those opposite belong to a party which would stand on the side of a street and, when it sees a house on fire, argue amongst its members about whether or not it is a fire. When they cannot resolve the argument about whether or not it is a fire they would argue about the cause of that fire. Then, in the process, they would argue about the media coverage of that fire and complain that it has been unfair and unbalanced. At the end of the day, while they are sitting on the sidelines arguing about the cause of the fire, it is Labor that is in there doing the hard yards—

Mr Hunt interjecting—

Mr STEPHEN JONES—the hard work, to put the fire out. They squabble amongst themselves, they deny the science and they argue about the cause, but it is Labor that is there doing the hard yards, working with industry, working with unions and working amongst the community to ensure that we confront the challenge of the future.

We take heart that there are employers out there, including the CEO of BlueScope, in my electorate, who understand that there is a
need to put a price on carbon. I quote from a statement by the CEO of BlueScope—

Mr Hunt—Do you want to finish your sentence?

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr KJ Thomson)—If the member for Flinders wants his opportunity to speak he will be quiet.

Mr STEPHEN JONES—who said quite recently on the Inside Business program:

In relation to energy, there is absolutely an argument that says there needs to be a carbon price so we can have natural gas base load generation in Australia, because no-one’s going to build new coal fired generation because it’s not going to make sense and it’s too carbon intensive, but you need a price signal for natural gas.

We are more than willing to meet with sensible employers like the CEO of BlueScope, who is a member of our business roundtable—consulting on assisting industry as we move to price carbon and transform our economy. We will work with sensible industry and business leaders as we work with households, community representatives and union leaders to ensure that, as we make this transformation, we bring industry along with us and we do it in the Labor way.

I am very pleased that the Leader of the Opposition has finally found his way to the electorate of Throsby. The last time he was there he was spruiking the benefits of Work Choices. I am also very pleased that the member for Gilmore found her way north to visit my electorate and to make speeches outside the gates of BlueScope—but what she will not do is spend the time talking in detail to those workers, employers and business leaders. They understand, as we understand, that to survive in a competitive global industry we need to get ahead of the curve, we need a carbon price and we need to help industries and businesses make the transition.

As the Prime Minister said recently, this is the year of decision. It is the year of action versus inaction. It is the year of acceptance versus denial. The task ahead of us will not be without challenges. On this side of the House we believe that Australians are up to this challenge. I and the member for Cunningham will stand side by side with all of the workers in the manufacturing industry to ensure that we build an industry based on hope, with the technology of the future. We will not debase ourselves with the fear campaign and the lies peddled by those opposite. (Time expired)

The DEPUTY SPEAKER—Is the motion seconded?

Mr Murphy—I second the motion.

Mr HUNT (Flinders) (8.11 pm)—Pink batts, green loans, citizens assembly, cash for clunkers, carbon tax—anybody notice a pattern here? This is not a debate about belief or science. This is not a debate about targets. This is a debate about economic competency and the best way to manage a problem. The government which gave us pink batts, green loans, the citizens assembly which never saw the light of day, and cash for clunkers, which had a problematic birth as well, has now given us a carbon tax.

I want to deal with this issue through a series of steps: firstly, the promise; secondly, the global situation; thirdly, the proposal; and, fourthly, our system. Let me begin with the promise. It is now infamous right around Australia that twice in the last week of the election campaign the Prime Minister ruled out a carbon tax. Firstly, on the Monday before the election, she most famously said: ‘There will be no carbon tax under the government I lead.’ Secondly, on the day before the election, in her last 24-hour pitch to the Australian people to seek a mandate, she said on the front page of the Australian newspaper, the major national broadsheet: ‘I rule out
a carbon tax.’ An election is about seeking a mandate to govern. It is about what we agree to do and it is also about what we agree not to do. There could not have been a more express, clear or absolute statement to the Australian people.

The Prime Minister has been through a series of defences since that time as to why that promise was broken. Firstly, she denied that there was a broken promise. We went through this evasive period where she would not even utter the words ‘carbon tax’, even though that was what she had produced, preferring instead to refer to a ‘fixed price on carbon’—which is, by the way, the very definition of a carbon tax. That was unsustainable because it was farcical and a fraud upon the Australian people. Secondly, she put forward the notion that, really, that was what she meant all along—‘Well, I’d always intended to say this.’ But there was no getting around the fact that she had ruled it out.

Most recently, we have had this wonderful roadblock analogy: if you head home intending to get there by taking the main highway and that highway is blocked, then you can take another route. The problem is that right from day one, before the Prime Minister even left her workplace, that highway was always going to be blocked. Every person in this chamber knew that the Australian Greens would hold the balance of power in the Senate, that they wanted a carbon tax and that she would deliver a carbon tax. The context of her comments was that right throughout those last two weeks we were advertising that, as sure as night followed day, the government would produce a carbon tax. The reason we said that was that the Greens wanted it and that the coalition, the government and Australians all knew that the Greens would hold the balance of power in the Senate. The road was blocked before the journey began. That is the fallacy, the fraudulence and the myth behind the Prime Minister’s latest attempt to excuse herself. She deceived the Australian people outright, and she is continuing to engage in that process and practice now.

The second part of the member for Throsby’s motion is about the international circumstances. We are going through a period of deception about what is occurring overseas. There is movement, as there should be, on climate change. It is important to take action, but it is about taking the right action. The Prime Minister’s reference to coal fired power stations being closed down in China was utterly deceptive. I have done a little bit of research on this. In the words of Professor Warwick McKibbin of the Reserve Bank of Australia—I know he is only on the Reserve Bank—China is currently, from 1990 to 2020, going through a period of increasing its total emissions by 496 per cent. It is going through the fastest growth in human emissions in history. That fact is the precise opposite of the impression that the Prime Minister of Australia wanted to leave. You have a duty not just to be literally truthful but also to be truthful in the intent of what you say if you hold the high office of Prime Minister of Australia, and that duty has been breached.

Moreover, specifically on the question of coal, in 2002 Chinese coal consumption was 1.5 billion tonnes, and the best projection is that in 2015 Chinese coal consumption will be four billion tonnes. In other words, their consumption of coal will be 266 per cent of what it was in 1992. So we are not only seeing the greatest growth in human emissions in history; we are seeing the greatest expansion of coal fired power in the history of industrialised society. That is happening right now—today—in China, and that is precisely the opposite of what the Prime Minister sought to convey. It was deceptive, deliberate and dishonest—unacceptable from somebody who holds the highest office in the land.
That brings us to the impact on families of this government's proposal, and all the while we say that there is a better way. I begin at the highest levels, the Nobel laureates Finn Kydland, Thomas Schelling, Vernon Smith and Jagdish Bhagwati who, along with others, put together an assessment of 15 different approaches to dealing with climate change. They took as their starting point the reality of the science and the need to take action. Of those 15 different approaches, they examined three versions of a carbon tax, and they ranked them at numbers 13, 14 and 15. That is what Nobel laureates have said. I acknowledge that there is debate, but these are three of the Nobel laureates in economics from the last decade, and that is what they have said at a global level.

How does the tax operate here? It operates by raising $114 billion—on the basis of Treasury's modelling for the emissions trading scheme, it will be roughly proximate. That money will be raised through higher prices for petrol, gas and, above all else, electricity. The electricity prices for mums and dads will start by rising by $300 per annum, on average, according to the work of the Australian Industry Group, the New South Wales regulator and the former Prime Minister, the member for Griffith. In this House on 3 February last year the former Prime Minister acknowledged that there would be a 19 per cent increase over two years but then refused to say what the increase would be in the third year. So we will see that it begins there; but the Minerals Council last week let the cat out of the bag when they indicated that the price of carbon will rise from $26 to $52 over the coming few years. What that means is that, in this week of the New South Wales election, the price of electricity should be declared by the Prime Minister to be increasing from $300 to $600 per family on top of everything else.

The other great myth propagated by this government is that carbon pricing will replace all other electricity price rises. New South Wales IPART prepared a legally binding determination which said that without carbon pricing there would be a certain proportion of increase but that with carbon pricing 25 per cent would be added over three years. That is a legally binding determination which stands to this day. So we know that electricity and gas prices will rise in order to raise $114 billion, the vast bulk of which will be cycled around the economy. Another myth here is that that will affect demand; but demand for electricity and petrol is largely inelastic. New South Wales IPART showed that a 50 per cent price rise in electricity had an elasticity of 0.01 per cent—in other words, for every 10 per cent increase in the price there was approximately a one per cent increase in demand. It is an incredibly blunt instrument, and jobs will be lost. That is why we believe there is a better way—and the member for Gilmore and the member for Hughes will address this—involving direct action to reduce emissions by cleaning up our power stations, our coalmines and directly investing in our farms, our soils and our trees—real action to reduce emissions which can begin immediately with a fast start to make Australia a country which is smart as well as clean. (Time expired)

Mr Murphy (Reid) (8.21 pm)—I rise to enthusiastically support the motion moved by my colleague the member for Throsby. Firstly, let us be very clear of the distinction between our government and the misguided contribution made by the member for Flinders a few moments ago. Our government has always expressed the need to mitigate the effects of climate change and assist our economy to transition to a clean energy future. In contrast, the opposition has held several different positions and still remains divided on whether climate change even exists.
The Leader of the Opposition has just reached his seventh position on climate change, and I doubt that it will be his last. Our government believes that a carbon price is the cheapest and fairest way to cut pollution and drive investment in a clean energy future. Even the shadow Treasurer believes a carbon price is inevitable.

A carbon price will raise revenue from large polluters, and this will assist households, support jobs and tackle climate change. Even without household assistance, Professor Garnaut makes it very clear that the impact of carbon pricing is small compared with other significant reforms, such as the GST. Our government wants our economy to continue to prosper and we want our environment to be preserved for future generations. Our government wants to ensure that local industries are not left behind and that we consult them to help make that transition to a clean energy future, as the member for Throsby just described. That is why our government has continued to state that every cent raised by carbon pricing will go towards assisting households, assisting businesses to make the transition and tackling climate change.

Many businesses appreciate the necessity to move to a clean energy future and have already implemented their own sustainable policies to remain competitive. For instance, GMH strives to minimise emissions and waste through the use of innovative technologies and environmentally compatible materials and processes. TNT has developed a program to raise awareness of climate change and to seek to reduce carbon dioxide emissions. Their primary objective is to reduce the environmental impact of TNT’s operations and boost the financial performance of TNT by improving fuel efficiency.

Even a local council in my electorate of Reid, the City of Canada Bay Council, has been very active in implementing environmentally sustainable practices and codes that have been recognised and praised at federal, state and international levels. Other industry leaders are actively seeking a fast and effective response about carbon pricing from our government for the long-term benefit of our country and have warned against inaction. The Chairman of Origin Energy, Kevin McCann, said in October last year:

Origin considers the best way to set a carbon price is an emissions trading scheme, however many of the same benefits can be delivered by a carbon tax.

Jac Nasser, Chairman of BHP Billiton, stated in November last year:

Economies that defer action are likely to face higher long-term costs, as global investment is redirected to early movers.

As one of the most carbon intensive economies, if Australia acts strongly to reduce its carbon footprint, its emissions-intensive sectors are likely to maintain or improve their competitiveness in a low-emissions world.

The government is also looking at the challenges emissions-intensive trade-exposed industries face. The government has made it clear that we will help the EITEIs transition to a low-pollution future. We do not want to see jobs going offshore. We want to support existing jobs while simultaneously creating new ones, ensuring the carbon price mechanism is fair and protects our international competitiveness.

Thirty-two countries and 10 US states already have emissions trading schemes and many more countries are planning to introduce an ETS. The opposition is well aware of this, as is the member for Flinders, as the list of countries already operating with an ETS is noted in the opposition’s direct action policy, if you can call it a policy. The UK has had an ETS for several years. Germany, France, Italy and our close neighbours in New Zealand have all implemented an ETS.
It is clear that other major economies, governments, local manufacturers and community organisations are taking action on climate change because there are obvious benefits for industry, the environment and the economy.

While the opposition continues to argue internally about what to do, our government has been very clear that we believe climate change is real and that it is human induced. The opposition voted for my motion to that effect earlier this year. We believe that implementing a carbon price will cut pollution and drive investment in clean energy. We will provide incentives to business to cut pollution and the necessary assistance to households to support them through the transition. The government will continue discussions with relevant stakeholders in the community to ensure that we have the right design for our country, for our future. I strongly support the member for Throsby’s motion.

Mr CRAIG KELLY (Hughes) (8.26 pm)—I rise to speak on the motion proposed by the member for Throsby. Sadly, this motion is just a continuation of this government’s conscious and deliberate deception as they try and hoodwink the public to support the insanity of burdening the Australian economy with a carbon tax. Let’s have a closer look at the detail of this motion. The first deception of the motion is the use of the words ‘putting a price on carbon’. These words are simply Labor code for ‘a great big new tax’. One thing you can be sure about is this: if it looks like a new tax, if it increases prices like a new tax and if the Labor Party has anything to do with it, you can bet your bottom dollar that it is a new tax. But this government is incapable of telling the truth as it refuses to call it what it is: a new tax.

The second deception of this motion is the use of the words ‘reducing carbon pollution’. These words are simply Labor code for ‘a great big new tax’. One thing you can be sure about is this: if it looks like a new tax, if it increases prices like a new tax and if the Labor Party has anything to do with it, you can bet your bottom dollar that it is a new tax. But this government is incapable of telling the truth as it refuses to call it what it is: a new tax. The second deception of this motion is the phrase ‘reducing carbon pollution’. This new tax is about reducing emissions of the odourless gas carbon dioxide. The words ‘carbon pollution’ create the false impression that this tax will address the problem of toxic black carbon soot and particulate matters that are emitted into the atmosphere, especially from diesel exhaust. But this new tax has nothing to do with this real environmental problem.

If we cut away the deceptions in the first paragraph of this motion, what is left simply reveals the government’s failure to grasp the most basic economic principles. This tax will simply not be effective at decreasing carbon dioxide emissions as it fails to understand that electricity and petrol are relatively price inelastic. They are essential services. We can look at the example of what happened in Norway after it introduced a carbon tax in 1991. The Norwegians, just like this Labor government, thought that introducing a carbon tax would reduce CO2 emissions. However, what happened in Norway is that per capita emissions actually increased by 43 per cent after the tax was introduced. In other words, the introduction of their carbon tax was a complete and unmitigated failure, and now this government wants to take Australia down the same mistaken track. That is why the coalition’s plan, our direct action plan, will be more effective at reducing CO2 emissions.

As for the second paragraph of this motion, about the government’s creation of so-called green jobs, we thank the member for Throsby for reminding the House of this government’s track record in creating green jobs, such as the jobs they created with the disaster of the ceiling insulation scheme, the Green Loans fiasco and the solar rebate scheme—one bungled and flawed scheme after another that have wasted billions of dollars of taxpayers’ funds. Again, we should be learning from the mistakes of other nations, especially Europe, where in many countries, for every green job they have created, in the same process they have de-
stroyed at least two other real jobs in other sectors of the economy.

We come to the third and, thankfully, final paragraph of this member’s motion, and here the deception continues. As for the talk of a carbon constrained future, perhaps the member is in secret talks with the Chinese or with our friends from India, as in future decades these countries will be using more and more coal as they lift hundreds of millions of people out of poverty.

Recently we have heard the government try to sell the story that everyone will be compensated for price increases that will result from this new tax. Let me see if I have this right. The government introduces this great, big new tax, then it creates a giant money-churning bureaucracy in Canberra, then it gives a few hundred million dollars to the UN and then it has enough to compensate everyone. We have the Prime Minister, who promised that there will be no carbon tax under a government that she leads, now saying: ‘Trust me—you’ll be compensated. The cheque’s in the mail.’ The public will not be fooled twice.

Members of parliament should stand up for their constituents, but where is the member for Throsby? He has not only sold out his own electorate to curry favour with the inner-city Greens but, with motions like this, he is leading an assault on the very people who voted for him, threatening their jobs and planning to punish them by increasing their cost of living. The obnoxious and dishonest political spin and misleading propaganda that characterise this motion are a disgrace and an embarrassment to the member who moved it. (Time expired)

Mr GEORGANAS (Hindmarsh) (8.32 pm)—The fact is that the world is warming. The trend is absolutely indisputable and it is also intensifying. Simply, the numbers do not lie. Sadly, those who misrepresent the facts do lie and they should be ashamed for attempting to deceive the public.

Australia has been warming consistently, decade by decade, since the 1940s. Similarly, decadal averages of sea surface temperature around Australia have increased every single decade since 1900. There has been no cooling effect. Every decade has been hotter than the previous, on land or at sea—the numbers do not lie. Both air temperature and sea temperature are increasing and they are warming with increasing speed.

That these changes are contributed to by human pollution is not disputed by the overwhelming weight of credible science. Global warming is indisputable and is affirmed by every single major national scientific academy in the world.

The National Research Council, established by Abraham Lincoln, has affirmed:

Climate change is occurring, is caused largely by human activities, and poses significant risks for—and in many cases is already affecting—a broad range of human and natural systems.

Those scientists who say it is not happening clearly cannot convince other scientists of the merits of their views. Their positions have no scientific credibility and can only be discounted. In short, they are full of it—laymen who profess superior scientific knowledge. The conclusions of the great majority of qualified scientists directly engaged in the development and peer review of the science inform us that global warming is here and it is getting worse with increasing speed. These are the facts that we must contend with and the forces that we as humans must counter.

Industry has stated emphatically that we need to price carbon. The Business Council of Australia, Origin Energy, TRUenergy, AGL, Santos and Shell Australia have all said that we need to establish a new economic playing field on which industry—very
much including these energy-generating companies—can get on with investing in the infrastructure that keeps our society powered and running.

On the basis of the feedback that I have been receiving in my electorate of Hindmarsh, community opposition to the accepted science is absolutely minimal; opposition to decreasing Australia’s emissions is negligible; and interest in the numbers, how the mechanism will work and its effect on consumers is quite real. People are also interested to learn that the USA is now pushing ahead with cuts of 17 per cent, and even China is pushing ahead with 40-odd per cent cuts per unit of GDP. The world is pushing ahead and getting on with doing its part—except, it seems, Australia.

The question is: how do we decrease our emissions? I believe those who do the polluting should pay, not those who are captive to the necessities that industry creates. We have in our midst politicians who want a command economy where big government tells everyone what to do, where their money goes and what they can buy. Like governments of the Soviet era, we have here in this parliament an opposition that opposes and seeks to undermine the principles of market economics. The opposition’s big government will drain taxpayers of $30 billion, handing money over to select big businesses. Australians will still face higher and higher electricity prices, broke and alone, under the opposition’s policy. We have a limited supply and the relentlessly increasing price of electricity and people’s inability to afford this electricity—none of this will change under Tony Abbott’s Soviet style carbon economy.

In contrast, the government will charge the big polluters for their pollution and give a large part of that, possibly $25 billion or so over five years, to the consumers, who will themselves be able to choose how to spend it. Labor is the party of consumer choice. We can have 20 million people making personal decisions on spending money on less carbon intensive goods and services, promoting market forces—(Time expired)

Mrs GASH (Gilmore) (8.37 pm)—I oppose this motion and I will state my reasons for doing so. Bob Harrison is the former state member for Kiama. He served in the New South Wales parliament for over 13 years and is a life member of the Australian Labor Party. He was also former Mayor of the City of Shellharbour, and I have a lot of time for Bob. He is a respected parliamentarian and remains a respected member of the community. Bob is extremely credible and when he has got something to say people stop and listen.

Earlier this month, Bob contributed an article in the Illawarra Mercury, whose banner read, ‘Carbon tax will burn Illawarra.’ He was scathing in his criticism of the Prime Minister’s strong advocacy and her deal with the Greens. He wrote:

It was sickening to listen to boasting by Greens Senator Christine Milne that the Greens’ “power sharing deal” with the Federal Government has delivered a carbon tax. I don’t remember voting for any power sharing deal with the Greens.

Bob’s theme was that this carbon tax will have a significant and adverse effect on the employment prospects for the greater Illawarra region.

As a representative of an electorate, part of which relies on the steel industry in Port Kembla, I totally agree with Bob’s sentiments and observations. The tax has all the hallmarks of another disaster in the making. Bob is not on his own in expressing those concerns. BlueScope is a major product manufacturer in the Illawarra providing jobs for thousands of workers, including those from the suburbs I represent in and around Shellharbour. BlueScope’s CEO Paul
O’Malley is a little more diplomatic in expressing his concerns. He says they could live with the tax, provided tariffs are imposed on their overseas competitors who will not have to pay a carbon tax.

“If there’s going to be a CO2 tax, it should not tax local manufacturers and give importers a free ride,” he said.

The likelihood of protective tariffs being applied is so remote that some manufacturers are saying they could move their operations overseas. It would be cheaper for them, and they would not have to put up with Labor’s biased industrial relations laws, which favour the unions, as well as onerous taxes just to appease the Greens. China and Indonesia must be clapping their hands with glee. I would also suggest that BlueScope’s views are not unique throughout Illawarra manufacturing and allied industries. BlueScope and OneSteel have said:

It’s a direct threat to this NSW regional economy and the 12,000 workers and their families …

Even the unions representing the manufacturing industry have today deep concerns at the impact this carbon tax is going to have. But the South Coast Trades and Labor Council are all in favour of it. They, who allegedly seek to represent the views of the workers in the Illawarra, the Australian Workers Union, have dismissed these concerns as scaremongering. Yet, in the concluding remarks of its Illawarra head, Mr Andrew Gillespie, as reported in the Illawarra Mercury, acknowledges that many workers were concerned about the talk of BlueScope potentially shifting operations offshore. Mr Gillespie said:

I keep telling them I can’t give you answers on carbon price, or carbon relief, because it hasn’t been done yet.

Fuel prices are predicted to keep on rising, oil production globally has plateaued and food costs will rise. The government is now offering a raft of dispensations for carbon emitters. If the government is to compensate low- to middle-income earners, what is going to be achieved practically? Nothing. That is why I totally oppose the thrust and sentiment behind this motion. A carbon tax is not an essential step and it is specious in the extreme to argue so.

The only thing I agree with in this motion is that governments must work with the rest of the community and the manufacturing industry to meet the challenge of a carbon constrained future. This motion was moved by the member for Throsby, in whose electorate BlueScope Steel sits. My former colleague Jennie George, now retired, did a splendid job representing the working-class voters of the seat of Throsby. We may not have agreed on a number of issues, but she had my respect in the way that she stood up for the welfare of those she was elected to represent. I just wish I could say the same thing about her successor. Has he even bothered to sit down with the CEO of BlueScope to discuss the concerns so publicly expressed before putting his motion? If he has not, it would be in keeping with the growing practice of Labor governments in discounting the need for consultation.

I will certainly be doing all I can, and if that means crossing swords with the member for Throsby and the unions, then so be it. I condemn this motion for being just too clever by half. Nobody wants this carbon tax except the members opposite. Unlike them, I take seriously my responsibilities and the interests of the people I represent. I thank the Leader of the Opposition who took the time to visit BlueScope and the workers last week. This motion and the tax it seeks to promote just says loudly and clearly that the member for Throsby has deserted the workers he so loudly claims to support.

Mr RIPOLL (Oxley) (8.41 pm)—Climate change is real. I think that is the
starting point of any of these debates. It is real and it is happening today; it is happening now. We know for a fact it is because of human emissions and activity. It has been well documented, and there is a vast body of science supporting it. Scientists all around the world from every major institution and every reputable and credible organisation all agree. A few people have got a slightly different view, and that is their right.

In the vast body of work that has been done there is no argument: they agree on climate change. They agree on the impact. They agree on the quantum and they also agree that something needs to be done. I have a strong view—and as the Prime Minister said—while Australia should not lead the world; we certainly should not be left behind. I think it is important to take note of this in the debate that is taking place in this House. Climate scientists are telling us that carbon pollution is causing climate change, and this is having an enormous impact on the world’s climate.

Australia needs to act. We need to act and we need to do it now. We have talked about this issue for many years. There is no better time than the present to make change. We know that, by acting on climate change, we are doing the right thing. We are not just doing the right thing according to some esoteric principle; we are doing the right economic thing for us. If there is any country in the world that will have a greater impact on it from climate change, rising sea levels and a range of other climate impacts, it will be Australia.

The Intergenerational report, for example, highlights that, without action on climate change, Australia’s GDP will fall by around eight per cent by 2100. If people today looked 20 years into the future, not too far away, we could look back and say that this almost seems like small bananas in terms of the big picture as to where Australia will be in two decades time. We need to make certain that we are part of the global carbon economy and not left behind as some sort of pariah.

It is about creating jobs for the future. It is about setting ourselves up for long-term prosperity. In all of those talks that we have in this place about mining, energy and resources, we always talk about the wasted years when we could have done more. Now is the time when we can do more, achieve more, plan for the future and make sure that we have jobs for the future in this country. Reducing our carbon pollution is a significant part of that. It is also a significant challenge. No-one argues that; no-one debates that. Given that Australia has a very carbon based economy with more than 80 per cent of our electricity generated through coal fired sources, we need to start turning that around. We need to provide more than what we are currently doing. You can only do that through economic incentive. In the end goodwill and good talk will only take us so far. There are only two ways through economic incentive: one is to provide an incentive not to pollute—in other words charge a price on carbon—

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Hon. BC Scott)—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. The member for Oxley will have leave to continue speaking when the debate is resumed.

Milk Pricing

Mr JOHN COBB (Calare) (8.45 pm)—by leave—I move:

That this House:

(1) notes with concern the impact on the Dairy Industry of the Coles milk pricing strategy, and that:
(a) dairy farmers around the country are today seriously questioning their future, having suffered through one of the worst decades in memory including droughts, floods, price cuts and the rising cost of inputs such as energy and feed;

(b) unsustainable retail milk prices will, over time, compel processors to renegotiate contracts with dairy farmers and the prospect that these contracts will be below the cost of production may force many to leave the industry;

(c) for many dairy farmers, the fact that supermarkets are now selling milk cheaper than many varieties of bottled water will be the straw that finally breaks the camel’s back; and

(d) the risk of other potential impacts include:

(i) decreased competition as name brands are forced from the shelves; and

(ii) the possible loss of fresh milk supplies to some parts of the country as local fresh milk industries become unviable; and

(2) calls on the Government to:

(a) ask the ACCC to immediately examine the big supermarkets and milk wholesalers after recent price cuts to ensure they do not have too much market power and are not anti-competitive in their behaviour; and

(b) support the new Senate inquiry into the ongoing milk price war between the country’s major supermarket chains.

The dairy industry has faced many challenges over the years; however, with the current milk price war, dairy farmers and their families across the nation are questioning their future in the industry, having endured a decade of severe droughts, floods, cyclones, increasing operational costs and cuts to farmgate prices. There are over 100,000 people employed in the dairy industry in Australia, mostly in rural and regional areas. It is Australia’s third largest rural industry, with a value of $3.1 billion at the farmgate—or it has been. Just as importantly, the industry provides all Australians with a sustainable, daily supply of fresh, high quality milk and a wide range of dairy products.

For feeding our nation and contributing so much to our economy, all dairy farmers ask and have asked for is a fair day’s pay for a fair day’s work. However, the launch of Coles’s—a wholly-owned subsidiary of Wesfarmers—cutthroat milk discount campaign on Australia Day has devalued milk and savaged the morale of dairy farmers right across the nation. Coles has now made it impossible for dairy farmers to get a fair day’s pay for a fair day’s work. They have dropped the price of milk to $1 a litre. The last time milk was priced at $1 a litre was in 1992. Dairy farmers would like to ask the customers of Coles two things: could they pay their bills if they went back to their 1992 wage? Do they really believe Coles when they say they are absorbing the cost of these 1992 prices? Dairy farmers are pretty logical and pragmatic people, and they know a bulldust story when they hear one.

Coles is a wholly-owned subsidiary of Wesfarmers, a company that was started by farmers as a cooperative in Western Australia and was still controlled by them when it went public in the mid-1980s. They have written to many members who are sitting in this House today and they have claimed publicly and have promoted to their customers that the discounting of milk to $1 per litre will not affect dairy farmers—a load of bull. Their claim could not be further from the truth. Coles are marketing milk discounted to at or below cost to lure customers from their competitors while at the same time growing their market share with their own brand of milk. The effect has been the devaluing of milk right across the nation as retailers competing with the Coles brand of milk have had
to drop their prices to try to protect their market share. They have also had to discount their own brands of milk to try to retain their sales. Dairy farmers who have their prices linked to processors' brands have already seen their milk cheques reduced. Processors will be put under pressure with their next contract negotiation with retailers and then dairy farmers will be put under more pressure.

Vendors and distributors are losing deliveries hand over fist with key milk-production markets in New South Wales and Queensland dropping by more than 15 per cent in Queensland and 10 per cent in New South Wales in the last 12 months. This includes farmers who supply milk which goes into Coles supermarket-branded milk bottles. Coles is totally owned by Wesfarmers, who actually have agribusiness people on their board and cannot claim that they do not know what this means. This provides clear evidence that Coles's claims are wrong or, worse, they have been tricky and purposely selective in quoting facts and figures to mislead Australians. Their public claims are tantamount to false advertising.

I am amazed that the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry and former agriculture minister Burke have both publicly supported Coles ahead of the dairy industry, despite supermarkets now selling milk cheaper than most brands of bottled water. Coles is not going to absorb over $60 million per annum which this discount will cost them; it just will not happen. To believe that Richard Goyder plans to go to the next Wesfarmers AGM with the story of Coles's drop in profit and market share is farcical. Farmers know that soon they will be paying for Coles's marketing tactics. Let us remember that Coles is a wholly-owned subsidiary of Wesfarmers. This is not some global company; it is acting like one, but this is a wholly-owned subsidiary of Wesfarmers, who were an icon for Australian industry in how to succeed. But not any longer.

While Coles said it had reduced the price of 5,000 products, it has been silent on what has happened to the price of the 15,000 other products sold in the supermarket. By using tricky marketing tactics like this unsustainable milk price cut, Coles is trying to lure in more customers. Recently the Managing Director of Wesfarmers, Richard Goyder, was quoted as saying that what Coles is doing is hopefully increasing demand for milk. Given Mr Goyder’s pay grade, I would have thought he would understand a little basic economics. Even I understand that the demand for drinking milk is pretty inelastic. Consumers buy and use only a certain volume. We are not going to see customers across the country saying, ‘Gee, milk’s cheap; I’ll have another bowl of cereal,’ or ‘Gee, milk’s cheap; I’m not going to have a beer today. I’m going to go to the pub and ask for a milk.’ Mr Goyder must know this.

These tricky marketing tactics are hurting not only dairy farmers but also small businesses across the nation, and it will only get worse. We all love the convenience of the local corner store. Well, Coles is doing them out of business. Coles, a wholly owned subsidiary of Wesfarmers, is also hurting vendors and the independent petrol stations. It is hurting small business everywhere, which is what Coles is pursing so that it can grow its own business over the demise of others.

Coles has imported from the UK a whole bunch of British executives who are experts in store brand tactics and taking business from others. But they are currently implementing a strategy that is not right for Australia and certainly not right for a company like Wesfarmers, with the reputation they previously enjoyed. Coles has about doubled its share of the milk market over the last 10 years with its discounted supermarket milk
brand. In countries like the UK, you now have to send out a search party to find an independent brand. What happens to consumers when they are left with no choice—and at what price? Dairy farmers do not, and should not, trust Coles—and neither should their customers when it engages in these practices.

Coles, a wholly owned subsidiary of Wesfarmers, needs to stop being tricky and start charging fair prices for its milk supplies. Woolworths and other retailers have stated both publicly and privately that these price cuts are unsustainable—and they must be in a very similar position to Coles. Competition needs to be fair and, in this case, the umpire needs to step in and red card Coles and its team of UK executives. I have asked the ACCC to look at the milk price cuts, and the motion calls on the government to do the same. For all of our futures, in an environment of tightening food supplies and a greater emphasis on food security, these unscrupulous practices of big retailers need to stop. We need to focus on sustaining our critically important food producing industries instead of squeezing them out of business.

I knew the previous chief executive of Wesfarmers. He was a person I was proud to know. He gave Wesfarmers a great name and they were an icon and a success story in Australian business. He took them from a $1 billion enterprise in the mid-eighties up to the multibillion dollar enterprise that they are today. I think he would be horrified at what his company’s subsidiary is doing today. I ask that the House support the dairy industry and back this very important motion.

Mr SIDEBOTTOM (Braddon) (8.55 pm)—The dairy industry in Australia was deregulated by the former Howard government, which means that the government does not have a role in determining prices in the market. However, this government has supported the establishment of a Senate inquiry that will look at the recent changes to milk prices. It is a timely and appropriate way to expose a broad range of issues relating to this matter.

As part of this process, the ACCC is in contact with industry participants and is seeking any evidence that those industry participants can provide on this issue. The ACCC will thoroughly consider any evidence that it obtains. To maintain the independence of the ACCC, the Competition and Consumer Act prevents the government from giving it a specific direction in relation to the enforcement of competition law. The ACCC has advised that it is assessing the current pricing of home brand fresh milk by the major supermarkets, including whether it raises competition concerns under the Competition and Consumer Act.

The major supermarkets have been competing very vigorously on their ‘own brand’ milk prices recently. However, although consumers will get some price benefit for now, they could well end up in the future with fewer brands, with prices going up and with the possible loss of locally produced product. While strong discounting is good for consumers and is not necessarily anticompetitive, it should not be at the expense of dairy farmers. Indeed, the real effect may well bring fresh milk prices down to benchmark price levels for international commodity markets like skim milk powder.

Although I hear assurances from Coles that lower milk prices will not drive down farm gate prices for dairy farmers, I am very concerned—as are many others—that Coles’
discounting has the potential to destabilise the fresh milk market totally and thus drive down incomes and returns to farmers. Coles may not see the farm gate impact immediately but, if it continues, it must flow through if only in the loss of contracts for those supplying other brands in the market which are under threat.

Milk is already undervalued in the marketplace. And why do we pay more for bottled water than we pay for fresh milk? According to National Foods in their Senate submission:

... the average price per litre for soft drink is about $1.51 and the average price for bottled water is $1.12.

When you compare the effort to produce a litre of milk this seems unfair. You have to grow grass, cut hay and silage, milk the cows, ensure they get in calf and so on, rain, hail or shine.

In the longer term I fear that this price war will reduce investment and innovation in dairy, because the industry is very capital intensive. Equally, as even Coles have publicly declared, milk processors must also ensure that lower milk prices are not passed on to our farmers.

I worry that what is happening will reduce the competitiveness of small stores in my region. Let’s face it: Coles are all about getting market share for its brand, which will significantly drive out the competition. Logically, the whole Coles/Woolworths retail duopoly is against the interests of the food suppliers and farmers in Australia in ensuring a sustainable return comes back to farmers—contrary to claims by them of the opposite. One local milk distributor I have talked to has seen a 15 per cent reduction in milk sales to corner stores in two weeks. Unfortunately, he is now looking to sell his business.

Whilst I strongly support competition, discounting and lower prices for consumers, we also have laws that prohibit anticompetitive conduct, backed up by an independent regulator, the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission, to enforce these laws. Contrary to claims by Coles the milk price war or ‘bigger market share war’ may well reduce competition from other milk brands. Betta Milk, for example, with around 30 per cent of the local Tasmanian fresh market are a locally owned and operated business. Coles’ action could send them to the wall. Is that what we want as a society—for the small processors to go out of business and for us to become totally dominated by large overseas businesses just interested in making a profit, with no consideration for the diverse and regional businesses that support our dairy industry? The fact is that Coles are using their market power to control an essential and basic commodity and push the smaller operators to the brink.

Prospects for the dairy industry in fact are very positive in my region. Only nine per cent of my region’s milk goes into fresh milk markets. Tasmania will be less affected by the fresh milk price discounting impact because we are focused on export products. However, the impacts will be indirect through the viability of the farmers producing milk for the fresh market being squeezed on the margins for other companies and then back to their farmers. But high-cost production areas are most at risk in Queensland and northern New South Wales and, along with others—including the mover of the motion—I am very concerned for their futures.

In Tasmania the dairy industry is very important, and especially in my region. Work at Climate Futures Tasmania and TIAR show that under climate change scenarios Tasmania will be growing more grass and be very attractive for dairy production. Last year Tasmania produced 673 million litres of milk, and 60 per cent of this was in my region—the Cradle Coast region. That is 270
out of 440 dairy farms. This year milk production has grown by around four per cent in the year to date to December—it was the only region to show growth again. Tasmania now produces 7.5 per cent of national milk production, and this share is growing. Tasmania is the only region I know with growing milk production. In the last 10 years Tasmanian milk production has risen by 10 per cent and national production has fallen by nearly 20 per cent. Farm gate milk production income was some $250 million for Tasmania in 2009-10. That is a considerable contribution to the Tasmanian economy.

Price is dictated by export returns, with Fonterra being the main company. Fonterra’s milk price is the same as in Victoria, which is a competitive market with Murray Goulburn, Warrnambool Cheese and Butter and other companies. Farmers have always received a variable price depending on the export market returns at the time. Importantly, Tasmanian dairy farmers are the most cost-efficient producers in the country. However, recent growth and expansion has come at the cost of higher debt levels, and this has created some financial vulnerability for the industry. This makes farmers vulnerable to price shocks, and price shocks are what we are experiencing now in the price of milk in our supermarkets.

I would add a word of caution: of course consumers benefit from price reductions, and certainly most immediately. I have read, in part, the Coles submission to the inquiry now before the Senate. In it they make the case that we should look to, for instance, the milk processors to see what part of their profit margins should be shared more fairly and known more publicly by consumers. But the market power of this massive duopoly that is taking place is extraordinary, and their powers are extraordinary. The fact is that the horse has bolted: that is the problem in Australia. If we had added antitrust laws—something like those in the United States—then we would not be in this position. I think that the onus of proof has to be on the major supermarkets; that they are indeed not affecting the price of milk to our farmers and to our suppliers.

So to those people who are enjoying reduced milk prices; that is all well and good. But we have to be fairly sure in our own minds that those prices are not going to have a detrimental effect into the future, where they not only affect the price of milk but indeed the quality of milk.

I am happy to support this motion. The government was happy to support the establishment of a Senate inquiry, and we want the ACCC to look into the current pricing of own brand fresh milk by our major supermarkets—particularly including whether it raises competition concerns under the ACCC.

Mr HARTSUyKER (Cowper) (9.04 pm)—This motion before the House today is an important move by the coalition to highlight the concerns of the Australian milk industry over the threat of the current milk price war initiated by Coles, a wholly owned subsidiary of Wesfarmers. This is an issue about sustainability of the dairy industry and, indeed, the future of thousands of Australian dairy farmers. It is also an issue about the integrity of Australia’s competition policy principles and, more specifically, the action by Coles to increase its market share through aggressive discounting of milk.

As the member for Calare has already noted, the Australian dairy industry is currently worth $3.4 billion to the Australian economy and employs approximately 100,000 people. A country the size of Australia should be looking to expand its production of dairy products. We should seek to increase dairy exports and to tap into opportunities which are opening up in Asia. In-
instead, the actions of Coles could lead to a reduction in the volume of dairy products and a decline in the number of Australians who work in the industry.

The latest threat to the dairy industry needs to be considered in an historical context. Dairy farmers have endured challenging times over the past decade as droughts, floods, price cuts and increased input charges have pushed many to the brink. This latest debacle has seen morale among the dairy industry reached an all-time low. Once again milk producers and processors believe they are the whipping boys because of the actions of big business and the failure of government to act.

The decision by Coles to lower their own brand milk to $1 a litre may appear attractive to consumers, but in reality this is unsustainable and not in our long-term national interest. The common perception amongst dairy farmers is that in an attempt to increase their market share Coles is willing to sacrifice dairy farmers and the future of the Australian dairy industry.

Recently I met with farmers across my electorate, and they raised serious questions over the market power of Coles and this latest advertising gimmick. Attending the forum were farmers Mike Jeffrey and Howard Lee from Kempsey, Allan Ussher, Jim Desmond and Greg Desmond from the Namucca Valley, Jason Bake from Crossmaglen and Heath Cook and Adam Darley, who are dairy farmers on the Dorrigo Plateau. All these farmers expressed the genuine concern that as a result of the price wars branded dairy products would be forced from the supermarket shelves and it would be the end of those products.

The farmers also believe it is inevitable that supermarkets will place further pressure on milk processors to cut their prices and that processors will have no choice but to reduce the farm gate price paid to farmers. For many dairy farmers this will be the last straw. A further cut in the farm gate price will simply make them unviable, and in the long term that will not be good for consumers. Once Coles has got rid of the market competition, their market power will be greater. They will be able to ramp up the retail cost of milk.

Competition is good for the consumer and good for business, but it is wrong that the actions of Coles will reduce competition in the marketplace through massive discounting which Coles can subsidise by cross-subsidising their losses. Let us not forget the impact of this aggressive marketing on small businesses such as the local corner store and milk vendors, who struggle to buy milk for less than the price that Coles are selling it for in their supermarkets. All these small businesses are equally threatened by the actions of Coles, and this is why all members of the House should support this motion.

The motion calls on the government to refer this matter for investigation by the ACCC and also to support the recent Senate inquiry which was established into the milk price wars. As a prosperous dairy country, we should be exporting our product to the world, but if Coles continues to use their market power to undercut their competitors then our dairy industry will be decimated. This will have long-term consequences for our nation’s food security. It will also impact on the consumer, who inevitably will pay more for milk once competition in the market is reduced. The government must take every action possible to ensure that the activities within competition policy are in the national interest. Instead of allowing Coles to use its market share to drive milk processors and dairy farmers out of business, the government must ensure that vital competition is maintained in the dairy sector.
This is a very important motion. I am delighted to have it debated here in the House tonight. It is vital that we support our local dairy industry to ensure that consumers enjoy high-quality milk into the future and that our dairy industry prospers.

Mr RIPOLL (Oxley) (9.09 pm)—This is a good motion, but it is an unusual one. These are unusual circumstances in which we find ourselves. In this place we generally tend to argue for better value and better prices for consumers. I do get the nuance here about protecting our farmers and competition and finding the right balance. I think that is important too, but I think there is a real issue here. This really is an unusual set of circumstances where we have a Senate inquiry being called and people making very good-quality submissions to that. I suppose there is a great task ahead for that Senate inquiry: to make a proper determination of what is taking place in the market and whether there is actually anticompetitive behaviour taking place. I think there is just as much pressure and onus on the ACCC to ensure that we can find where the balance point is in this between striking a good-value price, a fair price for consumers, and making sure that we can protect farmers in some way—and that farmers are not robbed in the process of making sure that consumers get good value.

Of course, there would be a lot of attention on what the giants are doing—the Coles and Woolworths of the world— in terms of brand milk. But there are a few significant points I want to make tonight in my short contribution. One is that a price of a dollar a litre is very competitive; it is a cheap price—cheap in the sense of what we are accustomed to. There is an enormous variety if you like your milk as I do. When I go shopping for milk, I cannot find my way through the milk aisle because there is so much choice it is almost ridiculous. There are 30 or 40 different types of milk at times, ranging anywhere from a dollar and a little bit to $3.50 for the same litre. I find that unbelievable. It is incredible that there could be such a difference in what is, for me, a base product. The reality is that Choice magazine has just done a survey, tested all of these different types of milk and found that there is actually no difference in quality or taste between a litre of milk for a dollar and a litre of milk for $3. I find that a really interesting outcome. The only difference, it seems, is the price. I find that very, very interesting.

I am as concerned as anyone else in here about market power abuse—the abuse of power by the majors in the way they compete—but I am also concerned for ordinary consumers and I am certainly concerned for the good electors of Oxley. Oxley is not, on the whole, a very wealthy place, and people have a lot of pressures on their cost of living, and milk is one of them. For a family of five like mine, the $1 difference makes a huge difference in how much we spend a year on milk. It can mean up to $500 of difference given the latest figures on how much milk is consumed by Australians. We love our milk, we think it is a good product and we love that it comes from good-quality Australian farmers. The fact also is that our dairy products are a major export for Australia and are sought after by many countries in the world. I think there is a lot to be said about how all of that works as well.

For us in this place, there are a couple of things that we need to be clear on. One is not to go over the top in the rhetoric of just abusing the usual suspects. I do not think it actually helps anybody. I think we have a good process and a good commission, and we ought to allow the process to go through. I want to know the facts here, because there are assurances given by Coles and others that in fact they are not reducing the margin. If I
am wrong on this, fine. I am not saying I am right or wrong; I am just saying what they are stating in their submission. They are giving assurances that that is not the case. They are saying they are reducing the price of milk. If that is true then that is a good thing. If it is not, they will be held accountable for it, and I think they will be very embarrassed, because there will be a whole heap of us in this place who will remind the community and consumers exactly how they misled people. But the fact is that if they can actually reduce the price of milk while not impacting on the margins of the farmers in particular at the farm gate then I will be very impressed.

There may be an issue with the processors. There may be an issue somewhere else along that chain of production. I am not the expert here, but I am keenly waiting to see the outcome of what comes through the ACCC inquiry and what happens in the Senate inquiry. That is the place for the judgment to be made properly so we can have the full information in front of us. That is what this government is doing. We are against anticompetitive behaviour. We do believe, thought, in a strong market and strong market forces. There ought to be drivers and incentives for big producers and the Coles of the world, who are easily criticised in this place on a daily basis. Where they can reduce the price of something, they should. If that is the case now and they are actually doing that then they should be given some credit for it. If it is not the case then they will have a high price to pay as well. But I think that in this one there is actually a lot of room to see that the proper processes are undertaken. (Time expired)

Ms MARINO (Forrest) (9.14 pm)—As a Western Australian it is really hard for me to stand in this place and speak on the member for Calare’s private member’s motion on milk pricing. I cannot believe that Wesfarmers, a company that has its genesis in Western Australia’s agricultural sector, are doing what they are doing through Coles. It is a decision that they know will cause long-term pain to dairy farmers, their families and their communities. This motion is about small business. Dairy farming is small business and I am a dairy farmer.

I was interested to listen to the previous speaker talking about what will come out of this. What concerns me is that we recently had the Senate Economics Committee inquiry into competition and pricing in the Australian dairy industry and a range of issues were delivered by that, but the government and the minister have chosen not to respond to any one of those recommendations. My concern is that what will come out of this may well be ignored in the same way. I have not seen anything from the Minister for Small Business or the Minister for Regional Australia, Regional Development and Local Government regarding this and I am really seriously concerned. There has been no support at all for small farming businesses from the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry. I was really concerned to see that his first response was to support Coles.

If you are a dairy farmer at the moment in Australia, particularly in the liquid milk states of Western Australia, Queensland and northern New South Wales, you are extremely concerned. You know that as negotiations evolve for milk supply contracts this aggressive marketing will affect your bottom line. It is a fact of life that that is what will happen. We know that small business has employed 300,000 fewer workers since this Labor government came to power, so I suppose a few more dairy farmers may not be a problem. This is a complex issue and dairy farmers are absolute price takers. I do not know that this House understands the immediate and longer-term impacts of Coles’s milk pricing on small dairy farming businesses, on farming communities, on our food
security, on nutritional quality and on food self-sufficiency. There will be long-term pain for short-term gain.

In a previous address I told this parliament that Australian farmers are hurting. Many survive on very limited returns. Farmers are sick to death of being told that it is great for Coles to continue to be almost voracious in pursuing market share but it is apparently obscene for a farmer to make even a standard Australian wage in some instances. This is the message that the government and even the ACCC are giving our small business farming communities. I refer to part 1(b) of the motion that:

… unsustainable retail milk prices will, over time, compel processors to renegotiate contracts with dairy farmers and the prospect that these contracts will be below the cost of production may force many to leave the industry;

In a liquid milk state like Western Australia, I defy anybody to deliver fresh milk on a regular basis from another state at $1 a litre. Anybody in the transport sector over a period of time knows that this cannot happen. We only have 165 dairy farmers left in Western Australia. We are suppliers of the liquid milk sector. I meet farmers every day who are seriously concerned about this. They know what this is going to do to their farm gate prices. This is not an illusion for them—they know what it will do over time and so do Coles.

Coles know what this will do to the broader market. They know that others have to match that price and they know how that will flow through, particularly in the liquid milk states. They cannot sit back and say, ‘We’re just going to look after one sector.’ They know that this will flow through and come back to the farm gate price as sure as night follows day. That is what is going to happen and Coles started this. As I said when I began, I cannot believe that Wesfarmers, which has its genesis in the agricultural sector in Western Australia, can be the architects of this.

Dairy producers in those three states are now dreading further negotiations in the next year, in the next two years and how this pricing will filter down to them. We do know about the power of the supermarkets. I am seriously concerned about their dominance and what this will do. There are those that cannot speak out and I spoke about these people before the Senate inquiry. I am seriously concerned that irrespective of the findings of the Senate inquiry, like the result of the last Senate inquiry, we will have a minister and a government who will fail to act. It is one thing to identify a problem, but the issue for this government is what they intend to do about it. That is the question facing us: what does this government intend to do about this problem?

Ms SAFFIN (Page) (9.19 pm)—I speak in support of the private member’s motion on milk pricing that the member for Calare put before this House. I do so with the support of dairy farmers in my area and all associated with them, community leaders and many people who are not associated with the dairy industry at all but are concerned about the future of the dairy industry. We face a perplexing problem because we live with a deregulated dairy industry. It was deregulated well over a decade ago, so we do not have a lot of tools to talk about regulation and that is not the way it is going.

We are concerned about what is currently happening, particularly Coles’s behaviour. Some go so far as to say it is predatory pricing and we are looking at the issue of predatory pricing at the moment. People in my area are saying people like getting cheap milk because who does not want to go to the shop or supermarket and get something cheaper. We are always looking for a bargain. We all talk about cost of living pres-
sures which are foremost in our minds and affect everybody. At the same time, we know that if what is happening is not sustainable for the dairy industry, it is not sustainable for any of us long term and therein lies the issue.

We want the ACCC to examine this issue so that we have all the facts before us. I do not profess to know all the facts. I know what I know. I have a dairy industry in my area. I know that the dairy industry is the third largest of the rural industries in Australia. I know what it means to my local economy. I know what it means to northern New South Wales and southeast Queensland which is close to where I live. And I know what it means to the industry at large.

It is within that context that I speak. I do not want this issue politicised and neither should it be by anybody. It is an issue of concern to the community, to the dairy farmers—to everybody. I want to be advised on it in a very open and transparent way, and I hope that the ACCC and the Senate Economics Committee’s inquiry into the impacts of supermarket price decisions on the dairy industry are able to reveal this. The Senate inquiry is supported by the government and I understand it is supported by all others. It is a Senate inquiry that has the ability to provide us with the facts and the transparency that we need so that we can make some informed decisions if we need to, or at least make some informed comment on it.

The issue is a concern, and it is something that is being talked about. I was asked by my local radio station today, ‘Janelle, if it is such cheap milk, why are you concerned?’ I said, ‘I have to be concerned about many things, and one is the long-term viability of the dairy industry.’ When it went through deregulation I saw gain by some, but I also saw the pain and I saw what that meant. We do not want an industry that is already feeling it—especially with some of the weather events that we have had—exposed any more.

One thing that I looked at today was Choice magazine. Choice did testing on milk and looked at different brands and so on, and they came up with some interesting findings on the milk. I would like to finish with two of the things they came up with. One was that Lite White and other reduced fat milks are more highly processed. I drink milk, but I like fat milk. I do not like skinny milk or any of those others.

Ms Marino—Regular milk.

Ms Saffin—I call it fat milk, but it is regular milk. I drink it and it tastes great. It is good milk and it is what I want to keep drinking. I want to keep drinking it at a good price but at a price that is sustainable for the farmers.

Choice questioned whether the $1 a litre milk was really a sign of genuine, healthy competition. They stated:

In our view consumers do not win if short-term discounting reduces product choice or undermines milk quality in the medium or long term.

(Time expired)

Mr Billson (Dunkley) (9.24 pm)—I support the call on the government to insist that the ACCC formally and immediately investigate what is happening with the milk wars that are being driven by the big supermarkets and their implications more broadly. I also want to draw attention to the Senate Economics Committee inquiry into the impacts of supermarket price decisions on the dairy industry. This inquiry into the ongoing milk price war is underway, but I seek to draw the attention of this chamber and of those who are listening to the inquiry that we really need to have—that is, whether the toolkit available to the ACCC is adequate, whether it best supports the public policy and economic objectives we have for our country.
and how well those tools are actually being utilised.

That very inquiry, an independent inquiry, is what the coalition offered the electorate prior to the last election. We were confronted—affronted might be a better way of describing it—by the then Minister for Competition Policy and Consumer Affairs, Dr Emerson, saying, ‘No, no, no. The competition laws in Australia are just fine. There is no scope to improve them. There is no opportunity to recognise changing market conditions. Everything the ACCC needs, it already has.’ That did not last very long at all, because shortly after the election, when we were highlighting—

Ms Saffin interjecting—

Mr BILLSON—I have just been heckled by the member opposite, who has little to offer on the issue of competition.

On the issue of price signalling, wasn’t it very interesting how, shortly after the election, when the coalition started working on issues of price signalling, all of a sudden Labor, who had said there was no opportunity to improve the competition toolkit, quickly came along and said, ‘We are going to introduce a price signalling law as well.’ The member opposite who chooses to interject may well benefit from the understanding that this is one sector of the economy. It is a very important one, but as to the concerns she seeks to talk about, if she bothered to learn much about other than what she wants to insist on for everybody else, she would see that these circumstances are actually happening in other parts of the economy. Because they are happening in other parts of the economy, there is a need to examine these concerns not through a straw, looking at a single industry, as important as it is, but also in the context of what else is going on where the supermarket chains are very dominant.

The supermarket chains are seeking to exercise their strong position in the marketplace to extend the range of supermarket own-branded goods and products. They are doing this in alcohol. We have already seen the supermarket chains rolling out their own lines of beer. The beer producers in Australia did not seek to cannibalise their own market, so they refused to play ball. So now the beer is coming in from New Zealand, where again the supermarkets are seeking to get an even stronger position and an even more dominant position in terms of the way they interact with their suppliers.

If the government recognised that there are shortcomings in the competition toolkit that is available, they would see that there is scope to improve it. That is what the coalition offered—an examination of the toolkit, an understanding of the national public policy initiatives that should drive competition law and then a recognition that, if the tools are not up to the task, they need to be improved. We actually believe that competition matters, but there is an important precondition for competition, and that is the existence of competitors. We also believe that there is an issue about durable benefits—

Ms Saffin interjecting—

Mr BILLSON—Oh, just pipe down!

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Hon. BC Scott)—Order!

Mr BILLSON—We also believe there is an issue about durable consumer benefit, so in relation to the short-term issues that might see a savings in milk, if they are not going to be available in the longer term, what might superficially appear to be attractive may well lead to more problems for consumers down the track.

The member for Calare’s motion is important not only because it seeks to have the ACCC do what it can do with toolkit that is available to it, but hopefully because,
through the Senate inquiry, it will highlight how that toolkit is deficient, some of the aspects relating to the misuse of market power and the need to satisfy a substantial market power test which sees a company able to raise prices without losing any business. That is an incredibly high threshold. Maybe the existence of market share might be an appropriate precondition. The issue is about not only the purpose for which a dominant player might be entering into a market or exercising its strength but also the effect of it.

The big players can say, ‘It wasn’t our intention to wipe out everybody in our supply chain. It just happened.’ This is not good for our country; this is not good for our economy. This is why we have 300,000 fewer people employed in small business since Labor was elected. We have seen the competition toolkit failing to meet the challenges of a contemporary market, and I am optimistic that through the prism of this totemic—

(Time expired)

Debate interrupted.

ADJOURNMENT

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Hon. BC Scott)—Order! It being 9.30 pm, I propose the question:

That the House do now adjourn.

Tambling, Hon. Grant, AM Solomon Electorate

Mrs GRIGGS (Solomon) (9.30 pm)—I rise this evening to speak about a number of activities and events that I have been involved in over this past month, and to speak about the outstanding achievements of one of my constituents who has also been a member of this place. This constituent is the Hon. Grant Tambling, or Tambo as he is affectionately known. Grant was recognised in the 2011 Australia Day honours list as a Member of the Order of Australia. This honour was bestowed upon Grant for his outstanding service to the parliament of Australia and to the communities of Norfolk Island and the Northern Territory, through his contributions to local, state and federal government. Grant’s outstanding political career spanned an amazing 30 years, from 1972 to 2001. Most interestingly, his career involved all levels of government—local, state and federal. After what we all thought was his retirement from politics he was appointed to the vice-regal position of Administrator of Norfolk Island in 2003, a role he held until 2007.

As mentioned in my first speech, Grant is a mentor of mine and he has made an enormous contribution to the development of the Northern Territory in a way that I strive to emulate. I congratulate him on receiving this Australia Day award. Grant is held in high regard and many of his past colleagues still in this place talk of him fondly, as do many Territorians.

I would now like to mention a number of activities I have been involved in over the past month. I joined many volunteers in the 21st annual Clean Up Australia Day. I would like to pay special tribute to Hayley Fletcher, who coordinated the clean up of Dripstone Park. It was surprising that in just under an hour more than 20 garbage bags were filled with rubbish. I was impressed at how the community came together and particularly by the number of young people involved in the day. It is really great to see young people who are passionate about keeping the Territory beautiful.

I was also a guest shaver at the Leukaemia Foundation’s World’s Greatest Shave fundraising event at the Mitchell Centre. At this event the Jacob’s Terrors, a family trio, were acknowledged for raising $3,300 between them—not a bad effort considering that Connor Randazzo is 12, his sister Imogen is 11,
and little brother Jacob is eight. Other outstanding fundraisers included local Scott Van Loon, who raised $7,100—the highest individual amount raised in the Northern Territory. As a cancer survivor, I believe that the World’s Greatest Shave is a vital event for Territorians to be part of to help raise much needed funds and to raise awareness of this disease. Shelly Ryan from the Leukaemia Foundation did a fantastic job in coordinating events in my electorate.

I joined students from Marrara Christian College for the National Ride2School Day. It was wonderful to see almost 70 students take part in the 3½-kilometre bike ride to the school campus. Students were accompanied by Principal John Metcalfe and Assistant Principal Adriaan, along with some parents and local community police officer Linda Farrand. According to National Ride2School Day organisers Marrara Christian College was the first school ever to register in the Northern Territory and the only school that participated formally this year. A special thank you goes to Mrs Glenda Nyhuis from Marrara Christian College for her assistance in coordinating this event. I am hopeful that next year many more schools across my electorate will participate in this event.

This past weekend I was very privileged to attend the St John’s College presentation ball. I was honoured to be involved in the presentation of 44 year-12 students, alongside Bishop Eugene Hurley. It is wonderful that such a tradition is still carried out, even with a modern twist. The students were incredible and were a credit to their families, teachers and school community. I would like to make special mention of teachers Bronwyn Graham and Tony Walton, who worked with the students to teach them special dances and appropriate etiquette for the evening.

I would like to mention one final thing. I have again been asked about the Indigenous funding guarantee program which the Gillard Labor government committed to in the lead up to the 2010 federal election. St John’s College is affected by this program and, like other schools I have previously mentioned, the delay is costing jobs in the Indigenous education sector in my electorate. These schools seek further assurance that the promised, but delayed, payment of the remote rate for remote students based at their school will indeed be backdated to include 2010. I pose this question to the Gillard Labor government: when can schools in my electorate expect to hear the government’s decision on whether the payment will be backdated or not?

**Multiculturalism**

Mr Hayes (Fowler) (9.35 pm)—Like other members, today I am wearing an orange ribbon. That signifies Harmony Day, which recognises the multicultural basis of our nation. It is also a way of recognising the individuals who have come to call this country home and to celebrate the immense contribution—economic, social and cultural—they have made to the development of this country. I also welcome the recent introduction of the People of Australia policy, which recognises and encourages the obvious huge benefits of multiculturalism to Australian society.

Harmony Day and the policy are of particular interest and significance to my electorate of Fowler, which is the most culturally diverse electorate in the whole country, according to the ABS. In fact, nearly 50 per cent of the population of my electorate were born overseas. Obviously a much larger proportion has an ancestry from various regions around the world. You can imagine how significant it is for these people, as well as for
our community, to be recognised for their contribution to this nation.

Lina Tjoeng, President of the Khmer Community of New South Wales, welcomed the People of Australia policy by saying that it was ‘a great recognition of the valuable contributions different cultures make to the Australian community’ and ‘it will help foster a more inclusive and harmonious society.’ Mr Kamalle Dabbousy, manager of the Liverpool Migrant Resource Centre also praised the new policy and ‘its certain positive impact on social cohesion’.

The president of Vietnamese Community Australia, Mr Thanh Nguyen, recently told me that his organisation supports and welcomes the efforts of the government that foster diversity and celebrate the contribution different cultural groups have made to this country. Mr Nguyen stresses that Australia can be proud of its position on diversity and multicultural acceptance, which distinguishes us throughout the world. He goes on to say: ‘Australia’s ability to celebrate the difference is what makes it a truly unique nation.’ Mr Nguyen strongly believes in the principles put forth by the policy, which state that the best way to integrate and improve as a society is by celebrating our differences.

Dr Ali Safras, a good friend of mine, an influential member of the Australian-Pakistani community and a person committed to religious tolerance, also welcomes the Australian government’s effort to foster multiculturalism, as ‘this is a way of fostering religious harmony’. Dr Safras also indicated that policies such as this, that ‘encourage members from various groups to feel a sense of belonging’ and value their contribution to their adopted home, Australia, are of significant value.

The recently introduced initiative to provide better aged-care facilities for elderly Australians of non-English-speaking backgrounds is also extremely significant to my multicultural electorate of Fowler. Specifically, the policy in that respect has been welcomed by the Indo-Chinese Elderly Hostel and its president, Mr Harry Tang. I visited him only the other day and saw firsthand what this age facility is doing for people of Chinese background.

The new funding for multicultural arts and festivals is also particularly welcome in my electorate. This is a community which truly knows how to celebrate its unique traditions. I have had the pleasure of attending many of the cultural events in my electorate, including the Moon Festival, the Tet festival, which celebrates the Vietnamese New Year, the Chinese New Year celebrations and the Serbian Festival, and I will be going to the Assyrian New Year festivities next weekend. This is an area of the world that knows how to celebrate its differences. All these people know that they are truly Australian. I am amazed at the colour and vibrancy of these events as well as the effort by the participants, not only to celebrate their traditions but to acknowledge their appreciation of their adopted home, Australia.

It is clear that multiculturalism is in Australia’s best interests and it is cultural diversity that makes us strong and focused on the future as a truly unique nation. (Time expired)

Carbon Pricing

Mr BRUCE SCOTT (Maranoa) (9.40 pm)—I rise this evening to voice my opposition and that of my electorate to Labor’s proposed carbon tax. The impact of this tax will be most felt by the hardworking communities in rural and remote Australia. The tax will have an additional impact on communities outside our major capital cities.

According to Professor Ross Garnaut, to meet the target of a five per cent cut to greenhouse gas emissions by 2020, Labor’s
carbon tax would have to start at around $26 a tonne. That means that electricity prices would initially increase by at least $300 per annum for households—just small family households—and would continue to rise to about $600 per annum, more than $10 or $12 a week, in three to five years. Professor Garnaut also let the cat out of the bag when he suggested to the government—after all, he is an adviser to the government—including petrol in the carbon tax mix, which would see fuel prices skyrocket.

For people living outside cities and regional centres, this carbon tax’s impacts on petrol and diesel mean a lot more than just extra dollars on the household bills. Every day thousands of people across rural and remote Australia, including my electorate of Maranoa, travel for business. It is an essential element of how they do their business. People often travel from town to town just for their jobs. Out there in Maranoa there is no urban transport subsidised by the taxpay- ers of Australia. They pay the full costs for their motor vehicles: the depreciation, the fuel and the wear and tear. One constituent in particular comes to mind. She lives in Dalby and works in Chinchilla—every day she has a 160-kilometre round trip just to get to work, do her job and come home. Our sports men and women, players and teams, travel hundreds of kilometres during the week just for training, and on the weekend they travel to attend matches. There is no subsidised urban transport for them in the electorate of Maranoa. Under this proposed carbon tax, every time a family in Maranoa travels in their car, just to carry out their everyday tasks, they will be taxed by this proposed carbon tax, as it would impact on fuel. They will feel that a great deal more than their city cousins.

The cost of bringing critical services to people of the bush will also rise under Labor’s proposed carbon tax. We rely on nurses, doctors and veterinarians who travel between a number of clinics every other day or week to provide health services to communities. They have to travel from town to town. There are teachers who travel across districts to teach languages and music and to coach the sporting teams at different schools. What about the future of our Royal Flying Doctor Service? The Reverend John Flynn recognised many, many years ago when he established that service that the tyranny of distance in rural Australia was a factor that impacted more heavily on people who live in the bush than on people who live in the city. We rely on the Royal Flying Doctor Service. Through their aerial work and also their on-road work, they would be a significant con- tributor, according to the government, of carbon emissions. According to Professor Garnaut, they too should pay carbon tax when they bring health services to people in rural and remote Australia.

Much of the economy of Maranoa relies on road transport. Tourists bring their caravans through for the outback tourism season. They would be taxed. Our mining companies bring their equipment in via road and rail. They would be taxed. The agricultural sector alone generates something like $155 billion in production and underpins 12 per cent of our gross domestic product every year. It also feeds some 60 million people in Australia and around the world every day. Our farmers would be taxed as they produce the food that we eat and so many people in other countries rely on, and it would cost them more to produce that food.

The other thing that concerns me greatly is that we would see more and more of a drift from the rural areas into our cities. Instead of encouraging the decentralisation of this great nation of ours, we would see a greater centralisation, because this carbon tax would impact on the cost of living and daily busi-
Blair Electorate: Building the Education Revolution Program

Mr NEUMANN (Blair) (9.45 pm)—The federal Labor government’s $42 billion nation-building and economic stimulus plan, which we announced in February 2009, was a plan to support local jobs and stimulate local economies. I want to speak about two schools in my electorate, one Anglican and one Catholic, which benefited under Building the Education Revolution. There were 220 projects in Blair, involving 65 local schools and $108 million.

I was pleased to be at West Moreton Anglican College for the induction of the new principal, Geoff McLay who, I have to say, is a loss to the Anglican priesthood—he preached a good sermon that day. He was inducted by Bishop Geoff Smith, the bishop of the southern region and chairman of the Anglican Schools Commission. Also present was Superintendent Paul Lostroh, the college council chairperson. I congratulate the college council. It put up $2.5 million of its own money together with $3 million under the Building the Education Revolution to build what I think is the best multipurpose hall I have ever seen. It is a fantastic facility.

No longer will we go to speech nights at West Moreton Anglican College—commonly known as WestMAC, a P-12 school in my electorate on the west side of Ipswich—only to be rained out. That seems to happen every time we have an event there, but no more will that happen. I was present with Reverend Lizzie Gaitskell, the college chaplain, who undertook the World’s Greatest Shave. I did too, but, while my hair will not grow back, hers will! Olivia MacPherson and David Gavranich, the school captains, were also present with Natasha Holt and Alexander Clark, the chapel captains, when together we opened the new hall.

I was also pleased that, on my invitation, the Minister for Foreign Affairs, the Hon. Kevin Rudd, was present for the opening. He was well received by the locals. The sporting grounds at West Moreton Anglican College were refurbished using $200,000 of the School Pride money and, as I said, $3 million was put towards the construction of a multipurpose hall. About 50 jobs were created as a result of this undertaking and, of course, the school is well supported in recurrent grants from the federal Labor government. Under the digital education revolution—which those opposite, if they had won the last election, would have scrapped—87 computers have also been delivered.

The next day, I was pleased to be present at the opening of the new multipurpose hall at Immaculate Heart Catholic Primary School, to which $2.125 million was given under the Building the Education Revolution program. The school is in the Leichhardt One Mile area of Ipswich. If you listened to those opposite, including the Leader of the Opposition, you would think that this investment in the Leichhardt One Mile was a waste of money. But do not say that to the people who were present at the opening of their new multipurpose hall on that day, because they—the parents, the school community, the staff and students—believe that it was not a waste of money.

It is a wonderful hall which will enable the school to hold cultural events—dancing, drama and singing—and to play netball. I understand that it will also be well patronised by the senior citizens of Immaculate Heart of Mary Catholic Church, who will play bingo there. Every time I have gone to that school in the past we have had to hold school activities in the church building. While I was present there, I congratulated the school com-
munity—particularly Petrea Rawlinson, the school principal, as well as the school captains, Stephanie Elliot and Thomas Picton—and heard the address by Father Peter Casey of St Mary’s Catholic Church, who gave the blessing.

I also thanked the Catholic community of Leichhardt One Mile for the fantastic communal spirit they showed during the recent floods in Ipswich. I congratulated Councillor Charlie Pisasale, who happens to be my local councillor in the Ipswich City Council, on the fact that he, along with Merv Neumann, my uncle, ran the evacuation centre at Avon Hall at the Immaculate Heart of Mary Catholic Church. I congratulated the whole community, including past school principals for the work they did: Bailey Pashley, who was principal from 1996 to 2004; Peter McKee, who was principal in 2005; and Brett Horton, who was principal in 2006. Immaculate Heart Catholic Primary School caters to children from prep to year 7. It is a fantastic little Catholic school, and these facilities will and have been well received in the Catholic and Anglican communities in Ipswich. It is a tragedy that those opposite cannot see the benefit of Building the Education Revolution in communities such as mine.

O’Connor Electorate: TradeStart Offices

Mr CROOK (O’Connor) (9.50 pm)—I draw the House’s attention to a significant regional issue for my electorate of O’Connor and the state of Western Australia: the opportunities for businesses in regional WA to access the export market has been hindered following Austrade’s decision to remove several TradeStart offices from regional Western Australia and to shift their focus to the metropolitan area. Previously, TradeStart operated seven offices in WA, including an office in Albany, in the Great Southern, and one at Geraldton in the mid-west. However, this program has now been scaled back to just two offices in the state—one located in the metropolitan area and one located in Bunbury in the south-west.

It is expected that the south-west TradeStart office will continue to service the Albany and Great Southern region; however, it has been indicated to me by the Albany community that this will not be an acceptable solution. TradeStart is a federal government initiative developed to assist small to medium sized businesses to export for the first time. The value of TradeStart will be significantly reduced when business representatives can only receive assistance and support over the phone or online rather than visit a TradeStart office and meet staff face to face. I believe the withdrawal of a TradeStart program from regional Western Australia—and it is a withdrawal—will be to the detriment of our small to medium sized businesses who wish to expand into the export market.

The issue of retaining a TradeStart office for the Great Southern has been raised with me, and it is my understanding that this position is so highly valued in the community that the Great Southern Development Commission in Albany continues to run the program, providing a dedicated TradeStart officer for the region out of its own pocket. This is a very strong indication of the program’s value. However, it is not the responsibility of the Great Southern Development Commission to provide this service; rather, it is the responsibility of the federal government. The Great Southern Development Commission has shown great merit in allowing this service to continue. However, they are not in a financial position to continue providing this assistance.

The Great Southern region of Western Australia is a large and vibrant area ripe with export opportunities. In addition to broadacre agriculture, which is the area’s traditional
industry base, the Great Southern also plays host to wine, dairy and plantation timber industries—three industries that are currently facing significant challenges to remain viable and competitive. The ability for these industries to re-establish themselves could be further hampered by a lack of local support to enter the export market. As an example, I draw the attention of the House to the problems currently facing the wine industry, including oversupply and a loss of market share in traditional markets. Gaining export sales in new markets in Asia presents an opportunity for wine producers in my electorate and elsewhere to address such issues. In a situation like this, guidance and assistance in breaking into these new markets is vital.

The Great Southern is on the cusp of becoming Australia’s next boomtown region, with a number of significant developments set to occur in coming years that will greatly contribute to economic and population growth. A large mining operation is soon to begin near Albany and will be an economic driver in the community. The WA state government has also confirmed that they will be expanding the Dampier to Bunbury natural gas pipeline into the Great Southern. This will benefit many of the towns in the Great Southern and is expected to play a major role in encouraging new businesses to the region. These factors will all contribute to the same flow-on effect: more small businesses will require the experience and support of a dedicated TradeStart office in the region.

I would like to emphasise to the House the number of industries in the Great Southern that will benefit from the service. Agriculture, resources, plantation forestry, wine and dairy—these industries are the backbone of our economy. The small-business community, the family-run winery, the local surfboard manufacturer, the gourmet pantry on the corner—these small businesses are the backbone of our regional towns and are an important part of making our towns feel like a community. These industries rely on the support of the federal government and the TradeStart program to give them the best chance on the international market. I hope the federal government is able to recognise this and will allow regional Western Australians to continue to access TradeStart services beyond Perth and Bunbury.

**Fremantle Electorate: International Women’s Day**

Ms PARKE (Fremantle) (9.54 pm)—Two weeks ago I had the pleasure of attending various events in Fremantle and Perth to celebrate the important occasion of the centenary of International Women’s Day. International Women’s Day was adopted in 1910 at the second International Conference of Working Women in Copenhagen and was first celebrated the following year. One hundred years later, thousands of events were held worldwide to celebrate the contributions and achievements of women, to acknowledge that there is more to be achieved and, once again, to commit to achieving these things together.

When I was attending public schools in Donnybrook and Bunbury in the south-west of Western Australia, I did not think I would ever work in a number of different countries for the United Nations or be a representative in the national parliament one day, but you can imagine how even more impossible those things would have seemed to girls back in 1911. One hundred years ago, when the first International Women’s Day was held, we were still 10 years from seeing Australia’s first female parliamentarian, Edith Cowan, elected to the WA parliament. In 1911 there was still 55 years to go before we removed the requirement that a woman who married had to resign from the federal Public Service, and we were still 32 years away from seeing the first women elected to the
federal parliament: Dorothy Tangney, a Freo girl, and Enid Lyons. Even now, of the more than 1,000 members elected to the House of Representatives since Federation, fewer than 100 have been women.

Thankfully, we have made a great deal of progress in the last 100 years. As Paul Keating famously said, ‘Equal representation of women in politics is not just about women; it’s about democracy.’ My predecessor, Carmen Lawrence, was the first woman to be Premier and Treasurer of WA. In Julia Gillard, Australia now has its first woman Prime Minister. Across all parliaments in Australia, the Labor Party, through its affirmative action policy, has 37½ per cent of its 387 representative positions filled by women. That is a significant achievement, but we still have further to go. We should be proud that women now make up more than 50 per cent of bachelor degree graduates in Australia but acknowledge that the international violence against women survey has reported that 57 per cent of Australian women experience sexual or physical violence in their lifetime. We should take heart from the introduction of Australia’s first national paid parental leave scheme but remain angry that women are still discriminated against when it comes to equal pay for equal work.

If we look at the situation of aged-care workers, most of whom are women, they are taking care of the most vulnerable people in our community: our own elderly family members. They are carrying out backbreaking and often heartbreaking work, and yet they are among the lowest paid and most underappreciated workers in Australia. The inequities that confront women are amplified if they are poor, migrants, refugees or Indigenous, and they are amplified still further if they are women trying to eke out survival for themselves and their children in a developing country. In PNG, Australia’s closest neighbour, a woman is 242 times more likely to die from pregnancy or childbirth related complications than an Australian woman.

The recent launch of the new UN agency called UN Women is very timely as it will give renewed impetus to the empowerment of women worldwide. Gender inequality is one of the main obstacles to the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals, which are aimed at eradicating extreme poverty. Michelle Bachelet, the former Chilean President who now heads UN Women, said at the launch:

It is no longer acceptable to live in a world where young girls are taken out of school and forced into early marriage, where women’s employment opportunities are limited, and where the threat of gender-based violence is a daily reality—at home, in the street, at school and at work.

The neglect of women’s rights means the social and economic potential of half the population is underused. … … …

… supporting faster progress for women is not only morally right; it makes good political and economic sense.

International Women’s Day reminds us that the struggle for women’s rights is a local struggle, a national struggle and an international struggle, and it is one that we must keep having if we are to truly ensure women’s place in the world.

There is more that we can do. We can be mentors to other women, we can get involved in our local communities and we can join with the national women’s effort in calling for an end to violence against women and for equal pay. We can get involved in the international women’s effort. As women, most of us in Australia have freedoms and opportunities that are beyond the contemplation of the women in refugee camps on the border of Sudan, the trafficked women in Kosovo or the little girls in the Pacific islands whose health and maternal prospects
are so much worse than our own. We can get involved in politics at the local, state or federal level. In WA we have the example of Carmen Lawrence who, in her first speech to federal parliament, urged women to become more politically engaged. She quoted another feisty woman, Sara Henderson, and I think these are appropriate words to sum up women’s struggles for rights and equality over the years:

Don’t wait for a light to appear at the end of the tunnel, stride down there and light the bloody thing yourself.

Harmony Day

Ms GAMBARO (Brisbane) (9.59 pm)—I am pleased to rise tonight to pay tribute to Harmony Day 2011. As many in this parliament would be aware, Harmony Day was first recognised and celebrated in 1999 as a result of a 1996 election commitment to implement an anti-racism campaign. Since its establishment by the Howard government in 1998, the Living in Harmony program has funded over 450 projects, and public recognition of the program has continued to grow over the past 12 years, with thousands of events being held all around Australia.

This year, Harmony Day has gained public endorsement and support from a number of organisations across the country, including the Australian Centre for Languages, Adcorp, the Australian Football League, the Australian Red Cross, the Australian Sports Commission, Girl Guides Australia and Scouts Australia.

When out and about in my electorate of Brisbane last week, I was absolutely delighted to see that one of the local schools, St Columba’s school at Wilston, was so keen to promote this very important day. The school did a fantastic job of highlighting the importance of Harmony Day. On Friday it was very hard to miss the sea of orange balloons, banners and posters at the front of the school.

This display no doubt reminded the hundreds of people who travel along Kedron Brook Road every day of the upcoming Harmony Day celebrations. Unfortunately, I was unable to be in my electorate to celebrate Harmony Day 2011, but I look forward to returning to Brisbane and speaking with Principal Martin Wilkie about how today’s celebrations turned out.

The continuing message for Harmony Day 2011 is that everybody belongs. This is a phrase that rings true to me and, no doubt, to the many diverse communities in Brisbane. Harmony Day is an opportunity to reflect on what it means to be Australian. We share a belief in democracy and respect for the rights and liberties of all Australians. We share a commitment to this country and its people. It is a day also to reflect on the benefits of living in a country that embraces respect, fairness, participation, acceptance and, above all, a fair go. Harmony Day is an important day for everyone who calls Australia home. Today is a day when each of us reflects on what makes us unique and what we have in common.

Sadly, for many in Brisbane one of the things that they have in common is having been devastated by the January 2011 floods. However, in times of tragedy and destruction, the community comes together. This was no truer than in the multicultural community recently. On 5 March, I attended an event hosted by the Queensland multicultural council to help support the food relief efforts across Brisbane. More than 300 people from many different organisations and areas across Brisbane attended the event. My sincere congratulations and thanks go to Kiong and Shona from the Australia Malaysia Business Council of Queensland for their promotion and efforts in organising this spectacular event.
While we pay particular attention to Harmony Day in promoting multiculturalism today and on 21 March each year, Sergeant Jim Bellos of the Queensland police force is committed to promoting harmony across cultures 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Of particular note are the very famous multi-faith dinners that Sergeant Bellos is known to hold regularly, where people of up to 50 different faiths can come together. Sergeant Bellos was the 2009 Queenslander of the Year and he continues to be a very strong advocate for encouraging and promoting harmony across communities. Sergeant Bellos is something of a celebrity in Brisbane and is a household name to many. We are very, very privileged to have him in the Queensland police force. His promotion to the position of Metropolitan South Region Cross Cultural Liaison Officer in 2005 is an absolute tribute to his hard work and commitment and his lifelong passion for working in harmony with multicultural communities.

I look forward to returning to the electorate of Brisbane and hearing the many stories of success from the many Harmony Day celebration events that were held today, not only in the Brisbane electorate but also across Australia.

Women in the Workforce

Ms BRODTMANN (Canberra) (10.04 pm)—Research is increasingly showing that greater gender diversity in organisations can boost performance, yet women remain underrepresented on Australian boards. While women make up 45 per cent of our workforce, they hold only 10.9 per cent of positions on ASX 200 boards, according to Women on Boards, and 87 ASX companies still do not have a woman on their board.

That said, things are improving. In 2008, women comprised only 8.3 per cent of ASX 200 boards. By the end of 2010, 57 women had been appointed to these boards, compared to only 10 for the whole of 2009. So we are heading in the right direction. For ASX 100 companies, this figure has reached 14.1 per cent, while women make up 16.5 per cent of ASX 50 directors. However, as of June 2010, just 4.3 per cent of board seats on the ASX 201 to 300 companies were occupied by women. This figure remains unchanged.

I have served on a number of boards in varying capacities and thrived on all the experiences. I was a director and audit committee member of the Cultural Facilities Corporation and ACTTAB, and a director of the National Press Club. I was also a volunteer director on the Gift of Life and Our Wellness community boards. I believe that diversity creates innovation and that groupthink stifles it. We need not only more women on boards but a more linguistically and culturally diverse make-up of boards.

I have witnessed firsthand the value of a diverse board. The traditional—yes, white Anglo-Saxon—male board members do see the tangible benefits of a board whose perspective is broadened and enhanced. Some have argued that diversity on a board adds to the bottom line and increases shareholder value. While the jury is still out on that one, there seems to be little doubt that board diversity adds to innovation and the ability to create new ideas.

The government’s policy is that we have a target for government boards of 40 per cent, which we are working our way towards. At the same time, the government is strenuously urging the private sector to act to get more women on boards. Shining a spotlight on performance, through vehicles such as Women on Boards, improves transparency and generates action, if the ASX 200 figures are anything to go by.

I commend the government on its initiatives and its determination to see this imbal-
In a joint initiative between the government and the Australian Institute of Company Directors, the institute now offers 70 scholarships that give Australian women the skills they need to become directors or chairs. More than 1,900 women from across the country applied for the program, so women are clearly ready, willing and able to serve. The scholarships were awarded to high-performing board-ready women, giving them the opportunity to attend a range of courses for free. I have done a number of these courses and found them invaluable.

New requirements introduced by the ASX Corporate Governance Council and programs introduced by the AICD and other business groups are starting to have an impact in terms of the number of women on ASX 200 boards. In addition, the AICD has recommended that listed company boards identify diversity goals over a given time frame and report on progress on both board appointments and executive management.

I believe we need to see a self-motivated change from Australian companies. I believe that the nation's companies want to lift female board representation and I believe that business leaders are on the side of reform. Earlier this month on International Women's Day the Prime Minister said she believes that men and women are born with equal capacities. When you see an area of life like boards in corporate Australia with a disproportionate representation of men, you have to start wondering whether selection really is merit based.

As the Prime Minister said, something is stopping Australian women getting through and Australian businesses need to address that. Businesses should be looking to get more women on boards. They should be looking to harness female talent and they should be looking to assist women to get the skills they need to participate on boards.

I believe the responsibility not only lies with government and business. I encourage women to become board ready, to learn the skills that a board director needs, especially those concerned with reading and interpreting financial statements, and being empowered to challenge decisions and ask questions. A good non-threatening start is by becoming a volunteer director on a community organisation or by joining the P&C.

**Brisbane Flood Donation**

Mr VASTA (Bonner) (10.09 pm)—I rise tonight to speak about a very special donation to the Brisbane flood recovery. As a result of the flood that so devastated the great city of Brisbane, my office and I wanted to do something special to raise money for the victims of that flood. We wanted to do something to support the clean-up of Moreton Bay that has been filled with silt and debris that washed out of the Brisbane River impacting the diverse flora and fauna of the bay and affecting many local businesses in that area that rely on the bay for their livelihoods.

Knowing that so many people across Brisbane and particularly on the bayside have an appreciation for and an affinity with fishing and that my electorate of Bonner is home to Wilson’s fishing rods, Australia’s premier fishing rod manufacturer, I decided to contact Wilson’s to see if they would like to donate five very special fishing rods that are unique and would fetch a premium price to aid in the flood relief.

I also knew that Alvey fishing reel company, an historic Brisbane based reel manufacturer for over 90 years, was a business that was a victim of the 1974 flood. I decided to contact Mr Bruce Alvey to see whether he would join with me and Wilson’s rods to manufacture five unique fishing reels to create a limited edition fishing reel and rod combination, the proceeds of which would be donated to the flood recovery.
I was delighted that both these Brisbane based companies were enthusiastic in producing a very unique fishing rod and reel combination and one that we all knew would appeal to a collector, regardless of whether or not they liked fishing.

The final specification of the Alvey fishing reel is made of Huon pine that is turned by a master craftsman and features a unique laser-cut design on the stainless steel face of the reel. The reel is adorned with an original 1950s Alvey badge that was salvaged from the 1974 floods from the original Alvey fishing factory that was situated in St Lucia, Brisbane.

These fishing rods are uniquely Brisbane made and are engraved by Brisbane's premier engravers, John Hammond and his 2IC Duncan Vickers, who, at their own cost, very generously donated their master engraving on these unique fishing reels.

This project took on a life of its own but, even while in its embryonic stage, I was able to raise over $2,000 for the first fishing rod and reel combination. This was achieved without even knowing its technical specification but the purchaser, a Brisbane business identity Greg Willems, knew that this was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity and in circumstances where the funds were going to such a great cause.

It did not take long once this initial fishing rod and reel was snapped up before interest in business circles allowed me to raise another $2½ thousand for the second fishing rod by local identity and fishing enthusiast, Doug Barton. The Wynnum Herald has featured an article on Doug's acquisition.

The Italian chamber of commerce then had a fundraising auction for the victims of the Brisbane floods with the Lord Mayor as guest. The auction featured the bream fishing rod and reel combination. This again successfully reached an auction price of over $2,000, and I would like to thank the president of the ICCI Mr Santo Santoro and the secretary-general of the ICCI Miss Federica Ordoriso for helping me organise the event. I would like to thank the Wilson family, especially Graeme and Belinda; Mr Bruce Alvey; John Hammond; Duncan Vickers; and Kord Lucas.

The final two fishing rod and reel combinations are still available for collectors with a passion for fine craftsmanship and who want to simultaneously donate to a great cause. The money raised from the special project is going to the Lord Mayor’s flood relief fund with a request that these funds be directed towards the recovery of Moreton Bay.

**International Year for People of African Descent**

Mr ZAPPIA (Makin) (10.14 pm)—On 18 December 2009, the United Nations General Assembly proclaimed 2011 the International Year for People of African Descent. It declared that 2011 is aimed at:

… strengthening national actions and regional and international cooperation for the benefit of people of African descent in relation to their full enjoyment of economic, cultural, social, civil and political rights, their participation and integration in all political, economic, social and cultural aspects of society, and the promotion of a greater knowledge of and respect for their diverse heritage and culture.

For most Australians the UN resolution has probably gone unnoticed. The links between Australia and Africa have, however, been growing in recent years as more people of African descent resettle in Australia.

Africa is a continent with a fascinating history. It is rich in resources and rich in culture. Sadly, it has also been a continent of much poverty, turmoil, conflict, brutality and oppression. The African people are still some of the most disadvantaged in the world, and
the UN resolution is clearly aimed at reducing that disadvantage. Australia has a role and a responsibility in doing that, both for Africans here and for those living in Africa.

African families, like all new settlers to Australia, have had to adjust to a new homeland, and that has not always been easy. Similar to other new arrivals, they have often been received with caution by the communities in which they settle. Today the African people are contributing to Australia’s productivity, adjusting to Australian life and building a better future for their families. They work hard and they often do the jobs that others reject. I have African families in my own neighbourhood. I see them at citizenship ceremonies, where they are always the best dressed and have the biggest smiles, and I see them at community events. I worked with them during my time as a board member of the South Australian Migrant Resource Centre, which for most of that time was chaired by the charismatic African Ben Yengi, OAM.

Today the South Australian African community is led by a great ambassador for the African people, Dr Joseph Masika. Dr Masika, whom I feel proud to call a friend, is keen to ensure that the International Year for People of African Descent does not simply become a year of rhetoric in which little is achieved.

To that end, I am indeed encouraged by initiatives I see throughout my own electorate, where Australia’s links with Africa are being strengthened and disadvantage is being overcome. Principal Mike Potter, of Tyndale Christian School, and his wife Danni have adopted African children and, since 2002, the school has been supporting two orphanages and a babies home in Kenya. Every second year a contingent of parents, students and staff go to Kenya where they provide practical and financial assistance to the orphanages. Their work has been directly associated with the building of Tyndale Cottage, a home for 30 children aged up to 16 years, as well as the building of a medical clinic, a soccer field, two basketball courts, swings and a bathroom for children with disabilities. Tyndale has also financially assisted with school fees, uniforms, educational materials and medical and food bills.

In a similar initiative, since 2005, Golden Grove Primary School has been sponsoring a young African student, Lee Mavuka, in the Chivi district in Zimbabwe. The support, which has now been extended to Lee’s community, includes school books, stationery, clothing, food and basic necessities. All the money is raised within the Golden Grove school community through the donations and fundraising activities. To quote Karen Crabtree from the Golden Grove Primary School:

It has been an amazing journey and a wonderful learning experience for the students to see how we can make a difference.

Another example is the work of the Modbury Uniting Church, where an international women’s group has been established. The group, which has a strong focus on African women, provides a safe place for new arrivals to meet. It also provides IT, dressmaking, English language, cooking, healthy eating and driving test tuition. The initiative, led by Wendy Sinnott and Pat Thomas, assists women in adjusting to their new homeland and building their self-confidence so that they can take control of their lives.

I also commend the work of Pastors Ralph and Wilma Legge of the City International Christian Church, who run a very similar program. Their church has a particularly strong following of African people from Liberia, Sierra Leone, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Burundi.

Lastly, I mention Pastor Mark Baker and the Harvest Christian team at Ingle Farm.
Each year the centre hosts the Watoto Children’s Choir from Uganda, in order to raise awareness of the needs in Uganda and also to raise funds to assist the people there. The Watoto Children’s Choir only recently visited again, on 27 February this year. Although I was unable to attend their performance, because I was on my way to Canberra, I have attended previous performances and have heard for myself their beautiful singing and their incredible stories.

Hopefully, these examples will inspire others in this, the Year for People of African Descent, to make a difference to the lives of African people, wherever they live.

### Kusal Waraka Adidi

**Mr ENTSCH (Leichhardt) (10.19 pm)—**

When the Torres Strait Light Infantry Battalion was formed in 1942, it was composed of 880 men who volunteered from across the Torres Strait, leaving only 10 men of eligible age in the outer islands. They created a cohesive battalion of men, formed into four companies—A, B, C and D. It was the only Indigenous battalion ever to be formed in Australian military history and, while Aborigines did serve, the unit was predominantly men drawn from the Torres Strait Islands. These proud Indigenous men volunteered, many serving for almost the entire period of the Second World War. What is significant is that these soldiers were not counted in the Commonwealth census at the time, they were not entitled to vote, they were not considered citizens of the country which they chose to defend, they were not able to drink alcohol and they were paid only half the wages of non-Indigenous soldiers.

One proud Torres Strait Islander who enlisted on 26 September 1942, at the age of 20, was Kusal Waraka Adidi. Sergeant Waraka Adidi, service No. Q85289, was a man among men in the Torres Strait Light Infantry Battalion. At a time when the Torres Strait Islander soldiers were not promoted above the rank of Corporal, Waraka Adidi’s natural ability to lead, his presence and the respect that other soldiers showed him led to his promotion to the rank of Sergeant. He was the only Torres Strait Islander in the battalion ever to achieve that rank. Sergeant Waraka Adidi served in D Company, which was formed of soldiers from Saibai and Boigu Islands. D Company served on Goodes and Horn Island and Thursday Island. Sergeant Waraka Adidi served his country with distinction for four years. He was a proud warrior of the Torres Strait, a proud Australian and a very proud Saibai Islander. His commitment to his country should never be forgotten. He was loved by all whose lives he touched. His legacy to us is the knowledge that we are certainly better people for having had the privilege of knowing him.

On a personal note, Uncle Waraka came into my life when I was first elected as the federal member for Leichhardt in 1996. I was initially made aware of the exploits of the Torres Strait Light Infantry Battalion through Uncle Etti Pau. We embarked on a campaign to have members of the Torres Strait Light Infantry Battalion service recognised through the granting of the 1939-45 Star Medal and the Australian Service Medal 1939-45. Through this campaign, and with the invaluable support of Vanessa See Kee, we successfully achieved this accomplishment 54 years after their service. Sadly, Uncle Etti Pau passed away just before the final administrative decision was made, and the medals were finally granted in 2001. As a lasting legacy, however, he did introduce me to three fine Torres Strait Islander warriors, who I collectively call ‘my generals’. These fine gentlemen, Uncle Seriako Stephen, Uncle Carolus Isua and, of course, Uncle Waraka Adidi, not only educated me in a broad range of local, cultural and social is-
sues; they also worked tirelessly on issues relating to Torres Strait veterans. They even travelled to Townsville to complete a veterans affairs training course and then worked as volunteer veterans affairs liaison officers, based in my electorate office on Thursday Island.

Sadly, Uncle Waraka was the last of my generals to pass away, and I will certainly miss him dearly. I believe that there are now only three remaining Torres Strait Islander Light Infantry battalion veterans remaining today: Jerry Stephen, Maui Gibuma and Enemarki Zaro. I am so thankful that I had the opportunity to spend time with Uncle Waraka a couple of months ago when he returned to Bamaga and I promised him that I would visit him again for Anzac Day this year. Sadly, Uncle Waraka’s time came early. He passed away peacefully on 21 February 2011. I will, however, fulfil my promise and return to the Torres Strait for Anzac Day 2011. I will take comfort in the knowledge that Uncle Waraka and my other generals, as well as Uncle Etti Pau, will be standing with me in spirit and great pride as we once again recognise and salute their service to our nation.

I wish to convey my condolences to Uncle Waraka’s children—John Adidi; Henry Adidi, deceased; Gillian Pearson; Wilfred Adidi; Maria Nona; George Adidi and Sam Adidi and their families, who I know are already aware of the enormous love and respect that I have for Uncle Waraka. Uncle Waraka has had a strong influence on my life, and one for which I will be forever grateful. I will never forget him and he will forever be part of my life. Koeyma esso, Uncle Waraka—which, in Western language, is ‘a big thank you’—and yawo, which of course is ‘goodbye’. Rest in peace, Uncle Waraka.

Illawarra Flooding

Mr STEPHEN JONES (Throsby) (10.23 pm)—Tonight I wish to update the House about the unfolding flood situation in the Illawarra and in my electorate of Throsby. Over the past 72 hours the Illawarra has been buffeted by torrential rain, with many areas receiving the equivalent of an entire average monthly rainfall over the past two days. Albion Park, one of the suburbs in my electorate, has been hit especially hard. It has recorded over 260 millimetres of rain since 9 am today.

Today we have seen serious levels of flash flooding that has inundated many houses, cut off roads, shut down public transport and left many people, including school students, stranded away from their homes. Many parents spent anxious hours today waiting to negotiate floodwaters to reach their stranded kids. Unfortunately, there will be many kids in my electorate of Throsby who will be sleeping somewhere in their school tonight because their parents have been unable to reach them because transport has been cut off due to the rising floodwaters. There have been reports of cars being swept away from the roads as waters rose too quickly for motorists to escape. Not surprisingly, there have been evacuations in some flood affected areas. Floodwaters that inundated homes in suburbs like Albion Park and Warilla forced residents to seek refuge with families and friends on higher ground in surrounding suburbs.

Most tragically, I have to inform the House that the floods have already resulted in a loss of life. Late this afternoon police recovered the body of a man who was reportedly swept into a swollen creek in Warilla. I am advised that the man was swept away while attempting to assist people to cross the road in a flood-inundated street. I know I speak on behalf of all members of the
local community when I say that our heart-felt condolences go out to the family and loved ones of the man who lost his life and to the entire community in Warilla.

Obviously the situation is of deep concern and very frightening for all of those caught up in it, and it is continuing to develop quite rapidly. Even tonight as I speak, the local authorities are reporting that it is high tide—the most dangerous time in many of the suburbs which surround the lake and the coastal areas as well. At times like this it is vitally important to follow the advice of all of our emergency services, including the SES, and the advice that is being relayed by the Bureau of Meteorology, the Roads and Traffic Authority and the Department of Education and avoid taking unnecessary risks in what is still a very volatile and dangerous situation.

I would like to take the opportunity to commend the role that is being played by the local media. The ABC have been reporting regularly and providing the community with updates, as have the Illawarra Mercury on their internet site. I commend all local residents to follow the directions that are being provided by the police and other emergency services. I also take this opportunity to commend the work that is being performed by SES volunteers. The crews have responded magnificently. Over the last 42 hours there have been around 1,000 requests for assistance, including 470 requests today alone. I commend each and every one of these volunteers, who continue to do an outstanding job for the local community in terrible weather conditions, providing a much-needed helping hand to those battling the full brunt of nature. We know that they will be working around the clock and through the night to provide emergency assistance to those who are in the greatest need.

These are difficult and dangerous times, and I am advised that the circumstances are likely to get worse before they improve. To the people of Throsby, especially those residents in the Illawarra who are being directly affected by the floods, I take the opportunity to wish everybody the very best and ask that they stay safe and wait for the storm to pass, as it inevitably will. I know that all local government representatives will do their best to work together to assist the local community in their time of need.

The SPEAKER—I am sure honourable members would wish me to associate the House with the remarks of the member for Throsby. We hope that those in the Illawarra have a safe night and good morrow.

Question agreed to.

House adjourned at 10.30 pm

NOTICES

The following notices were given:

Mr Hockey to move:

That this House:

(1) notes the Government’s failure to keep its promise to hold a Tax Summit by 30 June 2011;

(2) considers that any genuine Tax Summit will properly review and report on Labor’s proposals to introduce a national mining tax and a carbon tax; and

(3) decides that no legislation to impose a national mining tax or a carbon tax be considered by the House until after the October Tax Summit has reported.

Ms Vamvakinou to move:

That this House:

(1) acknowledges the Federal Government’s National Consumer Credit Action Plan, particularly phase one of the plan which came into effect on 1 January 2011 and provides for licensing of all credit providers, new responsible lending requirements and access to external dispute resolution for all consumers of consumer credit;

(2) notes that phase two of the National Consumer Credit Action Plan will be considered
by the Government in 2011, which will include consideration of new rules to apply to small amount short term loans (often known as payday loans);

(3) calls on all Members of this House to consider and consult with relevant community organisations on the impact of small amount short term loans on vulnerable constituents, particularly the impact of very expensive interest, fees and charges which can be detrimental to household budgets and reduce the ability for people to manage their day-to-day finances; and

(4) calls on the Minister for Financial Services and Superannuation to improve the operation of the consumer credit market in Australia by ensuring that small amount short term loans are not damaging to families and households, by replacing the myriad of existing state-based interest rate limits with a single, national limit on the fees and interest that can be charged by short term lenders.

Mr Christensen to move:

That this House:

(1) recognises the one-hundredth anniversary of the sinking of SS Yongala;

(2) notes that:

(a) the SS Yongala sank in a cyclone on 23 March 1911 on a voyage from Mackay to Townsville;

(b) the SS Yongala was lost 12 nautical miles off Alva in the Burdekin; and

(c) 122 passengers lost their lives as a result of the ship’s sinking; and

(3) extends its thoughts and sympathies, at this time of memorial, to the living descendants of those who perished with the sinking of the SS Yongala.
Monday, 21 March 2011

STATEMENTS BY MEMBERS

Macarthur Electorate

Mr MATHESON (Macarthur) (10.42 am)—Today I want to mention a beautiful township in my electorate of Macarthur, the township of Appin, and its 200-year celebrations. The week of 13 May 2011 holds great significance for the historic township of Appin, as the community celebrates 200 years of settlement. The town will be holding week-long celebrations with a much anticipated festival on the weekend of 21 and 22 May. Opening the festivities will be the launch of the book *The Bicentenary of Appin 1811-2011*, followed by activities such as community workshops, street parades, traditional Scottish highland games, village displays, historical and bush tucker tours along with a colonial style ball and celebrations.

The festivities will conclude with a fireworks display on Sunday night. Appin’s bicentennial celebrations will bring together tourists, amateur historians and merrymakers from all over Sydney, the Illawarra and the Southern Highlands as we celebrate and explore the rich and vibrant history of this remarkable town.

Appin was founded in 1811 by Governor Lachlan Macquarie. It was named in memory of a small coastal village of the same name in Argyllshire, Scotland, where Governor Macquarie’s wife was born. It was the fifth village to be established in New South Wales and still boasts a number of original buildings dating back to the early 1800s.

Appin is the traditional land of the Dharawal people and a traditional meeting place for Aboriginal tribes from all over the east coast of New South Wales. In April 1816 the Appin massacre occurred, when 14 Dharawal men, women and children were shot dead by Governor Macquarie’s militia and an unknown number of tribe members were forced over the cliffs at Broughton Pass. This dark day in our colonial history has been remembered with the erection of a memorial plaque at the Cataract Dam picnic site, where an annual service is held in honour of the massacre victims.

Today, Appin is home to a close-knit community of 1,750 people and is well known for its award-winning bakery and historically significant buildings as well as the thousands of hectares of nearby national parks, bushwalking trails and the Cataract gorge and dam.

I express my thanks to the Appin 200 committee and officially recognise the many hours of hard work they have put into organising these great celebrations. To Leanne Zautsen, Sharon Shelton, Ray Sle, Kwilang Ng, Julianne Rawcliffe and John Jones: I know that the coming festivities will do justice to your hard work. I look forward to attending the celebrations and welcome the wider Sydney community to attend as well.

Blacktown Girls High School

Ms ROWLAND (Greenway) (10.44 am)—Last Monday I had the pleasure of attending the morning assembly of Blacktown Girls High School, in my electorate of Greenway, to confer badges on two of the school’s new flag monitors and present them with a new Australian flag. I was enlightened to discover how prestigious it is at Blacktown Girls High to hold the position of flag monitor. This is because at the beginning of each school day three flags are
respectfully raised in the school grounds: the Australian flag, the Aboriginal flag and the flag of a different nation. This third category of alternating country flags honours the 57 different nationalities that are represented by the 725 students enrolled at Blacktown Girls High.

Over 50 per cent of students at Blacktown Girls High have a language background other than English. As I looked out over the assembly at the beautiful, diverse faces of these young women gathered together in the middle of Blacktown, drawn from virtually every continent on earth and including many Indigenous young women, my belief in the strength of multiculturalism as a practical, living thing was reinforced. These young women are united both in their differences and in their common goal to pursue the highest educational opportunities and make the best lives for themselves and their families.

In order to be selected for the Committee of Flag Monitors at Blacktown Girls High, potential candidates must submit an essay which demonstrates their understanding of the importance of multiculturalism and the significance of the national flags of other countries. The role of flag monitor includes selecting the other national flag that will be flown on any given day and ensuring that the arrival of each new student from a different country is greeted by the purchase of a corresponding flag. As I was informed by the school’s fantastic principal, Mr Peter Flowers, the total number of such flags from other countries continues to grow each year.

It was also fitting that the occasion of this new flag handover was on Monday, 14 March, which the students honoured as Commonwealth Day. The two fine school captains of Blacktown Girls High, Loloma Sagote and Rachel Ferret, delivered a most appropriate address on the official theme of Commonwealth Day 2011, being ‘Women as agents of change’. I was deeply touched by their comments that, as a woman born and educated in Western Sydney, they considered me to be an example of an agent of change. I say right back to those 725 young women of Blacktown Girls High that you, your principal and your dedicated teachers are the finest models of agents of change in my eyes.

Finally, I congratulate the community of Blacktown Girls High School for an outstanding 2010 academic year. The school became partially selective last year and recorded the highest number of university placement offers in its history. I know these young women are the next captains of industry, leaders of people, sports stars and scientists. I again praise the efforts of Principal Peter Flowers and his team and, of course, the young women of Blacktown Girls High, who have worked so hard, and their supportive families. The school is a credit to the Greenway community. It is my honour to represent them in this place.

Dornan, Mrs Dimity, AO

Mrs PRENTICE (Ryan) (10.47 am)—As I said in my maiden speech, I draw great inspiration from the remarkable people living in my electorate of Ryan. One such person—and she is truly remarkable—is Mrs Dimity Dornan, AO, the 2010 Queensland of the Year and founder of the Hear and Say Centre. Dimity is a true inspiration. Graduating as part of the inaugural class of speech pathologists from the University of Queensland in 1964 at just 18 years of age, Dimity has dedicated over four decades of her life to improving the lives of the hearing impaired.

A particular incident that shaped Dimity’s life occurred early in her career when she came across a severely distressed young man sobbing in the gutter outside the hospital where she
worked. Dimity tried to calm the man and asked what was wrong, suspecting he may have been in an accident or was seriously ill. The man became further distressed at this and would not speak to Dimity. As it turned out, he could not speak to her as he was a student from the school for the deaf. It was not until a teacher from the school came down and communicated with him in sign language that Dimity discovered that his problem was simply that he had forgotten his bus fare.

Dimity was moved by the isolation this man must have felt at not being able to convey such a simple, everyday problem. It moved her to dedicate her career to working with the hearing impaired, and, after many years of research and work in the field, in 1992 Dimity founded the first Hear and Say Centre in Brisbane, offering free-of-charge services for deaf children. Starting with just six children, the Hear and Say Centre now supports over 400 children and their families and has expanded to have another five centres in Queensland, with additional outreach services for remote and rural communities.

Dimity’s research found that parents are a child’s most natural language teachers, and the therapies taught at the centres build on this foundation, as parents can take the teaching home with them. The results have been extraordinary. As Dimity says, for the first time in history they have been able to prove that a group of children with hearing loss can develop speech and listening skills at the same rate as a group of hearing children of the same age and language ability. This has a profound effect on a child’s life.

As well as providing this audio-verbal therapy, the Hear and Say Centre is a world-class cochlear implant facility, providing the six years of intensive therapy that accompanies this transplant free of charge to children and their families. Dimity and her team are leading the world with this treatment and have found that a child who has a cochlear transplant and attends the Hear and Say Centre for treatment in Australia has a 92 per cent chance of attending a mainstream school, whereas a child in Europe with the same degree of hearing loss who receives a cochlear implant has just a 33 per cent chance. This difference is stark and to me is one of the clearest statistics demonstrating just how much benefit this centre provides.

I speak of Dimity Dornan and the Hear and Say Centre today not only to congratulate her for her achievements but also to remind the government of the enormous contribution she makes. The Hear and Say Centre is without a doubt one of the most worthy recipients of funding support, and I am determined to assist them. I will not stand quietly by if the government neglects the Hear and Say Centre when funding is needed. Dimity Dornan is a true inspiration, a leader and a role model. Her work with the Hear and Say Centre is invaluable. I commend her achievements and pledge my commitment to working with her in the future.

Wakefield Electorate: Leopard Tank

Mr CHAMPION (Wakefield) (10.50 am)—Last week it was my great pleasure to welcome to the town of Two Wells in my electorate a Leopard tank. This decommissioned tank has already become a great local icon. The Plains Producer, which is the local paper that covers the Adelaide Plains, reported that ‘The Leopard has landed’. Its front page has a photo of the tank and various people, including me. There has already been a big splash for this decommissioned Leopard tank.

For the last two years or so the local RSL in Two Wells, whose president is Tony Flaherty and secretary is John Allen, have worked very hard on getting this tank. They are very com-
mitted to the local town and their local club, making sure that it is not just a club for veterans but a club for the whole community. This decommissioned Leopard tank, which has been placed in the main street, is a great symbol of their commitment to the local community.

I thank Nick Femia and Rick Martin from Milagro Construction and Premix Concrete, who constructed and donated to the town the base on which to sit the tank. It is a great commitment by both those companies. I acknowledge their contribution.

We had 100 or so people out to watch the Leopard come off the back of a truck and be put on its base by a rather large crane. Many members of the community got a chance to sit inside the tank and examine what a claustrophobic environment it must have been for the soldiers who served in it. My electorate has a big defence presence, with RAAF Base Edinburgh and with DSTO. Most recently we had 7RAR come down from Darwin. As Tony Flaherty said to the local paper:

It's important—
that people—
remember the futility of war and the people who died wearing a uniform—both men and women.
That sentiment was there when this tank arrived. It serves to remind us of the tremendous commitment of our fighting men and women. It reminds us that they have often died and sacrificed to protect not only our liberty but the liberty of others as well.

Gordon East Public School

Mr FLETCHER (Bradfield) (10.53 am)—I rise to speak about Gordon East Public School in my electorate. Last year I asked a question of the then Minister for Education about the Building the Education Revolution works at Gordon East Public School. In essence, I asked why it was that the school was facing such high building costs. This followed concerns raised with me by parents at the school who thought it was surprising that, for an allocation of $2 million, they were to receive only four classrooms.

The response I received to my question was rather dismissive. In fact, the then Minister for Education put to me that I should apologise to the principal of the school for having the temerity to raise the issue. Therefore I was, as you may appreciate, Mr Deputy Speaker, interested to see what might be said by the Orgill inquiry—the Building the Education Revolution Implementation Taskforce—when it released its report in December 2010. Just as I was interested, so were members of the Gordon East Public School community, and particularly the P&C.

I take a moment to congratulate the P&C of Gordon East Public School on the commitment they make to working as volunteers to advance the interests of the school and the school community, particularly the students. Like so many parents on parents and citizens bodies around Australia, they do a terrific job. It is volunteer work. The contribution they make is tremendous and should be acknowledged.

It was a sad fact that the Orgill inquiry report rated Gordon East Public School zero out of 10 for cost. The finding of the Orgill inquiry—that is, Minister Gillard’s handpicked inquiry—was that the project at Gordon East Public School did not represent value for money.

These matters should be put on the record, and they are, but the important question now is: what will happen next? I have met with the P&C of Gordon East Public School. They make
the point that some important things at the school could be done if the matter were to be properly rectified. The Orgill inquiry makes some recommendations as to rectification. For example, it cites a covered walkway and solar cells as part of rescoping additions. So I use this opportunity to call for a constructive way forward to ensure that Gordon East Public School and its school community be dealt with appropriately. Now that it has been confirmed that taxpayers did not get good value for money, let us see whether we can rectify the problem and get it solved.

Fraser Electorate: Social Justice Summit

Dr LEIGH (Fraser) (10.56 am)—The community sector is vital to helping disadvantaged Australians. It is often overlooked in politics. In my time in office I intend to make it a priority to connect with and support community organisations in the ACT.

On 1 March I held a breakfast round table discussion in Parliament House with 13 community leaders in my electorate. The purpose of the discussion was to learn more about the unmet needs in Canberra, the public policies that are working to help the disadvantaged, and changes that should be made to help them more.

Those who attended were Lynne Harwood from Galilee, Annie Madden from the Australian Injection and Illicit Drug Users League, Clare Doube from Companion House, Roslyn Dundas from ACTOSS, Frances Crimmins from the YWCA, Diria Horne from Belconnen Community Service, Gordon Ramsay from Canberra Region Uniting Church, Sue-Anne Muggleton from UnitingCare, Shannon Pickles from St Vincent de Paul Society, Jenny Kitchin from Anglicare, Amy Kilpatrick from the ACT Human Rights Commission, Simon Rosenberg from Northside Community Service and Jackson Dunkley from Catholic Care. I was also joined by Alicia Payne, convenor of the ACT ALP’s Community Services and Social Justice Policy Committee.

Many attendees argued that Canberra’s most pressing social policy problem is housing affordability. We discussed homelessness, which is becoming a growing problem, especially for large families and youth. We discussed the importance of reducing the stigma and discrimination that is often directed towards disadvantaged Australians. Through preventive measures some of the participants expressed their belief that we can address poverty and disadvantage at its source rather than simply trying to react to homelessness, drug overdoses and mental health problems after the damage has been done. Some participants expressed concern about the balance of spending between proactive and reactive measures.

We also discussed the infrastructure of the community sector. Some participants believe that amalgamations or mergers are efficient and practical, whereas others argued that maintaining small, values-based organisations is the best way to run the community sector.

From my perspective, and hopefully that of other attendees, the summit was a tremendous success. The discussion was constructive and enjoyable and I hope it will be the start of an ongoing conversation. I want to publicly thank all of those who attended for their willingness to speak on these important issues so early in the morning and for their constructive and respectful attitude to their colleagues during the discussion.

Finally, I would like to thank Matt Hunter from Carleton College in Minnesota. Organising this event was the major project of Matt’s internship in my office and he did it with diligence and modesty.
Harmony Day

Mr TUDGE (Aston) (10.59 am)—Yesterday I had the pleasure of celebrating Harmony Day in my electorate with several hundred members of the local Indian community. The venue was the Sant Nirankari Mission, which is based in Rowville, in the southern part of my electorate. The leaders of the mission, including Reverends Tuli and Manjit Singh, had organised the special day to recognise and celebrate Australia’s achievements in integrating so successfully people from hundreds of different countries and cultures.

The members present at the celebrations, all members of the mission, were great examples of this. Many had been born in India and had come to Australia only in recent years. Yet, like so many new Australians, they had immediately and actively involved themselves in the local community. One small example of this was their contribution to Clean Up Australia Day just a couple of weeks ago, where they had the second or third largest group in Victoria participating in the Clean Up Australia Day activities.

The story of this group is similar to that of so many other migrants to Australia, who come here to seek a better life, to grab the opportunities that Australia presents and to contribute to making our country even better. I myself come from immigrant parents. My parents arrived in Australia just before I was born and established themselves in Pakenham on the eastern outskirts of Melbourne, the last stop on the train line.

Today, 44 per cent of Australians were born overseas or have parents, like mine, who were born overseas. People have come here from almost every country on the planet. Over 200 languages are spoken in addition to our mainstream language, English. I believe that we are the most successful country in the world at accommodating, welcoming and integrating so many people from so many cultures. No other country has done this as well as we have. Our success is in part due to successive government policies. But, more importantly, it is due to two things: the attitude and willingness of new migrants, who come to our shores and seek to contribute to our nation and integrate into our community, and the attitude and willingness of existing Australians who so generously welcome newcomers to our shores.

Our nation is not perfect in this regard—far from it. We must continue to stamp out racism where it exists and we must continue to work to encourage all new Australians to integrate into the community. But on National Harmony Day we rightly focus on our achievements, and I believe that those achievements are second to none.

Epilepsy: Purple Day

Ms HALL (Shortland) (11.02 am)—Half a million Australians will be affected by epilepsy in their lifetime. Purple Day will be held on 26 March 2011. It is a global grassroots effort dedicated to raising awareness of epilepsy worldwide. The federal government is helping to further the understanding of epilepsy by funding research. It has funded research through the SEISMIC study—that is through the George Institute for Global Health and through Epilepsy Action—and it is also funding research through Epilepsy Australia. Both groups are dedicated to coming up with treatments for and strategies for management of epilepsy.

In this parliament I have risen on many occasions to speak about epilepsy. It is on the record that my sister-in-law has suffered from epilepsy since she was 10 years old. Last week in my electorate office, two people came to see me, one person who is awaiting the outcome of her diagnosis in relation to epilepsy, with the uncertainty that surrounds it, and another...
woman whose husband is her carer who needs to have ongoing caring and monitoring because her epilepsy causes her ongoing problems. That is not unusual, as with my sister-in-law, whose epilepsy has never been able to be totally controlled.

Further to that I would like to talk about Annabelle from Lake Munmorah in my electorate. When she was 5½ months old she had meningococcal and, following that, she had some toxic seizures. Afterwards her mother, Tanya, noticed a change and a dramatic decline in her memory and her abilities in a number of other activities. That is quite often what it is with epilepsy. You cannot quite put your finger on it. She had a two-year rollercoaster of looking at medications and appointments with neurologists and paediatricians and finally she had the diagnosis of epilepsy. I think that is probably pretty common with most people. There is an uncertainty around the diagnosis, then there is trialling the medication, then there is stabilising and being able to get on with your life.

Tanya is undertaking some fundraising in my electorate, trying to raise awareness of and funds for epilepsy. In the last parliament we had the Friends of Epilepsy, and that group will be reactivating in the very near future. Purple Day is an opportunity for all Australians to consider the impact of epilepsy and the effects it has on those who have epilepsy and their families. I hope that all members get behind Purple Day. (Time expired)

**Sham Contracting**

Ms O’DWYER (Higgins) (11.05 am)—The Australian Building and Construction Commissioner has announced hearings for an inquiry into so-called ‘sham’ contracting in the construction industry. But, given the response by unions and the approach that this government has taken to industrial relations, it is the Labor Party that is the real sham. The Labor Party is committed to rolling back workplace relations reform and reintroducing regulation that pre-dates even the Hawke-Keating reforms. This greatly concerns my constituents in Higgins. The latest ploy by the government and unions is to force subcontractors to become employees under the definition of the Fair Work Act and to be subject to the same regulations as though they were directly employed by a business.

The Australian Building and Construction Commissioner is launching an investigation into the so-called sham contractors after reports that a small number of migrant workers were alleged to have worked without being covered by certain entitlements available to non-contracted workers. Curiously, despite the investigation being held at the instigation of the unions, the Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union is refusing to participate in the inquiry, claiming that the ABCC has not acted soon enough.

The investigation comes as the Federal Court has imposed $170,000 in penalties on the CFMEU and nine of its officials after they admitted to unlawful industrial activity and coercion. The ABCC has also recently accused the CFMEU of breaching right-of-entry provisions, with one union official alleged to have entered a work site, threatening to shut it down and deliberately obstructing work.

These sorts of cases occur regularly in the construction industry, which has developed a notorious reputation for violence and intimidation. Most of this unlawful activity the ABCC cannot control, but Labor’s watering down of the ABCC’s powers will make it even harder for it to put a stop to these abuses.
What we are seeing now is the result of a watered-down ABCC that has been reduced to a political tool for the Australian Labor Party in government. The crackdown on so-called sham contractors could very easily lead to genuine contractors being subjected to regulations which force them out of business.

The aim of the unions is to undermine the legitimacy of independent contractors by deliberately confusing the term ‘sham contractor’. A contractor who performs work that could possibly be done by an employee is not a sham contractor, nor is a contractor who is employed for a significant period of time with a business. If the unions get their way with this inquiry, legitimate small business men and women will be stifled. The productivity gains made in the construction industry under the coalition government will be eaten away. If independent contractors, who are responsible for their own businesses and do not want the government to push them into the hands of the unions, are prevented from offering their services, then we can expect a return to the low productivity that plagued the industry before there was a cop on the beat.

To get an idea of how the CFMEU operates, you can take a look at their rostered-days-off calendar for 2011, which I will speak of another time.

**Thu Duc Ex-Reserve Officers Association**

Mr HAYES (Fowler) (11.08 am)—Recently I had the pleasure of attending two functions organised by the Thu Duc Ex-Reserve Officers Association. Since 1987, the association has been working with and on behalf of veterans who graduated from the Thu Duc Military Academy in Vietnam. I identify with and fully support the values and objectives of this organisation, particularly the values of helping others, defending human rights in Vietnam and engaging in charity activities as well as providing emotional and financial support to former soldiers. I thank the two presidents of the Thu Duc Ex-Reserve Officers Association, Thinh Van Nguyen and Ngoc Quang Pham, for their kind invitation to attend their respective functions.

This year marks the 59th anniversary of the Thu Duc Military Academy, which was established in Vietnam. The Thu Duc academy trained more than 40,000 South Vietnamese army officers to fight for freedom. It produced several thousand officers each year and became the army’s primary source of their small-unit leaders. The officers who trained at the Thu Duc academy learned the values of discipline and respect. They also showed great courage. It is entirely fitting that those officers who now call Australia home are supported and cared for through the good work of the Thu Duc officers association.

I note with sadness that many of the officers who trained through the Thu Duc academy would have suffered following the fall of Saigon. Many fled Vietnam with their families in the hope of a better life, and I know that many found their way to Australia and are making a major contribution to our way of life in this country. They have sought to make Australia home and in doing so have contributed amazingly to the fabric of our society, particularly in my electorate of Fowler.

It should be the role and responsibility of all generations to ensure that our veterans are remembered and honoured. In that context, I value the work of the Thu Duc Ex-Reserve Officers Association, who ensure that their members—those who graduated from the Thu Duc Military Academy—and all South Vietnamese soldiers who fled following the fall of Saigon are not forgotten. They maintain their position in terms of democracy and freedom for Viet-
nam; indeed, they work tirelessly in support of human rights in that region. I thank the Thu Duc Ex-Reserve Officers Association for their role and for embracing me as the member for Fowler.

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

PRIVATE MEMBERS’ BUSINESS

Torres Strait Flooding

Debate resumed, on motion by Mr Entsch:

That this House:

(1) notes the severe flooding effects taking place in the outer islands of the Torres Strait and the dire conditions the Torres Strait Islander people find themselves in each year;

(2) recognises that:

(a) the Torres Strait Islander people deserve the same rights as the people in flooded South-East Queensland;

(b) discrimination should not exist in one particular area of the nation;

(c) the Torres Strait Islander people have been experiencing flood devastation for the past four years with no help from Government; and

(d) sea wall infrastructure at six low-lying islands is inadequate and in urgent need of repair; and

(3) in light of the evidence of continued flooding on the outer islands due to king tidal surges, calls on the Government to commit to restore and rebuild the damaged sea walls on the outer islands of the Torres Strait to protect the island communities from further devastation.

Mr ENTSCH (Leichhardt) (11.11 am)—I rise today to give voice to a considerable number of my constituents in the northernmost part of my electorate in the Torres Strait. I refer to some 1,000 to 1,500 permanent residents in a series of islands in the northern part of the state. There are the four coral islands of Iama, Poruma, Masig and Warraber, and then you have the two mud islands—which are quite close to the mainland of Papua New Guinea—Saibai and Boigu. For a considerable time, these islands have been suffering significantly from flooding. In the case of the two mud islands, we have a situation where we have deteriorating seawalls, infrastructure which has been there for well over 40 years. The extreme elements in that area have seen those walls start to deteriorate and be breached by the sea. As a consequence, we now find that, with every king tide, all of those homes are being washed out completely. This has a massive effect on these communities.

We have to understand that the total inundation contaminates their fresh water supply and sewerage system and means things like a high risk of Japanese encephalitis and the increased risk of other diseases like meningitis—not to mention illnesses in relation to youngsters, such as diarrhoea and other serious health problems. They have been pleading for years to have this matter addressed, so much so that the Mayor of the Torres Strait Island Regional Council, Mr Fred Gela, actually commissioned a report, which was completed, I think, in 2007, in which he figured that the community itself had to identify a way to have this fixed. The report suggested that, for an investment of $22 million, all of these communities could have their problems addressed in relation to inundation by seawater. To date, the report has been ignored—totally ignored.
During the last election campaign, I was proud to be able to announce that a coalition government, recognising the urgency of the issue, would put in $22 million over two years. The problem would have been addressed and resolved, and of course my constituents were very pleased with that. Unfortunately, we did not get into government, and it seems to me that, in spite of commitments by the Labor government that this matter would be addressed, it is still on the backburner. As recently as a few weeks ago, these communities were once again flooded.

We have seen the trauma of what happened in the south-east corner, extending right down the eastern seaboard into Victoria, and how people were affected by floods. Why would it be any different for these 1,500 residents? They are being impacted the same way, and not once but year after year. Why is their plight any different? This government has now introduced a flood levy to help people affected by the floods, particularly in the south-east corner of Queensland, to address this—but there is no mention of the people affected by flood in the Torres Strait. It seems that they are totally forgotten in this whole debate, and I found that quite outrageous.

I was with the mayor of the Saibai council just before Christmas, Mr Ron Enosa. He took me for a drive to the leeside of his island and I was disturbed and absolutely dismayed to find so many of their graves in their cemetery washed into the ocean. Could you imagine the outrage if a cemetery in Sydney or Melbourne or Brisbane was washed into the sea? This is what is happening on Saibai Island today. This is not just a new phenomenon, this has been happening for a number of years. The problem is that you cannot get all of the television stations or the major newspapers up there, and it seems to me that this government only reacts to a sensational headline or a lead seven-minute grab on the television and then, as soon as it is over, they forget it exists. But these people have real needs and the option that we have, unfortunately, is one that really should not be contemplated.

I know that the Labor Party has attacked us on many occasions in relation to the way we deal with Indigenous issues. You may recall the Bringing them home report, the stolen generations, the forceful removal of Indigenous people. We are now at a stage where we are going to have to forcefully remove whole communities from these places and find somewhere else for them on mainland Australia. At the same time, we are running around talking about foreign aid for climate issues in relation to the Pacific Islands that are being affected and throwing taxpayers’ money at them. Great, but what about our own backyard? How is it going to impact on these families who have culturally and traditionally lived in these communities forever? Where are we going to put them? How is it going to impact on the native title rights of other individuals when we relocate what are sea people onto the mainland? What is going to happen to all of these cemeteries as they are being washed away? Their connection with their ancestors, their connection with those they have lost.

Mr Deputy Speaker, how would you feel if you knew that your grandparents and your children and your other relatives’ graves are being washed out to sea where you have no way to visit them? That is what is happening on Saibai today. And we start to look at this, we take these people and forcefully remove them—I am telling you, a lot of the oldies do not want to go, and they will not go. It will be a forced removal. We will rob them of their culture and their homeland. We will force them into somebody else’s community, as we have done before. Fortunately, there was some cooperation with places like Seisia and Bamaga where some
people came from Saibai down to there. We had another situation down on Lockhart River. This is very different though. These people are being dragged away because of something that is absolutely and totally avoidable, for the sake of a $22 million investment to rebuild these walls that should have been done years ago as they started to deteriorate. The fact is they do not have access to mainstream media and they cannot get the pressure of a television news story—which is very graphic, I can assure you, when you stand there watching tombstones that are very important people. Strategically we are talking about islands that are three kilometres from the mainland of Papua New Guinea. These islands are strategically very important to us, and we can not afford to be in a situation where we have to forcefully remove those entire populations and relocate them.

So what I am saying in this motion is that I am desperately trying to give a voice to those forgotten people in the furthermost regions of Australia. They are as much Australians as those people affected by the floods in Brisbane, in Victoria or in New South Wales. They are entitled to exactly the same consideration as those people in Queensland—they are in fact part of Queensland. The difference is they have been suffering for three, four or five years now, not from a single phenomenon, and they are entitled to have the same value put on their homes, on their communities and on their cemeteries. They have a right to be able to visit the resting place of their people, their ancestors from time immemorial. We cannot sit back and allow this devastation to continue, this sacrilege of very special places for these people. I am pleading with this government to commit the $22 million now, not to wait for another election cycle, because I can assure you this side of the parliament is already committed to making it happen. Why should we see more of those cemeteries washed away? Why should we see more of these kids suffering from diarrhoea, japanese encephalitis or these other things because of this totally unsuitable situation? Water contamination from sewage is totally inappropriate and we should not even be contemplating the thought of forcefully removing these families because the government sits on its hands and does nothing. (Time expired)

Mr RIPOLL (Oxley) (11.21 am)—I want to begin by commending for a short moment the motion moved by the member for Leichhardt, who just spoke, in relation to the plight of the people of the Torres Strait Islands. I think everyone in this House would agree that in some parts of Northern Queensland and closer to Papua New Guinea the people of the Torres Strait do do it tough and have for many years been affected by flooding. They have a whole range of very complex problems that they are facing and it is good to hear that people do stand up and have a voice so that we can actually look at better ways to address some of the complex problems. But I will criticise the member, just for two things. One is that he oversimplified the problem by just playing a simple game of blaming government. If you are going to do this then do it properly. The member smiles and I know why he does. If you are going to do it, just do it properly and be genuine and sincere about being a voice—

Mr Entsch interjecting—

Mr RIPOLL—No, it’s you that doesn’t get it. If you are sincere about being a voice then do it properly. Come into this place and bring people with you, because there are people who will understand and be sympathetic and who will want to assist you. But oversimplifying the issue and overdoing the rhetoric does not actually help your cause. You would be better off trying to find some of the solutions to the complex problems that are faced by people genuinely in need in that area. We all understand that. But you are just coming in here bleating
about blaming government and saying, ‘If only we’d spend $22 million all the problems would be fixed.’ I think the problems are just a little bit more complex than that.

Trying to portray that this government is doing nothing is completely wrong. It is completely false. In fact, there is quite a bit happening. But before I get onto what we are actually doing let me say that I do not want to diminish or in any way simplify the very real problems that people in the Torres Strait Islands face. As we have all experienced recently, particularly in Queensland but in other parts of Australia—and for that matter the rest of the world—flooding devastation and other natural disasters are a real problem and they really do affect people in enormous ways. In my electorate alone, in a part of the world where we do not expect flooding, certainly not on a regular basis, the recent Queensland floods were an enormous thing to bear. So I can imagine what it must be like for the people up in the Torres Strait, where they face this flooding every single year—in fact more than once a year, as I understand it, with tidal surges and a range of other inundation problems.

But the problems are very different. In the member’s motion he states that there should not be any discrimination and people should be treated alike. Hear, hear! Absolutely. I completely agree, but we also need to recognise that we are facing very different problems. It is not a one in 100 year flood that we are facing or a very unusual and rare event caused by a whole range of matters in Queensland that we are still dealing with. In the Torres Strait, in the particular islands that the member mentioned, we are talking about regular flooding—flooding more than once a year, in fact, on a regular basis. So we need to look at the underlying issues. If I read it correctly, this motion talks about climate change. It really does look at what is happening with rising sea levels, what is impacting on those particular islands. I find it a little bit disingenuous. I understand the member is serious and is sincere about wanting to help people up in the north and in the Torres Strait—I do accept that. I do not challenge that. But he is being a little bit insincere in the way he portrays this and does not even address or deal with the issue of climate change.

If we are going to look seriously at these matters, something that the Labor Party has been talking about for many years is the real risk to low-lying islands and particularly the people in the Torres Strait, who will be the first people affected by climate change and rising sea levels. Yet it is only this government that is prepared to step up and make some tough decisions and tough choices about doing something about that for the long term. We are not just fixing a wall for the short term but actually looking beyond that, beyond what a seawall or other minor infrastructure changes might do today. We are looking to the future and looking at how we can actually do something about climate change more globally. To me, nothing speaks more of our understanding of the need to take some action, to help these people in the Torres Strait, than what we are trying to do about climate change. We are trying to at least pull back, trying to do our bit, because Australia will be the most affected country in the world. Australia will be the one that has the highest price to pay, and it will not be people where the good member lives who pay. It will not be the people living where he lives or where I live, particularly, who will pay, but it will be people on the low-lying outer islands, in the regions and in those coastal communities. Those who are at the lowest sea levels will pay the highest price.

The member used some very emotive language. He talked about a range of issues. I would say to him that I understand how difficult, how emotive it must be for people to be forcibly removed, but I do not know that this government was forcibly removing anybody. Perhaps he
might want to rethink the forcible removal that he is proposing, because it is certainly not a policy of this government to forcibly remove anybody. We are there to assist people. There are a number of programs in place and we are spending some money to try to deal with these problems, but forcibly removing people? It might be the member’s idea or the member’s policy but it is certainly not this government’s policy.

He talked about the graves and the homes and Indigenous people’s rights, and I agree that I would be devastated if my home were in a low-lying region that is now being overrun by rising sea levels. You would want to be doing something about that, absolutely, and you would want to be working with that community, not against that community. You would not want to be forcibly removing anybody, but you would want to be working with that community, and that is exactly what this government is doing. We are more than aware of the problem of coastal erosion and inundation facing the Torres Strait Island communities and we have already funded work to assess the risks and identify adaptation options in some of those communities, because you just cannot go in with a heavy hand. You cannot just go in and forcibly remove people. That might be the policy of the coalition and of the member, but it is not the policy of this government. So while inundation is being experienced, and it is consistent with what we have been saying for a number of years about climate change, I do not see any support for asking: how do we start to pull that back? There are specific responses that can be made.

There is also a need to understand that a flood in South-East Queensland is nothing like and has no relationship to inundation, rising sea levels or other complex flooding experiences that occur in that part of the world. This government is addressing some key issues in making sure we better understand those sea levels and have proper projections so that, if there are to be seawalls, we know what height they should be. Perhaps we should not just go and build them to a certain height, whatever it might be, only to find out in a season’s time that it was actually the wrong height or in the wrong place, not where it was supposed to be. Of course, it is always easy for members to be very critical, to heap on plenty of rhetoric, to oversimplify complex problems and to say somebody else should pay for the issue. The government has already provided some $400,000 for new research into the impacts of climate change on the Torres Strait Island communities, to see how we can develop strategies to better assist those communities. The Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs is also working jointly—that’s right, a foreign concept—with that community through the Torres Strait Regional Authority. We have given them a further $1 million for the operation and maintenance of regional tidal gauge networks. We are trying to better understand the things that are happening in those communities so we can actually deal with them properly, deal with them in a measured way.

I go back to where I started. I commend the member for Leichhardt for being a voice—and I say that genuinely. It is his community, it is his electorate and he ought to be doing that. That is his role. That is what he ought to be coming into this place to do. But, if you are going to do it, bring people with you. We feel for those people too. We want more to be done. But let us go through it properly. Let us make sure that we can organise it around what really ought to happen rather than just what the member thinks ought to happen. Then, if he is serious about helping those communities into the long term, he should look at starting to address the single
biggest problem that those communities face in the Torres Strait, and that is rising sea levels as a matter of climate change.

These are recent events. These are events that have happened in the last 20, 30 and 40 years. They are complex problems. They are not problems that can be just washed away, as it were, by merely saying, ‘A little bit more money here and we will patch up a few tidal walls and the problem will go away.’ I am sad to say that the problem probably will not go away. It is a problem that will last for some time and we ought to do something about it in a serious manner.

I too think this is an important matter. I too think that the people of the Torres Strait, their homes, their graves, their communities and their rights are as valuable as anyone else’s in Australia. We ought to be doing as much as we can up there to assist them, but we ought to do it properly and we ought to do it in conjunction with the community and with the cooperation of the community. We ought to make sure that proper adaptation principles are used up there and that we respect people’s rights. Where we can be of assistance we should be, and we should make sure that we work with the local Torres Strait Regional Authority. That is the proper course of action. That is the way that this government will act to continue to do its work properly. (Time expired)

Dr STONE (Murray) (11.31 am)—I strongly support the private member’s motion moved today by Mr Entsch, the member for Leichhardt. I could not agree with it more. Let me say that the coalition strongly supports it. It is of critical concern that we make sure that all Australians can live in safety. Certainly there is an issue of climate change. The coalition has a detailed strategy to address climate change. But if you just have that ethereal look and a lot of theory about what could happen with climate change and you have a carbon tax agenda and ignore at the same time the fact that there are communities being inundated as we speak in our Torres Strait Islands, with their sea walls disappearing, then how good is this government? It is ignoring a problem that can be fixed with some cement and mortar and some heavy machinery. It is a job that could be done tomorrow.

But what we are hearing from the government, as we just heard from the member for Oxley, who was speaking before me, is: ‘Let’s think about climate change. Let’s not think about the six low-lying outer islands in the Torres Strait, which for four years have lived with the dangers of sea inundation and island flooding.’ They have watched their cemeteries wash away. Their children’s health has been jeopardised by contaminated water and difficulties with mosquitoes and other water related conditions because the government has failed to do the simplest thing, which is to repair inadequate, partly destroyed sea walls—40-year-old sea walls.

Let us do the job that is immediately demanding action. Let us do it right now. Let us listen to the member for Leichhardt. As he said, the coalition have committed the funding but we are not, unfortunately, going to be in government in the next few months. Therefore, this government needs to adopt the actions that the member who moved this motion has identified. It is not rocket science. It is a matter of equity and justice for people who deserve better.

No-one in the opposition is surprised by Labor’s neglect of these remoter communities, these non-metropolitan communities. As the member for Leichhardt said, they are beyond the Canberra press gallery’s immediate and easy reach, beyond the daily metropolitan newspapers and beyond the electronic media’s interest. When you have issues that are a little bit further
away than Sydney, Melbourne, Adelaide and Brisbane then you struggle for attention from this government. That is simply not fair and it is un-Australian.

Labor stopped the funding of Landcare. People on the other side might say: ‘What the heck does that matter? What’s Landcare?’ Landcare was a 25-year-old program which was keeping environmental services going in our country. It managed weeds, feral animals and biodiversity. It was abolished without even an apology from the Labor government. The Natural Heritage Trust also disappeared.

But one of the worst was the independent youth allowance for rural and regional students. Again, the government of today has said: ‘Well, you know, it doesn’t really matter. Those kids, if they’re smart enough, will get to uni somehow.’ The realities are that country kids, those beyond the tram tracks, those beyond the green and leafy suburbs, are now deferring going to university at rates of twice those of metropolitan students. That is the erosion of the next generation of professionals in Australia. It is kids who on merit had places in universities but could not afford to go. The rate of university deferral in country Victoria has gone up to 15.2 per cent in 2010, while in the same year city deferrals are only seven per cent in Victoria. That means the rate of deferrals in country Victoria is double. And, of those who defer, only three out of 10 ever go back to take up the study option. That is another example of how this government turns and looks the other way when it comes to the needs of people beyond the metropolitan Australian populations. It is just not fair.

Then we go back again to this issue of serious flooding in the Torres Strait Islands. They have had violent storms, tidal surges, and you can imagine the terror of those populations during the recent cyclones that wiped out so much of Queensland—and of course south-east Queensland suffered dreadfully with their floods. We have had all those losses of lives. You can imagine the terror of being on a small, low-lying island like Saibai as those king tides, those violent storms, washed through and over their inadequate 40-year-old walls. I cannot imagine the terror of having that occur—and both the state and federal governments were looking the other way.

I am all for the support that is now being given particularly to flood affected victims in south-east Queensland. The coalition does not object to that. In fact we support that level of financial assistance to put farmers back on their feet, to put community non-government organisations back on their feet and to help local government. We wonder, though, why that same generosity of spirit does not extend to other parts of Australia like the Torres Strait but also like my electorate in northern Victoria, where I too saw floods devastate my communities. Over 80,000 hectares of field crops and 120,000 tonnes of hay and silage are gone, over 330,000 chooks, hens, were killed and over 11,000 sheep were destroyed. This is also devastation, but we have not had much media attention.

Today Prince William is going to one of the small communities still under water in northern Victoria. We hope that therefore the media entourage will take a good look at what it means to live in Benjeroop right now, a month after the flood but still with six inches of water through your house. We hope he will bring some attention to the problem, but what we want is the Prime Minister, Julia Gillard, and the Labor government to focus on it too. We want them to announce that part D of the natural disaster funding that is available in south-east Queensland is also available in Victoria. We want to see the state government of Victoria—which unfortunately has inherited a budget with a lot fewer dollars in it than it anticipated.
from the recently departed Labor state government—hand in hand with the federal government of Australia, saying, ‘Yes, we’ve got to restore those rural communities in northern Victoria, just like the Queensland government is being helped with south-east Queensland.’ Too often, we are ‘out of sight, out of mind’.

We have seen the government weep crocodile tears for low-lying Pacific islands—and we join with them in saying that places like Kiribati have serious problems. But why would you be sad and put some dollars into assisting low-lying Pacific islands when your own Australian populations on the Torres Strait are having those same devastating experiences of king tides and so on? They are being ignored.

Mr Entsch—They’re in the Pacific.

Dr STONE—They are in the Pacific; their one problem is that they hold Australian citizenship. It seems that you do not get as many brownie points if you are the foreign affairs minister or the minister for community services if you are helping your own, your Torres Strait Islander communities, compared to being out there saying to the Pacific islanders, ‘Yes, you need a hand too.’ That is not good enough.

We have a two-speed economy developing in Australia of the rural areas and metropolitan Australia. We have a back being turned on communities that are in enormous need but sadly are not on tram tracks, not in suburbia and not in CBDs of capital cities. We cannot continue in Australia to have our values of a fair go, with everybody paying their taxes—for example, flood levies being applied right across the populations whether you lost some of those 4,000 kilometres of fencing or not—and have the sense that you are all in there making the effort, but when it comes to your individual needs, if you are a community way beyond the cities and regional centres of Australia, you just do not matter.

I commend this motion. I say to the member for Leichhardt: what an important thing you are doing today. The coalition, yes, will do the job, but unfortunately we need to have this job done tomorrow to rebuild the sea walls of these low-lying islands. It is not fair that those small communities are suffering in the way that they are. They are Australians. They do their best. They stood between us and the Japanese some 60 years ago. No-one then said, ‘Oh, we don’t care much about what happens out there.’ We understood that they were the doorway, the gateway, to the rest of the country—

Mr Entsch interjecting—

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr S Sidebottom)—Yes, thank you; I am sure you have spoken already.

Dr STONE—as the member for Leichhardt said. I commend this motion and I ask the government to put their hand in their pocket and do the right thing by these small communities.

Mr NEUMANN (Blair) (11.41 am)—I thought I was here chairing the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs! In fact, four members and the committee secretary are present in the Main Committee. I commend the member for Leichhardt for bringing this motion on behalf of his constituents. That is what local members should do—raise issues of concern. I too believe that, whether you live in Tasmania or the Torres Strait, as an Australian you should be treated the same way, with the same rights and the same access to a good education and decent health care, roads that func-
tion and public transport. That is appropriate. And there should not be discrimination, whether you are gay or straight, black or white, or whatever colour, creed or religion you adhere to. That is true. I commend the member for Leichhardt. In fact, I note his strong advocacy for many years in relation to gay and lesbian issues as well, and I commend him for that. He has been a strong advocate for ending discrimination in all forms. I am not going to keep praising him; otherwise, he might be re-elected! But that is the case.

On this issue I do think—with respect to the member for Leichhardt—that he is being a little precious. He was elected, I think, in 1996 to this chamber. He had a voluntary sabbatical, if I can put it like that, from 2007 to 2010. He was a member of the Howard government at one stage, and I think he may even have served as a parliamentary secretary for quite some time. I notice in his motion here—perhaps it is the old lawyer in me—that in paragraph 2, subsection (c), he says:

... the Torres Strait Islander people have been experiencing flood devastation for the past four years with no help from Government …

Four years—we were not even in government at the time that this allegedly started. I imagine this happened many years before that, during the time of the Howard government. We have seen rising sea levels and we have seen problems in relation to islands off the coast of Queensland, whether in the Great Barrier Reef or other areas, for quite some years. I do not recall the coalition raising this issue much in the last three years during the Rudd and Gillard government. I do not recall any of his colleagues, those opposite, raising these issues. I cannot recall too many private members’ motions from those opposite saying, ‘This needs to be done.’ Indeed, I do not recall much at all in relation to those opposite.

One thing I will say is about the member for Murray—and I have heard the member for Leichhardt—criticising us about our commitment to regional and rural Australia. This always galls me as a Queenslander who represents a regional and rural seat in south-east Queensland. It always galls me because the truth is—the facts are—that, when it comes to funding for regional and rural Australia, this government has an exemplary record. For example, with respect to roads and rail and essential infrastructure like ports, we have massively increased the funding: $37 billion, and $22 billion of that is in rural and regional Australia—more than the doyens of the bush, the National Party, or any of those others, ever saw in Queensland. They claim that they represent rural and regional Australia, but the truth is that it is this federal Labor government which has invested massively.

It is not just that. Think about the regional and local community infrastructure we have funded. We just announced recently a billion dollars in relation to that. The Minister for Regional Australia, Regional Development and Local Government, the Hon. Simon Crean, announced that. The councils up there in the seat of the member for Leichhardt can share in that should they make application. I anticipate that the good member for Leichhardt has actually got on the phone to the local mayor and said: ‘Look, hang on a sec, mate; there’s some money on the table there. This pernicious Labor government over there, this wicked Labor government that doesn’t do anything for you’—that is despite the fact that we have just brought forward his third quarter financial assistance grants, getting money in the bank to help community infrastructure, despite the fact that we have activated NDRRA and despite the fact that we have put another $315 million on the table to help flood affected areas beyond the NDRRA. Despite all of that: ‘Oh, mate, there’s some money on the table here. Can you make an appli-
cation?' There is money on the table for councils to make applications for funding for essential community infrastructure if they want to do it. There is money on the table if they want to do it. But do we see the member saying: ‘I’ve just spoken to the mayor, and we should apply for that sort of funding if at all possible; we can do what we can do up there, if there are any roads or essential infrastructure we should apply for’? The member mentioned his local councils up there. He mentioned the Torres Strait regional council, for a start. But I do not think that the member, as valiant as his efforts are here in this chamber, has actually got on the phone and spoken to his local councils about applying for funding.

This is very important because those people opposite are absolutely racked with division on climate change. If you are associated with a little island off the coast of Queensland, you know that the climate science really tells us that we are at peril, because climate change is real, and human activity contributes to climate change. We have three members opposite sitting here in the Main Committee. I dare say there are probably four opinions over there about climate change. They have a leader who says that climate science is crap. He says one thing to the shock jocks and he says another to his local branch meeting when he is doing a fundraiser, and he says another when the national media is on him and he needs to look measured and reverential and really sensible. So you have opposite those people who really do not know in relation to climate science. But I imagine the member has had a chat to his local mayor and said, ‘Listen, mate, we should not just apply for the money; let’s back the federal Labor government on pricing carbon.’ I wonder whether he has had that conversation with his local mayor up there about that.

In Queensland we have had terrible flooding. Seventy-five per cent of Queensland was covered by water. Then we had Cyclone Yasi. The cost to rebuild Queensland before Cyclone Yasi impacted upon North Queensland was $5.6 billion. And the devastation is terrible—truly awful. In my electorate we have seen terrible devastation. We have seen 600 businesses in the Ipswich region affected. We have seen 3,000 properties in Ipswich, 470 in the Somerset region, inundated. Over 700 streets in Ipswich were affected. I drove up to Mount Stanley, north of Somerset, last week to meet with some of the local farmers up there. This is just one example of how one electorate has been affected. Leichhardt has been affected. Moreton has been affected. We know Brisbane has been affected. We know of many electorates. And the devastation is awful for people who are trying to rebuild their lives. So I have some sympathy for the member for Leichhardt in his protestations today. I do have some sympathy in relation to what he wants to do to stand up for his local community. Coastal erosion is real and coastal erosion needs to be looked at, as the member for Oxley talked about in terms of the studies that we are undertaking in that regard.

The truth is that climate change is going to make an impact on the Queensland coast. Climate change is real. Just a couple of years ago the Queensland Farmers Federation asked me to launch their climate change analysis and study. I did it at the home of a very prominent LNP member in south-east Queensland, Linton Brimblecombe, in Forest Hill. Linton Brimblecombe is campaign director for that area in the Lockyer Valley for the LNP. The study is quite clear. Climate change is real; it is affecting Queensland. It has been affecting us in the past and it will affect us in the future.

I would urge the member opposite, who moves this motion, to get on board with our proposals to tackle climate change. I also note he is one of the members opposite that did not
support us with the funding we needed to rebuild Queensland. So he wants us to provide the money for it but he did not support us on the flood levy, the $1.8 billion which we needed to rebuild Queensland. He did not do it. He wants us to give him the money but he does not want us to raise the money to pay for it. There is inconsistency between the member for Leichhardt’s motion here and what he has actually been saying. When those opposite did come up with some savings, it was a joke. They ended up with a billion-dollar black hole in their budget. They wanted to cut back funding for the NBN and the BER, defer some foreign aid and then what they tried to do was come up with some dodgy accounting. The truth is those opposite want us to spend the money in their electorates but they do not want us to raise the money for it.

I say to the member for Leichhardt, has he had a conversation with the Hon. Simon Crean, the Minister for Regional Australia, Regional Development and Local Government? If he has done that and had that conversation then he needs to speak to his local mayor and make an application for funding for these things, see what he can do about this. He does not need to come into this place, say one thing and then go back and say another thing in his own electorate. He needs to apply for the funding and take note of the fact that all those BER projects and that entire community infrastructure in his electorate were brought forward by a Labor government and they cause his area and mine to be commended.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr S Sidebottom)—I remind members that you are required to speak through the chair. I am not the member for Leichhardt.

Ms GAMBARO (Brisbane) (11.51 am)—I also rise to support the member for Leichhardt’s motion. He is a very dear friend and colleague of mine. He is well known for his advocacy and determination to ensure that the people of the Torres Strait Islands are not overlooked in their needs.

There is one thing I do want to dispute. The members opposite have called the member for Leichhardt a hypocrite. Anyone who knows the member for Leichhardt would know that that is absolutely not true. He is a person who stands on principle and there is nothing remotely hypocritical about the member for Leichhardt. He came into this chamber to highlight a very serious issue concerning the Torres Strait Islands, particularly the 48,000 square kilometres of open sea between Papua New Guinea and Cape York, a serious issue with infrastructure and a very old sea wall which is deteriorating. I am very happy to get up today and support him.

These problems in the Torres Strait have been occurring over a four-year period. The members opposite have highlighted this up earlier? The sea wall has been deteriorating over four years and there has been constant flooding. Members earlier, including previous members on our side and the member for Oxley, spoke about the infections and high risk of disease that has occurred. The member for Leichhardt spoke of his own sighting of graves and the destruction that it is causing to the culture and to the community. These are problems that have been occurring over four years and this government has been sitting on its hands. It took the member for Oxley eight minutes to speak about the specific responses that were occurring, including $400,000 that is being spent to gauge and see what the tides are doing. The member for Leichhardt can tell you what the tides have been doing. The devastation and disaster is there for all to see and yet we have more delaying tactics in measuring the tides.
The people opposite are the hypocrites in this debate. They keep pushing out climate change. When we talk about low-lying Pacific islands, their own Parliamentary Secretary for Pacific Island Affairs, Richard Marles, says that there are no climate change refugees. I want to reiterate that this government is spending money, particularly in the Pacific Island region, to help mitigate and to stop rising sea levels and yet closer to home, on its own shores in the Torres Strait, no serious money is being spent on this huge problem. What we are doing in the foreign aid budget is very admirable, but let us try to help some of our own people here in the Torres Strait Islands. Let us not bring out this climate change debate when your own parliamentary secretary says there is no such thing as climate change refugees.

Government members interjecting—

Ms GAMBARO—He was on the record. He was interviewed a few months ago; he said there was no such thing. You can check the record.

Seawalls, graveyards, roads and all of those community structures that we spoke about are being flooded year after year, and people on those low, outlying islands are unable to do anything. They feel powerless. Of course, they go to the member for Leichhardt; he is their member. He is a fierce advocate and he does visit them more than just in an election cycle, I can assure you of that. I have been in the member for Leichhardt’s electorate. He is a fearless advocate for his people and visits them on a regular basis. That is one thing I can say with great certainty.

This problem has gone on for far too long. It has gone on for four years. It has gone on for so long that in 2009 the Torres Strait Regional Authority took their concerns to the eighth session of the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues in New York. There they detailed their concern that approximately 27 per cent of their community was affected each and every year. They described their human right and need to be protected. They outlined their concerns about the right to life, the right to water, the right to food, the right to culture and the right to a healthy environment. What we are talking about here is $22 million that will put all of those things in place. They have a right to live in some sort of peace and harmony, knowing that their island region is protected.

During the 2010 election, the member for Leichhardt continued that fight for the islanders. He fought to secure money to assist the regions and he announced a commitment of $22 million to fix the seawalls and to develop a solution to this particular problem. The time for that solution is now. This government needs to invest heavily in the Torres Strait Islands to save these low-lying communities from destruction in the future. (Time expired)

Mr PERRETT (Moreton) (11.56 am)—I commend the member for Leichhardt for taking the time to move this motion. While I do not doubt his commitment to the Torres Strait Islands people in his electorate, I do wonder about the timing of this particular motion. For myself, I proudly have a Torres Strait Islands flag on my desk and I am very respectful of their contribution to Australian history. I am not totally sure that the Murray Islands are in the Torres Strait; I assume they are—any lawyer knows the contribution that Eddie Mabo and the two other successful claimants made in the Mabo decision. I know of their long-term connection to the land and to the sea and to the areas in between, particularly their fish traps. Also, on a committee with you, Mr Deputy Speaker Sidebottom, we gained insights into the importance of Torres Strait Islanders in keeping feral incursions out, particularly in protecting honey bees, and in their contributions to defence and security.
So I do commend the member for Leichhardt for his commitment to his people. However, he has a strange view of history. Unfortunately, he is not in the chamber so I cannot glean from him just when this flood devastation occurred. I get the impression that it was either at midnight on 24 November 2007 or when the election writs were issued! I am not sure when the devastation actually started to occur. Maybe it was the day Labor were elected! But it seems a bit strange that, while he was the member for that area from 2 March 1996 through to 24 November 2007, there were no problems whatsoever with flooding in the Torres Strait. My understanding of anthropogenic climate change is that we have accurate measurement of sea levels over the last 200 years—accurate, empirical data from scientists, not Alan Jones type fakers. These are accurate measurements of sea levels, empirical data, that show that over that time we have had about a 20-centimetre rise in sea levels.

I believe in climate change. I believe that humans have contributed to it. I do not believe that it is bovine faeces, to paraphrase the Leader of the Opposition. I believe that it is real and that people have contributed to it. Obviously that is going to have an impact in areas like the Torres Strait. Every Queenslander knows the challenges that come with being a local government in a remote area, and especially so when you are dealing with islands. The rateable basis for these shires is nothing like that for my area and Brisbane, which is an economy bigger than even Tasmania’s.

Mr Neumann—Twice as big.

Mr PERRETT—Twice as big, some might say. I would not say that, but our rateable area is completely different to the Torres Strait Regional Authority’s rateable area, which gives it particular challenges when it comes to providing protection against sea rises. So what do you do? We contribute money sensibly. We have given $400,000 for new research into climate change and how it affects the local area. Those opposite made light of that fact; they said, ‘Oh, it’s obvious!’ Well, it is not necessarily obvious. My area was flooded in the recent floods, in January, and it was completely different to what happened in the 1974 floods and a bit different for the member for Blair. For example, in 1974 the water came down Oxley Creek; this time, in 2011, the water came up the creek. I have people in my area whose houses had been flooded up to the ceiling in 1974 when the water came in through their back door; this time it came through their front door. So you do not just rush in and say, ‘We’ll build these walls.’ You do have to understand the situation, especially if you are going to commit significant amounts of money.

It is also good to see that we have contributed $1 million to the regional title gauge network so that people can have additional warnings. And perhaps we need to give additional support to the Torres Strait Regional Authority so that they can make proper decisions about where the housing and the infrastructure are located. Those are concerns in the Ipswich and Brisbane areas as much as they are in the Torres Strait. The federal government can play a role in guiding local government in this area.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr S Sidebottom)—The time allocated for this debate has now expired. The debate is adjourned and the resumption of the debate will be made an order of the day for the next sitting.
Debate resumed, on motion by Ms Saffin:

That the House:

(1) notes:
   (a) that the Commonwealth is responsible for regulating the export of live animals, and for negotiatiing the arrangements and conditions that apply to the export of both live animals and chilled or frozen meat;
   (b) that the current tariff barriers that apply in some countries to chilled or frozen meat exports mean that there is not a level playing field between the two forms of export;
   (c) that the Commonwealth has consistently campaigned for a reduction in tariffs on all agricultural exports;
   (d) the national and international concerns about the welfare of animals transported under the live animal export trade, both during transportation and at their destination, have been raised and substantiated in campaigns by organisations and individuals including the World Society for the Protection of Animals, Stop Live Exports, Princess Alia of Jordan, the RSPCA and the Barristers Animal Welfare Panel; and
   (e) that Australia is one of few countries that consistently treats animals humanely during slaughter and that Australian chilled or frozen meat has gained wide acceptance in the Middle East for its quality and observance of halal and kosher standards;

(2) acknowledges the opposition of the Australasian Meat Industry Employees Union and the local meat processors to the live export trade on the grounds that the live export trade has a detrimental effect on the local meat processing industry, affecting jobs and the Australian economy;

(3) calls for renewed consideration of a planned and supported transition in the medium term away from live exports and towards an expanded frozen and chilled meat export industry; and

(4) asks that Austrade be encouraged to be involved in negotiations to increase exports in frozen and chilled meat.

Ms SAFFIN (Page) (12.02 pm)—I have listed this private member’s motion so we can have a discussion about an issue that concerns many people in Australia, and one that is based on facts. I also raise issues of concern to locals in my area of Page which they have raised with me over the last three years. My overarching concern is for the industry—for farmers and all associated with it; for meat processing and all associated with it. My primary concern is jobs. Another concern forms part of the debate and also informs the debate, and that is the welfare of the animals, which is important. As a Labor person, jobs concern me—creating them so that we have economic and social inclusion and supporting and sustaining wealth-creating industries such as farming and the livestock industry.

I have seen some figures from the MLA claiming that if we did not export livestock or have a live export trade then it would cost a certain amount of money and impact on our overall budget. But I know that the figures are based on a cessation of it overnight, at midnight tonight, not on what this motion is about. Point (3) of the motion makes it very clear: it calls for ‘consideration of a planned and supported transition in the medium term away from live exports and towards an expanded frozen and chilled meat export industry’. There are seven parts to this motion, and that is at the hub of it.

The live export industry is a risky business. If you laid an audit template over it, it would come up with all red signals. We know that with an audit template there are red, amber and
green. I do not see any amber or green with this industry; what I see are the red signals. It is not a healthy situation for an industry to be high risk in that many countries taking live exports are increasingly moving to chilled meat and processed meat. There is volatility in their markets and in some of the countries. They are also being paid hefty subsidies. That puts us at a disadvantage here, not the locals in those countries. We have also seen the impact of Indonesia’s move to a policy of beef self-sufficiency, the 350-kilogram limit, and we know what that will mean to the live export industry here.

This motion is about sustainability and the general reason I outlined above and some specifics about jobs. I will turn to jobs because it is jobs that have disappeared in large part due to live exports. We are exporting jobs from our shores and not processing, particularly in regional areas where the meat processing takes place. In my area we have the Northern Cooperative Meat Company, which is a very large employer based in Casino. They have a fine reputation and export chilled processed meat to many places around the globe. It is one of those industries we all want to protect in our area. The way the live export industry has developed in Australia, and being as risky as it is, it is risky for them but also risky for our locals.

I have a few facts here. In the past 30 years, 40,000 meat processing jobs have been lost and 150 processing plants have been shut down, primarily due to the live export trade. If those jobs had been able to be taken up because of the live export trade and had been replaced in other areas, even then I would have had some concerns, but that has not been the case. From February to August 2010, 960 full-time Australian meatworker jobs have been lost nationwide. That is an average of over 150 jobs each month. The AMIEU, the union which represents workers in the meat processing area, is calling upon the government to take action to prevent further job losses and it spells out some of those. One of the plants that closed was Killarney, which is not far from my seat of Page, just over the border in Queensland, and another was in Dinmore in Queensland, where I used to work, in the seat of Blair. (Time expired)

**Mr BANDT** (Melbourne) (12.07 pm)—I thank the member for Page for putting forward this motion on the meat export industry. The Australian Greens have a long history of campaigning to improve the treatment of animals, particularly those bred or farmed for human consumption. This campaign is obviously a long way from realising its goals and it is one that rarely garners mainstream attention. But as tens of thousands of animals die as a result of the live animal export industry every year, and as hundreds of thousands of animals reared for human consumption are mistreated in this country largely out of sight of the consumer, it is a campaign that is both essential and urgent. We as a society have a long way to go in improving the way we treat animals. It is a basic test of decency to see how many deaths and how much mistreatment we as a society will tolerate in the name of industry and commerce. We firmly believe that so long as we have a live animal export trade in this country we will fail that test.

The Greens are on record, and it is quite clearly stated in our federal policies, that we want to see an immediate end to the export of live animals for consumption. The government knows full well that animals sent overseas in the live export trade suffer during transportation and are mistreated upon arrival. It is presented time and time again with such evidence, yet there so far has been a lack of political will to shine a light on this industry and reject the unethical practices inherent in this trade. This is truly disappointing. And this motion does indeed take a position that supports the economy and jobs. I note that the RSPCA recently re-
minded members that Australia’s meat trade as a whole internationally is worth seven times more than live exports and that sheep processed domestically contribute 20 per cent more to the Australian economy than those sent overseas in appalling conditions.

Although the Greens primarily approach this issue as an ethical matter, it would seem we would be on solid ground arguing against live animal exports on the basis of local job protection alone, as the member for Page has pointed out. When meat-processing facilities continue to sack staff because of lack of access to stock, and when the international demand for frozen meats continues to improve, live exports should be taking a diminishing share of Australia’s overall meat exports. Nor is this a minority opinion: a recent poll conducted by Galaxy indicates that 79 per cent of Australians would like the live export industry phased out. In the context of this overwhelming support, I believe the member for Page would even have been justified in moving a more ambitious motion. The action called on in this motion in part (3), for renewed consideration of a planned and supported transition in the medium term away from live exports, is a measured step towards an urgent outcome.

A division having been called in the House of Representatives—

Sitting suspended from 12.10 pm to 12.23 pm

Mr BANDT—I will be supporting this motion, as it is clearly a step in the right direction. I implore the government not to treat this as another private member’s Main Committee motion that is quietly debated and put aside but rather to give this debate the treatment that it deserves. I look forward to the next step—to a more public debate and an economic plan put forward by the government to scale back and ultimately terminate this unethical practice. The bottom line is that there is no ethically acceptable means of transporting hundreds of thousands of animals thousands of kilometres by ship for slaughter when the journey sees thousands of animals continue to die on route every year and when the destination countries consistently treat livestock with brutality.

It was growing up in the member for Fremantle’s electorate and seeing the sights and smelling lorry loads of sheep as they went past and then sat on the dock in the ships for often several days at a time that prompted me to first inquire about the ethical treatment of animals for export and the economics of exporting live animals. Everything that I have learnt in the meantime, together with the Australian Greens policy, leads me to support this motion and commend the member for Page for bringing it to the attention of the House. I support this measured step towards the end goal of stopping the export of live animals.

Ms PARKE (Fremantle) (12.25 pm)—I wholeheartedly endorse the motion moved by the member for Page and I thank her for her longstanding and passionate commitment to this issue. Like other members speaking in support of this motion, I am very happy to make the case for positive change when it comes to Australia’s live export industry.

I am not against farmers, I am not against exporters, and I am certainly not against the cattle and sheep export trade. Indeed, I am 100 per cent in favour of a thriving cattle and sheep export trade based on higher value-added production, higher job creation and greater rural and regional economic development activity. All those things will be delivered over time by a transition from a live export to a chilled meat export trade. Most importantly of all, those things will be delivered hand-in-hand with an end to the animal welfare travesty that is the current live export trade.
I want to put on record my gratitude for the tireless advocacy and dedication of a number of animal welfare groups in this cause, including Animals Angels, Animals Australia, Stop Live Exports, World Society for the Protection of Animals and RSPCA Australia.

As a parliamentarian, there are few issues that I have followed and pursued more consistently. That is appropriate because my electorate includes the port of Fremantle—through which flows 80 per cent of the live sheep trade—and because there is an overwhelming consensus in Fremantle that this trade should end.

Let my say quite clearly that it is not a nimby consensus. Last year the City of Fremantle adopted a resolution in support of a phased transition away from live exports, including the clear statement that the City would not support a shift of the live export trade from the Fremantle port to a new port proposed for Kwinana, some 20 kilometres south. The Fremantle community does not want the trade out of sight, out of mind; it wants the trade to end in favour of a more humane, more economically sustainable industry.

The Fremantle community does not want to be spared the sight of animals with broken limbs hanging from truck sides even before they are crowded into overheated ships and taken to an inhumane slaughter in the Middle East. The people of Fremantle want the entire industry to change, and to change for the better in every sense.

Strong evidence was provided in the 2009 ACIL Tasman report that a phased transition to a chilled meat export industry offers significant economic improvements for Western Australia, including the potential to double the jobs in the WA industry from 2000 to 4000 workers; the potential to increase the number of sheep processed in WA from 2.7 million to six million without the need to construct additional processing capacity; and the potential to replace a $700 million per annum industry with an industry worth $2 billion per annum. These are the economic benefits—more jobs, more sheep, more export dollars—that are likely to flow from an expanded meat processing and chilled meat export industry.

Last year I helped to host an event in Fremantle, in partnership with WSPA, Stop Live Exports and representatives from state parliament and local government in Western Australia. At that event, we heard from meat processors V&V Walsh and from the Australian Meatworkers Union, who testified to the damage that has been wreaked by the live export trade on the domestic industry in the last 35 years. More than 150 meat processing facilities have closed down with a loss of 40,000 jobs. Last year alone, 1,000 jobs were lost, mainly due to livestock shortages, not to a lack of demand.

We also heard from live export industry representatives who took issue with both the economic and the animal welfare criticisms of the current trade.

It was only a month or so later that horrible footage emerged of the gross mistreatment of sheep on arrival at a distribution point in Egypt. This footage, which was featured on the ABC’s 7:30 Report, showed live sheep being thrown and stuffed into car boots, injured sheep being mishandled, and throats being cut as animals struggled upside down at a dusty roadside. Some of these inhumane treatments were filmed occurring in plain view of signage that indicates that such cruelty is forbidden.

One of the same live export representatives who had attended the Fremantle community event was interviewed for the 7:30 Report story. You could see his certainty evaporate as he
was shown footage which plainly contradicts the claims that the live export industry is consistently operating to exclude cruel, inhumane and unacceptable treatment of animals.

On that point, I believe there are urgent short-term measures that need to be considered to deliver some essential animal welfare improvements in the current trade. These include a requirement that live animals be sold into closed systems—that is, for slaughter at DAFF approved and monitored abattoirs rather than for private sale with the kind of car-boot cruelty that we know follows—and a cessation of export to countries that do not demonstrate compliance with the World Organisation for Animal Health guidelines for the slaughter of animals, and the guidelines for the transport of animals by land, sea and air.

Finally, I would simply observe that many improvements have been made over time to Australia’s agricultural sector industries in the name of better economic, social and animal welfare outcomes. To my mind there is no reason Australia should not properly investigate a phased transition from live export to onshore processing that will deliver these outcomes.

A division having been called in the House of Representatives—

Sitting suspended from 12.30 pm to 12.42 pm

Mr TEHAN (Wannon) (12.42 pm)—I rise today to speak against this motion on the meat export industry. I want to touch on three points. The first is the trade implications of this motion. I say to the Minister for Trade that he needs to concentrate on his job as trade minister and forget about trying to take over as Treasurer. This motion would never have been allowed to come forward in its current form if he had been doing his job properly. For instance, part (b) of the motion says:

... chilled or frozen meat exports mean that there is not a level playing field between the two forms of export ...

What a ridiculous notion. If it said that we should do everything we can to reduce tariffs on frozen meat exports, fine. We would all be happy to support that. As a matter of fact, we would call on the trade minister to do his job and do something in the trade area so that he does reduce tariffs for our frozen meat exports. That is very important. But to just contrast this with what is happening with our live exports is a ridiculous notion.

What is even more ridiculous, however, is calling on Austrade to be involved in negotiations to increase exports in frozen and chilled meat. Austrade does trade promotion. It is the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade which does trade negotiation. The fact that this motion does not even comprehend that basic fact and that the trade minister has not been able to provide some advice to Ms Saffin on that basic fact shows that his eye is off the ball. It shows that he is after the Treasurer’s job instead of doing his own as trade minister. We have seen nothing in terms of a reduction of tariff barriers on any of our exports since the trade minister has been in the portfolio. All he has been trying to do is undermine the Treasurer. He needs to stop and he needs to focus on the trade portfolio.

Moving to other aspects of the motion, I want to touch on what the live export trade means to my electorate of Wannon. There were 620,000 sheep and 62,000 cattle that went out of the port of Portland last financial year. That is a million dollar contribution to jobs and to farmers in my electorate. The industry has improved its record in live sheep exports. It has also improved its record with the live export of cattle. It is continuing to look at improvements. What we need to do in this parliament is work with the industry so that we support it, so that we can
continually see improvements in the shipments of our animals but also in what happens once the animals arrive at the designated ports. If we work with the industry to achieve this, we can get good results. No-one in the world does this trade better than us; no-one has put in place better protocols once the animals arrive than us. And there is no reason why we cannot continue to work with the industry to make sure that we continually improve the trade and get those millions of dollars going back into our electorates, and in particular into my electorate of Wannon. The port of Portland does a very good job as a major export port, and this live export trade is very important to it.

In terms of the industry as a whole, this is an export industry that exceeded $1 billion for the second year running. This is not something that should be tampered with. It is not something that on a whim we say, ‘Oh, we should support this type of trade against this type of trade.’ This is a billion dollar industry that we are trying to engineer. This is not what government should be doing. It should let free enterprise and competition take its place. If there is a market for the live export trade, then that market should be able to flourish. We as government should not be dictating and saying: ‘No, we don’t want that type of trade. We will try and stop that and we will try and divert it into this area.’ Competition and free enterprise are what we should be seeking to achieve. The trade minister needs to get his eye on the ball. This motion should never have come to this place as it has. He has to stop trying to become Treasurer and instead focus on being trade minister again.

Ms Livermore (Capricornia) (12.47 pm)—I rise today in support of this motion by the member for Page. I thank her for putting this motion forward for debate. I know it is a contentious issue and one that has obviously aroused strong views on both sides. There are those members who will staunchly defend the live export industry and those who will instead speak in support of the motion out of a concern for the future of the meat industry in our electorates.

I am one of those members. Rockhampton is known as the beef capital of Australia for good reason. We have plenty of cattle and we have a lot of meatworkers, generations of meatworkers in fact. Through good times and bad, Rockhampton has always been and remains to this day a meatworkers town and I want to make sure it stays that way.

In Rockhampton, there are two major meatworks: Teys Brothers at Lakes Creek and the one operated by Swift and Nerimbera. But it is not just Rockhampton that I speak for today, because there are meatworks just outside the electorate of Capricornia in Biloela and also Bakers Creek, smaller towns that would face an even more uncertain future without the employment opportunities provided by those meatworks. The concerns about the threats from increased live exports to the meat-processing industry in Queensland are real. They have come to me from meatworkers and their union, the Australasian Meat Industry Employees Union, and they have come to me from processors. Those people inside the industry tell me that the live export trade is changing, growing and impacting in a real way on the processing sector down the coast of Queensland in a way that has not happened in the past. They also see the distortions in the international marketplace that give live exporters an unfair advantage over Australian processors and the way that this is helping to drive the shift to live exports over our value-added products.

The figures confirm that there has been a significant increase in recent years in the number of live cattle exported from Australia. In 2009-10 the number was over 954,000—most of them to Indonesia. This was up 34 per cent on the 2006-07 trade. Cattle coming out of Queen-
sland accounted for 170,000 or 19 per cent of that total and that represents a jump of seven per cent from 2006-07. A 34 per cent increase in live cattle exports represents a significant adjustment within the industry especially when 80 per cent of the live cattle went to Indonesia, which is an equally important market for processors exporting chilled beef. We are competing with ourselves within the same export market. We have to listen to the processing sector when they say this is having an effect and that is what today’s motion is all about—acknowledging those concerns and seeking a considered and reasonable response through our trade and other industry policies.

I said that Rockhampton is proud to be a meatworker’s town but it is not just us with a stake in this debate and the future of the meat processing industry. According to ABS statistics the meat processing sector in Australia accounts directly for around 32,000 jobs, most of them in regional and rural areas. The last two to three years—corresponding with the period of 34 per cent growth in the live export trade—have seen pressures on processors to keep their plants running full-time. There have been job losses in the industry, which have been attributed to the increase in live exports out of Queensland—something that has not traditionally been a big feature of the industry in our state but one that has processors very wary about the future.

The Heilbron report, which is a well-known study into this question prepared for the Australian Meat Processor Corporation in 2000, certainly sounded the warning estimating that the live export trade was costing Australia GDP and around 12,000 jobs. Heilbron have updated their 2000 report. Their update for the Queensland industry last year found that in 2008-09 live exports cost Queensland 1,200 jobs and $140 million in lost income to the state.

Today’s motion is really calling for us to stop and have a good look at what is occurring in this industry and to assess what is in the best interests of the workers in the processing sector, the livestock industry as a whole and, ultimately, for us as a nation. We cannot afford to allow continued growth of live exports of the magnitude we have seen in recent years without properly understanding the consequences. We have to do that before it is too late and we reach a point of no return for the processing sector and all the jobs that go with it. I wholeheartedly support this motion from the member for Page.

Mr HAASE (Durack) (12.52 pm)—This whole debate is disappointing me a great deal, primarily, the motivation for it. On the surface of it you may take the member for Page’s motion and think, ‘Here is a woman with great concern for her electorate, great concern for the future of the Australian industry.’ I find that that is so far from the truth.

As we go into this debate we find more and more from the member for Page’s own lips and from the member for Capricornia’s own lips the fact that this debate is about keeping union jobs and serving union masters. I am so disappointed to hear that because I speak for a quarter of the Australian landmass. In that quarter of the Australian landmass there is not one full-time cattle abattoir.

Members of the government need to get out and about, open their eyes, take theirs heads out of the sand, do some travel and find out what the real world is all about. It is not about tree hugging. It is not about bleating as the member for Fremantle did about the poor citizens of Fremantle that have got to look at stock travelling through their electorate—for God’s sake. It is about my pastoralists making a quid. It is about the members that live in Fremantle.
maybe realising why they live there in the first place—because it is a port. They all want to
live with the kitsch and the cappuccinos of the port and they forget that it is a port.

If we get dinkum about that we will realise that no one with a quid in their pocket and a
right mind is going to start an abattoir in north-western Australia. There is not a population
centre that can staff it, for starters; we have got a mining industry that is burgeoning and
daining employment away; and we have a government that does all it can to get in the way of
employing 457 visa employees and skilled workers from other countries. If you put your
money into an abattoir in north-western Australia you would be stark-raving mad.

The other reality is that we have a government that is supposedly very concerned about
carbon emissions, carbon footprints and food that is travelling the least distance. To send cat-
tle 2½ thousand kilometres from the Kimberley to an abattoir in Western Australia is going to
add thousands of tonnes of carbon dioxide in diesel emissions and add $100 to the cost of
transportation of that beast.

I do not expect members of the government to understand that, because understanding is
not something they are big on, but when they come into this House with a motion that proves
their stupidity and clearly shows their ignorance then I have a difficult time with that.

Ms Hall—Mr Deputy Speaker on a point of order, I would like to ask the member to with-
draw his comment. I found it highly offensive.

Mr HAASE—She would love me to withdraw it. I hope she finds it offensive, because
there is a real need here to bring to the attention of the Australian people—

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr S Georganas)—Order! The member for Durack will re-
sume his seat. The member for Shortland can only ask a question.

Ms Hall—No, I asked that he withdraw the comment that he made about stupidity and the
abuse that he has hurled at members on this side of the chamber. We all find it highly offen-
sive and I ask that the member withdraw.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER—The member may withdraw the word ‘stupidity’.

Mr HAASE—I will not go to the dictionary definition—

The DEPUTY SPEAKER—The member will withdraw the word ‘stupidity’.

Mr HAASE—I will withdraw it. I now find some of that time has been taken up when I
may have been illuminating the understanding of the people of Australia. Live export is a rea-
ality. Live export is creating better conditions for the transport of cattle, sheep and goats than
has ever been exercised by any other nation in the world.

The Middle East and Indonesia are not suddenly going to stop requiring wet market stock.
The Middle East and Indonesia are not suddenly going to say, ‘We’ll buy frozen product,’ be-
cause they do not have the freezers, they have not got the chillers. Their customers rely on the
wet market. If you are relying on the wet market, you are not going to be pulling something
out of the freezer and defrosting it, it will last about four hours. That is what wet markets are
about. They are about local killing of live animals to suit the culture. Rule No. 1 in any busi-
ness is: know your market. If you ignore the nature of your market as a manufacturer or a
primary producer, you will fail. When the market changes so will the adaptability of Australia
come into play and we will change our product. Until then we need to do live export better
than anyone else in the world. We need to treat animals more humanely than anyone else in
the world. We need to educate the public of Australia and make them understand that if they want to live in portside situations they are going to smell and hear stock and that is realistic. If you talk about fatalities in the transportation process, stock are safer on a boat and in the transport process than they are in the paddock. Look to the stats, understand the industry and do not bring crazy motions into this House.

Mr ADAMS (Lyons) (12.58 pm)—I thought that was a pretty poor contribution by the member for Durack, a Western Australian, and I do not think anything was gained by it. It was a short-term view—take the money and run, and do not care about the long-term issues for Australia. There are two strong reasons for the phase out of the Australian live animal export trade. Firstly, there is the dismal transport conditions of stock with their potential mistreatment on reaching their destination which is unsustainable in the long term. An unsustainable industry will not last into the long term.

Secondly, there is the continuing job loss being caused by a live animal export trade here in Australia, which is a loss to the Australian economy and to regional Australia. We need to be very conscious of the way that is occurring. Australia consistently treats animals humanely during the slaughter process and has gained recognition across the Middle East for observance of halal and those standards. By processing meat in Australia we are not threatening the important religious practices of other cultures, and we can do it all here.

Our good reputation is largely due to the skill and dedication of workers in our meat-processing sector. Those people are the human face of the live animal exports debate, the face that is often forgotten in this debate about this trade. The AMIEU, the meat workers union, asserts that 10,000 jobs have been lost over the past 30 years as a result of the live animal exports trade and more than 100 processing plants have closed in regional Australia due to this trade. Recent research shows that if livestock was retained for processing in Australia, it would be worth 20 per cent more to our economy, worth 20 per cent more to the local processing sector and to the Australian economy. Value-adding from a chilled product would give us that.

If we lose our skill base in the Australian meat industry, rural Australia will be the loser. The viability of our processing plants is at risk here. The live trade last year was worth $330 million. If we processed that meat here it would be worth $65 million more. The whole of the Australian economy would benefit. Regional areas are at risk—four works closed in the past two weeks—and the contribution from the members for Durack was an appalling indication of his ignorance in understanding the Australian meat industry. The live animal trade is a very risky trade for rural Australia. The trade is heavily subsidised by the Middle East governments. Therefore, with political unrest going on there now, that could fall over within days. So if we lose the skill base of our workforce in Australia, and if we lost the capital in our processing works, this could be a great threat for the future of our industry and for rural Australia. Cold storage is in place in the Middle East and it could grow quite easily. And, as the member for Page has said in the motion before the chamber, encouraging Austrade to be involved in negotiations to increase exports of frozen and chilled meat is the way for us to go—that is, to use our trade negotiations and our skill base to do that so that we are enhancing the Australian economy by value-adding.

A renewed focus on the Australian processing industry would certainly help to alleviate this problem and get us back to where we should be going as a nation. Giving money to a few
shippers and to a few agents at the expense of building a solid longterm sustainable industry is what we should be doing. So I am very disappointed that we have not been able to have a better debate. Most members on that side have been reasonable, except for one member. In my home state of Tasmania a processing plant was recently laying off workers due to stock shortages while stock was still being shipped overseas. This is a real problem. We need to be serious about this and— (Time expired)

Mr BILLSON (Dunkley) (1.03 pm)—This motion could be an opportunity to celebrate the advancements that have been made in this industry, a chance to recognise that chilled and frozen products alongside live exports are a complementary characteristic of this sector. Instead we seem to be hearing an argument that is having a go at the Gillard government’s trade minister, Dr Emerson, for not taking this matter seriously enough and not working hard enough to expand opportunities for chilled and frozen meats. And then we venture off into a trade barrier conversation, again completely within the domain of the government to address, but again here is a Labor backbencher seemingly being critical of the inactivity of the trade minister. And then we start talking about the animal welfare issues, which are very important and very concerning for my electorate. I have a very active community of concerned citizens wanting to make sure that the welfare of the animals involved in the live export trade are properly cared for. And I am pleased to be able to reassure them that there were considerable gains made under the former Howard government, putting in place the architecture through industry collaboration and proper and targeted inspection and regulatory regimes, the inclusion of vets on these journeys, the arrival infrastructure and handling arrangements that Australian taxpayers have invested in to make sure that the proper care and the welfare of animals is a high consideration even at those destination ports.

We could have talked about those things. Instead, this has been reduced it seems to an argument about chilled and frozen meat versus live exports. The reality is that we need both and we should support both. But we should also recognise in the decision here, however inspired—whether by the meat processors union, as some have suggested, or by animal welfare concerns; whatever the motivation for this motion today—that much has been gained. It is a chance to celebrate those advancements. Both the frozen and chilled export market and the live meat export markets are important to our nation’s future. We have a role to play in nurturing and supporting both.

To come in here and say only one is better than the other ignores some really sensible arguments that I thought the member for Durack and others have put forward. It is a very east coast chat, this one, isn’t it—where all the meat-processing facilities are? ‘Gee, we’d like more’, says the member for Capricornia. Of course we would like more, but where they are and where the sheep and the cattle are growing are not always neatly coincidentally beside each other. If we are interested in sustainability, the proposition that says that on pastoral land in the Northern Territory and Western Australia we should mandate or in some way engineer a requirement to put those beasts on road trains to freight them hundreds and, in some cases, thousands of kilometres so that they can be processed in meatworks, where we have had to import 30 per cent of the workforce through 457 visas, is somehow in our long-term best interests ignores the reality within the marketplace. There is an international appetite and demand for live meat exports, and we should hold up our head proud in saying that we are at least 50 per cent bigger than any country in that space. Through our advocacy and concern for

MAIN COMMITTEE
animal welfare, we have lifted the standard of all those involved in that trade. We have put our money where our mouth is to support the trade and to recognise that animal welfare matters. We have dispelled this myth that somehow activity out of sight is not a concern for us by putting people and resources in place in these destination markets to make sure that our expectations—dare I say, our cultural expectations—about the proper care of livestock is respected right throughout the supply chain.

Some of these destination markets do not have fridges, they do not have Safeways and Woolies down on the corner, they do not have the neat supply chains and a convenient collocation of stock and processing facilities that might be on the east coast, that we might wish was replicated right across our continent, and that we might hope would actually be in all the destination markets as well. That is not reality. So do we turn our back on this trade? I say no, because our leadership role in raising the standards of all those involved in this trade should be something that is celebrated and advanced. I am worried the current government has not advanced it quite as vigorously as the former Howard government. Minister McGauran has run rings around his successors in making sure that right throughout the supply chain, wherever we have an opportunity for influence, we exercise that influence in the interests of a sustainable industry that has both chilled and frozen products and live exports.

The value-add argument is a good argument and I would like to see more of it, but it needs a market. It needs realistic assessment of the economics involved. We should not be talking about the aberration of the odd Ethiopian sheep; we should be talking about what is the reality of a much enhanced industry through the work of the previous government. (Time expired)

Ms HALL (Shortland) (1.08 pm)—It is a pleasure to follow the member for Dunkley as opposed to following the member for Durack in this debate on the meat export industry. The member for Dunkley put forward a reasoned argument, even though I do not agree with a lot of what he had to say.

Firstly, I would like to put on the record my thanks to the member for Page for bringing this issue to the parliament and allowing this debate to take place today. I think it is an important debate. There are a number of members in this parliament who wanted to have a say about what they thought on this particular issue. It is very important to a number of electorates. It is about the livestock industry, the meat industry and whether or not we have live exports. My position is that it is not critical to the Australian economy. Sheep meat exports to the Middle East were worth $110 million more than live sheep exports to the region last year. So to say that only live exports are important is not correct. I say that we should be concentrating on expanding the sheepmeat export industry as opposed to the live sheep export industry.

It is also important to say that this is about Australian jobs and making sure that we support and protect those jobs. Australian jobs benefit most when we export meat from sheep that have been killed, rather than live sheep. That is very, very important. Australia is a member country of the OIE, which is the World Organisation for Animal Health. It is the only intergovernmental body that exists to improve animal welfare internationally. This issue is about a balance between jobs, our export market, which is very important, and animal welfare. I might put on the record here that I am a person who grew up in the country. I have a long-standing connection with people who are involved in growing and exporting cattle. I have
family who are involved in the industry. I am not arguing that we should not have a strong meat industry, because I think it is very important to our country.

Despite Australia having over 30 years of industry involvement in the Middle East, our animals are still being treated brutally. Here I would like to put on the record for the House a quote by Mahatma Gandhi:

The greatness of a nation and its moral progress can be judged by the way its animals are treated.

I think that is very important. This is an issue that has been raised with me in my electorate by a number of constituents. They are very in favour of the export of our livestock, but they would like to see them being exported once they have been killed. Live export for slaughter will never be ethically acceptable. Transporting animals thousands of kilometres by sea only to be slaughtered will never be logical nor ethically acceptable.

Australian funding may have improved ramps and feedlot conditions, but animals in nearly all Middle Eastern abattoirs are still being slaughtered while fully conscious. Here in Australia they are stunned before slaughter. Animal welfare will only be improved in the Middle East and other importing nations when there is local legislation to protect animals from cruel treatment. There should be an animal welfare benchmark before Australian animals leave this country live. This is a nonargument. Australian animals should not be exported live. We need to protect Australian jobs. We need to ensure that Australian animals are treated humanely and ethically. That will only happen when these animals are slaughtered at home.

Mr JOHN COBB (Calare) (1.13 pm)—Australian agriculture has a lot to be proud of in the way it does things and the way it represents Australia internationally. Its greatest selling point around the world is the quality of its product and the way in which it is delivered. That is no less true of the live export industry, be it sheep or cattle. That was not always true. It was not always the best run industry, but the industry has done enormous things over the last 20 years to make it better. Currently the fatalities on board ship are less than one per cent over all the red meat industry. That figure is under one per cent for sheep and about one-tenth of one per cent for cattle. In fact, it is probably true to say that the animal has more chance of dying on land than it does when it is sent overseas.

When Australian farmers made this industry happen, unions and others tried to stop them, not because of the animals but because they simply did not want it to happen and—they said—partly because of jobs. I accept that that might have been their reasoning. But this was the first time we had had actual competition where we as animal husbandry people were not at the mercy of one market, and that competition has great benefits for the Australian industry overall. The live export trade is worth over a billion dollars a year to the Australian economy. The issue of competition cannot be underrated. Currently, state governments—apart from others—take incredible taxes from everybody who kills an animal, slaughters it and goes through that process in Australia. Live exporters escape a lot of those state—and also some Commonwealth—charges on anything that happens within our country, so there are very good reasons why the live export industry goes well.

As the member for Dunkley so eloquently pointed out, this is an important industry not just to Australia but to various countries overseas which have an even stronger cultural background in eating meat than we do but which do not have refrigeration. Not everybody has a supermarket. But they do have a real need for red meat both culturally and in what they eat,
and we supply that market. A great amount of what we sell does not get sold and slaughtered for a supermarket or similar; it gets sold for individual families in one or two lots. It supplies a real need around the world in countries which are not as well off as we are.

The mover of this motion, who has every right to do it, has done it very cunningly. The motion does not actually say we must stop this, but that is what it wants to do. It wants to stop the live export industry, to the detriment of farmers and to the detriment of customers overseas. The member for Page refused to speak to the industry and refused to speak to her own constituents who have tried to talk to her about her motion. This is not about representing your constituents; this is about representing your unions.

I am somewhat horrified that I have to get up here and defend an industry which is so important to so much of Australia and to the people who receive, in the best condition of any live export anywhere around the world, Australian produce in those other countries. I cannot believe I have to get up here and defend a trade which has had its problems in the past but has dealt with those problems very strongly and very successfully. There is no-one in the world who can export live animals in the same condition and in the same way that we do.

I am very proud of Australian agriculture. I am very proud of the fact that everybody wants our product because it is delivered better than any other product in the world and because it is a better product than any product in the world. This particular product provides a heck of a lot of competition for the Australian farmer so that they are not at the mercy of a union and they are not at the mercy of whatever the domestic market wants to pay. Some 25 years ago Australian farmers marched en masse to ensure that this industry could and did have the freedom to sell the product where they were able to do so. (Time expired)

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr S Georganas)—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.

Education and High School Retention

Debate resumed, on motion by Mr Hayes:

That this House:

(1) notes that:

(a) the importance of high school completion in equipping young people with the skills and education levels to translate into paid employment or further education opportunities;

(b) the national rate of unemployment for persons aged 15 to 19 looking for full-time work was 24.2 per cent in January 2010; and

(c) the current rate for Fairfield-Liverpool region is 33.5 per cent;

(2) acknowledges that:

(a) education and high school retention play a crucial part in improving youth employment opportunity;

(b) in 2009, the Year 10 to 12 apparent national retention rate was 76.7 per cent; and

(c) in South West Sydney the current retention rate is: 72.6 per cent;

(3) calls on:

(a) the Government to continue its efforts to ensure an above 90 per cent high school retention rate nationwide by 2015 in order to reduce the youth unemployment rate; and
local businesses to give, where possible, priority to the local youth searching for employment.

Mr Hayes (Fowler) (1.19 pm)—The national rate of unemployment for persons between 15 and 19 years of age looking for full-time work was 24.2 per cent as at January 2010. The current rate of youth unemployment in the Fairfield-Liverpool region is 33.5 per cent. These figures are alarmingly high, and it is vital that we as a parliament play our part in encouraging our youth to continue with their education, making them more job ready and, in turn, encouraging our local businesses to reward these efforts with employment. Combating youth unemployment was one of the five initiatives that I nominated as my priorities in taking up the federal seat of Fowler. I have been advised by employers in the region that it is the lack of education and training—and, therefore, adequate skills—of the youth workforce that is the main reason for the lack of employment opportunities for this group.

Education, and high school retention specifically, plays a critical part in improving a young person’s chance of employment. According to the New South Wales Department of Education and Training, the current full-time retention rate for high schools in Western Sydney is 72.6 per cent. I know this statistic can be improved if governments, both state and federal, truly work together with the community. I note that the figure was as low as 69 per cent in 2004, so clearly progress is being made—but we still have a long way to go.

Keeping in mind that a lot needs to be done, I would also like to acknowledge that considerable effort has already gone towards achieving that goal. Last year, the federal government set a target of 90 per cent of young people completing year 12 by the year 2015. This is a realistic and obtainable figure, but obviously it is going to take considerable effort. The Commonwealth is also providing over $200,000 over the next four years so that each education jurisdiction can develop programs designed to encourage students to stay in school and complete year 12 and then be able to undertake further education and training. There is also $47 million as part of the National Career Development Week initiative, which includes individual career development sessions for students, local mentoring programs, improving work experience opportunities and targeting vocational pathways for young people. This also sits comfortably with the government’s position on trade training in schools.

I would like to take a little time to commend some of the local businesses in my area who are very much joining in and doing their part to ensure that young people receive adequate training and employment opportunities. Recently I spoke with Greg Pickering, Group CEO of Mounties Group clubs, one of the largest employers in the south-west of Sydney. This is one of the employers that truly understand the importance of giving young people a chance. In fact, 95 per cent of Mounties staff live within a five-kilometre radius of the club and 35 per cent of them are under the age of 25. This is an example of an employer that takes its community responsibilities seriously in tackling the issue of youth unemployment in our area. Mounties works with local high schools and other educational facilities, such as TAFEs, to provide work experience opportunities, traineeships and apprenticeships to local youth and students. Mounties is also the co-founder of the Street University in Liverpool, which has an on-site cafe that also serves as a training facility for youth in that region. Another example is Harry Hunt OAM, the owner of the Comfort Inn Hunts Liverpool, who spearheaded the Keep Australia Working committee for the south-west of Sydney. He is a man who certainly knows the value of giving young people an opportunity and working with them to provide them with a future.
We must not allow a situation to develop where young people who do not receive adequate training and support today become the long-term unemployed of tomorrow. Tackling this issue now is vital as an investment for our community. Finally, I would like to commend our high-school teachers for their dedication and professionalism, and for doing so much to help local students develop and fulfil their potential.

Mr HUNT (Flinders) (1.24 pm)—I commend the member for Fowler on his motion. It raises national issues and it raises issues of local provenance in his own electorate. I similarly want to address both national and local issues in relation to my own electorate and this motion in relation to school retention. As the motion notes, the national rate of unemployment for persons aged 15 to 19 looking for full-time work was 24 per cent in January 2010. This is unacceptable: it is too high; it is a disappointment; it is a failure; and it is something that we have to address. Of course, it is not 24 per cent of the entire population; it is 24 per cent of those who are not in school. We need to recognise that the best thing we can do is firstly to encourage young students to remain at school to complete year 12 and then to give them the best opportunity beyond that. Failing that, we also need to ensure that they have options that are going to assist them into youth employment through a number of different forms of incentives.

I want to speak in particular about the plans for Somerville Secondary College and the plans for a technical stream attached to Somerville Secondary College. First and foremost, the reason why, along with Neale Burgess, the state member for Hastings, so many parents in the community fought so hard for a year 12 Somerville Secondary College stream was precisely to give local students the opportunity to continue on in a supportive environment. Originally there was going to be no school. The state government of the day, the then Bracks government, had ruled it out. But we won that battle to retain the land. Then we won the battle to get the school established as a middle school in conjunction with the nearby Mount Erin Secondary College. Then we won the third battle to have it established as an independent middle school. Late last year I was delighted that, in working with the school council, the school principal and the school community, we were able to convince the Brumby government to match the coalition’s proposal of a year 7 to year 12 independent stand-alone Somerville Secondary College. That has now come to pass. That year 12 stream is now in progress and Somerville Secondary College will be a full year 7 to 12 school. I am delighted with that outcome.

The next step—and this goes directly to the motion before the House today about school retention—is to ensure that there is a second stream of a technical trades college built as part of and attached to Somerville Secondary College. The state government in Victoria allocated $4 million and I am delighted that my close friend and colleague Neale Burgess was able to carry the argument and carry the day to convince the potential premier at the time, Ted Baillieu, and to carry it forward now so that Somerville Secondary College will be accompanied by a technical college component. That is a tremendous outcome for the students of the area.

The area around Somerville is home to some of Australia’s best employers of trade skills such as BlueScope, Inghams and Esso—all of which are large employers and provide huge opportunities for young people with trades training qualifications. To be able to add to the great work being done at Western Port Secondary College with Somerville Secondary College and a Somerville technical college component is a tremendous increase in opportunities for
young people on the peninsula. So I commend that element of the motion by the member for Fowler and I particularly endorse the fact that we have won four battles in Somerville and we now have a standalone year 7 to 12 secondary college. The next phase will be the technical college component and that in turn will be followed at Point Nepean by the National Centre for Coasts And Climate. The Mornington Peninsula should be a centre for secondary and tertiary education and we will make it thus. (Time expired)

Ms OWENS (Parramatta) (1.29 pm)—I too would like to commend the member for Fowler for moving this motion. In an electorate like mine there are pockets of my community that do very well, many people that probably fall into the statistical averages generally but there are also areas of significant disadvantage that appear around the electorate. I spend quite a bit of time at my train stations and on a regular basis I go down to Telopea Station about 6.30 in the morning. It is in the middle of a very interesting area that includes a lot of new housing but also public housing. Most days when I am there this very young girl, who was about four or five when I first saw her, comes down to the station, goes across the train lines at a crossing where you have to wait to make sure a train is not coming, goes across a main road to the shop to buy some milk and then takes it back up to her home. In more recent years she brings her four-year-old brother with her, both in their pyjamas at about a quarter to 7 in the morning. I suspect that she comes from a home that is affected by things that cause her parents not to be up at that time of the morning, but she is clearly a person of great courage and strength. I look at her and I think, ‘This is a person who has got everything in them that they need naturally but probably won’t get the things from us that she needs to do well.’ It is a tragedy really, and poverty is already etched on her face at the age of six, that wariness that you see coming out of disadvantaged areas.

High school retention does not fix everything but it is an indicator of how well we are doing with people who need as much support as we can possibly give them. The increase in retention rates during the Hawke-Keating years, when we managed to increase rates from just over 40 per cent to nearly 72 per cent, was something I was very proud of. I am also proud of our current government’s commitment to improving year 12 or equivalent vocational completion rates to reach our target of 90 per cent in year 12 by 2015. One of the reasons we need to do that is that for the last 12 years of the Howard government in particular there was not the level of improvement we might have expected. In fact, it stagnated around 72 and 74 per cent for some 12 years. By the way, that is long enough for a person to start and finish school, so it is certainly long enough to have more of an impact than two per cent. One of the first things that Prime Minister Howard did when he became Prime Minister was to disband the disadvantaged school program. There was quite an uproar among the education leaders at that time about how that was actually making significant inroads into retention rates. Under the Howard government Australia was the third lowest investor in primary and secondary schooling in the OECD—not a record that any government should be proud of.

We have seen numbers turn around in the last couple of years. They have risen from around 74 to around 78 per cent in the last three years. Already we are starting to see the impact of the Rudd government and Gillard government strategy. We have been tackling the issue in a holistic way. We are well aware that the ability of a child to do well at school is largely dependent on the condition of their learning when they arrive at school in the first place, so we
are investing heavily in early childhood education because all the research shows that if a child arrives at school well, they do better at school.

We have invested $723 million over four years towards our national partnership on youth attainment and transitions programs, also to improve retention rates. We have already heard about the trades training schools today in this debate. The new national curriculum is another strategy which will give every child access to world-class curriculum, and the national partnership on low socioeconomic school communities also addresses the complex challenges facing students in disadvantaged communities. Those of us who spend considerable time in our schools would know that our schools quite often, probably in every case, reflect the communities surrounding them, and schools positioned in areas of disadvantage need considerable help. We have also extended the family tax benefit for families who have 16- to 19-year-olds at school or in vocational education, also a significant help to families with teenagers who come from that low socioeconomic band.

Finally I reiterate how pleased I am that the member for Fowler has moved this motion. It is something we should be concentrating on with all our efforts because it is the future of our children. (Time expired)

Mr CHESTER (Gippsland) (1.34 pm)—I join with the member for Parramatta in welcoming this motion on education retention rates and youth employment, and I congratulate the member for Fowler for the thoughtful way in which he has addressed this topic. It reflects very much on the member for Fowler. He is one of the true gentlemen of this place and I believe he is very sincere in his desire to help young people to achieve their full potential. He carries on the great tradition of members for Fowler in that regard. One wonders why he is not still the member for Werriwa, but that is one for the internal machinery of the Australian Labor Party.

I address my comments today to the issues of retention rates and to one of the key aspects of the motion of the member for Fowler: working with local businesses to give priority to local youth searching for employment. Education retention rates do provide a direct link to youth employment outcomes. Gippsland has one of the worst year 12 retention rates in Victoria, and subsequently we have a very low participation rate in higher education. Part of the issue is the aspiration amongst our young people and the value placed on education by some of the parents in my community—there is no question about that. We need to address that as a cultural thing in our community. The other big issue in terms of aspiring to higher education is the economic barrier. For kids from regional communities, there is no question that the costs of moving away to achieve higher education are a major barrier. It is why I fought so hard with this government on its changes to youth allowance. Instead of tinkering around the edges we should be having a complete overhaul of the student income support system, and it starts with the tertiary access allowance for all young people who have to move away from home to attend university. The simple fact that it costs country kids more to go to university than it costs city kids is a fundamental injustice we need to address in this place. I urge the Minister for Tertiary Education, Skills, Jobs and Workplace Relations to take a look at some of the ideas being put forward from not only this side of the House but also some of his own regional colleagues. Regional members understand that situation very clearly.

I am pleased today to see a media release put out by the Victorian government announcing a plan to ensure a long-term future for tertiary education in Gippsland. It comes from my
good friend the member for Eastern Victoria Region, Peter Hall, who is a former school-teacher. It outlines the decision to commission an expert panel to develop this plan for Gippsland. This plan is long overdue. We need to start working with our community to increase that aspiration and to make sure we have the right skills, education and training in place in the Gippsland community to secure a growing and competitive economy. I will not go through all details of the terms of reference now, but it is a process well worth undertaking. I commend the Victorian government for doing this.

The other aspect I will address is the issue of regional employment. The motion of the member for Fowler highlights that the fact that young people, particularly in his own community, have a higher than average unemployment rate. It is a very similar situation to that in my community of Gippsland and the Latrobe Valley. Small businesses are struggling at the moment. I do not believe the economic data is really reflecting that, but the reality on the ground in regional communities is that small- and medium-size businesses across the board are struggling, particularly in the retail and hospitality sectors. There is a real softness there. People are not spending and we are seeing small businesses closing their doors on a regular basis. It is an emerging issue for us in this place to see what support we can put in place for the small business sector as we come to some fairly uncertain times.

As part of my approach to being a member of parliament, I promote the message ‘Putting locals first’. This message is about not only promoting the needs of my local community but encouraging my community to support local businesses wherever possible. It is a fundamental issue for people from regional communities to look after their own small businesses, which look after their communities. These are the small businesses who put money into our sporting club and community groups, who donate goods and who sponsor different activities. We should support them in return. It is a fundamental issue for us in regional communities to put locals first, by supporting local businesses.

On that point, I have an issue with Ministerial and Parliamentary Services at the Department of Finance and Deregulation relating to the opportunity for members of parliament to support local businesses when it comes to office requisites. I have written to the department in relation to this and have followed that up with a letter to the Minister for Finance and Deregulation. We are not allowed to support local businesses in our community by purchasing our stationery from local shops. I think that is a fundamental flaw in the procurement process and I will continue to pursue it with the Special Minister of State. I believe that when we are entering government contracts we need to ensure that we give local businesses the chance to tender for every job that is available in regional communities. (Time expired)

Mr CRAIG THOMSON (Dobell) (1.39 pm)—I rise to also commend the member for Fowler for this motion. It is most important that the spotlight be shone on those disadvantaged areas where retention rates at high schools are well below the national average. In the northern part of my electorate, we have high schools that have retention rates of just under 40 per cent, so there are significant problems there. As some of the other speakers have said, this then is reflected in the youth unemployment rates. We have youth unemployment rates hovering between 30 and 40 per cent and they have done so for a considerable amount of time. The two are inextricably linked.

One of the great things about being part of this Labor government, though, is that we are looking at doing something about that and making sure that we put resources into schools and
into universities. Just this week I was with the member for Robertson at the Central Coast campus of the University of Newcastle, where we celebrated the $20 million of construction that is just starting there, which came from a funding grant from this government. It highlights the different approach this government takes to education from that of the previous government. To start with, the university campus would not even be in my electorate except for Labor. The former member for Dobell, Mr Michael Lee, fought very hard to make sure that kids on the Central Coast had a university in my electorate so that they could aspire to go there.

In the Central Coast not only do we have trouble retaining kids at high school but we also have one of the lowest rates of university entrance in Australia. That is starting to change since the campus has been there, particularly in the last three years with the injection of real money from this government into that campus. We have seen it grow by 10 per cent a year over the last four years under this government.

In higher education we have turned around what was a deficit in spending from the previous government into a net positive. We are starting to see the benefits. Ninety-five per cent of the kids who go to the Central Coast campus of the University of Newcastle come from the Central Coast. These kids would not often be able to make the trip down to Sydney or up to Newcastle to complete their higher education if it were not for this campus.

We can also look at the work we are doing in schools such as providing computers and trade training programs, which have links with business to provide alternate paths for those who are not going to go to university and never want to contemplate that, to make sure that they get the best chance in life.

One just has to look at the efforts, the direction and the resources that this government has put into education generally and compare them to what happened previously. In higher education, we were coming last in the OECD. We saw a 15 per cent reduction in investment in higher education. As the member for Parramatta said, we were ranked third last for schools in the OECD. The crowning glory of the previous government’s education program was putting flagpoles in schools. Flagpoles in schools may make you feel okay but they do not get you jobs, they do not make sure that kids stay at school and they do not make sure that disadvantaged areas like mine and the member for Fowler’s are looked after properly and given the same chances that richer electorates get and have had for a long time.

What makes the difference is making sure that we have proper training, that we are able to put the investment there and that we give kids the tools that are necessary in the 21st century to get a first-class education and give them the opportunities and the pathways to go right through school to university. Without this government’s investment, none of that would have happened. We were going backwards in education. Areas like mine were being condemned to having generations of young people who were not going to get a job because they did not have the skills and because they did not have the investment in their schools or in their universities.

The opposition’s policy in education was a bit like an episode of *F Troop*. They were all over the place with no idea of exactly what was happening, saying that putting up a flag in a school was going to resolve every issue. What we have at the moment is a government that has a real response to the issues of school retention rates, and that is having a marked and profound effect in disadvantaged electorates like mine. The member for Fowler should be commended for this resolution. *(Time expired)*

MAIN COMMITTEE
Mr VAN MANEN (Forde) (1.44 pm)—I thank the member for Fowler for his motion and I concur with it in its entirety. Education is the bedrock of our society and, if we want to continue to grow and build our society, education is a key component of that. The Forde electorate is very fortunate to be home to a great many primary, tertiary and higher education institutions. As I just noted, education is an integral part of our society. It has become a necessity for young people to complete their high school education in order for them to be equipped with the skills and education levels needed to compete in today’s competitive employment market. Along with that is the necessity to be technologically competent.

The Forde electorate comprises the Gold Coast and Ipswich regions. Unfortunately, these regions currently record higher unemployment rates than the national average, currently running at about seven per cent in the Ipswich-Logan region and about six per cent in the Gold Coast region. Even more concerning is youth unemployment. Currently, that is running at about 13.4 per cent, compared to the national average of around 11.7 per cent. The region has also recorded a sharp increase in unemployment over the last couple of years. I was talking to a local business recently where, in the last 18 months, they have laid off 20 per cent of their workforce due to business conditions.

Years 10 to 12 are really important years for high school students in terms of keeping those students engaged in education and pushing that retention rate up from the current level of approximately 76 per cent. I wish to encourage the continuing efforts to push that up to 90 per cent because those students, particularly those living in some of the underprivileged areas, will greatly benefit from that. It will significantly help their future employment opportunities and will give us the opportunity of seeing a reduction in some of those high youth unemployment figures that we see.

In conjunction with that, though, is the necessity, where possible, to encourage local businesses to give priority to employing local youth. Currently, business conditions are very difficult in the south-east corner of Queensland. I mentioned previously a business having laid off 25 per cent of its workforce. It is one of many businesses that are struggling. But there is some good news on the horizon. We have two fantastic initiatives within our community: the Junior Chamber of Commerce in Beenleigh and a new Junior Chamber of Commerce which is being established in Upper Coomera. These programs have been embraced by both the young people and the business community, who are eager to support each other and learn from each other’s experience and expertise. This opens further opportunities for these young people to gain employment. I had the pleasure of addressing the Beenleigh Junior Chamber of Commerce last week at their breakfast. There were approximately 60 students in the room, which I thought was a fantastic turnout and a great testament to the success of that program.

Other benefits include the ability of high school students to interact with fellow students from different schools, who have different things occurring at their school, so they are able to share those experiences and those ideas. The chambers of commerce aid young people by giving them the experience and allowing them to participate in a structured and democratic organisation. They also aid in building community capacity in these fast-growing regions. Certainly, my electorate is one of the fastest growing in the state of Queensland. These organisations also help identify youth issues, and the youth, rather than relying on other people to solve their problems, can work together to solve those problems within their community.
Debate resumed from 3 March, on motion by Ms Kate Ellis:
That this bill be now read a second time.

Ms MARINO (Forrest) (4.05 pm)—Education is a priority, as I frequently say in this House. I believe that people in this country should have access to lifetime learning, regardless of where they live in our nation—something that is extremely relevant in my regional and rural electorate of Forrest, as brought out very particularly by the government’s changes to youth allowance. Overseas students and services for overseas students are a core economic component of many Australian universities, schools and vocational education and English language training colleges. The Education Services for Overseas Students Legislation Amendment Bill 2010 reflects the national importance of the overseas student market in the Australian education sector. It is the result of the recommendations from the review of education services for overseas students, titled Stronger, simpler, smarter ESOS: supporting international students, conducted by the Hon. Bruce Baird, AM. The bill aims to strengthen the registration process for approved providers.

It is perhaps not well understood by many that overseas students represent Australia’s fourth largest export earner. They contributed $17 billion to the national economy in 2008-09. International student numbers grew from 228,119 in 2002 to 491,565 students in 2009. I understand the most recent valuation puts the export earning figure at around $18.6 billion—significant. By way of comparison, during 2007-08 Australia’s international education industry generated $4.9 billion more in export dollars than the Australian tourism industry.

Given the importance of the industry to the economy and the university sector, we need to ensure that our international education industry remains strong. However, despite Australia being a popular destination for overseas students, there has been a decrease in the demand for Australia’s education services. I understand there has been a 20 per cent fall in student visa applications, which could well see the sector lose $1.2 billion and possibly 19,000 jobs over the next two years. This is causing very serious concern in the education sector, as my colleague will attest. A recent story in the Australian commented that China’s biggest student agent for Australian universities and colleges has accused the Gillard government of policy mistakes that have caused a sharp drop in student numbers. The reasons cited were the changes to immigration rules, mounting competition and superior marketing from the US, Britain and Canada, as well as the rising cost of education in Australia.

One of the reasons given for the drop in numbers has been the high value of the Australian dollar, but this has been disputed by the chief executive of the Chinese student agency, who said that the dollar was at a similar value in 2008, when student numbers were growing rapidly. Australia has dropped from the No. 1 market for Chinese students to the third most popular destination. A further problem for the sector is the scrutiny over recent years, with alarm-
ing allegations made against some private education providers and by some students who, despite complying with all the requirements, are being forced to pay additional fees over and above their agreed payment. The collapse of private providers has added to the lack of confidence of potential students. The negativity surrounding Australia’s overseas student market has been exacerbated by international media coverage of protests in Australia by Indian students following a number of violent assaults. Given that the highest number of overseas students comes from India, this has had an impact on the market.

Many students experience the same problems as one Indian student experienced at a private Perth college. He was alone and away from home, away from his family, friends and supporters. He had to deal with the social and cultural differences as well as looking after himself. He had a dispute with his college over fees and was not allowed to attend classes. Then the college issued him with a section 20 immigration breach order. This student was not alone in his problems. At the same time, 12 other students reported problems to the immigration department in Perth. There were dozens of others who had to do the same. They were the subject of some unscrupulous operators—unscrupulous agents in India and unscrupulous colleges in Australia.

These stories are replicated over and over. This has placed Australia’s reputation as a safe provider of high-level education at risk, as you can see by the falling numbers. Some of this has also come as a result of some unscrupulous providers and education agents. We need to look after these students when they come to our shores. We must restore Australia’s reputation and build on our relationship with the countries where our international students originate from.

Improving accountability of not only colleges and education agents but also state and territory regulators is an integral part of this. This legislation will strengthen the registration criteria for providers of education services to overseas students, and the coalition broadly supports this effort. International students need reassurance that the Australian government takes their concerns seriously and will do everything in its power to prevent student exploitation by unscrupulous providers.

There are a number of regional local governments that have identified the overseas student market as an economic opportunity. The CAPEROC group—the combination of the councils of Augusta-Margaret River and Busselton in my electorate—is just one example. I am currently the chair of a group that is investigating the viability of establishing a higher education facility in the Capes region. We held a higher education forum earlier this year. The forum hosted a number of local, state and national representatives who provided information and a diversity of views on the opportunities and risks involved in a sustainable, viable higher lifetime learning education facility for the area. One of the presenters was Professor Jeanette Hacket from Curtin University, who stressed the important role that international students could play in such a facility. This is demonstrated well in the south-west town of Bunbury, where the number of international student enrolments at the South West Regional College of TAFE rose from 39 in 2008 to 67 in 2009. The college anticipates that the enrolment numbers in coming years will remain similar.

The international students currently studying in my electorate come from approximately 29 different countries and contribute directly to the south-west communities and local economy. Not only does the education institution benefit from increased enrolment numbers but the
money the students spend during their time in the community contributes directly to the local economy. Often the students themselves also make a valuable contribution to our society, both culturally and socially. Western Australia is fortunate in that it is the closest entry point for African and Asian students. However, we in Western Australia cannot simply take this market or the individual students for granted. Australia must work hard to retain and increase the number of not only Asian students but also all international students studying in Australia.

The legislation is aimed at the principal object of delivering education services to overseas students in Australia on a student visa, which are in part to provide financial and tuition assurance to overseas students for courses for which they have paid and to protect and enhance Australia’s reputation for quality education and training services. The Baird review report made 19 recommendations, and they were related to: more support for international students and improved information; stronger consumer protection mechanisms to ensure students are protected from unscrupulous operators; improved regulation of Australia’s international education sector; and improved support for those who study and live in Australia, including somewhere to go when problems arise. When you consider the isolation of the students, this is a really important part of the services that are required.

In conclusion, we certainly recognise the important role the international education industry plays in Australia. Even though we support the legislation, we really need to maintain very close scrutiny on how it will actually work in practice. That will be the measure of the effectiveness of this legislation.

Mr TUDGE (Aston) (4.14 pm)—I rise to support the Education Services for Overseas Students Legislation Amendment Bill 2010. This bill is an important one because it will strengthen Australia’s reputation as an international student destination. It will allow the Commonwealth to take action more immediately; it will strengthen registration requirements; and it will expand the role of the Commonwealth Ombudsman in this area. I will say more on these in a moment.

Before doing so, let me emphasise the importance of international education to Australia. As Senator Mason noted in the Senate, this is not a boutique issue for Australia. Overseas students are of vital importance to our universities and to the Australian economy and provide many cultural and foreign policy benefits to us also. Members would know the importance of overseas students to our universities. Many universities now rely on overseas students for a large proportion of their enrolments and of their income. Overseas students also enrich the universities themselves for other Australian students. They are welcomed on campus and are a vital part of our university life.

Our economy is also greatly enhanced by having international students. The full size and impact on our economy is often not known, but in fact we are one of the largest providers of education services for overseas students in the world. There are 2.8 million tertiary students who are studying abroad across the world, and we receive about 7.5 per cent of those students. Last year those students contributed $19.1 billion in export earnings for the country. This was almost doubled from five years earlier, when it was $10.1 billion. This makes it our largest services export industry, well ahead of others such as personal travel services, which are at $12.1 billion, and professional and management consulting services at $3.1 billion. It also makes it our fourth largest export earner overall after coal, iron ore and now gold. An Access Economics report into the beneficial effects of international students estimates that
overseas students contributed over 122,000 jobs to the Australian economy: over 30,000 directly in teaching jobs and the rest due to the flow-on effects from having those students here. In addition, we know that, for every two overseas students that we have present, we get a friend or relative who visits Australia, contributing a further $315 million to the Australian economy. We are fully aware of the mining sector and the impacts which it has on the Australian economy, but we should be equally aware of the international student market and the impact which it has also on our economy and how important it is for us.

But it is more than just dollars and cents that international students contribute to Australia. They add many cultural and social dimensions to our country as well. Importantly, they come here from many countries and build very strong relationships in Australia. Students come from China, from India, from Malaysia, from the Republic of Korea, from Vietnam, from Indonesia and from many other countries—all of these are critical trading partners and critical relationships for us to enhance. Through our having students from those countries here spending many years in the country, forging deep relationships with other Australians, indeed when they go back to their home country they have a greater appreciation of what Australia is like and are more likely to develop a stronger relationship with other Australians and with Australia as a nation in the long term. We know that many Singaporean students, Malaysian students and other students who have been here have since gone back and entered into very senior positions in their home country; many of them have gone back and entered into their home parliaments and are members of their home cabinets. Their experience in Australia and their understanding fully what Australian life is like from their experience here is invaluable.

I was lucky enough myself to have studied at an overseas university. I studied at Harvard University for a couple of years. Not only did I learn a lot from the course which I studied there but it gave me a much greater appreciation for the American way of life and American institutions by virtue of being there for a couple of years.

While most members of the House would agree on how important the international student market is to our nation, there are many significant challenges on the horizon. Firstly, there is significantly increased competition. With our traditional sources of students from China, Hong Kong and Singapore, those countries are rapidly developing high-quality education providers in their own countries, many of which teach in English. The United Kingdom is becoming more aggressive in seeking international students, in part because the government in the United Kingdom has cut the public funding to their universities and hence the universities themselves are reaching out to the international student market as a source of revenue. The United States, of course, continues to be an outstanding destination for international students to attend.

In addition to the increasing competition we have the rising Australian dollar, which of course makes it more expensive for international students to come to Australia as opposed to other countries. Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, we have had a string of private provider collapses, particularly in Melbourne, and high-profile incidences of violence being directed against overseas students. This has shaken the confidence in the market and has damaged the reputation of the international student market generally.

As a result of these challenges in the sector, there are reports of dramatic drops in enrolments at our universities and higher education providers across Australia. The official statistics show that the growth slowed considerably from 2008-09 through to 2009-10. So we have
work to do to continue to strengthen our nation as a destination, to make our universities and TAFEs as attractive as possible and to address some of the issues that have shaken the confidence in the sector. This bill is aimed at strengthening the sector and addressing some of those issues that I have outlined, particularly the collapse of private providers.

The measures in this bill come out of the Baird report into the international student market. This bill implements many of Mr Baird’s recommendations and builds on the original ESOS Act 2000. The main provisions in the bill include, firstly, the establishment of an overseas student ombudsman within the Office of the Commonwealth Ombudsman; secondly, it gives the Commonwealth power to impose financial penalties for a range of activities, including unethical recruitment practices; thirdly, it strengthens the registration criteria for providers of education services; and, fourthly, it introduces a new strategy for managing risk in the private education industry. These are important measures, and the coalition broadly supports them.

But, as Senator Mason has indicated and as the member for Forrest, who spoke before me, indicated, we will be watching closely for how these measures are actually implemented on the ground. It is one thing to have good intentions—and they are good intentions—articulated in the bill, but it is quite another to implement those intentions well.

This is a critical industry for Australia. We need to get it right. We need to be doing everything we can to support the growth of this industry, not only because of the important contribution that international students make to our economy but also because of the important contribution they make in so many other aspects of Australian life. The bill will go some way to addressing some of the pressing issues which are facing the international student market, and hopefully it will support and enhance this vital sector in Australia in the years to come. Thank you very much.

Mr HAWKE (Mitchell) (4.23 pm)—I rise to discuss the Education Services for Overseas Students Legislation Amendment Bill 2010. I want to record in the first instance my appreciation for this vital sector of the Australian economy. It plays an enormous contribution to the national economy and has in recent years, particularly under the Howard government, improved its contribution in economic terms. Private training providers have led the industry’s substantial growth in recent years. Enrolments have expanded. We have seen massive growth in the order of 70, 80 or 90 per cent in enrolment figures and, of course, turnover of billions of dollars, generating revenue for the government and for the Australian economy.

I want to record my appreciation of the role that private education providers are playing in Australia’s diplomatic efforts in the long term. That may be an odd way of phrasing that, but I think of it this way: in the globalised world in which we live with the importance of our region to our economy and our future, I think it is a fantastic system that we bring young, bright people from across our region to our country and provide them with a great, fantastic education product. It is something we should encourage in our society of today and seek to promote—and not hinder—as a government and as an enterprise. It is the case that that generates lots of benefits for Australia in ways that are difficult for us to measure or fathom. It is not simply an upfront economic benefit; it is not simply a benefit to those who come and work here and who add their skilled labour to the Australian economy. It is also the case that people who return to their countries in whatever part of the region they come from and who go on to be successful will have a higher and developed understanding of Australia. They will have an
appreciation for the quality and strength of our economy and for the quality of our education services and products. That is very important for us to state up front, because there is this hysteria in Australia today in relation to people from overseas that has been building for some time.

I want to record that my own background is from a migrant family after World War II, and so much of the Australian story is migration of people who have come to this country and succeeded. This is yet another evolution in the national debate on people coming to our shores and adding a value to our country. Sometimes you hear the arguments spelt out that there is something wrong with private education providers in Australia taking foreign students, something that we might seek to limit, hinder or interrupt, yet all they are doing is providing a first-class education product for international citizens who then go on to reward Australia with an improved opinion of our country. It is fundamental when looking at this type of legislation to understand that that is the basis of the whole sector.

The stories that have emerged in recent times that led to the Baird review which has led to this legislation today I think are minor and isolated. I do not think they are endemic. After speaking to different providers, different industry bodies and members of the sector, I think that government can tend to overreact in relation to various issues that do come up because of media commentary, because of a perception in the community or because of a need to address other matters that are not related to the bill before us today that are hurting a government at the time. It is very important to note that, since the problems with Indian students that occurred in the last few years, there has been a big downturn in the sector. At this juncture it is important to acknowledge that downturn and those figures, because the speculation that came from that review that 20 per cent of institutions are ‘dodgy’ or operate as ‘visa factories’ I do not believe is supported by any evidence. I accept the industry’s assertions in this regard. If you accept that perhaps 10 per cent of operators in the sector operate using some questionable framework, then we are doing is enacting a new series of regulations and standards for the rest of the sector that is already highly regulated.

I have many contacts, some within my electorate, who own colleges and private institutions who have explained to me the regulatory systems, state and federal, they have to go through in order to become certified education providers. I can tell members in this place that they are substantial requirements; they are serious requirements that are monitored by education departments every few years. The standards are high and are rigorous, which is a good thing. But constantly our instinct in dealing with legislation such as this is to regulate. Even if we accept the assertion that 20 per cent are dodgy, we are talking about some 100 out of 2,500 institutions or colleges; yet we are proposing a regulatory change or regime to cater for the 2,500 colleges and other enterprises out there, which I think is an overreaction.

Higher education is certainly the one that the government is keen to maintain. It is by far the biggest beneficiary of international student income. The problem does not lie with those ethical and high standard providers who have been in business and who have been certified for many, many years. Once again with regulation, we tend to see this effect, and the provisions of this bill are no different. There is some worthy intention within this bill. Yet our attempt is a blanket approach which does not recognise or distinguish between those serious, ethical and determined operators who have been hard at it for a long period of time. That is
where I have a great problem with regulatory regimes, and changes to regulatory regimes, that continue to treat everybody as if they are exactly the same.

There is a measurable and qualitative difference between colleges that have been in operation for many years, who have received the certification, who have never had a problem, who continue to provide a high quality product in education and who are regularly monitored and tested, and those colleges that we are looking to catch. Inevitably, with the design of any system to try to catch those people, we end up putting an undesirable burden on people who are doing the right thing. I would hope that this legislation is not an attempt to further hinder or regulate a sector purely because of an ethical or ideological viewpoint about the provision of education. There is no doubt that the education unions and other public sector people sometimes have the view that there is a threat or a problem with private education providers, something which I do not think is borne out in the data—that is, borne out in the economic activity or in the outcomes with our students.

I would like to make a couple of other points. When you look specifically at what is happening in the enrolment figures which come from 2007, 2008, 2009 and 2010 enrolments with the decrease we are seeing in all sectors, this is a worrying trend for Australia. While of course there is an increase overall in total enrolments from 2007 to 2010, the 2009 figure was 364,275 and the 2010 figure was 329,352. Not only does that represent lost revenue to the country, it is indicative of a trend that has emerged out of the many and public difficulties we have seen in the last few years as well as the negative commentary surrounding this legislation and the reason why we have it before us today.

The peak body for the private colleges, ACPET—the Australian Council for Private Education and Training—has acted under its own steam with tougher voluntary requirements on its members to ensure they are dealing with anybody that they find who is not acting ethically or who is acting outside the provisions of the regulation. We have seen from the drop in those figures I cited earlier that Indian visa applications are down some 45 per cent amongst ACPET members. That is almost a half drop in one of the biggest emerging economies and countries in our region, one of the fastest growing economies in the world. We often cite China’s growth, but India’s growth is also exponentially big. I think we have a big future in trade with India, sometimes more than we do with China, particularly if we as a government reverse our foolish decision not to sell uranium to the Indians.

Whatever the case, the democratic and historical links with India as a Commonwealth country mean this is an important nation for our future. A 45 per cent drop in enrolments from Indians amongst ACPET members is a serious thing: there is obviously a problem here; something has developed. I do not think we want to send a signal at this time from Australia to India that we are overly concerned about them, their students, or any other signal than we do welcome them to come here and train at our facilities and pay for the privilege to do so. It is a great system. It brings revenue on shore. It provides highly skilled and educated people who go back to India and have a great view of Australia. Considering the hit in the relationship between India and Australia since the election of the Rudd and now Gillard government, it is vital that we do something to turn that around—India being one of the most prominent countries in our region.

I think this legislation before us ought to be considered in the light of this very important emerging problem with India. I have spoken to members of the Indian community in Western
Sydney. We have the largest Sikh temple in Australia in the electorate neighbouring mine, and there are many prominent members of the Indian community in my electorate. I have spoken with many of them. They do feel that the government here in Australia has changed policy towards them. They feel affronted, particularly in relation to the problems with Indian students that happened so recently.

So we do not want to send a signal to these economies that we do not want students to come here and train in our colleges or private education and our workforce. While this legislation has some worthy intentions, it is vital that we do not allow there to be a significant proportional increase in the regulatory burden on colleges, making them unviable or sending out a signal that will then lead to a continuation of this unfortunate trend of dropping enrolments.

I want to turn to the proposed overseas students’ ombudsman for a minute. This proposal responds to strong calls from students during recent consultations for a students’ ombudsman to handle complaints. There is not really a view about that, I think—about the scope or extent, or what it would actually do to improve the situation. It always sounds like a good idea. We have been debating whether to have a cybersafety ombudsman as well in the cybersafety committee. But having an ombudsman tends to be a very reactive approach. It does nothing to pre-empt problems. It does nothing to manage problems upfront. It is an end-of-the-line process.

However, there is some case for saying, of the ombudsman proposal in the bill, that being limited to the handling of complaints against education providers really limits its scope. I think that is a valid argument. Why would we not expand that to ensure that we are catering for any kind of complaint that a student may have? It seems odd, and is probably yet another signal from the government that they are, in a way, unfairly targeting this to education providers, who have been doing the right thing most of the time.

Let us not get the impression here in this place that, out of those 2,500 institutions, a whole range of them are doing the wrong thing. We know, even if we accept the figures that are put forward, that, even at a maximum, this is 20 per cent. So to say that we need an ombudsman for the entire industry just to deal specifically with industry complaints is a rather odd intention of the government’s in this legislation.

It is the case currently that domestic and overseas students with publicly-run providers have access to statutorily independent complaints bodies and state or territory ombudsmen. Students of Australia will now have this opportunity. I think that this recommendation to extend the jurisdiction of the Commonwealth Ombudsman has some merit. But I do not think it should be limited to just the education providers; I think that is pre-empting the complaints and has an unworthy intention in it.

In finishing my remarks on this bill I would simply record my appreciation for the sector’s endeavours and its addition to the Australian economy. It has played a valuable role in Australia’s economic development and will do so in future. That is not to say there are no problems or that we should not regulate and deal with those problems as they arise. But I would like to see regulation that is effective—not just well intentioned but well targeted and well dealt with—in order to deal with the actual problems and not simply to impose higher regulatory burdens on the entire sector.
Ms GAMBARO (Brisbane) (4.38 pm)—I also rise today to speak in support of the Education Services for Overseas Students Legislation Amendment Bill 2010. The bill seeks to amend the Education Services for Overseas Students Act 2000 to strengthen the registration criteria for providers of education services to overseas students. It was introduced very much as a risk management approach for the regulation of the providers.

The international education industry in Australia is the fourth major export industry and it is worth an estimated $18.5 billion. An Access Economics report into education in April 2009 found that it creates an extra $12.6 billion contribution to our economy through teaching, food and accommodation for international students. These figures combined mean that the international student market contributes $30 billion or more to our economy.

But the world is changing. We have had a global financial crisis. There has been more competition from other countries and overseas providers, particularly the United States, which is now at parity with our exchange rate. In recent years there has been a more aggressive approach from other countries, particularly in targeting overseas students. In countries like China, Hong Kong, Singapore and Malaysia domestic capacity is increasing. Many of the universities in China, for example, are also introducing English faculty courses. This will provide us with much stiffer competition. As I said earlier, the United States is certainly in there and so is the United Kingdom. There have been cuts in the United Kingdom’s education system and they are looking abroad to find some way of redressing that particular loss of income to their particular industry. So we should not be complacent about this industry that we have had for a very long time.

I want to place on record my strong support for the VET system and the wonderful work that they are doing. Previous speakers have spoken about the need for redress and the fact that there might have been a couple of colleges that have collapsed in recent times, but that does not mean that the integrity of the whole system is at play here. The majority of providers that I meet through ACPET and through the governing bodies are professional people who work at ensuring we have the best quality education sector in the private provider sector. I want to place on record my absolute support for the great work that they do.

But we have to find a balance. We have to find a balance between regulation and a good education system, and we must balance the needs of our migration system as well. In this interface you have migration law, private sector educational facilities that come under stage training departments and Commonwealth law. So you have a lot of government regulation in this industry. I think we have to be very careful that we do not strangle an industry that has created so much opportunity for Australia and our providers.

The bill seeks to introduce provisions that will strengthen the registration process for the approved providers. It also has a demonstrated capacity to provide education of a satisfactory standard and providers will have to demonstrate access to the financial resources to meet the objectives of the act. They must have a sustainable business model, the capability and the government structures and management to deliver education of a satisfactory standard. The purpose of this measure is to build on a previous amendment which introduced two registration criteria and to further raise the bar of entry into the international education sector.

This is building on risk management, particularly in the re-registration process which was introduced by a previous amendment to the ESOS Act. This particular measure will extend a risk management approach to all registration throughout that registration period. The purpose
is to identify risk and to ensure a consistent assessment of risk by all state designated authorities to reduce the number of high-risk providers entering the international education sector or to set appropriate conditions on that registration, including for ongoing monitoring to better manage risk. This measure will ensure that, when assessing a provider for registration, the registering body will set a period of review on any conditions that should arise from the assessment of the provider’s risk profile. In addition to registration, a risk management approach will target regulatory activity to reduce duplication of effort and unnecessary regulatory burden. The risk management approach will be supported by limiting a provider’s registration period to no more than five years. This will introduce consistency into the registration regime to allow ESOS to formally recognise and align with limited periods of registration for each provider set by the states and domestic quality assurance frameworks.

One example of a quality and highly valued private provider of education to international students in Brisbane is the Charlton Brown group, which I have had the pleasure of working with for many years. Charlton Brown is a leader in skills training both in Queensland and overseas, and it has a very long and exemplary teaching service. I recently went to the opening of their new college at the Valley, where they have 1,500 students on the three campuses in the child services, aged care disability and welfare studies disciplines.

I spoke earlier about risk management, and that needs to be supported by enabling conditions placed on a provider’s registration when the provider is first registered or at any time throughout the registration period related to risk. This measure will allow the Commonwealth and/or secretary to impose a condition on a provider’s registration on their own initiative, rather than on a recommendation by a state designated authority, and for reasons other than noncompliance. Imposing a condition on a provider’s registration will arise from a provider’s risk profile, and that will be provided by the state designated authority where risk is identified separately by the Commonwealth as part of ongoing compliance monitoring.

This measure will also extend existing sanctions and strengthen the ability to take effective enforcement action by introducing financial penalties for a broader range of non-compliant behaviour to better address emerging issues confronting the international education sector, such as unethical recruitment activity and maintenance of student records. There is no doubt that there have been a few colleges engaged in some of these unethical practices. In addition, the changes in this bill include expanding the role of the Commonwealth Ombudsman, particularly to cover complaints from international students that relate to service providers. The proposed new overseas students’ ombudsman will also provide advice to private providers on complaints-handling processes, and that is a very good thing and something that is well overdue. For a long time, we have had overseas students who need to speak to someone about the terms and conditions of their courses.

We in the opposition support the Education Services for Overseas Students Legislation Amendment Bill 2010 [2011]. I know that it will go some way to improving particular services for students. I want to add to the comments of the previous speaker, the member for Mitchell. We need to balance flexibility and enforcement to make sure that we have a thriving industry we can continue to be proud of, which is recognised world wide as being of the highest quality standard and which has for a long period of time contributed, as I said earlier, over $30 billion to Australia. We need to support this industry, so today I support the Education Services for Overseas Students Legislation Amendment Bill 2010.
Mr KELVIN THOMSON (Wills) (4.48 pm)—The Education Services for Overseas Students Legislation Amendment Bill 2010 will, among other measures, strengthen the registration requirements of approved education providers by requiring that they have access to sufficient financial resources, a sustainable business model and the capability, governance structures and management to deliver education of a satisfactory standard. It will extend financial penalties for a broader range of non-compliant behaviour by providers.

I am pleased with this amendment as I have spoken in the parliament before about my concerns regarding the problems we have developed in the provision of international education. These concerns have been reinforced by recent analysis by University of New South Wales economist Gigi Foster. Her evidence has demonstrated that international students from non-English-speaking backgrounds are being passed without achieving the appropriate standard. Her analysis of university business students has raised real concerns over the issue of ‘soft marking’ of international students and the adequacy of English language standards. Asked whether her analysis was evidence of easier marking, Ms Foster said:

This is exactly what it is. Everybody knows the basic story being told here, but they haven’t been able to prove it conclusively because the data hasn’t been there and no one really wanted to know because it is such a delicate issue.

It would seem the poor written and verbal language skills of some international students and locals from non English-speaking backgrounds do not stop universities passing them. As reported by the Australian newspaper in reference to this research:

Academics have long alleged there are cases of cash-for-qualifications, that international fee-paying students with poor English are passed— not because they have made the grade but because universities are counting on their fees.

Ms Foster found international students and others from non English-speaking backgrounds perform significantly worse than domestic students with average marks four points lower on a 100-grade scale in the first case and slightly lower than four points in the second case. But the higher the concentration of international students in a course the more their marks were buoyed. The article states:

Foster says she interprets this phenomenon as evidence of a type of “grading to the curve” that effectively camouflages the underperformance of international students.

This means that international students in fact may not be getting value for money because they are not reaching the standard previously associated with the qualification.

As reported in the Australian, Flinders University business academic Tony English has been among those who have been put under pressure to pass substandard work. He says he no longer has a mobile phone as overseas students would ring him at six o’clock on a Sunday morning saying, ‘Please, please, please pass me, my family has spent so much money on this.’ Mr English argued universities now progressed students who should not be at university because:

… they lack the right blend of intellect, interest and English-language skills.

His concern is also for highly functional students who realise that marking is soft and modify their work standards accordingly, leading to underperformance. He says:

Some them are just being lazy, but some of them are disillusioned.

A former student at Flinders University has attested to this experience, which included problems with international students attending tutorials and saying nothing and finding group work hard when working with students who would be better off ‘doing other things’.

As the Australian says:
The easiest way to address the quality control crisis is for universities to refuse to enrol international students whose English is not up to the standard required to write a coherent essay and participate in classroom discussion. But the need for revenue, especially in less prominent universities that do not attract large numbers of prospective students, makes this hard.

As far back as 1998, vice-chancellors reminded institutions of their duty: “Given the financial and cultural consequences of failure, special care is required to ensure that only those international students who have a reasonable chance of success are enrolled.”

In August 2009 the Prime Minister, who at the time was Minister for Education, asked the Hon. Bruce Baird to review the Education Services for Overseas Students Act 2000 and its associated instruments and to recommend actions for ensuring that Australia continues to offer world-class quality international education. In a submission to that review I expressed concern about unsatisfactory private education providers who are more concerned with migration outcomes than with educational ones and who have eroded Australia’s reputation for the provision of quality services for international students. The lure of permanent residence has over the previous decade been the major driver of growth in international student enrolments. I emphasised the need to decouple the link between education and permanent residency, to have a cooling-off period whereby students return to their home countries after completing their courses here and to address the decline in English language standards.

The release of Mr Baird’s report included a number of important recommendations. They included: more support for international students and improved information; stronger consumer protection mechanisms to ensure students are protected from unscrupulous operators; improved regulation of Australia’s international education sector; and improved support for those who study and live in Australia, including having somewhere to go when problems arise. I want to focus on this last point because being an international student in Australia—indeed, I dare say being a student in any foreign country—means that they can be vulnerable to exploitation and to being ripped off. We have seen this in workplace areas and we have also seen it, regrettably, with students being put in situations of potential danger, working late hours and taking public transport and the like and being the subject of violent assaults.

The particular issue that I want to pursue about providing support for people who are studying and living in Australia, and providing somewhere to go when problems arise, relates to exploitation in relation to accommodation. I have come across a number of examples of this, but one that has been drawn to my attention recently is in the suburb of Brunswick in my electorate. At the invitation of one of my constituents, Mr Pasquale Valpied, I visited the complex at 108 Onion Street, Brunswick, and, frankly, it is a disgrace. If we saw it in a Third World city we would sigh and consider it as evidence of our superiority. Buildings such as this one will drag Melbourne down to the status of a Third World city. The problems include water saturated walls, mould on walls, garden beds and planter boxes left incomplete, electoral wiring left uncovered, inadequate security for electrical and phone connections, rubbish bins outside on the ground floor rather than in the basement, no newspaper holders for the delivery of newspapers et cetera.

Mr Valpied has had two reports on his apartment, one from Archicentre and another from a structural engineer. The reports say he needs to replace his entire front wall, which is saturated with water. This is probably the case for the other 25 or so ground floor apartments. He also needs to rip up the concrete topping at the front of his apartment and re-membrane and possibly re-tile it in order to waterproof it. The fundamental error is that the surface level outside the apartment is 150 millimetres higher than the floor level inside it. Therefore, every time it
rains water tries to make its way inside. Mr Valpied’s carpet has been ruined and he is afraid of making new purchases for fear that they will be ruined also. It is a mystery to me why the surveyor signed off on this apartment as fit for habitation. It is a mystery to Mr Valpied also. He says he has never sighted a certificate of occupancy and his council, the Moreland Council, does not seem to have sighted one either. This raises the question of the use of private building surveyors, rather than council ones, to approve constructions.

There are a series of other issues going to the suitability and habitability of this apartment complex. Mr Valpied says that he has spoken to consumer affairs on two occasions and has been told that he has no legal protection. If this is true then it is completely unsatisfactory and it needs to be changed so that we have new dwellings like this covered by builder’s warranty insurance et cetera.

Many of the apartments in this complex are foreign owned and many have international students as tenants, but neither the foreign owners nor the student tenants should be ripped off or be expected to live in substandard accommodation. The Prime Minister, in her previous role as the Minister for Education, gave her support to begin work to implement a number of the Bruce Baird recommendations immediately. She committed the government to further consultation with the international education sector stakeholders on the remainder of the recommendations for a second tranche of legislative changes.

This bill will introduce provisions that will, among other objectives, protect the interests of students, and this should include ensuring that they are not the victims of people who seek to take advantage of their significant investment in Australia’s education system. I hope that these amendments to strengthen the educational services for overseas students will result in a more sustainable international education sector through better protection of international students and an ongoing commitment to continual quality improvement.

Mrs Andrews (McPherson) (4.59 pm)—I rise to speak in support of the Education Services for Overseas Students Legislation Amendment Bill 2010. Australia is one of the largest providers of education services for overseas students in the world, with almost 270,000 student visas granted during the 2009-10 financial year. While according to the Department of Immigration and Citizenship this number constitutes a decrease of 15.8 per cent from the previous financial year, when 320,000 visas were issued, this is an important sector of the Australian economy and an important export. Almost half of the reduction in student visa applications came from India, and this is something that should be addressed. I hope the passage of this bill alleviates some of the concerns that students and parents from India, and perhaps from other parts of the world, have clearly felt. We know the impact poor word-of-mouth can have on our student numbers. Fairly or unfairly, our reputation in India over the past two years has clearly been diminished. Obviously there are broader issues here, but ensuring the integrity and business viability of our institutions is a step in the right direction. Ensuring international students receive a fair deal and a quality education is at the core of this bill, which is why I support it.

It must be noted that the nation from which the second-highest number of students came to Australia to learn was China, where student numbers did not diminish but grew, albeit marginally, in the 2008-09 to 2009-10 period. It is no surprise when looking at the visa statistics that the international education industry is our fourth biggest export industry—after coal, iron ore and gold—and is worth an estimated $18.5 billion. According to a 2009 Access Econom-
ics report, the industry contributes an additional $12.6 billion to our economy through employment and spending additional to tuition by international students.

It is important that we encourage our international students, and not just for their economic contribution. Their presence in the classroom and on campus adds to the learning experience for all students. Firstly, their presence at our educational institutions encourages an international approach to the curriculum by our institutions, helping to prepare Australian students for careers in an international business or academic community. In this way, Australian students receive some of the benefits of international study without leaving their home towns. Additionally, it must be acknowledged that our world is really becoming a global village, and exposure to different cultures is vital to our students in becoming as valuable as they can be in an internationalised world and marketplace. The broader extracurricular experiences that students have access to thanks to the presence of international students help them to understand cultures, religions and values different to their own and those generally around them. Students themselves develop networks with other students and with lecturers that cross international boundaries. The relationships developed by Australian students with international students and vice versa can be lasting and valuable, not just for the individual students but for us as a nation.

International students who study in Australia return home with an understanding of and exposure to Australians, our way of life and our values. As parliamentarians, we know the values that come from understanding not only our near neighbours but those outside our region. There are current international students studying in our universities who will become players on the world stage, whether it is in business or in diplomacy—perhaps even future ministers for foreign affairs, prime ministers or presidents.

In my electorate of McPherson there are two universities. In the south of the electorate we have a campus of the Southern Cross University at Bilinga and, more towards the north of my electorate, at the centre of the Gold Coast, we have Bond University. Bond University is a major contributor to our local economy. Bond’s 2009 study into its own economic impact on the Gold Coast showed a per annum contribution of $300 million, which is certainly a significant impact on the economy of the Gold Coast. Bond has a current student enrolment of about 4,500, and the international student population makes up around 40 per cent of the total student population. The largest international student populations come from China, Canada and the USA. Typically, 80 different nationalities are represented at Bond. This obviously creates an international campus, with the benefits as previously outlined, but it also creates a much more international Gold Coast.

With a significant portion of the economic contribution to the Gold Coast economy no doubt coming from Bond, arising from the presence of international students as part of the academic community, it must be acknowledged that the broader impact on the economy of the loss of these international students would be significant for surrounding accommodation providers, retailers and businesses in the hospitality sector, not to mention the educational institutions themselves. When international student numbers are threatened, so are these businesses and institutions. We must also acknowledge the economic contribution made through tuition to these universities by international students. International students generally pay significantly more for their tuition than Australian students do. Their contribution, in essence, subsi-
dises infrastructure, administration and education for all students and allows for better facilities and additional curricular and extracurricular opportunities.

It is with this appreciation for the contribution of international students that I approach this bill. This bill adds to the existing registration criteria for our education providers to require that they show that their primary function is to supply education and to supply that education at an appropriate standard. In general, from my discussions with the education industry, the industry is very supportive of this move. These changes arise out of the Stronger, simpler, smarter ESOS: supporting international students review conducted by the Hon. Bruce Baird. This bill partly implements the recommendations of that report. The registration criteria now also require of higher education providers evidence of a sustainable business model and appropriate management structures and governance structures. For any business, let alone one in which students place their learning and career futures, this should be part of good management practices.

Further, the changes proposed by the bill include a standardised risk management approach to the regulation of education providers. The risk management model is to be established by regulation, and the explanatory memorandum outlines that those institutions potentially falling into the highest risk category will be those that are newly established, those that have a small course scope that appears to be linked to migration policy, and those that have a high reliance on international students from a small number of source countries. Additionally, high foreign ownership and a history of compliance issues would potentially place an institution into the high-risk category. The risk management model also establishes consistency from the start of the risk management process. It enables the setting of a period of review, enables the placement of conditions on a provider’s registration and requires re-registration within five years.

While no institution should be immune from scrutiny, institutions that do have good track records, that appear to be very low risk, should not be put under undue additional administrative pressure. Red tape for red tape’s sake will not achieve anything, but it will hurt our institutions. That being said, the administrative costs to all institutions should be kept to a minimum. Many of our smaller institutions have been hit hard, and not necessarily due to any action of themselves. The impact of a higher Australian dollar on our education providers is certainly not to be discounted in this regard.

The introduction of the Overseas Student Ombudsman is a positive measure. It should add to the risk management features of this bill and lend international students greater confidence, and I certainly hope that that will be the case. This bill is a positive step in supporting our international education sector. For every poor experience a student visitor has in Australia we lose not only that student from our shores but others—potentially many more. There is no reason for any student to have a poor experience here. We have an accepting and multicultural society. When it comes to education we have high standards and quality outcomes. We have cities and towns that not only are great places to live in but offer unique experiences to visitors. I hope that the outcomes of this bill encourage more students from nations other than our own to make their way to Australia to study. I commend the bill to the House.

Mr WYATT (Hasluck) (5.10 pm)—I rise to support the Education Services for Overseas Students Legislation Amendment Bill 2010. I had the privilege of working in two jurisdictions in which I also had an association with institutions that provided for overseas students. What I
found most rewarding was that those young people would come to Australia, study here and then go back to their home countries. They took back messages about the quality of life and the strength of the opportunities they had here, which enabled them to acquire the skills necessary for the disciplines that they went into and which also gave them the opportunity of going into tertiary pathways.

I welcome the bill because it will strengthen the registration criteria for providers of educational services to overseas students and introduce a risk management approach for the regulation of these providers, which is critical in terms of its viability in the economy of Australia and also in protecting students. We must not forget that education is now Australia’s third biggest export sector. In 2009 it generated $18.6 billion and supported approximately 125,000 jobs across this country; therefore, it is a substantial area of our economy. It is an area that I hope we will continue to expand to provide opportunities for overseas students consistent with the direction that we established under the Colombo Plan. In 1990 Australia welcomed 47,000 international students. By 2000 this number had grown to 188,000. In 2009 nearly 500,000 students were studying in Australia, with more than 360,000 starting their courses in that year. Our international students come from 190 countries, from major cities and remote villages. What that brings is the richness of diversity and the richness of the culture from which they come, and it also enables people within our own universities and educational institutions to acquire an understanding of another culture that is rich in so many facets of art, dance, customs and food.

I strongly endorse schedule 2 item 2, which provides for the amendments to the Ombudsman Act 1976 to establish the Overseas Student Ombudsman within the Office of the Commonwealth Ombudsman, as proposed under section 19ZI. The proposal to establish the Overseas Student Ombudsman within the Office of the Commonwealth Ombudsman will provide overseas students with an avenue for having their concerns and grievances addressed, something which they have not previously had. That is critical in providing integrity and a sense of surety for a student’s course of study and also in students knowing, in instances where there is an issue that is of real concern to them, that they have an independent umpire they can appeal to who will address their issues—as opposed to having the issue addressed exclusively by the educational provider, who may not be supportive of the grievance or the concerns they raise. But equally it sends a strong message to the providers and agents that the Australian government is committed to a strong and vibrant overseas education sector. It also sends a strong message to overseas students that they are welcomed and valued for the contribution that they make to Australia whilst they are studying here.

We have all been exposed to media reports of unethical behaviour within the sector, including colleges closing, which meant lost fees and incomplete courses of study, leaving students in limbo and creating uncertainty. We are all familiar with the assaults on individual Indian students in their community, which has also caused problems in the international community. However, it is not uniform in its practice, and to Australia’s credit we have demonstrated that they are always welcome. We will occasionally have those people who, for different reasons, choose to single out individuals for the wrong purposes altogether. These issues may have tarnished Australia’s image, and may have been reflected in commentary, but our response as a nation and by government has been very strong. This now provides an avenue for those students who have experiences like that to seek the assistance of an ombudsman. Student griev-
ances have included personal welfare concerns, housing, employment and transport. There have been complaints about the quality of education provided, about the administrative practices of education providers and about the ethical standards of immigration and education.

I had the privilege of being pro-chancellor of Edith Cowan University, where we certainly targeted full-fee paying students from overseas to be involved and to enrol in our particular disciplines that we were expanding into. But, equally, as a university we were wanting to contribute back to the development of an overseas country, creating opportunities for the growth and the development of human capital, so that the skills acquired within Australia would be commensurate with the skills within the region—but, equally, in the long term, so that overseas students might also be attracted back to vacancies that occur within our own country, contributing to the economy and to the population within Australia.

I read with interest the Council of Australian Governments International Students Strategy for Australia 2010–2014 when it was released, because of my prior work within the education sector and more recently because of the work being undertaken by the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Health and Ageing. We heard of overseas trained doctors who come with experience but are required to go through a process that checks and tests the rigour of their training. It would have been easier, in many senses, for them to have studied and trained here, because they would have left university with qualifications of the nature that we require for the registration of the profession. And certainly, as doctors, even though they are caught within a process, they contribute very strongly to the provision of health services within rural and remote regions of Australia. The growth of the overseas student sector in the long term has the capacity to provide for those skills shortages that we will be faced with as the mining sector continues to grow.

In 2009 the Commonwealth government also brought forward a review of the Education Services for Overseas Students Act, the ESOS Act, and its associated acts and regulations. On 9 March 2010 the Commonwealth government released the Education Services for Overseas Students Act review report—Stronger, Simpler, Smarter ESOS: Supporting international students—and agreed to begin work to implement some of the recommendations immediately. The report made a number of recommendations, with two central themes:

… ensuring students are better supported through improved information, management of education agents, stronger consumer protection mechanisms and enhanced support to study and live in Australia, including having somewhere to go when problems arise, and

… improving regulation of Australia’s international education sector and ways to streamline Education Services for Overseas Students to ensure Australia maintains its reputation as a high-quality study destination.

I am sure that the proposed changes that have been put forward will enhance the industry that we are developing. Those changes will ensure that the principal purpose of providers will be to provide education; that they have a demonstrated capacity to provide education of a satisfactory standard that does not diminish or damage Australia’s reputation in the provision of education for overseas students; that they will be required to demonstrate access to financial resources; that they have a sustainable business model; and that they have the capability of providing the education programs that students enrol for and governance and management structures to support the delivery of education of a satisfactory standard.
Naturally, the increase of student numbers has resulted in growing numbers of international education providers, which has resulted in opportunistic arrangements whereby some operators established institutions which collapsed, leaving overseas students without a learning institution and out of pocket because refunds were not possible.

When I was researching this matter I was impressed by the following, which appears on an official Australian government webpage. It encourages an overseas student to enrol and study in Australia. It reads:

To start your journey, read on:

Live
Australia is one of the best places in the world to live while you learn. The standard of living is amongst the highest in the world, yet costs remain competitive. On your breaks from study, you will have a wide choice of activities to enrich your experience—from cultural festivals, concerts and museums, to major sporting events.

Learn
Australian education has a strong international reputation for excellence. Whether you study at a university, school, vocational or English language institute, you will receive a quality education that will form a strong foundation for your future success.

Grow
The benefits of living and learning in Australia are both personal and academic. Your years in Australia will give you the best platform to succeed in your career, and prepare you for the challenges of the workplace. It won’t just be your mind that develops - your time in the classroom will change you as a person.

I liked what I read, and I would be tempted to enrol to study in Australia if I were an overseas student.

I support the proposed changes to the Education Services for Overseas Students Act 2000 and the Ombudsman Act 1976. They will further strengthen the registration requirements for education providers delivering to overseas students with a specific focus on business sustainability; introduce a consistent risk management approach to the regulation of international education; limit the period of registration, allowing conditions to be placed on a provider’s registration according to risk; extend the range of non-compliant behaviour that could attract financial penalties to strengthen regulation; and also expand the role of the Commonwealth Ombudsman.

The international education sector is Australia’s third-largest source of export income, and it needs to be protected and enhanced. I therefore compliment the government on the legislation. I support a high-quality experience for international students to ensure a sustainable future for quality international education in Australia and ultimately for the region of which we are part—and for Australia’s economy, with the opportunity to have students who have acquired skills within our institutions that provide them with a pathway of learning and of experience that is underpinned by quality providers, providing students with a richness that will not be forgotten, so that ultimately they become ambassadors for our great country.

Mr Morrison (Cook) (5.23 pm)—I commend the member for Hasluck for his comments on the Education Services for Overseas Students Legislation Amendment Bill 2010. He spoke of the importance of a quality experience for international students studying in Australia. I think the benchmark for this bill is whether we are able to maintain a quality experience
for international students and for the international education sector in Australia and whether
the quality experience is there for the Australian economy and ultimately for the Australian
community, who can genuinely benefit from all of this activity.

This bill picks up reforms recommended in the Baird review. Mr Baird is the former mem-
ber for Cook, and I acknowledge in this place as the author of this report. He is one of quite a
number of former coalition ministers at the state and federal levels who have been tasked by
this government to come and sort out problems. I commend the government for acknowledg-
ing the experience and input of Mr Baird, who is a good friend of many years with many in-
sights into this area from his years working both overseas as a trade commissioner and in
various roles he has held in the tourism sector, and in some of those I worked with him.

This bill amends the Education Services for Overseas Students Act to strengthen the regis-
tration criteria for providers of education services to overseas students and to introduce a risk-
management approach for the regulation of these activities. The bill will also amend the Omb-
udsman Act to establish the Overseas Students Ombudsman, within the office of the Com-
monwealth Ombudsman.

These proposed changes arise out of the report, as I mentioned, conducted by the Hon.
Bruce Baird. They include a requirement for approved providers to demonstrate their ability
to access financial resources to meet the requirements under the ESOS Act and to have a sus-
tainable business model, capability and governance structures and the management to deliver
education of a satisfactory standard. The new measures will add to the requirements of the
originally passed ESOS Act as well as the recently passed Education Services for Overseas
Students Amendment (Re-registration of Providers and Other Measures Act).

In addition, the bill will introduce a new strategy for managing risk in the private education
industry. Registration periods for providers will be limited to a maximum of five years, and
this bill will enable conditions to be placed on a provider’s registration when the provider is
first registered or at any time throughout the registration period. The bill also allows the
Commonwealth to take action without referral from a state or territory regulator and it intro-
duces financial penalties for a broader range of behaviour, including unethical recruitment
activity and the proper maintenance of student records. If the bill is passed, it will allow the
Commonwealth to publish any enforcement action against, or the monitoring of, providers.

In addition, the changes in this bill include expanding the role of the Commonwealth Om-
udsman to cover complaints from international students that relate to private providers. The
proposed new Overseas Students Ombudsman, within the office of the Commonwealth Om-
udsman, will also provide advice to private providers on complaint-handling processes and,
possibly, report on broader systemic issues across the international education sector.

Our international sector is of enormous importance to our national economy. It is claimed
to be the third-largest exporter, behind coal and iron ore, and is worth some $16 billion to our
economy. This is a contribution to our economy that cannot be taken lightly and it must be
managed carefully. The growth of this sector has brought with it many challenges, and many
of these challenges were unforeseen, I think, by both sides of politics. We have seen a growth
in this area, spurred on by many encouragements and incentives that have led to a boom in
this business that we have seen play out particularly in our capital cities of Sydney and Mel-
bourne, but I think there is also a very strong industry in South-East Queensland. The growth
of colleges, the intake of students and the incredible increase particularly in vocational educa-
tional student visas have been the driving force behind the growth of net overseas migration in the last three or four years. It has led pretty much to the increase in the proportion of net overseas migration in our overall population growth and, in particular, has led, even within our migration program, the growth of temporary migration in our overall migration path. Back in 1990, temporary migration accounted for only about 10 per cent of our net overseas migration. Today it accounts for two-thirds.

So this has become a very important component of our population growth. I would add that, whether by design, by default or by accident, the growth in the student population in Australia has been important not only in terms of the growth of the international student industry; it has also become very important as a form of temporary labour within our economy more broadly. You need only talk to anyone who works in the tourism and hospitality sector, or the construction sector or various other parts of our service economy sectors to know that people working to their limits of 20 hours per week, who are here on student visas, are forming a very significant proportion of our labour force. That is why, when the changes were announced some years ago to address issues that were also addressed in Bruce Baird’s report, it was not only the education sector that gulped when these changes were announced but also those who relied heavily on student labour, if you like, within our labour force who were also feeling the impacts.

So the impacts of these changes are quite wide. They impact on how our cities are operating in terms of the growth of the number of people living particularly in our CBD areas. It is presenting many challenges. There are a lot of people who have come on these visas who are in a very vulnerable position, vulnerable to all forms of abuse. I have spoken on that issue on many occasions. People who have come and are unable to sustain themselves in this country on a temporary visa are exposed to some of the worst forms of abuse that we see in this country. Everything from sex slavery to extortion is taking place, and these are very concerning trends. In my own discussions with both the public and private providers of education services I have found a very receptive, enthusiastic group of people who want to do all they can to ensure that their students are safe in our community.

The measures that are outlined in this bill that come from the Baird report are really about trying to restore some integrity to ensure this sector can be successful and sustainable. It is not going to happen without some short-term pain and we ask for the forbearance of that sector, which has grown so rapidly in recent times, to continue to work with this parliament to ensure that we can get ourselves on a more stable footing when it comes to our longer term support for this sector.

I would also make the point that the changes that have been introduced here are designed to address problems that have largely occurred from a migration perspective as well. I do not just mean the changes in this bill, but in particular the changes that were introduced previously. We have to be very careful when we are merging discussions about migration with discussions about education. One of the key elements that are addressed in these reforms is the issue of a breaking of a nexus between a permanent residency visa and a temporary visa for student purposes. I think it is well argued that the way that the system was working, it was effectively becoming a visa marketing exercise for some. Some very unscrupulous operators, both here and overseas in particular, were using the opportunity through the points test and other things to provide a pathway to permanent residence.
I am not one who thinks that a nexus between permanent residence and temporary migration is a bad thing in all cases. A nexus, like anything else, is a device that you use in public policy. You use it where it is appropriate and you do not use it where you should not. On the issue of a nexus, I think we should be following the Californian example when it comes to students and seeking the best and brightest minds around the world to come and study in Australia. We particularly want those high-end skills in this country that can make such a significant contribution in a whole range of areas. Whether it is in science, the social sciences, information technology or any of these areas, let us by all means bring them to this country and give them a great assurance that they will be able to go forward and have a head start on permanent residency. We should act like recruiters in our migration program to ensure we get the best and the brightest here to achieve that. So the idea of a one size-fits-all of a nexus, denies us those opportunities to pursue that. Mind you, though, at the other end of the spectrum, in lot of the vocational courses that we have seen, the presence of the nexus works against the integrity of our objectives in the migration system. It is important that we have a horses-for-courses approach when it comes to this issue and we ensure that we continue to avail ourselves of the tools of the nexus to be applied where we want it to, but obviously to remove it where we do not think it is of any advantage.

The other issue with the nexus is this: if you look back over the past 10 years, in every single year we have a shortage of chefs and cooks in this country; if you go back further than that, you will find it appearing more often than not. But now we have to deal with the problem in the education sector that in order to prevent people coming and seeking permanent migration under a chefs and skills component and coming through the student pathway, we have decided that the answer is to take chefs and cooks off the skilled occupation list. The problem is that we still have a shortage of chefs and cooks all around the country. No doubt—and quite clearly, as a result of the Baird report—there are issues within the hospitality training sector when it comes to the training of chefs and cooks who never went on to be chefs and cooks in our economy. But the answer is not to pretend we do not have a shortage; the answer is to ensure that we have the proper regulation—and the proper oversight, more significantly—because the regulation was not as weak as some might suggest. There was a real clear absence of oversight, particularly by state governments in this area, which enabled this problem to get particularly nasty.

My argument is that we need to ensure that we enforce systems, not create some sort of surrogate measure that potentially does broader damage to our economy, particularly, for argument’s sake, in the hospitality sector: by seeking to close down a migration loophole we create another problem for the tourism and hospitality sector more broadly, which the Restaurant and Catering Industry Association raises at every single opportunity to meet with them. So the issue of a nexus is not a simple one of one rule for all. We should be very clever in how we use the nexus and use it appropriately where we think it adds value and not where we think it does not.

The other point I want to make relates to the regulation of offshore agents. One of the things we found in the tourism industry when I worked in that sector, and one of the great achievements of the previous government, was the regulation of outbound operators out of China, which cracked down on some horrific abuses that were taking place in the tourism industry at that time. Why do I make that reference to this sector? Because we are seeing a simi-
lar pattern at play. Regulation is not something I normally get wildly excited about, but when regulation protects the integrity of a market then it is something worth pursuing. We have had a breakdown in the integrity of this market in terms of many of the abuses of this system that we have seen and that this bill tries to address on our side of the fence. On the other side of the fence there is a need for some attention.

In the case of the tourism industry, we formed an agreement with the Chinese government to regulate outbound operators out of China to ensure that the business that was being brought to Australia had some protections around it and was not being subject to all forms of abuse. Those operators could deal with the appropriate operators here in Australia. I think there is a very strong case to apply a similar model here for education agents who are sourcing business for Australia offshore. I would start with China and I would add India to the list of the two key markets where we need to get some greater common sense in working with those governments about the sorts of people we want to do business with in those countries for our education sector. I think this is a reform that should be pursued at an international level and that will give a greater sense of confidence about both how these things are going to impact on our migration program and how they might impact on the labour market. In particular, it will give the international education industry some confidence that they can plan for the future.

A further review is currently underway, not, I am sad to say, by another Liberal of great esteem on this occasion but by Michael Knight, a former Labor minister from New South Wales. I will leave it to the people of New South Wales to pass their verdict on that decision this Saturday. This review provides the opportunity for some further commonsense reform. The coalition is prepared to engage with that in the interests of ensuring that we have a strong international education sector.

Mr CIOBO (Moncrieff) (5.38 pm)—I am pleased to rise to speak on the Education Services for Overseas Students Legislation Amendment Bill 2010. Following on from the member for Cook and others in this debate, it is for me as a representative—together with the member for McPherson, who is here at the table—a pleasure to speak about an industry that all of us on the Gold Coast are passionate about. We are passionate about the education of overseas students. It really comes down to two motivations. Of course, part of the passion is that there are opportunities to play a role in indirectly educating young people from abroad about Australian culture and, more directly, about the kinds of professional standards of education that we are able to offer as a country.

The second, and I would argue perhaps even more important motivation from an entirely domestic point of view, is that the education of overseas students is a significant export earner for this country. On the Gold Coast we are quite comfortable with the notion of being a services exporter. As Australia’s sixth largest and one of its fastest growing cities, we have been exporting services to foreigners for many years. It is the story of the Gold Coast to speak about how, through both tourism and more recently education, we have been able to sell our part of the world all around the world. In that vein I have been pleased over a number of years now to work closely and speak on an ongoing basis with education providers as well as tourism providers in my seat of Moncrieff and more broadly across the Gold Coast.

As someone who was educated locally for my tertiary studies at the Bond University, there was even at the time I was a student there—which is now too many years ago for me to even care to admit—a large contingent of overseas students who were studying at the university. At
Bond University, at Griffith University to its north as well as at an array of other universities that have campuses located on the Gold Coast, there is a very large contingent of overseas students who choose to come to our city, who choose to come and study in Australia, and in doing so make an incredibly valuable contribution.

But it is more than just tertiary education; it is also the VET sector. A number of colleges and campuses across the Gold Coast are also providing crucial education exports in this area. They are driving thousands of jobs; they are driving millions and millions of dollars of export income. To the extent that this bill, with its bipartisan support, goes towards addressing some of the concerns that we have arisen in recent years, we welcome it as members of the coalition.

Can I say though that, like any implementation issue and like any piece of policy designed to improve resources generally and more broadly improve the integrity of the export of a service like education, it is crucial that the government’s left hand operates in unison with the government’s right hand. Whilst I welcome a number of aspects in this bill that go to the very core of tightening the framework that applies to education service providers, at both a VET level and a tertiary level, the inescapable fact is that, although this is a step forward by the government and supported by the opposition, there is unfortunately a very big step backwards being taken by this same Labor government. I am talking about an issue that has been of central concern to education exporters on the Gold Coast and to me for some time now, and that is the decision by the Rudd now Gillard Labor government to close the immigration office on the Gold Coast.

It seems extraordinary that in Australia’s sixth largest city, with a population of some 500,000 people, a city for which I have fought for additional federal government services for many years, we have a federal Labor government that is closing the immigration office. This is not a small immigration office; this is an immigration office that handles some 32,000 clients a year and processes thousands of visa applications. Yet the Labor government is closing the immigration office. It is extraordinary that members opposite would stand up and profess a great love for education exports and would say there are so many economic benefits that flow from education exports, but then in the very same decision turn around and put a red line through the Gold Coast immigration office. From my perspective it is a great problem that requires significant effort to overcome.

It is true that the Gold Coast is not the only education export location in Australia. There is a rich framework of education suppliers and stakeholders across the length and breadth of this country that cater to the hundreds of thousands of students who take decisions to come and study in Australia. But, that notwithstanding, for the thousands of people employed in this industry in my city, for the jobs that it creates, for the investment income that it drives and for the export of the tourist dollar that flows alongside the export of education services—there is no single bigger threat to the whole industry in my city than this government’s decision to close the immigration office.

I have campaigned on this for some time. It was an issue in the last federal election. I raised it with the immigration minister, who indicated that, that notwithstanding, it was the Labor government’s view that they would redirect people just up the road to Brisbane. The trip supposedly ‘just up the road’ to Brisbane actually involves at least a 1½ to two hour commute. By public transport it would probably take even longer, and that is what the major-
ity of overseas students would be required to do. They would be required to resolve these mat-
ters by travelling up to Brisbane and then taking a two-hour commute back to the Gold Coast
later on in the day. It smacks of a government that is one of two things. It is either ignorant of
the realities of life between the Gold Coast and Brisbane and the distance that is involved or,
secondly and more concerningly, it is a government that simply does not care and is being
flippant in its response to those students who seek to study on the Gold Coast. My concern is
that this government is actively making the Gold Coast less competitive when it comes to the
export of education services. This government through this decision is putting at risk thou-
sands of jobs in the education sector. Those people, as a consequence of the historically strong
education services export industry, will now have their livelihoods threatened.

There is also a downside with respect to the tourism industry. As a number of previous
speakers have outlined, one of the benefits that flow with a strong education services export
culture is that it generally also attracts a large number of tourists. You have what they call in
the industry VFR, visiting friends and relatives, those people who take the decision to come
and visit their son or their daughter or their aunt or their uncle, whatever the relation may be.
They choose to come and visit and stay in Australia for some time whilst they visit their loved
one. Those people also may not come. It is of concern to me that the Gold Coast is going to
directly lose any competitive advantage we have because of this bureaucratic and frankly ig-
norant decision by the Labor government.

The reality is that this government needs to get real. It needs to get real about maintaining
not only the Gold Coast’s but Australia’s position with respect to the export of education ser-
vices. It needs to get real about not closing essential government services like the department
of immigration office in Australia’s sixth largest city. It needs to get real about maintaining
that presence, an office that provides some 32,000 clients every single year with the services
that they need in order to ensure that the Gold Coast continues to be a competitive education
exporter. For that reason, I put it to the parliament that the government needs to dovetail with
this bill a reversal of its ill-founded decision to close the department of immigration office in
Southport. It is simply too important a service to go about closing it.

Education more broadly is, as other speakers in this debate have outlined, Australia’s fourth
largest export, contributing just over $17 billion to the export earnings of Australia. It is our
fourth largest after coal, iron ore and gold. It means so much to our country. Some of the sig-
nificant concerns that we have needed to overcome in recent times have gone to the integrity
of the export of education. Some of the charges levelled have been that some service provid-
ers were duplicitous, perhaps in the best light, or in the worst light downright dishonest with
respect to the export of education services. It has generally been within the VET sector that
the charges have been levelled. There are a large number of high-quality VET providers that
provide services to overseas students. In this vein I want to acknowledge that this bill will
take some steps towards improving the integrity of the system to ensure that overseas students
are not at risk when it comes to their decision to study in Australia. This is crucial because, if
we are going to maintain a competitive position as a nation in a world in which our education
services have become more expensive as a direct consequence of the appreciation of the Aus-
tralian dollar, we need to recognise we must also address the credibility issue.

Unfortunately, the reality is that in recent years we have been under sustained attack be-
cause we have let house standards drop. We have not done enough to ensure that overseas
students feel comfortable within Australia. Steps need to be taken—indeed some have been taken, and this bill is another step in that journey—both to ensure that overseas students get an education that is substantive, internationally recognised and comparable with our peers who are seeking to operate in this market and also to recognise that we need to make them feel welcome. In that sense I would like to commend the work that was done by the former federal member for Cook, a good friend of mine, the Hon. Bruce Baird, with his report *Stronger, simpler, smarter ESOS: supporting international students*—the very report which, effectively, forms the backbone of the bill that is before the chamber today.

I commend this bill. I acknowledge that it will make some substantive improvements to the integrity of service providers and in particular put increased pressure on those that operate at the shadier end of the spectrum. I think everybody would welcome that. We need to recognise that there are two things we can be competitive on. The first is price, which is difficult with an appreciating Australian dollar. The second of course is integrity, and this bill does address the issue of integrity. But I put a very large caveat on my support, and that caveat is that this must be taken in tandem with an actual rollout of essential government services. I cannot stress enough that the decision by this government to close in Australia’s sixth largest city, a city of 500,000-plus people, the office of the department of immigration and to simply fob it off and say, ‘Well, students will simply have to go up the road to Brisbane,’ underscores that this government has lost its way when it comes to meaningful assistance being provided to overseas students. It is not good enough, as far as I am concerned. It is not good enough for the many people who have signed the petitions I have had running. It is not good enough for the shadow minister, who supports me in my call to have the office remain open, and it certainly is not good enough for the thousands of people who earn their livelihoods in this sector. Millions of dollars would flow into the Gold Coast but for this ridiculous decision by the Labor government.

Taking all of that into context, I support the bill but call upon the government to reverse its short-sighted decision with respect to the Southport office of the department of immigration.

**Dr JENSEN** (Tangney) (5.52 pm)—I rise to support the Education Services for Overseas Students Legislation Amendment Bill 2010 and to highlight the problem that we have with our local education and overseas student numbers. What we have is a declining number of students undertaking secondary studies in hard sciences and maths, which has a flow-on effect on the Australian economy and indeed on our tertiary sector. At present students in years 11 and 12 are dropping physics, chemistry and maths in favour of easier humanities subjects, such as history and politics, to boost entrance scores. A lack of interest in maths, physics and chemistry at high school sees fewer enrolments at university, and this has a knock-on effect for Australia’s research and development capabilities. There is not only a reduction in numbers but a reduction in cut-off scores and qualities in an attempt to reverse the decline in numbers. The danger here is that we may seek to get more overseas students to fill the gaping hole within our domestic student numbers. In short, an early interest by students in science and maths has a multiplication factor that increases our nation’s research and development capabilities. Fostering an appreciation of the fundamentals of science will cause our culture of excellence to prosper and will create a strong base to ensure long-term economic growth.

I hold a doctorate in science and have experienced the many benefits of studying science. Students of science understand the world in a measured and analytical way. Applying the
principles of scientific method makes students critical thinkers. This involves not only the answers that they find but, more critically, the questions that they ask. I firmly believe science and maths should be core subjects for every student up to year 12. The House of Representatives Standing Committee on Industry, Science and Innovation, of which I was deputy chair, was concerned by the trend against science and maths at the secondary level. I quote from our report into research training and research workforce issues in Australian universities:

The Committee is concerned that students currently shun subjects in the sciences, maths and humanities in favour of other subjects that appear easier or more attractive in terms of maximising tertiary entrance scores. This is likely to lead to fewer students acquiring the basic skills and knowledge that are required later in life to embark upon a research pathway.

Australian Academy of Science believes that:

… Australia will not be able to heighten its skills in mathematics and science until it ensures that prospective scientists are taught by teachers with degrees in the disciplines for which they are responsible … Only when programs are expanded to encourage high school students to study science and mathematics through teachers with degrees in their teaching disciplines can other issues such as tertiary level research training be fully addressed.

The government, to its credit, took up a number of the committee’s findings in its 2008 report. This led to modest increases in the uptake of science and maths related university courses, according to the 2009 university entrance acceptance statistics. But the government then took two steps back, dismantling the Australian Learning and Teaching Council, which was a vital cog driving research in universities. This was a major blow to our research capabilities. I believe we need more than modest increases in student numbers. We need a cultural shift in our attitudes to the hard sciences and maths. This will result in a significant boost to our research and development capabilities and have economic flow-on consequences.

China has made the seemingly obvious connection between investment in the sciences and maths and the multiplier effect on GDP growth. They are now reaping the economic and technological rewards. This is rather interesting: more than half of all Chinese students studying in China graduate in the hard sciences and engineering—I will repeat that: more than half—compared with a world average of 27 per cent and 17 per cent in the US. To give you some idea, in Australia in 2009 we had 13,638 completions in the natural and physical sciences and 8,367 in engineering, comprising 13.07 per cent of all domestic student completions. Contrast this 13.07 per cent in Australia with over 50 per cent in China. This is well below the OECD average when you take into account the brain drain that has plagued Australia for years. The number of students graduating in the hard sciences is a very real issue.

During the period of 1993 to 2003, China’s R&D expenditures grew faster than those of any other nation, pushing its share of world R&D investment from 3.6 per cent to 9.5 per cent. During the same period, the European Union’s share declined from 28.5 per cent to 25 per cent. Australia’s R&D expenditure, as a proportion of GDP, remains lower than the OECD average, although it has increased in recent years. This is a terrible indictment on a nation as prosperous as ours. Given our global economic and social position, our R&D expenditure should track at the upper end of the OECD nations. We should be at the top, not the bottom.

In January 2006, China initiated a 15-year medium- to long-term plan for the development of science and technology. The nation aims to become an innovation oriented society by 2020.
and a world leader in science and technology by 2050. Under the plan, China wants to develop indigenous innovation capabilities and leapfrog into leading new industries by increasing R&D expenditures to 2.5 per cent of GDP by 2020. China has also set ambitious research goals, such as becoming one of the top five countries in the world in the number of patents granted. In 1998, China’s research output was around 20,000 articles per year. In 2006 it reached 83,000, overtaking the traditional science powerhouses of Germany, Japan and the UK. Last year it exceeded 120,000 articles, second only to the US’s 360,000. Australia risks being left behind as countries like China streak ahead in R&D industries.

Australia’s approach to the sciences and maths is reflected indeed in this parliament. We are top-heavy with parliamentarians with arts and law degrees. China’s leadership, on the other hand, understands the value of the sciences and maths with eight of the nine politburo standing committee members holding engineering degrees.

I am not scaremongering about the rise of China. This is a statement of admiration, a pursuit of the facts that tell us that increases in research and development seen in China need to be replicated in Australia. Australia needs to set ambitious goals and commit funding in the long term. This is our Sputnik moment. In the 1950s when Russia launched its space program it frightened America so much that it began an unprecedented space program, an investment in science R&D, an investment in education in maths and the hard sciences, which resulted in technological advancements which are still being realised today. The example set by China should be our space race moment, not driven by a fear of Cold War hostilities but driven by an economic imperative that, if we fail to act, our economy could be left behind.

So how do we go about rectifying the current situation? Firstly, we need teachers trained in the areas of expertise who are keen to impart their passion and engage students. Paying these teachers as professionals—in other words, acknowledging the need to pay them more than other teachers—and giving these subjects more weight when it comes to university entrance exams are just two measures to encourage more students to study science and maths. I congratulate the University of Western Australia, which has begun to give greater weight to those subjects and hopefully this will help to address the slide against maths and science based subjects. But we must do more. Teaching, learning and advancements in research and development are at the core of ensuring that Australia has a prosperous economic future. But it all starts with the basics, with science and maths being a central cog in our children’s learning machine.

Mr GARRETT (Kingsford Smith—Minister for School Education, Early Childhood and Youth) (6.02 pm)—I thank all those members who spoke on the Education Services for Overseas Students Legislation Amendment Bill 2010. I have to say that given that we do now have a national curriculum which particularly looks at issues around making sure that we have full opportunities for students from foundation year to year 10 to learn English, history, maths and science, this is a substantial step forward for us and one which I am sure all members would applaud.

The Australian government is deeply committed to ensuring that international students who choose to study in Australia receive high-quality education and training. The Education Services for Overseas Students Legislation Amendment Bill 2010 builds on recent changes to the Education Services for Overseas Students Act and the re-registration of all providers on the Commonwealth Register of Institutions and Courses for Overseas Students, just completed, to
further strengthen registration, monitoring and enforcement of education providers delivering services to overseas students. It also makes consequential changes to the Ombudsman Act 1976 to ensure all international students have equitable access to a robust complaints mechanism regardless of whether they attend a public or private institution.

These amendments are the next step in concerted government action since mid-2009 to address regulatory challenges for international education following a period of rapid growth and change. These include a full review of the ESOS legislative framework conducted by the Hon. Bruce Baird, the finalisation of International Students Strategy for Australia under the Council of Australian Governments and a number of student visa integrity measures. It is pleasing that this bill has received a high level of support, including in the Senate Education, Employment and Workplace Relations Legislation Committee’s report handed down on 22 November 2010 which recommended that the bill be passed.

The Baird review made 19 recommendations relating to student welfare, risk management and the tuition protection system. This bill forms the first phase of the government’s response to the review with a focus on introducing risk management approaches to registration and ongoing monitoring of providers, giving regulators more options for effectively enforcing requirements and for improving complaints mechanisms so that students and providers can have every confidence in the international education sector. The new requirements will build a more sophisticated regulatory system that recognises the diversity of providers across sectors. Given the number of providers and overseas students, it will allow better targeting and less duplication of regulatory resources so that problems are addressed early and impacts on students and the industry are averted or minimised.

These amendments, together with the completed re-registration measure, will go a long way towards positioning ESOS for the planned handover, in large part, to the national regulators for the vocational education and training and higher education sectors when established under separate legislation this year. Consultations are currently underway on the details of this risk framework and on the remaining Baird recommendations, including those relating to consumer protection, for a second tranche of legislative change expected to be brought forward later this year. The government is committed to bringing in these changes through, knowing that they will provide the necessary benefits for this sector. I commend the bill to the House.

Question agreed to.

Bill read a second time.

Ordered that the bill be reported to the House without amendment.

PERSONAL PROPERTY SECURITIES (CORPORATIONS AND OTHER AMENDMENTS) BILL 2011

Debate resumed from 23 February, on motion by Mr McClelland:

That this bill be read a second time.

Mr KEENAN (Stirling) (6.07 pm)—I rise to talk on the Personal Property Securities (Corporations and Other Amendments) Bill 2011. As defined on the Attorney-General’s website, personal property is any form of property other than land or buildings and fixtures which form part of that land. It can include tangibles such as cars, boats, machinery and crops as well as intangibles such as shares, intellectual property and contract rights. Personal property securities involve an arrangement where an individual or business offers personal property, which
includes all property except for land, in order to secure a financial loan provided by a financial lending institution such as a bank.

As the system currently stands, Australia has different laws and registers in each state and territory. The personal property securities reform brings together the different Commonwealth, state and territory laws and registers under one national system. The bill makes some minor and technical amendments to the personal property securities regime, which was introduced with coalition support in 2009. This regime comes into effect this year. The regime rationalises the current Commonwealth state and territory laws on securities and personal property to create one national set of rules and a single national online register. It establishes one comprehensive law with clear rules.

The personal property securities legislation arises from an Australian law reform reference in 1990. The matter was pursued through COAG, which in 2007 endorsed the model of a national system. It should be noted that the former Attorney-General, the member for Berowra, gave the issue particular priority. In October 2008 COAG signed an intergovernmental agreement to effect the proposed legislation as part of the seamless national economy agreement between the Commonwealth, states and territories.

The amendments proposed by this bill clarify that the regime does not affect a secured party’s capacity to appoint or veto the appointment of a company administrator under a transitional security agreement; confirm that the rights and liabilities of receivers and administrators in respect of pre-appointment transactions are unchanged; ensure access to the third party data for consumer protection purposes; and prevent access to the registry for the purpose of sale of the data. There are also some technical amendments in respect of powers of the registrar to deal with accession to the regime by states that have not yet adopted the relevant version of the Personal Property Securities Scheme, as amended in 2010 and by this bill.

As noted in the bill’s explanatory memorandum, the bill will make a number of amendments to provide exemptions to the rules on taking personal property, free of security interests, for temporarily perfected transitional security interests and transitional security interests that were not previously registered by serial number; ensure that the definition of security interest is consistent with the New Zealand legislation and remove any potential for confusion; clarify that CHESS securities are intermediated securities and the means by which CHESS securities can be subject to control; ensure access to third-party data through the register, as an important consumer protection measure; impose conditions on accessing and using data on the register, to ensure that parties cannot sell this data and undermine the Commonwealth’s ability to recover costs associated with the implementation and ongoing administration of the PPS system; enable the registrar to investigate breaches of the rules authorising searches of the register and registration of security interests on the register; and clarify the provisions on security interests in authorised deposit-taking institutions and the provisions on control of inventory and accounts.

In conclusion, these amendments were wisely recommended by the Senate Legal and Constitutional Affairs Legislation Committee report on the 2010 amendments, and the coalition is happy to support the proposed amendments in this bill. I therefore commend the bill to the House.

Mr PERRETT (Moreton) (6.12 pm)—I rise to voice my support for the Personal Property Securities (Corporations and Other Amendments) Bill 2011. This bill implements a number of
minor and technical amendments that were recommended by the 2010 Senate inquiry by the Senate Legal and Constitutional Affairs Legislation Committee. Before we passed the Personal Properties Securities Bill in 2009 there were more than 70 Commonwealth, state and territory laws relating to security interests on personal property. Whilst that was good for article clerks and baby solicitors, in terms of giving them work and something to do—as I horribly remember, from my days as an article clerk—it was not good for business, it was not good for individuals with security interests and it was not good for the running of the country. So the Labor government introduced one national law governing security interests in personal property and a single, national online register.

Personal property is any property other than land, so we are talking about either tangibles like cars, boats, machinery or crops, and intangibles such as shares or intellectual property. Personal property securities are interests in personal property that secures a payment. So when the new scheme comes into force from October this year—as I am sure lawyers are eagerly looking forward to—the new online register will replace more than 40 registers around the country, of which many are still, in 2011, paper records. So, unfortunately, article clerks will have to look for new things to entertain their time!

Personal property securities reform is happening because of the 2008 COAG agreement. This bill will amend the Personal Property Securities Act 2009 to address issues raised by stakeholders and practitioners. Some of the minor and technical amendments include correcting drafting errors, clarifying certain definitions, clarifying that the intention of the act is not to interfere with existing rights of parties under the Corporations Act and introducing certain practical measures to ensure the regime is appropriate for users. I am sure the member for McPherson, who is in the chamber, will be looking forward to these changes when they come in, as are many other Australians.

Under the 2008 COAG agreement all states and territories agreed to refer their powers regarding personal property securities to the Commonwealth. This bill enables states that have not yet passed the necessary legislation to refer their powers to adopt the relevant version of the PPS Act and refer power to the Commonwealth. Personal property securities reform is good for the finance sector, it is good for business and it is good for consumers. Consumers will have greater protection, as they will be able to search to see if property they are considering purchasing is encumbered. For example, if an individual is in the market for a used car, for a small fee they will be able to do an online search to see whether a particular car is being used as a security for a loan—and, rather than searching around different states, they will be able to cover the entire nation. In my electorate—in fact, just down the road from where I live—is the Moorooka ‘magic mile of motors’, which will benefit from this process because people will be able to buy or sell a car and know whether it is encumbered or unencumbered. I am sure the member for McPherson would agree that this will be a great thing for Australian consumers.

Small business will benefit, as they will have greater access to finance at a reduced cost. The new system will enable them to use more personal property to secure finance. It will also benefit banks and financiers, who will have greater access to international finance. That will be a great thing, because the banks and financiers who lend money will have a better understanding of whether something is encumbered and it will therefore be easier to lend money to people. That benefits small business, it benefits the individual who is making a decision about
purchasing something and it also benefits banks and financiers, who will be able to lend for something knowing it is not encumbered. It will also benefit banks and financiers because, as I said, they will have greater access to international finance, so this should make money cheaper. Therefore money will be able to flow to those people who are in need and able to access credit, and they can then make considered purchases—and that is a good thing. Now, more than ever, we need to ensure that our banks can access finance to boost investment in Australia. This, in turn, provides jobs and financial security for Australian families.

The bill will also slash costs and red tape, as you would expect from our consistent national approach. I particularly commend the Attorney-General and Minister Emerson, who has been doing some great work in terms of slashing costs and slashing red tape. The amendments in this bill are very minor; however, they do show the government is listening to stakeholders and responding to their concerns. This bill will ensure certainty for all parties when the national system comes into play from October 2011. I commend the bill to the House.

Mr McCLELLAND (Barton—Attorney-General) (6.17 pm)—in reply—I commend the member for Moreton and other speakers for their contributions to this debate. As mentioned throughout the debate the Personal Property Securities (Corporations and Other Amendments) Bill 2011 makes the final set of amendments to the Personal Property Securities Act 2009 and consequential amendments to a number of other acts before the personal property securities regime comes into effect later in the year. Personal property securities are currently governed by complex regulatory arrangements. The PPS Act, as it is known, will replace these with a single, national, functional approach. The PPS reform will simplify over 70 Commonwealth, state and territory laws and replace the many existing registers of interests that complement these laws, with one PPS register.

PPS reform is essential for making secured financing more accessible and efficient by lowering risks for lenders, increasing competition between finance providers and providing greater certainty for both lenders and borrowers. This bill has been developed with the assistance of stakeholders including business, consumer advocates, state and territory governments, lawyers and financiers. Essentially, the amendments to the PPS Act will regulate the use of the PPS register, ensure that the regime is consistent with commercial practice, facilitate consumer access to data held on other databases, and correct minor errors and update certain definitions. In short, the amendments in the bill to the Corporations Act will also clarify that the intention of the regime is not to interfere with existing rights under that act.

In conclusion, the PPS reform is a key aspect of the government’s deregulation agenda. I would like to acknowledge the assistance of the states in achieving this reform. New South Wales, Victoria, Queensland and South Australia have already passed referral legislation, and Tasmania and Western Australia will be passing their referral legislation in the coming months. The states and territories have also made consequential amendments to their legislation dealing with personal property securities interests. The passage of this bill, and the commencement of the PPS regime later this year, are significant achievements and will deliver major benefits to many sectors in the Australian economy. I commend the bill to the House.

Question agreed to.

Bill read a second time.
Ordered that this bill be reported to the House without amendment.

Sitting suspended from 6.21 pm to 6.27 pm

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

World Veterinary Year

Debate resumed, on motion by Mr John Cobb:

That this House:

(1) notes that:

(a) this year marks the two-hundred and fiftieth anniversary of veterinary education with the establishment of the first veterinary school in Lyon, France, in 1761; and

(b) around the world, 2011 is being designated World Veterinary Year to honour the contribution and achievements of the veterinary profession in the community to animal health and production, public health, animal welfare, food safety and biosecurity;

(2) recognises that:

(a) in Australia, 2011 marks the one hundred and twentieth anniversary of the first class of graduates from the inaugurated Melbourne Veterinary College;

(b) seven schools of veterinary medicine are now established in Victoria, NSW, Queensland, WA and SA;

(c) veterinarians:

(i) are dedicated to preserving the bond between humans and animals by practising and promoting the highest standards of science-based, ethical animal welfare with all animals, large and small;

(ii) are on the front line maintaining Australia’s status as free from exotic diseases which threaten the environment, human and animal health, providing extensive pro bono services annually through ethical treatment of unowned animals and wildlife;

(iii) are vital to ensuring the high quality of Australia’s commercial herds and flocks and security of our food supply; and

(iv) provide a valuable public health service through preventative medicine, control of zoonotic disease and scientific research; and

(d) significant contributions and achievements have been made by many individual members of the Australian veterinary profession including:

(i) Nobel Prize winner and Australian of the Year, Dr Peter C. Doherty, who achieved major breakthroughs in the field of immunology which were vital in understanding the body's rejection of incompatible tissues in transplantation, and in fighting meningitis viruses;

(ii) Professor Mary Barton, a leading veterinary bacteriologist with a distinguished career in government and in veterinary public health, who has a strong research background in bacterial infections of animals and in antibiotic resistance in animal and human health; and

(iii) Dr Reg Pascoe, a renowned equine surgeon and dermatologist and leader in his profession for more than 50 years, who published 70 research papers and many texts while earning a doctorate and running a busy practice in Oakey, and dedicated years to the National Veterinary Examination and the Veterinary Surgeons’ Board of Queensland; and

(3) recognises:

(a) that 2011 is World Veterinary Year;
(b) the valuable and diverse roles veterinarians perform in the Australian community; and
(c) the veterinary profession as it celebrates the past and continuing contribution by veterinarians.

Mr JOHN COBB (Calare) (6.27 pm)—I rise to speak on the motion for this parliament to join the rest of the world in recognising the important contribution and achievements of veterinarians for the community by designating 2011 the World Veterinary Year. By passing this motion in the House today and in the Senate on Wednesday we will join parliaments around the world in celebrating the establishment of the first modern veterinary school in Lyon, France, in 1761—250 years ago.

In Australia we are proud to be celebrating the 120th anniversary of the first graduating class of veterinarians at the Melbourne Veterinary College. This was no small achievement for a country that was not discovered by the British until 1770 and did not see the arrival of the first convicts into Sydney until eight years after that.

Most Australians would be familiar with visits to the vet for family pets, big or small. They would be less familiar with the contribution by veterinarians to animal health and production, public health, animal welfare, food safety and biosecurity. It is these diverse and varied roles that they play in our community that I would like to pay tribute to today.

Australia’s economy has often been described in the past as riding on the sheep’s back. While we may not be solely dependent on sheep today, we remain an agricultural nation with an enviable reputation for being free from exotic disease, and much of this has been due to the pioneering work of our veterinarians. Since the early days they have played a leading role in the eradication of animal diseases, beginning with sheep scab, which arrived on the First Fleet. This mite damaged the fleece by causing the sheep intense irritation by producing moist yellow scabs. For the 19th century it devastated sheep farms and the wider public dependent on the income from wool production. It was estimated in 1865 that the annual financial loss to the colony was over half a million pounds, equivalent to $75 million today. In 1896 the eradication of the mite through the development of mass treatment of flocks was a significant turning point in Australian responses to disease. More significantly, however, it had marked the enactment of the first piece of legislation in New South Wales, in 1832, that gave officers the power to control animal disease. With officers able to detain, seize and destroy infected sheep, the disease was swiftly eradicated in 1896 and has never recurred.

This was the very beginning of Australia’s quarantine inspection service, which evolved into its current form with the drawing together of the human, animal and plant quarantine functions in the department of health in 1926, following the outbreak of rinderpest, or cattle plague, which has also been eradicated. These have not been its only successes. It succeeded in excluding: foot and mouth disease in 1801 and 1804 in New South Wales, in 1871 and 1872 in Victoria, and has not occurred here since; contagious bovine pleuropneumonia, introduced in 1858, with the last case in 1967 and freedom declared in 1973—one of the first countries to achieve this; bovine tuberculosis and tuberculosis in the 1990s; newcastle disease of poultry in 1930, 1932 and again in the 1990s; classical swine fever, 1903, 1927-28, 1912-13; and equine influenza in 2007.

With regard to health, it is reported in the UK and the US that over 50 per cent of human infectious diseases originate in animals and about three-quarters of emerging diseases are transferable from animal to man. Given such a high risk to human health, the contributions of the vets to science and research are obviously enormously important. Deadly zoonotic dis-
eases continued to threaten in Australia and overseas. Hendra virus here, BSE in the UK, SARS in China, nipah in Malaysia and swine flu in Mexico have proved fatal to humans. We face threats from our regional neighbours with rabies in Bali and swine fever in Indonesia. Other diseases, such as Rift Valley fever and West Nile virus have spread across the Middle East and the USA respectively, with serious effects on human and animal populations.

Ensuring that we maintain the integrity of our biosecurity is important through promoting the importance of ‘One Health’. We must encourage more cooperation between human and animal health on the front line fighting disease by funding the work of veterinary scientists within agencies including Animal Health Australia, CSIRO and private agribusiness. This is in addition to building on the advancements through international partnerships fostered and delivered by the now defunded Australian Biosecurity Cooperative Research Centre. We only have to look to the deaths of the two vets who died tending to horses infected with the Hendra virus from bats to recognise that veterinarians face real risks from the increasing prevalence of animal-to-human transmitted diseases.

Maintaining our unenviable international reputation as free from exotic disease is not without benefit to our economic wellbeing as we trade to overseas markets. We depend upon veterinary officers to monitor our borders and livestock for disease such as foot and mouth disease. Surveillance is critical if we are to ensure we take all possible measures to keep out diseases and pests that could harm our valuable agriculture and horticulture industries.

Veterinarians also play an important role in supporting the racing industry. You only have to imagine the impact of a Melbourne Cup day or spring racing carnival with well cared for and healthy horses that are tended by these professionals. Veterinarians as practitioners handle all species of farm animals, wildlife, aquatic animals, laboratory animals and companion animals in work, sport and recreation. It is the bond with animals that makes it natural that they would be out champions for animal welfare. Through the work of veterinarians I am proud to say that Australia leads the world with the development of the Australian Animal welfare strategy and implementation plans to protect animals. This strategy that has been taken up around the world and adopted by the OIE.

This motion gives us the opportunity not only to recognise the breadth of the contribution of vets to our community but to pay tribute to the achievement of individual vets, both past and living. Three have been acknowledged in this motion: Nobel Peace Prize winner and Australian of the Year Dr Peter Doherty, whose research has helped in our understanding of how human bodies fight disease and of the disease meningitis; Professor Mary Barton, a leading veterinarian bacteriologist who has made an extraordinary contribution to veterinary public health; and Dr Reg Pascoe, for his lifetime contribution to promoting veterinary science and excellence. But there are so many more, and we pay tribute to these women and men for all they have done to advance our nation and for their service to the community.

It is a great achievement for Australia to be celebrating its 120th anniversary of veterinary education on the 250th anniversary of the first veterinary school in the world. We have come so far. This motion, I hope, will open the eyes of our young people to understand the aspirations of those who came before and the opportunities for veterinary professionals in the future. It is a great honour for me to present this motion to recognise the important role that veterinary science has played in our history and the vital role of veterinarians in a prosperous and sustainable future. I ask that the House support this motion.
Ms O’NEILL (Robertson) (6.36 pm)—I thank the member for Calare for bringing this private members’ business forward today. The work of our veterinarians in our country is really quite pervasive, from the care of our pampered pooches to the vital work on the front lines of maintaining Australia’s biosecurity at our export meatworks. As the member for Calare has noted, the world’s first veterinary school was founded in the French city of Lyon in 1761. This means that 2011 is the 250th world anniversary of veterinary education and in itself the official creation of the veterinary profession. I note that international observations have already begun at Versailles and will continue throughout the year. Already, according to the Vet2011.org website, there are almost 280 events planned across the globe and, dare I say, I expect there will be many more veterinary celebrations held throughout the year on this side of the world. This includes three particularly important events in Australia, one of which is the Australian Veterinary Association’s annual conference, which is to be held in Adelaide from 15 May.

Friends who know me well would not think of me as a person who is particularly engaged with animals. In fact, I have to confess to having just bought our first puppy quite recently. However, the veterinary profession is one that I know absolutely fascinated many of the students I have taught over the years. And I can attest to the great skill development that those students have had in the care of local veterinary surgeons in the seat of Robertson. I want to speak in the first instance about the small animal care that is so much a part of the seaboard area of Robertson.

The James Herriot book is, I suppose, the closest I have been to the real workings of the inside of a veterinary surgeon’s practice. The Herriot book, which was actually the work of Alf Wight, an English veterinarian, was the story of a life of constant variation, a life where a man was totally integrated in his local community and was so vital to the social and economic wellbeing of that community. Trying to choose texts to engage young men in reading is not always the easiest thing to do, but when you put a veterinary surgeon’s experiences recorded in print into the hands of boys aged 13 or 14, which was my experience, you can see part of them come to life. They want to understand how somebody can have a job where they actually get to do something that seems so much fun every single day of the week. I do not know how much fun I would find it, personally, but I have to say I have found the work they do is a great comfort. We have had our young dog, Einstein—at the request of my son Noah, 14—for only a matter of months now, but we have had the need to visit our local veterinary surgeon on two or three occasions. Thankfully, Einstein is in good shape, but the comfort that is offered when you go to the vet by somebody who obviously cares very much about these animals is something that should not be underestimated. Also, in the times we have taken our little pup to the vet recently we have met people who are there with their dogs who express such a joy in having them as part of their lives. I do not think we can overlook the companionship dimension of domestic animals, particularly dogs and cats, that people seem to be very bonded with and the difference they can make in people’s lives.

The local veterinarians in our area have the capacity to engage young people who might otherwise be disconnected from their schooling. They can go to a place of work where they really desire to be a part of something and they are attracted to the work they do there through their contact with animals. Veterinary surgeons all across the country, and indeed around the world, would be responsible for great joy and great learning for many young people. They
might not necessarily have followed the path to become a veterinary surgeon themselves but they have engaged in developing work habits, a joy in showing up at that work and also an understanding of the cleaning and other dimensions of working in a veterinary surgery. Those are important skills for young kids to develop. So that contribution to the benefit of the whole community through the provision of work opportunities and work experience needs to be put on the record as well.

The image of the vet who works with small animals is a very common one that is played out on our television screens frequently. But the work that veterinarians do in biosecurity is also particularly important. We have veterinarians who work in meat and milk processing plants, making sure that food is safe to eat. There are also vets who are doing great work in our laboratories not only to discover new treatments, procedures and medicines for animals but who also work at critical times when our biosecurity is under threat. I am very mindful of newcastle disease and the implications that had for the chicken farmers up in Mangrove Mountain in my seat of Robertson. I am also very mindful of the equine flu virus and the amazingly challenging impact that had on the whole of the horse industry at all levels. The work of vets in those areas cannot be underestimated. We can see very clearly from those incidents how important their work is, not just for the companionship side that we were talking about earlier but in terms of the national economy and our capacity to produce quality farm animals for consumption.

Then there are the ‘exotic’ veterinarians, the ones who get to work in the zoos and in some circuses. And perhaps the ones I most feel for are the ones who become teachers in the tertiary setting. To have the opportunity to hand on your knowledge to another generation is important work. So for those vets who have perhaps given up the joy of their own practice and their encounters with animals to move into the tertiary sector and to transfer their knowledge, we applaud your work too. My seat of Robertson has a large rural area where the work that vets do is with large animals. In the coastal section there are lots of families who have precious pets and who rely on the comfort and care offered by vets to keep their animals well and, when they are not so well, to get them back to full health. That is greatly appreciated in the community.

Finally, I would like to recognise the professionalism of veterinarians. One of the saddest things, which I have read about in the books I have used in working with my students and which I know has happened to friends who have had animals that are no longer well, is to have to go to a vet with a particularly unwell animal to have that animal put down. I know the professionalism and the comfort that is offered by vets in that role is a really significant social asset to our community. Vets look after people and their pets, and in that way they come right into our lives and into our homes. On this occasion, when we are celebrating the work they do, I am very pleased to have had the opportunity to applaud the veterinarians of Australia. I hope they enjoy their celebrations this year.

Mr IRONS (Swan) (11.21 am)—I rise to speak to this motion celebrating World Veterinary Year 2011, which marks the 250th anniversary of world veterinary education. I acknowledge the contributions of the members for Calare and Robertson, and I hope the member for Robertson has a long and enjoyable time with her new pet. I thank the member for Calare for bringing this matter to the attention of the House. I also acknowledge my Western Australian colleague Senator Chris Back, a respected veterinarian, who will be speaking on this motion.
in the other place later in the week. I see him sitting in the gallery, so I welcome him to this chamber.

The points raised by this motion are apt. The number of distinguished veterinarians we have in Australia is testament to the professionalism of the local industry. I mention a local vet in my electorate, Brendan McKay, who is a strong contributor to the social fabric of our community as well as being the veterinarian in the area. The member for Calare mentioned that 2011 marks the 120th anniversary of the first class of graduates from the Melbourne Veterinary College. The motion acknowledges the importance of vets working in the livestock industry; however, today I focus on my contribution on the role that vets play in ensuring the welfare of Australia’s domestic animals.

Australia is a country of animal lovers. It was recently reported that Australia has the highest rate of pet ownership in the world, with over 60 per cent of households having one or more pets. This compares to the UK, where 43 per cent of households have a pet. According to PetNet, 12 million Australians are associated with pets; 63 per cent of the 7.5 million households in Australia own pets; 91 per cent of pet owners report feeling ‘very close’ to their pet, reinforcing that pets are an integral member of the family unit; pets are a normal part of childhood for more than 83 per cent of Australians; and of the Australians who do not currently own a pet 53 per cent would like to do so in the future.

Western Australia is a strong contributor to these statistics: figures from 2007 estimate there to be over 3.1 million pets in WA. With research showing all sorts of health benefits accruing from pet ownership, this is not surprising. According to the Australian Companion Animal Council—the ACAC—compared to non pet owners people who own pets typically visit the doctor less often and use less medication, have lower cholesterol and blood pressure, recover more quickly from illness and surgery, deal better with stressful situations, show lower levels of risk factors associated with heart disease and are less likely to report feeling lonely, with elderly pet owners reporting increased quality of life and companionship.

There would of course be few Western Australian pet owners who have not taken their animal to see a vet. However, it is not only in keeping domestic pets healthy that vets play a vital role. They also play an important role in monitoring the animal breeding industry and in checking that animal welfare policies are being adhered to. A good example of this is the puppy industry. With dogs being the most popular pets in Australia, there is naturally a high demand for puppies and a significant dog-breeding industry right across Australia. It is important that vets monitor every aspect of the breeding process, and respectable breeders make sure this happens.

However, when I was down in the Canning wetlands recently, one of my constituents, Jo Stone, raised some concerns about the regulation of the dog-breeding industry in Australia, in particular regarding the operation of puppy farms across parts of the country. Jo had seen a documentary on TV featuring a well-known vet who had exposed evidence of puppy factories in Australia. The RSPCA defines puppy farms as:

… an intensive dog-breeding facility that is operated under inadequate conditions that fail to meet the dogs’ behavioural, social and/or psychological needs.

Jo raised concerns that vets and welfare inspectors were unable to access these puppy farms, where dogs were kept in squalid conditions. With the help of the Parliamentary Library, I have been conducting some research into this issue in Australia. I thank the library for the assis-
tance it has provided. The research has highlighted some problems associated with the regulation of the puppy industry in Australia but has also shown that these areas can be addressed.

The RSPCA has raised concerns about the puppy-farming industry in Australia over the course of a number of years. The organisation is currently running a campaign to try and see the end of this practice in Australia. Part of the problem seems to be a lack of clear legislation guaranteeing animal welfare in this area. The first point to make is that, when it comes to legislation dealing with cruelty to animals and animal management containing provisions applicable to dog breeding, there is a great variation between different states and territories. New South Wales, Victoria and Queensland have prescriptive requirements relating to accommodation, care and transport. I note that in late 2010 the Queensland government proposed a new dog standard that includes requirements for the proper registration of all dogs from breeding to point of sale and for licensing conditional upon compliance with a code of practice outlining enforceable minimum standards.

In other states, including my state of Western Australia, local government laws tend to take some precedence. In WA the Dog Act 1976 sets out laws relating to the control and registration of dogs. The act permits anyone to keep two dogs older than three months, and the young of those younger than three months. Animal welfare provisions are outlined in the Animal Welfare Act 2002, which provides for proper food, shelter and protection from harm. It is important to note that there are no specific codes of practice or standards such as apply in New South Wales, Victoria and Queensland.

The RSPCA believe better regulation is needed across the board, as current voluntary registration and accreditation programs are not sufficient to ensure the identification and traceability of breeders. They suggest a system whereby all dogs are permanently traceable to the breeder and all subsequent owners and sellers through a nationally coordinated system. This means that a dog cannot be sold at a pet shop without a registration number that will allow welfare inspectors to inspect the conditions of the parents.

They have laid out four steps for this process. The first is developing a system which ensures that all dogs are registered and traceable to the person who bred the dog. This must include compulsory microchip identification of puppies by the breeder prior to the sale or transfer to be implemented in all jurisdictions. The second is that mechanisms for tracking breeder information should be explored, including utilising existing microchip registration systems to enable puppies to be traced to the breeder. The third is that the current Gold Coast breeder permit pilot project should be examined as a model for a potential national system. The fourth is that a national approach is required to ensure that puppies transferred across jurisdictions remain traceable. Such a system could be administered at the state or local government level.

The RSPCA also contend that there are insufficient standards nationwide to provide for the welfare and the health of breeding dogs and puppies and to ensure that puppies are appropriately reared to be suitable as companion animals. In short, they feel that they cannot act when they find a puppy farm. Most legislation requires the provision of shelter, food and water but does not include the need for exercise and veterinary access. In this way, the RSPCA recommend that standards be developed which are sufficient to provide for the welfare and health of breeding dogs and puppies to ensure that puppies are appropriately reared to be companion animals. They must adequately address the psychological, behavioural, social and physiological needs of both breeding dogs and puppies. Standards must cover all aspects of dog breed-
ing that have an impact on animal welfare, including: staff competencies and training; staff-dog ratios; record-keeping; dog care and management; breeding and rearing; socialisation, health and veterinary care; transfer of ownership; and transport. Standards must be linked to existing animal welfare legislation. Standards should take into consideration the national standards and guidelines for dogs, which are currently in development through the Australian Animal Welfare Strategy. Perhaps the federal government could be doing more to help harmonise legislation and create some national standards. Perhaps it should not be up to local councils and state governments and instead there should be clear regulations within Australia for the industry.

In conclusion, the good news is that my office has been in contact with RSPCA WA and there have been no incidences of puppy farms being uncovered in WA recently. However, I understand this is a significant issue over in the east and was a significant issue at the recent Victorian election. To minimise the chances of puppy farms being established in WA, a national scheme would be advisable, perhaps along the lines of that raised by the RSPCA. For constituents wanting to make sure they purchase their dog from a reputable place, the best advice is to ask to see the dog’s biological parents. If this is declined then it would be advisable to contact the RSPCA and ask it to investigate further. Animal welfare is important and should be at the forefront of our minds during World Veterinary Year. I would like to congratulate all those veterinarians who are celebrating the 250th anniversary of world veterinary education, and I wish them all the best for this year.

Mr NEUMANN (Blair) (6.54 pm)—I congratulate the member for Calare for moving this motion. The veterinary profession contributes an enormous amount to animal health and production, public health, animal welfare, food safety and biosecurity. Indeed, as the motion says, there are seven schools of veterinary medicine established in Victoria, New South Wales, Queensland, WA and South Australia. Before the last redistribution I had the School of Veterinary Science at the University of Queensland in Gatton located in my seat. That is a wonderful facility, and I will talk about it later.

I have spent a lot of time raising awareness of the devastation which has affected so many Queenslanders and those within the seat of Blair in particular. It is not just the people of Queensland who have suffered. I want to acknowledge the unsung heroes who acted on behalf of our native wildlife, livestock and, of course, family pets, particularly dogs and cats. I also want to thank Councillor Andrew Antonelli who is in charge and has responsibility in Ipswich City Council for the work he does; the local RSPCA; and the Ipswich pound for their great work and all the workers there. They really cared for the domestic animals of Ipswich during the time of the flood. I thank them for their skill and talent, the abilities they exercised and their concern not just for the people of Ipswich but for the animals of Ipswich.

The United Nations has declared 2011 World Veterinary Year to mark the work of vets around the world and here in Australia. This year recognises the 250th anniversary of the foundation of the world’s first veterinary school in Lyon in France in 1761. The slogan adopted by the UN for the year of celebration is ‘Vet for health. Vet for food. Vet for the planet’. This motto illustrates the important role that vets play in safeguarding human and animal health, working to enhance food security and protecting the environment. We thank those vets who work not just for the local profession but for local councils and also for the federal government for the work that they do, particularly in biosecurity.
The 2006 census estimated that 63 per cent of Australian households own registered pets, and there are about 6,000 registered vets. Those of us who have engaged in that wonderful political activity called doorknocking will probably testify to the prevalence of dogs and cats, particularly dogs, as we have knocked on doors and opened gates and heard barking. In my electorate, particularly in the country towns such as Kilcoy, Toogoolawah, Esk, Lowood and Fernvale, the prevalence of dogs is particularly noted. They are much loved and we thank them for the work they do in protecting livestock and households. The Sunday before last I did what is commonly my work, a mobile office—my 41st since the last election—this time at the Fernvale markets. You can see all manner of dogs being led through the markets at Fernvale. I think there were almost more dogs than people at the markets at Fernvale last Sunday week.

The veterinary industry is invested in keeping our domestic animals healthy and disease free. Fortunately, we have done that. But their work extends not just to domestic animals but across the paddocks, through bushland and into the outback. This industry is particularly important in a regional and rural seat like Blair. Beef farming is widespread and dairy still exists. At one stage there they used to have about 25 dairy farms from Lynvale to Somerset to Mount Stanley. That is not the case now. Only a handful of dairies are up in the Brisbane Valley, but still vets are extremely important. Most country towns will see at least one veterinary practice in those types of places. They are very important for animal production in regional and rural areas. It is not just domestic dogs and cats that are important in the veterinary industry; there are the cattle as well as those dogs involved in rounding up cattle.

Vets are highly educated and well-qualified individuals who also act as a conduit for public health information to the wider medical profession. I have had local doctors speak to me about the importance of discussing issues concerning human health with vets and how the presence of an animal will make a difference to the psychological if not psychiatric health of an individual.

Worldwide, tragically, one person dies every 10 minutes from rabies. It is the most fatal infectious disease in the world, according to the World Veterinary Association. Of the 55,000 people who die from rabies each year, most are children, which is even worse, while 99 per cent of cases are as a direct result of dog bites. Australia is fortunate to have such a professional and effective veterinary industry. Our close geographic neighbours are not so lucky, and anyone who travels through South-East Asia will recognise that.

I want to acknowledge and thank publicly some of the unsung and forgotten heroes of the recent flood crisis—those who toiled day and night to save our animals and wildlife. Domestic pets, wildlife and commercial livestock were all caught up in the disaster, sending animal welfare organisations and vets to the breaking point. At one point the Queensland RSPCA received over 100 calls a minute from pets and animal owners seeking advice and information. In my electorate of Blair we witnessed an Ipswich resident, Mr Ray Cole, rescuing a drowning joey. Like the image of Sam the koala during the Victorian bushfires, the whole world witnessed the stoic Australian spirit and our love for our native wildlife.

In Gatton in the Lockyer Valley, which was formerly part of the electorate of Blair, local vets spent days with little sleep, bandaging, treating and euthanasing affected pets, horses and wildlife from immediate area, referring many to the University of Queensland veterinary hospital for ongoing treatment. Small animal vet professor Bob Donnelly and his staff at the uni-
versity’s vet clinic offered their services to the Lockyer Valley Regional Council after the electricity and water supply could not be guaranteed at the local pound. He was quoted as saying:

They came in one by one—dogs covered in mud, cats terrified from their ordeal and horses that had worn down their hooves swimming for up to 30 hours to stay afloat. The Lockyer Council’s animal management offices did an amazing job searching houses and buildings for animals that had survived the flood. In some cases they had to rescue animals from houses that had collapsed.

Vets around Ipswich and the Brisbane Valley performed similar heroic acts during the flood crisis in South-East Queensland. We have special people to care for animals, but at a time of crisis these vets, their nurses, technicians, families and friends rose to levels of achievement that even they never thought possible. There are some quite extreme examples of the extent to which veterinary professionals went to support their local communities.

In Queensland, the RSPCA staff and volunteers care for over 41,000 animals every year. Further afield, organisations like Vets Beyond Borders provide the people and animals of our nearby neighbours with invaluable support.

I want to acknowledge also the work done by the School of Veterinary Science and vets in the Lockyer Valley in what we call the western corridor. I wish to acknowledge the public education institutions that train our vets. On 6 August 2010 I represented the Hon. Julia Gillard, then Minister for Education, when I opened the University of Queensland School of Veterinary Science at Gatton. The university received $47.2 million towards the building of that school. This was while Gatton was part of the electorate of Blair. As their federal member, I lobbied very hard to achieve this funding. The ears of certain ministers are probably still ringing from the amount of times I cajoled them into giving us this money. This provided a single site for agriculture, crop, animal and veterinary science, including collocating with the Centre for Advanced Animal Science and other existing animal production and research facilities. This impressive facility is important not just for the Lockyer Valley but for Toowoomba, Somerset, Ipswich, the Scenic Rim and Brisbane—indeed, the whole of the western corridor, as we call it in South-East Queensland.

Since the 1880s, when Dr William Tyson Kendall, a 29-year-old vet, migrated to Australia, vets have performed wonderful, heroic deeds. He really is the founding father of veterinary science in Australia and is recognised as such. Since then Australian vets have worked to improve animal and human health by working tirelessly to diagnose and treat health problems in domestic, production and wild animals; helping to increase food quality, quantity and safety; protecting the public by helping preventable diseases from occurring; promoting animal welfare; playing a crucial role in biomedical research; and helping to protect the environment and biodiversity. I proudly commend the motion to the House and I acknowledge the good work of vets all over Australia, but particularly in South-East Queensland during the flood crisis.

Mr McCormack (Riverina) (7.04 pm)—This year marks the 250th anniversary of veterinary education in the world. It has also been designated World Veterinary Year to honour the contribution of the veterinary profession to society. The first veterinary school was established in Lyon, France, in 1761, which was shortly followed by the Alfort Veterinary School, near Paris. Both of these institutions were the initiative of French veterinarian Claude Bourgelat. He collaborated with surgeons in Lyon and was the first scientist to suggest that studying animal biology and pathology would help to improve our understanding of human biology.
and pathology. If he had never worked this link out, modern human medicine may have been delayed for some time. We can thank him for his contribution not only to veterinary science but also to medical science.

In 1909 an act of the Victorian parliament enabled the establishment of the veterinary school and Veterinary Research Institute at the University of Melbourne thus creating the first university veterinary school in Australia. The first Bachelor of Veterinary Science degrees were awarded that same year. More than 2,000 graduates have passed through this school including Margaret Keats MBE, Victoria’s first woman to graduate with a Bachelor of Veterinary Science degree in 1923. Former students have entered every realm of veterinary science, whether treating pets in private practice; monitoring and regulating industries such as horse racing; and tackling disease. All these roles make a significant contribution to Australia’s agricultural industry.

Schools of veterinary medicine are now established around Australia, including in my electorate of Riverina. Indeed, in Wagga Wagga the Kay Hull Veterinary Teaching Hospital opened in April 2010. It was named after my predecessor, who, like me, was a strong advocate for further education to be available in regional Australia so students are not forced to move to metropolitan areas for their education. This hospital, based in Wagga Wagga, is part of the Charles Sturt University and has been acknowledged as a first-class teaching and clinical facility. This is a purpose-built teaching hospital and is used by students in their final three years of study and provides valuable clinical experience under the direct supervision of CSU veterinarians. These graduates will more than meet the diverse demands placed upon veterinarians in rural and regional Australia.

Veterinarians practice and promote the highest standards of science based ethical animal welfare with all animals large and small, domestic and exotic. They are on the front line, maintaining Australia’s status as free from diseases which threaten the environment, human and animal health and provide extensive pro bono services through ethical treatment of unowned animals and wildlife. The role of vets has been no more important than during the equine influenza epidemic of 2007-08 which threatened the viability of the horse racing industry—particularly thoroughbreds and particularly in regional Australia. It is veterinarians who ensure the high quality of our commercial herds and flocks, of our food supply, and who work in preventative medicine to control zoonotic diseases—infectious diseases which can be transmitted from animal to animal or animal to human—and other scientific research.

Some Australian veterinarians who have gained great achievements and made significant contributions to our country and our world include the following. Dr Peter Doherty was awarded the Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine in 1996 and was Australian of the Year in 1997. His research focuses on the immune system and his Nobel work described how the body’s immune cells protect against viruses; Professor Mary Barton is a leading veterinarian bacteriologist with a distinguished career in government and veterinary public health with a strong research background in bacterial infections of animals and in antibiotic resistance in animal and human health. She is currently a professor of microbiology at the University of South Australia. Dr Reg Pascoe is a renowned equine surgeon and dermatologist and leader in his profession for more than 50 years. When the contagious equine metritis outbreak erupted in 1977, Dr Pascoe acted as consultant to the federal government with one of the recommendations being the need for improved communication within the horse industry. This led to the

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formation of the Australian Horse Council in 1982, where he remained as acting secretary and acting chairman for many years.

Many people view veterinarians as only animal doctors and animal welfare advocates but this is not the case. They are also key public health stakeholders because of their crucial role in promoting food security by supervising animal production hygiene, controlling infectious diseases which can be transmitted from animals to other animals or to humans, monitoring food quality and safety, protecting the environment and partaking in biomedical research. I thank veterinarians—very special people—for all the valuable and diverse roles they perform in Australian communities, particularly in regional communities, and celebrate with them their past and continuing contribution as true professionals.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mrs D’Ath) — 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.

Biosecurity and Quarantine

Debate resumed, on motion by Mr Georganas:

That this House acknowledges that:

(1) a strong biosecurity and quarantine system is critical to Australia’s rural and regional industries, jobs, consumers and our natural heritage;

(2) Australian law protects Australia from pests and diseases carried by overseas animals, plants and their products; and

(3) the application of Australian law will continue to be rigorously applied in Australia and defended against external challenge

Mr GEORGANAS (Hindmarsh) (7.09 pm)—It is a great pleasure for me to be here to move this motion tonight that this House acknowledges that we have a strong biosecurity and quarantine system which is critical to Australia’s rural and regional industries, important to our jobs, to our consumers and of course our natural heritage. It is of concern to a lot of Australians. We have good laws in place to protect Australia from pests and diseases that are carried by overseas animals, plants and their products, and of course it is important that the application of Australian law continues to apply rigorously in Australia to defend against the external challenge. These are important issues. They are very important for our strong biosecurity systems and they are widely and deeply supported throughout the Australian community. In fact our need for strong biosecurity is one of the most fundamental and critical issues that people face day by day and it goes to the means by which people sustain their very lives. Last year the clear, unmistakable and very deep fear that people in the community felt in response to hearing—and all of us heard about it in our electorates—about the importation of beef that might have been infected with mad cow disease demonstrated widespread community concerns about such issues.

These issues were debated extensively especially in my electorate. One outlet for such public concern is often through media such as talkback radio. This issue was very prominent. It received great attention on the South Australian radio program of Leon Byner on FIVEaa. Not satisfied with simply airing these concerns about being forced to import these particular products or other similar issues of grave concern to members of the public, Leon Byner helpfully created an interactive website named Don’t sell Australia short and on this site members of
the public can express their deeply-held concerns, or advocate for change or conservation depending on the issue. I would advise anyone that is concerned or has an interest in this area to visit Leon Byner’s Facebook page, which is called *Don’t sell Australia short*, which has had over 4,000 hits. While the issues do vary markedly from foreign acquisition to protectionism to industry deregulation, the concern is consistent in contributors’ calls for Australia as a whole, and government, to take action.

Australian governments have for a century provided the laws used to keep Australia safe from imported diseases and we have been very successful in this matter. But a good quarantine system does not remove all responsibility for quality control from the public. Ultimately, it is every individual who chooses what he or she will consume, be it imported beef product or local beef product, be it imported fruit and vegetables or fruit and vegetables available from local producers. Consumers have the power to choose what they purchase and consumers continue to face risks in consuming available food.

While we have a good system that we are improving all the time, mistakes do happen. For example, the Interim Inspector-General of Biosecurity released a report in November last year into the inadvertent release of two consignments of raw, peeled prawns by the Australian Quarantine and Inspection Service. The consignments had returned positive results on tests for the white spot syndrome virus, a disease affecting prawns but which poses no threat to human health. Test results should have led to the prawns being destroyed or re-exported—and when I say re-exported, I mean sent back to their place of origin. However, human error caused the prawns to be released into the retail supply chain. This is one incident where our good system did not perform as it should have.

Improvements to the system to avoid the potential for human error are being undertaken. The Australian government’s work in this area continues. The government commissioned deep analysis of our biosecurity systems soon after coming to office in 2007. The Commonwealth agreed in principle with all of the review’s 84 recommended reforms and this government has been assisting our biosecurity agencies and helping to improve their systems, bringing them up to date, making them stronger and more thorough in the public interest. This work is ongoing, relentless and ever increasing, as it should be. I would like to acknowledge the huge task in which our biosecurity and quarantine personnel are engaged and on behalf of the Australian public give them every encouragement in the performance of their critical task. *(Time expired)*

Mr McCormack (Riverina) *(7.14 pm)*—A strong biosecurity and quarantine system is critical to Australia’s rural and regional industries, jobs, consumers and our natural heritage. The 2008 $1.7 million Beale review into Australia’s quarantine and biosecurity systems found our border defences are significantly under-resourced, putting Australia’s economy, people and environment at significant risk.

It is important that Australian law protects Australia from pests and diseases carried by overseas animals, plants and products. However, the Labor government seems set to bring Australia’s biosecurity into threat. In July last year the ban on imported apples was lifted and the Australian apple industry has been left in jeopardy through flooding local markets with cheap inferior products from overseas that potentially carry diseases and pests as well as spray contaminants used in foreign agriculture. Foreign apples should have never been allowed into our country in the first place, especially as our apple industry is free of fire blight and is self-
sustaining. This decision has the potential to devastate areas such as Batlow and Tumut, in my electorate of Riverina, the economies of which rely heavily on apples. That is neither right nor fair from a government that says it has regional Australia’s interests at heart.

But it is not just apples where Labor has weakened the biosecurity and quarantine measures. Now it is stalling on funding the eradication program to kill Asian bees. The Asian bee has threatened the industry over the past 20 years and now threatens to affect everyone—the honey industry, that is, and so many others as well. The Asian bee robs honey from managed hives, possibly causing hives to starve. This could devastate the pollination industry, which is responsible for $4 billion of production per year. Ninety-eight per cent of our fresh fruit and vegetables are locally grown and are now under threat. There is now evidence that the Asian bee displaces native bees from their natural habitats by competing for floral resources. This will do untold damage to our ecological biodiversity. The question is not what it will cost to eradicate the Asian bee; it is how much will it cost Australia if we do not eradicate this pest.

You just have to read the newspapers, watch the television news or glance at the internet to see the effects that weakened biosecurity and quarantine restrictions have on a country. Florida has been devastated by a bacterial plant disease that is destroying the production, appearance and economic value of its citrus fruits. Huanglongbing, HLB, also known as citrus greening disease, was introduced into America by a slip-up at quarantine that allowed an infected plant into the country. The citrus industry based around Griffith, Leeton and Hillston in the electorate I represent, comprising 8,500 hectares, is the largest citrus growing region in Australia. It produces about 200,000 tonnes of fresh oranges and juice every year, exports about one-third of its crop, with a retail value of half a billion dollars. Brazil and Florida have watched their industries dwindle because of this disease. I urge our government not to make the same mistake.

We stand here this evening to honour veterinarians and the wonderful job they do to keep our livestock the best that it is. However, if this government is already letting its guard down with food produce, imagine the damage that will ensue if they also decide to decrease the security within our livestock and animal imports. Already in 2007 we saw the devastating effects that equine influenza had on Australia’s horse racing industry. Veterinary surgeons suggested that the virus must have been transmitted between the two locations by human error. The New South Wales government blamed the Eastern Creek Quarantine Station and demanded that the federal government hold an inquiry into the biosecurity breach. No such conclusion was ever reached. Had it been worse the effects could have been far more detrimental.

The coalition has called on the Labor government to fund the Asian bee eradication program, and we have still not had a response from the minister in relation to it. The government should be protecting industries it is sworn to represent that help to keep the heart of Australia beating. Zebra chip in potatoes, bacterial canker in kiwi fruit and fire blight in apples are just some of the potential biosecurity risks we face in Australia because of the substandard quarantine and biosecurity systems and the lack of specialist scientists in Australia to provide the appropriate rigour in our process. The failure by the Labor government to invest the recommended $260 million per annum into our quarantine and biosecurity agencies and upgrade their antiquated IT systems is crucifying Australia’s border protection efforts. Weakened quarantine and biosecurity measures may not seem much to city slickers but this will ruin the live-
lihoods of regional and rural Australians. And I can assure you that the people in the city will be up in arms when they can no longer access quality produce from heartland Australia.

Mr ZAPPIA (Makin) (7.19 pm)—I am pleased to be able to speak on this motion and I commend the member for Hindmarsh for bringing this matter to the attention of the House. Australia is not only a net exporter of food products but food and farm produce has to date sustained Australia’s balance of trade position, with a net surplus of $14.2 billion from our food product trade in the year 2009-10. In fact, Australia is the 14th largest food exporter in the world. Without food exports, Australia’s trade deficit would be unsustainable. An unsustainable trade deficit would in turn ultimately be disastrous for the Australian economy. It would also be disastrous for the Australian economy if overseas markets were closed to Australian produce because Australian produce was contaminated.

The farm sector employs and sustains hundreds of regional communities around the country. When farm production in those communities has collapsed because of natural disasters such as floods, droughts and cyclones the impact on those communities has been terrible. A similar demise of rural townships has occurred when the international commodity prices or demand for their produce has plummeted. International prices and demand are beyond our control, as are extreme weather events. Indeed, food production has always been risky. However, one of the most serious risks constantly faced by food producers is the risk associated with disease, pests or any form of contamination. I recall that a couple of years ago I was contacted by an Adelaide kangaroo meat export company that was facing a severe business downturn because its major export country, Russia, had placed a ban on Australian kangaroo meat over an alleged contamination issue.

International demand for Australian food produce has always been underpinned by the food quality standards of Australian products. The reality in recent times is that, in aiming to increase export opportunities by entering into multilateral and bilateral trade agreements with other countries, Australia has simultaneously increased the risks associated with contamination and disease, which in turn threaten those very export opportunities. Trade agreements open up new markets for Australian produce. Agreements in turn require a free two-way flow of produce and while we can ensure that consumer standards are enforced in Australian production we have little control over production standards overseas. Control is effectively limited to Australia’s biosecurity and quarantine system.

It is indeed a huge responsibility that is placed on that sector and it is my view that the agencies associated with Australia’s biosecurity do an excellent job. This was also the view of the 2008 independent review of Australian biosecurity by a panel chaired by Roger Beale AO, which concluded:

… Australia operates a good biosecurity system; indeed, one that is often the envy of other countries, given its comprehensiveness … and scientific rigour.

The panel, however, also acknowledged that the system is far from perfect and went on to make 84 recommendations, all of which I have no doubt would strengthen Australia’s biodiversity security system.

I was also pleased to see that the government has agreed in principle with the Beale panel’s 84 recommendations. The most effective way of minimising risk is to prevent the importation of food products where production standards are less stringent than those applied in Australia or where an outbreak of a disease not present in Australia has been detected. It is my view that
the risks to the whole industry associated with importing a product from a country where that product has previously been identified as having a biosecurity risk associated with it justifies the banning of the importation of that product. A decision to do so by the government should not be subject to an appeal to or decision by an external body as was the case with the importation recently of New Zealand apples. Australia should always be the final decision maker in these matters. Australian producers can survive if one country closes to their product. But they cannot survive if the world market is closed to them.

Adelaide radio talkback host Leon Byner regularly raises this matter. From the public discussions that follow, I have no doubt about the widespread level of community concern over this issue. I know that many people in my electorate feel very strongly about this issue and would only buy Australian produce if it was clearly labelled and they could therefore make that choice. With respect to food labelling, I recently wrote to the parliamentary secretary for health urging her to immediately implement recommendation 41 of the recently completed food-labelling inquiry taking oversight of country-of-origin information from the FSANZ process to the Competition and Consumer Act 2010.

Mr BRIGGS (Mayo) (7.24 pm)—I rise to speak on the motion moved by the member for Hindmarsh and I give some credit to the member, who has for some time been raising in this place and in other places such significant issues as food security, particularly in relation to protecting Australia’s food from biosecurity risks arising from the importation of food from other places. I start by making the simple point that I am a supporter of a country that engages in free trade with other countries. I think it has had and continues to have enormous benefits not just for consumers but also for farmers in our country. If we stop trading and start putting tariffs back on or putting restrictions on our products, the great losers will be our farmers and Australian consumers. However, it also has to be said that we need to ensure that we have a proper and strong biosecurity and quarantine system in Australia to protect our own domestic food supply and the great export opportunities provided by our rural sector producers. We have a very strong and great rural sector in our country and we should be very proud of it. In my electorate we have some wonderful areas of rural production with exports of wine, grains, canola and the famous Adelaide Hills apples, which the member for Makin was talking about just a moment ago. They are the best apples in Australia.

Mr McCormack—I don’t know about that!

Mr BRIGGS—The member for Riverina might dispute this but, of course, we have the famous Adelaide Hills pink ladies, which are by far and away, according to my children at least, the best apples ever produced. We also produce beautiful honey in the Adelaide Hills, and on Kangaroo Island too. We are very proud of the export-quality food that we produce.

Honey has been a topic that we have debated in this parliament in the last couple of weeks. In particular, we had ‘honey meets parliament’, which highlighted a national disgrace at the moment, that the government would not commit a small amount of money—I think it was $10 million—to ensure action against the Asian honey bee, which is such a risk not only to our honey production in this country but also to the pollination aspect given the importance of pollination in Australia. Not many would know that in the early part of Australian settlement we had to import bees from Europe to pollinate crops. We were running out of fresh food in Australia in the early 19th century because we did not have pollinating bees so we imported them from England to ensure that we had fresh food. Now we have this huge risk of Asian
honey bees exposing Australia to enormous risk because they do not pollinate crops. The risk for our export industries as well as for our domestic food production is significant and for just $10 million we could prevent that from happening. I think it is a disgrace that the government is not investing that money today to ensure that happens.

The member for Makin referred to issues in relation to apple importation from New Zealand and China. Many in the apple and pear industry have great concerns about importation from both countries because of the disease risk. My view is that if we are confident that they are clear of disease it is fine because I am very confident that my producers in the Adelaide Hills will walk all over any competition from international competitors and from domestic competitors as well. But we need to make sure they are on a level playing field. A real concern that I have is that this government has not invested enough in making sure that we have a level playing field. Investing in the science, particularly the quarantine science, is good for our future; it is important for our future. There should be an immediate decision today by the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry, Senator Ludwig, to invest more money in our quarantine system. We know the state Labor governments have cut the guts out of primary industries departments across the country, particularly in South Australia. It is not good enough. One thing that we can do arising from this motion today is invest more to make a real difference for the future.

Opposition members interjecting—

Mr ZAPPIA (Makin) (7.29 pm)—by leave—I thank the members opposite and I would be pleased to speak about apples if time permits me to because I am very familiar with the situation in Adelaide and the importance of the apple industry to the people of Adelaide and South Australia. In fact I have friends in the Adelaide Hills who are apple growers.

I was making the point when time ran out that I have written to the Parliamentary Secretary for Health and Ageing, Ms Catherine King, with regard to the food labelling inquiry report, in particular recommendation 41 which transfers the matter of country of origin labelling from Food Standards Australia and New Zealand to the Competition and Consumer Act 2010. The importance of that is that it gives the opportunity to the consumers to make some choices in the products that they consume which, today, is very difficult for them to do.

Clear food labelling standards are linked to this very matter that we are speaking on because, certainly, when it comes to biosecurity matters which people are quite rightly and properly concerned with one, of the steps that they can all take as individuals is to choose a product on the shelf for themselves. They can only make the choice that I suspect many of them would want to make—that is, to buy the Australian product if they have clear labelling laws. I would certainly urge the parliamentary secretary to take that recommendation separate from the other 66, I think, recommendations in total and act on it urgently because I believe it is a separate matter to the questions of the other information that people are seeking on food labels.

I want to come back to the importance of this whole issue of biosecurity and the importance of ensuring that products that come into this country are not contaminated and do not in any way, shape or form present a risk of any sort to Australian producers. I know that frequently free trade negotiations, which I referred to earlier, are negotiations and agreements that are entered into willingly by this country at the urging of the industry sector which, perhaps, is also the sector that may have the most to lose if something goes wrong.
I recall being caught up in the discussions and the debate about the importation of meat in this country some 18 months ago. At that time there was a real concern that meat could be brought into Australia from countries that had what is referred to as ‘mad cow disease’ detected in their herds. I am also aware that at the time the importation of meat from those countries was driven by the cattle industry of Australia who I understand wanted access to the opposite countries’ markets.

The reality here though is that if, when dealing with one of those countries, we import meat which for one reason or another gets through the system and is contaminated and then contaminates the livestock in this country then we risk the loss of sales to every country around the world. That is why it is so important that we ensure that we have a very secure system in place to make sure that we do not have any contaminated products whatsoever coming into the country.

The same applies to the question of apples. I recall meeting with apple growers in Adelaide with the Minister for Primary Industries and Energy at the time and having a roundtable discussion about that industry and their concerns. Legitimately, they were concerned because, if we allow apples to come in from a country where previously in this case, I think, fire blight had been detected and in turn fire blight gets into Australian apples then that will immediately diminish the value of Australian products when we are trying to sell to other countries.

Australia has a terrific reputation. Australian growers, I believe, are some of the best in the world. They have a terrific reputation around the world for the quality of the products that they produce. It is in our national interest to ensure that that quality is in no way jeopardised. That is effectively what this motion is talking about. It is about the importance of having a strong biosecurity system in place to ensure that we do not allow products that could otherwise contaminate our own to be brought into the country. For that reason I support the member for Hindmarsh’s motion and I commend it to the House.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER(Mrs D’Ath)—There being no further speakers, the debate is adjourned and the resumption of the debate will be made an order of the day for the next sitting.

World Tuberculosis Day

Debate resumed, on motion by Mr Laurie Ferguson:

That this House:

(1) recognises that 24 March is World Tuberculosis Day, in observance of a disease that still claims the lives of 1.7 million people every year, and which:

(a) is currently the leading killer of people living with HIV and the third leading killer of women;

(b) has the highest growth in the South East Asian region, which accounted for the largest number of new Tuberculosis cases in 2008; and

(c) could be dramatically reduced by improved detection and diagnosis;

(2) recognises that the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria (Global Fund) currently provides more than two thirds of the global funding to combat Tuberculosis, and that:

(a) Australia could supplement its recent pledge to the Global Fund to ensure that the resources for Tuberculosis as well as AIDS and Malaria are sufficient to achieve the goal of significantly reducing the number of people suffering from these diseases; and
(b) action by Australia to supplement its pledge would influence other donor countries to increase their pledges;

(3) acknowledges that the widespread adoption of the new Xpert diagnostic tool, which cuts the time for diagnosis from several weeks to two hours, would lead to significant improvements in the detection and treatment of Tuberculosis; and

(4) requests the Government facilitate the adoption of Xpert in South East Asia.

Mr SIDEBOTTOM (Braddon) (7.35 pm)—I am very happy to support this motion moved by my good friend Laurie Ferguson. I remind everyone that one of the reasons that we are discussing it is that 24 March is World Tuberculosis Day. I would like to use this as an advertisement to remind us that together we can stop TB. We will be wearing our badges on 24 March, but we need to do more than wear a badge, I suggest. I was looking at the figures for tuberculosis around the world. Maybe I should not have been, but I was surprised to see that even in the United States TB is a killer. It is a very serious disease and health issue for many communities. In actual fact, it forms part of goal 6 of the Millennium Development Goals, which is to combat three of the most debilitating diseases across the globe: HIV-AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria.

Ms Saffin—The three Ds.

Mr SIDEBOTTOM—One of the foundation stones of the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria, which was established recently, was to make a difference by tackling head on three of the diseases that my colleague the member for Page quite rightly pointed out are called the three Ds. They condemn vast numbers of people to ill-health, discrimination and other human rights abuses, poverty and preventable early death. That is the sad thing about this: they are preventable. We, on our side of the economic ledger in the world, can do a hell of a lot more to help to combat these terrible preventable diseases.

TB kills someone approximately every 20 seconds. That is nearly 4,700 people every day or 1.8 million people alone, according to the latest estimates from the World Health Organisation. TB is second only to HIV-AIDS as the leading infectious killer of adults worldwide. It is among the three greatest causes of death in women aged 15 to 44 and is the leading infectious cause of death among people with HIV-AIDS. It is preventable. We can do something about it. We need to do something about it. On a global scale, although we are doing some things and there have been advances, we are not doing nearly enough.

Tuberculosis is global. The World Health Organisation estimates that two billion people—that is, one-third of the world’s population—are infected with TB. Mycobacterium tuberculosis is the official title of the bacillus that causes the disease. Mycobacterium TB’s unique cell wall, which has a waxy coating primarily composed of mycolic acids, allows the bacillus to lie dormant for many years. The body’s immune system may restrain the disease but it does not destroy it.

While some people with this latent infection will never develop active TB, particularly in more advanced countries—and, in a discriminatory way, it develops in males more than females—five to 10 per cent of carriers will become sick in their lifetime. So, effectively, if 9.4 million new cases of TB per year are diagnosed, how many are not diagnosed? It is very sad. Once active, TB attacks the respiratory system and other organs, destroying body tissue. The disease is contagious, spreading through the air by coughing, sneezing or even talking.
Mr McCormack—Stop talking then!

Mr SIDEBOTTOM—Not about this, though, my good friend from Riverina. An estimated nine million new active cases develop each year, as I mentioned. At any given moment, more than 13 million people around the world are suffering from an active infection, and we know that there are many more millions with inactive, latent TB. As I also said, it is the third leading cause of death for women of reproductive age, from age 15 to 44, worldwide. In 2008, for example, 3.6 million women developed TB and approximately another 500,000 died as a result. Again, the sad thing is that it is preventable and we can do something about it, but we just do not do enough.

Despite enormous advances in the provision of services in recent years—and there have been—TB’s deadly synergy with HIV-AIDS and a surge in drug-resistant strains are threatening to destabilise gains in TB control. From my research, I understand that if you do not take the full suite of drugs and remedies that you are prescribed, if you miss any, then it is too late; it becomes worse. I note my good friend Dr Washer, who knows a lot more about this than I do, is agreeing. So not only must we have the proper medicines and the proper diagnostic tools on the job and in situ but also the treatment has to be carried out totally and comprehensively. Again, that is the great challenge that faces us.

While the incidence of TB is stable or falling in many regions of the world, global rates of new infections are still rising in many endemic areas where TB goes hand-in-hand with HIV-AIDS and the effects of poverty. There they are together, the triangle of poverty, disease and suffering. And, of course, without tackling health, which is concomitant with poverty, that leads unfortunately to very serious economic, social and political consequences, which we all know about. There are dreadful instances of communities suffering because there is no peace; where there is no peace, it is difficult to provide health care; without that health care, the poverty continues; and so the cycle goes on.

TB, I understand, will rob the world’s poorest countries of an estimated $1 trillion to $3 trillion over the next decade. So, apart from the purely individual health, and social and political problems, there are economic implications. These are the terrible consequences of not being able to tackle TB. In some countries, lost productivity attributable to TB approaches seven per cent of gross domestic product—seven per cent.

I understand that there is a new test that can accurately diagnose tuberculosis in people within 90 minutes, compared to the six weeks needed for the current standard test—90 minutes compared to six weeks. It is called the Xpert MTB/RIF test, and I do not pretend to understand enough about it, but it can identify TB in 98 per cent of active cases. That is an improvement of more than 45 per cent on one of the current most commonly used techniques. It also, I understand, detects whether the TB-causing bacteria are resistant to rifampicin, a first-line drug for TB in 98 per cent of cases. According to Richard Chaisson, Director of the John Hopkins Centre for Tuberculosis Research in Baltimore, Maryland, who was not involved in the work:
It has the potential to be revolutionary …

So, on 24 March, I will join with all my colleagues in this place to remember World Tuberculosis Day and to do our part to ensure that we help tackle this preventable disease. Thank you.
Dr WASHER (Moore) (7.45 pm)—First, I would like to thank the member for Werriwa for moving this important motion, and I congratulate the member for Braddon: his pronunciation of the drug names was excellent! World Tuberculosis Day is on 24 March, a couple of days from now. Tuberculosis—previously known as consumption, phthisis, scrofula, Pott’s disease or the white plague—is an infection by the bacterium *Mycobacterium tuberculosis*. Tuberculosis primarily affects your lungs, and the bacteria that cause tuberculosis spread from person to person through tiny droplets released into the air via coughs, sneezes, laughter and speaking, making it a highly transmissible disease.

Historically, it is believed that *Mycobacterium bovis*, which is the cattle form, moved from cattle to humans approximately 20,000 years ago, coinciding with the domestication of animals. It is thought that it almost wiped out the human population at that time. The number of cases of TB has been increasing since 1985, partly due to the emergence of the Human Immunodeficiency Virus. HIV weakens a person’s immune system so it cannot fight the TB bacteria.

The first antibiotics used to fight tuberculosis were developed 60 years ago. The *Mycobacterium* has since developed the ability to survive these antibiotics and that ability has been passed on to its descendants so that we now have drug-resistant strains of tuberculosis. These strains are known as multidrug resistant, or MDR, and extensively drug resistant, or XDR. In 2009, 1.7 million people died of TB, including 380,000 people with HIV. TB affects mostly young adults and occurs mainly in the developing world, with more than half of all cases in Asia. TB is the leading killer amongst people with HIV. In 2009, 9.4 million cases were diagnosed, with 80 per cent coming from just 22 countries. It is a worldwide pandemic, with 13 African countries in the top 15 countries for TB incidence rates and a third of all new cases being found in India and China. According to the WHO *Global Tuberculosis Control Report 2009*, there may be more than 500,000 new MDR-TB cases diagnosed worldwide, with over 50 per cent coming from China, India and the Russian Federation. XDR-TB has been confirmed in more than 58 countries. Current testing for drug resistance can take more than four weeks, leading to higher mortality rates and the further spread of the disease.

Programs funded in 2009 by the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria have provided treatment for six million people with active TB. The global fund has provided nearly two-thirds of the external financing for TB and multidrug-resistant, or MDR, TB control efforts in low- and middle-income countries. TB programs supported by the global fund have also provided 1.8 million TB-HIV services. In many countries in which the global fund supports programs, TB prevalence is falling, as are TB mortality rates. To date, programs supported by the global fund have saved 6.5 million lives by providing AIDS treatment for three million people and anti-tuberculosis treatment for 7.7 million people. In October 2010, Australia announced a 55 per cent increase in its commitment to the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria, bringing its pledge to $210 million over the next three calendar years. Imagine how many more lives could be saved if we could supplement this pledge to ensure that the resources for TB, AIDS and malaria were sufficient. In December 2010, the World Health Organisation endorsed a new rapid test for tuberculosis. This new test can provide an accurate diagnosis in about 100 minutes—

Mr Sidebottom—Ninety.
Dr WASHER—Ninety, as the member for Braddon said, to 100—compared to current tests that can take up to three months to provide results. The Xpert diagnostic tool is a fully automated nucleic acid amplification test for the early diagnosis of TB as well as multidrug-resistant TB and TB complicated by HIV infection, which are more difficult to diagnose. The system uses single-use disposable cartridges which are self-contained, eliminating cross-contamination between samples.

Many countries still rely principally on sputum smear microscopy, which was developed over a century ago. The company which has developed the new test, Cepheid, has granted a 75 per cent reduction in the price for countries most affected by TB, compared to the current market price. Preferential pricing will be given to 116 low- and middle-income countries where TB is endemic, with additional reduction in price once there is significant volume of demand. It is estimated the cost of each test in 2011 will be about $16.86 with 0.6 million tests conducted, but this will reduce to approximately $10.72 by 2014 when an estimated 3.7 million tests will be conducted.

I request the government to facilitate the adoption of Xpert in South-East Asia and call on its use as part of the Debt2Health agreement with Indonesia. Indonesia has the third-highest rate of tuberculosis in the world, with more than 90,000 Indonesians dying from the disease each year. Despite tuberculosis being preventable and curable, the disease is on the rise in Indonesia and many other developing countries. Debt2Health is the financing initiative of the global fund and is helping to channel resources of developing countries away from debt repayment towards investment in health. Under the current Debt2Health arrangements, Australia will cancel $75 million of Indonesia’s debt and, in return, Indonesia will invest half of this amount into national programs to combat tuberculosis through the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria.

Mr LAURIE FERGUSON (Werriwa—Parliamentary Secretary for Multicultural Affairs and Settlement Services) (7.52 pm)—At the outset, I recognise RESULTS, the group that has approached the member for Forrest, the member for Braddon and me—and, I guess, many other members—on this issue. I admire their effort in lobbying members of parliament and working with the media—they have accomplished much in regard to microfinance and debt cancellation—as well as their interest in tuberculosis.

It is important to note that tuberculosis is very much related to poverty and, in particular, is gender based. The characteristics of women’s circumstances around the world—cramped living conditions; poor ventilation when cooking; using biomass fuel when they cook; confined living spaces and the predominance of women in sex work, which is very closely interrelated with living in confined spaces—are all aspects that lead to a greater prevalence amongst women. Throughout large parts of the world women with this disease suffer a degree of stigmatisation and often do not get the treatment that males receive. It is also important to note another example of how this affects poorer people. If we adjust the statistics to take account of differences in age structures between Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations in Australia, we see that the rate of tuberculosis amongst Indigenous Australians compared to other people in this country is 14 to one. It is very much a disease that is related to living conditions and to a person’s circumstances in life.

The situation is that, around the world, a person dies from TB every 20 seconds. Many other speakers have mentioned the figure of 1.7 million people dying per year, with 9½ mil-
lion people contracting active TB. One of the other problems is, despite the efforts of foreign aid and the efforts of doctors et cetera, population growth around the world is in some areas overwhelming our gains. We are making strenuous steps forward, occasioned by the United Nations and other organisations, but in some parts of the world population growth means that, although the rates are going down, the number of people being affected is making the situation extremely serious. Another problem that has been identified with tuberculosis is the difficulty that many people have in completing their regime of medication, which is supposed to be at least six to 12 months in duration. The circumstances of some people around the world make that very difficult. Screening rates are lower in large parts of the developing world. Self-medication is a problem when people do not have access to proper medical facilities et cetera.

The organisation referred to in the motion, which I take to be an organisation that does not have a commercial motivation, is advocating to move towards the Xpert diagnostic tool. The current test is very much affected by the circumstances in which the patient takes that test. But most particularly it takes too long to get the results back. On average, a person suffering from tuberculosis can infect 10 to 15 people. So if somebody is wandering around the streets undiagnosed, unknowing et cetera, that obviously becomes a major threat to the spread of the disease. It has been said that clinicians will now be able to obtain dependable test results in virtually any clinical setting, not only for detection of TB but for simultaneous determination of whether or not it is a drug-resistant strain. As the previous opposition speaker noted, another significant issue around the world with tuberculosis is the growth of drug resistance because of self-medication and people not keeping to their regimes.

Returning to the theme raised at the beginning, it is important to note that 17 of the 22 countries most affected by this problem, where 80 per cent of people are suffering from TB, have a per capita GDP of less than $760 a year. So it is very much related to poverty and associated issues. I also associate myself with Senator Pratt’s motion in the Senate, which, in addition, calls for Australia not to move backwards with foreign aid funding in this area, calls for funding not to be affected by the Queensland floods and other catastrophes, and calls for Australia not to in any way walk away from commitments on foreign aid in this and other areas.

Mr McCormack (Riverina) (7.57 pm)—I rise to speak on the member for Werriwa’s motion relating to World Tuberculosis Day and commend him for putting it before the House. This coming Thursday, 24 March, the world recognises World Tuberculosis Day. Tuberculosis is one of the oldest diseases which still causes a grave effect on humans. It is currently the leading killer of people living with HIV and the third-leading killer of women. Besides people with low immunity, the disease is often found amongst lower socioeconomic communities and the homeless. It is a disease of the past and of the present, and if nothing changes it will continue into the future.

More than two billion people are currently infected with the TB bacterium, which is roughly a third of the world’s population. Tuberculosis, commonly referred to as TB, is a chronic infectious disease caused by bacteria known as mycobacterium tuberculosis. It is an infectious and airborne disease. Tuberculosis predominantly attacks lungs; however, it will proceed to attack bones and joints, the circulatory system and the central nervous system.

First reference of a disease similar to TB in humans dates back to ancient Egypt. Examinations of mummies in tomb paintings reveal that tuberculosis was present at that time—around
Ancient Egyptian paintings portray spinal tuberculosis, indicating the presence of the disease, and reference to the disease is evident in ancient Greek literature by Hippocrates as well as in literature by English playwright William Shakespeare.

Tuberculosis has been known by different names since ancient times. The ancient disease called phthisis has references to symptoms similar to that of TB. The recognised term ‘tuberculosis’ was first used in the 19th century. It is believed to have originated from the word ‘tubercle’, meaning a protuberance, swelling or nodule. In the case of tuberculosis, such nodules are found in lungs or on bones.

In 2010, TB became one of the leading diseases in HIV related deaths. According to the World Health Organisation, prevention and treatment of TB in people living with HIV is an urgent priority for both HIV-AIDS and TB programs. It is sad to see the disease that for so long infected our ancient ancestors is still affecting many people today. Preventing TB is easy. Treatment is simple. However, it continues to navigate its deadly path, causing devastation amongst those less fortunate. Supporting further action to control tuberculosis is one way in which Australia can increase the impact of its aid. TB is in most cases a curable disease. The past 20 years has seen considerable success in eradicating the disease. However, TB still kills more than 1.75 million people a year internationally and has the highest growth rate in the South-East Asia region. The highest number of deaths occur in the Asia-Pacific region in countries including China, India, Indonesia, the Philippines, Thailand and Vietnam.

The World Health Organisation has announced an endorsement of a new rapid tuberculosis diagnostic tool, Xpert MTB/RIF. This tool allows patients to receive an analysis and begin suitable treatment faster than ever before. Used widely, Xpert will prevent TB transmission on a massive scale. In recognising World Tuberculosis Day, it is important to acknowledge the implementation of this new Xpert diagnostic tool and particularly what it can do in South-East Asia. The member for Braddon spoke passionately about the cycle of poverty and tuberculosis and the spread of the disease. This is a sad state of affairs as it is extremely preventable. The implementation of this device will cut the time for diagnosis from several weeks to two hours and will eventually lead to significant improvements in the detection and treatment of tuberculosis. Awareness of what can and should be done is commendable and encouraged, particularly on such a significant day as this Thursday.

Dr LEIGH (Fraser) (8.01 pm)—Tuberculosis, as the previous speaker, the member for Riverina, has noted is a disease from the times of ancient Egypt. It inflicts upon the world 1.7 million deaths each year. Each untreated sufferer of tuberculosis can infect another 10 to 15 people around them. Our region is in a part of the world where many other countries have high tuberculosis rates. Indeed, almost half the world’s tuberculosis fatalities occur in the Asia-Pacific region. The 10 countries with the highest tuberculosis rates include China, India, Indonesia, the Philippines, Thailand and Vietnam. Tuberculosis is a curable disease and considerable progress has been made in its treatment and diagnosis in the last 20 years. What is required is more generosity and more leadership, which is why the Labor government are committed to increasing our aid commitment to 0.5 per cent of GNI. I note at this stage that the UK government, despite having budget challenges that are far greater than our own, has continued its pledge to increase UK aid to 0.7 per cent of gross national income.

Seventy per cent of aid that targets tuberculosis comes via the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria. It is important in this context to acknowledge the role that the
global fund has played. The role of the global fund and the role of foreign aid have at least been bipartisan policies in this parliament, and I hope that this continues to be the case. Two reasons that are often cited for cutting back on foreign aid—and reasons which arose in the recent debate when the coalition suggested that they would find budget savings by reducing foreign aid to Indonesian schools—are national interest and corruption. It is true that the global fund has recently had disturbing revelations about corruption. There have been suggestions that global fund resources have been misused. As a result, the global fund’s executive director, Michel Kazatchkine, announced a series of changes, including tougher controls and monitoring, a doubling of the budget of the independent inspector general and a panel of international experts to review procedures.

We should be rigorous about reducing corruption but the fact that we see corruption does not mean that we should shut down our support of the global fund. The global fund concept has been effective. The global fund makes countries compete for money based on their ability to implement programs—driving a race to the top among recipient countries. The global fund is also effective because it brings together resources from a range of different sources. These include government moneys, wealthy philanthropists, such as those who support the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, and businesses. An interesting idea highlighted in a recent article in the *Economist* is Product Red, which was created by Bono and is a brand attached to products and services from firms such as Apple, Gap and Starbucks. This scheme has so far raised $160 million to go to the global fund to help reduce the prevalence of tuberculosis in the world.

It is important, as we wrestle with the challenge of corruption, that we recognise that the main game is cutting poverty. The problem of corruption and aid is a bit like the challenge of a footy coach trying to reduce injuries. No footy coach wants the players to hurt themselves but neither does a footy coach go out and say to the players, ‘Blokes, the main thing here is that we do not have any injuries at the end of the game.’ A strategy which guarantees zero injuries is also a strategy that will earn you the wooden spoon. We should be rigorous in reducing corruption as we go through, and we should do in the global fund as we do in the Australian aid program: try and reduce corruption whenever we can.

A generous foreign aid program is an expression of who we are as Australians. It is also a program that is in our national interest in bringing about a safer region and a region in which there is more trade. Of Australia’s 20 nearest neighbours, 18 are developing countries. So our aid program needs to be a strong one if we are to invest in a richer and safer region. I want to thank my friend and colleague the honourable member for Werriwa for bringing this motion before the House for debate this evening.

Mr TEHAN (Wannon) (8.07 pm)—I rise to talk on this motion, in particular points 1 and 3, which recognise that 24 March is World Tuberculosis Day—an observance of a disease that still claims the lives of 1.7 million people every year. It also acknowledges that the widespread adoption of the new Xpert diagnostic tool, which cuts the time for diagnosis from several weeks to two hours, would lead to significant improvements in the detection and the treatment of tuberculosis.

This year marks the second year of a global two-year campaign by the World Health Organisation called ‘On the move against tuberculosis’. The goal of this campaign is to inspire innovation in tuberculosis research and care. Today I would like to acknowledge the work and
research that has been done on this important topic. Tuberculosis is an airborne infectious disease that is preventable and curable. The World Health Organisation is working to dramatically reduce the burden of tuberculosis and halve tuberculosis deaths and prevalence by 2015. The World Health Organisation is championing the ambitious new objective and targets of the Global Plan to Stop Tuberculosis 2011-15, which involves identifying all the research gaps that need to be filled to bring rapid tuberculosis tests, faster treatment regimes and a fully effective vaccine to market. In addition to this, the global plan shows public health programs how to drive universal access to TB care, including how to modernise diagnostic laboratories and adapt revolutionary TB tests that have recently become available.

TB is a disease of poverty affecting mostly young adults in their most productive years. The vast majority of TB deaths are in the developing world and it is among the three greatest causes of death among women age 15 to 44. More than two billion people around the globe, one-third of the world's total population, are infected with TB bacilli, the microbes that cause TB. One in every 10 of those people will become sick with active TB in his or her lifetime. People living with HIV are at much greater risk. While Australia has one of the lowest rates of tuberculosis in the world, we are not immune and the disease remains a public health problem in our overseas born and Indigenous communities.

In 2008, 1,228 TB notifications were received by both national notifiable diseases surveillance system corresponding to a rate of 5.7 notifications per 100,000 population. In 2007 there were 1,174 notifications or 5.6 per 100,000 population. The notification rate of TB was higher than the national average in the Northern Territory and New South Wales and also in my state of Victoria where the NNDSS reported 7.1 per 100,000 population. As with many infectious diseases, time is of the essence with regard to treating tuberculosis. Whilst TB is an ancient disease, today it is curable and globally we should be working towards zero deaths from TB in the 21st century.

Two major goals that are set regarding the global fight against tuberculosis are the UN Millennium Development Goals and those of the Stop TB Partnership. The UN Millennium Development Goals aim to have halted and begun reverse incidence by 2015 in comparison with 1990. The Stop TB Partnership aims to have halved the deaths by 2015 in comparison with 1990. It is heartening to hear that the Stop TB Department of WHO confirm they are currently on target globally to achieve both the goals set under the UN Millennium Development Goals and those set by the Stop TB Partnership. I wish to acknowledge World Tuberculosis Day on 24 March and express my thoughts and sympathy for those who have lost family or loved ones to tuberculosis.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Ms S Bird)—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.
Debate resumed, on motion by Ms Parke:

That this House:

(1) recognises that:
   (a) there are 650 million people living with disabilities worldwide and that approximately 80 per cent of those people live in developing countries, with 82 per cent of those living below the poverty line on an income of less than US$1.25 per day;
   (b) children and young people can often be the hardest hit by disability, whether because a child has a disability or is caring for an adult with a disability; and
   (c) UNESCO has found that 90 per cent of children with disabilities in developing countries do not attend school;

(2) notes that the Australian Government is:
   (a) committed to implementing changes in Australia’s development assistance designed to deliver better outcomes for people with disabilities, as outlined in the strategy Development for All: Towards a disability-inclusive Australian aid program; and
   (b) already held in high esteem internationally for its leadership in this field and in particular for the human rights-based approach taken to forming the strategy, in accordance with its adoption of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities; and

(3) calls on the Australian Government to consider:
   (a) including the active participation of people with disabilities in its aid policy formulation, as well as incorporating monitoring mechanisms within aid funding to ensure that disability inclusive development is effectively measured; and
   (b) any further ways in which AusAID and the Department of Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade can continue their engagement with Disability-Inclusive Development policy to further strengthen Australia’s commitment to this important cause.

Ms PARKE (Fremantle) (8.12 pm)—In the world today there are over 650 million people living with a disability, which represents a worldwide cohort that is half the population of China, double the population of the United States and 29 times the population of Australia. Eighty percent of the world’s people living with disability are to be found in developing countries and 82 percent of those live below the poverty line on less than US $1.25 per day—a truly shocking statistic.

As the Foreign Minister, Kevin Rudd, notes in his foreword to AusAid’s historic first disability strategy, Development for All: Towards a disability-inclusive Australian aid program 2009-2014, only three to four percent of people with disability are estimated to benefit from international development assistance. These people are among the most disadvantaged on the planet. They suffer enormously, they struggle to survive and they often have little prospect of improving lives that are desperate, impoverished, alienated and characterised by physical and psychological pain.

I bring this matter for consideration as a notice of motion tonight with a view to achieving two things: first, simply to raise awareness of the particular disadvantage faced by people with disability in developing countries. In saying that, of course, my sense of that disadvantage flows from an understanding of the need for improved disability services in this country—and I am glad that that is a priority of this government. The second and more substantial
reason is to support and advocate for a greater focus on disability when it comes to the administra-
tion of Australia’s development aid program.

While it is true to say that a focus on disability already exists within our aid program and while it is important to recognise that our aid agency has now, for the first time, a guiding disability strategy, it is also true that our efforts in this area will need to go wider and further still. That is a view shared by organisations like UNICEF and World Vision.

When it comes to people who face the twin impediments of poverty and disability, it is no surprise that some of the worst and most severe effects are experienced by children. Across the world, some 200 million children live with disability; 90 percent of whom will never attend school. For a child in a developing country, disability is a barrier to education, health, mobility and social inclusion. It is often an insuperable barrier.

UNICEF estimates that 10 percent of South-east Asian young children have some form of disability. In Bangladesh, an ActionAid study of 100,000 children found a prevalence rate of between 13 and 14 percent. UNICEF’s own study, called Educating Children in Different Circumstances, found that only eight percent of these kids were enrolled in school. Only one percent of schools in Bangladesh have the physical capacity to cater for children with disability.

In Pakistan, it is estimated that there are 820,000 school-age children with some form of disability. Only two per cent attend formal or informal schools, which is partly because of cultural and social stigmas that lead parents to feel that disability is a curse or bad fate that has been earned somehow and so it is a condition about which the family and child should be ashamed. In some families, children with disability are actively neglected for this reason.

In addition to those kids who suffer disability, there are a significant number of children whose lives are affected by the disabilities of those around them. The lack of support for people with disability means that children with disabled brothers or sisters can find that their needs are not properly met. The unleavened burden of disability takes its toll on the whole family unit, and in many cases it will be the children whose health and life prospects are irretrievably damaged.

Children living in communities where, through conflict or war or extreme poverty, there are large numbers of people with disability can find themselves forced out of school and into work, and this will almost always be the case with children of disabled parents. In such circumstances, children as young as five or six can be forced to live an adult life, with all the harsh consequences that this brings in terms of safety and physical hardship, and with all the deprivations that it involves in terms of losing one’s childhood, losing the protective cocoon of the home environment and losing the enabling force that is education. Children in this situation experience a severe impact on their social, mental, educational and physical development, and it tends to be an impact that echoes through the rest of their lives.

The International Labour Organisation estimates 386 million people with disability are of working age. Many are prevented from working through the absence of appropriate support programs. Yet, with the provision of relevant training and workplace opportunities, they would be able to earn an income and be productive members of their communities. This is an example of the ballooning positive impact that is made possible by removing the barriers that disability represents.
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I want to take this opportunity to draw members’ attention to the particular case of people with disability who also suffer from HIV-AIDS. People with disability in the developing world are especially vulnerable to HIV infection, which is a compounding of misery that seems about as hard and terrible and unfair as things get. World Vision is doing a lot of important work in this area, and I would suggest that those interested in this issue look at a video called The voice of 650 million times one, which shows clearly how programs to tackle HIV and AIDS are not sufficiently accessible or inclusive of people with disability.

I am proud to be part of a government that has not only committed to expanding our development aid assistance but that has also created a new aid strategy that targets funding towards people with disability. The Development for All strategy administered by AusAID now seeks to direct aid in a manner that will best help disabled recipients by directly funding the treatment of curable and preventable illnesses that can lead to disability, as well as by funding infrastructure and educational programs designed to equip people with the items and knowledge they need to live safe, healthy lives, and lives that are as unencumbered by disability as possible.

We should remember that Australia was one of the first nations in the world to ratify the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. In 2008 we further confirmed our commitment to a human rights based approach to disability through both government initiatives and the work of the Australian Human Rights Commission. In that way, we acknowledge that each and every person has the same fundamental rights, that people with disabilities sometimes require assistance to have their rights fulfilled and that it is very much the role of government to ensure that they receive that assistance.

The Australian Disability and Development Consortium has welcomed this government’s move towards a development assistance program that is designed to include consideration of people with disability and to directly address their needs as a matter of human rights, as a matter of good global citizenship and as a matter of common sense. Some of the identified priorities to be pursued in the medium term include: a greater focus on assistance that increases access and inclusion when it comes to education, especially in the Asia and Pacific regions; an emphasis on participation by people with disability in sector policy dialogues and in program design; the inclusion in general aid effectiveness monitoring mechanisms of specific disability support indicators; and a review of emergency response and assistance programs to ensure that the special needs of people with disability are properly accounted for in the aftermath of emergencies and natural disasters.

These are only some of a range of well-considered objectives, and I am sure all members would recognise that the last one I mentioned seems particularly important in the context of the events both here and around the world in the first three months of 2011.

As we pursue these imperatives through our own programs we of course acknowledge that organisations such as Oxfam, UNICEF, World Vision, Handicap International, the Atlas Alliance and the Swedish Organisations of Disabled Persons are likely to be important partners of government through their expertise and experience in helping people with disability in the developing world.

As I have said before, and as I will continue saying, Australians are rightly proud of our foreign aid commitments and of our move to increase aid to 0.5 per cent of GNI by 2015-16.
Our provision of development aid assistance is entirely consonant with our belief in a fair go for everyone, and with our character as an outward looking, compassionate people.

It would be an improvement to the future administration of Australian development assistance if consideration of people with disability was a more deeply pro forma part of assessing and delivering our aid program. That is why we are on that path, which is the most important thing, and I congratulate both the current and former Foreign Ministers and their parliamentary secretaries on their work in setting us on that path.

Mr ALEXANDER (Bennelong) (8.21 pm)—I rise to speak in support of the motion moved by the honourable member for Fremantle. We have to recognise how far we have yet to go to reach the standards of efficiency in our aid delivery that is expected by our constituency. It is perhaps fitting that this motion is being debated on 21 March, which is Harmony Day. The value of Harmony Day is not only relevant to our diverse electorate here in Australia but also gives us the opportunity to look outside our own borders to those less fortunate.

As a prosperous nation, Australia takes its commitment to foreign aid very seriously. That is why both the coalition and the government have committed to increasing foreign aid spending to 0.5 per cent of our gross national income by 2015-16. However, the ever-present record of wasteful spending by this government gives us great concern, as it is essential for us to ensure that taxpayer money is delivered in the most effective way possible.

There are several strategies to deliver effective aid. In recent discussions with the Ambassador for the Republic of Korea, I have been informed that his country chooses to deliver their aid directly by actually implementing the program themselves, not through just giving money in the expectation that it will reach the right place. This is a form of direct action, if you will. A recent report by the Centre for Global Development entitled Quality of official development assistance assessment ranked Australia 21st out of 31 developed nations in the efficiency of our foreign aid programs. It is clear that these programs must include detailed plans which target aid initiatives where they are most needed and have strict controls to ensure that the money is actually reaching the intended targets.

While an increase in our aid commitment will make general progress towards the Millennium Development Goals, it is vital that we look beyond this to ensure our aid will be focused on the most underprivileged segments of society in developing nations, namely those with a disability. The heavily stratified societies often evident in developing nations only serve to compound the hopelessness faced by those living with a disability in these countries. Poverty is an issue for many across the developing world, but social marginalisation exacerbates the effects of poverty as the ability of a person with a disability to help themselves is often severely constrained.

It is generally recognised that education is the single most important factor in alleviating the effects of poverty in the long term. According to UNICEF, 90 per cent of children with a disability in the developing world are not getting an education. AusAID’s report Development for all: towards a disability-inclusive Australian aid program 2009-2014 correctly suggests that it is imperative for our aid program to tackle this problem as part of our aid program’s specific focus on disability inclusive development.

The determination is to ensure that our aid which is directed towards assisting those living with a disability in developing nations is in line with our obligations under the international
Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. The right to live life by acceptable standards has been further highlighted by the recent announcement of the National Disability Strategy by the Council of Australian Governments.

However, one must question this particular government’s ability to deliver on the goals set out in this strategy. It is therefore essential that whilst we ensure special strategies are developed to create a disability inclusive aid program, we do not forget that the compound social disadvantages for those with a disability are not exclusively limited to developing nations. Here in Australia people with a disability continue to be amongst the most vulnerable. This is despite the many support programs in place, the inroads made in relation to antidiscrimination practices and a general understanding of an inclusive society.

Though Australian society does not face the same issues of poverty present in the developing world, social exclusion and marginalisation are still problems for Australians with disabilities, and that must be dealt with. The coalition has welcomed the findings of the Productivity Commission’s February report, which made clear the urgent need for reform of the existing system of disability support, with bureaucratic red tape leading to people with a disability and their carers slipping through the cracks and not getting the fair go they deserve. By continuing to improve the circumstances of people living with a disability in Australia we can lead by example in encouraging and assisting developing nations to do the same.

In the electorate of Bennelong there are many disability service organisations that are committed to ensuring that those living with a disability have the opportunity to fully participate in our society, despite the challenges presented by circumstance and policy administration. The Harmony Day lunch that I will be hosting in my electorate office on Friday will include representatives from local ethnic groups, members from groups such as the National Epilepsy Association, and service providers to disadvantaged and infirm members of our community.

Celebrating diversity is not just about cultural diversity; it is also about making sure that everyone belongs, regardless of their ability. As I expressed in this place during the last sitting period, I reiterate my strong commitment to support the work of all of Bennelong’s hardworking disability service organisations and hope their great efforts can serve as inspiration for the lofty goals we have for a strong and effective disability inclusive foreign aid program.

Mr NEUMANN (Blair) (8.28 pm)—I heard the member for Bennelong talking about perceived, alleged Labor government waste. I want to tell him this: under the Howard government profligate spending was rampant. John Howard never found a middle class welfare rort he did not want to fund. We have made $83.6 billion in savings in the last three years—far more than the Howard government ever made. Yet those opposite spend most of their time in the red chamber trying to knock off our savings measures. And they come into this place and have the gall to make statements like those of the member for Bennelong!

When Paralympian Kurt Fearnley crawled onto an airline flight in 2009 after refusing to be pushed around in an airline wheelchair, all Australians shuddered. Kurt had just crawled the Kokoda Track and earlier had won his fourth New York wheelchair marathon. I applaud the member for Fremantle for moving this disability inclusive development aid motion and speaking in support of it. Kurt Fearnley demonstrated to us that people living with disabilities can determine what they need and what services should be delivered to them. And domestically the federal Labor government has shown its commitment to antidiscrimination against those
suffering from disability by the legislative law reforms we have undertaken and by our commit-
tment to support disability support pensioners and their carers with massive increases in the
pension and through secure and sustainable redevelopment of the pension. Our commitment
to carers, carer payments and carer allowance is exemplary and it is far more than those oppo-
site ever did during their many years of tenure on the Treasury benches.

This motion recognises the importance of active participation by people with disability in
the formulation of policy and the monitoring of funding. The federal Labor government is
committed to ensuring that people with disability have the opportunity to reach their full po-
tential as equal citizens and not just objects of charity, which was how they were so often
thought of by the Howard coalition government. Just this week the Minister for Families,
Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs launched the National Disability Strat-
egy, a 10-year national plan. Those opposite never had the wit nor the wisdom to do such a
thing. It is a plan to improve the lives of Australians with disability, their families and their
carers. This is a particularly significant undertaking, done in partnership with the states and
territories under COAG. The strategy acknowledges that successful implementation requires
collaboration with people with disability. That is what is happening here in Australia.

The World Health Organisation tells us that 10 per cent of the world’s population is living
with a disability, and 80 per cent of those are living in developing countries—many in our
neighbourhood, in the Pacific rim and in South-East Asia. Southern Asia is the world’s second
most populous region and the World Health Organisation estimates that about 140 million
people of all ages in this region are living with a disability. Thirty per cent or 42 million of
those are children. High levels of illiteracy, gender disparity and inequality, poverty and child
labour may define the socio-economic context of the region and also contribute to the risk of
disabilities.

In South Asia large numbers of children with disability, who struggle daily with additional
hardships, are not getting the chance to improve their lives through education. They are the
world’s largest marginalised group. In 2008 the federal Labor government ratified the UN
Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disability, formally ratifying our inherent belief
that people with disabilities are entitled to have the same rights as many others and are citi-
zens, not objects of charity.

All people, including children, deserve the right to full participation in the community. The
devastation recently experienced in my home state of Queensland and in Christchurch in New
Zealand, and which was climaxed in our thinking in the Japanese earthquake, tsunami and
nuclear threat, highlights the timeliness of this motion, and I commend the member for bring-
ing it. Past experience demonstrates that people with disability are more likely to be left be-
hind or abandoned during evacuation in disasters and conflicts. We saw that in Hurricane
Katrina in New Orleans in the United States.

During the Pakistan floods in 2010, 20 million people were affected, killing 1750 and sub-
merging an area larger than the UK. In Australia and New Zealand during the recent crises
local governments responded to communities without essential services. However, from time
to time we even saw people with disability unable to use the portaloos. It is important for
AusAID and the Departments of Foreign Affairs and Trade and Defence to continue their en-
gagement with disability-inclusive development policy, particularly when you consider the
work that goes on internationally during disasters and conflicts. I commend the member for
Mr WYATT (Hasluck) (8.33 pm)—I want to compliment the member for Fremantle for putting forward this motion. It has always been my belief that our commitment in aid, particularly in the areas of health, and in this particular field, are significant in the contribution that we make. I know that we often agree to the rights of individuals—we sign conventions—but the thing that needs to follow in this process is consideration of humanity and compassion in the way that we implement programs and put them into place.

I recently had a unique experience in Hasluck, where I have established a disability and carers advisory group that comprises carers and people who are experiencing difficulties. But let me say that without the health and allied health industries and agencies found in developed countries such as Australia, the plight of the disabled in developing countries is fairly dire. It is problematic because they do not have access to the level of skills and the types of supports that are needed.

Let me just share with you some of the things that I have discovered in my journey, which I think would be compounded significantly in countries that experience third-world conditions or who do not have access to the same things that we do. What was said to me was, ‘We agree that children and young people are hit with disabilities but the hardest hit are the mothers—the carers who look after children.’ I suspect that that is compounded in Third World countries or countries that we provide aid to.

Seventy-five per cent of marriages disintegrate, and men walk away for their responsibility of caring for children. Again, I think this problem would be compounded in countries that the member for Fremantle alluded to in her address. Post-school options for disabled children in Australia are dire to nonexistent in many parts. The young disabled men and women of Australia are sitting at home alone and isolated. Their parents do not know where to turn for help. That was the very clear message that came out in a First World country. I would suspect that the issue in any nation that we support would be much more dire than that.

I also heard some clear messages about accommodation options. Independent and supported accommodation options are few and far between. The consequences of having no accommodation options for carers is that elderly parents look after their children until they themselves die. The other message I heard clearly from parents and caregivers was: ‘What happens to the person I am caring for when I die?’ If we have this dilemma in this country, then, again, it would be compounded in the countries that we provide aid to, where there are no systems that provides that level of support and comfort. I think in our own backyard we are hearing some of those very significant messages.

Once they become an adult, disabled children are often lumped in the 16 to 65 age group; their individual needs are not addressed. Carers are isolated and lack support from agencies in the community. Respite care is expensive and difficult to arrange. With their lives as tough as they are, carers have the added burden of having to negotiate ridiculous red tape and bureaucracy. At least we are fortunate enough in this country to have that opportunity, although it is not favourable in terms of the challenges that the families face. I would hope that our aid is going to the process of implementation. Not the broad ranging establishment of a program but the way in which it counts for any child or any adult who has a disability that is affected, because the figures that the member for Fremantle mentioned are horrendous. The aid that is
often provided from a number of countries is not sufficient to meet needs. Again, we have that same situation in our own country, so there is a compounding effect for anyone living in a country where you do not have access to the types of supports that prevail here.

The other thing that is challenging is that you can often be lost within systems. If people get lost within a system such as ours, then I suspect the figures that you provide are only indicative—they are not the true figures for children in countries that we provide aid to who experience disabilities. I commend the member for putting forward this motion and I support it. Thank you.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Ms S Bird)—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.

GRIEVANCE DEBATE

Debate resumed from 28 February.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Ms S Bird)—The question is:
That grievances be noted.

Grandparent Carers

Mr RANDALL (Canning) (8.38 pm)—This evening in the grievance debate I grieve for grandparents who are carers. I grieve for grandparents who are carers because they are in a special category in Australia. I have spoken about this issue in the House before and it is an issue that I want to see dealt with, not given passing reference to by decision makers both at a state and federal level.

To put it in context, there are foster parents, there are grandparents who care for their grandchildren, and there are grandparents who care for their grandchildren without any formal arrangement. Foster parents are a group of people who in this community are held in high regard. They take it upon themselves to take into their house so many children that are in need of care and help, for whatever reason—they have been abandoned and they need somebody and a good home to give them the guidance and love that they deserve.

In a media release by Robyn McSweeney, the WA Minister for Child Protection; Community Services; Seniors; Volunteering, Women’s’ Interest; and Youth on 2 March this year, the minister calls on the community help to increase foster care numbers. In the launch in Joondalup she talked about the need for increased foster parents.

In a media release by the minister Robyn McSweeney, the WA Minister for Child Protection; Community Services; Seniors; Volunteering, Women’s’ Interest; and Youth on March 2 this year, the minister calls on the community help to increase foster care numbers. In the launch in Joondalup she talked about the need for increased foster parents.

“As at January 31 this year, there were 3,529 children in care,” Mrs McSweeney said.

“We have 2,539 registered carer households and, while we are grateful contributions and commitment, the reality is we need more foster carers.”

That is fine, but can I tell you that we have a real crisis in this country, because so many children end up as the responsibility of their grandparents. This happens for a number of reasons. This can happen for a reason such as the parents are killed in a car accident or just go missing, but usually it is through drugs. It is because of drugs that parents abandon their children and
hand them over to their parents, the children’s grandparents. The sad part about this is that I have had a number of people in my electorate come to me and talk to me about the state of these children when they receive them. They are dishevelled, they have not been to school, they have nits in their hair to the extent that they are burrowing into their skulls and their skulls are bleeding.

These grandparents, who are wishing to retire and most of them pensioners, are obliged to take on their grandchildren. It is not something they do lightly, because at their age and stage of life, they do not have the resources and they do not have the facilities, the accommodation, to take on the children of their children and to give them the care and the nurturing that they should receive.

I praise foster parents for doing what they do, but foster parents have a walk-up start compared to grandparents. They receive a huge amount of funding in terms of new school uniforms, school excursions, costs associated with care, and a whole range of costs that the state government quite rightly should give them. I raised this issue interest in the government party room during the Howard government era, because it was brought to my attention by one of my constituents in Pinjarra called Margaret Saunders, who had her children delivered to her by her daughter, who was a drug dependant person and whose partner was the same. She was not of pensionable age, and she was required to seek work. The commonwealth on that occasion needed to say to this grandparent, ‘You do not need to seek work because your full time occupation is these children—to bring them up and to care for them.’

It took a fair bit of doing—I had the support of John Howard and I had the support of Joe Hockey at that stage—to see that the Commonwealth, on a case by case basis, looked at the grandparents involved and said, ‘Look, your primary responsibility with the money that is coming into you is such that you shouldn’t be looking for work; you should be taking the primary care of these children.’

I am raising this issue tonight because the same minister, Robyn McSweeney, who I have a great deal of time for—she is a member of the coalition in Western Australia and I have taken grandparents to meet with her—has put out a press release, saying:

Child Protection Minister Robyn McSweeney today announced $1,000 in financial assistance per child to foster grandparents looking after grandchildren, following … assessment plan.

The problem I have with that is that most of the grandparents that end up with grandchildren do not have a formal arrangement from the Department of Child Protection. You would ask: ‘Why?’

Guess what? Quite often these dysfunctional parents—and as I said, many of them drug dependent—will not hand over formal assignment through the courts to the grandparent. Why? Because they want the child support payments and they want family tax benefit and all the things that go with having a child. They want everything that comes with the child except the child. The sad reality is that they will not hand them over. They take them back on the odd occasion to qualify for these entitlements, but the grandparent ends up with the child and has to pay school fees and the ongoing costs of raising them: food, care, health care and everything else that goes with it.

I am disappointed because, as I said, people in my electorate, like Margaret Saunders of Pinjarra, Betty Fairfowl of Park Ridge and others have come to me and said, ‘We can’t cope
any longer, because we are not getting any support.’ They are having to sell their houses, if they have a house. They are having to shift into smaller accommodation. This is wrong. This ‘one-off payment’ announced by the minister is not sufficient. Please give them the same status as foster parents. Please make sure that they get the same funding and entitlements as foster parents. It is just not right. What is better: a foster home or the home of a blood relative; a blood relative that has the care and love of the grandchild or a foster home which has a lot of care but not same blood relationship and attachment?

Grandparents are eligible for this ‘establishment payment’. This payment will apply to children placed with their grandparents by the Department of Child Protection from 1 January 2011. The fact is that $1,000 is not sufficient, even for those who qualify. But because they are not assigned by the courts and because there is not a formal relationship, so many people fall through the cracks. Centrelink estimated that in Western Australia there were approximately 2,500 to 3,000 grandparent carers in 2010. WA is 10 per cent of the population. A Current Affair some years ago estimated there were at least 30,000 grandparents around Australia in the same predicament.

There are a whole lot of organisations involved in this. The national grandparents support group is Grandparents Australia. In WA there is Grandcare, which is a subset of Wanslea Family Services; Grandparents Support Groups Referral Service; and Grandpower for Grandkids. Can we show some leadership in this parliament and try, through the COAG process or whatever means we have with the state governments—because it is in the state jurisdiction—to get on with giving grandparents the entitlements that foster parents have to look after the grandchildren that they end up with? Quite often they want to move on with their own lives but because they are their flesh and blood they are willing to take on this huge responsibility of bringing up their grandchildren. I grieve for grandparents like Margaret and Betty and others in my electorate and I ask that we get all the support that we can to help them through this very serious time of raising young children who have come from dysfunctional homes to give them the care and love that they deserve.

Nuclear Energy

Mr BANDT (Melbourne) (8.48 pm)—The debate on nuclear power in this country is now over. The recent terrible events in Japan and the ongoing emergency at the Fukushima nuclear power plant have shown very clearly the dangers of nuclear energy and why we should not go down this path in our country. It should silence once and for all those who seek to take Australia down the road into this dangerous and threatening future.

The idea that we should be the world’s biggest supplier—and then recipient—of nuclear fuel must also now be taken off the agenda. Around the world, even before this disaster, the nuclear industry was in decline, desperately trying to find new markets and trying to use climate change to justify its continued existence. Now we are being forced again to confront the dangers of nuclear power and learn the lessons. We did not learn the lessons of Three Mile Island. We did not learn the lessons of Chernobyl. Now we must learn the lessons of Fukushima and say, ‘Enough!’

The Australian public, it seems, have taken heed of the dangers. An Essential Media poll released this week gives a clear picture of what the Australian people think about nuclear power. The poll found that 53 per cent oppose Australia developing nuclear power plants for
the generation of electricity. That is a considerable shift in opinion since this question was last asked in December 2010.

We should not underestimate the danger of the present situation. Frank von Hippel, a nuclear physicist from Princeton University, said of Fukushima:

‘This is definitely in the Chernobyl league now. If the reactors go, that’s bad, of course. But the real concern at this point is if those … spent-fuel pools catch fire. There are many Chernobyls’ worth of radioactive material in there.’

Right now, emergency workers in Japan continue frantically to try to bring the situation at Fukushima under control. I hope, and I am sure every member in this place does too, that this work is successful. The International Atomic Energy Agency, the IAEA, say there is reason for hope. They say:

There have been some positive developments in the last 24 hours, but the overall situation at the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant remains very serious.

Efforts to restore electrical power to the site continue. Off-site electrical power has been connected to the local substation for Unit 2 … Work is continuing under difficult conditions to connect power from the substation to the reactor building.

Regardless of the success or failure of these heroic workers to bring us back from the brink of catastrophe, it is now absolutely clear that the risks of nuclear power are just too great for us in Australia to go down this path. Already in Japan the impact is enormous, with hundreds of thousands of people evacuated; the workers exposed to high levels of radiation; and traces of radioactivity found in water, milk and spinach. Japan’s exports of food are being affected. And this is no doubt just the beginning, because, even in the unlikely event that no more radioactive material is released, there will be enormous economic and social costs to stabilisation and, it seems, the inevitable mothballing of these reactors.

This nuclear disaster also throws into question Australia’s continued exports of uranium, which are used to fuel these dangerous nuclear power plants in our region, including in Japan. That is right: Australia exports uranium to Japan. In fact, TEPCO, the company that operates the Fukushima reactors, buys and burns Australian uranium in its reactors. It may be—although we do not know for sure—that Australian uranium fuelled some or part of the reactors in Fukushima. We need to take the opportunity, while our focus is on Japan, to review again Australia’s role in this industry. Uranium mining fuels an industry that is expensive, dangerous and toxic. While the rest of the world is turning away from nuclear power, the Australian mining industry is trying to shovel as much as it can out the door before the world changes direction.

It is worth looking at what nuclear advocates for in this place have said about nuclear power and the nuclear industry. Here, less than three weeks ago, members of the Labor and coalition parties were lining up to spruik nuclear power. That was during the recent debate on the Muckaty nuclear waste dump bill. A number of members expressed very frightening, unequivocal support for nuclear power. The member for Canning had this to say:

Three Mile Island and Chernobyl happened decades ago. When people want to talk about them, remember that comparing those archaic facilities at Three Mile Island and Chernobyl with nuclear facilities today is akin to comparing an FJ Holden to a Lamborghini. They were FJ Holdens, and they broke up and fell apart, but nothing in any way like that has happened since. The modern nuclear reactor today delivers clean, unpolluted power. The Greens will say, ‘Shock, horror—nuclear power!’…
He was backed up by the member for Kooyong, who said:

Decades of experience since the explosions at Chernobyl and Three Mile Island indicate that reactors are inherently safer too.

The Labor member for Lyons got into the line-up as well. He said:

New generations are coming to understand that, as we look at the need for a low-carbon future, we certainly have to have a debate on nuclear energy.

The only reason we have not had to do this in Australia is that nuclear is still very expensive compared to other power sources, such as coal. But there may be a day when we will have to consider it—and that day is getting closer all the time.

The member for Mitchell then accurately claimed:

The list goes on and on.

But where are those members now? What has happened to their irresponsible advocacy of nuclear power? Are they going to continue to claim against all the evidence that nuclear power is safe? Are they going to continue to push for its adoption in Australia? Will they look voters in the face at the next election and say, ‘I want a nuclear power station in your electorate’? In the middle of Tasmania? In Hawthorn or Kew? I doubt it. These wild statements in support of nuclear power were made in the context of the debate on the government nuclear waste dump legislation, as I say, less than three weeks ago.

The risks and safety of nuclear waste have been highlighted again by the dangers of the spent fuel rods at the Fukushima nuclear plant. While the waste intended to be stored at the Muckaty nuclear waste dump in the Northern Territory is of a much smaller volume than those fuel rods, it reinforces the importance of honestly facing the risks to the people and the environment of the Northern Territory from the dump. The dump will house processed spent fuel from Australia’s Lucas Heights reactor as well as other radioactive material, and it is opposed by the traditional owners. The bill to put in place the dump has passed the House of Representatives but not yet the other place, and that gives this parliament and the government another opportunity to look again at the dangers from the dump in light of the events in Japan.

The nuclear dump is dangerous and unnecessary. The nuclear dump is opposed by the traditional owners. The dump is being rammed through the parliament against the wishes of Territorians. We have been reminded again of the dangers inherent in the nuclear industry. We should learn the lessons of Fukushima. We should end Australia’s involvement in this dangerous cycle of mining, radiation, weapons and waste, and make the rejection of the Muckaty bill the first step away from a nuclear future. The government should now go back to the drawing board. Angela Merkel, Germany’s Chancellor, is said to have reflected on the recent events in Japan and stated:

We cannot continue business as usual … the only honest answer is a forced and accelerated path into the era of renewables.

Likewise, now is the time to commit Australia to a safe energy future.

**Battle of Long Tan Awards**

Mr NEVILLE (Hinkler) (8.57 pm)—On 9 March I had the extraordinary honour of presenting Battle of Long Tan veteran Lieutenant Colonel Harry Smith with his Star of Gallantry
award at the Maryborough Military Museum. It is thought around 400 people attended the ceremony, including VC winners Keith Payne and Corporal Ben Roberts-Smith, who along with the crowd were there to pay tribute to Harry and his men and their extraordinary victory—the one they secured at Long Tan back in August 1966.

One might ask: why would the federal member present a national war hero with his award and not the Governor-General? The question is worth asking because it reveals a trail of inexperience, stubbornness and frustration leading from 1966 right up to today. Let me state, however, that the chain of circumstance is no reflection on the Governor-General, as Harry Smith will confirm and, indeed, conveyed to her. It was of a protest that he was talking.

You would be aware of the historic Battle of Long Tan on 18 August 1966, but you may not be aware of the surrounding furore that met the awards that should have been granted from that battle. I would wager few would know the difficulties surrounding the presentation of the awards which have been approved, including that of Lieutenant Colonel Harry Smith. The matter has dragged on for a number of years following a review by the Honours and Awards Appeal Tribunal in 2008 which reinstated the original award, a DSO, recommended to Lieutenant Colonel Smith. At the time of the battle he was Major Smith.

At Maryborough he received the DSO equivalent, the Star of Gallantry, second only to the Victoria Cross. Upgraded with him—although both were not presented on the day—were Dave Sabben and Geoff Kendall, who were awarded the Medal of Gallantry, the equivalent of the old Military Cross. However, 12 other men from D Company did not receive their gallantry awards or upgraded awards, those being three medals for gallantry and nine recommendations for gallantry. To that point, this group had only received two MIDs.

The battle commander’s recommendation—that being Smith’s recommendation—and the end-of-war review disregarded them on the basis of alleged lost paperwork. This is something that Harry Smith and I want to see reconsidered. It is something that I have spoken about before. There is ample evidence from other sources to see this injustice corrected.

Lieutenant Colonel Smith, having had his original award reinstated, agreed that it would be appropriate for the Governor-General to present this Star of Gallantry and the two medals for gallantry to Lieutenants Kendall and Sabben and also a D Company unit citation at a ceremony at Governor House on 17 August last year. As is right and proper, Lieutenant Colonel Smith requested that with the surviving men of D Company—after all it was their citation—some of their family members and the next of kin of those killed in the battle attend the investiture. Here is where it becomes quite distressing, especially for those who planned to attend the ceremony. The Department of Defence rejected a request as to the costs associated with the transportation to Canberra of the families and of the next of kin of those killed. Defence agreed to fund the transport costs of the officers but refused to provide mainly service transport for some of the 80 survivors and 23 next of kin to be present for the citation presentation.

Let me balance that with a report in today’s Courier-Mail which outlines some of the expenses racked up by the Department of Defence between July and December last year. The Courier-Mail states that more than $400,000 was spent on dinners and receptions in Australia and a further $361,000 was spent on overseas hospitality in that six-month period. Included in those costs were $7,900 on gifts, $5,000 on childminding and $2,000 on club memberships. I understand the way of the world and I know that these costs are part and parcel of doing business at the diplomatic and military levels. I am not going to be mealymouthed and take a
populist view in criticising individual items of spending, but I make the point that I cannot fathom why a commensurate degree of hospitality and courtesy could not be extended to the heroes of Long Tan and their loved ones.

After all, these are the men who fought and won at Long Tan. It is their victory which marks our national day. Long Tan Day is their day and they are the ones who won that victory, and many of their comrades died in that Vietnam war achieving that victory. Yet the defence department could not extend itself to transport these men and these families and the next of kin of those who died in Vietnam to Canberra for the event. Just how fair dinkum are we?

Let me go over the circumstances for you again, Mr Deputy Speaker. On that dreadful day in August 1966, 105 Australians and three New Zealanders faced a force of at least 2½ thousand North Vietnamese. It was in a way a chance encounter. Intelligence said that there was the 5th Division of the North Vietnamese army, a force of about 5,000, somewhere in the area. But this was largely disregarded by headquarters, in fact so much so that B Company was sent on leave about that time. What we have subsequently found out is that the Australian base at Nui Dat, which on that afternoon was to have a concert with Col Joye and Little Pattie, was the target. Had it not been for Smith and his 108 colleagues, God only knows what would have happened on that day. I ask honourable members to think about what might have happened, about what a bloodbath could have occurred. By contrast, Smith was there, right up in the rubber plantation, lying flat down in the mud, in three or four inches of water, with his New Zealand artillery officer, Morrie Stanley, calling down 3,500 rounds of artillery into the rubber plantation in front of them. They were fighting 15 metres from the enemy and they fought off 2½ thousand of them. It was one of Australia’s most glorious victories. Let me say to you, Mr Deputy Speaker, we should not go to a memorial on Long Tan Day and put our hands on our hearts unless we do due honour to these men. I will not rest until those 12 men, who have yet to be honoured, are honoured.

Deakin Electorate: Ringwood Aquatic Centre

Mr SYMON (Deakin) (9.05 pm)—I rise in this grievance debate to talk about the Ringwood Aquatic Centre, which I spoke about in this House back on 28 February this year. My grievance at the time was with Maroondah City Council and their decision to close the pool from 31 May. It gives me great pleasure to be able to relate to the House that this decision has now been changed. The closure date will now be the end of October. This is very important for all the local user groups, the many thousands of people who use the pool every week. It has been greeted locally with a great deal of relief. The pending closure of the pool was part of a wider plan to build a brand-new pool in 2010, a plan that did not go ahead. Unfortunately, the closure date of the pool was not then pushed out.

What we have in Ringwood now is an indoor pool that is in a usable state today that was due for closure on 31 May even though it was still quite usable. As I said, that date has now been pushed out, and that is a good thing for not only the user groups but all the residents of Maroondah and surrounding municipalities because it is such a well-used pool. There are not many indoor 50-metre pools in the eastern suburbs of Melbourne anymore. It is used right throughout the year. Because of the change of heart by the council, they are now going to take it to a meeting on 28 March. The public consultation, which was the part that was missing prior to this, is going to happen in May. I believe that we will be able to have a very good outcome for the citizens of Maroondah, which is part of my electorate of Deakin.
As I have said before in this place, local facilities such as that are vital to keeping a community together. It might be something as simple as parents taking their kids for swimming lessons on a Saturday morning or it might be older children or adults in training for diving or for the state swimming championships who can do it locally. If they cannot do it at a local pool, the next closest indoor 50-metre pool is not in the City of Maroondah. It is across into the City of Whitehorse or it is out in the City of Knox. Each of them is a distance of many kilometres away and usually those facilities are fully booked. You cannot just turn up and say, ‘I would like a lane to practise swimming in.’ That is not so easy. I congratulate Maroondah City Council on their change of mind about keeping the pool running for longer than it was originally scheduled to. I am sure that will give user groups, members of the public and the council itself more time to think about how best to use this wonderful facility that we have in Ringwood.

Migration
Multiculturalism
Carbon Pricing

Mr SIMPKINS (Cowan) (9.09 pm)—As all our federal members would know, we are often approached by constituents. It is gratifying when you are out and about in the community that people just come up and speak to you about things. It might be on a federal issue, but it is also on state and local government matters, and of course we will always try our best to do what we can there. I will take this opportunity tonight, because I told many of my constituents I would, to speak about the three federal matters that are particularly pressing in Cowan. They are border control, multiculturalism and the Prime Minister’s carbon tax. These matters have all been raised with me by my constituents in recent months through emails and phone calls and in conversations that I have had with them.

Australia is a tolerant country. If someone wants to come here the right way and for the right reasons they are welcome. If someone wants to apply for a visa, through one of our diplomatic posts or through the normal channels for humanitarian program entry, Australians really do not have a problem with that. I really think it is that simple. If Australians objected to someone coming here because of the colour of their skin, their race or their religion that would be racist. But there is a big difference between objection on that basis and objection to those who seek to bypass the proper channels for application and who seek to get here at the cost of those who are still behind the fences in refugee camps elsewhere in the world.

So when my constituents come to see me and express their concerns about the boats, they first start by saying—and this is pretty much every time—‘I am not racist, but—’. I reassure them that from what they say they are not racist. Just because you object to people who do not apply properly for entry to this country does not make you a racist. It may serve the interests of so-called refugee advocate groups and various other bodies, whose agendas are clearly political and who are funded by governments around this country, to use the term ‘racism’, but in reality they use such terms to try to marginalise the debate. They use terms such as ‘bigotry’ or ‘Islamophobia’ or ‘racism’ to try to silence their opponents and to make them feel bad for even questioning the position of these advocacy groups.

When we see the scenes from Christmas Island, there are several points that the majority of Australians make, and I have heard them all too clearly in Cowan. They say, ‘You have come
by boat when you could have stopped on the long route in another country and then applied from that country for entry into Australia.’ They say, ‘You have had the money to bypass legitimate processes. You do not wait for entry like others do but seek to promote yourselves in the queue. You take advantage of the softer policies of this government. Not only do you do these things but when you are here, after so many of you have concealed your identities by disposing of your identity papers, you then object to the time it takes to process you. You riot and destroy property as well as attack the staff. At the same time, you are provided with comfortable accommodation—a gym, unrestricted internet access, three square meals a day, and all of these at taxpayers’ expense.’

This is the summary of the points raised by my constituents. It is of little surprise that there is outrage in the community regarding both the boats and the actions of those who have rioted on Christmas Island. It is clear that the people I have spoken to—and I am certain that they are in the majority—want to see a genuine commitment to prosecution of these people and, of course, deportation at the first appropriate opportunity. I do not believe that in the rightful pursuit of accountability that any person in this country should be called a racist, bigot or other such term that questions their motives in wanting to see the laws of this country upheld. I applaud them instead for their courage in the face of denigration and name-calling that vocal minorities always resort to when faced with the outrage that has built over the last few years.

The second point relates to multiculturalism, yet it also relates to the same sorts of issues that I previously spoke of. To explain the differences between cultures we know that there are nationalities and religions; in overall terms these represent cultural differences. Unfortunately, there has been a tendency in this country to promote and advance minority cultures and an attempt by some to ensure that we cannot be accused of racism et cetera. Indeed, it appears that if you represent some cultures, you get funded and your culture gets promoted. In contrast, if you represent a Christian organisation—either Western or Orthodox Eastern churches—your culture rarely gets a look in. Government funded offices and organisations to do with multiculturalism seem fascinated with non-English-speaking and, most of all, non-Christian cultures. It seems to be out of fashion these days to promote the achievements of the last 223 years but instead to be ashamed of the very essence of this nation that made it the country that has attracted so many immigrants in the last 100 years.

I make the point that the majority culture of this country has been an overwhelming success—so totally successful that people want to come here from so many other countries around the world. We should not lose sight of the fact that those who seek to come to Australia have clearly made the decision that there is something about this country that is more appealing than their previous country. We should remember that. It may be our moderate climate. That might be true, but I suspect that it is more about the strong democracy, the standard of education and the safety of our society resulting from its system of secular laws and, of course, the equality of men and women. These are not matters that are merely interpretations of circumstances here; they are realities that are the pillars of the majority culture of Australia. My point here is: if this country and its majority culture are so bad, why do people want to come here? The answer is that they come because the benefits of this nation and its culture are something to be desired and we should always strive to keep it that way.

I have always made the point to my constituents that if a person or a family want to come to live in Australia they should firstly apply properly, as so many have done before them.
Then they must have respect for the values and institutions of our society that have made this country the great success it is today. Finally, they should work to look after themselves and their families, seek nothing more than the occasional hand-up from the taxpayer and never a handout. And if they do these things they are welcome regardless of colour of skin or the religion they follow.

What no-one should do, whether immigrant, visitor or resident, is seek to change this country and emulate the country they wanted to leave. I see no point in trying to re-create any place that people wanted to leave. I see no point in trying to establish laws that are based on religion when this country has succeeded brilliantly without them.

The final matter I want to refer to is the carbon tax, that which the Prime Minister ruled out in the election campaign, so clearly and so unequivocally. That was because she realised it was politically dangerous for her not to do so. But now it is back because the support of the Labor coalition partners, the Greens, has to be paid for.

It is true to say that there are an increasing number of my constituents who question the science that links climate change to carbon dioxide and hotter weather. But I also say that the government calling those people oddballs today is not likely to sway them to support it. Indeed, calling the scientists who disagree with the government non-credible is also unhelpful—a political strategy yes, but constructive no.

We know that the government have been suffering politically because of the significant extra costs that carbon tax plans will place upon the people of this country. After announcing their carbon tax plans with their allies the Greens and the members for Lyne and New England there—and perhaps the member for Denison—they began first by denying that there would be a cost. They clung to saying, ‘There is no cost because we have not decided what the price per tonne will be.’ And that is interesting. Yet on the other hand they said, ‘Unless we put a price on carbon no-one will change their behaviour and reduce their carbon output.’ Now the government says there will be compensation. I think the Prime Minister might even have said today that there will be generous compensation. Again, from a logic perspective, the government wants to tax carbon dioxide to change behaviour but wants to compensate people so they can still afford to do what they have to do—and so how is that not churning money? No-one is going to change their behaviour if they are compensated for the tax.

The main aspect of this scenario is: what will this multibillion dollar tax actually achieve? I want to offer up some figures. The government quoted today that Australia is the highest per capita producer of carbon dioxide in the developed world. But the most recent figures I could find, from the US Carbon Dioxide Information Analysis Center in 2007, showed we were actually ninth—behind Qatar, Kuwait, the UAE, Bahrain, Trinidad and Tobago, Luxembourg, Brunei and the USA.

What will this multibillion tax actually do for CO2? The percentage of CO2 in the atmosphere is 0.0395 per cent, but 97 per cent of that is naturally occurring, leaving humans accountable for 0.001 per cent of the CO2 in the atmosphere. Australia’s contribution is 1.28 per cent of that figure. Therefore, Australia is responsible for 0.000871 per cent of the human-produced CO2 in the atmosphere. If the carbon tax is able to reduce our CO2 contribution by five per cent, then this multibillion tax will have reduced CO2 by 0.000003905 per cent. The question will be: was it ever really worth it? Was any benefit from this huge tax ever
achieved? Finally, what temperature drop did we achieve with this super tax? Perhaps we will let the people decide at the next election. *(Time expired)*

**Moreton Electorate: Archerfield Airport**

Mr **PERRETT** (Moreton) (9.19 pm)—I rise tonight to inform the House about developments at Archerfield Airport, in my electorate, and to highlight the growing concerns of many of my constituents. Archerfield Airport is owned by the Commonwealth and has been leased to the Archerfield Airport Corporation since 1998. It is Brisbane’s secondary airport and a hub for Queensland’s general aviation activities, including flying training, charter flights and corporate aircraft.

Archerfield has had a long and varied history. The airport has been operating since 1929 and was Brisbane’s main airport from 1930 to 1947. In World War II, Archerfield became a base for the RAAF, the US Fifth Air Force and the Royal Dutch Air Force. In fact, if you travel around Archerfield Airport and go to places like Caterpillar, you can see the old huts they used, and these are now heritage listed. In fact, my grandfather, TJ Morrissey, worked for the Americans and drove a grader during World War II. He lived down the road, at Watson Road in Acacia Ridge. So my family has had a long connection with the Archerfield Airport.

Once the current Brisbane airport site, at Eagle Farm, was selected, that became the main passenger centre. The RAAF moved a bit further west to Amberley and Archerfield became a centre for light aircraft. Under the Airports Act 1996, the Archerfield Airport Corporation is required to submit a master plan for approval and revision by the Minister for Infrastructure and Transport, the Hon. Anthony Albanese. In addition to addressing noise, and environmental and land use issues, the master plan is required to set out the strategic plan for the airport for the next 20 years. The drafting of the master plan also requires a public consultation period of 60 business days. Unfortunately, many of my residents did not hear about the consultation process until the 11th hour, and by this stage it was too late for them to have their say in this important master-planning process. There were many reasons for this. One of the obvious ones is that it was school holidays over Christmas, but the other one, and the most significant, was the fact that my electorate was hammered by the floods early in January. In fact, over 5,200 properties went under water because of the floods.

The draft master plan includes two particularly controversial proposals. Firstly, it introduces domestic passenger flights at Archerfield, and this is in the context of their already being concerns about noise levels from frequent air traffic at the airport. I am particularly concerned about bigger aircraft flying into this area. Secondly, Archerfield Airport proposes to realign the secondary runway to allow more room for non-aviation industries on the site. Also, the realignment will increase the air traffic over residences in my electorate. So, while I will wait to receive the formal advice from CASA and Airservices, I remain concerned that the proposed realignment of the runway will negatively impact on local residences in Archerfield, Acacia Ridge, Moorooka, Rocklea and Salisbury. I declare a self-interest because I live in the suburb of Moorooka.

It seems to me and to the many residents who have contacted me, especially in the last couple of weeks, that this realignment of the runway at Archerfield will lead to more low flights over residential areas, which will mean more noise and less sleep. The last thing residents need is more flights, more noise and more disturbances. In many ways the airport, under its director, Gavin Bird, has flourished in recent years and is quite a viable industry. It has
seen an increase in flights and flight training at the airport. I know there have been a few disappointed tenants at Archerfield over the years; nevertheless, in terms of the overall success of the business, I do commend Gavin Bird for his endeavours. I am not a backwards person or a philistine; I do support aviation generally but, of course, my job is to stand up for my local residents, and they are the ones who wear the environmental noise impact of the success that has been a part of the Archerfield Airport story.

As the operations of the airport become more commercialised, as you would expect, hobby pilots and community organisations like the Air Scouts that are based at the airport have felt increasingly disenfranchised. I apologise to Ross and Lindsay and all those people who are part of the Archerfield Chamber of Commerce, who are primarily tenants associated with the airport. I do feel their pain and I do hear the many concerns they have about the changes that have come over the last few decades but, to some degree, this was an inevitable outcome of privatisation. However, I believe that, with openness, transparency and cooperation, it is possible for Archerfield Airport to meet their commercial aims while supporting the smaller operators at the airport, such as those represented by the Archerfield Airport Chamber of Commerce, who do a sterling job for their members.

It is not my intention to take sides in this debate, but I am interested in making sure that there is proper consultation with my community, and that has not been possible because of the floods and the holiday break. I do want to ensure the best for my community, and I believe in balance and genuine consultation. Archerfield Airport has a proud history, and I believe it will continue to have an important role in aviation in Brisbane and South-East Queensland.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Hon. Peter Slipper)—I call the honourable member for Burke.

Ms Burke—Chisholm.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER—Chisholm, sorry.

Ms Burke—Don’t worry; everyone does it. It’s okay. The wonderful seat of Burke, tragically, got abolished. But never mind!

The DEPUTY SPEAKER—Normally you have to be dead to have an electorate named after you!

Ms Burke—It was the right spelling, too.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER—It is a resurrection. I call the member for Chisholm.

Chisholm Electorate: Box Hill Institute of TAFE

Ms BURKE (Chisholm) (9.25 pm)—Tonight, I do not want to grieve. Having watched the news tonight, I think we need to be speaking about some wonderful things in our community as opposed to all the traumas that are happening out there. I do put on the record, though, my sympathies for the people of Japan and New Zealand. Again, having watched the news tonight, it is a devastating situation.

I want to talk about some great things that are happening in my electorate at this time. My electorate is home to a lot of higher education institutions: Monash University, Deakin University and Box Hill Institute of TAFE. I specifically want to speak about Box Hill Institute of TAFE tonight. TAFE does not get a lot of praise and it certainly does not get mentioned much. I think in a lot of people’s minds TAFE is a secondary thing, where tradies go and get their
skills and all of the rest of it. Box Hill TAFE is a phenomenal institution—and it certainly does teach tradies, which is a fantastic thing.

I am sad this week that I am not at the presentation of the trade training student of the year award at Box Hill TAFE. I did get to attend last week’s vocational presentation awards ceremony, including the Outstanding Student of the Year award. There are a raft of certificate courses and degrees offered at Box Hill TAFE. Overall, the amazing part of the evening was the continued praise for the institution, about how it differentiated itself in its teaching style and its ability to nurture students who had fallen through the cracks everywhere else. If it were not for this wonderful institution, these students would not have been able to do all that they have been able to do. Students spoke of the amazing support from the staff, the small class sizes where they can have easy interaction with their teachers, the relevance of the courses and, most importantly, the hands-on experience. All the participants, the nominees and the winners of the evening, spoke about their great hands-on experience—their ability to go out and do vocational training and have quite a high degree of interaction with the industries they would go on to be employed in. By virtue of that, most of the people who are doing these courses already have paid employment lined up for when they finish their vocational training—something that I can tell you as a university graduate was not forthcoming when most of us finished our graduate courses.

The night started in fantastic fashion. Emma Roberts, the previous winner in 2010, spoke of her experience, which echoed many of the others’ experiences. She had had difficulty studying in a normal setting, she could not achieve and she had missed a lot of school through illness and other reasons, but she decided she wanted to learn. So she went to TAFE, she did her certificate course and she did so well that she was invited to the University of Melbourne to go on and do a degree there. She started at Melbourne; she lasted a couple of weeks. It was not for her. The environment was not right. She has returned to Box Hill TAFE and is doing her degree there. She is assured of a terrific career in the future.

Box Hill Institute has an international reputation for developing best practice, customer focused, innovative education and training services. Graduates go on to many areas. There are 30,000 students enrolled at Box Hill TAFE. The awards night was to recognise very specific award recipients. The awards are sponsored by the Rotary Club of Box Hill, who give a nice cash donation to some of these kids, which is a nice way to end the evening! Not all of them are kids. Most of the stories were about people who had returned to education because, even though they had found it difficult previously, they had a desire to do better and to educate themselves.

Debbie Andrews received the achievement award. Debbie is a single mum who wanted to do better for herself and for her kids. She loves animals, and for years she had been volunteering at the Myuna animal farm in Doveton and she absolutely loved it. But she knew that, to get a job there, to get paid employment and do better for her kids, she needed her certificate. She had always struggled with reading and writing, so to ensure she could do this course she enrolled in adult education so she could get her certificates I, II and III to enhance her reading and writing skills. She then did her accompanying animal studies as an animal attendant at Myuna Farm. She is now working at that farm where she volunteered. She is an inspiration to everybody but particularly to her two children. She has been able to demonstrate that you can do it.
Serena got the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning, a VCAL. Serena was recognised by the CEO for outstanding achievements. Again her story was of struggling with school and an inability to learn. Her teachers in school kept telling her, ‘School’s not for everybody,’ but it should be for everybody, particularly somebody desirous of learning. Still only 17, she has now chosen, after successfully battling all the odds, with the support of the staff and the students, to get through this. She achieved her year 11 equivalent and has gone on to do her hairdressing apprentice course at Box Hill TAFE and is now guaranteed of going on to get further employment.

The wonderful thing about the evening is that all these people are so confident now about what they are doing. They all got up and spoke in front of a room full of dignitaries, members of the academia and their parents. It was an inspirational night. Hailey McKenzie was the overall winner on the night. She got an Advanced Diploma of Graphic Design. Hailey left home and was living independently at the age of 17. She wanted to go on to study and she got through this challenging and testing time. She said, ‘Initially I started out wanting to study multimedia as I had always been interested in visual art but graphic design won me over. Design is such an amazing field and studying at Box Hill has given me the ultimate head start in my career.’ Again she spoke of the practical hands-on experience and the actual going into the workplace and seeing her work in action. Those experiences have led to her getting a full-time position when she walked out with her advanced diploma.

Another astounding person who was a nominee but did not win on the night was Jessica Duncan. Jessica is working in the hospitality area. She now has a full-time job at the Sebel Heritage Yarra Valley. Jessica spoke of the amazing experience she had working at the TAFE. Box Hill TAFE has Fountains restaurants where all the students get to have hands-on experience. On the night of the awards presentation and many nights I have been there, we were served by the students, we were fed by the students, the students had done the flower display and the students played the music. It was a great experience. Jessica spoke of her wonderful abilities in this course. Not only did she get to work in some amazing places here that gave her excellent opportunities but she also got to travel to Broome as an intern participating in the hospitality industry within Broome. She also got to go to Dubai as part of a global exchange that Box Hill TAFE has with an international resort in Dubai. She said it was a mind-blowing experience and if she had gone anywhere else she would not have had that opportunity. How many 18- and 19-year-olds studying hospitality get sponsored to go to Dubai? It was a fantastic night and these are outstanding kids. Box Hill Institute is an amazing place and I want to commend them for their support, their dedication and the awards night.

Higher education is an amazing thing within my electorate. Last week I also got to visit the Monash Sustainability Institute. While we are talking about climate change we need to realise that we must be adapting to the lifestyle that we are now generating by our use of the environment. Believe or not in climate change, a lot is happening around us and we need to be more sustainable. If you do not believe it, we are still using up all our resources. The Monash Sustainability Institute has a drive focused on three main areas: research, education and action. They talk about sustainability. The most common way to define sustainability is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of the future to meet their own needs. Let’s not waste the future for our children by using up all the resources today. Let’s learn how to use them well and use them into the future. One of the terrific pro-
grams they are running in education and research is the Green Steps program, where they get students to learn how to live and work in a sustainable environment. The students voluntarily do an intensive course and then go into a business in an internship and develop a plan for that business. It may be National Australia Bank, it may be an energy company, it may be a hotel. They develop ways for that company and that business to become sustainable. This is a tremendous program that is now reaching out to many more students and many other universities and it is going global. I really want to commend the Monash Sustainability Institute for their foresight and thank Monash University for hosting it, and hopefully we will have a sustainable future for future generations.

Cowan Electorate: Coptic Orthodox Church

Mr SIMPKINS (Cowan) (9.35 pm)—by leave—I take this opportunity to congratulate the new Coptic Orthodox church in the suburb of Wanneroo within the electorate of Cowan. The St Mark and St George Coptic Orthodox Church has recently come into full operation. On Saturday I was honoured to be invited to the ordination of the parish priest, Father Luke. The ordination was undertaken by Bishop Suriel of the Melbourne dioceses. It was a great event. Although the service took place over several hours, there were hundreds of worshippers at the church.

We do not have a whole lot of Orthodox churches in Perth but this is literally a brand new church. It is truly a beautiful church. At the end of the ordination, the bishop said it was the best of the churches of the whole dioceses within Australia. That is a great testament to the members of the church. The church was planned about 10 years ago. Land was bought in the semirural area of Wanneroo and they had the vision to see it through with many years of hard work, lots of planning and many donations. The church has turned the original building, which were stables, into a temporary church with a number of facilities for children to worship at Sunday school with the Coptic Orthodox community. Finally, they built the brand new church. With its icons and its architecture, it is a great testament to faith and the courage of the Coptic Orthodox people.

As we know, these are people who have suffered greatly. Ten million Coptic Orthodox worshippers live in Egypt and are constantly on the receiving end of much persecution, particularly by organisations such as the Muslim Brotherhood. From those harsh origins in Egypt, it is great to have the Coptic Orthodox community within the electorate of Cowan as they add such value. I wish them all the best for the future and I hope the persecution their people suffer in Egypt comes to an end as soon as possible.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER—Order! The time for the grievance debate has expired. The debate is interrupted in according 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 9.39 pm