



**New South Wales**

# **Legislative Assembly**

## **PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES (HANSARD)**

**Fifty-Seventh Parliament  
First Session**

**Tuesday, 23 March 2021**

Authorised by the Parliament of New South Wales



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# LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY

**Tuesday, 23 March 2021**

**The Speaker (The Hon. Jonathan Richard O'Dea)** took the chair at 12:00.

**The Speaker** read the prayer and acknowledgement of country.

## *Bills*

### **COVID-19 LEGISLATION AMENDMENT (STRONGER COMMUNITIES AND HEALTH) BILL 2021**

#### **Returned**

**The SPEAKER:** I report receipt of a message from the Legislative Council returning the bill without amendment.

### **PREVENTION OF CRUELTY TO ANIMALS AMENDMENT BILL 2021**

#### **Returned**

**The SPEAKER:** I report receipt of a message from the Legislative Council returning the bill with amendments. I order that consideration of the Legislative Council's amendments be set down as an order of the day for a later hour.

### **PROPERTY SERVICES COUNCIL BILL 2021**

#### **First Reading**

**Bill received from the Legislative Council, introduced and read a first time.**

**The SPEAKER:** I advise the House that I have received a written authority from the Hon. Mark Banasiak, MLC, advising that the member for Orange will have carriage of the bill in the Legislative Assembly. I order that the second reading of the bill stand as an order of the day for tomorrow.

## *Announcements*

### **BULLYING, HARASSMENT AND SERIOUS MISCONDUCT**

**The SPEAKER:** As previously advised, a meeting of the Parliament's executive group was held yesterday to consider the Parliament's approach to bullying, sexual harassment and other serious misconduct. The decision was taken to establish a working advisory group comprising members, members' staff, parliamentary staff, relevant managers, and other representatives and stakeholders. To facilitate establishing such a group, the Presiding Officers have appointed the Deputy Speaker in the Legislative Assembly, Leslie Williams, MP, to act as the initial chair and bring together a number of key people for preliminary meetings and discussions. This will include members in each House who have expressed an interest in assisting with these matters. Given the flooding on the mid North Coast, it would be appreciated if anyone wishing to contact the Deputy Speaker could do so via email.

## *Business of the House*

### **SUSPENSION OF STANDING AND SESSIONAL ORDERS: ROUTINE OF BUSINESS**

**Mr MARK SPEAKMAN:** I move:

That standing and sessional orders be suspended to permit government business to continue beyond 1.15 p.m. and until 2.00 p.m. today.

**Motion agreed to.**

### **SUSPENSION OF STANDING AND SESSIONAL ORDERS: CONDOLENCE MOTION**

**Mr MARK SPEAKMAN:** I move:

That standing and sessional orders be suspended at this sitting to provide that business before the House be interrupted at 3.45 p.m. to permit the moving of a motion of condolence regarding the Hon. Ian Morton Armstrong.

**Motion agreed to.**

[Notices of motions given]

*Bills***COVID-19 RECOVERY BILL 2021****Second Reading Debate****Debate resumed from 17 March 2021.**

**Mr RYAN PARK (Keira) (12:20):** I lead for the Opposition in the Legislative Assembly in debate on the COVID-19 Recovery Bill 2021. The bill is being led on behalf of the Opposition by my colleague the Hon. Walt Secord, in the other place, in his capacity as shadow Treasurer. I say from the outset that Labor will be supporting the bill. We will not oppose it. In general terms, the bill is about temporarily extending the operation of certain measures that were implemented in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, which we and our communities have had to endure over the past 15 months. Last year amendments were made under multiple Acts in order to equip the Government to deal with the pandemic. This bill seeks to extend those provisions. This is yet another example of Labor working in a bipartisan way in relation to the pandemic. The Leader of the Opposition and the entire shadow Cabinet have sought to do that from the very beginning. It has been a challenging 15 months for our community. Labor said from the very start that we will not get in the way and that, in fact, we will encourage, support and provide assurances. We will support legislation that aims to support the community, businesses and residents, whom we are fortunate to represent and who have all been affected in some way.

The bill amends the Residential Tenancies Act and provisions relating to workers' entitlements and extends various provisions relating to the pandemic. It also makes amendments in relation to the use of video calls by departmental officers so that they can continue to conduct video meetings during the pandemic and can require persons to provide answers via audio or visual links, thereby enabling the functions of government to continue. Those measures have ongoing benefits—such as supporting digital processes and flexibility—and will be evaluated for potential permanence. I am glad that is being considered as a result of lessons learnt from the pandemic. Not everything relating to the pandemic has been negative. We have learnt lessons about the way in which government does business. I hope that the Government examines those measures in the future. Labor is examining how to make some measures a permanent part of our legislative framework in order to ensure that businesses and community groups are able to engage with government in a more seamless manner. We must consider these things. Of course, measures strictly related to the pandemic will not be evaluated and will lapse on their expiration date.

Without these amendments, the measures will lapse this month. The temporary extension of a range of provisions is proposed to support operational flexibility for businesses, councils and communities as they address the ongoing health risks posed by COVID-19. They do not extend powers, alter the scope of measures or make any permanent changes. Emergency COVID-19 protections for residential and commercial tenancies were introduced in April 2020. They have assisted tenants financially impacted by the pandemic, which Labor supported. My colleague Julia Finn, the member for Granville, was a strong supporter of those measures because they made sure that tenants and landlords were treated fairly while making sure that roofs were kept over people's heads even if they were unemployed. That is something that all members worked very hard to ensure.

The bill will amend the Retail Leases Act—which I know very well, having previously being involved in a review of it in another life—to preserve protections that accrued to impacted commercial tenants during the pandemic for the time that they were in place. It will mandate that landlords will not be able to take action against an eligible tenant that relates to a breach of a lease that occurred during the prescribed period unless they have renegotiated the rental agreement and attended a mediation. This is important because all members know that commercial landlords, commercial businesses and small business operators are doing it really tough.

Whilst the State is largely through the health crisis—touch wood—it has a long way to go to get through the economic crisis. At the end of this month, the tap from Canberra will start to be turned off. That will impact significantly the ability of businesses and residents to use that discretionary spending, which has been especially important for small businesses. The bill will only cover breaches of a lease that occurred in the prescribed period and will not impact on landlords' rights in relation to breaches of a lease that occurred after the prescribed period. That is very important.

The provisions have been discussed by Government off the back of a range of input from a variety of stakeholders. As Labor has made clear from the beginning, it will not oppose the provisions. This is another example of Labor working with the Government to ensure that legislative measures are in place for businesses, residents and community groups to navigate the impacts of COVID. I hope that many of the lessons that have been learned from COVID will provide an opportunity for permanent legislative changes that make it easier for businesses, residents and community groups to more productively engage with government.

**Ms MELANIE GIBBONS (Holsworthy) (12:27):** I support the COVID-19 Recovery Bill 2021. I thank the Treasurer, the Hon. Dominic Perrottet, for introducing the bill to the House. Just over a year ago both the New South Wales Government and the Federal Government passed legislation to combat the unprecedented and changing effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Today marks one year since significant COVID-related restrictions were imposed on the people of this State. In that time New South Wales and the rest of the country have done an outstanding job of containing the virus. However, COVID-19 remains a threat to the community and it is important that that is reflected in this legislation.

During the pandemic, the New South Wales and Commonwealth governments have provided financial support for those who have needed it most. This Government also passed necessary and appropriate regulatory changes to ensure that the people of New South Wales were able to adapt to the new norms to keep the State on as even a path as possible. Through the cooperation of the people, those legislative changes have guaranteed flexibility and freedom whilst maintaining protection from the virus. One of those freedoms and flexibilities was the digitisation of workplaces. This was a necessary step forward for some industries, and the pandemic allowed them to make the ultimate leap to digitise the way they operate. This meant that businesses, jobs, and access to certain goods and services could continue throughout the pandemic. It also reflects a modern way of working, as people were given the option to work from home.

Those regulatory changes were necessary and this bill will extend provisions within the current legislation to ensure that the people of this State continue to be protected. Protections and support in the bill have been refined and tailored to suit what is currently needed to manage the effects of the pandemic. Without this legislation, the emergency measures that were introduced last year would automatically cease at the end of the month. This bill therefore proposes the temporary extension of necessary measures for up to 12 months. This will not only serve to help the continued management of the pandemic but also assist in long-term economic recovery.

This bill has provisions to allow for greater flexibility for employers and employees about when and how workers can take leave during the course of the pandemic, safeguarding both employers and employees in times of uncertainty. These provisions allow them to reach a mutual agreement regarding notice before taking long service leave and also allow an employee to take shorter periods of annual leave, such as a few days a week. Provisions are in place that state that when a worker is stood down by their employer due to the COVID-19 pandemic, their long service leave and annual leave will continue to accumulate. This protects workers during an uncertain time.

The proposals in the bill also seek to support the transition back to the previous normal commercial and residential tenancy laws after emergency measures were introduced last year during the peak of the pandemic. They will provide support for tenants and landlords whilst also allowing for the market to progress and meet the changing economic landscape. Provisions were required at the time, but it is understood that those measures have served their purpose and, with the economy stabilising, are no longer necessary. Continuing with those emergency measures could potentially prevent the rental market from evolving to meet new conditions.

The Holsworthy electorate certainly had its share of COVID-19 outbreaks. It was the first area impacted by the Crossroads outbreak, and I really believe our community showed how to respond to this crisis. We put the wellbeing of our community first. I thank the Premier for her telephone call when we first heard about the outbreak to tell me what steps would be taken, and I was impressed by how quickly the testing clinics were set up—within just a matter of hours. I am particularly grateful to members of our community for how they responded. They only headed out of their homes in order to be tested. This bill is focused on the recovery from the pandemic, as is our community. It is important to note how the Holsworthy electorate has come together in so many ways to offer support to each other during this uncertain time.

Turbans 4 Australia has been an integral support network for the local community throughout the pandemic. I have spoken about this organisation in the House many times because it deserves recognition for its continued hard work. It provided essential support both locally and in many of our electorates by giving freshly cooked meals and grocery hampers to relief centres. It also acted quickly to provide hampers to international students, who struggled at the beginning of the pandemic because they were not able to obtain JobKeeper or to find any work. I acknowledge the Shepherd Centre in Casula, which offers support to children who have a hearing impairment or who are deaf, and indeed to their families, for its continued support to children throughout the pandemic. During the pandemic, its usual services were moved online to continue to support its important early intervention programs. I thank the Shepherd Centre for adapting so efficiently during this unprecedented time because it ensured that these children were still receiving the necessary and timely support they needed.

I thank Prestons Robins Little Athletics and Liverpool Robins FC for giving up their fields—for a year now—so that a pop-up COVID-19 testing clinic could be established. They have been put out onto different fields and their teams have been moved all over the place, but it was important as that pop-up clinic was a response to the Crossroads Casula outbreak. Those clubs rallied together in response. I acknowledge all the schools across the

Holsworthy electorate, as I am sure we all would, for how they responded to the pandemic. All the teachers and students are to be commended for efficiently mastering virtual learning. It was not an easy task—especially at such short notice—but with the support of families, all the local school staff made a real effort to ensure that students were not left behind and that online learning was as fun and engaging as it possibly could be.

Our frontline workers have been the real heroes throughout the pandemic. Even to this day, with the administering and rollout of the vaccine, they remain a critical factor in getting us through. I recognise all the frontline workers and staff who have worked in pop-up COVID-19 testing clinics across the local area and at Liverpool Hospital. I note that Liverpool Hospital has been an integral part of the State's vaccine rollout. It was one of three hospitals in New South Wales that had the initial availability and capacity to store and administer the vaccine and it is incredible to have that service in south-west Sydney. Now that the vaccine rollout is well underway, I will acknowledge some of the local GP clinics that have joined the COVID-19 vaccination program. They include: Prestons Family Doctors, Prestons; All Care Medical Centre, Hammondville; and All Care Medical Centre, Wattle Grove. I thank those general practices for being part of that important step in the pandemic.

It is also important to recognise all of the local businesses across the Holsworthy electorate. Tough restrictions were placed upon them, but thankfully they have come out the other side. I particularly thank them for being so vigilant with the required measures such as implementing the Service NSW check-in system and ensuring that patrons are protected. It is because of the compliance and understanding of those businesses that we are where we are today. We would not have gotten through the pandemic if it were not for the leadership of some important people. They include New South Wales Premier Gladys Berejiklian, Chief Health Officer Dr Kerry Chant and health Minister Brad Hazzard. They have devoted so much of their time to ensure that the citizens of New South Wales were well informed and kept safe. Many of us started our day watching their morning briefings, while they started their day hours earlier to get that information ready for us all. Those individuals and our ministerial team continue to work hard as the pandemic progresses to new stages. I have no doubt that they will continue to guide the State out of the pandemic.

I thank my team for working in unusual circumstances to keep our electorate as calm as possible, particularly after the COVID-19 outbreak at the Crossroads Hotel. The team includes Daniel Nicholls, Clayton Hopper, Sophie Carlton and Faith Perryman. We all came together to work separately and I appreciate all that they did to keep us operating during that time. The COVID-19 Recovery Bill 2021 proposes important steps to ensure that New South Wales transitions smoothly back to normal conditions and also adopts some regulatory settings as the new, but hopefully temporary, normal. It is critical that the New South Wales Government remains on top of the pandemic. The bill is testament to the commitment of the Government to guarantee the safety of the citizens of New South Wales as well as the operation of local businesses and organisations. I commend the bill to the House.

**TEMPORARY SPEAKER (Mr Lee Evans):** I announce the presence in the advisers gallery of the President of the Legislative Council of Victoria, the Hon. Nazih Elasmr, who is visiting the Parliament for a program with President John Ajaka. President Nazih Elasmr is accompanied by Acting Clerk Anne Sargent. I welcome them to the New South Wales Parliament.

**Ms JULIA FINN (Granville) (12:36):** The object of the COVID-19 Recovery Bill 2021 is to temporarily remake or extend the operation of certain measures that were implemented last year in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Those measures have been essential in allowing us to go about our business, and to adapt our businesses and our way of doing things in New South Wales as much as possible, while also reducing the risk of infection, and supporting people and communities through a very difficult year. There have been a number of school closures in my electorate, a lot of people have been housebound for months on end and a lot of businesses have struggled. We have needed the bipartisan support of governments to get people through the pandemic.

Many of the measures that we are considering today are very much commonsense measures that allow meetings and AGMs to be conducted electronically. A lot of those things probably will end up being adopted in perpetuity. I will focus my comments on the amendments to the Residential Tenancies Act. I thank the Treasurer for the briefing that he provided last week to outline the main provisions in the bill that relate to residential tenancies. The bill includes a temporary moratorium on termination for breach of agreement or for non-payment of rent or charges, and a temporary moratorium on no-grounds termination until 26 September. New section 28 requires that a landlord must not give a termination notice under section 85 of the Act to an impacted tenant who accrues arrears during the moratorium period unless it is fair and reasonable in the circumstances. That is a significant move away from section 85 of the Act, which provides that no grounds are required to be given in relation to the termination of a periodic agreement. A temporary moratorium is a step in the right direction.

It is important to recognise also that significant arrears have accrued largely in the absence of any financial support for tenants who have lost income over the past year. Labor has argued previously for hardship assistance for landlords and tenants; however, the Government failed to act effectively. Last year Labor successfully

amended the COVID-19 Legislation Amendment (Emergency Measures—Miscellaneous) Bill in the Legislative Council to recommend the use of the Property Services Compensation Fund to assist residential landlords and tenants suffering hardship. The Government stubbornly refused to take any action on Labor's constructive approach to addressing hardship and failed to implement this measure. But it gets even worse.

We said previously that the Government's residential and commercial rent package was "disappointing", "modest" and "very complex" compared to Federal assistance programs. We said that it does little to help renters or "mum and dad investors" who own a single unit. In New South Wales only 16 per cent of residential landlords pay land tax; 84 per cent of landlords will miss out. So providing any sort of support via the vehicle of land tax excludes most of the tenants in New South Wales. I said previously:

Relying on land tax relief to be passed on to tenants ignores the simple fact that many lower value rental properties do not pay land tax and small 'Mum and Dad' investors are not required to pay land tax. Mum and Dad investors with a single unit in western Sydney, the Hunter or the Illawarra will receive little assistance from the package, as the current land tax threshold is around \$734,000 - calculated using unimproved land value with primary residences exempt.

Recent figures show that only \$659,374 in land tax was waived by the New South Wales Government. That is a tiny drop in the ocean given the number of people who lost work and income last year. In my electorate between March and May last year, the number of people on JobSeeker in the suburb of Merrylands doubled. That was similar to many suburbs and towns around this State, but the Government's program to help them was just smoke and mirrors—a big announcement with no follow through. It was incredibly difficult to access, even for poor landlords who do pay land tax. Every tenant struggling to pay their rent and every landlord struggling to pay their loans should feel outraged. The Treasurer's failure to pay \$439 million of their committed support is a wasted opportunity to help the tens of thousands of landlords and tenants who desperately need assistance. The need for hardship assurance still remains, especially now that tenants will need to pay rent and any outstanding arrears accrued in the last year. Many of those people would benefit if they could access some of the \$439 million that was promised but not delivered.

The comparison between New South Wales and Victoria could not be more stark. In Victoria, the Government announced rent relief grants for Victorians experiencing significant rental hardship as a result of COVID-19. Victoria has also the second largest population of tenants and the second highest number of renters behind New South Wales. So any support provided by the Victorian Government would have been even more welcome here. The Victorian package was a one-off grant to help renters maintain safe, secure and stable accommodation, if they had lost income during the pandemic. A rental assistance fund was established to provide rent relief payments of up to \$3,000 to Victorians experiencing rental hardship due to the pandemic. Of course, that helped both tenants and landlords because it had to be used for rental payments.

The one-off grant was specifically targeted for tenants living in their primary residence to help them remain safe, secure and in stable accommodation, and to prevent people from having to move during the pandemic. It was paid directly to the tenant's agent or landlord to contribute to the tenant's rental payments after a rent reduction agreement had been lodged with Consumer Affairs Victoria. How many grants have been approved? As of 19 March 2021, 32,637 tenants had been assisted and grants totalling \$76,729,781 approved. At the same time, Consumer Affairs Victoria has registered over 97,000 variations in rent. Fair Trading here has registered just a handful. What has happened in New South Wales is that most landlords have said, "Do not worry if you cannot pay it. Pay me back later." We live in a State where a huge number of people—more than one-third of all tenants—are already paying rent that is unaffordable. If their rents were not reduced, paying it back later will not help them because they could not really afford their rent to start with.

I have a number of questions I wish to direct to the Minister and it would be very helpful if either the Minister or the Treasurer could respond so that tenants and landlords are aware of the intent and operation of the amended provisions in the bill. Households may have built up other housing or household debts during the pandemic and while they may have tried to ensure that they always made their rent, they may have drawn down and depleted their savings and/or made use of other credit available to them. For example, they may have accrued debt on energy bills, credit card bills or phone bills rather than rental arrears prior to 26 March. With ongoing pressures and the reduction in income supports, they may be forced into arrears in the coming six months.

What happens to those renters who now accrue debt and are affected by COVID-related financial pressure following the end of JobKeeper payments? What happens to those renters whose financial situation worsens after the end of JobKeeper payments—those who have accrued debts and who now have to pay weekly rent plus their accrued arrears? What financial support is available to those renters whose tenancy has ended? If renters are having difficulty finding alternative affordable accommodation in areas which now have record low rental vacancy rates, what assistance is available to them?

In relation to non-hardship related supports, proposed new section 27 (6) requires that section 27 (5) does not limit the matters that the NSW Civil & Administrative Tribunal [NCAT] may have regard to when considering

whether a landlord is authorised to take prohibited action. Proposed new section 27 (5) (d) refers to the availability of reasonable alternative accommodation for the impacted resident rather than affordability and availability. Is this intentional? Does the Minister believe that non-inclusion of affordability in this subsection is warranted? In addition, section 228C (2) (d) of the Residential Tenancies Act 2010 currently requires NCAT to have regard to any special vulnerability of the impacted tenant. Is it intentional not to include special vulnerabilities with the bill's proposed new section 27 as a matter for consideration by NCAT? What measures are envisaged to support tenants' special vulnerabilities following the repeal of part 13 of the Act?

These are really important things to consider. There are parts of this State that have actually seen rents increase enormously during the pandemic. The number of people who have decided to move to the far North Coast and to the South Coast where a number of properties were destroyed last year during the bushfires has placed enormous pressure on rents in those particular areas. I know from friends who live in the area that kids are being withdrawn from school because parents who cannot afford proposed rent increases have had to move out of the area. This is not going to help them. All those families need support and have not had it yet.

**Mr ALEX GREENWICH (Sydney) (12:46):** The COVID-19 Recovery Bill 2021 extends various provisions introduced to deal with the pandemic that are due to expire at the end of the month for another six months. COVID-19 is still with us and will be with us for at least another six months. I welcome the extension to allow participation in strata community decisions through electronic means, which will ensure democracy can continue. At the beginning of the pandemic I heard from constituents who were concerned that their scheme could not proceed with required meetings. Owners and residents should not be excluded from participating in decisions that will affect them. I welcome continued voting and attendance through electronic, televised or telephone forms of communication. I support other provisions to ensure business under a number of Acts can continue, but we urgently need to progress recovery beyond facilitating routine business to actual economic and social recovery.

JobKeeper is about to be withdrawn and we face a potentially massive wave of business collapse and unemployment. The 2020 Equity Economics report *A Wave of Disadvantage across NSW: Impact of the COVID-19 Recession* was commissioned by the New South Wales Council of Social Service. The report predicts that unemployment will reach 11 per cent in Sydney's inner city and the inner south by June this year. The number of families experiencing housing stress is expected to increase by more than 88,000, more than 24 per cent, with 27,447 more children at risk of neglect. An additional 9,000 people are expected to experience homelessness across the State. The extension of the moratorium on residential evictions for rental arrears and on no-grounds evictions will help to keep in their home people who lose their jobs and cannot pay their rent, but they are likely to still experience housing stress and mounting debt. I understand that The Greens will have some amendments to strengthen these provisions, which I intend to support.

Reports from constituents and tenant advocates indicate that in the first wave of unemployment associated with the pandemic few tenants got rent reductions, with rent deferrals more common. In the inner city, this can result in significant growing debt. We need to protect newly unemployed tenants from going into massive debt. This will involve ensuring that they can get a fair rent reduction or are able to break a lease. Some small businesses in commercial and residential leases will benefit from the requirement to renegotiate rent and attend mediation, but this will do little to protect the small business operators from the CBD who I met with and whose situation is dire.

The delegation of small business operators that I met with based in the CBD ran businesses that rely on trade from office workers. The towers that house those workers are still only at 25 per cent capacity because they are tenanted by multinational corporations that continue to have global work from home policies. One of the operators I met runs a coffee cart in a bank building that has virtually been empty for over a year. During the height of the pandemic, trade dropped to 90 per cent of pre-COVID levels, yet the small businesses I talked to were only offered around 10 per cent rent reductions at the time. The full rent is now being demanded from many, despite ongoing reduced trade.

Rent negotiations are not being done in good faith; they have gone through mediation and the Small Business Commissioner, but a fair outcome has not been reached yet. One operator attempted tribunal action but was sent away to get legal advice that he simply could not afford. JobKeeper is the main source of income for these businesses and without it they risk bankruptcy. Although many would like to, they cannot just close their businesses because they will lose large bonds, be liable to continue paying rent and risk landlords pursuing their assets used as guarantees, including their homes. Mandatory mediation and renegotiations will not help these businesses. I ask the Treasurer to address this concern in his reply and confirm that the Government will either provide financial relief or help small businesses in the CBD to end their leases without financial ruin.

**Mr JIHAD DIB (Lakemba) (12:51):** I share the sentiments of members who have spoken before me in debate on the COVID-19 Recovery Bill 2021. This time last year things were different. We were wondering where we would be and what was going to happen. We were talking about shutting down pretty much the whole of

society until September. When we had very limited numbers here to pass some emergency legislation I remember I was quite concerned. Nobody knew what was going to happen. We had to avoid each other as much as possible and only a certain number of members were allowed in the Chamber, as is still the case now. When I look back at this time last year, I remember that my children were not taking it as seriously as I hoped they would. We could see the wave coming, whereas many others could not. They changed their opinion when I told them that companies that produced body bags were being asked to increase their production. I think that was when it really hit my children that it was real.

One year later, we thank our lucky stars. We have had not only good luck but also good planning and a good response from the community to ensure that we can be here normally, interact pretty freely—give or take some numbers—and look after one another. The pandemic caused every part of our lives to be impacted in a way that nobody saw coming. How do you entertain three kids at home? My family held pretend overseas dinners to entertain the kids and keep us going. At one stage I thought to myself how lucky we were to have a house. Some people with three kids were living in units and were pretty much stuck. People could not go out and we all had to create our own entertainment to make sure everybody's mental health was good.

Schools closed down as an emergency measure but some teachers said school was the only safe place. There was a bit of confusion around that. Places of worship, which are important to so many people, and the shops closed down. Every single part of our lives changed in ways we never thought they could, but it showed that we are resilient and we can do what needs to be done to protect each other. Who would have thought we would all be talking to each other electronically? I was struggling with FaceTime before COVID, but all of a sudden I know how to use an app called Zoom; it is pretty good. Tap and go rates increased as we made sure we were being as careful as we possibly could be.

With all the flexibility in the way we have dealt with events, there is one thing I worry about: I hope we have not lost the desire for human interaction and human contact, because it is the most important thing. I could see the relief once events started to open up again and people started to see each other. Humans rely a great deal on being able to interact; that is what makes us who we are. As good as Zoom is, I would be happy never to have another Zoom meeting in my life. I much prefer face-to-face contact. Locally, we had some major issues. Thousands of people in the community I represent had to accept JobSeeker because they were in insecure employment or working in the hospitality or retail industries. They were affected so quickly and suddenly found themselves out of work.

A number of people, such as refugees and students, did not qualify for JobSeeker. I was concerned about them because they were renters and had lost work. They could have become literally destitute overnight had it not been for some amazing things that happened in our community. I often talk about my electorate and the things we do. There is so much about the community I represent that I am proud of. I share that community with the member for Canterbury, who is in the Chamber, and the member for Oatley, who is in the chair. We could not be more proud of our community for always putting their hands up, stepping up and helping out. We asked for donations, as we had during the bushfires, and people brought them.

It is interesting that this time we delivered food by sending somebody a text message upon delivery and then walking away so there was no contact. Shops had closed, which had a massive impact. I acknowledge all the local communities across the State for helping others out. It is a great thing about our society that people look to what they have, are grateful for it and say, "There is somebody who needs even more than I do." Our office called everybody over the age of 70 to touch base and make sure they were okay. It took a bit of time, but it meant a lot to people when their local MP or MP's office rang to ask, "Is there anything that you need?" It was heartwarming that many people said, "We don't need anything, our neighbour is looking after us" or "Our neighbour's kids have popped in to see us." Although we worry about where our society is heading, that reinforces how good it is. We focus on the bad, but there is so much good in our society.

There was some criticism of local supermarkets. I felt for them because the panic buying was phenomenal. I never would have thought toilet paper was the most essential item in the world. Of course we want people to use toilet paper—I am not discouraging its use—but it became ridiculous. I remember seeing a video that was around the traps on social media of people fighting over toilet paper. I thought that was ridiculous. The supermarkets had to bear the brunt of such behaviour. At that time we did not know what was going on and panic had been allowed to set in. We should not just rely on businesses or supermarkets to deal with that; members have a role to play by helping however can. We needed more intervention and we needed it earlier; we should not have reached the point where one person had 100 packets of pasta that they were never going to finish and somebody else was begging for some.

I posted a beautiful story on my Facebook page, which I will share with the Chamber. On the fourth day that a gentleman aged over 70 came to the Woolworths at Punchbowl looking for toilet paper, young Amanda took it upon herself to put a packet aside for him. She paid for it and delivered it to him. That is one of the most

powerful stories I have ever heard. Amanda was not paid to do that. She did not have to do it, but she did so out of the goodness of her heart. To Amanda and Punchbowl Woolworths I say: Well done. They were fantastic. The gentleman, Karim, was incredibly appreciative and embarrassed when I put that story on Facebook. The impact of COVID on small businesses was phenomenal. I will share a bit of history about what happened during COVID, which is important because it leads to my next point. Another thing that people struggled with was where to go.

They would visit their local MP's office, but some were closed. Unfortunately, some MP's offices had a little sign that said "Ring". Members who are working with multicultural communities need to see and speak to people. We must make sure we play it safe, and that is a responsibility of all members. We ask people to vote us into Parliament so we need to be there for them. We cannot go missing in action at the time they need us most. I hope that such times are short. How do we support people? We dealt with COVID in an incredibly bipartisan way because that is what we had to do. There is a time for politics and a time to actually do our job, which is to protect the people of New South Wales. We must make sure that the people of New South Wales always come first. It is our job to support whatever proposals are better for the community. That is a really important point. While it took a while to get going, we did eventually get there. In this context, I acknowledge health Minister Brad Hazzard. He was available when he was needed. When there was a COVID outbreak in Lakemba, he and his office were outstanding—they were phenomenal. Maybe we do not often hear that from this side of the Chamber, but it must be acknowledged when things that are needed get done.

The Treasurer and the finance Minister had decisions to make and worked with our side of the House to make sure those decisions were fair. I worry about the debt that is being racked up, but we will have to find a way through that. If you ask me whether to leave people destitute or to consider how to give people assistance during the pandemic, I would choose assisting those people every single time. I offer my congratulations to the Treasurer and the finance Minister on their work; I am sure that the Treasurer is listening to this debate right now—glued to the television screen. In terms of supporting my local community during COVID, together with the member for Canterbury, I asked about funding to support Canterbury Hospital through the employment of local tradies and local businesses, which would be great. I seek an extension of time. [*Extension of time*]

Before I move to my last point, I must mention the discussion about rental properties. We can say, "Look, you can't evict people because they couldn't pay because of COVID," but people have found ways around this. A number of people came to my office seeking assistance because they could not pay their rent and we tried to help out in any way possible—whether through a small business grant or making sure we spoke to the relevant people. I had a few personal conversations with people to say, "Look, can you just get them to reduce the rent by \$20?" Now \$20 might not seem much, but it makes a really big difference when you have nothing.

I remember one Friday night at six o'clock somebody rang the office. I picked up the phone and spoke for a few hours with a person whose family had basically been asked to leave their rental property and had nowhere else to go. It took us a few weeks to work through the situation and, gee, there was not much protection for that family. To simply say you cannot evict somebody because of the impact of COVID does not mean people will not find another way. We must make sure that tenants have the ability to take matters to the next level if they need to. We can set the rules, but we have to find a way to ensure that those rules are supported and are being implemented in the spirit that they were intended.

I wrap up my contribution to the debate with this thought. We are coming out of the pandemic, and the community has been phenomenal. New South Wales has been phenomenal in terms of adhering to all the rules and restrictions and maintaining safety. It is now second nature to us—every time I cough, I seem to wash and sanitise my hands. We have changed the way we go about our daily lives. Some people have done really well during COVID, and some people have done really poorly. For some businesses, COVID has delivered incredible profits. For people with an insecure line of work, however, their insecurity continues. They may have some work now, but where is the security? Some people have changed their approach to work and, while that is positive, we must continually make sure that nobody falls through the cracks as a result of the ongoing impact of COVID.

As we come out of COVID, as we recover and as we move forward, where is the mental health support for people who suffered during the pandemic? Where is the support particularly for the increased number of domestic violence victims during COVID? Where is the support for businesses that are never going to be able to recover as a result of COVID? Where is the support for businesses that will have to transition to operating electronically? Where was the support for families who had to educate their kids at home with no real idea what they were doing? As we come out of COVID and move into recovery, how do we make sure that nobody is left behind and that everybody has the best possible opportunity to succeed in our next step forward? The recovery process will give us a chance to reset and to restart some of the things that we really need to.

As I said, this has been bipartisan and I give credit where it is due. Significant calls have had to be made; they were made and they received bipartisan support because at the end of the day everyone is in this House for the same reason: We want the best for New South Wales. We want the best for our community. There are many

who will never get a mention, but what they did in helping other people will never be forgotten and it made a difference. If we can all make a difference in the things that we do, then we will create a better society. As we move forward, I congratulate and thank everybody who has done what they can. I also congratulate and thank Foodbank and OzHarvest for their work. Mr Assistant Speaker and I took our electorate office staff to Foodbank just before Christmas in an act of bipartisanship. I believe I did all of the work and he took lots of photos; no, that is not true.

**The ASSISTANT SPEAKER:** Supervised.

**Mr JIHAD DIB:** It was fantastic and that is the spirit of what Parliament actually can be. We were there to help people and we both took leadership in doing that. I see OzHarvest every single Tuesday at Lakemba—funded at Lakemba—giving up to 300 hampers to families in need. I thank the House for its indulgence and the additional time.

**Ms SOPHIE COTSIS (Canterbury) (13:05):** I will be brief in my contribution. I acknowledge the shadow Treasurer, the Hon. Walt Secord, for the Opposition's response to the bill. I also acknowledge the extension of the amendments to workers' entitlement provisions and the general extension of COVID-19 provisions under the Residential Tenancies Act. That is quite sensible, particularly with the changes to JobKeeper and government assistance. The extensions are very welcome and very important. The member for Lakemba covered off a number of important issues in regard to the devastating year many have had. We have had drought, fires and now the floods on the mid North Coast and throughout some of our areas. I acknowledge the SES. I visited the Canterbury SES over the weekend to thank the volunteers.

As Australians, we are resilient. We have come together at difficult moments recently and throughout our history, and there is a spirit of genuine outreach that we are seeing once again. People are coming out to make sure that their neighbours are okay, and that people are safe and well. The message I conveyed to the community when I visited the SES over the weekend was for people to follow the authorities—the police, the SES and the emergency services—and to not drive, walk, ride or swim through floodwaters. This morning we heard of the devastation that has happened and I am truly distraught about some of the animals. It is going to be a tough time rebuilding, and I urge the Government and the Treasurer to provide certainty in that. I know the Treasurer takes that duty very seriously and that he understands the importance of certainty. There are a whole lot of assumptions around what is happening now. I know conditions change very rapidly and information for the community changes rapidly.

As the Government knows and as the Leader of the Opposition has said, we are working with the Government to ensure that our communities not only are safe but also have that certainty. My message to the Government on the COVID-19 Recovery Bill covers a couple of things. I acknowledge that there have been so many real estate agents and accountants who have been bombarded with questions about rental assistance. They have been the quasi-information providers to a number of small mum-and-dad landlords and renters who are looking for assistance. In my electorate 30 per cent of people have been very concerned about where to get information, advice and assistance.

I urge the Government to provide better coordination of the information. There are people living in rental accommodation who have lost their jobs or had their hours reduced, have not been able to study, have a couple of kids or may not be able to pay for their insurance. They then have landlords—not all of them, but some of them—on their doorstep demanding rent. This is where the Government must be clear and provide a balance. We need coordination of information to make sure that our renters, who have myriad concerns and headaches, do not have another headache, particularly when it comes to housing and having a roof over their head and their children's heads.

It is important to listen to what renters are saying. It is not people's fault that we are in a pandemic. It is the situation we are in and I understand that decisions must be made quickly. But we must also understand how people are suffering on the ground. The Government must understand the mental suffering and stress that is going on. We are seeing little kids affected at school. Those are the post-COVID effects. Certainty is an absolute must. I also ask the Treasurer to speak about the underspend in the provision of assistance packages in relation to the announcements the Government made. A number of small businesses in my electorate that pay rent are working their guts out, like businesses across New South Wales and Australia. In my electorate the questions business owners keep asking me are: "Sophie, where do we get this grant assistance from? We do not have the information, how can we get it?" For those who are tempted to try to access the grants, the criteria is too rigid and limited.

These people, who have invested in small businesses and are having a go to be their own bosses, have taken out loans against their homes. These are small mum-and-dad investors who are giving it a go to open a cafe, bakery or little restaurant and they have put their family home as collateral. I urge the Government to consider those people. We do not want to see those people lose not only their business and their livelihood, which affects

their kids, but also their home. I do not want to see people lose their homes. I do not like the view that in this situation there will be winners and losers. No, we cannot have people lose everything that they have put into their small business and everything they have put into their home. We do not want to see them lose. I urge the Government to take that into consideration because we do not want to see small businesses lose.

I see the Treasurer has a number of advisors in the Chamber today. I urge him to have a look at the criteria for business grants and potentially a new round of some of those grants—something to keep people above water and make sure that they do not lose their businesses. I have already seen that happen and in our communities we are seeing "for lease" signs. That is not good. That is negative. We do not want to see that. We want to see small businesses flourishing and working. We are all supporting and encouraging our communities to support small businesses. It all comes from government and this is where the Government must provide that support. I also acknowledge my colleague John Graham, the shadow Minister for Music and the Night Time Economy, and the fantastic music entertainment sector. One of the most harshly affected sectors was hospitality. I acknowledge that a lot of work has been done by everyone—by our party, by the Coalition and by the sector—to make sure some certainty was given to the hospitality sector in terms of entertainment.

One of the things that people are asking me about at the moment are the big events—dancing, venues and festivals. They are calling on the Government to give us some certainty about that. What criteria are needed to get to that point? I urge the Government to speak to some of the local councils that are being quite conservative in not allowing outdoor dining. The Government and the sector worked together in collaboration and there were some great reforms last year to the 24-hour economy. I ask the Government to push hard on those councils to allow outdoor dining and to invest some funds if it is a resource issue. We want to see more people outdoors but the resources must be there. The Government must provide additional support. I urge the Government and the Treasurer to address the grants criteria and to support and save our small businesses.

**Ms JENNY LEONG (Newtown) (13:15):** I speak on behalf of The Greens on the COVID-19 Recovery Bill. It is wonderful to hear so many members in this place say that we must think about the impact that this pandemic has had on renters and people living under housing stress. I welcome the fact that renters are being talked about by all sides of the Parliament. For too long when we have talked about housing affordability and housing stress we have not heard the voices of renters in the community, and it is important that they be heard. It is crucial that we look at the impact of COVID on our economy. There is a need for the Treasurer to indicate that we are moving to the recovery stage. We may be moving to the recovery stage but, according to some economic indicators such as jobs and growth, when we talk to people in the community about the stresses and impacts of COVID on those who are doing it tough—those who are still dealing with the realities of the situation—it does not seem as though we are in the recovery phase. It is appropriate and crucial to have an extension of and transition to the recovery phase.

I foreshadow that The Greens will be moving some amendments in the other place. We are having constructive conversations in the hope that some additional protections can be provided through a Greens amendment that would make changes to the Residential Tenancies Act. The bill will amend the Residential Tenancies Act 2010 to transition out of the moratorium on evictions introduced in April 2020, which is a welcome addition. These transitional measures will be in place for six months—from 27 March to 26 September. The measures in the bill will limit the ability of landlords to terminate the tenancies of COVID-19-impacted tenants for rental arrears that were accrued in the moratorium period, while supporting tenants and landlords to negotiate and agree on repayment plans. The changes will also ensure that the COVID-19 provisions continue to apply to any termination notice issued prior to 27 March 2021 under the Residential Tenancies Act and the Boarding Houses Act. This will also continue for a period of six months.

The bill also makes a permanent change that will ensure any COVID-19-impacted tenants will not be able to be blacklisted on the tenancy database due to rental arrears accrued during the moratorium—a crucial point. Anyone who has rented a property in Sydney knows that the landlord has the power to put their name on a blacklist, thereby preventing them from being able to rent a property in the future. If we recognise that these COVID-impacted tenants were in rental arrears because of a global pandemic we must then ensure that they cannot be put on the blacklist—an important and crucial addition to the bill. I acknowledge the work of the Treasurer's office in ensuring that that protection was in place. When we were in the middle of the pandemic, everyone who was working from home was scrambling to make sure that that protection was provided.

The Greens' amendments that I have foreshadowed would provide protection to renters during this transition period and would extend that protection. I think we would all agree that providing protection to COVID-impacted tenants at a time when they were impacted as a result of COVID and had to go into rental arrears was absolutely necessary. I think we would also have to be living with our heads buried in the sand or living under a rock to think that what is coming when the Morrison Federal Government ends JobKeeper in this country will not have an impact on people being able to pay their rent. We know that the changes to JobSeeker and to JobKeeper

that will come into effect at the end of March will have a serious impact on people's ability to pay rent and, potentially, on their ability to be able to maintain a safe and secure affordable place to live because they will be evicted. Therefore, it is hugely concerning that in this recovery and transition plan we would see an end to those protections for renters at the end of March at the same time as we would see changes to JobSeeker and an end to the JobKeeper support.

It is absolutely essential that we do not see people forced into homelessness as a result of this pandemic. We are still living in the middle of the repercussions of what is this global pandemic; it is still real. I recognise the need for transition and recovery, but we must also recognise that what is coming at the end of March when we see an end to JobKeeper will have a significant impact on our communities. The Greens' amendments that we will be moving in the other place will be that the protections in the moratorium extension period will cover those who are within the transition period. That is essential because we do not know what will happen at the end of March.

To take a point on the statistics and the information circulated yesterday by the NSW Parliamentary Library Research Service, as at December 2019 in the electorate of Newtown 1,923 people were on the JobSeeker allowance, and as at December 2020, 4,477 people were on JobKeeper. Ending those will have a massive impact on the community, and the realities of high rental areas in our cities will impact people more. I pay tribute to the Tenants' Union for all of its advocacy and support in relation to this. I would very much like to see the protections afforded to renters during this pandemic extended to include the transition period, recognising the very, very unfortunate alignment of the end of this protection period at the end of March with the end of JobKeeper. We know that this is going to have an impact. We know that people cannot live on these rates of pay and that the financial pressure on renters across the community is high.

I conclude by addressing the incredible support and engagement that we saw across the electorate of Newtown for people who were doing it tough. I recognise that while there were protections for COVID-impacted tenants, while there were protections for JobKeeper and JobSeeker increases, one group of people that did not receive support were those who were on temporary protection visas, international students, and students and other people who were on different types of short-term visas. To recover as a State we need to do more to recognise the people who do not live in a situation where they are afforded the supports the Government offers at present and we need to consider how we go about improving the way we do that. It fell to the likes of Addison Road Community Centre, to the local churches and to charity groups to step up and provide that support. It is absolutely crucial when we are looking at how we support people going forward that we do this in a way that encourages international students to come to our city to study.

It is very important to recognise that if the Treasurer and his team are keen to encourage international students to come to New South Wales, there is a very simple and obvious message that we could send right now to international students across this State: New South Wales will finally get rid of the discrimination in not allowing international students to access travel concessions in this State. That would make the Treasurer the champion of all international students across this State. It would encourage high levels of enthusiasm in international students to come to New South Wales to study if we were to finally get rid of that ban on travel concessions for international students in New South Wales.

It has been a long-held passion of mine. I know it is probably sitting as an idea on the desk of multiple people as to how it can be addressed. I very much hope that we can finally put an end to that discrimination to show the community that if we genuinely want to recover and make ourselves better as a result of hardship and tough times during the COVID-19 pandemic, one clear message we can send to international students and communities is that New South Wales is open and welcomes students to come here, that we do not encourage discrimination or whipping up racist fear. The message is that we support travel concessions that can be accessed by international students in New South Wales. I hope that we see some progress. The Greens will move amendments in the upper House that will seek to provide additional cover for renters. We thank the Tenants' Union for its work and input to highlight the gaps. In this place we commit to making sure that renters and the hardship felt by people who suffer from housing and financial stress is put front and centre of this Government's priorities.

**Mr PHILIP DONATO (Orange) (13:26):** I thank the indulgence of the Treasurer in allowing me to make a short contribution to the important COVID-19 Recovery Bill 2021. My colleagues and I will not support the bill. For the record, the reason is that 12 months ago when the original legislation was put in place no-one could foresee what was ahead of us. The forecasting of risk factors that we were seeing globally was that it would be a pandemic like we had never experienced before, which is why we supported the legislation. By and large, the Federal and State governments have done a good job over the past 12 months in keeping us safe. But there comes a time when we need to draw back on the sunset clauses and restore the liberties of people.

NSW Health COVID-19 statistics show that since January 2020, 5,267,667 tests have been carried out, of which 5,081 were confirmed. If my maths is correct that equates to less than 1 per cent. The majority of the

confirmed cases have come from overseas travellers who were quarantined accordingly. I give credit to the State and Federal governments for doing a good job in keeping us safe. But there comes a point in time when we need to start looking at drawing back on these once-in-a-generation laws that were put in place in March 2020. My colleagues and I have concerns that extending those powers for probably 12 months—noting that a regulation is adding another six months, making it 12 months—will mean that those powers have been in place for two years. I cannot see the rationale behind the proportionality of that. It is very difficult to turn it back once government has an appetite for power. It is for those reasons that the Shooters, Fishers and Farmers will not support the bill.

**Mr DOMINIC PERROTTET (Epping—Treasurer) (13:28):** In reply: I thank the shadow Treasurer, the member for Keira, and the members representing the electorates of Holsworthy, Lakemba, Granville, Canterbury, Sydney, Newtown and Orange for their contributions to this debate. Other than the member for Orange, they were supportive of the Government's approach to this bill. We know that the Attorney General introduced his own legislation more specifically related to the Justice and Health clusters in respect of those areas across government where we could extend provisions to support the pandemic response and where there have been circumstances where unnecessary regulations have built up that could be removed for a period of time. If you look at the Government's focus during COVID, this bill continues to deliver on targeted support for those who need it. To the member for Newtown's point, while we have come a long way over the past 12 months and from when we set out with some of these changes—I will get to the leases more particularly, even on the commercial side—there is no doubt that we would not have envisaged the State of New South Wales being in the strong position it is in today. That, as I have always said, is testament to the great health teams that we have.

We have been able to open up the economy and reduce the amount of businesses and people participating in the JobKeeper program. We saw 500,000 people on that program in December. That has now reduced to 350,000 people. But, to the points that have been made in the debate, there is a long way to go. There will be challenges ahead, particularly as that program winds down. I think that the other relevant point that has been raised is the fact that the silver lining of this pandemic has been cutting through government bureaucracy, red tape and regulation. Ultimately, not many people or areas within the New South Wales Government sit there and get government out of the way so that businesses can flourish with the freedom to invest and innovate.

We have seen many changes occur during this period and the world has not ended. In fact, in many ways we have been able to provide better flexibility for businesses and the old way of doing things pre-pandemic should not necessarily be the way that we do things in the future. I look at council regulations. During this debate I think the member for Canterbury raised outdoor dining and measures in place to support that. We have worked very closely with councils, particularly the City of Sydney, on exactly that, allowing businesses to operate their restaurants and bars on the footpaths to get a more alfresco dining environment. For some bizarre reason over time some bureaucrats decided that that would somehow cause a problem to the State. Some of the changes we have made achieved that.

The member for Orange raised valid concerns that lifting these regulations might cause further problems, that we have dealt with the pandemic and we cannot open for the future. That is fair enough, but the member should name what he is referring to. That was a motherhood statement without any specifics associated with it. It is very difficult to respond to that critique in relation to why certain exemptions and restrictions that have been lifted should not remain in place in circumstances where none are specifically referred to. Hopefully the Shooters, Fishers and Farmers in the upper House will provide some clarity on what he is referring to.

I note the member for Canterbury and the member for Granville raised issues in relation to tenancy and information that could be provided. I inform the House that during this period the Government has made available a range of tailored tenancy information and additional services, which it provided early on and which I will come back to, for landlords and tenants to negotiate, and supported over 6,000 phone inquiries, complaints and negotiations. Service NSW, which was obviously established prior to the pandemic, has been instrumental in our success as a State, not just in getting general support from the public in relation to QR codes but also with the teams. We put a lot of investment early on into leveraging up Service NSW to deal with a whole range of areas and put more personnel on to deal with the concerns of our citizens right across the State. It responded to a further 7,000 phone inquiries, and there have been 620,000 views of the NSW Fair Trading moratorium information on its website. The information was certainly out there.

I think success looks like the fact that we have not had a substantial amount of evictions over this period. From the outset of this pandemic that was my concern. We needed to act very quickly to put those provisions in place. However, to the point of the members for the electorates of Canterbury and Granville, that information was out there so that people could quite easily access what, in many circumstances, can be quite complex issues and challenging information to get across. We funded an additional \$2½ million for tenancy advocacy advice and support for tenants to navigate this difficult time. The member for Canterbury also raised outdoor dining. I spoke to that, but we put a trial together in December last year that will go through to 31 October 2021.

I move to the concerns raised by the member for Sydney, Alex Greenwich, and congratulate him on his constructive support during this period. We worked very closely with him and the Lord Mayor of Sydney. One of the significant concerns that I see for us as a State over the next 12 months—and if members look at those JobKeeper numbers, they are not by industry but by geography—is that Sydney is still substantially affected. As the member knows, we worked through the Sydney summit, which, earlier on, people said might have been a talkfest. We brought in all the parties from across the Sydney CBD, recommendations were made and we made some substantial changes during that period, not just in terms of regulation but also investment. The Dine & Discover voucher was actually one of the ideas raised. We increased the payroll tax threshold for businesses from \$1 million to \$1.2 million, up from \$750,000 a few years ago. We cut the payroll tax rate to 4.85 per cent for two years, which is the lowest headline payroll tax rate in the nation. Businesses that did not qualify for payroll tax received a \$15,000 payment.

I turn to the concerns raised by the member for Newtown. She had a very constructive role in the original provisions that were put in place. She reached out to me personally in respect of the issues about which she spoke most passionately in her recent contribution to this debate, being the blacklist for those tenants who had not paid rent, which would then affect their ability to get into accommodation in the future. We made that change based on her advice. There we have it: The Greens and the Coalition working together for a constructive outcome. Let us hope that does not become addictive. Another area addressed in this bill was a decision that the Government and I thought was appropriate. Those tenants—commercial and residential—who found themselves in arrears during the pandemic, from March last year to April this year, could not be forcibly evicted. That was crucial during the pandemic in the past 12 months. Those actions that were in place to mitigate against that challenge—negotiation, mediation and, subsequently, arbitration—will be maintained in the bill. That is crucial.

I note that the member for Newtown has proposed four amendments to the bill. We will review those in the upper House. I can say that the Government supports in principle the third of those amendments, and we will consider our position in the upper House in relation to amendments Nos 1, 2 and 4. That will occur in the other place among the very enlightened members in the upper House, who I am sure will provide inspiration to the bill when it returns to the place of the people down here.

I thank members for the general bipartisanship that has occurred over the past 12 months. From my own personal experience, early on in the pandemic there was no rulebook for some of the provisions that we had to make. When it came to the stimulus measures that we put in place, I remember that very early on I thought the package we initially announced in March would become obsolete within about three days. That is how fast the pandemic was moving. It was not just about providing fiscal support for businesses and people right across New South Wales but also about ensuring protections.

To the points that have been made by the member for Newtown and Labor members opposite, there is a long way to go. Of the concerns of the past 12 months—the industries and people that are affected—some will continue but others will also emerge. Our role will be—as it has been over the past 12 months—to work in as bipartisan a way as possible with business, industry and unions to make sure that as a State and as a great people we get through the next 12 months in the strongest way possible. To the point of the member for Orange: Yes, we need to wind certain things back. Reference those issues specifically in the upper House and they will be considered. I will go back to where I started, which is that this pandemic has taken a knife to unnecessary and burdensome red tape and regulation and allowed our people the freedom to live their lives and operate their businesses in a way that has made for a strong response from our State—not just from an economic perspective, but ultimately a strong economy leads to a vibrant and prosperous society. That is what this bill is all about. I commend it to the House.

**TEMPORARY SPEAKER (Mr Gurmesh Singh):** The question is that this bill be now read a second time.

**Motion agreed to.**

### **Third Reading**

**Mr DOMINIC PERROTTET:** I move:

That this bill be now read a third time.

**Motion agreed to.**

## **LOCAL GOVERNMENT AMENDMENT BILL 2021**

### **Second Reading Debate**

**Debate resumed from 17 March 2021.**

**Mr GREG WARREN (Campbelltown) (13:42):** I am delighted to contribute on behalf of the Opposition towards the Local Government Amendment Bill 2021, more commonly known as the rating bill. I begin by acknowledging the flood-affected communities right across our State, which are currently being ravaged by storms and the effects that floods are having. We know in this place that local councils are the closest level of government to community. I acknowledge all of the volunteers on our front line including SES, RFS and each and every one of those frontline volunteers and workers. I also acknowledge our local councils, which are navigating their way through those challenges at this time. Whether it is up through the Hunter, the North Coast, the mid North Coast, the South Coast or Sydney, they are all doing what good local councils do and supporting their communities during a very challenging time. It again highlights the important role that local government plays in our community and more broadly in society—the vital contribution it makes to our communities.

I will go into more detail in relation to the bill, but it is important that we understand at the outset that it is being introduced by the Government in response to the *Review of the Local Government Rating System* by the Independent Pricing and Regulatory Tribunal [IPART]. We on this side of the House also feel that this is very much about amending the mistakes of the past for the Government and a failed forced merger policy that is seeing communities across the State pay for those mistakes.

Those communities should not have to wear the burden of a government's failed forced merger policy. The draft IPART report was released in August 2016 and presented to the Minister in December 2016. I acknowledge that the current Minister was not the Minister at that time. In June 2019 the final report was released. However, the Government's response was not forthcoming until June last year. Neither the Government nor any local government Minister has ever offered a reason for the extensive period between release of the draft report and the Government's response. The IPART report contained 42 recommendations, of which 13 have been incorporated into the bill in some form.

I turn to the content of the bill. The bill seeks to allow councils created in 2016 by this Government's forced mergers the option to harmonise rates gradually over a period of up to four years instead of by 1 July this year. In any year, councils cannot apply more than 50 per cent of the total increase in rates over the harmonisation period. The bill removes mandatory rating exemptions for land that is the subject of a conservation agreement and creates a new rating category for environmental land. That would not affect land subject to existing agreements where the landholder receives regular financial assistance from the Government. In future, land that is not exempt may be rated as environmental land. The bill also allows councils to levy special rates for infrastructure jointly funded with other levels of government. That will increase council income outside that rate peg without IPART approval. The Opposition is of the view that the IPART approval process is vital and important for independence.

I acknowledge the time the IPART process takes, but that is no reason to remove the independent umpire from the process. If there is an issue with the process, it should be fixed. The umpire should not be removed. The Government should address the issue by doing what any good government should do: Put a process in place that works and that does not make financial impositions or hold back vital infrastructure, expenditure or financial reform. The Government should fix the process rather than abolishing IPART's role in it. The bill allows a time frame for the receipt of postal votes in council elections to be prescribed by regulation. That will allow time frames to be adjusted by regulation in response to changes to Australia Post delivery schedules to ensure that electors are not disenfranchised.

That allows greater flexibility in the appointment of returning officers for countback elections. After the next council elections a council will have the option to fill vacancies in the first 18 months of its term by a countback instead of a by-election. The bill extends terms of office of chairpersons of county councils to two years and aligns the terms of chairpersons of county councils and joint organisations with the electoral terms of councils. The bill gives councils the option, from 1 July 2022, to make superannuation contribution payments for councillors in addition to the payment of councillors' fees. Superannuation should be an equitable entitlement. The optional element of installing superannuation for our local government representatives must be addressed. We must ensure that it does not become a political football, as we have seen happen in many councils during reviews of council allowances in particular. I am sure the Minister would be aware that during these politically turbulent times, code of conduct reports sometimes contain frivolous complaints that are unnecessary, costly to local councils and used simply for the political expediency of individuals, rather than for holding people to account for their actions, behaviour and conduct.

I foreshadow that the Labor Opposition will be moving amendments. I understand that the Government is aware of those amendments. Ultimately, the purpose of the amendments is to provide the communities with the support they need as a result of being forcibly merged against their will by the Government in 2016. There have been serious consequences. I draw the House's attention to the recent inquiry into the changes in the Stronger Communities Fund and the Stronger Country Communities Fund guidelines, which saw many communities across

our State miss out. That inquiry received damning pieces of evidence that displayed a government that felt it could get its scratchers into the public wallet and use it for its own political gain rather than for the needs of communities.

These communities were forcibly merged by this Government. It is only right and just that this Government provides those communities with the adequate financial support they need and have missed out on during that transition. We only need to look at the many councils around our State that were forcibly merged and continue to navigate their way through the challenges of financial sustainability. Look no further than the Central Coast and the mess that has been created there as an outcome of this Government's forced merger. I know that some members opposite will want to go up there and play political games and get their scratchers all over the local council for the benefit of their own existence or to cop a cheap hit. The reality is that the people on the Central Coast are paying the price for a failed policy and an ignorant government that forced them together. The Liberal-Nationals Government in this State is responsible. The Fit for the Future program was ultimately designed by the Government to substantiate its political and ideological intensions. We are now seeing communities pay the price. It is grossly unfair and simply unjust. They should not have to do so. They certainly should not front the cost of a failed policy from a government that had a dearth of respect for and engagement with these affected communities.

In 2016 then Premier Baird and then Deputy Premier Grant established the Stronger Communities Fund and the Stronger Country Communities Fund to support those communities. Adding further insult, a new Premier and a new Deputy Premier changed the guidelines about how the money was to be used. We are not talking about a couple of bucks; we are talking about millions of dollars. I take nothing away from any community receiving adequate, appropriate funding to see good things happen. We on this side of the House understand that good governments govern for all. That is precisely what a future Labor government will do. But we do not accept a government using the public purse for its political expedience rather than for the needs of people around our State, particularly local families, businesses and community organisations that have suffered as an outcome of a flawed policy of forced mergers. What a bungle it was, and it continues today.

That is why the Opposition believes in the Independent Pricing and Regulatory Tribunal, which ensures that probity, and checks and balances are in place. This is particularly important for this Government because it cannot be trusted to manage the public purse in a democratic, fair, just and balanced way. It would invest public money in political opportunity over the needs of people in the councils that it forcibly merged. The Liberals are happy to say, "Yeah, we pork-barrel," but are they forgetting those whose councils were forcibly merged and may be losing their homes? The anxiety and frustration caused by this Government and its inept approach to the distribution of wealth cannot be underestimated. It merged those councils and then the affected communities were not adequately supported through the drought, the floods, the fires and COVID.

These amendments are sensible. They go a long way to providing communities with the support they require. Amendment No. 1 will create a financial support grants scheme for forcibly amalgamated councils. Adopting this amendment is the Government's opportunity to rectify the mistakes of the past by adequately funding those local communities to minimise the potential hardship of harmonisation. This is the Government's chance to get it right. Not only did it get it wrong last time, but also it gloats about it. I remember sitting at home watching a press conference during which the Premier gloated that the Government pork-barrels for political means. That disappointed me because that is not leadership. The people of New South Wales expect better than that, but they were not provided with leadership on the fair and equitable distribution of wealth that they deserve. To see the Premier gloat about pork-barrelling was deeply disappointing not only as a taxpayer and a member of a local community, but also as a member of Parliament. I never thought that I would hear such a thing from anyone from any side of politics for any reason.

The process of de-amalgamating the newly constituted areas involves a business case for demerger proposals and time limits for consideration by the Minister. Councils can submit those business cases, but this bill does not provide a conduit for that process. Opposition amendment No. 2 will ensure that the appropriate levels of legislation, with controls, are in place. The Government will point out that elements of the Act already provide for that mechanism, but the need for these amendments is highlighted by the time it has taken—at significant cost—for Cootamundra-Gundagai Regional Council to de-amalgamate. Supporting these Opposition amendments would tighten that mechanism. If any member wanted to further strengthen that measure, the Opposition would be happy to talk to them. Members on this side of the House understand that the best outcomes are achieved by working together.

**Debate interrupted.**

**TEMPORARY SPEAKER (Mr Lee Evans):** I will now leave the chair. The House will resume at 2.15 p.m.

*Announcements***MEMBER FOR BARWON**

**The SPEAKER:** I wish the member for Barwon a happy forty-fourth birthday for yesterday.

**BRITISH CONSUL-GENERAL MICHAEL WARD**

**The SPEAKER:** I acknowledge outgoing British Consul-General and Deputy Trade Commissioner Michael Ward, who is coming to the end of his time as British Consul-General. I met Michael Ward through the Parliamentary Friends of the United Kingdom. I thank him for his friendship. On behalf of members of the Assembly I thank him for his contribution to the UK's positive relations with New South Wales and Australia.

*Visitors***VISITORS**

**The SPEAKER:** I welcome the guests of the member for Lake Macquarie, who are about to watch question time live from the McKell Room. I welcome Charlton Christian College legal studies teacher Anne Duquemin as well as students Anthony Charlton, Richard Kao, Shelby May, Abbey Greenfield, Laura Hyslop and Jack Drayton.

*Business of the House***SUSPENSION OF STANDING AND SESSIONAL ORDERS: MOTIONS**

**Mr RYAN PARK:** I seek leave to move a motion relating to COVID-19 seating restrictions in the Legislative Assembly Chamber.

**Leave not granted.**

*Question Time***STATE EMERGENCY SERVICE**

**Ms JODI McKAY (Strathfield) (14:18):** I direct my question to the Premier. I acknowledge the efforts of the State's emergency service workers and volunteers, who are doing a phenomenal job in trying conditions. My thoughts are with the thousands of New South Wales residents who have had to leave their homes and animals or who have returned to find their homes and livelihoods destroyed. With 18,000 residents evacuated already and with weather conditions expected to worsen, the role of the SES is more crucial than ever. Do our State's hardworking SES volunteers have all the resourcing and equipment they need to keep themselves and our communities safe?

**The SPEAKER:** That question was inordinately long and it included a statement, but given there has been no objection I will allow the question on this occasion. I do not want that to be a precedent for future questions.

**Ms GLADYS BEREJIKLIAN (Willoughby—Premier) (14:19):** I welcome the question, which goes to the heart of what our State is experiencing today. It gives me an opportunity to provide the House with further updates on the current situation. There is no doubt that our State is going through a catastrophic weather incident. Our SES workers and volunteers are coming under more pressure than they have ever experienced before. I take the opportunity to thank the 1,750 volunteers who are on the ground. They are ably supported by all of the State's emergency services. I accept and appreciate that, given our State has been through the tragedy of the bushfires, the tragedy of the pandemic, previous floods and now this catastrophic event, our strength is in taking a whole-of-government approach.

It is not only the SES and its resources that New South Wales citizens can be assured of but also the full resources of our police, our RFS and all of our emergency agencies. In fact, very early this morning I was pleased to join with Minister Elliott to observe the State Emergency Operations Centre, which has stood up in a very short time to deal with the emergency. Any resources that are required are being provided and any additional resources that have not been anticipated will be provided. I assure everybody that we are using and accessing the equipment and manpower and womanpower of the SES as well as those of all of our agencies. In fact, a lot of RFS trucks are on hand and on stand-by. I acknowledge and thank the many non-government organisations that have assisted, such as bus companies that have volunteered to transport people who are stranded in our regional communities. The feedback I have had from government agencies is that non-government resources that would ordinarily be used to commute citizens are now being used to support the rescue efforts that are taking place across the State.

I cannot underscore enough the severity of the conditions, and they are worsening. The weather conditions in some parts of the State will be worse today than they were yesterday. Some weather conditions will be easing

tomorrow. But what is concerning for us is that even if the weather conditions ease, the floodwaters will continue to rise. Not only do we have the catastrophic front on the eastern seaboard that will not budge, but it is now moving south to the Illawarra and South Coast. There is an additional front coming through the Northern Territory that will impact many inland communities. Of course, the impact of the south-east Queensland front will also impact the Northern Rivers and north-western New South Wales.

This is a weather incident beyond our comprehension. Normally a flood situation is confined to one region with one catastrophic or very serious weather incident. We have multiple weather fronts, and multiple communities have been impacted. In fact, 34 local government areas have already been declared a state of emergency. Please know that the resourcing that the State is putting into the floods is beyond one agency; it covers a number of government agencies. We will provide additional resources as soon as they are asked for. I said to Commissioner Carlene York, as I said to Commissioner Shane Fitzsimmons during the bushfires, "Just tell us what you need and we will provide it." Our Government stands ready and shoulder to shoulder with all of our citizens, workers and volunteers to provide all of the resourcing that is required. That goes without question.

I also extend deep gratitude to the governments of South Australia, Victoria and Queensland. They provided us with emergency rescuers—the people who go into rivers and have the capacity and capability to rescue people. Ordinarily our State would be able to deal with that hands down, but when 18,000 people have been evacuated and another 17,000 people are likely to be evacuated in the next couple of days, that is beyond our means. Therefore I am deeply grateful to those States for offering their services. I am grateful for the responses we have received to date from the Commonwealth in relation to the Australian Defence Force being on stand-by for the clean-up, when that occurs, and for the fact that disaster relief is already hitting people's pockets.

We appreciate that for those who are in this crisis situation it may be difficult for them to access or even apply for relief. Please know that we are trying to get as much of that assistance to them as possible. The Commonwealth and the other States are supporting the resources we have in New South Wales, such as the SES, the RFS, the police and Fire and Rescue NSW. I thank Commissioner Baxter and his team. Fire and Rescue have been amazing, standing up in many communities where they have those trucks and resources. I also thank non-government organisations that have come forward and provided their support. Resourcing is not an issue. What is most concerning to us is the difficult weather conditions that will hamper operations, and making sure that we can rescue people when that is required. In response to the question, please know that whenever any additional resources are required, they will be provided.

### FLOODS AND EMERGENCY SERVICES

**Mr PETER SIDGREAVES (Camden) (14:25):** My question is addressed to the Premier. Will the Premier update the House on how the Government is supporting communities affected by the record floods?

**Ms GLADYS BEREJIKLIAN (Willoughby—Premier) (14:25):** I thank the member for Camden for his question. I accept that as we meet during question time today, literally tens of thousands of people are directly or indirectly impacted by the catastrophic weather conditions across the State. To date there have been 17 evacuation orders in place, covering around 8,000 properties and about 18,000 people. I thank the families and friends who have taken many of those people in to support them. We have about 17 evacuation centres up and running across the State, but the latest information I have is that whilst people are registering, they are not staying at those places. They are staying with families and friends, which is the advice we provided.

I thank not only our emergency services workers and volunteers but also the families, friends and fellow citizens who have been taking care of those who are in this difficult situation. This is a tragic situation in itself, but the absolute irony of having communities that have been impacted by deep drought and bushfires now being impacted by flash flooding is a tragedy beyond proportions. Please know that wherever you are in our State, if you are experiencing extreme anxiety, stress and desperation because of your situation, we are here to support and assist you in any way we can. I acknowledge that 900 flood rescues have already taken place. In addition to the 17 evacuation orders, there are 19 evacuation warnings. That means today a further 17,400 people are on stand-by to be evacuated.

That is an enormous number but one that we have to come to terms with and one that the Government is making preparations for. As members know, flooding has not been isolated to one region. It is across the State and the number of areas that are directly impacted is likely to increase. Thirty four local government areas have been impacted. I know many members in this place on all sides of the House are directly impacted; please know that if you ever require a briefing or support for your community, we are here to work as one to support our citizens when they need us the most. Clarence Valley, Coffs Harbour, Kempsey, MidCoast, the Hunter region, Lake Macquarie, the Central Coast, Hawkesbury, Blue Mountains, the Hills and Wollondilly are just some of the 34 council areas directly impacted. Regrettably we know that number will increase as the day goes on.

The tragedy of the bushfires taught us a number of things, and one is the need to have a whole-of-government response. As I mentioned in my previous answer, I am very pleased that we have already stood up the State Emergency Operations Centre in Homebush. In my living memory I have certainly not experienced this place having to stand up two emergency crisis cabinets and operations: first, the pandemic and now the flood situation. But I know that through our resilience we can withstand anything that is thrown at us. Our first and foremost priority is to support those communities doing it so tough. Again I thank our SES. I had not mentioned the fact that 10,300 requests for assistance have already been made or attended to, and that number will no doubt increase as the days go on.

Whilst weather conditions are varied across the State, even if the sun does come out tomorrow, the flood conditions in parts of New South Wales will continue to worsen, the rivers will continue to rise and people's lives and property will continue to be in danger. I thank the many government agencies—including the Department of Education, which has worked with both government and non-government schools—that have stood shoulder to shoulder with our emergency services personnel. About 200 schools are closed today. Previously I acknowledged the support provided by other State governments and the Commonwealth in making sure that emergency payments get to those who need them most. I remind all members and citizens that they can get direct payments if they have lost their home or belongings or have had damage.

Support for affected local councils, concessional loans for small businesses, freight subsidies and grants are all available. Given our experience in the bushfires, we know that often when people are in a state of shock and despair, they do not know where to turn to get support and help. That is why it is important for all members to ensure that our communities receive that information in a timely way and as easy a way as possible. I am pleased to announce that the New South Wales Government is already considering how it needs to gear up for the clean-up and recovery. Regrettably it will be a long and prolonged process, but we took many learnings from the bushfire experience. I thank the Deputy Premier for again agreeing to be the Government Minister responsible for the clean-up and recovery. [*Extension of time*]

It is no surprise to this place that during and after the catastrophic bushfires, the Government gave attention to learning how it could get support quickly and do the clean-up quickly. Even though we were dealing with the pandemic as well, we were able to meet our time frames in the clean-up operations after the fires. The recovery from the bushfires is still ongoing, as the Deputy Premier, myself and local members would know, but the clean-up was done in a record time and we were able to provide assistance to people in a timely way. The floods will be no different. In fact, it will be more challenging, given that the aftermath of a flood is very different to the aftermath of a fire. The clean-up is much more complicated.

Again I extend my deepest gratitude to the Deputy Premier for taking on the enormous responsibility on behalf of the citizens of this State. He will be supported by Resilience NSW. Following the bushfires and given the advent of the pandemic, the Government determined that it was important to have an agency within the New South Wales Government to not only proactively deal with major catastrophic events but also have a proactive posture in trying to mitigate events in the future across a whole range of issues. The Deputy Premier will be supported by Commissioner Fitzsimmons and Resilience NSW. They have already started to consider where we can start some of the clean-up.

Regrettably some communities have been very frustrated by waiting a few days to come back to their homes. It is not yet safe to do so. As soon as it is safe to do so, please know that you will be supported through the clean-up and recovery. Again I commend and thank the Federal authorities for having the Australian Defence Force on stand-by. There is no doubt that we will be utilising them in some of our communities for the clean-up. In terms of the operations I thank the other States and all of our State emergency services—both paid workers and volunteers—for the efforts they are providing. No matter where they are, they should know that the people of this State are supporting them. We look forward to working together during these very difficult times.

### WARRAGAMBA DAM

**Mr CLAYTON BARR (Cessnock) (14:32):** My question is directed to the water Minister. On behalf of the residents of western Sydney, how much water was proactively released from Warragamba Dam in the lead-up to these flood events?

**Mrs MELINDA PAVEY (Oxley—Minister for Water, Property and Housing) (14:32):** I thank the shadow Minister and member for Cessnock for his important question relating to the concern and fear that many residents in what is known as "the bathtub"—western Sydney and the Hawkesbury-Nepean flood plains—are feeling. The people of Greater Sydney, including Wollongong and the Illawarra, which are serviced by Sydney Water and WaterNSW, appreciate and understand that Warragamba Dam is the city's water catchment. Eighty per cent of Sydney and the Illawarra's water supply comes from that dam, so that is a very reasonable question to ask. That dam operates under a licence, under rules and under law that says that it is a water supply

dam. The dam operates one metre under full supply level to ensure operational and maintenance issues. I also point out that the situation has changed over the past 14 months with the rain in Sydney, remembering that Sydney's water supply was down to 42 per cent in February last year. The lowest that our water supply has ever been was 38 per cent during the Millennium drought. It is important to respect and appreciate that we maintain that water supply and that Warragamba is a water supply dam, not a flood mitigation dam. Having said that, in the past three months we have released 130 gegalitres of water to keep it under that one-metre supply level.

It is important to acknowledge that we have had a one-in-50-year event, or an event that has a 5 per cent chance of occurring in any one year. Some 1,550 gegalitres of water has come through the system and the dam holds 2,000 gegalitres. There is no way that we could have brought the dam level down to a point where it would have avoided a spill. There are people who understand that and it is important that we have these conversations. If we had released water—not that I was in a position to do so—it could have made the situation worse because we would have further saturated the flood plain, keeping in mind that currently half the water going through the river system is from the basin—the bathtub—not the dam. There is a complete saturation of the flood plain. Our SES workers, personnel and management, along with WaterNSW, have been doing an incredible job managing an incredibly stressful situation for the residents of that flood plain.

We must secure Sydney's water supply into the future at all times, but no decisions could have been made to avoid the situation simply because of the rainfall we have experienced in this catchment. I acknowledge that Minister Ayres has been leading the work of Infrastructure NSW. The Government is considering raising Warragamba Dam wall by 14 metres to give certainty and confidence to residents and to change the operations to a flood mitigation as well as water supply dam. I say to the residents and communities across New South Wales who are going through enormous challenges, including my community in Kempsey, the Nambucca Valley, the Bellingen Valley and the Hastings out at Wauchope: This has been an extraordinary event that the Bureau of Meteorology only saw the significance of a couple of days before it started. It was a fast-moving event. I am proud of the work my agencies have done and I am proud of the work of the people of New South Wales.

#### FLOODS AND REGIONAL COMMUNITIES

**Mr MICHAEL JOHNSEN (Upper Hunter) (14:38):** My question is addressed to the Deputy Premier. Will he update the House on the devastating impact the current floods are having on regional communities?

**Mr JOHN BARILARO (Monaro—Minister for Regional New South Wales, Industry and Trade, and Deputy Premier) (14:38):** I thank the member for Upper Hunter, who endured the devastating impact of the rainfall and the floods over the weekend in his electorate. Places such as Gloucester, which was quickly underwater, and Dungog are areas that are feeling the pain. It continues to rain across the State. Yesterday I had the opportunity to travel through Coffs Harbour and up to Nambucca, Kempsey and Telegraph Point where we saw a significant rain event last week and over the weekend. The water Minister and member for Oxley, and I spent the day up there to see the impacts. For me it was one of those moments. I have travelled to those regions over the past 12 to 15 months as the Minister responsible for bushfire recovery and seeing some of the areas that were burnt by bushfires now underwater and flooding is one of those moments where you scratch your head.

At the time when we were dealing with recovering from the fires I never would have thought that I would be back in those regions talking about recovering from floods. We met people on the ground, such as a volunteer at Nambucca hospital who said that this time last year he was fighting fires in his backyard and now he is fighting floods. This is the reality of living in regional and rural New South Wales—we have endured the worst drought, we have been praying for rain and now we have seen it. These two extremes, from drought to rainfall, are difficult. On the mid North Coast about 15,000 people and 6,850 properties have been affected by the evacuation orders, which has impacted our community. Yesterday in Kempsey I had the opportunity, along with Minister Melinda Pavey, the local member, to meet the local mayor, Liz Campbell. At her house on the edge of town on the Macleay River we could see how high the water had risen.

Everybody was on edge that another metre or half a meter of rain—that sounds like a lot, but not in the event of what we saw over the weekend—could mean the town centre of Kempsey would be underwater. Luckily enough we saw the rain subside a bit overnight. But again, as the Premier touched on earlier this afternoon, even if it stops raining in those parts of the State and into those river systems, we know that rain is coming to the north-west of the State inland, and we will continue to see rainfall in the Tweed and Northern Rivers. Even all the water from rain that is falling in the southern part of Queensland will come south at some point. Our river systems, which are already saturated and have burst their edges, will continue to be under pressure. Even if the rain stops, some of the impact of the floods will continue beyond the rainfall event. That is why it is a tough time for many in the region.

Yesterday at Telegraph Point we met a young man called Dinesh, who owns the local servo for rural supplies. It is a sad story because he has a number of businesses in Gloucester as well and about three of them are

underwater. He told us that when he went outside and realised the water was coming he went to move his car. In the time that took—we are talking about two or three minutes—he was pushed back into the shop and had a meter of water up against the building. He spent about three hours inside his shop because he could not open the doors to get out. He busted down a wall at the back of the shop to get out at a time when it was safer. It was devastating for him. His neighbours found him. They were able to keep him dry and gave him some clean clothes.

He told us that story as the water receded and the floods disappeared. Yes, the banks were still high, but a dozen of his neighbours got out and about to help clear and restore the shop, and clean up a lot of the debris. He said he could not thank his neighbours enough. His father moved here about 10 years ago—it might have been a bit longer—from Kenya, originally from India. He saw regional and rural New South Wales as a place to invest in and raise a family. I was lucky enough to meet their son and the family, including his dad. This is the great Australian story: Migrants come to this country for a great opportunity and take every advantage and they do it in rural and regional New South Wales. But they then also feel the impact. Yesterday all he wanted to talk about was his community, whom he spoke of so highly, and the fantastic Australian community spirit of coming together to support him during and after. We will need that community spirit as we start the road to recovery. [*Extension of time*]

Over the next few days and after this week in Parliament I intend to get out and start looking at where we can support communities to start recovery. I will take advice from our emergency services about where it is safe to do so. The crisis of the emergency has not stopped. This week will still be a tough week—the Premier touched on that. I encourage people to keep up to date with the warnings and abide by them. We do not want to see anyone put in danger. We have many people on the ground, including volunteers and the SES. The RFS is on stand-by to support and we have the support offered by the Federal Government through the defence force. I am once again seeing how communities and volunteers come together and, more importantly, how the management and preparedness of our emergency services is at a point where we can feel confident enough to get through the crisis of the emergency and, on top of that, respond to recovery. We will be doing that. I will not pretend that it will not be a tough journey. I have already seen the impact across Kempsey, Nambucca and Telegraph Point—that whole region—on our road infrastructure. We have had landslides, we have lost a lot of amenities, and a lot of homes have been inundated with water.

The impact is real and it is going to take to time clean up. It is very hard to do that after floods when it is still raining. Community spirit is high, but things are tough. I keep using the word resilience: Regional and rural people are resilient. We have had droughts and we have had bushfires. We have gone through the pandemic, like the rest of the nation and the rest of the globe. Parts of the State are being impacted by the destruction of crops from the mouse plague. Now we have floods. But we are resilient. I look forward to working with Commissioner Shane Fitzsimmons because this is going to take a mighty effort and a combined effort of all government resources. We have learnt a lot from the fires. We never pretended we were perfect, but we gave it a bloody mighty go. I am going to give this a mighty go to make sure that we put the best recovery in place.

#### **DARYL MAGUIRE, FORMER MEMBER FOR WAGGA WAGGA**

**Ms SOPHIE COTSIS (Canterbury) (14:45):** My question is directed to the Premier. ICAC has recommended Daryl Maguire face criminal charges for lying under oath about his involvement with the property developer Country Garden. Given he told the Premier about his dealings with Country Garden in a phone call five months before he took the stand, why did she not tell ICAC what she knew?

**The SPEAKER:** Order! I call the member for Wakehurst to order for the first time. I call the member for Canterbury to order for the first time. I call the member for Keira to order for the first time. I call the member for Baulkham Hills to order for the first time. I call the member for Bathurst to order for the first time. I call the member for Baulkham Hills to order for the second time. I call the member for Canterbury to order for the second time. I call the member for Bega to order for the first time.

**Ms GLADYS BEREJIKLIAN (Willoughby—Premier) (14:46):** The New South Wales Government welcomes the report. There are a number of recommendations we will consider in due course, and the relevant matters there will be considered by the DPP.

#### **STATE BUDGET AND EMERGENCY SERVICES**

**Ms ROBYN PRESTON (Hawkesbury) (14:47):** My question is addressed to the Treasurer. Will the Treasurer update the House on the strong budget position underpinning the Government's response to the floods across the State?

**Mr DOMINIC PERROTTET (Epping—Treasurer) (14:47):** I thank the member for Hawkesbury for all the work that she is doing looking after her local community at this difficult time. As both the Premier and the Deputy Premier have pointed out, the past 15 months have been an incredibly difficult time for people across our

State, both in the bush and in metropolitan New South Wales. We have come through the droughts, the bushfires, the pandemic and this flood. Our Government remains completely committed to doing whatever is necessary to help our communities right across New South Wales to pull through in this difficult time. In government you can prepare for the good times; it is harder to prepare for the more difficult times that come our way. Our sound financial management since coming to office 10 years ago has laid strong fiscal foundations so we have been able to invest record amounts when it is necessary.

**The SPEAKER:** I call the member for Kiama to order for the first time. I call the member for Shellharbour to order for the first time.

**Mr DOMINIC PERROTTET:** There are average surpluses of \$3.4 billion. As members on this side of the House know so well, the support we have been able to give for the bushfires and the drought have come off the back of that.

**The SPEAKER:** I call the member for The Entrance to order for the first time.

**Mr DOMINIC PERROTTET:** Before COVID struck, labour income growth had outperformed the national average since the Government came to office in 2011. Annual average growth was 4 per cent compared with 3.8 per cent nationally. We know the recent unemployment rate of 4.5 per cent was the lowest of all the States. Between 2011 and 2020, New South Wales employment increased by over 650,000—more than any other State—accounting for 36.3 per cent of the national increase in employment between 2011 and 2020. As the Premier and Deputy Premier know, when the bushfires hit we committed more than \$4.4 billion over five years to support affected communities. I was pleased to see the Premier today appoint the Deputy Premier to coordinate the response to the floods following a successful coordinated response during the clean-up after the bushfires. As the Premier pointed out clearly, this is not just a matter for the emergency services. Whether it has been in bushfire or drought, the strength of this Government has been in the coordinated approach it has taken.

We have delivered \$1 billion to help communities impacted by the bushfires. Small Business Recovery Grants worth \$335 million have supported more than 20,000 businesses. The Minister knows well we provided Fire and Rescue NSW with a record investment of \$900 million in 2021 to support frontline firefighters, and we are obviously responding to the reports that come through. I told the emergency services Minister during the bushfire crisis that he would have any financial assistance he needed. During one of the worst droughts on record we have invested \$4.5 billion. So \$9 billion has been spent to support communities that have been significantly affected by bushfires and droughts, including drought relief for farmers and farming communities. We invested \$1 billion in the Farm Innovation Fund to provide concessional loans and greater drought resilience. We handed down \$244 million for waiving Local Land Services rates and other government charges. With the pandemic off the back of all of that, we allocated \$29 billion to a range of health, social support and economic stimulus measures.

As I said, we come to these challenges in a very strong position, not just fiscally but also economically. I thank the Treasurer of Victoria, Tim Pallas, who has reached out to provide whatever support the Victorian Government can to assist us at this time. It is not just the past 10 years. In the 2021 budget we ensured that we committed an unprecedented \$1.8 billion in emergency services funding. With the help of the Minister's advocacy, the SES received a record investment of \$201 million of funding to support its frontline volunteers to prepare and respond for these events. The funding has ensured that 10,500 SES volunteers are trained and equipped to the highest standards. To the Leader of the Opposition's first question to the Premier—it demonstrates that that support is there. It has not just come about since the flood. It has been there in our preparation of budgets in the past, and if more support is required it will be delivered.

#### WARRAGAMBA DAM MINISTERIAL MEETING

**Mr CLAYTON BARR (Cessnock) (14:52):** My question is directed to the Minister for Police and Emergency Services. Given that the Minister has acknowledged he was in a meeting last October to discuss dam levels at Warragamba Dam, who else was in that meeting with him?

**The SPEAKER:** Order! I call the member for Kiama to order for the second time.

**Mr DAVID ELLIOTT (Baulkham Hills—Minister for Police and Emergency Services) (14:52):** I am delighted to see the Opposition's question time tactics remain committed to three-day-old newspaper articles. This has already been in the public domain. I take this opportunity to acknowledge the many MPs who have been in daily communication with me about the welfare of local SES members in their electorates and the two—only two—Labor backbenchers who have taken an interest in the welfare of the SES as well.

**Ms Yasmin Catley:** You're the last person we'd contact.

**Mr DAVID ELLIOTT:** You are so rude.

**Ms Yasmin Catley:** No, I'm not.

**The SPEAKER:** I call the member for Swansea to order for the first time. I call the member for Swansea to order for the second time.

**Mr DAVID ELLIOTT:** I have to refer the member to our publicly disclosed diaries. Whoever was at that meeting I am sure will be disclosed publicly.

#### FLOODS AND WESTERN SYDNEY

**Mr KEVIN CONOLLY (Riverstone) (14:54):** My question is addressed to the Minister for Jobs, Investment, Tourism and Western Sydney. Will the Minister update the House on the impacts of the flood events in western Sydney and how the Hawkesbury-Nepean Flood Strategy is creating a more resilient community?

**Mr STUART AYRES (Penrith—Minister for Jobs, Investment, Tourism and Western Sydney) (14:54):** I thank the member for Riverstone. His community suffers the effects of flooding, particularly in larger-scale floods, and even before being elected as the local member I know that in local government he has been a passionate advocate for flood mitigation across western Sydney. There is no doubt that what we are seeing right across the State of New South Wales is a significant flood event that many people have never witnessed before in their lives. Up on the mid North Coast in excess of 15,000 residents have needed to be evacuated from their homes and from their communities. This is an incredibly distressing event that requires a lot of support from local community members, emergency services and, indeed, every member of this place.

As a representative for western Sydney, which is also going through its own challenges with flood right now, my heart goes out to those communities across regional New South Wales, but particularly up on the North Coast where they are experiencing what is effectively a one-in-100-year flood event in some locations. In western Sydney, Mother Nature is giving us a very serious lesson about the risks associated with this valley. We have known for a very long time that the Hawkesbury-Nepean Valley is the highest risk flood location of anywhere in Australia.

**The SPEAKER:** Order! I place the member for Blue Mountains on two calls to order.

**Mr STUART AYRES:** It is critical that people understand all the actions that have been taken over many years to reduce the risk of floods in communities. Both sides of politics in the State Government and local government have largely adopted a one-in-100-year development level across western Sydney to ensure that people are not living in low-lying areas. The history of development across western Sydney has meant that there are towns and villages that have been built in those locations, and they are the areas that are being impacted right now. Over time we have improved our knowledge base on where floodwater goes and with that knowledge base we have moved people further and further away from the risk. But the risk still exists. That is why it was so important that we released the Hawkesbury-Nepean Flood Strategy a few years ago, which has already led to that community being more resilient during this flood that we are experiencing right now.

There has been a lot of talk about raising Warragamba Dam wall and I will address that in a minute, but there are many other actions that the Government has taken: a greater level of coordination between councils about where development goes; and improved local road structures so people can travel on roads rather than being impacted by floodwaters, and there is more work to do on that. It took this Government to put flood evacuation signs into the Hawkesbury-Nepean. Just a few short years ago there were no flood evacuation signs—no arrows to tell people where to go. It is so critical that we have been able to build this level of resilience. In fact, right now the community is demonstrating that resilience. We are seeing a one-in-50-year flood event in this community. The way the community is responding and the way it is working with the SES, the way those evacuation orders have been responded to by the community, the way local governments have worked alongside emergency services and the way all parts of governments have worked have ensured that those people who have been most disrupted by this flood event are getting the support that they need.

However, there is no doubt that there is a need to further improve flood mitigation in the Hawkesbury-Nepean. That is the reason the New South Wales Government has a policy position of raising Warragamba Dam wall to hold 14 metres of additional water in a temporary fashion to reduce the flood event downstream. To be really clear, to 6.00 p.m. last night around 770 gegalitres of water has come into Warragamba Dam and has flushed down the river system. If we had a 14-metre mitigation wall above Warragamba Dam the dam would not have spilled in the past three to four days; we would have been able to hold that water back.

**The SPEAKER:** Order! Members in the Cooper gallery will remain silent.

**Mr STUART AYRES:** What is crucial is that there are low-lying areas of the Hawkesbury-Nepean that would flood in any circumstance because of where that development exists. Raising the dam wall will allow us to hold those waters back so more water can make its way to the ocean. There is no doubt that a high dam wall will

reduce the peaks of floodwaters. There is no doubt that raising the dam wall will also ensure that some areas will not be flooded at all. [*Extension of time*]

**The SPEAKER:** I ask members in the Cooper gallery to remain silent.

**Mr STUART AYRES:** There is no doubt that the Government's position of raising the dam wall will reduce the impact of floods in the Hawkesbury-Nepean. We are working through every element to make sure that the dam wall gets raised. I want to be clear that there are multiple other options that the Government considered before settling on this position. Those options include the compulsory acquisition of people's homes and removing people from the community; river dredging; the creation of levies; the removal of restrictions and opening up the Sackville Gorge; the construction of new dams; lowering the water supply, which we heard the water Minister speak about earlier; and increasing the height of the dam wall to even higher levels. All of those options were considered—and they were all available for every member of the public to access in our options assessment report, which is on the Infrastructure NSW website—and all of those options performed worse than raising the dam wall by 14 metres.

This is about making sure that we invest in the infrastructure to give western Sydney the flood mitigation that it deserves. We cannot go back and make changes to communities that were established in locations in some cases almost 200 years ago. What we can do is learn the lessons of this flood event and past flood events to make sure that that we mitigate these flood impacts in the future. There is no doubt that Mother Nature is giving us a very serious lesson.

**The SPEAKER:** I call the member for Blue Mountains to order for the third time. I call the member for Summer Hill to order for the first time.

**Mr STUART AYRES:** If we do not heed the lessons of this event we will be doomed to make the same mistakes of past governments in the future. What we are doing now is building a more resilient community and we are giving them everything they need to support themselves in this high-risk flood location.

#### **JOBKEEPER AND MUSIC VENUES**

**Mr ALEX GREENWICH (Sydney) (15:01):** My question is directed to the Treasurer. Given that JobKeeper ends next week and a number of live music and performance venues are going out of business, will the Government urgently provide a financial support package to these venues, which contribute so much to Sydney?

**Mr DOMINIC PERROTTET (Epping—Treasurer) (15:02):** I thank the member for Sydney—the greatest member for Sydney since Joseph Jackson in 1922 to 1927, who was the Nationalist member who became one of the founding fathers of the Liberal Party. Look at the great legacy he would be proud of with the member for Sydney. It has been a while since we were there, but it is great to see the constructive nature of the member for Sydney in working with the Government during this time, and particularly his advocacy for Sydney and the Sydney CBD, because we know—to his point—that JobKeeper finishes in March. Yes, certain industries have been impacted, and we will touch on those but, importantly, from a geographical perspective the Sydney CBD has been significantly impacted. We identified that very early on and the member participated in our Sydney summit when we came together with a lot of businesses locally and, through those discussions, implemented many policies that have had a substantial impact on businesses in the Sydney CBD.

Early on, 52,000 small businesses benefited as we rolled out \$10,000 grants and \$3,000 recovery grants to 36,000 small businesses, at a total value of \$109 million. The member for Sydney is very aware of, and has supported and called for, prior to the budget, an increase in the payroll tax threshold, which we increased to \$1.25 million and put the rate down to 4.85 per cent for the next two years, which is the lowest headline rate in the nation. There was also funding through the arts and cultural organisations. Stage one funding was provided for non-profits in financial distress. Funding was also provided for sector-specific initiatives to help volunteer, community-based arts and cultural organisations remain operational with one-off grants.

As part of the work to bring people back to the CBD, which the member assisted us with, we have had highly successful evenings. I was at Sunset Piazza having dinner with the lord mayor as that kicked off. Summer in the Domain unfortunately has been washed out, but it has been deferred. I watched some brave souls the other day getting drenched out there. But it has been deferred to ensure these events continue going forward. As the jobs Minister knows, Great Southern Nights—1,000 gigs at venues—was incredibly successful right across the State. In Sydney, the ArtHouse Hotel, the Chippo Hotel, the Lansdowne Hotel, the Pyrmont Bridge Hotel and the Factory Theatre were engaged in the event.

The Minister has also done work in relation to the 24-hour economy. Relaxing the lockout laws and getting them out of the way, we have been able to put ourselves and the Sydney CBD in the best position possible. But

as I have said, there is more to do. If I look at the businesses on JobKeeper today, there are 7,859 as at December in the arts and recreational services. That is on the higher end compared to other industries. There are 22,341 individuals on JobKeeper from December in the same area, arts and recreational services. Of concern are those occupations that are limited in receiving targeted support post-March. Around five and a half thousand people are in the category of musicians and entertainers.

The answer to the question is, yes, we are acutely aware of the challenges the industry faces. We have been working very closely with them, just like the other support and grants we have provided over the course of the past year. I have said that the support packages that we will provide in the next 12 months will be different to those provided in the past 12 months. They will be tailored particularly to those areas, as we have ensured that our stimulus is complementary to the Federal Government's so that there is as little crossover as possible. I assure the member that the Government is aware of his concerns. In the near future there will be an announcement to provide further support to the industry. The Government has made the point throughout this entire pandemic that our success will be in keeping as many businesses in business and as many people in jobs during this time. We are regularly monitoring the data. I appreciate the constructive advocacy of the member for Sydney. He will soon see the announcement from the New South Wales Government.

### FLOODS AND EMERGENCY SERVICES

**Ms MELANIE GIBBONS (Holsworthy) (15:07):** My question is addressed to the Minister for Police and Emergency Services. Will the Minister update the House on the recent severe weather and the response by our emergency services?

**Mr DAVID ELLIOTT (Baulkham Hills—Minister for Police and Emergency Services) (15:07):** I thank the member for Holsworthy for her question. I certainly congratulate her on her stellar contribution to the Emergency Services portfolio as the Parliamentary Secretary. I think I speak for every member of the House in saying that our hearts are breaking as we see communities impacted by damaging storms and floods, but our hearts are also filled and lifted with the stories of resilience right across this State. This is not just a Sydney problem. Indeed, this severe weather event is impacting coastal communities, inland rural villages and metropolitan Sydney alike. Our SES volunteers have worked round the clock over the past few days, responding to requests for assistance, completing flood rescues, door-knocking homes in harm's way and sandbagging areas to protect communities. There have been more than 10,000 requests for assistance to the SES, with over 1,500 in the last 24 hours alone. There have been 900 flood rescues.

But we have had too many instances where people are not heeding the warnings. Floodwaters are dangerous and unpredictable. People should never drive, walk or ride through floodwater. If possible, we encourage our constituents to stay off the roads and do not drive if they do not have to. Statewide there are currently 17 evacuation orders in place, affecting 18,000 people and 8,000 properties. A further 21 evacuation warnings are also current, affecting a further 19,200 people. Overall a total of 29 evacuation centres have been opened across the State for this current event in response to the evacuation orders and warnings. Seventeen evacuation centres remain open across the impacted areas, with around 100 staff from Resilience NSW, the Department of Communities and Justice and partner organisations offering emergency accommodation and other support to affected communities.

Yesterday I visited an evacuation centre in western Sydney and I am pleased with the level of support and care being offered to victims of the floods. I inform the House that more than 2,300 people have registered for assistance and commercial accommodation is being provided to a further 300 people. We are closely monitoring a number of areas, including the Hawkesbury-Nepean Valley, the mid North Coast and inland rural communities as they experience heavy rains. I place on record my sincere gratitude and thanks to our SES volunteers and emergency services personnel, including Fire and Rescue NSW, the NSW RFS, the NSW Police Force, NSW Ambulance, Surf Life Saving NSW, the NSW Volunteer Rescue Association, Marine Rescue NSW and St John Ambulance, which are all working tirelessly and in sync to protect lives and homes. We have at least 1,750 SES volunteers and staff engaged in operations as we speak. The Rural Fire Service has contributed around 500 personnel in strike teams each day in addition to local brigade activity and also has staffed 15 search and rescue helicopters.

Fire and Rescue NSW has committed 11 strike teams, including some of its highly trained flood rescue technicians and impact assessment teams. As we face a number of challenging weather fronts, I thank Queensland, Victoria and South Australia for sending volunteers to assist us, with the first contingent of Victorian SES volunteers arriving last night at Sydney Kingsford Smith Airport and being deployed on operations today. I can inform the House that the State Emergency Operations Centre [SEOC] stood up yesterday morning, confirming the large-scale, multi-agency response to this severe weather event. The SEOC will allow access to live information, intelligence sharing and digital mapping as well as the rapid circulation of critical updates to our communities. The Prime Minister recently made strong remarks about making the Australian Defence Force

available should we need its support. I am delighted to inform the House that two requests have been made by New South Wales, including for aircraft assets as well as defence personnel to assist with the clean-up.

Thousands of our first responders have been part of this amazing multi-agency response. Today I will share a few stories of their heroism over recent days. A helicopter, *Helitack 204*, was called to rescue a family of five in rising floodwaters just north of Taree on Saturday morning. Luckily, all five family members are now safe and well. It was also thrilling to see the rescue from Tuncurry, where flood rescue technicians rescued a family after the Manning River broke its banks, the team wading through water containing snakes and debris in darkness to reach the stranded family. We also continue with our operations to keep the community safe in large parts of the State. Recovery operations have already commenced in other areas. Natural disaster declarations have been issued in 34 local government areas, triggering a range of assistance measures, including help for eligible people whose homes or belongings have been damaged; support for affected local councils to help with the costs of cleaning up and restoring damaged essential public assets; concessional interest rate loans for small businesses, primary producers and non-profit organisations; freight subsidies for primary producers; and grants for eligible not-for-profit organisations. [*Extension of time*]

As the impact of the severe weather becomes clearer to us, the New South Wales Government will no doubt offer more financial assistance to support affected communities. This is just the start, as we all know recovery can be a long journey. But I assure members of the House that those who are impacted and those communities that are suffering will see the New South Wales Government alongside them on every step of the journey.

#### *Documents*

### **OMBUDSMAN**

#### **Reports**

**The SPEAKER:** In accordance with section 31AA of the Ombudsman Act 1974, I announce receipt of the Special Report to Parliament of the NSW Ombudsman entitled *2020 hindsight: the first 12 months of the COVID-19 pandemic*, dated 22 March 2021. I order that the report be printed.

### **INDEPENDENT COMMISSION AGAINST CORRUPTION**

#### **Reports**

**The SPEAKER:** In accordance with section 78 of the Independent Commission Against Corruption Act 1988, I announce receipt of the report of the Independent Commission Against Corruption entitled *Investigation into the conduct of councillors of the former Canterbury City Council and others*, dated March 2021. I order that the report be printed.

#### *Committees*

### **LEGISLATION REVIEW COMMITTEE**

#### **Report: Legislation Review Digest No. 28/57**

**Ms FELICITY WILSON:** As Chair: I table the report of the Legislation Review Committee entitled *Legislation Review Digest No. 28/57*, dated 23 March 2021. I move:

That the report be printed.

#### **Motion agreed to.**

**Ms FELICITY WILSON:** I also table the minutes of the committee meeting regarding *Legislation Review Digest No. 27/57*, dated 16 February 2021.

#### *Petitions*

### **RESPONSES TO PETITIONS**

**The CLERK:** I announce that the following Minister has lodged a response to an electronic petition signed by more than 500 persons:

The Hon. Andrew Constance—Freshwater Manly Ferries—lodged 16 February 2021 (Mr Chris Minns)

*Bills***LOCAL GOVERNMENT AMENDMENT BILL 2021****Second Reading Debate****Debate resumed from an earlier hour.**

**Mr GREG WARREN (Campbelltown) (15:15):** I continue my earlier contribution. My closing remarks were about the Opposition's proposed amendments, which are about tightening existing measures and provisions. That is consistent with the needs of the affected communities to determine a better outcome for them. That is what they are looking for from a legislative perspective: to provide them with that conduit. We feel that the Labor Opposition's amendments do so appropriately and, importantly, do so adequately. There has been much debate in this House over time about the forced amalgamations—a very robust and long-running debate that has had consequences across the affected councils. I again acknowledge that, whilst it was the Government's action, it is not the action of the Minister for Local Government that we intend to rectify today.

The Minister and I do not agree on everything all the time, but one thing we do agree on is the importance of local government and the role that local councils play in our community. We cannot deny the serious adverse effect that the forced amalgamations have had and, in many cases, the financial unsustainability of those councils. We cannot move past the reality of the issues and challenges that those communities and councils continue to confront. The Minister is aware of the Labor Opposition's amendments. I accept that she is willing to consider them, and I thank her for that. I know we have a lot of business before us today and there are many speakers on this important legislation, so I will not prolong my contribution. But I take this opportunity to appropriately summarise our amendments, which are intended to provide provisions and measures to tighten the legislation and make it better for communities.

Those sensible amendments will support local councils and local communities to ensure that their demands are met, that they can move forward and that we can finally put an end to this debacle for local government and the serious challenges that it has been confronting. With respect, this is the Government's opportunity to amend the fatal mistakes of the past caused by its draconian approach to local government and to ensure that provisions are in place so councils can get the support they so desperately need. I acknowledge the United Services Union, Local Government NSW, all stakeholders, our councils, our councillors, my colleagues who have engaged with this long conversation and colleagues on the other side of the House who have approached me with the concerns of their communities.

I acknowledge my own staff and all staff in the office of the Leader of the Opposition. I acknowledge the Minister's staff, who reached out to provide information when needed. Ultimately, the best outcomes are achieved by working together. We will work with the Government, but we will not yield when it comes to providing affected communities with what they need and deserve. We will watch this debate closely. We urge the Government and the crossbench to support the Labor amendments. They are sensible amendments that will provide a better outcome for communities across the State that desperately need it. I commend the bill to the House.

**Mr ADAM CROUCH (Terrigal) (15:20):** I speak in support of the Local Government Amendment Bill 2021 and note the Minister's presence in the Chamber since the commencement of this debate. The bill includes a number of measures designed to assist councils in harmonising their rating structures from 1 July 2021. Those measures are of course particularly relevant to the 17 local councils created in 2016 and the communities that still need to bring together the rating structures of their former council areas. Those 17 councils are from right across the State. In regional and rural New South Wales, we have seen my own Central Coast Council in the news quite recently. That brings me to the point the shadow Minister made during his speech when he said that the councils were forcibly amalgamated.

I note that the shadow Minister visited the Central Coast recently and was called out by a local journalist for using those same words. The journalist was very quick to correct the shadow Minister that both Wyong Shire Council and Gosford Shire Council voted to amalgamate. Let us clear up the myth that Opposition members have been spreading because both councils actually voted to amalgamate, so it was a voluntary amalgamation. Through the Fit for the Future process, the Central Coast community overwhelmingly supported the amalgamation and the creation of one regional council for our region. We on the Central Coast know that we are the Central Coast. We are not Gosford and we are not Wyong; we are one Central Coast. Let us be clear about that. It was quite amusing that the shadow Minister was called out by a member of our own local media, Dave Abrahams from the *Coast Community News*, who obviously set the facts straight during that press conference.

In addition to the Central Coast Council, the voluntary amalgamations included Dubbo, Edward River, Federation, Hilltops, MidCoast, Murrumbidgee, Snowy Monaro and Snowy Valleys councils. There were also councils like Bayside, City of Canterbury Bankstown, Cumberland, Georges River, Inner West, Northern Beaches

and City of Parramatta councils. They are all due to harmonise their rating structures from 1 July this year. As members will be aware, since 2017 ratepayers of councils that were created by mergers have received the benefit of a freeze on their councils' existing rate paths. At that time, the Local Government Act 1993 was amended to freeze the rate paths for new councils created in 2016 for four years. That effective freeze ensured that ratepayers would pay, for an initial period only, the same rates they would have been charged if their councils had not merged.

At the end of the rate path freeze, each council will need to harmonise to a single rating structure. In practice, that means residential ratepayers will pay the same rate in the dollar on their properties unless councils create different rates for different categories and subcategories of land, as is permitted under the Act. In 2019 a further amendment was made to the Local Government Act 1993 that gave the then Minister the power to allow councils a further year to harmonise their rates. That will end on 1 July this year. Ultimately, 17 of the 20 councils created in 2016 chose to take up that option and receive an extension of time. Those councils have now had five years to talk to their communities about the services and infrastructure they want from their councils and what they are prepared to pay for those services through rates.

I understand that many of those councils are doing exactly that. They have begun to have detailed conversations with their communities about the rating structure that is to apply from 1 July. I am bitterly disappointed that the Central Coast Council has left it right up until the last minute to implement its rate harmonisation. Central Coast Council has been in existence since 2016. It was provided with four years to do this and was also given an additional year on top of that through the gracious extension by the Minister. It has had five years to discuss with the community the issues of harmonisation. It has provided the Central Coast Council with five years to discuss harmonisation with our community. That needs to go on the record because it has not occurred.

The bill provides this council with a further four years to implement rate harmonisations so that ratepayers do not have to shoulder a massive fluctuation in rates at the same time as the council tries to recover from its appalling financial situation. As the Minister has said, the situation that the Central Coast Council is in is unprecedented. Let me be clear: The community knows exactly who is responsible and it has nothing to do with amalgamation. The blame lays squarely with six Labor and two Independent councillors who had the balance of power when voting. The council hid its financial reports from the community and the Minister. It is unconscionable that those people have allowed that situation to arise. They failed to be open and transparent with the community and the community knows who is responsible for the current situation. The community wants those councillors to be held to account and that is exactly what I intend to do: They will not be let off scot-free. Hiding more than half a billion dollars of debt from the community and the Minister is unacceptable. In addition, they failed to talk about harmonisation for almost five years and now want the ratepayers to stump up and cop the lot. That is totally unacceptable.

The bill brings a balanced and measured approach to harmonisation. I congratulate the Minister and her team on this balanced and measured approach to harmonisation as it will allow—despite the COVID-19 pandemic on the Central Coast and the associated difficulties—an option for harmonisation to be spaced out over an additional four years. It will reduce the pain to the ratepayers, who are already suffering because of what was hidden from them by the council; they certainly do not need more pain. I look forward to the member for Gosford supporting the bill, which will help ratepayers in her electorate as well. I am sure she will say the bill is wonderful; if not, she will need to explain to her community why she does not support it. A number of measures in the bill are directed to providing these councils and communities with greater flexibility as they undertake this task. The bill will provide all councils, including those councils harmonising rates, with greater flexibility to create new rating categories and subcategories.

In particular, it will enable councils to choose to keep different rates for farmland based in their location. It will allow newly separated residential rates to be set in urban areas like Greater Sydney and the Central Coast. It would be a matter for those councils to determine in consultation with their communities should the bill become law. It is what councils should be doing in consultation with their communities. The bill provides a clear pathway for the 17 councils created in 2016 to harmonise their rating structures, including the council that was voluntarily amalgamated on the Central Coast. There was no forced amalgamation. That includes allowing the option of a gradual transition to a new single rate structure for the whole local government area over a four-year period. It provides the council with the ability to reduce the impact on ratepayers. Without the measures in the bill, councils need to create a single harmonised rate structure in a single year commencing on 1 July, which would lead to immediate and significant rate increases in many areas, including the Central Coast. To help councils limit these impacts, the bill proposes to provide the option of gradually changing to a new rating structure over up to four years for residential, farming and business rates.

The proposed four-year term provides for gradual change while setting a reasonable limit on how long some ratepayers are effectively subsidising others. I will repeat that: The proposed four-year term provides for

gradual change while setting a reasonable limit to how long some ratepayers are effectively subsidising others. Under the bill, councils that choose to take up the gradual harmonisation option will need to apply no more than 50 per cent of the total increase in rates for each rating category over the period in any one year. Those councils will also be required to advise ratepayers in advance about what they intend to do in each year. It will allow councils with different legacy rating structures to harmonise in consultation with their communities according to local circumstances and conditions under the Integrated Planning and Reporting framework. The Local Government Amendment Bill provides each council required to harmonise rates with greater flexibility to distribute the burden of rates in a fairer and more equitable way.

It will help to limit the impact of the changes for residential, farming and business rates by giving councils the option to gradually move to a single rate structure. As I said previously, the shadow Minister has misrepresented to the House the Central Coast Council amalgamation. It is clear that Wyong Shire Council and Gosford City Council voluntarily amalgamated and the Central Coast community overwhelmingly supported the amalgamation of those two councils. Labor members can try to blame whoever they want to but everyone in our community knows exactly who is responsible for the situation that has been created within the Central Coast Council. There are more questions that need to be answered. [*Extension of time*]

The people of the Central Coast will not easily be persuaded or ridden over. Their judgement cannot be clouded on this issue. They know exactly who is responsible. They understand that it has been hidden from them time and time again over months and months with the result that they are expected to pick up the lion's share of the cost of the financial mess that has been left as a legacy by the council. The bill provides protection for those ratepayers on the Central Coast who will be unfairly burdened by a rapid implementation of harmonisation. It should have been discussed with them over the past five years, not at the eleventh hour when the council is half a billion dollars in debt and trying to find a way out including slugging the ratepayers. That is totally unacceptable. I acknowledge the amount of time that the Minister has spent with me listening to the concerns of the Central Coast community. I will continue to be the voice of the Central Coast to the Minister on the issue. She knows how the community feels about this. The bill will go a long way to protecting the rights of the community and the ratepayers of the Central Coast. They should be put first in this situation and that is what this bill does. I commend the bill to the House.

**Mr RON HOENIG (Heffron) (15:31):** I make a contribution to debate on the Local Government Amendment Bill 2021. The shadow Minister for Local Government and member for Campbelltown has made a contribution to debate to the bill. As I am bound to I endorse the remarks he made to the House—whatever they may have been. I am aware that a bill in respect of the amalgamated councils needs to be considered by this Parliament. Otherwise the amalgamated councils will be required to harmonise rates for 1 July 2021, which has a significant impact upon various council areas, in particular my electorate, which includes the Bayside Council area of Mascot and East Lakes and the Inner West Council area of Tempe, Sydenham and St Peters. Residents in those areas will pay the usually substantial rate increases unless there is the opportunity to harmonise. The fundamental principle that needs to be considered is that in the midst of a pandemic many people are out of work and placing them in a situation where there is an increase in rates, effectively a property tax, is a terrible burden to impose upon them.

Bayside Council has an application in to the Independent Pricing and Regulatory Tribunal [IPART] to increase the minimum rates—that is all the unit holders in Mascot and East Lakes in my electorate—by some 40 per cent. I have made a submission and I have encouraged people within my electorate to make submissions. To put it in context and indicate to the Government of the day that it is not political, I say that Sydney airport is located in my electorate and 11,000 people have lost their jobs at Sydney airport, not including those working with airlines. Most of those people live in my electorate and they cannot pay their mortgages. They have no income. Many of the Qantas pilots are at Woolworths at East Gardens stacking shelves. There have been no pay increases, including to politicians. The frontline workers have only had a 0.3 per cent increase in wages and they cannot afford an increase in property tax at this particular point in time during the pandemic. If a bill is not enacted and rates harmonised, it will have an adverse effect on my electorate and the people in my electorate. It should never have come to this. The bill should not have been presented at this late stage.

The Government has known, as we all have, that the Local Government Act had an arbitrary period of time for councils to harmonise. Once again, this Government does not trust councils to harmonise themselves and to determine when their communities have the capacity to pay. The Opposition, through the member for Campbelltown, will seek to extend the four-year period to at least eight years to allow amalgamated councils to harmonise themselves. Rather than enact a bill to fix the shambles of amalgamated councils—and most of them are a shambles, including the two in my electorate—the bill includes a pile of rating amendments purporting to come out of the IPART review whilst ignoring the most fundamental part of the review. In 2013 the Government set up a local government panel to examine amalgamations and it recommended that an examination be undertaken into the way in which councils rate. In December 2015 the Premier referred the question of local government

rating to IPART. In 2016 IPART recommended to the Government what it needed to do to make local government rating fair to comply with taxing principles.

For four years the Office of Local Government NSW sat on that report and ignored its fundamental recommendations. IPART recommended that local government mandate capital improvement value [CIV] be the basis for setting ad valorem rates in metropolitan council areas. It recommended amending the Act to allow non-metropolitan councils to choose whether to rate on capital improved value or unimproved value [UV] as a basis for setting ad valorem rates. It recommended the removal of section 548 of the Local Government Act, which determined minimum rates.

It did that on the basis that the current rating system is unfair. It also recommended other criteria to manage transition rates so as not to exceed 10 per cent. There was adequate protection included in the recommendations. What was the Government's response to the fundamental review of local government's taxing power? The June 2020 Government response states:

Government does not believe there is a clear case in support of implementation and further development of capital improvement value at this time.

That has been the response of the government of the day since 1904. In 1904 when the then Government provided for unimproved capital value, it was done not as the basis of a taxing mechanism but as a way to provide compensation when the government took your land or for a mortgage. At the turn of the twentieth century capital improvements did not add value to the land. That was provided for in the 1905 Local Government Act and in the 1919 Local Government Act. In 1993 the Liberal Government, with the support of the Labor Opposition, enacted the 1993 Local Government Act adopting the same rationale as had been applied at the beginning of the twentieth century. In 2015 it was sent to IPART and a recommendation was made to replace unimproved capital value as it was not a fair system of property tax. Once again the Government says what governments have been saying for over 100 years. If you think what I am saying is a pile of rubbish and is not appropriate, I quote from IPART's 2016 *Review of the Local Government Rating System*. Box 3.3 states:

### 3.3 Performance of CIV method against tax principles

We analysed the performance of CIV against our tax principles, and found in metropolitan areas, CIV significantly outperforms UV on all tax principles:

- efficiency, including the benefits received principal and minimising changes in behaviour
- equity, including the ability to pay and benefits received principles
- sustainability, and
- simplicity.

On every taxation test it has been recommended to the Parliament that we change the system of CIV rating by councils because it fails the tax principles, it is unfair and it is a regressive tax. The answer we receive from Local Government is "now is not the time". It has not been the time since 1895 when this House passed the first piece of legislation that provided for unimproved capital value. [*Extension of time*]

The Government ignored what it was told five years ago. If you tax the minimum rate, it is a poll tax. If you tax an unimproved capital value and you add a domestic waste charge then you have a mini poll tax. The reality is that you need to tax the improved capital value of property to be fair. A typical example is a three-storey mansion on a block of land next door to somebody who has a tin shed. They should be paying a different level of rate based upon the improvement to the land, particularly in metropolitan Sydney. I know it is very hard in New South Wales for people in the local government sector to get their heads around that but that is precisely why IPART was engaged to look at it. After four years we get two lines from the Office of Local Government.

The merged councils that have had such an adverse impact in my electorate were political decisions made by the government of the day. They were not decisions made by boundary commission inquiries, though politically appointed, who are experienced in knowing and anticipating the outcome. The councils went through a process of litigation and a poor political process that allowed some of them to get off following the change of Premier. But the rest of us are copping poor quality service and poor financial standards from amalgamated councils. Some of the amalgamated councils have 100 more staff than they had at the time of the merger. How do you have 100 more staff when there was supposed to be a reduction in staff and expenditure? The results, in my experience with councils in my electorate, have been poor service standards. When I talk to my colleagues across the political spectrum about their electorates, they report the same poor service standards.

The United Services Union is trying to maintain a rate harmonisation increase because it is fearful that people will lose their jobs at certain councils if it does not. I understand that it is not this Minister's fault as she has been handed the poisoned chalice. The reality is that there are fundamental problems with the amalgamated

councils because decisions have been made for political reasons and not on the basis of merit. The Opposition will propose amendments to the bill. I agree with whatever the member for Campbelltown said as I am bound to. However, rushing major local government rating amendments through in this form and ignoring the recommendations of IPART completely is a poor result for the Office of Local Government.

**Debate interrupted.**

*Condolences*

**THE HON. IAN MORTON ARMSTRONG, AM, OBE, FORMER LEADER OF THE NATIONAL PARTY AND DEPUTY PREMIER OF NEW SOUTH WALES**

**The SPEAKER (15:45):** I extend a warm welcome to the family of the late the Hon. Ian Morton Armstrong, who, with my consent, are seated in the public gallery for the condolence motion. I welcome Ian's wife, Jenny Armstrong; his son and daughter-in-law, Angus Armstrong and Jane Neale; and his daughter and son-in-law, Angela and Ian Sinclair. I acknowledge Ian's grandchildren present today, Jock Armstrong, Bronte Armstrong and Louisa Sinclair. I also acknowledge grandson Oliver Sinclair, who is not able to be present today as he resides overseas. Finally, I acknowledge Polly Bennett, who is Ian's former chief of staff. I did not know Ian well. However, I found him always to be a thorough gentleman who was affable and generous in offering assistance, including to me. I am sorry for his family's loss.

**Mr JOHN BARILARO (Monaro—Minister for Regional New South Wales, Industry and Trade, and Deputy Premier) (15:46):** I move:

That this House extends to the family the deep sympathy of members of the Legislative Assembly in the loss sustained by the death on 15 December 2020 of the Hon. Ian Morton Armstrong, a former leader of the NSW Nationals and former Deputy Premier of New South Wales.

It goes without saying that many of us in this place have stark ideological differences in opinion. However, one thing we all have in common is a desire to serve our communities and leave a legacy for the people of New South Wales. I am certain that all sides of politics can agree that the Hon. Ian Armstrong did exactly that. I offer my deepest condolences to Ian's family, his friends, and to everyone who was fortunate enough to work with him during his incredible period of service to regional New South Wales. Ian is survived by his wife, Jenny; children, Angus and Angela; and grandchildren, Oliver, Louisa, Bronte and Jock.

As the Speaker acknowledged, members of the family are here today in the public gallery. I welcome them. Ian was a family man through and through and cites his family as being his greatest pride. He spoke fondly of the support his family gave him during his time as a member of the New South Wales Parliament. He told a story about one particular Christmas while in government when he "took something like 34 calls from an angered constituent" who happened to have his telephone number at the time. *Hansard* records him saying:

That takes a bit of tolerance during a family Christmas, I can assure the House. If I never achieve anything else, to have the love and affection of an intelligent, wonderful, supportive family is the greatest asset I have achieved over the years.

Ian embodied what it is to be a statesmanly politician and a member of the National Party. For 100 years the National Party has proudly represented the bush, and Ian's involvement spanned a significant part of that time. His involvement with the party began in 1964. He served as branch vice-chairman, as a member of the Natural Resources Cabinet Subcommittee and as a representative on the Central Council of the National Party. Ian held various other positions in the Country Party and the National Party during his membership.

In 1981 Ian was elected to the Legislative Assembly, representing Lachlan. He held that position for 25 years until 2007. He was one of the greatest agriculture Ministers New South Wales has ever seen. He also held the important role of rural affairs Minister. His contribution to the NSW Nationals was significant. In 1993 he became leader of the party and Deputy Premier. He served the community tirelessly until his electorate was abolished in 2007. As he had no interest in representing another electorate, Ian retired from politics, importantly showing that he was first and foremost a National Party local member.

During Ian's time proudly representing The Nationals, he saw droughts and rains, good times and bad times, and his commitment to the bush never faltered. Ian was a fierce advocate for regional New South Wales. He stuck up for what he believed in. He was fair and reasonable and was judged by those who knew him as being a genuinely good bloke. Ian was a proud son of the bush and a fierce advocate for regional communities. He was a husband, father, farmer and grazier and served countless community organisations over the years. Ian Armstrong embodied what it was to be a rural advocate.

In 1992, by relocating the Department of Agriculture to Orange, he was responsible for ensuring public servants work in the regional communities they represent—the single largest decentralisation process undertaken by a government department. That legacy that Ian left influenced significantly my decision to decentralise the

Department of Regional NSW, with offices to be set up in Queanbeyan, Dubbo, Coffs Harbour and Armidale. Ian showed us the importance of public servants living and working in the regions they represent. When public servants shop locally, eat locally and conduct business in local establishments, they make decisions that best represent that community.

In moving the Department of Agriculture to Orange—now part of the Department of Primary Industries [DPI]—Ian paved the way for well-paying public service jobs in regional communities, giving country people opportunities they did not have before. On 3 November last year the New South Wales Department of Primary Industries marked its 130th anniversary by officially opening and unveiling the new DPI headquarters as the "Ian Armstrong Building". The building was named after Ian Armstrong in recognition of his contribution to agriculture in New South Wales and his decentralisation of the agency. The new facility will house more than 300 DPI employees and reaffirms the department's commitment to the economic and social prosperity of regional New South Wales.

In moving the DPI headquarters to Orange, Ian shattered a system where city people dictated policies that impacted people living in the bush. He revolutionised the bureaucracy and transformed Orange into the thriving inland city that it is today. When Ian decentralised DPI he would have faced much criticism as people pushed back against leaving the city. Now, when we see what Orange has become, if we tried to move the department back to the city there would be riots in the street. Ian took a risk in decentralising an entire agency. He set an incredible precedent for public sector workers embracing a better quality of life in the bush. Now people are kicking down the door to get out of Sydney. We continue Ian's legacy by further decentralising government departments.

Despite his substantive contributions as a Minister and as Deputy Premier, Ian Armstrong's commitment to his electorate of Lachlan never wavered. The area still benefits from his legacy as local member. Ian's commitment to his electorate was recognised by the voters. At one stage he achieved 73.5 per cent of the vote. As the leader of the National Party, he knew what it was to endure drought. He showed incredible resolve to regional communities that were doing it tough. Often he spoke about the need for us to store water and futureproof drought recovery. In one way, his legacy and commitment to water security lives on in the commitment to Wyangala Dam, announced at the last election, of the NSW Nationals and the New South Wales Government.

Ian Armstrong has been widely recognised for his contribution to New South Wales. In 1978 he was admitted to the Order of the British Empire for services to primary industry. In 2001 he was awarded the Centenary Medal and in 2009 he was admitted as a Member of the Order of Australia. Ian was a true giant of the National Party and of politics in New South Wales. He transformed the way government operates. He will be remembered forever for his incredible contribution to the State of New South Wales, particularly by those living in the bush.

But for me personally, whenever there was an opportunity at a branch meeting, a branch dinner, our National Party Conference dinners, an event or Central Council, Ian would pull me aside and, of course, always advocate for the Bells Line of Road. He would pull me aside and advocate for water security and diversity in the region so that we could futureproof regional and rural New South Wales more than ever. But personally, what I found with Ian was that he would pull me aside and just see how I was going. I think it sometimes takes another leader—another Deputy Premier—to understand the tough job that we sign up for, especially when you are the leader of a party, and how lonely, hard and tough it can be, and how the decisions you have to make sometimes upset the ones who support you the most. But that is what leadership is all about—empowering.

I will never forget the opportunities that Ian took to speak to me about how I was going—not about politics, not about policy and not about the National Party. He was actually checking in on me. Those who know me, know that last year I had a pretty tough year, and I will always remember people like Ian Armstrong who actually cared about people rather than just about politics. That is why it is with great sadness that we commemorate the passing of Ian Armstrong but it is with fondness that we recall his enormous contribution to New South Wales. Vale, Ian Armstrong.

**Ms JODI McKAY (Strathfield) (15:55):** I also pay tribute to the Hon. Ian Armstrong, a man who served the people of New South Wales with great distinction throughout his many years in public life. I too acknowledge his family in the gallery. I thank them very much for being here today. It is a pleasure for me to speak on this motion and to acknowledge his enormous contribution to public service. It was a long and distinguished career. He served as the member for Lachlan from 1981 to 2007, as Minister for Agriculture and Rural Affairs from 1988 to 1993, as Deputy Premier and Minister for Ports and Minister for Public Works from 1993, and as Leader of the National Party on both the Government and the Opposition benches from 1993 to 1999. It is not just his friends and former National Party colleagues who remember him with fondness. I have had many conversations with Labor members—those who have served in this place—who have also spoken about him in the most respectful way.

The Hon. Ian Armstrong had the respect of people from across the political spectrum, both in the community he represented and, as I said, in this place. That sentiment was reflected in the touching comments of the member for Oxley when Ian passed. She said:

He was a beautiful human being who loved people. He wanted to talk to people, hear their stories and act on their concerns. He was a very genuine person.

That sentiment has been shared by all who knew him. The Hon. Mick Veitch attended the State Funeral on my behalf. He knew Ian well and he tells of a man who did not care where you were on the political spectrum. If he was your representative, then he would do his level best to represent you, and he would do his level best to represent the people of rural and regional New South Wales. In opposition, Ian kept delivering for the people he represented. Whether it was working with then health Minister Craig Knowles to deliver a new hospital for Young or with the Minister for roads, Carl Scully, to deliver upgrades for rural roads across his community, he would work across the House to deliver for the people of rural and regional New South Wales and also to offer advice to the government of the day. It was frank, fearless and sound advice, and that helped the Labor Government to deliver better outcomes.

I am going to tell you something now that those on the opposite side of House definitely do not know. I am not even sure that Ian's family is aware of this. I spoke to former Labor Premier Bob Carr, who says that they were robust opponents in the House but they had a cordial relationship. That cordial relationship came into play when Bob was preparing the front bench when he was taking over as Premier. It was 1995 and he had a conversation with Ian about who would take over in the Agriculture portfolio—a portfolio very dear to Ian, and of course it was important that Labor could continue to deliver for rural and regional New South Wales. It was Ian who advised him to put Richard Amery into that portfolio. So Richard Amery became the agriculture Minister, not because Bob wanted him but because Bob took the advice of Ian Armstrong. It was a wise decision and one that Bob never lived to regret.

I am not sure that other Labor leaders would take the advice of an Opposition member in determining their front bench, but I am certainly up for that discussion as we move through the next two years. Bob also said that he sought advice from Ian on matters to do with the management of what was then known as the Department of Mines and Agriculture, now the Department of Primary Industries. He said that he always appreciated Ian as the voice of the old-fashioned Country Party, with its rich and long history across New South Wales. It is fitting then that the headquarters of the Department of Primary Industries in Orange is now named, as the Deputy Premier said, the Ian Armstrong Building as a tribute to someone who was not content merely to administer that department but who did much to shape it into the organisation that it is today with the role it has in New South Wales.

Ian was, as the Deputy Premier said, a pioneer of decentralisation. He led the department to Orange from Sydney, basing it in the regions where it could best serve the people whom it worked for. He pioneered that approach and other governments have followed that decision and the example set by Ian. That has led to so many jobs in rural and regional New South Wales, as well as the strengthening of rural and regional communities, who benefited from that approach to decentralisation. He will also be remembered in this House for his contributions on the floor of the Parliament. I also spoke to Richard Amery, because he obviously owed his job to Ian so I decided it was important that I spoke to Richard. He described Ian as "a great soapbox orator". He said that you could spring any motion in the House on Ian and he would be able to stand up here, he would be able to answer it fully, and he would give a response that was of substance and that would leave everyone sitting there wondering how on earth he got that information into his head in a short time.

But that was how Ian was regarded in this place. If you asked him a question, he would know the answer. If you raised an issue, he would give a well-considered response. Richard Amery served in this place for a very long time, until quite recently. When I spoke to him, he spoke with such fondness of Ian and his contribution to this place. I can tell you that there are many former members of this place who feel exactly the same way as Richard Amery does. I think it is also fitting that history will regard him as the sole member for the Division of Lachlan. He held that seat from its creation in 1981 until it was abolished in 2007. Perhaps that is because some shoes are just too big to fill.

In that light, I offer my condolences, and the condolences of the New South Wales Labor Party, to his wife, Jenny, to Angus and Angela, to their families and friends, and also to his old friends and colleagues. I also offer my deep respects to the Deputy Premier and the National Party and, of course, to the people of the Central West, because they have lost a great champion of their communities. I speak today sincerely and from the heart in saying that he will be very deeply missed. I commend the motion to the House.

**Ms GLADYS BEREJIKLIAN (Willoughby—Premier) (16:03):** It is with great sadness but also with a great deal of honour that this House marks the passing of the Hon. Ian Morton Armstrong. On behalf of the Parliament and the people of New South Wales, may I also extend my deepest condolences to Mrs Jenny

Armstrong, their children, grandchildren and extended family who are here today. It is wonderful to see them here, and they are well deserving of the accolades Mr Armstrong is receiving today from all sides of the House and from all members who are making contributions. In particular, it is a privilege to reflect on Mr Armstrong's life of public service and his many achievements. In particular, we recognise his enormous contribution to the people of regional New South Wales, which extended before the time he came to this place and well beyond the time he left it.

Mr Armstrong—I cannot call him Ian; I always called him Mr Armstrong—entered New South Wales Parliament as the member for Lachlan, as we have heard, on 19 September 1981 and served the electorate for more than 25 years. I had the privilege of spending four years with him in the Chamber and benefited greatly from his political experience. He rose to the highest levels of the New South Wales Government, serving as the Deputy Premier from 1993 to 1995. He initiated significant reforms in a number of senior portfolios, including in agriculture and rural affairs, ports and public works. As the Deputy Premier has outlined, he was a senior figure within the National Party for more than 20 years, elected deputy leader in 1984 and then leader from 1993 to 1999. In his first speech in this place Mr Armstrong dedicated himself to serving the people of country New South Wales. He said, "I understand them; I believe in them." And of course he did. In that speech Mr Armstrong told of how he had experienced firsthand and from childhood the joys and hardships associated with rural life.

As a boy of seven in drought-ravaged Boorowa in south-west New South Wales, he came home from school each day to help his mum pull sheep from their dam, which had been reduced to a muddy bog. At the peak of that drought they lost up to 15 sheep a day. Mr Armstrong tried to cut a track to the water's edge to make it easier for the sheep to get to water. He was barely bigger than the shovel he used. Those are visceral memories for a young child. They shaped the man and politician that he would become. After completing high school at Sydney's Newington College, Mr Armstrong returned to the family's wool and beef property and cultivated a lifelong connection to the land.

He held a variety of agricultural jobs—farmer, grazier, drover, stud stock breeder, stock and station agent, real estate agent, auctioneer and the list goes on—but Mr Armstrong's ambitions extended well beyond his own patch. He wanted to give rural and regional communities a strong voice, and he did that proudly. In 1964 he joined the National Party, or the Country Party as it was then known then, and remained a member for the rest of his life, for some 56 years—what a contribution. He became prominent in the Cattlemen's Union of Australia in the 1970s, where he was described as a "cocky, straight-talking campaigner". After an unsuccessful Federal tilt for the electorate of Hume—and aren't we glad in New South Wales that he missed that opportunity?—he turned his focus to State politics and was elected in the new electorate of Lachlan in the Wranslide of 1981.

**Mrs Melinda Pavey:** Hear, hear! They would have held the electorate of Hume, though.

**Ms GLADYS BEREJKLIAN:** Indeed. In a Coalition reduced to 28 seats, Mr Armstrong instantly became shadow Minister for a portfolio that was very close to his heart: water. Such are the vagaries of rural life, New South Wales was gripped by drought when Mr Armstrong entered Parliament in 1981 and again when he departed in 2007. He devoted large sections of both his inaugural and valedictory speeches to drought, lamenting its unseen casualties: the country businesses that close their doors when farming incomes dry up. As he farewelled this place Mr Armstrong said:

I think we sometimes forget that this is the lowest, flattest, hottest and the second driest continent on earth.

...

We must prepare for the next seasonal change—be it boom or bust. We must store water in the city, town and country.

Mr Armstrong was elected Deputy Leader of the National Party in 1984, within three years of entering Parliament. After serving as shadow Minister across a multitude of portfolios for seven years, finally he was in a position to deliver meaningful policy change in government. With the election of the Greiner Government in 1988, he became Minister for Agriculture and Rural Affairs. As we heard proudly from the Deputy Premier and from the Leader of the Opposition, he executed the largest decentralisation ever undertaken in Australia, moving 482 positions from McKell House near Central railway station to the new building in Orange. It brought Department of Agriculture personnel closer to the farmers and rural communities they served. The move had a profound effect on Orange, pumping \$20 million into the local economy and pegging unemployment at 4 per cent below the national average during the recession of the early 1990s.

Again, as we have heard from the Deputy Premier and from the Leader of the Opposition, last September the New South Wales Government was proud to name the Department of Primary Industries' new Orange headquarters the Ian Armstrong Building, in honour of his decentralisation record and all that he has done for rural New South Wales. The Ian Armstrong Building houses around 800 public servants from a number of New South Wales government departments and agencies. Mr Armstrong also launched Agsell, a marketing service for agricultural products. Among its many milestones, Agsell introduced Australian beef into Hong Kong,

Taiwan and Japan. In 1989 Mr Armstrong converted the Sydney Fish Market from the traditional voice auction system to the Dutch auction system that still operates today. Adopted from the Dutch tulip auctions, it ensures that product is sold quickly and at premium prices. Through the system the Sydney Fish Market sells almost 3,000 crates at every auction, or an average of 50 to 55 tonnes of fresh seafood every day.

Following the retirement of Wal Murray in 1993, Mr Armstrong was elected Leader of The Nationals and became Deputy Premier to John Fahey. He also assumed broader portfolio responsibilities as Minister for Ports and Minister for Public Works. In that role he was able to deliver infrastructure to regional communities and bring greater rigour to public works contracts. He introduced turnkey contracts that required contractors to plan, design and deliver projects to set specifications at an agreed price by a set date. It seems incredible that such conditions did not exist as recently as 30 years ago. As Mr Armstrong described it, the majority of contracts before 1993 were struck between the Government and the project manager, with the eventual price determined by litigation. The new system enabled the Government to build schools, hospitals and other much-needed social infrastructure. It was a timely reform in the year that Sydney was awarded the right to host the 2000 Olympics.

As Minister for Public Works, Mr Armstrong oversaw the early stages of the Sydney Olympics building program and the transformation of Homebush. He literally fixed the last tile to the Olympic swimming pool. In fact—and I hope I have this right, Mrs Armstrong—attending one of the Olympic swimming events in 2000, with Australia out in front, Mrs Armstrong told her husband, "If that tile comes off now and Australia loses this medal, it will be your fault." I hope that is true. It is; she is nodding. After the Coalition's narrow election loss in the 1995 State election, Mr Armstrong chose not to hang up his well-worn bushman's boots. He remained in Parliament for another 12 years and continued to lead the National Party for four years. In 1996 he had the task of steering his party through the parliamentary vote on tighter gun controls following the Port Arthur massacre. He served on the board of the Sydney Organising Committee for the Olympics Games and helped to deliver the "best Games ever".

He also mentored the younger generation of politicians coming through. In fact I regard myself as one of those. Shortly after I was elected to Parliament in 2003, Mr Armstrong invited me to spend time with him at his home in Cowra. "I think you will go places, Gladys," he said, "so you'd better come and learn a bit about the bush." And I did. I spent about five days with the Armstrongs and I am very grateful for that time. Every day we would drive long distances, covering many kilometres. Most of all I saw Mr Armstrong in his natural habitat and how much he thrived on his interactions with people. I will never forget the time he took to mentor me, support me and encourage me. He did that for many people. He very much felt a responsibility to prepare and educate the next generation of coalitionists. I will be forever grateful for his kindness and generosity. I am also grateful for Mrs Armstrong's hospitality.

Though Mr Armstrong reached the heights of New South Wales politics, he never lost sight of his local community. He loved Lachlan. It was an electorate covering 39,000 square kilometres—about 1,500 times the size of my electorate—and he knew every inch of it. He kept reminding me of that. He was proud of its landmarks, such as the Cowra Japanese Garden and Cultural Centre, and Henry Lawson's birthplace at Grenfell. He travelled around by whatever means of transport was available, always with a copy of *The Land* on the seat beside him, as I saw on my travels with him. My colleague Paul Toole said it could take hours to walk through a room with Mr Armstrong because he knew everyone and was always ready to stop for a chat, and that was certainly the case. Former Federal National Party Minister and neighbouring MP John Sharp said Mr Armstrong was the best politician on the stump he had ever seen. How can we disagree with that?

He had an easy rapport with his constituents and they returned his loyalty. Initially elected with just 58.7 per cent of the two-party preferred vote, by the time he left Parliament he had a whopping 71.2 per cent of the two-party preferred vote. In his wry fashion he attributed his rising popularity to the intelligence of his Lachlan constituents. When Mr Armstrong left Parliament, the electorate of Lachlan left with him in the redistribution before the 2007 election. But he did not stop; he continued to push for the interests of regional New South Wales. As Chairman of the Bells Line Expressway Group, he campaigned for an expressway linking the State's Central West to Sydney. He consulted with business, community groups and government and became the inaugural Chairman of Central Tablelands Local Land Services. And he never left the National Party, which he described as his "professional family". Fittingly he was made a life member in 2006. As much as the National Party meant to him, it was no match for his love of family. Politics is tough on family life, particularly for members of regional electorates who have to travel long distances both within their electorates and to represent their constituents at Parliament House. Mr Armstrong acknowledged as much in his valedictory speech when he said:

My greatest pride is undoubtedly my family.

And we know he meant that. He went on to say:

I thank them for their tolerance and for their forbearance in all the times and troubles when dad, father, husband, grandfather would come home tired, and angry sometimes. I thank them for that Christmas Day ... when we were in government, I took something like 34 calls from an angered constituent who happened to have my telephone number at the time.

To Mrs Armstrong and the Armstrong family, on behalf of the people of New South Wales I thank you for sharing your husband, father and grandfather with us. Mr Armstrong has received many deserving accolades for his work. Before entering politics he was appointed an Officer of the Order of the British Empire for his services to primary industry. In 2001 he was awarded a Centenary Medal, acknowledging those who contributed to the success of Australia's first hundred years as a Federal nation.

Mr Armstrong was recognised for his service to the New South Wales Parliament and to international trade. In 2009 he was appointed a member of the Order of Australia for his services to the New South Wales Parliament, the agricultural and livestock sectors, and the community. Since his passing on 15 December 2020 the accolades have continued, not surprisingly, from far afield and from all walks of life. He is credited with lifting the standard of public services and infrastructure in regional New South Wales and improving the quality of life in those communities. Perhaps his most enduring legacy is that he gave the three million residents of regional New South Wales a voice and the confidence to use it. I can assure the people of rural and regional New South Wales that we hear their voice, and we are grateful to Mr Armstrong for training our ears to it. May he rest in peace.

**Ms JULIA FINN (Granville) (16:15):** I also wish to give my condolences to the family of Ian Armstrong and pay my respects to his incredible legacy. As a child I grew up in the electorate of Lachlan, on a farm outside of Canowindra but inside the Cowra shire, which was part of that electorate for most of Ian Armstrong's service in Parliament. He was a larger-than-life figure. He was incredibly well known by his electorate, to a level most of us could only imagine. I pay my respects to his wife, Jenny, and the entire family for their support throughout his career. I know that Jenny has been incredibly active in the community. When Ian was in Sydney she was out on the ground, listening to people's concerns and passing them on. That is something I heard time and again from the local community, whenever I was out there to visit it.

As the local member from 1981 to 2007, and the only member for Lachlan, Ian Armstrong left behind an incredible legacy. He was also an incredibly gifted and committed local member. Regardless of one's politics, he would always go into bat for one and he was an incredibly strong advocate for the community as a whole and for individuals. That is very much something on which I reflect, having come here as a member holding a marginal seat. It is a very good lesson to learn from someone who had such an enormous margin. He never took anyone for granted and never decided that anybody's concerns were too trivial or were not worth listening to because they came from the other side of politics.

His career in this place was very long and distinguished. We have heard that he served as the Deputy Premier, as the Leader of the National Party for a very long time and that he delivered for the community. The relocation of the Department of Agriculture to Orange still stands today and set in place the agenda for decentralisation over many decades and across government, regardless of who has been governing. To this day I know lots of people who have grown up in the Central West and, whenever they are sick of living in Sydney, who think that applying for a job at the Department of Agriculture in Orange would be nice. In fact, I know some who have actually done that, which has resulted in the Department of Agriculture having some very highly trained and experienced staff at all levels. People want to go and live in Orange. Many people have even taken a pay cut to work there and stay there for a long time. They are doing a job they love in a city they love.

It is a wonderful testament to his commitment to rural New South Wales, and to the Central West in particular, that the Ian Armstrong Building has been named after him and that it houses hundreds of public servants. It gives Orange a more diversified economy and makes sure that kids who grow up in the bush can aspire to move back there. They do not need to move to the city to get a good job. I want to reflect on some of the comments made by the mayor of Cowra, Bill West, somebody from my side of politics but somebody who had—

**Mrs Melinda Pavey:** No, he is not. His sister is.

**Ms JULIA FINN:** His sister is. He is an independent, but he is certainly not a member of the National Party. He has enormous respect for Ian Armstrong. His comments in the *Cowra Guardian* are very kind and spot on, and I quote:

"It's always very sad when somebody who has contributed so much of his life in a positive way to state parliament and the community, particularly from this area, passes away," he said.

"He was a tremendous advocate for the region and rural areas, a gentleman who was able to engage with all sections of the community and work with politicians of all sides of the political spectrum.

"In his 26 years of state parliament, serving as Deputy Premier, was a tremendous achievement and reflection of his ability.

"The fact that he relocated the State Department in his time as Minister for Agriculture to Orange was certainly a tremendous move in the direction of decentralisation and something which I think he's to be remembered for, among other achievements.

"That legacy is to be applauded and we could encourage others to follow his footsteps."

...

"Despite my late father—

he was referring to his late father, Tim, who also contested elections against Ian Armstrong—

and Ian having a slightly differing opinion on politics, they both had the highest regard for each other and treated each other with a great deal of respect," he said.

"They had differences in some political beliefs but also had similarities too, both being generational farmers and both having a deep seeded passion and love for rural and regional areas.

"The relationship between them is a model that other politicians could follow in today's politics."

I think that is very true. There are so many of us who could really learn from that. Too often our elections—and particularly that pre-poll period—are just beset with nastiness. The civility shown by Ian Armstrong towards people from all sides of politics is something everybody should learn. Mr West also reflected on his own experience. He said:

"At a personal level, I always got on extremely well with him and found him supportive and encouraging.

He then expressed his deepest condolences to the family and passed on the condolences from the entire Cowra shire council. Ian Armstrong will be long remembered for the contribution he made to rural New South Wales and to the Central West of New South Wales, particularly Cowra and Orange. I really do think his legacy is one from which many of us can learn and can try to emulate. We need more strong advocates in this place; people who are prepared to stand up for everyone in their communities, not just necessarily their own political allies. I appreciate Jenny's and all the family's efforts in coming here today. My thoughts are with them all and I pay my incredible respect to Ian's legacy. Thank you.

**Mr MARK SPEAKMAN (Cronulla—Attorney General, and Minister for the Prevention of Domestic Violence) (16:22):** There was only ever one member for Lachlan in its most recent incarnation. The seat seemed to have been made for Ian Armstrong, who occupied it from its creation, in 1981, until his retirement, in 2007. The seat of Lachlan vanished at the same time as its first and last member vanished from this place. There is something significant in that, given that even a cursory glance at his inaugural and valedictory speeches in this Chamber reveal he was the sort of local member who adhered to the creed that all politics is local. He knew the capacity of every dam, the length of every rail line and road, and what was needed to improve them. He took joy in the diversity of agricultural industries the seat of Lachlan supported—from eucalyptus distilleries to vineyards, wool and livestock.

He also came here prepared for a fight—or a few. Inaugural speeches, like valedictories and even these condolence motions, are customarily heard in silence. But this newbie MP was spoiling for political biff from the outset. "If an honourable member should feel moved to the point of losing self-control," he told the House, "I shall be pleased to mix it with him." When he left here some 25 years later, he exclaimed, almost as he walked out the door, "If I have offended anybody in this place—tough!" Earlier in that speech, he praised the voters of his electorate for their intelligence. Over his seven campaigns for the seat of Lachlan, his voters became gradually more and more intelligent, returning him with 55.3 per cent of the vote in his first election and, in his last election, with 73.5 per cent—each of his voters, no doubt, deserving of a membership of Mensa.

He was truly of the land he represented. He came into this place in 1981 while the country was emerging from the grip of what he described as the greatest drought in living memory. We have had a few more of those since then, but one just has to look to a small passage in his valedictory speech to recognise that he felt to his bones the troubles and triumphs of those who toil in agriculture. He said:

As a small boy in 1944, when most of the men were away at war and resources were scant, there was a massive drought in the southwest of the State. There were dust storms every day and the dams—they were only small dams in those days—dried up. When I came home from school each day my mother and I would go down to the dam, I would hook some rope around a sheep that was bogged in the mud, mum would lead my pony, Silver, and we would drag the sheep out. Anywhere from eight to 15 sheep would die every day, and we would burn them. That went on for weeks and weeks.

That goes a long way to explaining why water was one of his greatest political obsessions. He wanted more water storage. In that he would find good company with the present member for Penrith, and Minister for Jobs, Investment, Tourism and Western Sydney. One could only imagine what he would say if he had witnessed the deluge presently almost drowning our State.

When the Greiner Government won office in 1988, he wasted no time after he was appointed Minister for Agriculture and Rural Affairs. He laid claim to achieving the greatest decentralisation undertaken in the history

of this country, a feat he said had not been equalled by the time he left Parliament in 2007. That was the moving of 482 positions in the Department of Agriculture, just next to Central station, to a new building in Orange. That achievement lives on today in a brand new headquarters bearing the name the "Ian Armstrong Building", opened late last year, with almost double the number of public sector workers calling it home.

He became Minister for Ports and Minister for Public Works in 1993, until one Robert John Carr brought an end to Ian Armstrong's time on the Treasury benches. Some people who come to this place bow out once they have held the reins of ministerial authority rather than face the relative obscurity of life on the other side of this Chamber. Ian Armstrong was clearly not one of those people. His longevity, until the electorate of Lachlan was no more, speaks of his commitment to being a dedicated parliamentarian as well as an effective politician. That shows that he knew the value and necessity of a fierce, determined, hardworking opposition to hold governments to account. That he held numerous shadow ministries from straight after the 1995 election for the next 10 or so years speaks volumes about his attitude to public service.

If there is a fight to be had on behalf of the people of New South Wales, then pick it and win, as often as possible. Ian Armstrong left this Chamber paying tribute to the friends he had made along the way on both sides after serving seven years in opposition, seven in government, and another seven and a half years in opposition. Given he spent 25 years here, we can probably count ourselves fortunate that he was not appointed Treasurer. Like most members, though, he recognised that it is our families who make the most sacrifices for our careers here, and it is Ian Armstrong's family who will most keenly feel his loss. Along with my condolences, I thank them for their support of him throughout his career, which has left a lasting impact on the people of New South Wales so much for the better.

**Mr ADAM CROUCH (Terrigal) (16:28):** As the Government Whip it is my pleasure and honour to make a brief contribution to the condolence motion for the Hon. Ian Armstrong. In doing so I acknowledge Mr Armstrong's family, who have made a trip here today under very trying circumstances, I suspect. I acknowledge Jenny, Angus, Angela, Jock, Bronte, Louisa, Ian, Jane and Polly. Today members speak in appreciation of Ian Armstrong's long and meritorious public service to the people of New South Wales. Mr Armstrong is most well known for serving as Deputy Premier between 1993 and 1995. Other members have already mentioned this, but I note the length of time that he held a position of public office.

He was the member for Lachlan for a staggering 25½ years, stretching from September 1981 until March 2007. Mr Armstrong served as a member of the Coalition in both government and opposition. In opposition he served in a wide variety of portfolios, including Tourism, Sport and Recreation, Racing, Agriculture, Regional Infrastructure and Development, Planning and Decentralisation, Infrastructure Development and Ports, State Development, Rural Affairs, and the Olympics. In government Mr Armstrong served as Deputy Premier, but first entered the Cabinet as Minister for Agriculture and Rural Affairs between 1988 and 1993, then Minister for Ports and Minister for Public Works from 1993 to 1995.

On behalf of the people of the Central Coast, which is parochially a region, I thank Mr Armstrong for his contribution to the decentralisation of government services. There are literally hundreds of people on the Central Coast who are now working in government departments because of Mr Armstrong's vision for decentralisation of the workforce. While we may not be as far out as the west, the Central Coast is a passionate region. It is his vision and his drive for that decentralisation that has seen hundreds of people on the Central Coast benefit from not having to travel to Sydney for work and being able to spend more quality time with their families, which I am sure his family wished he could have done when he was serving in this place.

Unfortunately I never had the opportunity to meet Mr Armstrong—his time in Parliament concluded in 2007 and mine commenced in 2015—but his legacy is clear from those who have spoken today. Mr Armstrong is considered to be one of the elders of the National Party, as was so eloquently put by the member for Oxley. Colleagues that I serve with today speak only in great terms and of great fondness for Mr Armstrong. His 25 years of dedicated service to this place is incredibly impressive and a great legacy. It is so fitting that Mr Armstrong had the Department of Primary Industries building in Orange named after him. I thank Mr Armstrong's amazing family for loaning him to the people of New South Wales for over a quarter of a century. We often forget the sacrifices that family members of MPs make. For that, I say to Ian's family, thank you so very much for the sacrifice you made for our State. We are a better place because of it. I am privileged to make this contribution as the Government Whip. Vale, Ian Armstrong.

**Ms STEPH COOKE (Cootamundra) (16:31):** It is a true privilege to acknowledge and remember the life and legacy of the Hon. Ian Armstrong, AM, OBE. I particularly acknowledge Ian's wife, Jenny; Angus, Bronte and Jock Armstrong; Angela, Ian and Louisa Sinclair; and Jane Neale, who are in the Chamber today. I note that Oliver is not here but no doubt will be tuning in, or we will get the footage for him afterwards. I cannot imagine the loss that they are all feeling with Ian's passing and the strength and courage with which they faced the past several years as his health deteriorated. I stand here as not only the National Party Whip but also, more

importantly, as the member for Cootamundra, the New South Wales electorate that makes up almost all of Ian's seat of Lachlan.

His communities and the people he held dear are now my communities and the people I hold dear. In my mind, there are no bigger shoes to fill than his. It has, and always will, weigh heavily on me. In his last speech to this House—which many of his family members were here for—his family was very much in the front of his mind. He described them as his greatest pride and thanked them for their tolerance, patience and support throughout his political career. Those of us speaking today are doing our best to reinforce just how magnificent their husband, father, grandfather and father-in-law was, how much he meant to all of us and the legacy he has left. That legacy has two forms: firstly, the impression he left on those who worked with and for him and those he helped as the Deputy Premier, Minister, shadow Minister and the member for Lachlan; and, above all else, his family and friends.

The bricks and mortar of the Ian Armstrong Building in Orange represent the opportunities thousands of public service workers have in regional communities. While he was too unwell to join us at the opening of the Ian Armstrong Building last year, I hope he was able to appreciate, even for a fleeting moment, just how remarkable it is for someone to live long enough to see their legacy celebrated. Normally in politics our actions and campaigns are things we hope will make the lives of others better. Rarely do we have the chance to stop and see those efforts not only come to fruition but also noted for generations to come. As the song goes, a legacy is sowing seeds in a garden that you may never see. It is testament to the achievements of Ian that he was able to live long enough to see his. But it should be no surprise; farmers know what to plant for success.

Ian was a champion of decentralisation. The fact that we think having public servants live in the communities they serve is logical, rather than fanciful, is testament to his impact on changing attitudes in government—something that every member in this Chamber can attest is no easy feat. In 1992 he moved the NSW Department of Primary Industries from Sydney to Orange, which was an enormous effort and the largest decentralisation project ever undertaken by a government in Australia. It was vital in ensuring the New South Wales public service was in touch with the communities west of the Blue Mountains, particularly in the agriculture sector. While we look back on this as a logical step, many did not agree with it at the time. It was described as a "victory" for decentralisation, and victories are rarely declared without a fight.

Almost 30 years on it is hard to estimate just how much of an impact those hundreds of public service jobs have had on the Central West. They represent tens of millions of dollars in salaries based in the community, hundreds of children attending local schools, hundreds of volunteers in local organisations, houses bought and sold, new graduates able to start their careers in a familiar community and, above all, a New South Wales government department located in the heart of the sector it is responsible for. We can feel that legacy right now in the way our communities adapted to remote working and learning last year—the argument that you can be anywhere in this great State and get the job done. For his work and quarter of a century of service to the people of New South Wales, Ian Armstrong was appointed a Member of the Order of Australia.

But that is not Ian's only legacy. I first met Ian Armstrong when I was a teenager, a constituent, and he my local member. It was a memorable meeting for me—a teenager with some interest in politics—to see the way he listened to everyone in the room, took on their concerns, and then fought with passion and integrity to fix the issues they shared with him. He seemed to be in every town, on every issue. That is a motto I have adopted in my political career. Ian always had time for young people and was a great supporter of Rural Youth, youth music and youth participation in agriculture. He wanted to create communities where young people not only found work and purpose but also thrived. He seemed a giant to an impressionable schoolgirl. Ian's ability to make his role work in opposition and in government is one that stands out to me.

I remember his fight to upgrade the Lachlan Valley Way, particularly the dangerous stretches of the road between Murringo and Boorowa, during his time in opposition. It was a fight that led to the naming of the "Scully-Armstrong Way", in recognition of the bipartisan approach to addressing road safety along this key route through his electorate. The fight for further improvements has been taken up by his successors and, should the upcoming redistribution deliver the communities of Boorowa, Rye Park, Reids Flat, Rugby and Frogmore to the Cootamundra electorate, his fight will also become mine. As I have already proudly stated today—and do so over and over again given half the chance—the Cootamundra electorate takes in large parts of Ian's electorate of Lachlan, owing to subsequent redistributions.

The National Party preselection on Sunday 27 August 2017, where I won the party's nomination for the electorate of Cootamundra in an upcoming by-election, was the last Ian ever attended. It was an incredible privilege to have the presence of a man who had given so much of his life to fighting for the communities I now represent. In the immediate aftermath of the preselection vote and acceptance speech, I walked straight from the lectern to Jenny and Ian. I was lost for words and feeling overwhelmed—much like today. I looked at them both and said to Ian, "How am I ever going to be as good as you?" With Jenny on one arm, he took my hand and said,

"You just have to touch 50,000 people and you'll be just fine." I did not know whether to laugh or cry. I will never forget that moment.

Throughout his 25 years in Parliament Ian regularly spoke out on the issues that mattered to his communities. Drought seemed to dominate Ian's life. He was a small boy during the droughts of the 1940s, joining his mother to pull sheep out of the mud and slop at the bottom of dried dams after school every day. In 1981 when Ian entered Parliament drought was again ravaging the State, and just before his election he could be found driving livestock through the Riverina. When Ian left—one-quarter of a century of service later—the Lachlan electorate was in the middle of the Millennium drought. His experiences during drought guided me when I came to office in 2017, with our communities once more gripped by this insidious natural disaster. Ian spoke about the need for us to prepare for the next drought, to think of the businesses in regional communities such as machinery suppliers, cafes and corner stores, which did not qualify for farm-based assistance but undoubtedly suffered the same from years of drought.

He also stressed that our communities must have water. He argued the need for a reduction in water service charges during drought, water recycling programs and the need for new water infrastructure, particularly dams—something I am proud we are delivering on. We have Ian Armstrong to thank, in his time as Minister for Agriculture and Rural Affairs, for expanding the research facilities at Department of Agriculture research stations at Grafton, Murrumbidgee, Trangie, Condobolin and Cowra. I am proud we are continuing Ian's work in this field, with a new glasshouse at the Cowra station, which will help shape the future of agriculture in the region. We also have Ian to thank for being part of introducing Aussie beef to Hong Kong, Taiwan and Japan, and for pushing Australian wool into China, well before that economic giant was as open to global trade as it has been this century.

We, his "party family", continue to champion rural and regional communities, to fight for water infrastructure projects, to reduce bureaucracy and to have common sense in government. While Ian was undoubtedly a champion of the bush, his skills and achievements can also be found in Sydney, as has been detailed in relation to transforming Homebush into a world-class sporting precinct for the 2000 Sydney Olympic Games. As a proud member of The Nationals, there is much to be drawn from Ian's political life. *The Land* newspaper described him as a "straight-talking campaigner", but he also gave his time and skills to industry associations like the Cattle Council of Australia, the Cattlemen's Union of Australia, the Australian Registered Cattle Breeders Association, the Australian Brahman Breeders' Association, the NSW Stud Merino Breeders' Association—formerly the NSW Sheepbreeders' Association—and the Australian Stock Horse Society. The list is extensive.

As a passionate primary producer and a member of the Royal Agricultural Society, Ian would certainly be watching the exciting build-up to the Sydney Royal Easter Show from above, which is happening in regional communities around the State right now. There were few sporting organisations in the Central West that Ian was not part of, including the Cowra Gun Club, Cowra Junior Cricket Association and the Parkes Jockey Club. They will all miss his straight-talking, sound advice and vision for the future. Ian once stated, "One of my skills has been to have good staff around me, and I have mainly been successful." I am honoured to have Clare Taylor in my team, a Cowra local who worked for Ian for 15 years until the redistribution and abolition of his electorate. Clare is here today.

I know that Clare, and my dear friend and a former staffer of Ian's, Mr Ron Cooper, felt Ian's death keenly. I believe it is testament to the caring and professional person he was that 13 years after leaving his office Clare regularly speaks of him very fondly and shares stories from her time in his office. During the recent rollout of new technology in our Young electorate office, Clare recalled a particular day in Ian's electorate office when the computers were not working and Ian's team were literally crawling under desks trying to find the problem. Ian called IT in Sydney, asking for someone to come out to Cowra and fix the system, and he then informed the Premier Bob Carr that his office would be closed until the issue was sorted. There was another day, while driving himself to Parliament, when Ian called the electorate office to declare he was going to start a campaign to get a new road built in line with the Bells Line of Road. It is little wonder then that when I ring the electorate office on the way home from Parliament, such as to declare that I am starting a campaign to get Tresillian Residential Services established at the Cowra Hospital, Clare audibly sighs down the phone line—and so the work begins!

Ian was a champion of regional media; he loved *The Land* newspaper and he no doubt enjoyed the sparring dance of a talented journalist's line of questioning during an interview. He told the newspaper once that there was always a copy of *The Land* in his ute, the truck or the electorate vehicle. He always had time for his communities and would carry a box or crate so he could stop on a street corner and talk to people. And now, you—his family, friends and loved ones—we, The Nationals, and the communities of the Central West and Riverina who were so well served by him for years, must go on without him. We must keep fighting the good fights he started, championing our rural and regional communities, infrastructure projects and drought proofing. We must find a way to do him proud in the choices we make and the causes we fight for. As the member for Cootamundra,

I must continue to fight for those communities he loved dearly, with the same passion, tenacity and foresight he displayed for decades. As I said earlier, he has left big shoes to fill.

My deepest sympathies go out to his family and friends for the loss of a truly great man, one of nature's gentlemen and a titan of our communities. He simply could not have been all he was without their love and support. I thank them for sharing him with us, and for letting us share in their sadness and loss. I can think of no better words to finish this speech than those of Ian himself: "Thank you for your indulgence."

**Mrs MELINDA PAVEY (Oxley—Minister for Water, Property and Housing) (16:47):** I had the privilege of delivering a speech at the memorial service, for which I will be forever grateful to Jenny Armstrong, and I am going to repeat a bit of it because I want to get it on the official parliamentary record. I am also going to give much of my speech today to Polly Bennett, who was Ian's chief of staff. What great speeches were just made, from our Deputy Premier, the contribution from Labor, which was excellent, and from our National Party members.

Ian Morton Armstrong, AM, OBE—bush warrior, one tough cocky, best man on the stump—for 25 years dedicated every day to fighting for the people of Lachlan in this Parliament. He loved this place, he loved this floor, he loved this bear pit, but he loved his electorate the most. We talk of Ian cracking the whip—he was a mighty fine hand at it. Any rumours and stories that he took off the tip of somebody's nose, it was not actually Ian—Ian was too good for that—it was another member.

**Mr Christopher Gulaptis:** Name him.

**Mrs MELINDA PAVEY:** It has something to do with Monaro. That cracking of the whip was also a metaphor for his life and how he just got on with it. His Anglo-Celtic Scottish ancestors had farmed the Central West plains for more than 100 years. He had an energy, a sparkle, a drive that went well beyond farming. He thought big, he acted big, he loved people's stories, he was a genuine host and a raconteur and he had a great sense of humour. He was regarded originally when he arrived in this place as a bit of a firebrand. He took on the stuffy Graziers' Association to help create the rival Cattlemen's Union to get things done. When Leon Punch stood down after Ian had been in this place for only one year, he missed out on the top job by only one vote, but the most important thing is that he became Wal Murray's loyal deputy through thick and thin for the next nine years. And what a formidable team they were.

After too many years in the wilderness, along with Liberal leader Nick Greiner—who could not be in Cowra because he was in New York as our new consul—and Peter Collins, who was in Cowra for the memorial service, Wal and Ian turned the State around and they cracked the whip on all of the aforementioned achievements—the deregulation of the egg industry, the dairy industry and the Dutch auction system at the Sydney fish markets. Only someone who showed livestock at the Royal Easter Show for more than 50 years could have convinced those stakeholders to move from Centennial Park to Homebush—an incredible achievement that laid the foundation for the Olympics.

We speak about the largest decentralisation in the history of Australia, if not the Southern Hemisphere, of the Department of Primary Industries to Orange. What an incredible achievement, which laid the foundation for change and having people live and be part of the bush and the regions. It was he and his director-general at the time, Kevin Sheridan, who came up with the plan—a great plan that has had a lasting legacy. I also note the very decent contribution from the Opposition leader in which she talked about Bob Carr seeking advice. I just wish that Bob Carr had sought more advice from Ian Armstrong, but it might have taken more than 16 years to turf Labor out of office.

I remember when we did go into opposition in those days, it was so horrible. Ian fought for the Lake Cowal goldmine; Bob Carr originally did not want it. Lake Cowal, as the member for Cootamundra knows, is an important part of the region, and that mine is really important for jobs and opportunities in the west. Ian was a big supporter of the Cadia goldmine at Orange. He would never have opposed it—our party would never have opposed that goldmine. That has also been fundamentally the reason for the success of Orange that we read so much about in today's papers as the place to be and the place to live, with great cafes, culture and wineries, goldmines, departments and salaries. That is the mixture that Ian supported and fought for. I just wish at times that we had more bipartisanship in relation to big jobs and opportunities in the regions—and I include in that Wyangala Dam.

When Wal stood down in May 1993 he repaid Ian's loyalty and supported him as leader. It was a bitter time, a very tough time, but Ian and Wal showed respect and loyalty to each other and Ian held that the whole way through. There were some very tough moments for Wal through that period and Ian stuck by him. I had the honour and privilege of working for both of them. I think Ian's greatest regret in politics was that the majority of the time he spent in Parliament was in opposition. He had only seven years in government to get things done but, as was pointed out, he never wasted an opportunity across that political divide for the good of our communities. Even

Michael Knight would acknowledge that Ian did not play to politics; he played the game and he played for what was in the best interests of the State.

I refer now to Ian's final speech in which he said, "I would like more achievers—business people—to come onto both sides of Parliament and to build the future not just for the next election." I believe Ian Armstrong was talking about people exactly like our current leader John Barilaro. He wanted people who understand how to run a business and be successful, and who understand that the relationship between government and business needs to be better to get things done in order to employ people and to make change, which is why it was so prescient that John Barilaro took to the election campaign—with the support of us all—the raising of Wyangala Dam to give towns and farmers greater water security. How delighted would Ian be at the current prices our beef and lamb producers are receiving! But he would be heartbroken to see the cattle that have gone down some of the rivers, particularly the Manning and the Hastings at the moment. Those are some really heartbreaking scenes, but he knew that was and is the lot of farmers and life on the land.

Ian was an absolute champion of women in our party. He appointed Wendy Machin as The Nationals' first female Cabinet Minister. He was an integral mentor to Fiona Nash, the first female deputy leader of the Federal party. He was a friend and mentor to Katrina Hodgkinson, our State's first female primary industries Minister. He was a huge supporter of that young kid he met many years ago, Steph Cooke. He insisted that I put up my hand for Parliament 18 years ago when I was nine months pregnant. He said, "No problem at all." He gave me that confidence and the certainty that it was the right thing to do. He created the Rural Women's Network, knowing that policies and ideas needed to include the views of women to help grow agriculture and success in the bush. That was no small part because—rumour has it—the farm ran better under Jenny when Ian was engaged with all the other work that he needed to do. He really valued the contribution of women. Polly Bennett, The Nationals' first female chief of staff and appointed by Ian, in saying vale to Ian Armstrong, her boss, said that he was remarkable, understood how to motivate teams and lead, delivered a collegiate atmosphere and welcomed different views. She said:

He challenged and inspired all of us. In coming into government he challenged what some refer to as the ... centralized process of recruitment and insisted he got to make his own appointments.

He did that and, as Polly points out, with great success, because 90 per cent of his staff worked with Ian for the duration of his period sitting on the Government benches over two terms. Talking about government and those two terms—and it was not a fixed election period, but cut terribly short—the other important thing was that, when we went into the 1995 State election, the National Party came out of that election holding every electorate that it went in with. I did not make that point as strongly at the memorial service, but that is very powerful. If only we had all done that on our side, we still would have been in government. We have to remember that because we lost a lot of momentum in regional New South Wales over those 16 years that we are now getting back. Ian always so much supported, as did Wal Murray, that plan of the Olympics. After the 2000 Olympics, an investment in Sydney was then meant to be replicated in regional New South Wales. We lost that opportunity because we did not win enough seats to form government. Polly also talked of the times of being interviewed at six o'clock in the morning by Ian—I am remembering she was at that time in her early twenties and was also meant to be having a life—and said that was a signal for life ahead. She said:

I grew up in rural NSW but now I was about to be imbedded in a new job and way of life, which required a conversation each day very early in the day with Ian the boss and minister, with the objective of no disruption to Jenny and the family.

Polly said that there would be a discussion on the topics of the day, their advice and his availability to prosecute his case, supporting all his leadership and ministerial colleagues, and his electorate. She said:

I could bang on here about his thoughtlessness to an approximate 30 year old average staff age member, and he had no regard to what our staff lifestyles looked like. But on a Thursday or Friday as parliament rose, as he headed out to Cowra he took time to chat to all of us and thank everyone for their achievements and contributions. Whilst Deb and Ray insisted he get a crack on—

And they were cracking their own whip to get him out the door. Polly said that he recruited a gaggle of professionals into his office, including staff from former Labor Minister Jack Hallam's office. She said that his view was that it was their job to explore the best policy outcomes with government agencies, communities and industries, and his job to advocate for success and difference. He had a great group of advisers and he was always a gentleman. This was one of my favourite things about Ian. If you were walking down Macquarie Street heading towards Hyde Park, he would always be on the right side to protect you from puddles and all of those things. He was such a gentleman. Polly said that he also wanted to hear different views and you were always encouraged to give those different views. She said that he had a keen sense of fun and welcomed all parliamentary colleagues from both sides of politics into his office at any time. She said—and this is nice:

Not all our staff had country origins and Ian took huge pride in showing our city slickers the regions. Explaining to Deb that the beautiful paddocks (not fields) of purple flowers was in fact Patterson's Curse. He legalized kangaroo meat with a Roo BBQ at the overseas terminal. Dingo puppies were not to be cuddled.

They sometimes brought them into Parliament to convince all the young staffers that it was okay and dingoes were fine, but we were not allowed to touch them. Polly said, "He had a deep sense of history and storytelling full of anecdotes, and we all came out the wiser for his sharing." Out of respect to the staff, in no particular order, Polly wanted me to mention Debra Monks; Regina McCulla; David Bell, who married Wendy Machin; Ian Webb; Anne Pommeroy; Russ Neal, who I think is still working for the Deputy Prime Minister; Julie Ingram; Bryce Osmond, my dear friend; Sean O'Connell; Adrian Simpson; Tim Stevens; Wendy Whittaker; Talbot Sanderson; Ray Oliver; and Paula Tardy. From his beautiful electorate office, I will mention Julie Harrison, Clare Taylor and Ron Cooper.

He had a huge impact on us all. I also acknowledge that at the memorial service there were some great leaders of the community, who were so proud to be there. I particularly highlight Bill West, and, yes, he is not a member of the party, but he is more inclined to our way of thinking. Phyllis Miller was there, as was the magnificent mayor of Parkes, Ken Keith, and Reg Kidd. I highlight Rick Firman, who can now hold the title of the best dressed man in the west because Ian is no longer with us. Ian certainly was a fine and tidy dresser. He loved nothing more than to actually clean our boots during meetings in our offices. He found it very cathartic to clean everyone's boots and make that a part of the process of the meeting.

I remember being in the office when Oliver was born. He was so happy. To see Oliver Zoom in from Europe, gorgeous-looking and speaking with a European accent—where's that Aussie kid gone? That was wonderful. Louisa, Bronte and Jock's stories of their holidays and of him being a better horse rider than a boat driver were fantastic. He loved Angus and Angela. You do not often hear a parent talk so beautifully of the in-laws, so I acknowledge Jane and the other Ian, Ian Sinclair. Jenny made him good too. She really did. The member for Granville raised that. She has been very much two-for-one for the taxpayer. It has been a very long association. I adored him. I learned from him. We are all better people for knowing him. We will all continue to work hard to make great policy and achievements for our country communities, leading by his example.

**Ms YASMIN CATLEY (Swansea) (17:03):** I give condolence to the family of Ian Armstrong on behalf of the NSW Labor Party. Each of us comes to this place to represent our community and to prosecute the case for policies that will improve their lives. I did not know Mr Armstrong, but I have listened to many of the speeches today and he certainly left a legacy. I say to the member for Oxley that she is a hard act to follow and her contribution was lovely. I certainly learnt a lot about the man whom those in The Nationals all loved.

Having not known him, I read his inaugural speech earlier today. While many members' inaugural speeches cover personal stories—which his indeed did—or the history of their family, Mr Armstrong's dealt mainly with water policy. Right from the outset he was determined to make a difference. It was clearly something about which he was passionately concerned and it remains something that affects the lives of many people in one way or another and especially those living in rural areas, as we see this week with the flooding across our State. Upon his election Mr Armstrong was the National Country Party's water spokesperson and he wasted no time in speaking to those matters right here in this Chamber. Like many farmers, of course, he was an environmentalist of sorts. He was keen to increase water recycling efforts and take steps to lower the water table to arrest the increased salinity of rural lands. He sounded an early warning for government on the dangers of overdevelopment in peri-urban fringe areas without adequate water resources.

Mr Armstrong gave 25 years of civic service to this Parliament and served in various capacities—as shadow Minister, Minister, party leader and of course as Deputy Premier. I note his lifelong commitment to rural and regional communities across this State. While we may argue about the method, I am confident that all members of Parliament who represent regional electorates share a common aim towards similar outcomes for our communities. I reiterate my condolences to Mr Armstrong's family, his wife and two children, and I commend that dapper gentleman's service to this Parliament.

**Mr PAUL TOOLE (Bathurst—Minister for Regional Transport and Roads) (17:06):** I also acknowledge Jenny, Angus, Angela and all of the family and friends who are present here today, as well as the tens of thousands of viewers who are watching Parliament in this place. It was an absolute honour and a privilege to speak about Ian at the memorial service that was held in Cowra. It is also an honour to stand in this House today and share some memories of someone who was a mentor, a gentleman, a legend of Australian politics and a really good guy—someone who loved his community, but most importantly someone who loved his family.

I spent a fair bit of time speaking with Ian about the Bells Line of Road and it is fitting that today and over the past few days I have spent a lot of time talking about the Bells Line of Road, which like so many roads has been hit hard by the big wet at the moment. Anyone who spent time with Ian would have heard him speak about the Bells Line of Road and there is no doubt that cut across everybody: mayors, Ministers and politicians at a State and Federal level. It was because Ian was passionate. Ian was passionate about creating a better regional New South Wales. He had a vision and was passionate about ensuring that our communities in the west had a voice

that would continually advocate for them. We are better off in our communities in the west because of that platform and the work that Ian Armstrong did for each and every one of us.

I will share some comments that I also made at Ian's memorial service. As I said, he wanted to build a better road over the mountains because he knew that it was important to have those stronger connections between Sydney and the Central West. I would always hear the story at those Bells Line of Road meetings about the dairy trucks and farmers getting through the mountains. If I did not hear it at that meeting then I would definitely hear it on a phone call or at the next meeting—or it would be down the street, or it would be in Sydney. I had the opportunity to work with him on the Bells Line of Road committee not only when I was the mayor of Bathurst but also when I was the local member. It was an honour to work with somebody who was so passionate in their beliefs and in what they were trying to achieve in this space.

As the chair, he led the fight. He was persistent and he led that fight with both Federal and State Ministers. He would go to governments all the time asking for more investment. That persistence may have been annoying, but that is how he achieved so much in so many different areas over that time. It did not matter, too, if Ian was ever knocked back on any particular matter. He was someone who would get back up. I know that he would say to the media, "There's always a chance if you keep working at it. We will take every opportunity. We're not giving up." That really describes who Ian Armstrong was. He knew what it took to make regional communities hum. He also knew what it took to create jobs in the regions and he fought to make that a reality. If it mattered to his communities then he was relentless in pursuing it.

I know that Ian would be proud of the work that has happened on the Bells Line of Road. It has become a much safer road. There are more opportunities now for motorists to overtake. It is a very wet road today, too, and one that we hope will be reopened again very soon. As soon as it is safe we will get our crews out there. They will assess the damage and we will again see motorists using that road. I hope Ian would also be proud of the work that The Nationals are doing in government. At the last election, the Deputy Premier announced \$2.5 billion to go towards upgrading the Great Western Highway. It was another road that he fought for over time, another road that he knew would open up the Central West, another road that would provide connectivity and make it safer for motorists travelling to and from and through the mountains. I hope as a National Party member that we will see generations of Nats follow in Ian's footsteps as genuine champions for their communities and that they are just as dogged in their pursuit of projects that really matter.

Ian seemed to know everyone, and Jenny can attest that it took hours for Ian to get through the room because he seemed to know everybody's name and wanted to have a chat with everyone. I am sure he mentioned the Bells Line of Road. Did I mention that? I am sure he would have as well. But this is important: He was not someone who just wanted to say hello and talk to you. He wanted to know what you were thinking. He cared about what mattered to you. If it mattered to them, it mattered to Ian. I think that is something really special that Ian Armstrong was important in delivering.

When I have been talking to people about Ian Armstrong over the past couple of months, one of the most common comments that I have had is that he was a great man—and he was. He was a friend of our family. I know that he helped my dad in various elections, as well, but it went beyond that. He would still contact him from time to time and that is the kind of man that Ian was. He reached out to people in communities right across this State. There is no doubt that New South Wales has lost a true champion of the bush. The Nats have lost a giant of their party. Jenny, Angus, Angela and all of the family have lost a much loved husband and father. Like so many people across this country, we have lost a friend. We have lost someone who was a sounding board to each and every one of us, and he will be greatly missed.

**Mr KEVIN ANDERSON (Tamworth—Minister for Better Regulation and Innovation) (17:13):** I join with colleagues in paying tribute to the great man. We have heard wonderful tributes and stories this afternoon. In Ian Armstrong we have heard about the type of person and politician that many in modern-day politics should heed in the way that they conduct themselves. He conducted himself with honesty, integrity and compassion—not only for his job but for others around him, including his colleagues. He had a work ethic that is rarely matched even today. He stood for old-fashioned values that are sorely missed in many parts of our lives, both professionally and personally, and we would do well to follow those values and treat each other with the respect and care that Ian Armstrong showed.

Ian had a great presence. I remember being at AgQuip in Gunnedah. We would be in the alleyway there, trying to hustle people as they went past—trying to get a brochure in their hands—and Ian would turn up and he would be the star. We may as well have just stepped back because the light shone brightly as he spoke. He knew everyone and would say, "Kevin, have you met this person? Kevin, have you met that person?" I would say, "Yes, yes, thank you." He really was the centre of attention. They would reminisce about days gone by, he would hold forth on what he knew about agriculture, and it would go on for some time. Then he would wander off down the alleyway at AgQuip and do the rounds. It was fantastic to have him there onsite.

It is now up to us, The Nationals of today, to carry on those values and traditions, the commitment and the passion he had, and build the platform. We are the new generation that needs to carry that forward. We have to carry on his legacy and keep pushing hard. We need to continue that work. The NSW Nationals website has an opening paragraph that reads:

Through times of war and peace, prosperity and hardship, we have stood shoulder to shoulder with the people who call country NSW home. We stand for all regional communities—mums and dads, families, the retired, small business operators, sea-changers and tree-changers, students, apprentices and anyone in between.

We're united by a love for the real Australia and a commitment to make it better.

It is as if those words were penned by Ian Armstrong himself. We are better for having known him and we will continue his legacy. We thank his family for allowing us to share in his life. Vale, Ian Armstrong.

**The ASSISTANT SPEAKER:** The question is that the motion be agreed to.

**Motion agreed to.**

*Members and officers of the House stood in their places as a mark of respect.*

#### *Bills*

### **GOVERNMENT SECTOR FINANCE AMENDMENT (GOVERNMENT GRANTS) BILL 2021**

#### **First Reading**

**Bill received from the Legislative Council, introduced and read a first time.**

**The ASSISTANT SPEAKER:** I advise the House that I have received a written authority from the Hon. Robert Borsak, MLC, advising that the member for Barwon will have carriage of the bill in the Legislative Assembly. I order that the second reading of the bill stand as an order of the day for tomorrow.

### **LOCAL GOVERNMENT AMENDMENT BILL 2021**

#### **Second Reading Debate**

**Debate resumed from an earlier hour.**

**Mr PETER SIDGREAVES (Camden) (17:18):** I speak in debate on the Local Government Amendment Bill 2021. Local communities, particularly across Greater Sydney, are already experiencing significant population growth and are forecast to grow even further over the coming years. This is especially true in the Camden local government area [LGA], which is the fastest growing LGA in Australia, as I have said in this place before. It is growing at approximately 8 per cent per annum and forecast to have an annual growth of 5.5 per cent over the next 20 years. In 2016 the population of the Camden LGA was a touch over 80,000. In 2041 the population of the Camden LGA is forecast to be over 300,000. While the State Government delivers a range of services to these communities, they also rely on local infrastructure and services provided by local government ranging from footpaths and local roads to libraries, swimming pools and parklands. As new families move into growing towns and suburbs, councils are expected to keep pace with the change and provide much-needed local services and infrastructure. While these expectations are natural and reasonable, they impose a significant financial burden on councils—particularly where growth happens quickly and is significant in scale, as is the case in Camden.

It is concerning that council finances are coming under significant pressure as their populations swell. The New South Wales Government remains committed to ensuring that councils have a stable and reliable revenue base so that they are well positioned to plan and deliver services for their communities into the future. With that in mind, as part of the Government's final response to the Independent Pricing and Regulatory Tribunal [IPART] review of the local government rating system, it committed to ensuring that councils can align their incomes with population growth. The bill will allow for that commitment to be met effectively and efficiently by providing for multiple rate pegs to be set for different councils, if needed, as part of the rate pegging system.

Each year IPART limits the general income councils can raise from rates without further approval by setting a rate peg. I understand that the rate peg is currently set by a methodology that takes into account changes to the value of average council costs for goods and services and any improvements to productivity that have occurred during that period. These costs include things such as staffing, capital, and operating and maintenance costs. The current methodology effectively assumes that the cost of serving each ratepayer will be on average the same, or that a special rate may be levied in areas where servicing groups of ratepayers involves higher and special costs. This methodology does not take into account the increase in demand for services that comes with population growth. In addition, councils often face these costs before the future ratepayers can begin to pay for them. This is exactly what Camden Council is experiencing.

On 14 December last year, with the approval of the Premier, Minister Hancock provided IPART with terms of reference to conduct a review of the rate peg methodology to incorporate population growth. The review will enable recommendations to be made which, should they be accepted, will allow the general income of councils to increase as their communities grow. Importantly, however, this will not impact the income growth that councils with stable or declining populations would have achieved under the existing methodology. IPART has also been asked as part of its review to have regard to the Government's commitment to protecting ratepayers from sudden or excessive rate rises, while improving the financial sustainability of local government.

The IPART review will also take into account the differing needs and circumstances of councils and communities in metropolitan, regional, and rural areas of the State. The Minister has asked IPART to provide a report with recommendations on this review in September this year. To ensure that any new methodology approved as part of this review process can be implemented, the bill proposes to put beyond doubt that more than one rate peg could be applied if that is required. The New South Wales Government will then consider whether to support IPART's recommendations, as a decision is made about how to change the way the rate peg is set to include the pressures of population growth. Growing communities in Camden and across the State need a range of local services and infrastructure and should expect that their council is in a strong position to meet their needs, now and into the future. The bill not only addresses the pressure on councils of growing populations but also provides them with the flexibility they need to apply rates in a fairer and more equitable way amongst their ratepayers.

In years gone by most residents expected their council to deliver only a few basic services—maintaining local roads and footpaths, and collecting rubbish. Those services remain important. However, over time local government functions have expanded to capture a wider range of services. Many of our councils are responsible for fostering local economic development, shaping the places in which we live and work. Others provide local health and community services, supporting ageing residents and those with disabilities or other specific needs. At the same time the community's expectations of their council have grown and changed. Each council is adapting in its own way, striving to provide the kinds of services that meet those community expectations. Although that presents opportunities for councils that already serve New South Wales communities of widely different size and scale, it also presents challenges, particularly to their financial sustainability. The Government understands that the Local Government Act 1993 must continue to provide an effective governing framework for all diverse, modern councils, which requires further moves away from a one-size-fits-all approach towards greater flexibility, particularly in relation to rates, to ensure that different types of ratepayers pay their fair share.

The bill provides greater flexibility for council rating through a number of important measures. Those reforms deliver recommendations made by IPART as part of its review of local government rating. The bill provides for a new rating category for environmental land, which adds to existing categories that enable councils to set different rates for residential, business, farming and mining land. Currently under the Act, if a parcel of land does not fall within the residential, farming or mining category it must be rated as business land. The New South Wales Government has heard that is resulting in higher rates for land on which the owner cannot carry out residential or commercial development due to geographic restrictions, like steep slopes, or significant restrictions imposed under other laws. Often such differences are not reflected fully in the value of those properties that impose lower costs on the local council. It is only fair that a separate and different rate be applied to them.

The bill also provides for changes to the different types of rates councils can set within each broad rating category. First, in relation to residential areas, urban councils would be able to set different rates despite the absence of distinct centres of population, such as separate towns and villages. Under the Act councils in regional and rural New South Wales can draw those distinctions already and often use those provisions to provide fairer rates in their local areas. The bill extends this to councils in Greater Sydney and other urban areas where there is, on average, different access to, demand for, or costs of providing services and infrastructure. Under the bill, if a council took up that option it would have to seek the Minister's approval to set a rate in an area that is more than 1.5 times the average rate structure across all residential subcategories. That provides a safeguard against any future misuse.

The bill also allows councils to set different rates for business land based on whether the land is being used for industrial activities. Currently under the Act councils can set different business rates only for different centres of activity, thereby limiting rate setting to location rather than to the activities taking place on each property. Usually it also means that businesses that are not clustered together are charged only a general business rate. IPART recommended and the Government supports changing that to enable the creation of different rating subcategories for land where industrial and commercial activities are occurring. Activities that may be prescribed as industrial include, for example, manufacturing, warehousing, abattoirs and works depots, which recognises that the land where those activities take place typically has different access to, demand for, or costs associated with providing council services.

The bill also gives each council the option to set different rates for farmland based on geographic location. That would apply in addition to the current bases for creating rating subcategories: intensity of land use, irrigability of land and economic factors affecting land. Some councils rely on those factors. However, as part of its review, IPART found that they are subjective, inflexible and difficult to apply fairly to ratepayers in many rural areas. Therefore, IPART recommended that councils should be able to set different farmland rates based on geographic location. In many rural areas, setting rates based on location better reflects the productivity of the land and access to council services. It is also simpler to apply. The Government supported that recommendation.

Over the past few years, the Government has undertaken significant consultation with councils and communities across the State to identify specific areas where that flexibility is most needed. IPART has also undertaken an independent review of the local government rating system, which has been relied on to develop the bill. On that basis, I am confident that the measures in the bill are necessary and have been developed carefully to respond to the needs of local communities across the State. I commend the bill to the House.

**Ms TANIA MIHAILUK (Bankstown) (17:30):** I make a contribution to debate on the Local Government Amendment Bill 2021. As the member for Bankstown, I have seen firsthand the devastating impacts of the Government's mismanaged and misdirected council amalgamations. In my electorate, the 2016 merger of Canterbury and Bankstown councils created a mega council with a jurisdiction of over 370,000 people. Yesterday's findings in ICAC's Operation Dasha inquiry only cemented my view that Bankstown City Council never should have amalgamated with Canterbury City Council. I welcome the 23 corruption findings made by ICAC to help address the corruption risk identified during the investigation and to ensure that we prevent that type of conduct from occurring again.

The City of Canterbury Bankstown council was borne out of an ill-advised amalgamation policy. Members can read about how that amalgamation came about in the ICAC transcript. I urge members to look at that transcript because it horrifies me that the final deliberation on the amalgamation occurred at a barbecue at Councillor Pierre Azzi's House. I commend ICAC for its findings and for its work in preparing the 23 corruption recommendations. I hope every council looks closely at those recommendations and ensures that it is abiding by those recommendations. Indeed, I hope the Government also ensures that the departments of planning and local government also consider the recommendations and ensure they are thoroughly supported by all councils and all levels of government in the planning context. We know that councils often obtain very sensitive information, so it is imperative that ICAC's recommendations are implemented by every council across the State and by the various government departments that have a role in local government.

Members should make no mistake: There is immense opposition in my community to the rate hike proposed by the City of Canterbury Bankstown council. Over the next five years rates will increase cumulatively by 32 per cent to 63 per cent despite overwhelming protests from residents across my council area. Those rate hikes are the direct result of this Government's disastrous council amalgamation policy. Just as it did all over the State, the Government forced together two councils with vastly different financial positions and financial needs, without proper regard to their different requirements. As a response the council is passing on the cost of that merger to its ratepayers. Despite my vocal opposition to the merger at the time, the Government ran through its misguided vision and demolished the local aspect of local government. I made continued claims that the proposal would increase costs for ratepayers but was assured by Government members time and time again that the merger would in fact improve cost-saving efficiencies and reduce rates. Now we know that is not the case and we are seeing the results of the Government's refusal to heed my advice. Now ratepayers in those council areas are suffering from the results of the Government's failure to listen to them or their representatives.

The bill presents an opportunity to correct some of those failures, but instead of advancing meaningful and successful solutions the Minister is proposing bandaid solutions to cover over the failures of the botched merger process. The bill is utterly misguided in its attempts to move the special rates variation review process outside of the Independent Pricing and Regulatory Tribunal, or IPART. Since the formation of IPART in 1992, that independent body has been an essential protector against misconduct by government institutions at any and all levels. The tribunal's consistent review process for council rates has been rigorous, transparent and inclusive. In 2016 IPART delivered its Local Government Rating System, which sets out 42 recommendations. That document has been sitting with local government for 4½ years and finally the Government has proposed a bill. However, it cherry-picks the recommendations that it supports. In fact, only 13 of those recommendations are supported by the bill.

Through the bill the Government seeks to amend section 495 of the Local Government Act, which will permit councils to levy special rates for infrastructure, jointly funded with other levels of government, which are outside the rate peg and without IPART's approval. In particular new section 495 (4) (b) recognises that income from that special rate will not form part of a council's general income under the rate peg and therefore will not be forced to undergo the rigorous criteria that IPART imposes on such rate variation applications. To mitigate that

reduction in checks and balances, new section 495 (f) requires councils to place a tokenistic statement in its annual report, listing the cost of the project, the total revenue it generates, the outcome of the project and its benefits to the local community. Those insubstantial reporting requirements are absolutely no substitute for IPART's stringent and comprehensive criteria, and allow councils to freely pursue policies without actual accountability. Labor will introduce an amendment to remove that new provision in its entirety.

That provision, which attempts to reduce IPART's capacity to regulate those decisions, is reflective of the Government's broader attitude towards that essential body. The Government is willing to stand by IPART when it supports its views—in fact I recall several Liberal Ministers in the past singing IPART's praises in some council areas, particularly when we were dealing with Fit for the Future submissions—but now it has certainly started the process of devaluing the role and the work of IPART. During the Government's amalgamation process it consistently ignored advice from IPART when it came to my council area. As a consequence my local government area is now feeling the pinch. Without a well-resourced, independent and powerful IPART, local governments will find it all too easy to pass on the costs of those mergers to their ratepayers. I call upon the Government to provide support to IPART, to offer protections for its role and to allow it to institute its own independent processes and programs within the Ministry of Local Government to further oversee the actions of local government. Without those protections IPART cannot pretend to be helping the residents of local governments.

Further, the bill's prescribed rate harmonisation time lines for councils are far too rushed to be realistic. Clause 127 (2) (b) demands that councils harmonise their rates over a maximum of four years only. It is now clear that there is quite a lot of opposition to that process. I commend the shadow Minister for Local Government, the member for Campbelltown, for proposing an amendment to ensure that that be extended to an eight-year period, given the incredible impact that some of those rate harmonisation processes—and indeed the special rate variation requests from those councils—are having on communities statewide. Perhaps most worryingly, the bill does almost nothing to provide support to those councils that have been financially burdened by forced amalgamations.

The Government was forced to abandon its amalgamation program prematurely during the election period and shortly after Premier Gladys Berejiklian was elected, and the merged councils that sought legal redress did not have to amalgamate. Unfortunately for the councils that did not choose to go down the legal path, they were stuck with those amalgamations. Rather than forcing unwanted and devastating changes onto those councils and then leaving them out in the cold, the Government must take responsibility for what it has done. The bill must provide clear provisions for equitable, generous and available financial support grants. Up until now the only councils that the Government has believed to be worth supporting are those that are located in Liberal and National Party electorates; 95 per cent of the \$250 million Stronger Communities Fund has gone towards councils in those areas. [*Extension of time*]

Councils in areas that the Government does not believe are electorally significant have also been hamstrung and financially devastated by council amalgamations. Labor will introduce amendments to the bill to mandate the creation of financial support grants that are actually designed to support councils in need, which will mean that councils will not have to pass on crushing and debilitating rate increases to vulnerable residents. Labor cannot in good conscience support the bill in the absence of those amendments. However, for those councils where amalgamation is fundamentally inappropriate, even the provision of financial support grants would provide only temporary relief. The Government must be willing to acknowledge its mistakes and enshrine a clear business case process for demerger proposals that I have no doubt will proceed in New South Wales.

It is deeply unfair that those councils have no ability to review the case for demerging. Labor will also introduce amendments to institute a clear business case process for the de-amalgamation of newly constituted areas. Those amendments will specify time limits for consideration by the Minister. Again, I commend the shadow Minister for his work. I appreciate that he has held many meetings with different stakeholders, as has the local government Minister. I acknowledge that perhaps some of those past decisions do not reflect the views of the local government Minister, who is in the Chamber today.

**Mr David Harris:** Hear, hear!

**Ms TANIA MIHAILUK:** But the responsibility does lie at her feet to make the appropriate changes. It is very clear that the legislation requires serious amendment for Labor to support it, and the issues with the bill do not just end there. Changes to sections 713 (1) (b) and 713 (2) would see land sold after three years of unpaid rates rather than the current five years. That would unfairly punish landowners who have financial issues by prematurely selling their land. Again, Labor will introduce an amendment to ensure that the current five-year period is maintained, particularly given that our communities both in Sydney and out in the regions are suffering through the pandemic. Indeed, it is almost obscene to propose that particular new section in the legislation. I would have thought that the Minister would not support varying the position from five years to three years because it puts undue pressure on families, businesses and communities across our State.

Moreover, the significant changes that the bill introduces will go without sufficient review. Labor will also move an amendment to enshrine the statutory review of all provisions that are affected by the bill after two years to ensure that any issues arising from the bill are efficiently addressed. While the Government has included a couple of provisions in the bill that are worthy of consideration, such as ensuring that superannuation is provided to mayors and councillors, Labor's proposal that it be mandated is the better approach. It will be more fair and equitable across the State, given that some councils in particular areas may reject the proposal. The amendments proposed by Labor are essential to ensure that the bill protects and supports residents in local council areas, particularly those who are in forcibly amalgamated council areas. I urge the Government to acknowledge its past mistakes and amend the bill to provide meaningful support to affected local residents, rather than stubbornly standing by its colossal failures of the past.

**Dr MARJORIE O'NEILL (Coogee) (17:44):** I make a contribution to debate on the Local Government Amendment Bill 2021. I thank my colleague the member for Campbelltown for his work on the bill so far, and for his continuing and passionate support for local government. I should disclose that I love local government. Up until recently I was an elected local councillor and I have previously held a position on the executive of Local Government NSW. Those positions have put me at the coalface of what we are debating in the Chamber. Local government is the closest level of government to the people, but the Liberal Government's forced mergers have attempted to silence local voices and centralise the power away from the people.

In almost every example of this failed policy at work, the Liberal-Nationals Government has made a complete mess of local government areas across the State, leaving local people frustrated and leaving local councils and councillors to pick up the mess. The botched forced amalgamation process and subsequent efforts toward rate harmonisation are a disaster of the Government's own making. I note that the original Independent Pricing and Regulatory Tribunal report was released in 2016 and that the Minister at the time sat on his hands and did nothing for years. I note that the Minister in the Chamber is a different Minister, who is attempting to clean up the mess that her Government has created. This terrible policy, along with the ineptitude with which it has been executed, has destroyed the local government sector across New South Wales.

Not only that, the Liberal-Nationals Government has overseen such a denigration of the Office of Local Government that it now exists only as a minor branch within the Department of Premier and Cabinet. It is a department so undermined and underfunded that it no longer has the capacity, staffing or resources to fix the enormous problem that has been created by this policy. Thankfully my local council and the other local councils in the Eastern Suburbs have avoided that fate, despite the hard efforts of the Government to force amalgamation, thanks to the extraordinary efforts of the Liberal-strong Woollahra Municipal Council, which took the Liberal New South Wales Government to the Supreme Court to stop the forced amalgamation of Woollahra, Waverley and Randwick councils.

It was only after the case progressed right through to the High Court of Australia that the Government finally decided to back down, because it knew it was wrong then and it knows it is wrong now. But the people won. Along with that case, residents of the Eastern Suburbs lodged their own proceedings with the Land and Environment Court of New South Wales, looking to stop the deeply undemocratic process from forever changing local government in the east. What is clear from this policy and all policies from the Liberal-Nationals Government is that it completely ignores the will of the people. In fact, the local people impacted by this terrible policy are literally the last concern of the Government. Those opposite seek only to make things better for themselves, which always comes at the cost of local people and local voices.

I speak on the bill because I wish to echo the calls made to me by local people in the Eastern Suburbs. They did not want amalgamations forced upon them. Had they been forced to amalgamate as the Government desired, we would be faced with the same issues of rate harmonisation that all those who were forced to amalgamate are facing now. During her second reading speech, the Minister for Local Government described the bill as "sensible reforms". I stand with my colleague from Campbelltown in calling the legislation what it is: a desperate set of reforms to patch up the botched merger process and a bandaid solution to a haemorrhaging wound. The Opposition is seeking to make important amendments to the legislation, which I will touch on briefly, to produce proper and meaningful reform within the local government sector.

The amendments provide our communities and councils with the support they need to be able to address the issues that have arisen from the Government's mistakes. One of the amendments addresses the rate harmonisation process for forcibly amalgamated councils by increasing the maximum time period for the harmonisation process from four years to eight years. The proposed harmonisation period of four years is too prescriptive. Councils are accountable to their people. The maximum period should be increased to eight years, with local governments determining their own time lines within that period. Given the financial stress that the botched forced amalgamation process has placed on councils and their communities, an extended time line would

allow councils more flexibility to harmonise their rates based on the capacity of their communities to meet the increases and in line with improving their long-term financial sustainability.

The Government must create a process for de-amalgamation of newly constituted areas, a business case process for demerger proposals and time limits for consideration by the Minister. The bill must include a process and pathways to demerge. The Government has botched this process from start to finish and needs to provide a mechanism to opt out where mergers have not worked. In some cases, councils are being driven to financial ruin and ratepayers are picking up the tab. That is not sustainable and the Government must provide a life raft to the councils it is sinking. The Government also needs to create financial support grants for forcibly amalgamated councils. Councils need to be supported on an equitable basis. Sadly, to date, the Government grants have been targeted predominantly at supporting councils in State Liberal and the Nationals electorates.

The bill must also mandate compulsory superannuation for mayors and councillors. Labor is the party of the worker and we created superannuation for working people. All remunerated positions in the country earning more than \$450 per month receive the superannuation guarantee of 9.5 per cent of ordinary earnings, excluding mayors and councillors. All workers should be treated fairly and equitably. The proper remuneration, including superannuation, for elected local government representatives would encourage greater participation in local government, particularly for women and people from diverse multicultural and socio-economic backgrounds. The Minister often talks about encouraging more women into local government. This is her chance to ensure they—and all other elected local government members—receive the same rights as the Minister and every worker in the country.

The bill is a poor attempt to reform a terrible policy. Both the bill and the amalgamation policy are emblematic of the Government. It is a 10-year-old Government—a tired Government—that has made a complete mess of local government across the entire State and can provide no real answers on how to fix its own mess. The amendments put forward by Labor are sensible and come from a place of deep understanding of the plight of the local government sector in New South Wales. The amendments will go a long way towards fixing the mess the Government has created for itself. I implore the Government to accept the amendments and begin to repair local government in New South Wales.

**Mr DAVID HARRIS (Wyong) (17:51):** I contribute to debate on the Local Government Amendment Bill 2021. I commend the member for Campbelltown and shadow Minister for the amendments that he is putting forward. I have a couple of comments to make on the bill and I will respond to some of the comments made earlier by my Central Coast colleague the member for Terrigal. Like others on this side of the House, I recognise the efforts of the current Minister for Local Government in trying to clean up what has become a bit of a mess. The previous two members who had the position of Minister for Local Government owe the current Minister quite a few drinks.

**Mr Jamie Parker:** To say the least! They owe her a brewery.

**Mr DAVID HARRIS:** A brewery! There you go. I start with rate harmonisation. That part of the legislation is not a deal-breaker for me, but I will talk about it because it was raised by the member for Terrigal. I have been supportive of the Minister's actions with Central Coast Council, and that is on the public record. I have a strong belief that, given the financial situation of the council, the current councillors' relationships with each other were so toxic that they did not have the ability to do what needed to be done on behalf of the community. In fact, on several occasions I had to ask the Minister in the corridors to do what she finally did. I have no problems with that, but I do have problems when people try to apportion blame in the wrong places.

The member for Terrigal raised the issue of the debt and said that it can be attributed to a certain number of councils. That is certainly not true. When the two councils were merged—and this is in the forensic audit—\$317 million worth of debt was carried over. That cannot be attributed to the current council. Of that, \$235 million was directly related to water operations. What people do not understand about Central Coast Council is that it does its normal council operations, but it is also the water authority. Unlike other councils in the Illawarra, the Hunter and Sydney—where Hunter Water and Sydney Water operate—Central Coast Council operates its water. That means that any debt that Sydney Water or Hunter Water would carry is carried by Central Coast Council. I do not like that arrangement. I think it should be separate because it gives a false view to the community and allows people to attack the council for things that are not fair.

The \$235 million for the water assets is actually good debt because it makes money and because my area of Wyong, which is growing at a rapid rate, needs that infrastructure. To criticise the current council for that debt, which it did not take on, is unfair and unreasonable and gives a false impression to the community. I have to call that out. The second part of the debt is \$200 million, which was the use of restricted funds. We all agree that was the wrong thing. But the administrator and the forensic audit both say the councillors were never made aware that

that practice was happening, so we cannot attribute that to them either. The new council ran up very little debt. Most of it was already there and had been incurred through unlawful practices.

Where we can blame the current council is for going on a spending spree when its revenue was not growing. It was responsible for the deficit in funding, and that deficit was getting bigger and bigger. There are lots of reasons for that. Partly it was because \$129 million that councillors thought they had had been improperly identified in the budget. Again, that is in the forensic audit. So councillors thought they had almost \$130 million more than they did, and they were spending it. There were a whole range of reasons for that and a lot of those things came out in the forensic audit. I am not absolving the councillors. As I said, they were so busy attacking each other that they could not see the total picture. But there was a range of issues. The member for Terrigal said that the Government would vary the rates through this legislation. I got hold of a letter from the administrator, who admonished the member for Terrigal. He says:

I did explain to the community how rate harmonisation would impact on their rates. I told them if there was no council proposed Special Rate Variation [SRV] of 15 % there would still be a rate increase for former Gosford Council residents, of 27%, and that this 27% increase was directly caused by the Council amalgamations.

That is from the administrator, who continues:

Your letter passes over this by advising that your Government is trying to pass legislation that would allow effected councils to spread this very large increase over a longer period. Of course, this would amend the legislation you voted to put in place originally.

Your letter also fails to mention that if your proposal—

and this is the part that affects my people—

is passed (and subsequently adopted by the Council) it would delay the rate reduction of around 20% that former Wyong Council ratepayers have patiently been waiting for.

I understand why delaying the increase would be appreciated by your constituents in the electorate of Terrigal, but I suspect the larger number of former Wyong Council constituents who would experience further delays to their rate reductions, and who you also represent as the Parliamentary Secretary for the Central Coast, may see it differently.

That is a letter from the administrator in response to what the Government is proposing. It is a huge increase, but the Government has allowed this to sit here. Then at the eleventh hour, when people start complaining, it wants to put through legislation to try to fix it. My people have been in touch with me. I have had nearly 13,000 responses of protest asking why we should keep paying more for longer just so that people down south do not have to pay as much for a longer time. It has created division. The Government wanted to bring councils and communities together but this delay has actually caused division.

I acknowledge that the council could have done this previously and had a schedule for it. It did not do it. We know why: because it was not good at doing much at all really. My people in the northern part of the council area should not be penalised because of that, and I want to put that squarely on the record. The administrator has the power; he is the council at the moment. If he wants to immediately put the Wyong rates down and put the increase for the other area over a longer period, I will support that. But I do not support my people paying more for longer to compensate for the policy that the Government put through. We did not agree with it. Now that everyone is throwing their hands in the air and saying how unfair it is, the Government is trying to rush in and fix the problem. I know that is not the current Minister's fault. I wholly acknowledge that, but it is a fact.

The real deal-breaker for me is the section about the levying of special rates. Again, it is because of the low level of trust that people have. There was a huge outcry across the Central Coast about this because giving councils unfettered ability to raise levies through IPART, through the umpire—

**Mrs Shelley Hancock:** They can do it now. Sorry. You've got that wrong.

**Mr DAVID HARRIS:** I am telling you how my constituents and constituents across the Central Coast see it. They do not want to give councils that. [*Extension of time*]

There are two issues. The first is just having to report about it when you have got low trust in your local government organisation to start with is not enough of an approval process. The second point is the real concern about cost shifting. Say the State or Federal Government says at election time, "You have got this project and it is going to cost you \$20 million. We will give you \$4 million and the council can levy the rest." We could have levies all over the place all at the same time for different projects. One example on the Central Coast is that old Gosford council had a levy for a library that has been in place for 23 years. As yet, there is no library. That is why people have such low trust.

We strongly believe that IPART should stay part of the process. We should resource it more if this creates more work for it, but there should be independent scrutiny and the community should be able to have input into whether they think something is a good project. A bunch of councillors making a decision based on a State or Federal grant is not necessarily the best way to set different levies. The Minister said we have always had levies,

but I am not sure this is the same thing. We have had a coastal levy that has helped our surf clubs. We have had other sorts of levies for swimming pools and things like that. It is not that we are against levies. It is just that people want some form of scrutiny, whether it is the Minister making the decision or IPART giving the approval. People want to stop councils going off and making all sorts of decisions on their own behalf. Someone said to me, "If you don't like it, then vote the council out the next time." That takes four years. Sometimes you may not get enough people standing for council and you end up with the same people back anyway. I support the amendments that Labor will put forward to make IPART part of the process.

I also have serious concerns about reducing the amount of time in which people can have their property sold from five years back to three years. When rates are going up and people are under stress, that is the wrong time for this sort of amendment. I oppose that one. There are some good parts to the bill but unfortunately, as we have seen a lot with this Government, they are wrapped up with a whole lot of other ones that are pretty unacceptable. At this stage we cannot support the bill in its current form. If some of those other items are brought back or if the Opposition's amendments are accepted, then we may be able to support it.

I would be doing the wrong thing as a local member who has received so much correspondence about the unfair situation that came about when the old Wyong council area received a special rate variation in 2014, which resulted in a 36 per cent increase in rates. We have been paying that ever since because it was frozen under the amalgamation legislation. Then we were told that we must keep paying that extra rate longer. But, under what the administrator is putting forward, people in my area would get a 20 per cent decrease in their rates. We do not have councillors at the moment. The administrator will make the decision. At the moment, according to the letter and my conversations with him, because of the financial situation at Central Coast Council, he cannot see any way in which he can delay that rate harmonisation. He said financially it is going to be very difficult because they have taken out loans based on what their projected revenue will be, and he thinks that will be placed at risk. I have spoken to him directly. I have a copy of the letter that he wrote to the Parliamentary Secretary—

**Mrs Shelley Hancock:** How did you get that?

**Mr DAVID HARRIS:** Someone posted it on Facebook. It is really important, given the financial difficulties at Central Coast Council, that we do the right thing moving forward to get the revenue back on track. I certainly cannot support the bill at this stage.

**Ms JODIE HARRISON (Charlestown) (18:06):** I speak on the Local Government Amendment (Rating) Bill. I thank the shadow Minister, the member for Campbelltown, for the extensive work he has done to bring forward amendments to make the bill acceptable to the Opposition and also for the consultation he has undertaken with all stakeholders. I would be remiss not to recognise today the hard work of councils across New South Wales that are working incredibly hard to ensure that their local roads and infrastructure are safe during the heavy rains, winds and floods we are currently experiencing. Along with the SES, Fire and Rescue NSW, surf lifesavers, police and charities such as the Salvation Army and the Red Cross, local councils are at the coalface right now, working hard to keep our communities safe.

I note that the bill has been introduced primarily to implement recommendations from the Independent Pricing and Regulatory Tribunal's [IPART's] review of the local government rating system. But it does not implement all of the IPART's 42 recommendations—13 have been supported and only five adopted. The provisions of the bill have travelled a long and winding road to this place. In August 2016 the IPART released its draft report and it was presented to the Minister in December of that year—it was a different Minister at that time. One Premier, three Ministers and an election later the final report was released in June 2019. It has taken nearly a year for the Government to get its act together and to deliver a response. The delay of the release of the final report is highly questionable, as is the fact that an explanation for the length of the delay has never been offered.

However, finally the day has come. Minister Hancock is now at the helm and the bill is before us. In local government there are many stakeholders and there would have been much navigation of positions to do. However, this Government's dabbling in reform of local government, certainly since 2011, has been haphazard—whether it be offloading infrastructure in need of repair to local governments as a form of cost-shifting or bungled amalgamations. This bill is no different. Elements of this bill can be salvaged, but Opposition colleagues and I have tremendous reservations about its provisions. The bill will allow for a process outside of IPART with regards to special rate variations for intergovernmental projects.

The Government suggests that this will enable more communities to benefit from improved infrastructure, but I see it as a blatant attempt to bypass the independent umpire. IPART was set up to administer a system of checks and balances on proposed pricing of New South Wales Government instruments, including councils' rates increases. Ratepayers might not always agree with IPART's determinations but that system is designed to be transparent and reasonable, balancing the views of all stakeholders. The proposed provision will do away with that process. The current process for review by IPART of a council's special rate variation may well be long and

cumbersome, but that does not mean that the IPART review should be abolished. Instead, it means that IPART should be given the resources to undertake those reviews in a timely manner. We owe it to the ratepayers of every council across this State.

Let us turn back to this Government's hasty and ill-considered scheme to amalgamate local governments, the so-called Fit for the Future program, and the ramifications it has had for the impacted communities. I was mayor of the City of Lake Macquarie Council when this Government suggested amalgamating the City of Newcastle and Lake Macquarie City councils: a merger that would have created a sprawling local government area stretching from Stockton to the Central Coast and cost staggering sums of money. Newcastle is a very different place from Lake Macquarie. Lake Macquarie's mix of urban, rural, semi-rural and village design would not have meshed well with Newcastle's much more urban character. Trying to deliver services to 360,000 people across such a diverse area would have been next to impossible.

Independent financial analysis from PricewaterhouseCoopers reinforced Lake Macquarie City Council's view that the proposed merger of the City of Newcastle and Lake Macquarie City councils would have been much more expensive than letting Lake Macquarie council stand alone. The proposed merger was estimated to cost \$47 million over the transition period and \$28 million per year afterwards, with a corresponding rate increase of more than 12 per cent for Lake Macquarie council's ratepayers. Some 87 per cent of the Lake Macquarie City Council's residents opposed the suggested amalgamation. Though the Government eventually listened to reason and backed down on the merger, that it was even suggested underlines the Government's commitment to politics and ideology over sound policy.

As it stands, the bill will give the local governments created as a result of forced amalgamations four years to harmonise different rating systems brought by amalgamated councils. That time frame is simply not long enough for many ratepayers. Once again the Government is trying to rush through changes when communities should be given time to adjust. I believe, and as the shadow Minister and previous speakers on this side have outlined, the proposed time frame should be increased considerably to give impacted communities a reasonable time to adjust. There should also be a legislated process for de-amalgamation, for use when the Government's merger experiments prove unsuccessful. The creation of a business case process for de-amalgamation proposals is necessary, and there should be time limits imposed on the Minister for Local Government to ensure a proper and timely response. The delay between the release of IPART's report and the Government's response makes clear that this Government is not above putting off dealing with inconvenient issues. This bill should make sure that it cannot do that again. As I outlined, the cost of council mergers could be astronomical, which is why the Opposition wants to see the creation of grants of financial support specifically to offset these costs for forcibly amalgamated councils.

The bill has one provision that I welcome but I do not believe it goes anywhere near far enough—namely, the provision to provide councils with the option to make superannuation contributions to councillors in addition to the payment of their fees from 1 July 2022. My experience is that many people do not understand that the role of a councillor is not a full-time role, unlike in our neighbour State to the north. Mayors or councillors who are doing their jobs properly put in a huge amount of hours for the allowances they get. The vast majority of people will quite reasonably assume that superannuation is paid to councillors and mayors for doing their jobs. Linda Scott, the president of Local Government NSW and recently of the Australian Local Government Association—and I congratulate Linda—recently said, and I quote:

We know that councillor remuneration is a significant factor in encouraging more people – particularly women and younger people – to serve on their local council; which is why we have worked with the sector to ensure these needs are met ... mayors and councillors should be entitled to receive superannuation "in line with every other Australian employee." And I could not agree more. I recognise that councillors and mayors are not employees of councils in the legal sense, but nor are we in this place employees of the New South Wales Parliament. Yet we still receive superannuation as any employee does. It is exactly the same logic, and councillors and mayors should not miss out on superannuation contributions simply because they have put up their hands to serve their communities in local public office. Councillor Scott went on to say:

... the NSW Government has finally recognised the need for elected councillors to have the same superannuation rights as other women and men in the workforce.

For too long people considering running for elected office in local government have been unable to do so unless they were independently wealthy. This reform will enable more people to consider running to be a mayor or councillor, and this is a welcome step forward.

She is right. Our communities will benefit from having people with a diversity of backgrounds, viewpoints, priorities and experiences stand for and be elected to local government. There is evidence all over the Hunter of how badly things can go when only the independently wealthy are able to have a tilt at local government. The image of brown paper bags full of cash being handed over in the back seat of a Bentley has become a symbol of corruption in the Hunter. Only yesterday we saw the release of the ICAC report on Operation Dasha, which made recommendations of criminal charges against not only Daryl Maguire, the former Liberal member for Wagga

Wagga, but also Michael Hawatt, a finance broker and ex-councillor of Canterbury City Council, and Pierre Azzi, a Canterbury councillor and project director at a property and infrastructure consulting business.

Superannuation for all mayors and councillors is vital to boosting the representation of women in elected local government office. I know the Minister is keen to increase the number of women serving as mayors and councillors in New South Wales, which she has spoken about on multiple occasions. Women make up more than half the population of New South Wales but occupy only one in three seats on local councils. As Councillor Scott put it:

Research shows that on average, women retire with 47 per cent less superannuation than men, so introducing superannuation to local government will allow more women to consider running to be an elected leader.

It is high time we addressed this imbalance. Let us mandate compulsory superannuation for mayors and councillors. Unless heavily amended, I cannot support the bill. I urge the Government to support the amendments that will be moved by the Opposition and shadow Minister. After years of mishandling local government policy, the Government has a chance to get things right.

**Mrs HELEN DALTON (Murray) (18:16):** I welcome the opportunity to speak in debate on the Local Government Amendment Bill 2021, and my contribution will be brief. While I support the general principles behind the bill, I strongly oppose one particular aspect. The Government is seeking to create a new rating category for environmental land, which will pave the way for the Government to charge farmers rates if they enter into a biodiversity agreement. That makes no sense to me at all. We want to encourage conservation, not discourage it. Any land that farmers set aside for conservation should be exempt from rates. That would create a positive incentive for farmers to protect and conserve land, and to provide ecological goods and services. The bill will impose costs on farmers who are doing something good for the environment.

I know a case of a farmer who entered into a biodiversity agreement years ago, but back then the cost to uphold that piece of land was cheap; now it is incredibly expensive because of the unmanaged and unregulated national parks that adjoin the property. They now have an influx of feral pests such as pigs and goats, which they never had years ago. They must also fence the property because national parks do not do it and it must be strong fencing, which is a further cost impost on them. We do not want to discourage people from entering into any conservation agreement. We know that this Government has a "lock-up and leave" policy on national parks. Farmers who border national parks must bear the increasing costs of government neglect and mismanagement. While I support the bill in principle, my party will support amendments in the upper House to take that clause out of the bill.

**Mr JAMIE PARKER (Balmain) (18:18):** I appreciate the opportunity to speak in debate on the Local Government Amendment Bill 2021. Like many other members in this House, I too served on a local council as a mayor. I served for 12 years on the former Leichhardt council and, like many members in this place, I have a soft spot for local government. We know that local government is the closest sphere of government to the people from where we can help change and shape our community like very few other roles in wider society. I acknowledge the work of councillors, mayors and council staff, and acknowledge that it is a difficult job. The bill is important. We have heard a lot of discussion about different aspects of the bill, but a key aim is to deal with the significant problems that resulted from the forced amalgamations.

I acknowledge the Minister for Local Government, who has been very collaborative and sought to develop the bill in a positive way. It would help if the Minister and the Government did not have to spend so much time fixing the problems of the past. They could then get on with the job of addressing some of the more productive changes that are needed in the local government sector. Some people have mentioned Operation Dasha, which made 23 key recommendations about how local government should work. Obviously a lot of the matters were to do with planning, consultation and local environmental plans, but a really important recommendation was about reducing corruption risk in local government. Knowing the Minister's reputation, I expect that she is supportive of those recommendations. I look forward to the Minister, the planning Minister, the Government and others working to implement them as soon as practically possible to make sure that we can further corruption-proof local government.

As a representative of my community, I was quite involved in the forced amalgamations. This is an important issue. When we look back we must reflect on some of the key issues at that time. In many cases I supported amalgamation, but it is about letting the people decide. The KPMG report, which was the basis of so much of this disputation in 2015, was never made fully public. If the arguments were strong, they should have been put to the people. Persuade the people by putting forward an argument about the merits of whatever project or suggestion the Government has—that is the way we do things in a democracy. Unfortunately, the opposite occurred. A huge majority of people opposed the amalgamations but the Government forced them through and now we are seeing some of the problems.

I note that councillors on the Inner West Council—the major council in my area—moved to support and join what the member for Coogee referred to as action by councils to oppose the amalgamations. But Labor councillors opposed it. Sadly, that meant Leichardt, Marrickville and Ashfield councils were not saved from amalgamation. If those Labor councillors had supported that action, we would not have had the amalgamation. I acknowledge the member for Coogee and her work to make sure that her community was not subject to compulsory amalgamation. It is a pity we did not have the same support from Labor councillors in our local area. I note that the proposed legislation includes a pathway to de-amalgamation. I also note that four motions have been put to the Inner West Council for a referendum to ask the people what they think. Again, Labor and Liberal voted together to defeat those referendums.

It is important that while a process is identified for how those de-amalgamations can happen—I know Labor has put forward those provisions—it should always be about the community and letting the people decide. If they vote for amalgamation, we back it; if they do not vote for it, we take a different position. The harmonisation approach is a difficult one because, on the one hand, we have people who are waiting for their rates to be reduced and want it to happen as fast as possible; and, on the other hand, there is another cohort of people who are not enthusiastic about their rates increasing. It is a difficult balance to work out the time frame. I know that for the Inner West Council it is a divisive issue, and Opposition members have referred to it. It is challenging because of the disputes it causes in the community: "Why is it that person in Ashfield is paying less and I have to pay more?" The bill is an attempt to bring the two sides together, and I acknowledge that it is an incredibly difficult issue.

The key point in our minds when we considered the bill was that there were some opportunities to improve it. First, it has been a great disappointment for councils—including my own, and I 100 per cent back it on this—that they were not able to participate in the process that awarded the grant money available for amalgamated councils. That has put the Inner West Council in a difficult position, and I support its concerns. We really welcome the issue of superannuation. I note that my colleague David Shoebridge in the other place has been driving this issue and I note that the Minister has been thoughtful about superannuation. She, like all of us here, knows that superannuation is important for getting women, in particular, into local government and I acknowledge the Minister's effort in that regard. I note that we will be moving a few amendments in the other place. Some members have raised concerns about not getting information from council general managers, where a general manager has told them to lodge a Government Information (Public Access) Act [GIPAA] application if they want certain information.

Council general managers are paid fantastic amounts of money. In Inner West Council the general manager is getting paid more than the Premier. What is going on? We will be moving an amendment to provide that councillors are entitled to the prompt provision of any information that they would be entitled to under the GIPA Act without the need for a formal GIPA Act application. It is terrible that that type of provision needs to be even enunciated in this place, and that there are general managers who hide information. We have seen it and the Minister will know this happens—and I appreciate the fact that the Minister has been in the Chamber listening to the debate—some of the councillors do not get all the information. It is a great disappointment to many of us.

Obviously we would like to mandate superannuation, as we discussed before, but what is really critical is cleaning up the mess of the compulsory acquisitions to make sure that we improve the process, to make sure that local government can be stabilised, especially those councils that have been amalgamated, and to make sure that local government can get on with what it does best, which is serving local communities. Local government cops such a bagging but, at the same time, so much of local government has a bad reputation for no good reasons. We can always quibble and argue about different things, but look at the time that councillors and mayors put into their community—and I am not talking about The Greens, Labor or Liberal; I mean all councils across the board. With very few exceptions, they are outstanding commitments and I want to ensure that those local representatives know that as far as The Greens go—and I am sure the wider Parliament as well—we really support them and believe that they are doing incredibly important work.

I look forward to hearing the debate on particular amendments. Obviously, we know the bill will get passed in this place but it is important that we look to improve it. I conclude by acknowledging local councillors and thanking the Minister, her staff and those people who have been talking with us with over the past few months. I particularly thank them for their engagement. I hope that we move out of this very difficult period of forced amalgamations into a more positive environment for councils.

**Ms YASMIN CATLEY (Swansea) (18:27):** I make a contribution to debate on the Local Government Amendment Bill 2021 and reiterate the concerns of the Opposition in respect of any amendment brought by this Government to change local government administration in New South Wales. This is a Government that has comprehensively and persistently mishandled local councils across this State. The Government has repeatedly failed to learn the lessons of its recent past. Communities across this State, especially in regional and rural areas, do not want their councils undermined, underfunded or interfered with by the State Government.

As a starting point, we are very conscious that this Government has done a very poor job over the past 10 years with local council matters. That is not something that I am saying or the Labor Opposition is saying. It is something that has been made crystal clear to the past and present Liberal Premiers through ballot boxes in Orange, Murray and Barwon. It is made obvious by way of the financial collapse of the Central Coast Council, which was forcibly amalgamated. Central Coast residents face service cuts, hundreds of council employees face losing their jobs and all of the ratepayers face 15 per cent hikes to their quarterly rates.

The cause of all this hardship and stress for people on the Central Coast is the decision by the State Government to amalgamate the former Gosford and Wyong councils. The Government has a woeful track record, so we are deeply suspicious of the Government when it comes to this House with any further amendments to the way in which councils in New South Wales are administered. The O'Farrell, Baird and Berejiklian governments have done a bad job so far and the only thing we trust them to do is to make things even worse. The bill seeks to amend various aspects of the Local Government Act, but it is primarily a vehicle to deal with rate harmonisation, which is, of course, required because of council amalgamations and the often inequitable arrangements arising for residents in amalgamated councils. The member for Balmain put it quite eloquently when he said that it is a very tricky issue.

In our view, the four-year time frame for rate harmonisation is too prescriptive. Elected councillors should not be forced to bear the political brunt of an angry constituency whose primary complaint is about a State government policy. While this is a problem of the Liberal State Government's making, it is a problem that local councils that have been forced to amalgamate are left to fix. Forcing councils to deal with this issue within four years puts the blowtorch on councillors and makes rate rises in many areas an absolute and pressing necessity for councils to deal with in one council term. The impacts of the Government's botched amalgamation process should be minimised, but here we see it exacerbated. The Government must begin to offer communities the option to demerge. In the first place, this must involve business cases for merged councils to demerge. In many cases, councils, such as the Central Coast Council, have been driven into financial ruin by the Government's amalgamation policy. Central Coast Council is functionally bankrupt as a direct consequence of the Liberals' amalgamation experiment. We said it then and we say it now: Amalgamation was always a bad idea for the Central Coast, and we have been proven to be right.

All of the councils that have been amalgamated deserve a chance to survive and to do that they must be unshackled from the incompetent interference in their operations. I am particularly concerned about the attempt to remove the Independent Pricing and Regulatory Tribunal [IPART] from its role in managing rate variations by councils. If anything, the incompetent mishandling of council amalgamations has proven that we need more oversight and transparency in local government, not less—it is the last thing we need to see removed. Councils should continue to apply via IPART for special rate variations so that they must at least run through a series of public awareness and transparency measures before increasing rates.

It is not good enough to say that the removal of IPART from these processes will free up councils to participate in more intergovernmental projects, which are often a stalking horse for cost-shifting by State and Federal governments that hope to crow about funding one project or another without providing adequate funding for it. For instance, if a Federal Minister wishes to build a new library and bank a political dividend for doing so, they should fund the entire project themselves using Federal money and then hand it over to the council to run. They should not saddle councils with heavy debts or force them to raise funds through rate variation—ultimately the ratepayers will be paying for those projects—just for their own satisfaction.

Similarly, the State Government must stop finding solutions to its own problems that involve using local council funding. I am appalled by the way in which, for example, the dredging of State-controlled waterways, particularly around Tuggerah Lakes and Brisbane Waters, has been dumped on the doorstep of local councils to deal with and for ratepayers to pay twice. These issues are State government responsibilities and it is a cop-out for the Government to continue to shift these costs onto local council. This constant cost-shifting robs ratepayers twice because their hard-earned money, paid as rates, cannot now be spent on the essential services councils are supposed to provide and, because it often requires some kind of tax hike to fund the new projects, councils are forced by State governments to take them on.

Finally, the other matters on which the Labor Party is determined to see action are twofold: First, we must create financial support grants for forcibly amalgamated councils. So far, government grants have been rorted and abused by the Government—there is no other way to describe it. A pot of money was created to assist amalgamated councils, but it was rorted. Hornsby council received money through the fund and it was not amalgamated. In the meantime, Central Coast Council has gone bankrupt because it could not cope with the huge blowout in costs associated with the forced amalgamation. The money that was set aside to assist councils like the Central Coast Council was instead burgled by Liberals and The Nationals members to curry favour with their own

electorates. This is grossly unfair and, if a single council worker loses their job because of it, it should be characterised as criminal.

Finally, we believe superannuation payments should be mandatory. All other elected public office holders, including members of this place, receive superannuation of one sort or another. Councillors and mayors receive none. It is unfair and not something we agree with. All workers in Australia should receive the 9.5 per cent superannuation guarantee. I end on this point: The Liberals and The Nationals have done enough to wreck local government in this State. The least they can do now is amend their proposed legislation to start doing some good again. I do hope that the Government looks very carefully and seriously at the amendments put forward by the member for Campbelltown. They are very sensible amendments that will make this shocking piece of legislation somewhat better.

**Mr JIHAD DIB (Lakemba) (18:35):** I make a contribution to the Local Government Amendment Bill 2021. We are here to discuss a number of things, including rate harmonisation. As a local member, I straddle both former local councils of Canterbury and Bankstown. Basically my electorate runs through the middle of both of them. It is the largest council, with the potential of up to half a million residents within a few years when we consider the projected number of increases in dwellings and so forth. I understand the need for the spread of rate harmonisation over an extended period of time, the impact that that will have and the way that it may make things a bit easier. I acknowledge the Minister, who I know has a long history in local council. I am happy to hear that the Minister has been quite collaborative with others in working through this. I feel for the Minister. We have this problem because of a decision that her predecessors made. Effectively, she has been left to deal with this.

Many members have spoken about the fact that local government is closest to the people. But what does that mean? For most people that means getting the basics right. They are really interested in making sure of the necessities and that bins are being taken out, lawns are being mowed and services are available, whether it is community centre services, early childhood education services, or services for the community. For example, in my electorate currently the OzHarvest Hamper Hub happens once a week. It is being run through the council and with council resources. These things are closest to the people. As a result, anything that happens to local government impacts the people quite significantly and quickly. The forcible merger has not been good for us. A number of constituents talk to me constantly about that, but also the things that they start to see on a regular basis. It is not because the council is not trying. The council and the councillors are trying. They do the best that they can.

When the amalgamations were on the cards, I said they would cause a massive problem. We have an area that stretches across enormous changes of demographics and geography and just sheer volume—I do not think we were ready for it. We have seen the result. It has not been as good as what we either hoped for or intended. As a result, local residents suffer. At least once a week—and it has slowed down a bit now—I deal with a local council issue. More often than not I am dealing with council issues. I am not sure how other members of the Legislative Assembly feel, but I dare say they receive a lot of that. A number of buildings are no longer in use as a result. We have less services and fewer staff. As I said, it is not the councillors' and the council's faults. They have an impossible task. I do not know the exact number of kilometres, but from Tempe all the way to Villawood is a huge distance. It takes a good 40 minutes to travel by car. The demographic is so completely different.

Each one of the local areas is unique in its own way, particularly part of the electorate that was in the old Canterbury council. Residents tell me constantly that there is a massive decrease in their services. We know that some issues with Canterbury council have come up recently through some of the ICAC findings. But the impact is on local residents. It is not a positive one. I know that people have spoken about the amendments and the shadow Minister has foreshadowed the amendments. I congratulate and thank him for taking up these issues, understanding that there are some major problems in not only the way that the bill is presented but ultimately the changes to local government that we have seen. What can we best do? How do we make this situation the best that it can possibly be? As I said, one amendment is about extending the harmonisation over a period of time. That is because some parts in our local council area will be hit with basically 30-odd per cent or more in rate increases. The longer we can spread that out, the better it is for them.

I am particularly thinking about people in Lakemba who may have purchased their homes 20 or 30 years ago when people did not want to live there. It was quite cheap. The values have gone up astronomically since that time. They have more than tripled. They may still be in low-income jobs. Many of them have retired or are on the pension. I know some support is there, but a massive increase in rates for them will have a huge impact on them. If there is going to be rate harmonisation in that way, an extension as much as possible would create the best system of fairness. We sort of understand it. Those opposite have to get there. But how can we make it as fair as possible? How do we ensure that people who might be really struggling to pay are supported through this? As I said, I made a submission to the Council Boundary Review in 2016. I talked specifically about rate rises in the

community and their impact. Unfortunately, at the time it was ignored. Our local councils, the Canterbury and Bankstown councils, were forcibly amalgamated.

The member for Canterbury, the member for Bankstown and I spoke against it at the time, because we knew what was happening in the local community. Here is a good example: Your land is valued at \$1 million, which is the average price in Sydney, and you live in the former Canterbury Bankstown council. The rate is going to go up by potentially \$440. That is in the Bankstown area. But if you live in the Canterbury part of the old council, it is going to go up potentially between \$1,800 to \$2,500. That is an enormous hit. This then reinforces the point that I was making: How do you support people who are going to struggle with that? I talked about services. Mowing verges might not seem important and it may not be the world's biggest item, but lately I have received a number of complaints because the council has decided that it does not want to mow verges anymore and it is causing other problems, such as picking up the rubbish and things like that. These things are really bothering people. It is not always the big stuff. It is the little things and making sure they happen. What are the first services to be cut? These are.

And why do I not blame the council? Because the council has not been supported through the forced amalgamation. It has not had access to the grants that other councils have received. There was a discussion a while ago about grants. You could call it the Government's really dodgy process, but it was nothing short of that. The biggest council did not even know that these grants were available and was not even invited to tender for them. While they may not be specific to this particular bill, they do point to the problem: If you are going to force somebody to do something, where is the support that you are going to give them? Where is the help that you are going to give them? How are you going to help them get to the place where they need to get to?

My colleague the member for Campbelltown has spoken about a number of amendments. He had a few things to say about the special rate variations outside of the Independent Pricing and Regulatory Tribunal [IPART]. IPART is essential in providing fairness to both councils and ratepayers. I think that is a really important point to make. Increasing the implementation period of time for the rate harmonisation for amalgamated councils is a really important one as well, as is a process for the de-amalgamation of newly constituted areas. We did not have the choice. If we knew then what we know now and all our councils needed to do was literally go to court so that they were not forcibly amalgamated, they would have done it. But I know that at the time both of the councils were concerned because they did not want to be seen to be spending ratepayers' money on a process that they thought was not going to succeed. Again, they were not given that opportunity. I know that the member for Canterbury has spoken quite strongly about that as well. I have also spoke about the financial support.

There should be opportunities for all of us to be able to share in this bounty that is New South Wales, regardless of where we live. We often hear the Premier say that it should not matter where you live, and it should not; your postcode should not matter. But we are not seeing that, especially when it comes to the support for forcibly amalgamated councils. I will speak on behalf of the councils that I represent in the area, which is the Canterbury Bankstown council. The Stronger Communities Fund might not be specific to this, but it points to a bigger problem. Every councillor works a lot harder than their salary and allowances might suggest. They do not do it for the money, they do it because they believe in service. This Government must support them. I hope that the Minister, for whom I have a lot of time and respect, takes my comments on board to make the best of the current situation.

**Mr GREG PIPER (Lake Macquarie) (18:45):** I am broadly in favour of the Local Government Amendment Bill 2021. However, in some areas I support the Opposition amendments. Like you, Madam Temporary Speaker, and the Minister, I am fortunate enough to have had local government experience. I spent eight years and five months of my 21 years at Lake Macquarie City Council as the mayor. At the time it was the fourth-largest council in New South Wales, so this was a significant role. Based on my experience, I have a good feel for these matters and a lot to offer to the debate on the bill. However, other members have greater experience and I respect their views regarding local government. I single out the member for Heffron in this respect, whom I always like to hear from on such matters.

Councillors have always had different views and councils have had different needs and capacities. Due to variations in population size, land uses, historic starting points for rate income and underlying infrastructure needs have meant that rarely have councils played on an equal playing field. Those differences were always going to present a problem when amalgamating councils. That was certainly the case in 2016 during the latest round of amalgamations. I acknowledge the contribution of the member for Charlestown when he spoke about Lake Macquarie City Council. She served with me when I was the mayor during a very effective period for the council. We made some important changes to the financial system of the council, including a courageous push to increase the rate base.

From 2009 Lake Macquarie City Council engaged closely with the Independent Pricing and Regulatory Tribunal [IPART] on the model it developed to allow for a rolling seven-year increase, which reset the bar for the

council. The good financial management of the council continued during the member for Charlestown's time as mayor. I was shocked when the council became a target for amalgamation with Newcastle City Council in 2015-16. It is 40,000 or 50,000 residents larger than its better-known neighbour. The council manages a very significant area around Lake Macquarie and worked hard as environmental stewards for the lake, the hinterland and the bushland of that catchment. However, the process did not consider any of those issues. While Lake Macquarie City Council passed every test that was put to it through the amalgamation process, for some reason at the very end it was claimed nebulously that it did not meet the target for scale and capacity. What a nonsense that was. Regardless of what the council did, the undefinable issue of a lack of scale and capacity was used to argue for amalgamation.

Changes were made and Lake Macquarie City Council was not amalgamated. I acknowledge the Premier at the time, Mike Baird, for that decision, even though he was involved in the original decision to merge the council with Newcastle City Council. I appealed to him and I am pleased that Lake Macquarie City Council was taken out of the amalgamation process. The member for Wyong talked about the amalgamation of Wyong Shire Council and Gosford City Council into Central Coast Council. I do not share some of his views about the responsibilities of the respective councillors, particularly in the last council. If a councillor is appointed to a council, they have a responsibility to carry out their duties. While underlying problems may exist, councillors have a responsibility to understand what is happening in the community. Even though they were given advice, they did not take it seriously and pursue it.

That is not to say that some questionable practices were not occurring at the two councils. The amalgamation was complicated because Wyong Shire Council and Gosford City Council were large councils that shared ownership of the water and sewerage authority. While incompetence was seen at the councils, not all actions could be described as such. This bill seeks to harmonise the rates of merged councils. Opposition amendments Nos 6 and 7 propose that the time allowed for rate harmonisation should be doubled to eight years. I am pleased that the Minister did not suggest eight years because then the Opposition may propose 16 years. Four years for amalgamated councils to harmonise their rates is a reasonable period, so I do not support those amendments. [*Extension of time*]

However, I do support a number of the other amendments, which I regard as sensible. I particularly support the maintenance of the role of the IPART to determine the special rate levy. The bill does not include a role for the IPART to determine a special rate levy if the levy is for infrastructure jointly funded by another level of the State Government or the Commonwealth Government. I do not see any sinister intent in this regard, but this provision could allow for levies on unpopular projects or require a council to use a levy and effectively cost-shift. On the other hand, it could be a valuable pathway to provide much-needed infrastructure. The IPART should run a tape over proposals because it is an independent body that has expertise with regard to special rate levies.

I note that the bill will give councils the option of paying superannuation to the mayor and councillors. Most fair-minded people would have assumed that this already happens. In fact, I think they think councillors are on big money. This has been an issue regardless of which party has been in government. It has not just been the case during the current Liberal-Nationals Government. A number of previous governments, including those run by Labor, have had to deal with paying superannuation to council workers, so this is a sensible position to take. It is not particularly costly to the community to provide some measure of superannuation. Therefore, I think it is sensible and I acknowledge the Minister for that. However, taking the step under the amendment to mandate it as a requirement takes away any possibility of any political games that might be played within a council or with a tax by people who, for whatever reason, might have some issue with council. I certainly support the amendment in that case. I do not know if it is something that the Minister would argue strongly, but we will see how it goes in the other place.

I also note that the bill mandates the payment of child care expenses for councillors with children. Again this is a long overdue reform and I hope it encourages more women into important civic roles. It is very important. In some ways it is a minor consideration in the scheme of things, but we should do whatever we can to make it easier for women to get into local government and other power-making positions such as State and Federal government. In addition, I am particularly pleased that the bill creates a new rating category for environmental land, which is also supported by Lake Macquarie City Council. It is anticipated that environmental land will attract lower council rates than it currently attracts as farmland or business land. It could apply to land that is protected for its environmental value or constrained by geography or regulation. It is a sensible move that I certainly support. I am also supportive of a move away from the one-size-fits-all rate pegging model that is currently applied to all councils throughout the State.

I am pleased to see this ongoing reform to the local government sphere, even though other people would see it as the State Government interfering in the business of local government once again, with local government saying, "Get out of our way." But all governments do it. When I first came to this place in 2007 a local government

bill was one of the first things that I debated and I made that point then. When you are in local government you really wish the State would get out of your way and let you do things, but the reality is that is not what the community wants and local government is a child of the State. We have a role to manage local government in a positive way in partnership with it, and many of these measures are trying to do that. I commend the Minister at the table here tonight. I hope that this is a good step for most councils, and I believe it will be. In the consideration in detail stage there will be some amendments from the Opposition representative for local government, the member for Campbelltown, that I will support.

**TEMPORARY SPEAKER (Ms Sonia Hornery):** I pay homage to the member for Lake Macquarie. When you were mayor you invited the member for Wallsend all the time. You were very fair and always listened to me and I have not forgotten. People do not forget those things. Thank you.

**Mr DAVID MEHAN (The Entrance) (18:57):** On behalf of my constituency in The Entrance electorate, it gives me great pleasure to make a contribution to debate on the Local Government Amendment Bill 2021. I welcome this bill: It illustrates the mess this Government has made of the local government area. It will not fix that mess, but I look forward to continuing to talk about local government and what this Government has done to it—particularly in my area—all the way up to the next State election. The bill is about a bunch of unrelated things that are put together in a complex way, but at its core it is about rates and increasing rates. It does not make the rating system simpler. It opens a wormhole that is only going to get bigger by removing the oversight of rate increases from the Independent Pricing and Regulatory Tribunal [IPART], which I absolutely resist. I know a lot of my constituents are following the progress of this bill and the debate. To help them, let us consider where we are at the moment.

The existing rate system is reasonably straightforward. You have the rate peg, which is an increase in rates that applies across the board to all councils in New South Wales, plus special rate variation. The rate peg is a small increase on rates each year that is determined by IPART to cover the reasonable increase in council operating expenses. In the past 10 years the rate peg has ranged from about 1.5 per cent to 3.6 per cent and this year it is 2 per cent. On top of the rate peg you have special rate variation, and my constituents know all about that. In 2013 the former Wyong Shire Council applied for a special rate variation because it did not think the rate peg was enough. It did not get all it wanted, but it got most of what it wanted: a 30 per cent increase in rates for the area. That had to be argued before IPART, and the community had the opportunity to engage and comment on it, and council was obliged to explain it to the community. That is the process. It is pretty straightforward.

What will this bill do? The guts of it will be to introduce 31 changes that make the rate system more complex and less fair. The most significant change is the introduction of new section 495 in schedule 1.1 [3] on the special rate variation for projects. That is the wormhole. That gives the State Government the ability to shift more costs onto council for projects whereby another Liberal government will be able to say, "We are going to give you X amount of dollars for a project, but you have to put in some money. We reckon you should do it through a special rate variation."

This Government has already been doing that on the Central Coast by saying, "You can't have dredging unless council puts in money and you can't have a boardwalk at Terrigal unless council puts in money." The member for Terrigal wants a seawall at Wamberal. That is going to be the next cab off the rank with the Government saying, "You won't get your seawall unless you get a special rate variation." There will be no IPART oversight and no input from the community. It is a dreadful wormhole that this Government will use to increase rates across the board under the guise of special projects and to continue cost shifting back on to local government, my constituents and ratepayers generally.

The other element is rate harmonisation. Locally I am referring to that as the Terrigal amendment. The reality is the amalgamation process has been an absolute mess. Premier Baird, who everybody loved, said, "This is going to be great. I am a banker. I know about these things. We know how to handle money. When you put two together you can get rid of things and everybody will pay less." In 2016 the Central Coast Council was created out of the amalgamation of Wyong and Gosford city councils. It was not supported by Labor councillors, who voted against it, but it was carried through on the votes of Liberal councillors and their fellow travellers who call themselves "Independents".

The community did not get a vote. In 2016 it was forced upon us. Then we were subject to the rate path freeze, which means people in the former Wyong council continue to pay 30 per cent more than those in Gosford, plus the rate peg each year thereafter. Of course, the council did nothing to harmonise that over four years—it could not. Then it accepted the extension. Five years down the track and we still have differential rates on the Central Coast that see Wyong shire residents pay 30 per cent more than those in Gosford.

The member for Terrigal is running around saying that the new section 127 in the bill will enable that situation to go on for even longer. It is appalling. It is prolonging the torture of many of my constituents because

my electorate is the only one that contains constituents from the former Wyong and former Gosford councils. I think the fairest outcome is to bring Gosford up to the rate being paid by people in Wyong. That would go a long way towards fixing the financial problems on the Central Coast. I have made a public submission to IPART in that regard. The member for Terrigal spoke a lot about local amalgamation. I will refer to an exchange of correspondence. I will seek leave to have a letter from the member for Terrigal to the council and a reply from council incorporated in *Hansard*. I have almost concluded my speech but I seek a short extension of time. [Extension of time]

I seek leave to have those two letters incorporated in *Hansard*.

**Leave granted.**

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Mr Adam Crouch MP  
Parliamentary Secretary for the Central Coast

11 March 2021

Dear Mr Crouch

Thank you for your letter regarding comments I made at this week's Council meeting. You claim you are "providing facts to correct these comments" Nothing in your letter corrects any comments made by me at the meeting.

In regard to public commentary on Council matters I responded to recent media comments by the former CEO, the former Mayor Smith and yourself in regard to your regular comments opposing the Council's proposed rate increase In regard to yourself, I agree you have "consistently opposed the Council's proposed rate rise".

I am disappointed however, that despite personal briefings on the extent of the financial crisis, you have never offered a single idea or proposal on how to deal with the crisis - other than opposing a rate increase.

I did explain to the community how rate harmonisation would impact on their rates. I told them that if there was no council proposed Special Rate Variation [SRV] of 15 % there would still be a rate increase for former Gosford Council residents of 27%, and that this 27% increase was directly caused by the Council amalgamations.

Your letter passes over this by advising that your Government is trying to pass legislation that would allow effected councils to spread this very large increase over a longer period. Of course, this would amend the legislation you voted to put in place originally.

Your letter also fails to mention that if your proposal is passed [and subsequently adopted by the Council] it would delay the rate reduction of around 20% that former Wyong Council ratepayers have patiently been waiting for.

I understand why delaying the increase would be appreciated by your constituents in the electorate of Terrigal, but I suspect the larger number of former Wyong Council constituents who would experience further delays to their rate reductions, and who you also represent as the Parliamentary Secretary for the Central Coast, may see it differently.

I would welcome your views on alternative savings/revenue options if we were to withdraw the 15% SRV application.

Yours sincerely

Dick Persson AM  
Administrator

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Mr Dick Persson AM  
Interim Administrator  
Central Coast Council

Via email: [theadministrator@centralcoast.nsw.gov.au](mailto:theadministrator@centralcoast.nsw.gov.au)

Dear Mr Persson

I am advised a number of factually incorrect comments were made at a Central Coast Council meeting on Tuesday, 9 March.

I write to provide some facts to correct these comments:

1. Special rate variations, or rate rises, are determined by the Independent Pricing and Regulatory Tribunal and not by the NSW Government.
2. I have consistently stated my opposition to your Council's proposed rate rise. On Thursday, 28 January the Minister for Local Government also publicly indicated her opposition to this rate rise.
3. The NSW Government is introducing new legislation to Parliament that will allow each of the 17 Councils created in 2016 that have yet to harmonise their rates the option to gradually harmonise rates over four years. Your Council has been part of a working group which played a part in the development of the proposed legislation, and the proposed legislation was released for public feedback in December 2020. For your convenience, please find a copy enclosed.

Should you wish to further discuss these facts, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Yours sincerely

ADAM CROUCH MP  
Government Whip  
Parliamentary Secretary for the Central Coast

Member for Terrigal

CC: The Hon Shelley Hancock MP, Minister for Local Government

10 Mar 2021

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**Mr DAVID MEHAN:** I thank the Minister, who is generous in that regard. I look forward to the Minister coming to the Central Coast to talk about this bill and about councils generally. The member for Terrigal wrote to the Central Coast Council about the rate increase. He referred to this bill coming before Parliament that would allow rates harmonisation to be pushed out even further. That letter is in *Hansard* for my constituents to read it in full and they can be assured that I am not selectively quoting from it. In the administrator's reply to the member for Terrigal, his opening paragraph states:

Thank you for your letter regarding comments I made at this week's Council meeting. You claim you are "providing facts to correct these comments". Nothing in your letter corrects any comments made by me at the meeting.

He further goes on to state:

I am disappointed however, that despite personal briefings on the extent of the financial crisis, you have never offered a single idea or proposal on how to deal with the crisis – other than opposing a rate increase.

This next part is important for constituents in the former Wyong shire area:

Your letter also fails to mention that if your proposal is passed [and subsequently adopted by the Council] it would delay the rate reduction of around 20% that former Wyong Council ratepayers have patiently been waiting for.

He notes that the logical outcome of the amalgamation policy of the Government will result in people in his electorate paying 27 per cent more for their rates than would otherwise be the case if there had been no amalgamation. It might happen in four years down the track under this bill, but it will happen. Labor's position on amalgamation on the Central Coast is clear. We opposed it at the time and our current position is that we want an inquiry into what went on with the amalgamation—all the dealings and the decisions made by the former administrator, which seem to have created costs that people are now expected to pay through rate increases.

The State Government should cover the full costs of amalgamation. The Government paid \$10 million and that is great but it went nowhere near covering the cost of amalgamation. The State Government expects my constituents to pay for that. That should not be the case. The State Government should cover the full cost of amalgamation rather than expecting ratepayers to pay it through a rate increase. Moreover, there needs to be a referendum at the next local government election to put it before the people of the Central Coast: "Do you want the Central Coast Council to continue, or do you wanted to demerge?"

I turn now to quickly touch on what those costs were. The member for Terrigal said, "The administrator said none of our current problems have anything to do with amalgamation," but the administrator's own report states the cost of the new information technology [IT] system, and the figures just blew me away. There were two councils, each with their own IT system. Instead of just migrating one over to the new amalgamated council, the government-appointed administrator to the newly amalgamated council commissioned a new IT system that has cost \$50 million, with \$8 million recurrent cost. The cost of putting two payrolls together is another figure that staggers me. It cost \$25 million just to put two payrolls together.

I know what the administrator stated in his report. He said the amalgamation had nothing to do with it, but those two figures are in his report. Those two figures would not have existed without the fact of amalgamation, which is the Government's policy for my local area. It has been a disaster and now my constituents are expected to pay for it. I thank the Minister for her generosity. I thank the House for allowing me to speak a little bit longer. I do not usually do that. I usually try to be brief. However, I oppose the bill in its current form. Labor will move a number of amendments and if all the amendments are agreed to without change, I would welcome that; otherwise, I will vote against the bill. I look forward to talking about local government all the way to the next State election and to doing the best I can to protect my constituents from this State Government.

**Ms JO HAYLEN (Summer Hill) (19:10):** I speak on the Local Government Amendment Bill 2021, the rating bill. Technically the bill responds to the Independent Pricing and Regulatory Tribunal review of the council rating system. However, as we have heard from previous Labor speakers, what we all know is that this bill is really about mopping up the mess caused by the Government's failed forced council amalgamations. Primarily, the bill introduces measures to assist councils that are forced to harmonise rates the option of doing so over an extended period of time. It also establishes a new rating category for environmental land and allows the council to levy special rates for all infrastructure jointly funded by other levels of government. It allows the timetables for postal voting to be determined by regulation and allows returning officers to conduct countback elections in the first 18 months of their term, thereby sparing communities from expensive by-elections.

Importantly, the bill allows councils to make superannuation contribution payments to councillors. I intend to focus my contribution this evening on the issue primarily around rate harmonisation. However, I first commend the move in relation to superannuation for elected councillors. We know just how important a strong, well-supported local council is for our communities. It is the level of government that is closest to the people and responsible for some of the most important services on which people rely—well beyond rates, roads and rubbish. For a council to successfully serve a community it needs to be led by representatives who represent the community itself. Our communities are too often failed because good, experienced people do not run for office because of financial barriers that make it impossible for them to do so. Disproportionately, that of course means that good, effective women do not run for election.

It is a disgrace that in this State women comprise less than a third of councillors and mayors currently serving on councils across New South Wales. Ensuring councillors are paid superannuation removes one financial barrier to good people running. Unfortunately, this bill takes that important first step but does not make it mandatory for councils to pay superannuation to councillors and mayors, leaving it up to councils to decide for themselves. I encourage the Minister to adopt Labor's very sensible amendment to make it mandatory; otherwise, we will have a situation where there are councils that, for example, are wholly made up of men, who will be determining whether or not it is going to pay superannuation and potentially locking out women who might be interested in running for council. That undermines the good purpose of this measure. I encourage the Minister to adopt Labor's amendment in that regard.

The primary objective of this bill is to address the chaos in councils forced to merge by the Baird Government in 2016—namely, the harmonisation of rates that would result in some residents paying less while their neighbours just across the street may well have to pay hundreds of dollars more. The Liberals rate rise will not earn a dollar more revenue for our cash-strapped councils, but it will raise rates for thousands more families, home owners and businesses in the middle of a pandemic. It will not address the precarious financial position our councils find themselves in thanks to these forced mergers, nor will it empower councils to invest more in the services and infrastructure our communities need right now. It is really important to acknowledge that everyone in the community knows that the Liberals' council mergers were a terrible mistake. They were forced on communities across our State and they were driven by politics—namely, to benefit the New South Wales Liberals.

Let us remember what happened back in 2015. When the then Premier announced the merger policy he said it was, and I quote, "in the long-term interests of every ratepayer in this State". We were promised that rates would not increase but now they will. We were told that services would improve but now we are told we will have to pay more just to continue the current services—not to improve them, not to deal with infrastructure backlogs or with the whole range of issues that councils are trying to grapple with out there right now. This rests on the fact that these councils were forcibly amalgamated, and now residents are going to have to pay more. In my electorate residents of Ashbury, Marrickville, Dulwich Hill, Petersham and Lewisham will all see their rates go up. Rates harmonisation is lifting the minimum rate across the Canterbury-Bankstown Council area to \$728.18 for residential properties and to \$794.27 for businesses.

The increase will disproportionately impact Ashbury residents, whose land value is considerably higher than the average land value across the Canterbury-Bankstown local government area [LGA]—a giant LGA. Many residents of the former Marrickville Council, including in Marrickville, Dulwich Hill, Petersham and Lewisham, will see their rates increase by up to 20 per cent. That means a family who once paid annual rates of \$710 on their home will see their rates go up to \$850. A couple managing their bills after buying their first home, for example, and who currently pay the average rate of \$765 per annum, will see their rates jump by 18.7 per cent to \$908. An older self-funded retired couple who have lived in their home for decades, supporting themselves without government assistance and paying the highest rate of \$1,110, will now pay \$1,316 a year—an increase of 18.6 per cent.

Similarly, businesses in the former Marrickville LGA are facing rate rises of between 7 per cent and 19 per cent, adding costs at a time when, of course, business are focused on getting customers back and creating local jobs after the devastation of the COVID-19 pandemic. Right when households and businesses need a hand up from this Government, what are they getting? They are getting giant rates bill increases. It is a slap in the face for these residents and these businesses. The Inner West Council consulted residents and businesses about what this new rate structure would mean for them, and I quote one local business owner in Petersham, who said:

We own a shop on New Canterbury Road, Petersham, and the change in rates is 22 per cent higher. How can we continue with these rises and pandemics?

Here is an example of the knock-on effect for renters of this rate increase. One respondent said:

I provide low-cost housing in Newtown. The increase in council rates compounds the impost of land tax already imposed by the State Government. The rent will barely meet the annual outgoings. I will be forced to sell property, putting one low-income family on the street.

Lastly, the local government Minister might want to listen to this resident, who said it best:

You lied to us. My rates are going up 22 per cent under the new structure. When the councils amalgamated we were told it would be more efficient, which implies lower rates not massively higher rates.

The fact is that we in the inner west are getting used to being lied to by this Government, and I would like to point to the latest rort—

**Mrs Shelley Hancock:** Point of order: I object to the phrase "being lied to". I think that is unparliamentary language.

**TEMPORARY SPEAKER (Ms Sonia Hornery):** Members will come to order.

**Ms JO HAYLEN:** Inner west residents are sick of being conned by this Government. The latest insult to our community is that at the very same time this Government is making residents pay more, they have also been ripped off by the Government to the tune of hundreds of millions of dollars. In fact, Inner West Council was ripped off by \$24 million, and Canterbury-Bankstown Council by a further \$40 million. That is tens of millions of dollars that our community was cheated out of. The Stronger Communities Fund was established to support councils that were forcibly amalgamated by this Government. Instead, the fund was used as a pre-election slush fund, with more than 95 per cent of the \$252 million gifted to councils in Liberal electorates just before the election.

Local councils in my electorate did not even get told they could apply for this fund. In fact, \$100 million of the fund was gifted to councils that were not even amalgamated. This is pork-barrelling on a breathtaking scale. The fund was meant to support merged councils to deliver improved services and infrastructure for ratepayers. [*Extension of time*]

That includes fixing up parks, fixing roads and footpaths, building cycleways and public toilets, and delivering environmental services, childcare centres and swimming pools—these are the services that residents in our amalgamated councils need and deserve. The Inner West Council, for example, would have used these important funds for projects like building much-needed links in the cycling network across the LGA. A second field is needed at Tempe Reserve for the hundreds of local football club members who need space to play. Leichardt Aquatics Centre could be upgraded so that residents have a place to swim. They are some of the essential services that residents have been deprived of because of the allocation of this slush fund to Liberal electorates.

It is absolutely imperative that we know residents across the area are missing out. As the shadow Minister and colleagues on this side of the House have noted, the Opposition will move a number of amendments to ensure this bill actually gives residents in communities like mine a fair go. We are demanding the Government extend the maximum time period for harmonisation of rates from four to eight years. This is about trying to at least minimise the pain—to make sure residents are not hit with an absurd bill shock in the middle of a pandemic. We are calling on the Government to lay out a process for councils that were forced to merge in 2016 to progress demerger proposals. Councils should be able to offer a business case to show that they are better off returning to their former boundaries and the Minister should be held to a strict time line to assess these.

Labor never supported these undemocratic and shameful mergers and has always promised to provide communities that want to restore their local councils with a clear pathway to do so in the State Parliament. We ask the Minister to consider these very reasonable amendments. Importantly, Labor is also demanding that the Government create a financial support grant for forcibly amalgamated councils that missed out. It is not another slush fund—it should be transparent, targeted funding to ensure that residents who are being forced to pay higher rates will see higher levels of service, and to guarantee improvement in local infrastructure. That means improvements to parks, roads, footpaths, cycleways, childcare services and all the things that residents need. Make no mistake, the lack of upgrades and services provided in our local community is a result of the Government forcibly amalgamating our councils. It continues to rip these councils off to the tune of tens of millions of dollars.

Finally, we think the Government should go further than its current commitment and mandate that councils provide superannuation to councillors and mayors. Leaving it up to councils to decide is not good enough and shirks the responsibilities the Minister and her department have to improve the breadth and depth of people elected to serve their local communities, including women. It will be disappointing if the Minister cannot consider these amendments because what it takes for the Government to try to fix the mess it created is to admit that it made it in the first place. Admit that it is a mess, and then put in place genuine remedies, not half measures or bandaid solutions. That is why I encourage the Government to consider the amendments put forward by Labor and look after the inner west residents who have so far been betrayed by the Government.

**Ms SOPHIE COTSIS (Canterbury) (19:24):** The Berejiklian Government cannot say it was not warned about its botched amalgamation of local government in New South Wales. In 2013, as the shadow Minister for Local Government, I said that the plan was a recipe for monster councils and monster rate rises. I certainly did not exaggerate on the second point. I also warned that the forced mergers would result in cuts to local services and jobs, but the Government did not listen to those warnings. Even when heckled at the Local Government Association conference in 2015, former Premier Mike Baird declared:

There's no doubt that if we have less councils we have hundreds of millions of dollars that we can put to work for our ratepayers.

The then local government Minister, Paul Toole, told us in 2016 that the forced mergers would lead to planning that would "better allocate future residential development and relieve pressure on existing suburban neighbourhoods". Mr Toole declared the amalgamations would "deliver better value for money for ratepayers now and into the future". How wrong he was.

I acknowledge that the Minister for Local Government and our very hardworking shadow Minister for Local Government are in the Chamber. I acknowledge that I have spoken and written to the Minister for Local Government on a number of occasions and unfortunately this Minister is the one who has to clean up the mess. After myriad reviews and consultations—we did go along with the Fit for the Future process and Professor Sansom made scores of recommendations—the Government needed to pick out a number of sensible recommendations. This is not a panacea; it is not one size fits all.

New South Wales Labor took this issue to elections both in 2011 and in 2015. The Government did not pursue a "no forced mergers" policy in 2015. We took that policy to the election, but the Government has been dragged to this issue kicking and screaming. There were some sensible recommendations that it did not take on at the time. However, when the Government lost the seat of Orange, it turned everything around. Our former shadow Minister for Local Government had urged the Government to release report after report, because even the former Treasury Secretary had stated that this is not one size fits all. Having larger councils does not mean they will be efficient or that they will push rates down.

But Mr Baird and Mr Toole continued to claim that it would put downward pressure on rates. That is absolutely wrong, and we have seen the disaster of Central Coast Council. The forced merger in my neck of the woods, Canterbury-Bankstown, has resulted in 60 per cent higher rates for small businesses in Earlwood.

**TEMPORARY SPEAKER (Ms Sonia Horner):** Order! The member for Wollondilly will remain silent.

**Ms SOPHIE COTSIS:** That is the policy this Government forced on councils. How wrong were Mr Toole and Mr Baird? The amalgamation process and subsequent rates harmonisation have been nothing short of unmitigated disasters. We have seen councils driven to financial ruin and now some ratepayers face stratospheric rate rises. We have also seen councils in Liberal and Nationals electorates get the lion's share of New South Wales Government financial support grants. Not only did some local councils in non-Government electorates such as Inner West and Canterbury-Bankstown receive no grant funding but my electorate—which has also been smashed with overdevelopment, as the ICAC report stated yesterday—did not even know about it. We got not an iota of grant funding. The Government has to take responsibility for that. There must be proper process.

My constituents are not second-class citizens. They are hardworking people who do the right thing. They want to bring up their kids and they want their kids to play football, soccer, union or cricket on fields like they have in Mosman or Hornsby. There should not be a difference. There should be a competitive process to access grants, but all councils should be told about it. That is the unfairness of the situation. I was a staffer in a Labor government and there was fairness across the board when it came to non-Government electorates. We were always reaching out to make sure that non-Government electorates had access to programs and that there was propriety and proper governance. All I am asking for is proper governance so that councils can compete equally.

There is a competitive process for deciding sports grants and Community Building Partnership grants. Applications go to the Department of Premier and Cabinet [DPC], the sports department or the infrastructure department. Everybody has to apply via the proper criteria and they go through a competitive process. That is all we are asking for. My constituents did not even know about the support grants. They are hardworking small business people. They may not support the Labor Party, but it does not matter. What has happened is very unfair. We also saw 95 per cent of the \$252 million Stronger Communities Fund and 99 per cent of the bushfire grants funnelled into Coalition electorates.

The Berejiklian Government is now forcing ratepayers to fund its botched mergers. It has created a disaster for local government in New South Wales. The Government ignored the warnings. It has shown utter contempt for the fact that local government is the closest level of government to the people and to local communities. The Government has relegated the Office of Local Government to a minor branch of the DPC. The shocking findings

of this week's ICAC report on the former Canterbury City Council, apart from shedding more light on the dodgy dealings of former Liberal MP Daryl Maguire, only provide more evidence of this Government's utter contempt for local government. The ICAC found a New South Wales planning system that in its words "lacks effective anti-corruption safeguards". I welcome the ICAC report. Its shocking findings show that a lack of anti-corruption safeguards and proper oversight by the New South Wales Government can lead to unchecked overdevelopment. The ICAC has recommended that the DPP determine whether criminal charges should be laid against former councillors, senior staff and former Liberal member Mr Maguire. The ICAC noted:

The report says that corrupt planning decisions at the Council were a consequence of both underlying integrity issues and poor controls, and a NSW planning system that lacks effective anti-corruption safeguards.

It is just devastating to see what my community has had to face over the years and what has happened on Canterbury Road. There is more and more overdevelopment in my community but I cannot get a hospital built. I have written to Minister Hancock. I have written to the Independent Pricing and Regulatory Tribunal [IPART] and raised my concerns. I acknowledge and thank those in my community who have also written to Minister Hancock and to IPART. I acknowledge the work that local councils do. I have seen that marvellous work firsthand.

I acknowledge the United Services Union and its leader, Graeme Kelly, and our hardworking local council workforce. I acknowledge Local Government NSW and all the people out there who do amazing work for our councils, whether it is in child care or upgrading roads. We want to see more apprenticeships and more apprentices. Whether it is at your swimming pool or your local ovals, the workers do an amazing job and we want to see a fair rating system. I also acknowledge the work of our shadow Minister for Local Government in putting forward a series of very sensible amendments to the Local Government Amendment Bill 2021. They are practical and make a lot of sense. The amendments will ensure that there is fairness across the board and a level playing field, particularly for people in my community from low socio-economic backgrounds. We have had COVID. We have high unemployment and high underemployment. Renters are suffering. Our small businesses and mum-and-dad landlords are suffering. I urge the Government to support the amendments.

**Dr JOE McGIRR (Wagga Wagga) (19:34):** I speak in support of the Local Government Amendment Bill 2021. The Opposition has proposed a number of amendments, which I will also be supporting. I thank the councillors in my electorate for their hard work in the council areas of Wagga Wagga, Lockhart and Snowy Valleys. Often they are underappreciated. From my observations, it is a difficult role. I have not been in local government. However, I look on with admiration at the work that local councillors do. I speak on two aspects of the bill. The first relates to the payment of superannuation to councillors. The second relates to rate harmonisation and council mergers. In her second reading speech, the Minister spoke strongly about the issue of superannuation for councillors. She said:

More must be done to break the barriers women face when seeking elected office, particularly at the local government level.

She continued:

Providing councillors superannuation payments is another measure designed at increasing the diversity across our councils.

I acknowledge the Government's commitment to facilitating women's involvement in local government. I also acknowledge the Minister's passionate views on that, which are no doubt the result of her many years of experience in local government while juggling family responsibilities. The Minister spoke movingly of her experience in local government and the challenges particularly for women who wish to participate effectively in local government. That goes to an important point, which is the urgent need to encourage women's greater involvement in local government and, indeed, in government at all levels. The recent revelations concerning the toxic, misogynistic culture in parts of our Federal Parliament should be a warning to all elected representatives. We need to make sure that women are respected in our parliaments and that there are no barriers to women's full participation in representing their communities.

As the Minister has noted, the introduction of virtual meetings for councillors would be useful. The workshops being held around the State to support women entering local government are also important. However, they will be of little use as long as the perception exists that our representative institutions perpetuate a culture in which women are treated as second rate and where power is abused in relation to women. The Premier announced that she has commissioned Pru Goward to:

... review the processes in place for ministerial staff to make certain that we have the best practice processes for making and handling complaints about bullying, harassment or sexual assault.

The Speaker also commented on the issue and the work being done by the Presiding Officers and senior officers with the privileges committees of both Houses in relation to the code of conduct and compliance. Of course, those steps are welcome. However, they must be done in a completely transparent way and with as full as possible involvement of affected women. Part of the problem is that women's perspectives are missing or simply not acknowledged in men's top-down approaches to address the problem. The Opposition has indicated that it will

move an amendment to make the payment of superannuation compulsory. That is important. For that measure to be effective in increasing women's involvement it cannot be left to local politics. An earlier speaker noted that perhaps a council dominated by men would not understand the significance of the issue in enabling women's participation in council.

**TEMPORARY SPEAKER (Ms Sonia Hornery):** Order! The Clerk will stop the clock. There is too much audible conversation in the Chamber. The member for Heffron will remain silent.

**Dr JOE McGIRR:** The second aspect of the bill I speak about is rate harmonisation and merged councils. The bill allows the 17 merged councils that opted to freeze their rates temporarily to gradually change to their new rating structure over a four-year period for residential, farming and business rates. The argument is that it is important to harmonise rates over four years because that will offer residents protection against sharp and sudden rises. Of course, the measure is part of the response to the issue of the merged councils and the struggles they have faced to operate successfully.

I commend the Minister for her attempts to clean up the issues related to the mergers. However, cleaning up is not enough. The mergers should not have occurred in the first place. Certainly that has been the issue in my electorate where the Snowy Valleys Council [SVC] was created in a merger that no-one asked for and that has bitterly divided the community. The merger has not produced the economic efficiencies that were promised. Instead, it has damaged the morale of communities. The councillors and the council executive are to be commended for the way they have handled it, but it cannot go on. Councillors and staff have struggled valiantly, admirably and honourably through the bushfires and COVID and the damage to local industry. The community is sick of the fighting.

The financial analysis by Deloitte, commissioned by the Local Government Boundaries Commission, indicates that the Tumut part of Snowy Valleys Council would be significantly better off in a demerger. The views of the Tumbarumba part of the shire are summarised in correspondence I have received from Save Tumbarumba Shire Inc. The group said:

There can be absolutely no doubt that there is overwhelming support for the demerger proposal in the former Tumbarumba Shire. There is also significant support for the proposal in other parts of the SVC area.

It continues:

A plebiscite in September 2017 showed that well over 90 per cent of all voters on the electoral roll in the former Tumbarumba Shire wanted to demerge. Since that time thousands of people have signed letters and petitions to the government in support of the demerger. The proposal to demerge was signed by approximately 90 per cent of all voters in the Shire. Residents addressing the Boundaries Commission inquiry in Tumbarumba and Tumut in November 2020 were again almost 90 per cent in support of the demerger.

The boundaries commission has produced a report on the Snowy Valleys Council and Cootamundra Gundagai Regional Council mergers. I commend the Minister for referring the matter to the boundaries commission. We do not know the outcome of the report. I have asked that the report be made public and that a decision be made soon. I understand that the Minister has committed to making the report public, and I thank her for that. Clearly any demerger needs government support. The Opposition has foreshadowed an amendment in regard to demergers and support for them. That is important. I support the bill and look forward to debate on the proposed amendments. I commend the Minister for her work and her progress. I reiterate strongly my support for the demerger of the Snowy Valleys Council and for it getting the support it needs to achieve that.

**Mr MICHAEL DALEY (Maroubra) (19:41):** I make a brief contribution on the Local Government Amendment Bill 2021. Like many members who have contributed to debate on the bill, I have a background in local government. I am proud to say that for 13 years I served on Randwick City Council. Together with obtaining a law degree, which I did, time on council is excellent training for anyone who wants to become a member of State Parliament. I am blessed to have the very good Randwick City Council in my electorate. I was blessed to have another good council, Botany Bay Council, in another part of my electorate. The member for Heffron, who is in the Chamber, was mayor for 300 years or something like that—30 years, around three decades. It was an excellent council, not only because the member for Heffron presided over it for a long time but also because it represented a community. It was a good council, but it has been subsumed into Bayside Council and effectively destroyed.

Anyone who has been around for a long time, whether in local government or as a political observer or as a member of this place, knows that going back decades governments have always had their fingers singed when they have gone into council amalgamations in a big way. That is because often members in this place and local government Ministers have presumed that they know best. They have considered local government to be their junior, their little brother or sister—a subordinate and inferior form of government—when it is not. In fact, it is simply one of three levels of government in Australia.

If the great man Lionel Bowen had had his way, we would have given it constitutional recognition, which it deserves because of the work it does in making citizens' lives better or worse every day at the coalface. However, at times, governments have plunged headlong into amalgamation, and most of the time they have been burned. Never has a government been so burnt by amalgamations than this Government. It is because—like the Fire and Emergency Services Levy, which was supposed to be the greatest tax improvement in a generation, or the debacle that attended the Treasurer of today through the creation of the beast that is called icare—they went into it with politics and ideology on their mind and not the best intentions of the people that they are supposed to govern. Certainly it was ill considered.

Members may remember that when Baird and Berejiklian were the champions of those forced amalgamations it was all one big secret. They told us that the sky would be bluer, services would be better, rates would come down and that councils were not fit for the future. Who can remember that phrase? "Fit for the Future" was never properly defined and never properly scaled, and still to this day a KPMG report that was commissioned by the Cabinet of the day has never been made public. It was a big secret then but it is not such a big secret now because we know that it was all about politics and ideology and not about making life better for the citizens of any local government area. We knew at the time that it was a fraud.

Graeme Kelly and the United Services Union did a lot of work on it, together with Local Government NSW. They asked myriad questions, as did members of Parliament and as did councils all over the State. Local government areas were put through hoops to prove that they were fit for the future and it was all a big fraud. We predicted that it would not go well and it has not gone well. For some areas it has become a bigger mess. Councils were smashed together on the basis of politics. Now we see in some regional areas—again, because National Party Ministers have twisted the ear of the Premier of the day—they have been de-amalgamated. Councils in regional areas were declared not fit for the future but, after mysteriously having amalgamated them, they were retrospectively declared fit for the future so that they could be de-amalgamated. It was all a major crock; it was a policy failure of the Government.

It has meant that in certain areas, particularly in mine, things are worse than they were before. In my area we had the great Botany Council. Its approval ratings were through the roof; its efficiency was through the roof. The residents of Botany Council loved their council. The place shone like a new pin. Now we have the son of Frankenstein, Bayside Council, which has forced together localities that have no community of interest. The suburbs of Botany, Banksmeadow, Hillsdale, Daceyville and Pagewood have been forced to amalgamate with suburbs that have an airport, General Holmes Drive and Botany Bay between them. They share absolutely nothing.

**Mr Mark Coure:** The airport.

**Mr MICHAEL DALEY:** They share an airport, do they? It is a Federal institution. You are the bloke who caused all of this—you and your politics. The residents of Botany Council raised a petition and conducted a survey when amalgamation was being mooted. Over 90 per cent of the residents who took part in the survey said they did not want or need an amalgamation. They were ignored and, as I said, they have now been smashed together in this council. I am not blaming the councillors or the staff; it was doomed to fail. It was always doomed to fail and there was absolutely no need for it. Now we have the emergence of something that Baird and Berejiklian and the local government Minister of the day never foretold. One aspect of the Fit for the Future charade or farce that was never predicted—in fact they dodged it like a bullet—was that there would be rate increases.

The residents of the suburbs of Botany, Banksmeadow, Hillsdale, Daceyville and Pagewood now have a 40 per cent rate rise for a worse outcome. The rating base of Botany Council used to be predicated on the fact that there were massive industries within its boundaries. The mayor of the day rated it so that the weighting was on business and residential rates were kept lower. That was the cost of doing business in the area. Those businesses had everything they needed close by and they accepted that arrangement. Everyone liked the arrangement. No-one likes the current arrangement. The 40 per cent rate rise can be phased in over one, two, three or four years. But people are struggling because of COVID, businesses are hitting the wall and the wages policy of the Government from Baird to today has seen the suppression of not only public sector wages but wages right across the State. Do not quote me; quote Andrew Charlton or Philip Lowe, the Governor of the Reserve Bank.

At a time when the Government has put lead weights on top of any wage rise, it will now impose upon the residents of former Botany Council a 40 per cent rate rise for a worse service. Can anyone name an analogous product or service where the consumer is told, "We are going to give you a much worse service and we are going to increase the cost of that service by 40 per cent"? I do not know of one, but if anyone can mention one I will buy them dinner at Machiavelli before the night is out. I cannot imagine one at all. That is the farce that has been imposed on the residents of the former Botany Council.

Now non-Government members of this place have been left with the proverbial sandwich or a gun to the head. The Government is saying, "Let's impose this farce upon your residents over four years or if you vote against

the bill they will cop it in the neck straightaway." I am not having any of that. The member for Campbelltown, and shadow Minister for Local Government, Greg Warren, has done an excellent job of coming up with carefully crafted amendments to make that farce, that highway robbery, at least a little bit less painful for the victims of the crime. If those amendments are not carried, I will not vote for the bill and Labor will not vote for the bill. We are not here to clean up Baird's and Berejiklian's mess.

**Ms LIESL TESCH (Gosford) (19:51):** I contribute to debate on the Local Government Amendment Bill 2021, which is a response to the Liberal Government's debacle that is the forced amalgamation legislation. The bill is much needed for the 17 councils that were forced to come together. Unfortunately it was needed long before now and sadly it is too late to improve the circumstances in our community. The New South Wales Government's amalgamation of Gosford city and Wyong shire into the Central Coast Council has not worked out and our community is really suffering. Local government is the tangible level of government; it is the closest level of government to the people. The outcome of the amalgamation has destroyed our community's trust in that very important level of government. Tonight I acknowledge the great work of our local council employees who, alongside SES and other emergency service people, are out protecting our community on the coast and across New South Wales.

The reforms are not sensible; they are a desperate attempt to patch over the merger process across New South Wales. It is an attempt to cost shift onto local government, and that means onto ratepayers. It is a bandaid solution that will not fix our community. Let us take a step back. The Government amalgamated the two councils on the coast that were deemed not fit for the future and offered us \$10 million. Some \$317 million of existing debt was carried over after the amalgamation, and \$235 million of that debt related to water. That anomaly belongs to our community. The unfair assumption that has been made by members during debate on the bill is that that debt belongs to the recently merged Central Coast Council. The Government did not provide the support structures that merged councils needed and its promises have not come to fruition.

The Audit Office of New South Wales and the Office of Local Government failed to detect errors in local government reporting and mismanagement on the Central Coast for three years in a row. Forensic audits also indicated that a lot of the financial information that should have been made available to councillors was not actually available. At the same time, the Liberals gave developers a 1 per cent contributions cut in Gosford and took over 2 per cent of developer contributions for themselves. They have also taken planning powers away from our local representatives, without any additional funding for the community.

I thank Regional Development Australia and our chambers of commerce across the coast for coming together at a meeting of community leaders two weeks ago. Members of that meeting voted unanimously to support a full inquiry into the long history and painful processes at the Central Coast Council. This supports the petition signed by over 20,000 coasties asking for an independent inquiry into the collapse of our council. Our community has made it very clear that we need an inquiry to support the new administrator to dig out and reform the processes and procedures with council, and assist in merging the two organisational cultures that have been forced together into a culture that employees often tell me is "toxic", noting that both councils were recognised by the Liberal Government prior to amalgamation as "not Fit for the Future".

The people who work in council are our neighbours, our friends and important members of our community, and they continue to talk about the bullying and nepotism within council. Two very different leadership models and cultures within council have been forced together and they still do not work. There are so many questions that need to be answered. Even our existing administrator, Dick Persson, has identified there are significant legacy issues that need to be addressed.

**TEMPORARY SPEAKER (Mr Greg Piper):** The member for Tamworth and the member for Heathcote are becoming too boisterous. They will not incite the member for Kiama.

**Ms LIESL TESCH:** Last week the Parliamentary Secretary for the Central Coast refused the opportunity to bring debate forward in a timely manner to hear the voices and concerns of coasties in the New South Wales Parliament before the Liberal Government makes a decision about our council's future. Once again, he and this Government have ignored the people of the Central Coast. We know that Wyong Shire Council put up its rates just before amalgamation, to try to make its finances look better. We also know that Gosford council stupidly sold our community car park, and now we as a community are paying the price for that.

As a result of that rate increase, the people in Wyong are currently paying significantly more than people in the old Gosford area, and are patiently awaiting their rate decrease. The policy of the Liberal Government is that harmonisation balances out our rates. Even the administrator is letting coasties know that harmonisation is a consequence of Liberal Government policy and that we have to endure this regardless of the state of council's finances. While nobody on the Terrigal or Gosford end of the Central Coast wants a harmonisation rate rise, as it will cost us more, you would think the Parliamentary Secretary for the whole of the Central Coast, the member

for Terrigal, would be bold enough to stand in this Parliament and acknowledge that the harmonisation process is fair for people on the northern end of the coast. Once again, he is not listening to, or representing, the people of the Central Coast.

I acknowledge the hard work of the shadow Minister in bringing forward amendments to improve this bill. Coasties opposed the Baird Government's forcible merger in 2016, and we need an opportunity to hold a referendum to be given the option of a demerger or de-amalgamation. Another important amendment is to maintain the status quo regarding the sale of land for unpaid rates. The Government wants to decrease this from five to three years. Yet given the current pressure on finances of many people across my electorate and the coast and the increase in rates, we need to be mindful about doing this. Labor's amendments also call for the creation of financial support grants for amalgamated councils. As a Central Coast MP, I have already asked for additional funding to pay for the exorbitant cost of the amalgamation—our \$50 million IT system, our \$25 million wage harmonisation and now perhaps support to cover the \$45 million redundancy costs.

We on the Central Coast definitely need financial support grants to help fix the problems and the associated costs of amalgamation. This Government needs to provide equitable access to grants—financial support grants—not just the boardwalk in the Terrigal electorate. This bill is a reflection of the absolute underfunding and cost shifting that is going on under the Liberal Government to our local councils across New South Wales. The cost shifting of what was \$75 million and now totals \$115 million is something that we as ratepayers will be forced to pay out of our own pockets. This is the cost of amalgamation for the people of the Central Coast. It is above and beyond the fifty-fifty funding that the State Government drip feeds to our community for so many projects—fifty-fifty for dredging, if the council ticks all the boxes correctly; 50 per cent for beach erosion protection in the Terrigal electorate; and a promise to pay, yet a failure to pay, for beach protection in The Entrance electorate.

There has not been equitable funding of councils, and the Premier has gloated that pork-barrelling occurs—at a cost to our local Central Coast Council. As a taxpayer, a ratepayer and a community member of Parliament, I still cannot believe the Premier and the Liberals think pork-barrelling is okay. Our community suffers. Our council area got zero bushfire recovery funding, despite suffering damage totalling around \$163 million. The Blue Mountains got zero and yet the Oxley electorate was given an \$11 million skydiving fund. Where is the money to support our council? To make matters worse for communities across New South Wales, this Government is asking to remove the Independent Pricing and Regulatory Tribunal [IPART] to increase rates across local governments for specific projects that have shared funding with State or Federal governments.

These are specific projects that are identified and need to be delivered in local communities. They are not something that residents, who are already paying rates, should be forced to pay for over and above their rates, especially without the oversight of IPART. In many cases, these projects should be fully funded by State or Federal governments. On the Central Coast we see that that has not worked in the past. We have had a special rate variation for our library for 23 years and, even though we have State and Federal money to support that build, it still has not happened. We also know that not all ratepayers are keen to add an extra rate cost to the amount to dredge the Ettalong Channel or support the Copacabana boardwalk, the San Remo bike path, the Terrigal seawall or whatever the project might be.

This bill is utterly misguided in trying to move rate increases outside IPART. IPART was established in 1995 and provides an external rating system, independent of government as a protector of ratepayers, and performs rigorous oversight to protect communities. We are not certain that our Central Coast application fee for the 15 per cent rate rise will even be approved. This Government is trying to devalue the rigour that is offered by this independent body, which possibly needs additional resources if we have to speed up the variations required in the approval process, rather than shredding the oversight of integrity. I request an extension of time. [*Extension of time*]

Across New South Wales we are watching amalgamated councils scrambling to recover the cost of mergers through special rate variations. Last time I looked, seven out of the 10 councils applying for rate variations were amalgamated councils. I acknowledge that the Minister for Local Government, who is in the Chamber, did not deliver the original legislation, and possibly did not see the pain that was coming to the Central Coast community, especially given that the Audit Office and the Office of Local Government failed to detect errors in local government reporting. I ask the Minister for Local Government to seriously consider the future of our whole Central Coast community moving forward. Any decision she makes to support or reject an inquiry, put our councillors back in place and assume business as usual will be more poor oversight of the Central Coast.

The trust for our council is at absolute rock bottom and, whilst I thank Dick, Rik and Natalia for the work they continue to do, the "broken" is far from fixed. Whilst it does not begin to make up for the job losses, I acknowledge those in our community who have lost jobs in council on the Central Coast, and acknowledge the adjustments in service provision that we as coasties are already seeing across our communities. This failed amalgamation has set us back—not just over COVID, when insight into the spending of restricted funds finally

became visible and our council was suspended; not just as we wait for the possible 13 per cent plus 2 per cent rate rise to be approved by IPART to meet current debts; not just as we wait for the sale of assets that previously belonged to the people of the Central Coast; and not as we will not be eligible to use the additional funding grab, with or without IPART approval, to support State and Federal grant money, as we cannot even accept this funding, let alone afford to build anything new for some years into the future due to our financial circumstances.

The people of the Central Coast were not suffering before the amalgamation. We are strongly the Central Coast, and it is appalling that this bill is before Parliament in this form, scrambling to pick up the pieces of a devastated community of 330,000 people and growing. The people of the Central Coast have been absolutely screwed over by this Government amalgamation process and the failed amalgamation of our Gosford and Wyong shire councils. This bill should be about funding councils appropriately, not further cost shifting onto ratepayers and increasing our rates.

This Government is not listening to the people of the Central Coast. Regardless of the time frame, residents along the coast will be hurt by the harmonisation forced upon us by the Liberal Government's amalgamation. Unfortunately for coasties, this bill comes too late. The people of the Central Coast will be feeling the cost of amalgamation for years to come. I will not support this bill in its current form. It is just an attempt to mop up the amalgamation mess. Coasties want the New South Wales Government to listen to them and to fund our council to build a strong foundation and put in place bold and visionary policies, strategies and projects to take our great region forward. Our community needs the State Government's support to undo the damage done by amalgamation in a place of trust and to rebuild our very strong and important community resource: the Central Coast Council.

**Mrs SHELLEY HANCOCK (South Coast—Minister for Local Government) (20:05):** In reply: I thank all who contributed to debate on the Local Government Amendment Bill tonight. It is an extraordinary list of people who have shown their compassion and their interest in local government. For that I am really grateful. I will list them: the member for Campbelltown and shadow Minister, and the members representing the electorates of Terrigal, Heffron, Camden, Bankstown, Coogee, Wyong, Charlestown, Murray, Balmain, Swansea, Lakemba, Lake Macquarie, The Entrance, Summer Hill, Canterbury, Wagga Wagga, Maroubra and Gosford. It is an extraordinary list. Maybe they have nothing better to do; I do not know. But I really thank those who actually read and understood the bill and spoke about the provisions contained in it. I must say that so many of those who spoke about this bill were not speaking about the bill at all but were having a rant about amalgamations. They were going back to the 2016 processes. They admitted that I had nothing to do with that, but they still wanted to have a rant.

When one brings to this House a bill containing sensible provisions on which the Government has consulted over a long period of time with the local government sector, one expects that other members would recognise that. Clearly, they did not read the provisions of the bill. If they had questions about the provisions of the bill, they could have come to talk to me at any time. They did not. Some of their contributions demonstrated a lack of understanding of some of the things in this bill. Nevertheless I have to say that most members commented during the debate that many of us in this place have long had a keen appreciation of the importance of local government in New South Wales, through personal experience. I think the member for Maroubra was the last to say that. I have too; many of us have. It is reassuring to know that so many members share my regard, as the shadow Minister does, for the value of local councils and understand the importance of taking measures to strengthen councils' capacity to deliver for residents and ratepayers across the State.

I note the comments of the member for Campbelltown and shadow Minister regarding the work our councils are currently undertaking during the floods overwhelming the State at the moment, as they did during bushfires. Local councils came together during bushfires and are coming together now to help each other. I thank the member for his comments praising local councils at the moment because they are so relevant. The member for Campbelltown knows, as many other members may know, what councils do: They step up. Over the past two years they have had to step up more than ever before, dealing with drought, bushfires, floods, the COVID-19 pandemic and now a once-in-a-generation flood crisis. I offer my sincere appreciation for the work our councils do in providing services and facilities for their communities, not only in times of crisis but on a daily basis.

I now speak to the bill. Throughout the second reading debate, a number of members mentioned the progress made by new councils in their electorates and raised concerns about the performance of those councils—that is, the councils created from the mergers in 2016. Some of those councils are in regional areas, while others are in greater Sydney. I am confident they are all working hard to deliver the kind of local services and infrastructure their communities need. It is fair to say that, like all councils across New South Wales, councils created in 2016 have areas of strength and weakness. Having said that, I am confident that these councils now are in a solid position and are looking forward to building on that over the next few years to consolidate the benefits of coming together. The Government is continuing to work closely with all new councils to ensure that they have the support they need to deliver stronger services and infrastructure and better value for money for their

communities. I have seen how we are working with local councils throughout the State and assisting them—in particular, the new councils. Ultimately, these councils will face elections later this year, and residents and ratepayers will have the opportunity to judge their performance for themselves.

A number of members made specific mention of the provision to allow newly formed councils to harmonise rates over a period of four years, and I note the Opposition's amendment to provide for rate harmonisation over a period of eight years. That was a prevalent theme in the debate this evening. I understand why the shadow Minister has gone this way. But the Government has undertaken a great deal of consultation and detailed consideration in recommending the four-year maximum term for gradual harmonisation by merged councils. After considering the report of the Independent Pricing and Regulatory Tribunal, feedback from the relevant councils and the outcomes of public consultation, the Government reached the view that a four-year term would allow for gradual change for ratepayers who may be asked to pay more, while also setting a reasonable limit on how long some ratepayers are subsidising others.

This limit is an important consideration and should not be overlooked. For each further year that a council gradually moves to its new rating structure, some of their ratepayers will continue to pay higher rates than they would have otherwise. I do not think in this case they will appreciate the amendment of the Opposition to go to eight years. They will not appreciate that whatsoever. I reiterate that the term of four years after a one-year extension has come from extensive consultation with councils themselves. The four-year term takes into account an unusual three-year council term, with elections in 2021 and 2024, as well as the fact that all land is to be revalued as part of a general process of land valuation before rates are levied for 2023 and 2024.

In 2019 the Government introduced a bill that, in part, allowed these councils the choice of a further year to harmonise rating structures, so this makes five. After that bill was passed by the Parliament, 17 councils took up the option to take a further year to harmonise. Those councils have now spent five years preparing for this transition, and the Government is of the view that this is a sufficient and appropriate period in which to prepare a new rating structure. To do anything more would just prolong the agony and make it even more difficult for councils generally. The Office of Local Government has met with general managers and senior staff of those councils on several occasions to support them to prepare for rating harmonisation from 1 July 2021. With that in mind, I remain of the view that a maximum term of four years balances all of these considerations and meets the needs of the vast majority of councils and communities needing to harmonise rates from 1 July 2021.

Having reflected on the range of comments made in relation to the bill, I now address particular issues raised by some members. I thank the member for Campbelltown for his contributions, his commitment and his passion for the local government sector. I know he shares that with me and he works hard in that position. I thank the member for Terrigal for his contribution. I note he received a lot of criticism from the member for Wyong. I think that was not warranted. The member for Terrigal is an absolute champion for the Central Coast and the strongest advocate for that community. He has been talking to me about that council not for a few weeks, as some members have been, or a few months, but for a long time. He comes to my office perhaps every day and rings me just about every second day to talk about his community and his council. It was a bit unfair to criticise him in the House.

The member for Heffron raised a number of matters specifically relating to capital improved value [CIV], which was interesting. He said it has been around for a hundred years, but he did not seem to give consideration to the fact that there had been several Labor governments in between that could have done something about CIV. Even in the past few years, he could have done something. He could have brought a private member's bill. He could have convinced the shadow Minister to do something about it himself. It was a bit unfortunate, a bit of a rant and a bit irrelevant because he did not really reflect much on the bill.

The member for Camden formerly served as a councillor and as mayor of Camden Council. I note that today is the final day that the member can serve in the role of councillor, as is the case with the member for Goulburn. I congratulate them on their carrying out a dual role. The member for Camden is one of those who understood the bill. He spoke about the provisions in the bill, the subcategories of rates, all of the good things in the bill—which not one member on the other side referred to. What a shame! The subcategories of rates will provide so much more flexibility. It would be unfortunate for the Opposition to vote against all of the good things. Because guess what? I will be telling all of those councils that is what the Labor Party did. It is willing to sacrifice all of the benefits in the bill for a political pointscoring exercise.

The member for Bankstown talked about mergers, mergers, mergers. She criticised her own council, as she does all the time. She did not understand the difference between levying special rates and special rate variations. I will talk about that when we deal with the amendment, but she had a distinct lack of understanding about those two things. Levying special rates and special rate variations were threaded right through the Opposition speeches and it was unfortunate that they just did not understand. The member for Coogee talked about superannuation in a most passionate way. I accept what she said but not one Opposition member has talked

to me about superannuation. They did not write a submission to my discussion paper on superannuation, which I issued last year following my discussions with Mr David Shoebridge in the other House. Nobody made a submission to that discussion paper on superannuation.

Some of the members opposite were so passionate about superannuation. Would you not think they would come and talk to me? Would you not think they would say, "I think that is really good but you should mandate it," or, "It is really good the way it is. Can I write a submission?" Nobody on that side of the House spoke to me except for the member in the other place Mr David Shoebridge, and I give him credit for that. I see Mr David Shoebridge in the adviser's area and I give him credit for being the one who has worked on this bill. Those on the other side who pretended to be supportive of it have done nothing to come and talk about it until this evening. I find that really disappointing. It is not only the member for Coogee, it is other members as well. Then came the member for Wyong. I value the comments of the member for Wyong. He is always measured, always considered and understands local government. But all he wanted to talk about was the Central Coast.

**Mr Ron Hoenig:** Maybe he represents it.

**Mrs SHELLEY HANCOCK:** Again, member for Heffron, we have a bill in front of us with various other provisions which he should have been talking about. Rather than ranting about amalgamations and all the rest of it, he should talk about the bill and the good things in the bill. Even though I have the greatest respect for the member for Wyong, I was understandably a little surprised that he had not properly read the bill. The member for Charlestown made a sensible contribution and also spoke on superannuation. But again I say that the Opposition did not make a submission on superannuation in the discussion paper.

I will talk to the member for Murray about the issue of the environmental rate. I believe she has some good things to say about it but is a bit misguided. I will endeavour to talk to her tomorrow about that. As always, the member for Balmain did not rant. Even though he might be critical of amalgamations, he never comes into this place and has a rant and rave about what the evil Government has done. He is respectful and considered and I have the greatest respect for him. In relation to Operation Dasha, which he raised, we will go forward. There will be lessons to learn from Operation Dasha and we will learn them. We will go forward to try to resolve those issues. I look forward to talking to him about that because he talks to me respectfully.

The member for Swansea ranted. The member for Lakemba is a great local member. One of the great things that he did was not criticise his own council. I encourage all members in this place to work with their local councils, not come into this place and criticise them because they are not doing this or they are doing that. Members should try to work with their local councils. I think that is what the member for Lakemba was trying to say. He was demonstrating that he wants to work with his local council and he respects his local council. That is the sort of person the member for Lakemba is: dignified and respectful of other people. The member for Lake Macquarie is in the chair. I respect everything the member has to say about local government and have sought his counsel on many occasions because of his experience—not that I do not have experience myself. How long did you have on council?

**TEMPORARY SPEAKER (Mr Greg Piper):** Twenty-one years.

**Mrs SHELLEY HANCOCK:** Yes, slightly longer than I had. I value your words of wisdom, member for Lake Macquarie. The member understands the issue of harmonisation very well. Some of the other speakers did not seem to understand how important harmonisation is. I thank him for reading and understanding the bill. The member for The Entrance seemed to understand the bill, but again there was a misunderstanding about levying a special rate and a special rate variation. He was one of the members who misunderstood that. I ask the shadow Minister to please try to explain that to his troops. It is a serious misrepresentation of the proposed Labor amendment to the bill. So I have to be careful.

The member for Canterbury talked about botched amalgamations. If I hear the word "botched" one more time tonight, I do not know what I am going to do. Try to find a better word—and that is from an English teacher. Try to find a different way to describe it; I do not know what. The member for Canterbury talks about botched amalgamations, but her party amalgamated councils by sending them a facsimile. I know that is old-fashioned technology. That is how Labor did it. There was not any consultation or working through a process. They just sent them a fax and amalgamated them. Please do not talk to me again about botched amalgamations. I want to move on and be positive. I know the shadow Minister wants to move on and be positive. We are not going to go back.

The member for Wagga Wagga talked about Snowy Valleys Council. I know his views on Snowy Valleys. We will get to the issue of the two Local Government Boundaries Commission reports on Cootamundra, Gundagai and Snowy Valleys after this issue has been completed. The member for Maroubra had an angry rant about amalgamations. I was a bit disappointed in his contribution, which clearly indicated that he either had not read the bill or did not even want to talk about it.

Finally I acknowledge the extensive work of the Office of Local Government not only in drafting the bill, but also over the long period of time it has been involved in the consultation process that has been undertaken. I thank the office for its tireless efforts. It really has been tireless over recent months where it has consulted with the sector and worked diligently to prepare the bill. I also thank the United Services Union, particularly Graeme Kelly. I know his name has been mentioned many times and I will mention it again. I have to say a word about Graeme Kelly. I have tried to work with every stakeholder in local government and Graeme Kelly has been far and away the most delightful one to work with. He has been fantastic. He always takes our calls, talks to us and understands what we are trying to do. He might not always agree, but he is a genuine gentleman.

I thank the Local Government Professionals and Local Government NSW for their productive input. It has proven to be incredibly valuable and I thank them for representing their members and assisting with the formation of the bill. Every council that took part in the consultation process in various forms should be thanked, and I am grateful to the councillors and council staff who took the time to register their insights into how we can best reform the sector. Many members of this place engaged with me and my office to ensure that the views of their constituents and communities were represented, and I thank them for their valued contributions. Again I thank all members who contributed tonight. I did not expect quite so many speakers, but it reflects the interest that all members hold in local government. I thank them for their contributions. I wish they had been a bit more positive.

**Mr Ron Hoenig:** Does that tell you anything?

**Mrs SHELLEY HANCOCK:** We need to move forward and introduce sensible reform. If the member for Heffron, who is interjecting, wants to talk about capital improvement value, then he can bring a private member's bill. I commend the bill to the House.

**TEMPORARY SPEAKER (Mr Greg Piper):** The question is that this bill be now read a second time.

**Motion agreed to.**

**Consideration in detail requested by Mr Greg Warren.**

#### Consideration in Detail

**TEMPORARY SPEAKER (Mr Greg Piper):** By leave: I will deal with the bill in groups of clauses and schedules.

**Mr GREG WARREN (Campbelltown) (20:25):** By leave: I move Opposition amendments Nos 1 and 4 on sheet c2021-008D in globo:

No. 1 **Financial support grants for amalgamated councils**

Page 2, clause 2(2)(c), line 11. Omit "[30]". Insert instead "[29]".

No. 4 **Financial support grants for amalgamated councils**

Page 11, Schedule 1.1. Insert after line 18—

#### [29A] Section 620 Making of grants by the Minister

Insert at the end of the section—

- (2) The Minister must, with money appropriated by Parliament for the purpose, re-establish the financial support grant program established to provide financial support to councils for areas amalgamated in 2016 to meet the costs of the amalgamations.

The amendments provide financial support for many communities that have missed out. They missed out because the Berejiklian Government changed the guidelines, which, quite frankly, were rightfully put in place. Labor opposed the forced amalgamations but we needed to see the financial provisions of support put in place for affected communities. Premier Baird and Deputy Premier Grant rightfully put in the provisions of that grant to support those communities. We have a new Premier and Deputy Premier, who changed the guidelines. The bill was the Government's opportunity to right the wrongs of the past and help communities that are financially stricken—local families, local businesses and community organisations. Millions of dollars should have been spent in the communities that were adversely and seriously affected by this Government's failed forced merger agenda. On this side of the House we know. Even Government members know; just ask the member for Cootamundra the effect it is having on her community down through the Riverina.

Members on the Central Coast are aware, but you know who is more aware? The families, ratepayers, businesses and community organisations that continue to suffer and have uncertainty for their financial future. The amendments show that we on this side of the House put people first. There are not too many more important things than debating bills respectfully and strongly when we come into this place. It must be done fairly to reach an outcome that is consistent with the suitability of the needs, the dreams and the aspirations of that community. There is no more important aspiration than to ensure these affected communities get their fair share of the money

they deserve—the money that was gouged out of their pockets by the Government and that they were denied. The Government can right that wrong tonight by supporting the amendments. I commend the amendments to the House.

**Mrs SHELLEY HANCOCK (South Coast—Minister for Local Government) (20:28):** I will probably give the same speech about all the amendments. The amendments came to me this morning and all of them propose to make a series of significant amendments to the bill. I reiterate the fact that the Government has undertaken considerable consultation with the sector. The right thing for us to do is to take more time to consider these amendments and their ramifications. Some of them have serious financial ramifications, especially amendments to do with superannuation and harmonisation. Those are serious matters we have considered at length with the sector—not just in our cloistered office, but with the sector. I am not sure that the sector would be terribly enamoured with me if I simply roll over and support the amendments because they superficially sound quite good.

We have listened to the feedback from local councils and have incorporated that into the bill. If I support any of the amendments at this stage I will be turning my back on many months of consultation. I am disappointed, but I understand why the shadow Minister is doing what he is doing. I caution him about suddenly moving amendments with no real warning because we would then have to spend the next 24 hours going back to the sector to talk to it about that. I know that the sector will be angry with some of those amendments. That is my general speech on the amendments; I might have something further to say on the rate levying. Generally speaking, I think the Government will be opposing all the amendments.

**TEMPORARY SPEAKER (Mr Greg Piper):** The question is that Opposition amendments Nos 1 and 4 on sheet c2021-008D be agreed to.

**The House divided.**

Ayes .....34  
Noes .....38  
Majority.....4

**AYES**

Aitchison, J	Doyle, T	Mihailuk, T
Atalla, E	Finn, J	Minns, C
Bali, S	Harris, D	O'Neill, M
Barr, C	Harrison, J	Parker, J
Butler, R	Haylen, J	Smith, T
Catley, Y	Hoening, R	Tesch, L
Cotsis, S	Hornery, S	Voltz, L
Crakanthorp, T	Leong, J	Warren, G
Daley, M	Lynch, P	Washington, K
Dalton, H	McGirr, J	Watson, A (teller)
Dib, J	Mehan, D (teller)	Zangari, G
Donato, P		

**NOES**

Anderson, K	Gulaptis, C	Saunders, D
Ayres, S	Hancock, S	Sidgreaves, P
Barilaro, J	Hazzard, B	Singh, G
Clancy, J	Henskens, A	Smith, N
Conolly, K	Johnsen, M	Speakman, M
Cooke, S (teller)	Kean, M	Stokes, R
Coure, M	Lee, G	Taylor, M
Crouch, A (teller)	Lindsay, W	Toole, P
Dominello, V	Marshall, A	Tuckerman, W
Elliott, D	O'Dea, J	Upton, G
Evans, L	Pavey, M	Ward, G
Gibbons, M	Provest, G	Williams, R
Griffin, J	Roberts, A	

**PAIRS**

Car, P

Davies, T

## PAIRS

Chanthivong, A  
 Kamper, S  
 Lalich, N  
 McDermott, H  
 McKay, J  
 Park, R  
 Saffin, J  
 Scully, P

Perrottet, D  
 Petinos, E  
 Williams, L  
 Constance, A  
 Preston, R  
 Berejiklian, G  
 Bromhead, S  
 Wilson, F

**Amendments negatived.**

**Mr GREG WARREN (Campbelltown) (20:40):** By leave: I move Opposition amendments Nos 2 and 12 on sheet c2021-008D in globo:

No. 2 **Business case for de-amalgamations**

Page 3, Schedule 1.1. Insert after line 2—

**[1A] Section 218CC**

Insert after section 218CB—

**218CC Proposals for de-amalgamations**

- (1) The new council may, within 10 years of the constitution of the new area, submit a written business case to the Minister setting out—
  - (a) a proposal for the de-amalgamation of the new area, whether by reconstituting the former areas or constituting different areas, and
  - (b) the reasons in support of the proposal.
- (2) The Minister must, within 28 days after the business case is submitted, refer the de-amalgamation proposal to the Boundaries Commission with a direction that it conduct an inquiry and report on the proposal.
- (3) Without limiting subsection (2) or section 263, the Boundaries Commission may in its report recommend that—
  - (a) the de-amalgamation proposal be supported, or
  - (b) the de-amalgamation proposal be rejected, or
  - (c) a different de-amalgamation proposal be supported.
- (4) The Minister must ensure that the report of the Boundaries Commission is publicly released within 48 hours after it is provided to the Minister.
- (5) The Minister must, within 28 days after the report is provided to the Minister, provide a written response to the new council setting out—
  - (a) whether or not the Minister supports the de-amalgamation proposal or a different de-amalgamation proposal recommended by the Boundaries Commission, and
  - (b) the reasons for the Minister's decision, and
  - (c) if the Minister supports the de-amalgamation proposal or the different de-amalgamation proposal—the anticipated time frame for giving effect to the proposal.
- (6) The Minister is to ensure that the cost of any de-amalgamation of the new area resulting from a business case submitted under this section is fully funded, whether by using grants under section 620 or otherwise.
- (7) This section extends to new areas constituted before the commencement of this section.
- (8) In this section—

*new area* means the area constituted by the amalgamation of areas (*former areas*) by the relevant proclamation.

*new council* means the council of a new area constituted by section 219.

*relevant proclamation* means the proclamation made pursuant to Chapter 9, Part 1 that amalgamates former areas into the new area and constitutes the new council.

Insert "and about council area amalgamations" after "certain terms of office".

Again, having these provisions in place will enable the Government to right the wrongs of the past. I note that the member for Cootamundra is in the Chamber and I commend her for her representations on behalf of her community. She knows all too well the ramifications of this forced merger and how it is affecting the community, their wellbeing, their livelihoods and, dare I say, their health, particularly their mental health. The financial sustainability of that council will have a detrimental effect on that community for generations to come.

We know that they are failed mergers, the councils know that they have failed and the Government knows that they have failed. Having this provision in place will provide councils with the opportunity to get their business case together and to do what good councils have done, like in Cootamundra: substantiate their position with fact, display why the forced merger has failed, but also display how their community will be better off. I acknowledge that there are some references to this in the legislation, but what we are proposing is a lot tighter and provides that financial support. I urge the Government to consider its position, support these amendments and do the right thing to help these desperate communities. I commend the amendments.

**Mrs SHELLEY HANCOCK (South Coast—Minister for Local Government) (20:42):** As I said before, we will oppose these amendments. The amendments have very serious procedural ramifications. Whilst this has been a debate for the Opposition about amalgamations, this process will not lead to a better outcome at all. In the strongest of terms I have to oppose these amendments; they are not thought out well, they are misconceived and obviously a lot of misinformation has been provided to members opposite about this. We oppose the amendments.

**TEMPORARY SPEAKER (Mr Greg Piper):** The question is that Opposition amendments Nos 2 and 12 on sheet c2021-008D be agreed to.

**The House divided.**

Ayes .....34  
Noes .....38  
Majority.....4

**AYES**

Aitchison, J	Doyle, T	Mihailuk, T
Atalla, E	Finn, J	Minns, C
Bali, S	Harris, D	O'Neill, M
Barr, C	Harrison, J	Parker, J
Butler, R	Haylen, J	Smith, T
Catley, Y	Hoenig, R	Tesch, L
Cotsis, S	Hornery, S	Voltz, L
Crakanthorp, T	Leong, J	Warren, G
Daley, M	Lynch, P	Washington, K
Dalton, H	McGirr, J	Watson, A (teller)
Dib, J	Mehan, D (teller)	Zangari, G
Donato, P		

**NOES**

Anderson, K	Gulaptis, C	Saunders, D
Ayres, S	Hancock, S	Sidgreaves, P
Barilaro, J	Hazzard, B	Singh, G
Clancy, J	Henskens, A	Smith, N
Conolly, K	Johnsen, M	Speakman, M
Cooke, S (teller)	Kean, M	Stokes, R
Coure, M	Lee, G	Taylor, M
Crouch, A (teller)	Lindsay, W	Toole, P
Dominello, V	Marshall, A	Tuckerman, W
Elliott, D	O'Dea, J	Upton, G
Evans, L	Pavey, M	Ward, G
Gibbons, M	Provest, G	Williams, R
Griffin, J	Roberts, A	

## PAIRS

Car, P  
 Chanthivong, A  
 Kamper, S  
 Lalich, N  
 McDermott, H  
 McKay, J  
 Park, R  
 Saffin, J  
 Scully, P

Davies, T  
 Perrottet, D  
 Petinos, E  
 Williams, L  
 Constance, A  
 Preston, R  
 Berejiklian, G  
 Bromhead, S  
 Wilson, F

**Amendments negatived.**

**Mr GREG WARREN (Campbelltown) (20:51):** I move Opposition amendment No. 3 on sheet c2021-008D:

**No. 3 Intergovernmental projects**

Pages 3 and 4, Schedule 1.1[3], line 8 on page 3 to line 32 on page 4. Omit all words on those lines.

Without doubt this amendment has certainly drawn much attention and debate from the Government. We on this side of the House understand that because we have seen what it does with the public purse when you remove the capacity of control. We are of the view that the Independent Pricing and Regulatory Tribunal [IPART] plays a vital and important role as the independent overseer. When you think about that term "independent overseer", it is no wonder that those opposite want to see it removed. My argument on this is very simple and I have a couple of points. If the IPART process is long, opaque and stands in the way of other measures for councils, then the Government should fix the process. Good governments fix things. It should fix the process of IPART, make the changes, bring the changes here and see how we can speed it up. It should cut that red tape and remove those bureaucratic hurdles in place.

We will talk with the Government, but it should not remove the independent overseer. We know on this side of the House how important it is for transparency and accountability. We have always believed that, but we have only recently learned how important it is with the inquiry into grants that saw hundreds and millions of dollars taken and used for political expedience. I also draw the attention of the House to this particular amendment in terms of the dollar for dollar. Many communities that I have spoken to simply do not trust this Government. They do not trust this Government to manage the public purse. They also view this as an option for the Government to let itself off the hook on adequately and appropriately funding projects across communities in this State.

The Government may say, for example, "We wanted to build that bridge but the council couldn't get the other half, so sorry, we can't build that bridge." That is not a good circumstance to put local councils in. The amendment seeks to provide certainty for those communities. Let us be serious, Mr Temporary Speaker—and you would know this yourself as well as every other councillor here: Cost shifting in this State has been abhorrent and never worse than under this Government. To suggest that it can push back or put a noose around communities to fund portions of something that government itself probably should be funding is inadequate and at the very least unreasonable. That is why we moved this amendment. It is not just about the IPART; it is about adequate funding and the use of the public purse for the benefit of the community.

We will always defend accountability and transparency. We know that those opposite want it removed so they can do what is best for the Liberal Party or The Nationals in New South Wales. We on the Opposition side understand that good governments govern for all and on a demands basis to ensure that every man, woman and child gets their fair share. Whether that is in Willoughby, Barwon, Heffron, Shellharbour, Camden, Campbelltown or Ku-ring-gai, everyone deserves to be treated with the same degree of equitable respect from government when it comes to the distribution of wealth—particularly when it comes to needs and demand. I again urge the Government to consider its position and support this amendment, which I commend to the House.

**Mrs SHELLEY HANCOCK (South Coast—Minister for Local Government) (20:56):** Tonight members have been talking about removing the Independent Pricing and Regulatory Tribunal [IPART] from the actual process. The irony is that this is an IPART recommendation to provide flexibility to councils so, far from actually removing it from the process, we are abiding by one of its recommendations. That is so sadly ironic. There are some serious misunderstandings about the issue. The bill provides for councils to be able to levy special rates outside of the rate peg for jointly funded infrastructure projects that are agreed priorities. I remind members that special rates are very different from special rate variations. Many speakers tonight, in referring to that provision, were not speaking about special rates but special rate variations. They did not seem to know the

difference, so I think they should go back to school and learn something about local government before they dare to come into this House to talk about it.

Special rate variations, as members should know, are a variation to the whole of the general income of councils through an application to IPART; by contrast, special rates are levied for particular priority projects targeted to meeting community needs. As I said, IPART recommended this flexibility for councils. The Government supported its recommendations to ensure that councils could quickly take advantage of the opportunity to partner with other levels of government to deliver priority infrastructure. That is all it is about. It is not some sinister motive. We are trying to allow councils to partner with other levels of government for infrastructure—a great policy.

The bill provides for important safeguards—and this has to be clarified so that Opposition members get it—including specific requirements for community consultation and transparency throughout the life of each project. Councils must comply with their integrated planning and reporting responsibilities, have the support of another level of government and clearly articulate and justify any expenditure to their communities. Those measures are in fact tougher than the measures currently required of councils under the special rate framework—as opposed to the measures under the special rate variation framework, which do not require the approval of IPART. This is a serious misunderstanding and a serious lack of knowledge. It is ironic that those opposite are talking about leaving IPART out when it is actually IPART that made the recommendation. We oppose this amendment.

**Mr RON HOENIG (Heffron) (20:59):** I am delighted that the Minister for Local Government is listening to a recommendation of the Independent Pricing and Regulatory Tribunal [IPART] in the report that it released in 2016 because when I referred to its report on capital improved value, she accused me of ranting, saying that the Labor Party had most of the past hundred years to change the rating system.

**Mrs Shelley Hancock:** That is what you said.

**Mr RON HOENIG:** That is the case, but just because previous Labor governments failed—you are the one who is introducing the legislation. You are the one who is ignoring a recommendation that is under your nose. You are the one who is not taking a recommendation for comprehensive change and is just taking the little easy bits out of it. That is all the Minister is doing. The reality is that the Opposition is simply saying that IPART should be part of the process for a special rate. In the Opposition's view, what IPART has recommended or what the Minister asserts is adequate protection is not good enough. The reasons have been clearly articulated by the member for Campbelltown.

We do not accept that simply because there is some type of government grant for an infrastructure project, that is sufficient to enable a special rate for raising funds beyond the rate-pegging limit. Most statutory authorities and government authorities have to go through the IPART process and the Opposition's view is that IPART provides a mechanism for ensuring that that process is not being abused. After all, simply sticking an ad on a website is not sufficient in our view to provide proper scrutiny. The Minister says that she consulted in respect of the bill and it has been terrific and that 200 people made submissions, but there are eight million people in New South Wales. I am really sure that if all the property owners in New South Wales knew they would get massive rate increases, they might have had some particular views.

**TEMPORARY SPEAKER (Mr Greg Piper):** The member for Canterbury will remain silent.

**Mr RON HOENIG:** Despite what IPART might have recommended, there is nothing wrong with a policy position of ensuring that if a special rate is to be levied beyond rate pegging and beyond a special rate variation then IPART should be given the opportunity to review it. What if the council wants to raise \$10 million by way of a special rate for an infrastructure project? Do members think there are sufficient safeguards in that respect? The Opposition's view is that there are not, so I support the amendment.

**TEMPORARY SPEAKER (Mr Greg Piper):** I appreciate seeing the member for Heffron in full flight. The reason I allowed some leeway between the member for Heffron and the Minister is that the member for Heffron directly addressed the Minister, sought an interjection and received it. I will not be so tolerant of others in the wings. That is the differentiation between the two.

The question is that Opposition amendment No. 3 on sheet c2021-00D be agreed to.

**The House divided.**

Ayes .....34  
 Noes .....38  
 Majority.....4

## AYES

Aitchison, J	Doyle, T	Mihailuk, T
Atalla, E	Finn, J	Minns, C
Bali, S	Harris, D	O'Neill, M
Barr, C	Harrison, J	Parker, J
Butler, R	Haylen, J	Smith, T
Catley, Y	Hoening, R	Tesch, L
Cotsis, S	Hornery, S	Voltz, L
Crakanthorp, T	Leong, J	Warren, G
Daley, M	Lynch, P	Washington, K
Dalton, H	McGirr, J	Watson, A (teller)
Dib, J	Mehan, D (teller)	Zangari, G
Donato, P		

## NOES

Anderson, K	Gulaptis, C	Saunders, D
Ayres, S	Hancock, S	Sidgreaves, P
Barilaro, J	Hazzard, B	Singh, G
Clancy, J	Henskens, A	Smith, N
Conolly, K	Johnsen, M	Speakman, M
Cooke, S (teller)	Kean, M	Stokes, R
Coure, M	Lee, G	Taylor, M
Crouch, A (teller)	Lindsay, W	Toole, P
Dominello, V	Marshall, A	Tuckerman, W
Elliott, D	O'Dea, J	Upton, G
Evans, L	Pavey, M	Ward, G
Gibbons, M	Provost, G	Williams, R
Griffin, J	Roberts, A	

## PAIRS

Car, P	Davies, T
Chanthivong, A	Perrottet, D
Kamper, S	Petinos, E
Lalich, N	Williams, L
McDermott, H	Constance, A
McKay, J	Preston, R
Park, R	Berejiklian, G
Saffin, J	Bromhead, S
Scully, P	Wilson, F

**Amendment negatived.**

**Mr GREG WARREN (Campbelltown) (21:13):** By leave: I move Opposition amendments Nos 5 and 8 on sheet c2021-008D in globo:

**No. 5 Sale of land for unpaid rates and charge**

Page 11, Schedule 1.1[30], lines 19 and 20. Omit all words on those lines.

**No. 8 Sale of land for unpaid rates and charge**

Page 14, Schedule 1.1[31], proposed clause 133, lines 5–10. Omit all words on those lines.

There are not too many more sacred things that we have than our homes. We understand the stress and anxiety that is created for those under financial pressure. This amendment seeks to keep the status quo of five years for councils to compulsorily acquire those homes. From my negotiations and consultations with the sector, it is not an easy process and it is probably one of the most difficult things that they do. Changing it from five years to three years does not address the issues of this process; it merely reduces the time that people have to try to solve the issues and the financial situation for them to hopefully pay their rates and keep their home. The Labor Opposition is of the view that this should stay the same. If the Government wants to talk to us later down the track about

appropriate means to have better provisions in place then we are happy to do so. But this change in this piece of legislation does not do that. All it does is create more anxiety.

I ask members to put themselves in the situation of a ratepayer who has come across hardship, whether through health—many of our seniors are in this situation—unemployment or many of the other factors that confront society, particularly as we have seen during this pandemic. Now is not the time to create more anxiety and more pressure that will affect people's financial situation and their very health and wellbeing. I understand and acknowledge the complexities around the acquisition of one's home to get rates back. Fortunately, when I was a councillor—and, indeed, mayor and deputy mayor—we never had to do it; we worked through the issues. They are very complex, but they must be worked through.

The Government needs to understand that these pieces of land are not just commodities with a value on them to recoup funds. We must remember that these are people's homes. They are places where they may have lived their whole lives, where they have brought their children up and are potentially still looking after them, or where they are looking after their grandchildren. I think we need to exercise every measure. I call on the Government to have a heart on this matter, particularly during these times, when we know communities are struggling right across this State. I accept that we need to make changes in relation to this, but these are not the right changes and this is not the right time. I commend the amendments and urge the Government to support them.

**Mrs SHELLEY HANCOCK (South Coast—Minister for Local Government) (21:17):** Whilst I recognise and accept there is some merit in the argument of the shadow Minister, for the reasons I have outlined before, we oppose these amendments. Again, this is a recommendation that has come from the sector. This has come from actual local councils. They are not going to be terribly happy that those members opposite are not supporting local councils.

**TEMPORARY SPEAKER (Mr Greg Piper):** The member for Bankstown will cease interjecting.

**Mrs SHELLEY HANCOCK:** We oppose the amendments.

**TEMPORARY SPEAKER (Mr Greg Piper):** The question is that Opposition amendments Nos 5 and 8 on sheet c2021-00D be agreed to.

**The House divided.**

Ayes .....34  
Noes .....38  
Majority.....4

**AYES**

Aitchison, J	Doyle, T	Mihailuk, T
Atalla, E	Finn, J	Minns, C
Bali, S	Harris, D	O'Neill, M
Barr, C	Harrison, J	Parker, J
Butler, R	Haylen, J	Smith, T
Catley, Y	Hoenig, R	Tesch, L
Cotsis, S	Hornery, S	Voltz, L
Crakanthorp, T	Leong, J	Warren, G
Daley, M	Lynch, P	Washington, K
Dalton, H	McGirr, J	Watson, A (teller)
Dib, J	Mehan, D (teller)	Zangari, G
Donato, P		

**NOES**

Anderson, K	Gulaptis, C	Saunders, D
Ayres, S	Hancock, S	Sidgreaves, P
Barilaro, J	Hazzard, B	Singh, G
Clancy, J	Henskens, A	Smith, N
Conolly, K	Johnsen, M	Speakman, M
Cooke, S (teller)	Kean, M	Stokes, R
Coure, M	Lee, G	Taylor, M
Crouch, A (teller)	Lindsay, W	Toole, P
Dominello, V	Marshall, A	Tuckerman, W
Elliott, D	O'Dea, J	Upton, G

## NOES

Evans, L  
Gibbons, M  
Griffin, J

Pavey, M  
Provest, G  
Roberts, A

Ward, G  
Williams, R

## PAIRS

Car, P  
Chanthivong, A  
Kamper, S  
Lalich, N  
McDermott, H  
McKay, J  
Park, R  
Saffin, J  
Scully, P

Davies, T  
Perrottet, D  
Petinos, E  
Williams, L  
Constance, A  
Preston, R  
Berejiklian, G  
Bromhead, S  
Wilson, F

**Amendments negatived.**

**Mr GREG WARREN (Campbelltown) (21:26):** By leave: I move Opposition amendments Nos 6 and 7, and 9 to 11 on sheet c2021-008D in globo:

No. 6 **Rate harmonisation**

Page 12, Schedule 1.1[31], proposed clause 127(2)(b), line 11. Omit "4 years". Insert instead "8 years".

No. 7 **Rate harmonisation**

Page 13, Schedule 1.1[31], proposed clause 129(5)(a), line 12. Omit "4 years". Insert instead "8 years".

No. 9 **Statutory review of amendments**

Page 14, Schedule 1.1[31], proposed Part 41. Insert after line 10—

**Division 5 Statutory review****134 Minister to review amendments**

- (1) This Minister is to review the amendments made by the amending Act to determine whether—
  - (a) the policy objectives of the amendments remain valid, and
  - (b) the terms of the provisions inserted, substituted or amended by the amending Act remain appropriate for securing those objectives.
- (2) The review is to be undertaken as soon as possible after the end of the period of 2 years following the commencement of this clause.
- (3) A report on the outcome of the review is to be tabled in each House of Parliament as soon as practicable after the review is completed.

No. 10 **Superannuation payments for councillors**

Page 15, Schedule 1.3, proposed section 254B(1), line 30. Omit "may". Insert instead "must".

No. 11 **Superannuation payments for councillors**

Pages 15 and 16, Schedule 1.3, proposed section 254B(4), line 39 on page 15 to line 4 on page 16. Omit all words on those lines.

I make a brief contribution to debate on these amendments. It has been a long night but it is important that I show members their importance. Extending the rate harmonisation period from four to eight years is not currently a requirement. We on this side of the House understand that the socio-economic circumstances of each local government area, local council and ratepayer are not the same. These amendments will give those councils with greater socio-economic challenges the opportunity to minimise that financial impact on local ratepayers—whether business owners or residents.

These major changes will come at an enormous cost, so extending the rate harmonisation period to eight years will give councils the flexibility to manage that cost. However, that does not mean that the harmonisation must be done over the full eight years. I acknowledge that many councils have taken a progressive approach to harmonisation, which has minimised the financial impact on ratepayers. I also acknowledge the unique circumstances of the socio-economic challenges throughout communities in society, depending on where they may be.

I particularly note the serious financial hardship and issues throughout rural and regional New South Wales, particularly for our farmers and those in the bush. We only need to read the media reports to see the impact it is having on them. I spoke to many people in rural and regional New South Wales as I went around on a number of occasions and the matter that was specifically raised with me was their fear of the financial effects on their livelihoods and wellbeing. That told me there were totally different circumstances and situations in the Riverina, Dubbo or anywhere else in rural and regional New South Wales than I would find if I went to see my colleague and good friend in Canterbury. That means we need to provide flexibility. This amendment provides that flexibility.

The statutory review of two years is a very simple amendment. It says to the people of New South Wales and the sector that the legislation will put in place checks and measures so that in a couple of years we make changes where required. We know and accept that not everything is done right all the time; it is not a criticism of Government. Having this provision in place means that the Government, whatever it may be, has the capacity for the legislation to come back via a statutory review to ensure that we can make the amendments required and put the provisions in place that help local families, ratepayers and businesses. It may be that when it is reviewed everything is, dare I say, hunky dory—but it may not be. The amendment includes a provision to review the regulation.

Finally and very importantly, we come to superannuation. Members on this side of the House are proudly the party of superannuation. We established it and we support it, but we believe in equity. We do not believe anyone should be disadvantaged. We believe it should be mandatory. Like everyone else who receives adequate remuneration, so should councillors. Members get it in this place. How could we possibly refuse it when we enjoy it ourselves? It is very easy for commentators to have a swipe at local elected representatives; that is fair enough. But the reality is that local councillors do not get remunerated to that level. Some of them do some wonderful, hard work. They are very committed and passionate about their communities. They do not do it for money. They do it for the love of their community and because they want to make a change. I believe that is the view of the overwhelming majority of councillors across this State.

We also must remember that many councillors do not have independence in terms of their own finances. They are not independently wealthy. It would be remiss of me not to state the fact that many councillors are working mums who are running a home, raising kids and perhaps working part-time. It does not sit right with me that they be deprived of superannuation when I enjoy it. The question may be asked: Why should it be mandatory? Because it is mandatory for us. Temporary Chair, you are a former councillor. The Minister at the table is a former councillor. We know how remuneration can be politicised. We know that it can be used for political grandstanding. It could be used in areas where one councillor is financially comfortable, which is a wonderful thing. We take nothing away from that. But if there is a political point to be scored, perhaps that particular individual may use that to the detriment of someone who is not in the same financial position.

Labor's amendments are right and just. I am very happy to lead amendments of proposed new section 254B (1) on behalf of the Opposition. It is the first time we will see superannuation payment become mandatory. With all respect to the Minister, who commented previously about hearing nothing about superannuation from the Opposition, I point out that Labor members are the champions of superannuation. I remind the Minister of her political party's history on superannuation and the debates we have had over the generations.

**Mr Brad Hazzard:** You waited for 16 years when you were in government. What a bloody fool.

**Mr GREG WARREN:** I remind members opposite to do their research.

**TEMPORARY SPEAKER (Mr Greg Piper):** I ask the member for Wakehurst, and Minister for Health and Medical Research, to cease interjecting.

**Mr Brad Hazzard:** I am just helping. I am just reminding him that for 16 years they did nothing.

**TEMPORARY SPEAKER (Mr Greg Piper):** The member for Campbelltown does not need the assistance of the Minister. At this stage he is in full flight. He is wrapping up and the Minister is not helping. The member for Campbelltown will finish his contribution without the assistance of the member for Canterbury or the member for Wakehurst. The member for Campbelltown will continue.

**Mr GREG WARREN:** I note the health Minister's interjection.

**Mr Brad Hazzard:** Thank you.

**Mr GREG WARREN:** Opposition members are very proud to be the champions of superannuation. We supported it then, we support it now, and that is why we moved amendments Nos 10 and 11. We know that the Government will vote against them but I look forward to the bill being received in the other place, where we will have appropriate and adequate consultation and ensure that we move forward to a fairer and better outcome. There

is no fairer, better or more just outcome than equitable treatment and equitable sharing of superannuation for everyone. It is only fair and just. I commend the Opposition's amendments to the House.

**TEMPORARY SPEAKER (Mr Greg Piper):** The member for Wakehurst will cease interjecting.

**Mrs SHELLEY HANCOCK (South Coast—Minister for Local Government) (21:36):** We oppose the amendments.

**TEMPORARY SPEAKER (Mr Greg Piper):** The question is that Opposition amendments Nos 6 and 7, and 9 to 11 be agreed to.

**The House divided.**

Ayes .....34  
Noes .....38  
Majority.....4

**AYES**

Aitchison, J	Doyle, T	Mihailuk, T
Atalla, E	Finn, J	Minns, C
Bali, S	Harris, D	O'Neill, M
Barr, C	Harrison, J	Parker, J
Butler, R	Haylen, J	Smith, T
Catley, Y	Hoening, R	Tesch, L
Cotsis, S	Hornery, S	Voltz, L
Crakanthorp, T	Leong, J	Warren, G
Daley, M	Lynch, P	Washington, K
Dalton, H	McGirr, J	Watson, A (teller)
Dib, J	Mehan, D (teller)	Zangari, G
Donato, P		

**NOES**

Anderson, K	Gulaptis, C	Saunders, D
Ayres, S	Hancock, S	Sidgreaves, P
Barilaro, J	Hazzard, B	Singh, G
Clancy, J	Henskens, A	Smith, N
Conolly, K	Johnsen, M	Speakman, M
Cooke, S (teller)	Kean, M	Stokes, R
Coure, M	Lee, G	Taylor, M
Crouch, A (teller)	Lindsay, W	Toole, P
Dominello, V	Marshall, A	Tuckerman, W
Elliott, D	O'Dea, J	Upton, G
Evans, L	Pavey, M	Ward, G
Gibbons, M	Provest, G	Williams, R
Griffin, J	Roberts, A	

**PAIRS**

Car, P	Davies, T
Chanthivong, A	Perrottet, D
Kamper, S	Petinos, E
Lalich, N	Williams, L
McDermott, H	Constance, A
McKay, J	Preston, R
Park, R	Berejiklian, G
Saffin, J	Bromhead, S
Scully, P	Wilson, F

**Amendments negatived.**

**TEMPORARY SPEAKER (Mr Greg Piper):** The question is that clauses 1 and 2, and schedule 1 be agreed to.

**Clauses 1 and 2, and schedule 1 agreed to.****Third Reading****Mrs SHELLEY HANCOCK:** I move:

That this bill be now read a third time.

**Question put.****The House divided.**

Ayes .....42  
 Noes .....30  
 Majority.....12

**AYES**

Anderson, K  
 Ayres, S  
 Barilaro, J  
 Butler, R  
 Clancy, J  
 Conolly, K  
 Cooke, S (teller)  
 Coure, M  
 Crouch, A (teller)  
 Dalton, H  
 Dominello, V  
 Donato, P  
 Elliott, D  
 Evans, L

Gibbons, M  
 Griffin, J  
 Gulaptis, C  
 Hancock, S  
 Hazzard, B  
 Henskens, A  
 Johnsen, M  
 Kean, M  
 Lee, G  
 Lindsay, W  
 Marshall, A  
 McGirr, J  
 O'Dea, J  
 Pavey, M

Provest, G  
 Roberts, A  
 Saunders, D  
 Sidgreaves, P  
 Singh, G  
 Smith, N  
 Speakman, M  
 Stokes, R  
 Taylor, M  
 Toole, P  
 Tuckerman, W  
 Upton, G  
 Ward, G  
 Williams, R

**NOES**

Aitchison, J  
 Atalla, E  
 Bali, S  
 Barr, C  
 Catley, Y  
 Cotsis, S  
 Crakanthorp, T  
 Daley, M  
 Dib, J  
 Doyle, T

Finn, J  
 Harris, D  
 Harrison, J  
 Haylen, J  
 Hoenig, R  
 Hornery, S  
 Leong, J  
 Lynch, P  
 Mehan, D (teller)  
 Mihailuk, T

Minns, C  
 O'Neill, M  
 Parker, J  
 Smith, T  
 Tesch, L  
 Voltz, L  
 Warren, G  
 Washington, K  
 Watson, A (teller)  
 Zangari, G

**PAIRS**

Berejiklian, G  
 Bromhead, S  
 Constance, A  
 Davies, T  
 Perrottet, D  
 Petinos, E  
 Preston, R  
 Williams, L  
 Wilson, F

Park, R  
 Saffin, J  
 McDermott, H  
 Car, P  
 Chanthivong, A  
 Kamper, S  
 McKay, J  
 Lalich, N  
 Scully, P

**Motion agreed to.**

**COVID-19 RECOVERY BILL 2021****Returned**

**TEMPORARY SPEAKER (Mr Greg Piper):** I report receipt of a message from the Legislative Council returning the bill with amendments. I order that consideration of the Legislative Council's amendments be set down as an order of the day at a later time.

*Private Members' Statements***SYDNEY TRAINS**

**Mr MARK SPEAKMAN (Cronulla—Attorney General, and Minister for the Prevention of Domestic Violence) (21:53):** I update the House on train services in the Sutherland shire and recent developments. Our rates of public transport in Sydney are among the highest in the nation and in a non-COVID year annual patronage on Sydney trains is now around 375 million. With New South Wales's population predicted to grow to 12 million by 2056, it is critical that our planning and delivery of transport infrastructure caters for anticipated growth. At the same time, technology is transforming the way people live and travel. One obvious example of this trend is ridesharing, which seamlessly integrates smart technology to enable personalisation and immediacy. The popularity of Uber, particularly among millennials, is astronomical. This sort of service innovation shows us that while it is important to increase service volume, our future planning should also consider how to harness new technology to promote flexibility and enhance the end-to-end experience for public transport customers. We have to continue to make public transport an attractive and viable alternative to using private vehicles. We need services, including train services, that are frequent, comfortable, reliable and safe.

During COVID in particular, we have seen COVID-safe travel applications now accessible via the Opal travel app. Additional services have been introduced to support physical distancing. Green "no dot, no spot" markings are in place on train carriages to show the safest places to stand or sit. Measures to deal with face mask noncompliance and hand sanitiser stations have now been installed across the network. As a result of these initiatives and a high standard of general service delivery, overall satisfaction with Sydney Trains and intercity train services has now hit an impressive 94 per cent. We have seen New South Wales in 2017 become the first State to accept contactless transport payments, with the Opal reader technology expanded to allow payment with credit and debit cards. It means that customers can tap on and off using smart phones and wearable devices linked to an American Express, Mastercard or Visa card.

In the Sutherland shire, the timetabled fleet is now fully air-conditioned, which is something that I fought for as the member for Cronulla. Now, adding to that strong record, the Government's \$5.3 billion More Trains, More Services initiative will deliver capacity for a 30 per cent increase in peak services on the T4 Illawarra line by around 2024, with extra services from Cronulla, Waterfall and Hurstville. The program includes \$110 million worth of contracts for digital signalling, with the first on Sydney's rail network to be between Sutherland and Cronulla. While traditional signals have served Sydney well for decades, they are fixed at set locations and limit the railway from operating at its full potential. Lineside signalling is also costly to maintain. This new technology, in addition to being more cost effective, will allow the track and train to talk to each other continuously and deliver information directly to the train cab. It means that trains can run closer together, safely and more reliably. Construction will start this month, with the new system due to be ready for operations in 2023. There is still plenty to do, but when it comes to delivering world-class rail services into the future, New South Wales and the Sutherland shire are firmly on track.

**NEWCASTLE CITY POLICE DISTRICT**

**Ms SONIA HORNER (Wallsend) (21:57):** I have spoken in Parliament about this matter a number of times and my community regularly air their frustration at the lack of adequate police resources in the Wallsend electorate. Each time new officer allocations are announced, I ask the same questions: Why is the Newcastle City Police District consistently overlooked for new officers? Why does this Government continually ignore the pleas of Wallsend residents for more police? Despite under-resourcing and understaffing, our local police officers do great work and I thank them. But, sadly, this under-resourcing does not end at my electorate boundary. Figures over the last 15 years show that across the northern boundary police resources have not kept pace with population growth. In 2006, 1,393,110 people lived in the northern region. The 2006 population was serviced by 2,305 police officers, supported by 192 administrative staff.

By 2020 the population of the northern region had grown to 1,675,275. That is an increase of 291,355 people—a 21 per cent population growth. Over the same period, the overall police numbers in the region dropped. In 2020 there were 114 fewer officers serving the northern region than there were in 2006. That is 5 per cent fewer police officers serving a population 21 per cent larger. If the trend continues it means higher levels of stress and danger for police officers already feeling the pressure of an increased workload; it means

communities all across the northern region, from Brisbane Water to the Queensland border, feeling less safe; it means that crime will increase and the reporting of crime will decrease as people feel that their reports are being ignored.

The need for a stronger policing presence in the Newcastle area is obvious. The Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research publishes rankings of the State's local government areas [LGAs] in 27 categories of crime. Unfortunately, Newcastle is ranked in the top 10 of LGAs in eight different categories. The Newcastle LGA has the distinction of being the State's leader in stealing from persons, ranking first in that category. Newcastle is ranked second for fraud, fifth for other theft, sixth in stealing from motor vehicles, seventh in offences against transport regulations, eighth for stealing from retail stores, and tenth for both theft of motor vehicles and robbery. The trend is not due to Novocastrians' criminal inclinations being stronger than their counterparts in other areas. We can draw a clear line between the Government's lack of support for our local police and the district's current rankings.

The Government touts changes to operational police work to explain this sort of decline. Our police are making use of innovative new ways to engage with crime, but nothing replaces more boots on the ground. One Shortland resident said to me, "We have been having issues with petty crime and antisocial behaviour for so long, and when the cops have been able to attend, they have been great. They are just so overloaded. I can't keep calling the Police Assistance Line every time I see something." I encourage Wallsend residents to report every instance of crime or antisocial behaviour on the Police Assistance Line. The Government must listen to what people in Wallsend and across the northern region are saying. We want to feel safe. We need more police on the streets.

### FLOODS

**Mrs MELINDA PAVEY (Oxley—Minister for Water, Property and Housing) (22:02):** Almost a metre of rain has fallen on the catchments in the four valleys of my electorate, with an enormous deluge through the Sydney basin. As water Minister, I should be happy with the State being flooded with water. But the deluge across New South Wales that is moving to western New South Wales now brings many challenges and also many benefits. I thank Deputy Premier John Barilaro for visiting my electorate of Oxley yesterday. He chose Oxley because it was not facing the same challenges that the Manning Valley, represented by local member Stephen Bromhead, has been facing in the past 48 hours. It was a great place to come because we have also constructed a highway to ensure that if he flew to Coffs Harbour, he could travel to Kempsey safely.

One of the lasting memories for me will be the Deputy Premier, while I was driving the car, very safely photographing and posting to Facebook when we were on the longest bridge in the Southern Hemisphere, a bridge that the people of Kempsey fought for. The original plan from Roads and Maritime Services was for a more solid road construction. The Kempsey community fought for a bridge style that ensured that there was not a big block to stop the waters flowing through. The Deputy Premier said, "Oh, is that the river?" and I said, "No, that's the farmland." For up to 50 seconds his Facebook post showed the water on the flood plains of the Macleay River. This has happened many times before, but now the Deputy Premier is leading the challenge that faces our communities in the regions and cities of New South Wales with these enormous floods. This is a one-in-100-year event, which means there is a 1 per cent chance that it could happen in any one year—it does not happen just one in 100 years. In Sydney it is one in 50 years, which is a 5 per cent chance.

The mayor of Nambucca was not able to be with us yesterday because she was locked into her property. She arranged for Paul Gallagher, the infrastructure responsible officer for Nambucca Valley Council, to meet with us. The general manager, Michael Coulter, was in Canberra for his daughter's wedding that weekend. The mayor enabled us to have a look at some of the damage that was on Riverside Drive at Nambucca. We met Max, the local traffic controller, who was helping to clear the works. This was a very good opportunity to show the actual impact of the flood. I point out that councils have been challenged because there were some big storms around 9 March and now there is another set. A lot of maintenance work went into the roads to fix them. The sinkholes and potholes have never been bigger than what we are seeing right now.

We travelled into Kempsey and met up with mayor Liz Campbell at her home, together with the general manager, Craig Milburn, to have a look across the Macleay River. He undertook an interview with Ray Hadley from that very spot in her backyard overlooking the river as we were all holding our breath hoping that the waters did not breach the levee bank. We were able to walk across the bridge at Kempsey into the town centre to look at all the sandbags that had been touched but not overcome by the deluge because of the levee banks that had gone in. This was an incredible experience. I talk about Wauchope and Hastings. I went down there on Saturday. I toured the electorate as far as I could to thank the SES volunteers, Yasmin and Elle at the Wauchope SES, my mates at the Kempsey SES—incredible people doing incredible work. This was coupled with the pressure and demands of knowing what was happening in Sydney with our bathtub, as I explained earlier in question time, and the releases that needed to be made from Warragamba Dam—Sydney's water storage, not a flood mitigation dam but a water storage.

We are going to work through this, but the big plea will be for the farmers and the stock. I refer to Sue McGinn, my friend at Kempsey and a councillor as well. To see the damage done to her paddocks and her pastures from the water sitting on the Macleay flood plain will be very profound. We will be working with Pat Conaghan, the local Federal member, and making sure we get out there and get the support to our communities as they need it. There are so many people I want to mention, like Danesh at Telegraph Point. We will stand behind you, we will stand beside you and we will stand in front of you to get the support that you need to get your businesses, your farms and your homes back in order. I thank the House for its indulgence.

### **DUNNS ROAD FIRE**

**Mr JUSTIN CLANCY (Albury) (22:08):** As the Minister and member for Oxley spoke so well of the community impact of the floods and our State confronts yet another natural disaster, our thoughts go out to the communities impacted by the floods of recent days. Natural disasters have an immediate but also enduring impact. This is evident with the Dunns Road fire of December 2019 and January 2020, which began with a lightning strike. Fifteen months later it continues to have major ramifications for the softwood timber industry and for towns such as Tumarumba that provide the workforce and support. At its peak the fire ran for 30 kilometres in length and damaged 3,500 square kilometres. There were horrifying days in the mountain communities. Supplies for the timber industry extend to stands of 24 years and older. This is a business which takes a long time to grow.

Much was harvested or salvaged. Nearly 60,000 B-double trucks of fire-affected timber has been salvaged over a period of nine and a half months. That has been a massive operation. Having got through this phase, the industry in the South Western Slopes Bioregion now faces hard realities. The number of harvest crews required will drop from 24 to about 14. The number of trucks working the south-west slopes will shrink from 23 to 14. It will take about seven years to simply get the replanting program back in balance. Economic pain and personal hardship will travel through all the contractors and businesses that have their future linked closely with the prosperity of the mill and forests—the haulage businesses, the food and accommodation businesses, real estate, schooling and education. Peter and Theresa Lonergan, who are logging contractors, have spoken to me about the need for support not just for family members who work in forestry but also for their daughter, for example, whose apprenticeship as a chef is imperilled by the employment uncertainties for the timber industry at Tumarumba.

In the South Western Slopes there are contractors who today represent generations of contribution to the timber industry in Australia. There is history, connection, input to the regional economy and pride in what has been achieved by businesses working together for so long. Some of those contractors are in more vulnerable positions than others. Consideration must be given to individual circumstances. In particular I am thinking of those contractors who have purchased new plant and equipment and have gone into debt on the basis of projections that will no longer come to pass. Today I fly the flag for those businesses and people; I press for support from the mill and the Government, where appropriate. I know these matters are under discussion but I will take a moment to make a few points.

Firstly, there must be assistance for workers to transition out of the softwoods industry and into other meaningful work. All efforts must be taken to help them and their families stay in the places that they call home, to re-skill their labours and to repurpose their expensive equipment. Secondly, there must be financial support for those businesses that have taken the necessary financial risks to be useful contractors to this industry and that now find themselves in debt which cannot be managed without assistance. Solutions need to be found surrounding the timber that is exported and what is retained for processing within Australia. Bushfires and now the pandemic hit the Tumarumba region hard. Challenging times have made us look keenly for the light at the end of the tunnel. That light is now closer; it is not a light of hope but loss. I am grateful for the support the New South Wales Government has provided to the timber mills and to planters. It has been most welcome.

My attention turns to forestry workers and contractors who, as a sector, seek support directed at their level of the industry. Salvage operations have kept those businesses hard at work and engaged in the industry up until now. With salvage drawing to a close, it is the time to acknowledge their need for support. Working in the timber industry is special—akin to a vocation. If you grow up in a timber town or timber family, you are drawn to a working lifestyle that is both exhilarating and dangerous. In these hard times for that industry, we should show our gratitude for the timber that builds our homes and furniture, and which supplies our paper. Together, industry, contractors and government can collaborate to find solutions that work for our softwoods communities.

### **PORT OF NEWCASTLE**

**Mr TIM CRAKANTHORP (Newcastle) (22:12):** When ships face a storm, the best thing they can do is to face it head on. They point their bow towards the waves and propel the ship forward. This ensures that they have enough power to steer and it allows the ship to drive through the waves, rather than be pushed around by them. This advice could be well utilised by this Government as it stubbornly sticks to its guns and its anti-competitive restrictions on the Port of Newcastle. These illegal restrictions, which were written into the port's

privatisation by this Government, mean that for every container the port receives—over 30,000 containers each year—they must pay compensation to NSW Ports, the entity that owns Port Kembla and Port Botany. These illegal restrictions also take the wind out of the sails of the lower Hunter economy and the viability of the port's plan to look to its future and diversify—building a multipurpose deepwater terminal with a throughput capacity of two million standard containers each year. By comparison, the State's largest container port, Port Botany, handles 2.5 million containers each year.

Newcastle is the world's largest coal port, but we all know that this cannot last forever. If we do not act now to diversify, one of the region's biggest economic drivers will be severely affected. This project will create 9,271 full-time equivalent direct and indirect jobs in the lower Hunter alone, contributing \$1.3 billion to the local economy. When we look further to a State level, that becomes 12,602 jobs and a \$2.2 billion economic contribution, while nationally it will create almost 15,000 jobs and contribute \$2.5 billion.

Standing in the way of this project is absolute madness, as members of the Liberal and National parties are realising. The NSW Nationals have backed it in. They understand how this will help reduce the costs for regional producers to access overseas markets. They understand how much those 15,000 jobs are needed. They understand how a competitive market benefits us all. Even members of this very Government have turned their backs on their own team's stubborn refusal to support the creation of 15,000 jobs. Government members the Hon Catherine Cusack and the Hon. Matthew Mason-Cox from the other place have spoken to *The Newcastle Herald*, recognising how important the issues surrounding the port are to our region. The support goes right to the top. Just this month the Prime Minister vocalised his support for the port's diversification, saying:

I want to ensure that Newcastle can deliver all of the services that this region needs for it to be successful ... whether it's the port in Newcastle or the port in Townsville or Gladstone, I want these ports to be able to service the regions as fully and competitively as is possible.

The idea that bolstering the container trade at Port Botany and Port Kembla at the expense of all other opportunities is a sinking ship, and one that individual members and whole branches of Government-affiliated parties are jumping off. The response of the Liberal members of this House, however, is pure disinterest. For example, take the last question on notice I asked of the Treasurer. Last week I received the answers to seven questions I asked, two of which fobbed me off to the transport Minister and another two referred to an 18-month-old document. But that is their modus operandi. They will take any port in a storm so long as it does not require accountability or reason from them.

Even major corporations are acting where this Government refuses to. The ANZ bank recently announced its divestment from the Port of Newcastle. It clearly saw the fire going out on coal-based businesses. The ports know that this future is coming and they have \$1.8 billion of private investment ready to go so they can move forward. While their Federal leader, Coalition partners and major investors all back the project, this self-interested Government persists in holding the Port of Newcastle to an anti-competitive and illegal container cap. Whose pockets are being lined out of this arrangement? It is certainly not the people of the lower Hunter.

### **TRIBUTE TO JOHN DAVID SPENCER, AM**

**Mr DAVID ELLIOTT (Baulkham Hills—Minister for Police and Emergency Services) (22:17):** Tonight I pay tribute to John David Spencer, AM, GCStJ, a true gentleman and a champion of the Order of St John, who recently passed away after a long battle with cancer. I acknowledge the coach of the Parliamentary Auxiliary of St John in the Chamber, the member for Fairfield. John's dedication to a life of service through the Order of St John began at a young age. In 1949, at the age of 10, John enrolled as a cadet at the Orange ambulance cadet division. The cadets' shout-and-point leadership style had a profound and positive impact on John at this early stage of his life, pushing him to achieve high standards and to set the same for his peers throughout his life.

John made an immeasurable contribution to St John Ambulance in Australia, particularly to St John Ambulance NSW. John Spencer's commitment to St John took on many forms, such as an officer in charge of the Orange cadet division, superintendent of North Sydney police boys' club cadet division, treasurer of St John Ambulance brigade in New South Wales, Commissioner of St John NSW, Chief Superintendent of St John Ambulance in Australia, a long-time member of the National Finance Committee, and NSW State Council councillor and president. The list goes on.

Never one to dodge a challenge and always one to agree to help and give freely and generously of his time, John was a close confidant and friend to many very senior and distinguished leaders in St John. I particularly think of people such as former chief commissioners Brigadier Dr Gordon Young, Major General Peter Falkland and Professor Villis Marshall as well as Charles Campbell, longstanding priory secretary of St John. The leadership he displayed as an official first aid provider to the Sydney 2000 Olympics and Paralympics embodied John's devotion to the cause. His peers remember him for thinking of every detail, fighting hard to secure welfare resources for members and ensuring that St John volunteers could wear the well-recognised black-and-white

uniforms whilst on duty. John's perseverance and determination ensured that St John delivered an exceptional service beyond all expectations of the Olympic organising committee. He inspired St John members, his peers and other volunteers to join him in setting a standard that would be revered for years to come.

On Australia Day in 2002 John was awarded the Member of the Order of Australia for his service to the community and to the Olympic and Paralympic Games. That was to be the first of many, many honours that were bestowed upon John Spencer. In 2006 John was honoured as a Bailiff by Her Majesty the Queen. The highest accolade the Order of St John can award is that of Bailiff Grand Cross and there are fewer than 35 recipients of that honour in the world at any one time. John served St John Ambulance for 65 years. At a special ceremony at Government House in Canberra on 26 June 2020, His Excellency the Governor-General presented John with one of the first service medals in gold with three bars for ultra-long service to St John Ambulance.

I can say with absolute certainty that John's legacy leaves an indelible mark. His passion, devotion and dedication pushed St John Ambulance to exceptional heights. John Spencer was a hero of the service and an inspiration to many, including myself. The knowledge and wisdom he imparted to those around him has made the world a better place. I offer the sympathies of the House to John's widow, Tricia, and their extended family. Vale, John Spencer. May he rest in peace.

#### **MR ARTHUR WATSON**

**Mr GUY ZANGARI (Fairfield) (22:22):** I commend the efforts of Mr Arthur Watson, who was nominated for the Fairfield City Citizen of the Year at the 2021 Australia Day Community Awards. Mr Watson has been associated with the cricket community in the Fairfield-Liverpool area for over 60 years. He began playing cricket in 1954 at club level. He quickly progressed to playing representative cricket and over a period of 20 years has been a manager and coach for junior cricket teams. Mr Watson has also been involved in the administration aspect of cricket and in 2006 was awarded a life membership to Guildford Leagues Cricket Club. He was also awarded a life membership of the Fairfield-Liverpool Cricket Umpires Association, where he has served as honorary secretary and patron. In 1955 Mr Watson became a member of the Fairfield-Liverpool Cricket Association and he remains a member to this very day. He was also elected patron in 2011 and I am honoured to be the co-patron of that association along with Arthur.

Mr Watson became a foundation member of the Fairfield-Liverpool Cricket Club in 1979 and since that time has held a number of roles in the club, including that of vice-president. He donated the perpetual trophy known as the Arthur Watson AW Green Shield Encouragement Award in 2011. In 2017 the umpires room at Rosedale Oval was named in his honour and he was awarded a life membership of the club in 2019. Apart from his support and contribution to cricket at the local level, Arthur has also played cricket himself with Cricket Australia. He represented Australia at a one-day international level in 1979-80. He has also been involved as an umpire for the one-day international series. In May 2009 Arthur was awarded the Australian gold lapel pin to mark 50 years of service to Australian cricket and in 2000 he was also awarded the Australian Sports Medal.

Since 1969 Arthur Watson has been involved in the NSW Cricket Association and the New South Wales Cricket Umpires and Scorers Association. He has been both umpire and mentor at those associations, holding positions on and off the cricket pitch. In 2002 he was awarded a lifetime membership of the Sydney Cricket Association in recognition of the 779 premier grade and shire matches and the 365 first grade matches he officiated. Arthur has been a volunteer umpire for the Blind Cricket Association of Australia since 1995 and was made an official ambassador of this association in 2008. He officiates regularly in social matches between the Primary Club of Australia and the NSW Blind Association of Australia. They have included the one day Ashes International Series Australia versus England in 2008-09, the 2009-10 National Championships Queensland versus Victoria, the 2009-10 Trans-Tasman Series Australia versus New Zealand and the 2009-10 Trans-Tasman Series Australia versus New Zealand.

In 2014 the Arthur Watson Cup rivalry round was contested in recognition of Arthur's services to the game. Since then this has been an annual event and is a great addition to the cricket calendar. Arthur has also been an active member of the community in other areas in addition to cricket. I was honoured to present him with a certificate of recognition for 50 years of service as a Justice of the Peace in New South Wales in 2019. His community service also includes the Probus Club of Holroyd, a community club on which he has served as treasurer, vice president and president at different stages; and the Gallipoli Scholarship Fund on which he has also served as treasurer from 2019.

Arthur Watson has dedicated so much of his life to cricket on a local level in Fairfield and on the wider national stage. His commitment to the sport and its advancement in the Fairfield area is to be admired and is shown by the many executive and mentoring roles he has undertaken in the years of his involvement. Arthur is a terrific advocate of cricket and our local community and his ongoing support over the years has been invaluable. I thank him for his contributions for the many years he has been involved in the cricket arena and for the many

services he has rendered the community outside of the cricket world as well. I commend him on his commitment to advancing the local area of Fairfield. He is an inspiration to us all. I also congratulate him on his nomination for Citizen of the Year 2021 in the Fairfield City Council Australia Day Community Awards.

### ST IVES HIGH SCHOOL

**Mr JONATHAN O'DEA (Davidson) (22:27):** Over the past 15 years the population in my electorate of Davidson has been steadily rising, with a large number of new residential developments in areas such as St Ives. Consequently, the capacity of some facilities at local schools, including the gym at St Ives High, have been stretched. However, I am pleased that St Ives High School has benefitted from substantial upgrades in recent years, funded by the New South Wales Government. Earlier this year, a new multi-use indoor sports centre at St Ives High School was completed as part of a \$25 million upgrade to the school funded by the education department. The upgrade has two sports courts, two new learning spaces, a fitness lab and seminar room. The upgrade has additionally provided refurbished technical facilities. The New South Wales Government is investing \$7 billion over four years to deliver upgraded schools as part of the largest investment in public education infrastructure by any State Government in Australian history. I commend the Government for its financial commitment to public education and infrastructure initiatives.

As a separate matter, more than two years ago Ku-ring-gai Council secured a \$3.5 million grant from the Government for additional community facilities to be located at St Ives High School. Those moneys were sourced through the Greater Sydney Sports Facility Fund. That sports fund helps to improve and build existing and new facilities across Sydney to enhance the quality and accessibility of sports infrastructure. As part of this extra project, two more indoor basketball courts, undercover parking and related facilities and services were to be funded by Ku-ring-gai Council and made available for public use.

While the courts funded by the Department of Education have recently opened, Ku-ring-gai Council has unfortunately been delaying construction of its two planned courts, and that is despite the substantial State contribution of \$3.5 million that I have mentioned. Furthermore, the New South Wales Government has recently announced that it will also now provide more than \$471,000 to Ku-ring-gai Council for the St Ives Indoor Sports Centre project from its Low Cost Loans Initiative. That will see Ku-ring-gai Council reimbursed for half of its interest costs on loans for the project.

I understand that council and the Department of Education have recently signed a heads of agreement to progress the project. That is good news. Council will manage the approvals process and the education department will manage the tendering and construction. Council is now preparing a development application and expects that it will be approved in the next year. While I welcome that news, I also give a view that any additional council delay in delivering the two remaining basketball courts will constitute a significant inconvenience to all stakeholders, especially the students at St Ives High School and sports lovers in the broader community.

For 25 years local basketball organisations such as the Hornsby Ku-ring-gai Basketball Association have supported the development of indoor basketball facilities in our community, mindful of the current lack of public courts. Additional courts would not only help promote basketball to students and service the broader community but also cater for other sports such as netball, badminton, floor hockey and wheelchair sports for people with disabilities. A strong partnership between State and local government should enable the continued development of important sporting infrastructure to the benefit of our local communities, particularly young people. I urge Ku-ring-gai Council to now clearly commit any remaining funding and publish a project time line for completing this important infrastructure project at St Ives High School. I expect voters will consider the project status when they vote in council elections this September.

### LIGHT YEARS AHEAD

**Mr EDMOND ATALLA (Mount Druitt) (22:32):** I extend my congratulations to Blacktown City Council, the Western Sydney Regional Organisation of Councils [WSROC] and Endeavour Energy for their recently completed Light Years Ahead initiative to upgrade residential street lighting in the council's established suburbs. This initiative, being one of the largest such programs in Australia, saw the replacement of old and inefficient mercury vapour lights with much more efficient LED lighting. Ratepayers who reside within Blacktown City's established suburbs, including those in my electorate of Mount Druitt, now have the same environmental and economic benefits as those living in the newly developed areas of the city.

The Light Years Ahead program is projected over the 20-year life of these lights and will deliver emissions savings of 68,000 tonnes of carbon dioxide and a cost saving of \$8.5 million to Blacktown City. I commend the Mayor of Blacktown City Council, Councillor Tony Bleasdale, OAM, for council's recognition of a climate emergency and its stated aim for a net zero emissions target by 2030. I congratulate Mayor Bleasdale for

participating in the Light Years Ahead program and the vision in making our city a cleaner and healthy environment for the residents of Blacktown.

I also take this opportunity to note the remarks earlier this month by my colleagues in the Legislative Council about the need for the energy and environment Minister to disclose what measures will be taken by the State Government to ensure that there are enough workers in our State's electricity distribution companies, including Endeavour Energy, so that homes and businesses are able to remain safely connected to power. The skilled workers in Endeavour Energy, some of whom were involved in the rollout of the Light Years Ahead program, deserve not only commendation for this successful project but also the reassurance that the Minister understands and supports their need for ongoing employment. Again I congratulate Blacktown City Council, WSROC and Endeavour Energy for their Light Years Ahead initiative.

### **CAMDEN ELECTORATE SCHOOLS**

**Mr PETER SIDGREAVES (Camden) (22:35):** I am incredibly grateful to the New South Wales Government for the new and upgraded schools that have been delivered in recent times in the Camden electorate as part of its record investment into school infrastructure. In 2019 Yandelora School in Narellan was opened. Yandelora is a new, purpose-built, state-of-the-art school for specific purpose to cater for students with moderate to severe intellectual and physical disabilities. In 2020 the New South Wales Government opened a new public school in Gledswood Hills and a new high school in Oran Park. Oran Park Public School was upgraded with an additional 24 learning spaces. These projects allowed students to start on day one, term 1, 2020.

This year Barramurra Public School in Oran Park South opened on day one, term 1. In mid-2021 Denham Court Public School will be opened. An upgrade of Harrington Park Public School is currently under construction. This project includes a new building with 14 additional learning spaces and a new hall, canteen, administration office and library. It also includes refurbishments to existing classrooms. The Camden electorate has seen and continues to see the delivery of new and upgraded schools. However, it is important to remember that the Camden Local Government Area [LGA] is the fastest-growing LGA in Australia, growing at approximately 8 per cent per annum and forecast to have an annual growth of 5.5 per cent over the next 20 years.

It is imperative that the government of the day continues to deliver new and upgraded schools to keep up with the growth of the population in Camden. Yesterday I had the opportunity to meet with a group of dedicated and passionate parents and members of the Gregory Hills community who want to know when Gregory Hills Public School will be ready for their children. I thank the parents and kids who made it out in the pouring rain to talk to me yesterday. Funding was allocated for the planning of Gregory Hills Public School in the New South Wales 2018-19 budget. So far Gregory Hills Public School has only progressed to the advanced planning stage, with no further funding allocated for it to progress.

The site of the Gregory Hills Public School is currently a vacant patch of land in waiting to become the next learning hub for tomorrow's future leaders. The Gregory Hills community and I would like to know: When will this be turned into reality? At the meeting I was able to hear firsthand from parents of their frustrations at having to wait so long for the school, at having to enrol their children at other schools and then having to worry if their children's siblings and future siblings will be at different schools or how their children will cope with changing once the school is built. Parents are also concerned about the increased and condensed traffic at neighbouring schools their children currently attend and the associated dangers that this brings.

People want to live and raise their families in Camden. Camden has so many natural and historical assets. Most importantly, Camden has great people and a strong community. It is imperative that this Government delivers new and upgraded schools for the young children of the Camden electorate. I support the Gregory Hills community. These are hardworking, community-minded people who deserve to be able to send their children to a local school that was not only planned but much wanted and, most importantly, is needed. I continue to advocate for this and to support the wonderful community that I have the privilege to represent.

### **WOLLONDILLY ELECTORATE FLOODING**

**Mr NATHANIEL SMITH (Wollondilly) (22:39):** In recent days my electorate of Wollondilly has experienced the tragedy of floods. As the member for Heffron would probably appreciate, since my election in March 2019 my electorate has seen the seven plagues of Egypt—almost. We have had drought, bushfires, floods, COVID-19, floods again, COVID-19 again, and then more floods.

**Mr Ron Hoenig:** And it is nearly Passover.

**Mr NATHANIEL SMITH:** And it is nearly Passover, thank you. I accept that interjection from the member for Heffron, who is always my sparring partner during private members' statements. I know he enjoyed that many years ago when my father was in Parliament.

**Mr Ron Hoenig:** Not that long ago.

**Mr NATHANIEL SMITH:** Only a couple of years ago. In 2016 Wollondilly had a tragic flood that wiped out a whole community in Picton. The viaduct had a blockage where the Southern Highlands railway line goes through it. It backed up and Picton's Argyle Street flooded to about 1.8 metres to two metres. That knocked out every business, some of which received insurance payouts and some did not. That was the disappointing thing about it. Since then we have had fires. That was pretty tough for my community. In between we had drought and then COVID-19, which was also tough for my community. However, regional areas have picked up. The New South Wales Government is doing great things like introducing Dine & Discover NSW vouchers to encourage people to visit, discover and spend in our great regions such as Wollondilly in the Southern Highlands.

In February 2020 the floods returned. The mayor of Wollondilly Shire Council at the time, Matthew Deeth, and I were sandbagging on a Sunday night to help save businesses. One or two of them went under; the others survived. That is a regular occurrence in my community of Picton. As urban development increases around Picton, Stone Quarry Creek is at capacity. At 9.00 p.m. on Saturday, the creek was about one and a half feet from flooding. At 1.00 p.m. today, the area was almost evacuated because we were one or two metres from flooding again. We have to accept that. The surrounding area is being developed. The council must do more to clear vegetation through the creek and land belonging to the local Aboriginal land council. The creek should be widened to improve flow through the viaduct. Currently the creek flows through only one section of the viaduct. In future we want it to go through three sections of the viaduct.

I have had emails from many people, not only from my constituents. I received one email from Ian Vine, a chicken farmer who talked about mitigation on his farm and he made some suggestions. One of my suggestions for Argyle Street, Picton, is to retrofit every small business to become resilient and ready for flood. That would require channel drains at the front entrance and back flow prevention devices or reflux valves in the sewerage system. A big issue is that once an area is flooded, the sewerage system is also flooded, so the whole area is infected. We can stop small businesses being affected by that—as the water comes in under the sandbags it can be pumped back out to the street. I know it sounds equivalent to bucketing water out of a leaking dinghy, but we must protect small businesses so they can operate the next day.

Flooding will happen when we go through high rainfall cycles, as we are currently. But if we can get businesses back up and running as soon as possible, we will be in a better position. I am pushing the Government for grants for small businesses to make those businesses flood resistant. It is not foolproof. We cannot do much when a big flood comes through; it depends on how much rain comes down. It would be a good thing if we can make provision for certain businesses in flood-prone areas to push the water out of their premises so they can resume operating as soon as possible.

I thank the SES for the fantastic job it did on Friday before the high rainfall came; Dylan Whitelaw, the incident controller who I know very well from the Wingecarribee branch and who controlled the whole Wollondilly operation; Warren Turner, the operation commander; Heather Rowe, the planning officer; Ngaire McCarthy, the sector commander; and Valerie Couch. I thank all of those people for the hard work they did and the Wollondilly Shire Council for protecting Picton in its time of need.

#### LOCAL GOVERNMENT AMALGAMATIONS

**Mr RON HOENIG (Heffron) (22:44):** It is timely to draw the attention of the House to the impact of council amalgamations on my electorate on the same day that the House has been debating reforms to the local government sector. Today is a day of reckoning for the New South Wales Coalition Government, almost five years after it first began forcibly amalgamating councils across the State. It has bled and bled and paid the political price ever since, particularly in the bush. Councils now face the prospect of going to the polls in September's local government elections hot on the heels of rate notices landing in their constituents' letterboxes showing huge increases in rates.

Two of the affected councils are in my electorate: Bayside Council and Inner West Council. Bayside Council was formed in September 2016 by the merger of the former City of Botany Bay council and the former Rockdale city council. It has been a disaster. The merger occurred despite the residents of the former Botany Bay city council area expressing their opposition to a merger with Rockdale council at a plebiscite, in which 90 per cent of participants voted no to the amalgamation proposal. The council is now undertaking a highly contentious rate harmonisation process, the net effect of which is to shift the burden of rates paid by residents of the former Rockdale council to residents of the former Botany Bay council.

Botany Bay always had some of the lowest rates and minimum residential rates in metropolitan Sydney, all while delivering a higher quality of services than Bayside Council provides. Residents of the Rockdale council area paid average residential rates of \$1,239 per annum, compared to Botany's average of \$709 per annum.

Rockdale's minimum rate was \$768 per annum, while Botany's was just \$553. Should the Parliament not adopt the Local Government Amendment Bill 2021, rates paid by my constituents will jump by between 28 per cent and 51 per cent on 1 July 2021. Bayside Council proposes to harmonise the minimum rate paid by all residents simply by raising the minimum rate across the council to Rockdale's \$783. That is a 39 per cent increase. If the minimum rate is harmonised over four years, minimum rates for Botany residents would rise from \$553 to \$844 per annum. That is an increase of 53 per cent over four years once a 2 per cent annual rate increase is applied.

This has severe impacts for the high-density areas of Bayside, such as Mascot and Eastlakes, because most apartment owners pay only the minimum rate. I have made a submission to the Independent Pricing and Regulatory Tribunal [IPART] in terms of its review of the application and have encouraged thousands of my residents to do the same. When reviewing Bayside's application, it became apparent how paper thin the justification for an increase is. The application threatens that council will run out of cash and be in operational deficit in its financial plan to 2031, unless a 53 per cent increase is granted. It states that cuts to "capital expenditure and services provided" will be necessary. I shudder to think just how far the standards of service would fall. That is despite the fact that in its Fit for the Future assessment, IPART found that the City of Botany Bay exceeded sustainability criteria "based on a positive and increasing operating performance ratio and continued improvement in own source revenue".

Botany also exceeded IPART's infrastructure and service and asset maintenance management criteria and had zero debt at the time of the merger. Somehow a merger that was supposed to generate productivity and cost savings has resulted in an even more bloated and bumbling bureaucracy. Residents of Botany Bay are left staring down the barrel of higher rates or a further reduction of services. This all comes during the worst health crisis in a century and Australia's first recession in almost 30 years. The economy might be recovering, but my community is not there yet. We have pilots and flight attendants stacking shelves and operating checkouts in Woolworths and Coles. Mums and dads are struggling to put food on the table and meet their mortgage obligations. I have urged IPART not to grant approval to council's rate rise application because it will be my community that pays the price of the Liberal Government's council amalgamation agenda. Those opposite are condemned once more by their incompetence.

#### **GREYHOUND RACING INDUSTRY**

**Mrs WENDY TUCKERMAN (Goulburn) (22:49):** Since August last year the Goulburn community and I have been voicing our strong support for the establishment of a centre of excellence and an optimal straight track for the greyhound racing industry to be located in Goulburn. Last Friday I had the pleasure of hosting the Minister responsible for greyhound racing, the Minister for Better Regulation and Innovation, the Hon. Kevin Anderson, welcoming him to the great electorate of Goulburn. The greyhound racing industry is well established in Goulburn, ideally located only two hours from Sydney and one hour from Canberra and with easy access from the Hume Highway, making it easily accessible for both regional and metropolitan markets. With greyhound racing no longer permitted in the Australian Capital Territory, a huge opportunity has now presented itself. Greyhound Racing NSW has responded with a strategic plan that includes substantial investments in safety at greyhound racing tracks in New South Wales.

Last Friday 19 March the Minister and I hosted a meeting with relevant stakeholders to discuss expanding the current Goulburn greyhound site to include a straight track, as is needed by the industry. The current greyhound track in Goulburn is located at the Goulburn Recreation Area, an area also utilised by other community organisations that work together and share the space and utilities. Last Friday we gathered these community organisations to discuss potential concerns for expansion on the current site and what this may potentially look like. The stakeholders included the Goulburn Mulwaree Council, the Agricultural, Pastoral and Horticultural Society, the Goulburn Harness Group, Greyhound Racing NSW and key groups with an interest in any future expansion. A robust discussion ensued, and the general consensus of the room was that although minor challenges may be present there is nothing that cannot be overcome, with a straight track at the current Goulburn Recreation Area site as the currently preferred option.

On 6 August last year I called on the Minister and Greyhound Racing NSW to recognise the need for a centre of excellence in Goulburn. I am very happy we have taken the first step, including an agreement that all parties will form a working group to map out a potential plan for the precinct. I am so happy that this community-led campaign has paid off and that Goulburn will be the recipient of the first centre of excellence and straight track in the southern region of New South Wales. This is a huge win for our local trainers, patrons and the many racing dogs who will benefit from increased safety at the track. The expansion of Goulburn's greyhound racing capacity will allow for a more holistic approach to greyhound racing and care, with better welfare and integrity outcomes. The New South Wales Government is currently investing \$30 million to upgrade tracks right across the State to meet stringent new minimum safety standards and drive down injury rates in the sport, with

\$11 million allocated for track safety upgrades across southern New South Wales. Goulburn will benefit enormously from that bucket, with a significant investment towards the establishment of a straight track.

Greyhound racing is already an important part of Goulburn's economy, currently employing 16 locals on a regular basis across operational, officiating and hospitality capacities. I am very excited about the further economic prospects as a result of a centre of excellence coming to Goulburn, and I very much look forward to continuing to work with the working group to establish a road map of exactly what the site footprint will look like moving forward. I thank Minister Anderson for attending and supporting me on Friday, as well as Greyhound Racing NSW for its vision and commitment to greyhound racing, not just for Goulburn but for all of southern New South Wales.

### CHRISTCHURCH MASSACRE COMMEMORATION

**Mr JIHAD DIB (Lakemba) (22:53):** Last week I joined the Leader of the Opposition, the Minister for Multiculturalism, the members who represent the electorates of Granville and Oatley and over 200 people for the second Christchurch massacre commemoration, hosted by the Australian National Imams Council. Two years ago New Zealand experienced an atrocity that shook the world to the core, one which saw 51 innocent lives so viciously taken by a terrorist whose name we shall not speak. It was a day that will forever plague New Zealand's history and will haunt the Muslim community. The brevity of the act drew a collective gasp across the globe. Tonight I remember those innocent lives lost on that tragic day and look to the better angels of our society who showed us that amidst the carnage love could find a way.

One only needs to look to the Prime Minister of New Zealand, Jacinda Ardern, to see the true meaning of leadership in times of crisis. For Muslims, Friday is the most sacred of days. Muslims come together in congregation as a single, unified community and submit to Allah, the Arabic word for God. However, what they were met with on 15 March 2019 was far from mercy. Interrupting a moment of tranquillity, a single gunman fired indiscriminately on two mosques. The tragedy of what happened is indescribable. It was made worse because the victims were children, women and men, and it was broadcast live. Ramia Sultan spoke at the memorial and said:

For Muslims, attending the mosque is an opportunity for attendees to literally leave the chaos and worries of life outside, and switch into an introspective state to do some soul searching and refocussing. This sacred moment was taken away from every victim by a heinous act of hatred and terror.

Muslims feared entering mosques for weeks and months after the attack. Mosques and community organisations ramped up their security out of caution. I saw that when I visited mosques myself. All of a sudden, the issue of security was obvious: People were taking it in turns to keep watch while others prayed, bollards sprung up and cameras were erected on vantage points. It is quite sad as all places of worship should be free from fear. You should never feel the urge to look over your shoulder when praying. When a Muslim prays they must look to the ground in front of them, not around them or to the side, and they should be focused solely on one moment of meditation. Everyone, regardless of their faith, should feel comfortable and serene in their holiest places.

The truth is that that atrocity was not an isolated event. As Grand Mufti of Australia Dr Ibrahim Abu Mohammad said on the night, "Let's not forget the massacres by terrorists over many periods of time." We must collectively acknowledge that the threat of hate and division is real. The Christchurch terrorist named previous right-wing extremists as his influences. That act was no coincidence; it was influenced by an ideology of division and animosity. Right-wing extremism has gained much traction over recent decades and has been allowed to fester in places of power. Whether it be the English Defence League, the Identity Bloc in France or Alternative for Germany, those groups have gained a following over the years.

Recently we have seen security concerns in Australia over the rise of right-wing extremism. We have seen Islamophobia among people of power—legislators and high-profile politicians. The perpetrator was one of us—an Australian. Let us not pretend that we do not have that problem in Australia, a place where in our highest Parliament a Senator once called Islam a disease and performed a public relations stunt ridiculing religious garments less than two years before the Christchurch atrocity. Let us not forget the Minister who still to this day defends his claims that it was a mistake to let Lebanese Muslim migrants come to Australia in the 1970s. What we say in places like these matter. Ideology needs a justification. If people in positions of power use their profile to spread hate, how can we be surprised when it manifests itself in the minds of others?

I do not by any stretch lay the blame on any one person; that is not fair. But I do say, as I have said many times before, that with leadership comes responsibility and with free speech comes responsibility. Using leadership and free speech to spread hate does nothing but divide us as a country. Just months after the Christchurch massacre and while pregnant, Rana Elasmara was the victim of an Islamophobic assault. The perpetrator had also made comments about Muslim women before starting the attack. Rana said of the attack:

I had no affiliation or previous contact with the perpetrator. This was an attack purely based on my Islamic faith, made evident through my veil and also because I am a woman.

She added:

I prayed to god for the protection of my baby and I.

Rana spoke about the intersectionality of being a Muslim woman and the risks of wearing the hijab in public. Members in this place have the power and responsibility to do better. We all have the responsibility to fight bigotry and racial politics for all minorities and to create a peaceful, unified country. No-one should be made to feel unsafe because of their faith or cultural background. In saying that, I am optimistic for the future. Each and every one of us in this country has an obligation to do everything in our power to ensure that an atrocity like that is never committed again. If the perpetrator of the Christchurch massacre knew the good hearts of his victims he would have never committed the act.

One of the survivors was Farid Ahmed. After losing his wife in the attack, he demonstrated how faith and love could provide a pathway to progress with three words: "I forgive him." It is in Farid's example that we can find a way to combat hatred and terror with love and mercy. We cannot change yesterday but together we can work towards changing tomorrow. We can achieve that through our continued respect for each other, through celebrating our shared values and diversity, and by addressing the issue of religious vilification. May we never forget the lives that were lost on that tragic day. May they all rest in peace and may we all create the better world to which we aspire.

### FLOODS AND NORTHERN TABLELANDS ELECTORATE

**Mr ADAM MARSHALL (Northern Tablelands—Minister for Agriculture and Western New South Wales) (22:59):** Almost 500 residents of north Moree are currently evacuating the town in the face of rising floodwaters from the Mehi River, the Gwydir River and Tycannah Creek. After issuing an evacuation warning earlier today, this evening the NSW SES issued an evacuation order for northern parts of Moree. Over the past few years communities in north-western New South Wales have gone through one of the driest periods on record, and over the past few days they have been inundated by torrential rain. Not only has the flooding affected Moree, but also it has affected the townships of Warialda, Ashford and Inverell in the Gwydir Valley. In the past 24 to 36 hours nearly 200 millimetres of rain has fallen on ground that has already seen its soil moisture profile reach 100 per cent following very good falls over the past couple of months.

The community of Moree is very strong and resilient. Whilst the floodwaters will destroy some good sorghum crops in the region, in the long run they will do more good than harm for the area. However, that does not remove the threat that the floodwaters pose to residents. I thank the emergency services—particularly the SES, RFS and NSW Police Force—for working with Moree Plains Shire Council to give the community as much warning as possible before issuing the evacuation order. This gave people time to move to higher ground before the floodwaters reach their peak, which is predicted to be at 9.00 p.m. tomorrow when the Mehi River reaches 10.4 metres. That will see the river break its banks and almost reach the level of the 2012 Moree flood, which was one of the largest recorded in the history of the town.

At midnight tonight the Mehi River is expected to reach around nine metres, which should see the water remain just below its banks. Nevertheless, many low-lying areas around Moree are already inundated. A number of community members who experienced the 2012 floods evacuated to friends or families' homes before the order was issued. However, now that it has been issued, the NSW SES, the RFS and local police will doorknock to make sure that the remaining residents have other accommodation arrangements in place. If they do not, they will be accommodated at the evacuation centre at the Moree Police and Community Youth Club in Boston Street.

I pay tribute to and acknowledge Superintendent Mitch Parker from the NSW SES, Chief Superintendent Heath Stimson from the NSW Rural Fire Service, Superintendent Steve Laksa from the NSW Police Force and Assistant Commissioner Geoff McKechnie for the work they have done with other agencies, including Local Land Services, Transport for NSW and NSW Health. I also acknowledge Bronwyn Cosh and David Quirk from Moree Hospital. They lived through the 2012 floods and the hospital is as prepared as it can be for what will confront the community during the rest of the week. Unlike their coastal cousins on the mid North Coast, Moree locals know that the floodwaters in their town are not the result of a fast torrent of water that rages through a river system. These floodwaters rise and recede slowly, which makes them different from what is being experienced in many other areas, so the community is preparing for many days of complete isolation.

I thank Moree Plains Shire Council Mayor Katrina Humphries, Lester Rodgers, Local Emergency Management Officer Renee McMillan and all the team at the council for their efforts over the past few days. The council represents the gold standard for rural and regional councils in this State. The local knowledge and experience shown under the leadership of Mayor Humphries has once again put the community in the strongest possible position not only to deal with the flooding crisis, but also to come out the other side and begin the repair

journey. Over the next few days I look forward to joining the community in Moree. Together we will definitely pull through.

### AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY BLACKTOWN CAMPUS

**Mr STEPHEN BALI (Blacktown) (23:04):** It was a great honour and privilege to witness and participate in the official opening ceremony for the establishment of the Australian Catholic University [ACU] multi-faculty Blacktown campus, which has been named St Josephine Bakhita Campus. It has been a long and difficult journey for Blacktown city to have a multi-faculty campus. On paper, Blacktown city's credentials make the location a no-brainer for a university campus. It has a population of 400,000 in the local government area, which is the largest in New South Wales; the third-largest university population of students by local government in New South Wales; and the second-youngest average age by local government in New South Wales. Blacktown city's gross regional product approaches \$19 billion, which is larger than 72 nations in the world, and its pre-COVID economic growth over the last four years was in excess of 4.5 per cent per annum.

At this point it is important to acknowledge and appreciate the Western Sydney University college in Nirimba and the Western Sydney University medical school presence at Blacktown hospital. The people of Blacktown city deserve a multi-faculty campus. When I was mayor of Blacktown City Council, I was authorised to undertake the journey with council CEO Kerry Robinson and other staff to find a university partner that understood the needs and aspirations of the Blacktown community and was willing to work with the community to deliver the inspirational outcomes that it deserves. There were bumps along the way, which included the Federal Liberal-Nationals Government deciding to cap available university positions and, unfortunately, even more recently, increase fees for the social science courses that are so desperately needed to make a fairer society.

I acknowledge that the dream of the university in Blacktown started in the late 1970s when the Hon. John Aquilina was mayor of Blacktown City Council, and the then Labor councillors—including my father, Charles Bali—believed that university education was a way for their children to improve their knowledge and have a more comfortable lifestyle than they had endured. That was on the back of the Whitlam Government introducing a free university education system. A 40-year dream came to fruition on 12 March 2021, the official opening of the university, with almost 500 students enrolled across several faculties in courses such as nursing, teaching, sports science, humanities, high-performance sport, theology, commerce and law. The Australian Catholic University officially opened the Blacktown campus and named the campus after St Josephine Bakhita.

St Josephine Bakhita is the patron saint of victims of modern slavery and human trafficking. The St Josephine Bakhita Campus is a fitting name, given the history of Blacktown city. One of the earliest recordings of the Stolen Generation can be attributed to Aboriginal youth being removed from their families and relocated to the Native Institution site in 1823. We can fast-forward to post-World War II, when the Soviet communist revolution across eastern Europe saw many refugees fleeing war and civil unrest and settling in Blacktown. Since the 1970s many Vietnamese people leaving communist takeover have made Blacktown city their new home, through to the modern era with people from Middle Eastern and African communities settling there as a result of civil unrest and wars. St Josephine demonstrates that out of severe adversity, good things can come. ACU is a ray of hope for the people of Blacktown city.

I acknowledge and thank the efforts of then Chancellor the Hon. John Fahey and Vice Chancellor Greg Craven, through to the current leadership of Acting Chancellor Julien O'Connell and Vice Chancellor Professor Zlatko Skrbis. I thank Professor Hayden Ramsay and Deputy Chief Operating officer Paul Campbell, who have been working incredibly hard to deliver the project. I thank Blacktown City Council staff, councillors and my successor, Mayor Tony Bleasdale, for seeing through our dream and making it a reality. I acknowledge Parramatta diocese bishop, Vincent Long, for his strong support since our initial meeting some six years ago. I am proud of ACU's strong academic offering, the pool of talented local students and its focus on serving the community. Blacktown and ACU's next challenge is to grow the university campus. It is planning for a new vertical campus in the CBD. The opening of the ACU Blacktown campus is enhancing the lives of the people and transforming Blacktown and western Sydney.

### BARWON ELECTORATE

**Mr ROY BUTLER (Barwon) (23:09):** Today marks two years since the people of Barwon elected me to represent them in this place. I do not shy away from saying how much of an honour and privilege it is being here. For decades the Coalition treated Barwon like they do any safe seat—as a given. They took the people of Barwon, Orange and Murray for granted. Now almost half a million square kilometres of New South Wales is represented by the Shooters, Fishers and Farmers Party—60 per cent of New South Wales. When I was elected I was asked how the Government had got to this point. I said the Coalition's losses were "the price they pay for regional neglect". When I was asked about how they had treated Barwon communities, I was short and succinct in my answer, "Abandoned, ignored, not listening."

As a candidate I promised only to work hard and be honest, to bring back representation to the people of Barwon, to listen, to give people a voice in Parliament, to take the concerns of the west all the way to Macquarie Street, and to fight for Barwon and keep fighting until we receive the necessary investment and attention from the Government. It does not sit well with me to talk about achievements because when I look at the Barwon electorate I see communities that have been so severely neglected that many of the things we are achieving are the necessities of life. They are things that electorates in the city would take for granted. While today we have rain drenching the State, it most certainly was not like this a year ago. It was a dust bowl out west, but we were told by the Government to pray for rain instead of looking to the Government to provide drought support. I lobbied for drought assistance every chance I got and I am still lobbying the Government to actually address drought, drought support and drought recovery instead of developing memory loss and burying their heads in the dust. It must be difficult for them to have a member for Barwon who cannot be silenced.

The Government should also never forget that they stood by and allowed charities to deliver bottled water to communities in my electorate so that citizens of New South Wales would have access to clean drinking water. Through political and social pressure, the Government came late to the unfolding disaster and started paying for water to be delivered. Those very same communities were having plans drawn up to prepare for evacuation because they had no access to acceptable drinking water. This is the type of neglect people in Barwon faced. Access to water—not a shiny new pool or a flying car—that is what people in Barwon were crying out for. They asked for clean drinking water in the twenty-first century in New South Wales. A few weeks ago a member of this Government made the claim that I like to take credit for things. I have had a look at the announcements that the Government makes in the Barwon electorate. Since March 2019 there are a stack of them—hundreds of millions of dollars are pouring into the electorate. I tell people to shake their hand, take their money and ask for more.

I would like to point out a couple of things regarding these announcements. I have no problem not being invited. As I frequently say, I am not deluded in thinking that I am important. I just occupy an important position. But I do have a problem with how little respect is shown for the community members, sporting clubs and organisations who put in hours of hard work to apply for grants, who do amazing things in our communities on the smell of an oily rag, and who are forced to beg the Government for a little bit of money to keep going or to provide our kids with opportunities like kids in the city have. This is not a generous New South Wales Government seeking out areas of need in towns across Barwon. The money comes because passionate, community-minded people slog out application forms. They spend their evenings gathering data, writing proposals, getting quotes and calling people for letters of support. It is their work in our communities that is deserving of any credit, not a government that likes to keep our communities on a funding drip-feed. Perhaps those in this Parliament who like to visit Barwon and make announcements should keep this feedback in mind the next time they are out west trying to buy back some love.

Now, there are a few lines my opponents like to use when they visit Barwon: "Roy's not at the decision-making table. He won't be able to get any change", and, "Roy's not part of the Government. He can't do anything". They know it is a furphy but it is all they have got. Dishonesty does not trump real representation. Despite what my opponents suggest, working with genuine members of the Government has been productive for the Barwon electorate—for example, the Wanaaring Health Centre funding, the repurposing of Ivanhoe and Brewarrina Correctional Centres, vital legislative amendments, a rural healthcare inquiry, the review of the Isolated Patients Travel and Accommodation Assistance Scheme, funding of wild dog control measures, expanded transport subsidies for restocking and the active engagement of my office by Ministers who take their role to govern for the whole of New South Wales seriously.

Through negotiation with genuine Ministers—and they know who they are—I have been able to get the Government to begin to address festering problems that are long in the tooth and often unique to Barwon. At the end of the day, politicking belongs at election times. Genuine members of Government understand that. Those out for their own gain will probably never understand that. I would like to acknowledge that there are areas of New South Wales significantly affected by floods at the moment and I pass on my thoughts and hopes for the safety of those people. I thank the people in the emergency services who are placing themselves at risk while trying to take care of those communities.

#### REGIONAL SENIORS TRAVEL CARD

**Ms JODIE HARRISON (Charlestown) (23:14):** When it comes to Newcastle and Lake Macquarie it is a sad tale of two cities. In the eyes of the Government, Lake Macquarie is deemed a regional city, while Newcastle holds a somewhat unique position of being sometimes a regional city and at other times metropolitan. For the constituents of the Charlestown electorate, some who reside in the Newcastle local government area and others who reside in the Lake Macquarie local government area, this tale of two cities is more of a riddle, particularly when it comes to eligibility for the regional seniors travel card.

My constituents who live in the Newcastle local government area are not eligible for the card; however, my constituents who live in the Lake Macquarie local government area are currently signing up for the second round of the travel card scheme. A line on a map determines those of my constituents who are deserving of the card and those who are not. That line runs across the suburbs and streets of Lake Macquarie and Newcastle and leads to one neighbour being eligible for the travel card while the neighbour who lives just across the street or a couple of doors down is not—a very sad ending indeed.

Now a new chapter in the tale of two cities has opened. This chapter is titled Retirement Villages Amendment (Exit Entitlement) Regulation 2021. It tells a very familiar story indeed. Exit entitlements are paid by the retirement village operator to the former resident if their property does not sell within 12 months. However, schedule 5A of the regulation lists the local government areas where the prescribed exit period is six months for the purpose of section 182AB, which allows a former occupant to apply for an exit entitlement of a vacated retirement village residential premises if the premises remains unsold for the prescribed period. That is where the plot gets interesting. If you own a retirement village home located in Newcastle you are subject to the amendment. That is, you only need to wait six months to apply for an exit entitlement if your home is not sold. However, if you live in the Lake Macquarie local government area you will need to wait 12 months before you can apply for an exit entitlement.

It is now time to explore some of the themes in this tale of two cities. When it suits the Government, usually because it will save it some money, Newcastle is a metropolitan city; when it does not suit the Government, usually because it will save it some money, Newcastle is a regional city. Lake Macquarie is always a regional city. It is just that sometimes the New South Wales Government likes to include or exclude Lake Macquarie, depending on whether it will save the Government money or not. Another theme worth exploring in this tale of two cities is one of this Government's favourites: putting big business before people. It is a theme this Government returns to again and again in many of the bills and regulations it introduces to Parliament. It is certainly a theme well covered in the Retirement Villages Amendment (Exit Entitlement) Regulation 2021, where we see the New South Wales Government putting the interests of big business ahead of the people by shifting the financial burden away from business and directly onto the people.

In this case, they are retired people on fixed incomes who should not have to bear that burden. Last week I met with about 80 residents living at Eleebana Shores, a retirement village located in the Charlestown electorate. It is in the Lake Macquarie local government area. The residents at Eleebana Shores expressed their dismay and anger at their exclusion from this amendment to the regulation. One resident said, "We feel like second-class citizens." Another noted that the Government was setting up a framework that allowed retirement villages to be run in a similar fashion to the way big business operates large retail shopping centres. "We should not be treated like tenants at a Lendlease shopping centre," that resident said. I could not agree more with those 80 residents who met with me. I call on the Minister to fix the mess that is the Retirement Villages Amendment (Exit Entitlement) Regulation 2021 and start putting people before profits.

### FLOODS AND EMERGENCY SERVICES

**Ms JENNY AITCHISON (Maitland) (23:19):** The Hunter River at the Belmore Bridge in Maitland is currently below the minor flood level of 5.9 metres. River levels in Maitland were expected to exceed that level this afternoon. The river level may reach around 7.2 metres early Wednesday morning, and further rises are possible. I thank the SES and the many volunteers who work and struggle to save so many people, houses, livestock and property in our community. I also thank Maitland City Council, which has been providing many updates about the many roads in my community that have been closed as a result of the weather events. I thank the RFS and Fire and Rescue NSW, the local police, Local Land Services—which is doing a lot of work with local farmers in my electorate—paramedics and all of the other emergency services and volunteers.

I thank the Minister for Energy and Environment, Matt Kean, who has taken the time with his staffers today to brief me extensively on how the Hunter Valley Flood Mitigation Scheme works and how it is coping with the current flood event. I want my community to know that we have been asking about the floodgates. Most of the floodgates on the Hunter River are actually automatic. Once the floods have started and they have been activated, they will work to keep the water in the river rather than on the flood plain. I have had a lot of people calling my office and contacting me on social media over the past couple of days about that.

The other good news I heard today is that the Hunter Valley Flood Mitigation Scheme now has a permanent office within the SES office in Maitland. That is vitally important. Maitland is the home of the SES; it was established in Maitland after the 1955 floods. Maitland is also the fastest growing regional city outside of Sydney in the State, so floods impact us very quickly. We are used to them but we do have a new population that is often not aware of the impacts. We are asking for regular situation reports from the Hunter Valley Mitigation Scheme people and also from the SES.

I thank the Minister for Regional Transport and Roads, the Hon. Paul Toole, who told me today that he will meet with me tomorrow for a briefing about Testers Hollow, a State road in my electorate. It was promised to be raised after the floods in 2015 and we are hoping that there is not too much of a delay now that it is mid project but not completed. I thank the Deputy Premier for his comments this evening when he gave me a briefing. I also thank other members in this place. One of the issues my community learnt about in 2015 was that the lack of briefing across parties was very damaging during floods. I really hope the Government will keep good with those promised briefings.

I urge the community to be very careful about what they are posting on social media. It is easy during periods of intense emergencies for people to get concerned because of rumours they might hear. Just today I had someone asking me if one of the streets in Maitland had been closed and it had not, and that information was readily available on the council website. In 2015 a lack of information meant that people were very concerned about flooding in the CBD. While we should have been aware of the situation at that time, it should not have been a cause for alarm or concern at that level.

I urge people to refrain from driving or walking through floodwater. I had a look at some of the roads that were flooding over the weekend. They are very dangerous and we should all know in Maitland that it does not matter how safe it looks, we do not know what has happened to the road surface during a flood event. Road closures and isolation due to flooding is going to affect families, workers and schools. We are hopeful the floods will not create an island at Gillieston Heights again. I urge people to monitor emergency warnings and severe weather updates on local ABC radio, the SES Facebook pages and the Bureau of Meteorology website, as well as my Facebook page. I urge everyone to please be safe, take care and adhere to all directions from the SES and other emergency workers.

### SEXUAL CONSENT

**Ms ANNA WATSON (Shellharbour) (23:24):** The New South Wales Commissioner of Police has put forward the idea of a sex consent app. Commissioner Fuller acknowledged that the app may be "the worst idea I have had all year", but he said that COVID-19 had shown the importance of adopting technological solutions. For women, the use of such an app may have the potential of confusing the action of consenting to sex or not. Andrew Dyer, senior law lecturer at the University of Sydney, said a consent app would do more harm than good. He said:

The proposal is well-intentioned but it would seem that the perpetrators of sexual assault might well gain more protection from this than victims. If the evidence of consent on the app came into evidence at a trial then it could be used against women to discredit them.

He went on to say that not only would it not account for people withdrawing consent part way through sex, but also it would fail to account for the "subtleties" of sexual encounters. Catherine Lumby, a professor at the University of Sydney, who specialises in ethics and accountability, described the idea of a consent app as "naive". Professor Lumby said the app was a quick fix and did not take into account the circumstances that surrounded sexual assaults. She said:

Fundamentally what we are having now is a reckoning that a very small minority of men are opportunists, who make the decision to sexually assault women, they don't care where, how and why they do it, they will take the opportunity and I'm sure they are more than capable of manipulating technology. They certainly wouldn't say, "I'm thinking of having sex with you now, would you like to sign up to this app and say yes?"

She said the sexual assault crisis would only be solved if human communication was the focus and that "The answer isn't letting technology solve our problems." Society obviously has the wrong idea about what consent means and what the words "no" and "stop" mean. What must be made clear is a woman's autonomy over her body. We need to understand this and I am sure an app will not help that. It needs to be clear that women get the final say over what happens with their bodies. It does not matter if people got together before or even if they said yes earlier and then changed their mind. People are allowed to say "stop" at any time, and their partner needs to respect that.

Consent is never implied by things like past behaviour, what a person is wearing or where they go. Sexual consent should always be clearly communicated; there should be no question or mystery. Silence is not consent. And consent is not just important the first time a person is with someone. Couples who have had sex before or even ones who have been together for a long time also need to consent before sex—every time. The issue is more than simple consent via an app. The issue is about initial consent, continuing consent and what the consent is for. Consent may be given. Saying yes to one thing like going to the bedroom to do some petting does not mean a person has said yes to other things like intercourse. A person can only consent to something if they have the full story. For example, if there is a change in the behaviour of a partner during sex that a person does not agree with, then consent can be withdrawn at that time. Having a society that understands this is a crucial point to bring about change.

People who are drunk, high or passed out cannot consent to sex. There are also laws to protect minors from being pressured into sex with someone much older than them. Education may be the key to change. Victoria is already rolling out consent classes that will soon be made mandatory for students in all Victorian State schools because of concerns the issue was not always being addressed head on. Under the plan, teachers will be given access to extra resources, guidance and professional development to help ready them to teach the sensitive topic appropriately. Education from an early age may go some way to turning the tide of sexual assault. This is what we need to do in New South Wales schools—age-appropriate education regarding the respect of an individual's rights and body autonomy. I went to a briefing today organised by the Minister for Education and Early Childhood Learning, the Hon. Sarah Mitchell, in the other place. Schoolteachers and others were at the briefing and I acknowledge what a great idea that was; it was very informative and I congratulate her on the initiative.

**The SPEAKER:** Private members' statements have concluded. I also note that there are no community recognition statements this evening. I thank all the staff who have kept the Chamber operating at this relatively late hour of 11.30 p.m. I thank Hansard, the attendants and everyone else who has been keeping the Chamber operational.

#### *Community Recognition Notices*

#### **MY LE THI**

**Ms TANIA MIHAILUK (Bankstown)**—I was delighted to attend the Our Place Art Exhibition at Parliament House on March 9 2021. This exhibition included a beautiful and thoughtful artwork from Bankstown artist My Le Thi. The Our Place Exhibition will run from March 2nd until March 31st, showcasing the talents of artists from across Sydney. It is very impressive for Ms Thi's artwork to be included in this prestigious exhibition. Ms Thi migrated to Australia in 1985 from Vietnam and has long been passionate about art. She is currently a member of the Bankstown Art Society and is teaching others in the community and passing on her gift for art. Her artwork that was included is a mixed-media piece that comments on the differences and the similarities between people of colour, language, and culture. I would like to thank the Bankstown Art Society for its continued support of artists in the community and Dianne Yousouf in particular for attending the exhibition with me. I congratulate Ms Thi on her successful inclusion in the exhibition and I am excited to see what her future artistic creations will be.

#### **VCA NSW CHAPTER HARMONY DAY**

**Ms TANIA MIHAILUK (Bankstown)**—I am delighted to acknowledge the Vietnamese Community of Australia (VCA) NSW Chapter Community Harmony event held March 21 at Bonnyrigg. The members of the VCA NSW Chapter have worked tirelessly to provide support and essential services for the Australian Vietnamese community in NSW. The event commemorated the Trung Sisters, who fought and sacrificed their lives to protect Vietnam from foreign rule, and paid tribute to their courageous contributions. The values of bravery and fearlessness exhibited by the Trung Sisters continue to be a significant influence on Vietnamese culture and tradition to this day. I would like to thank VCA NSW Chapter President Mr Paul Huy Nguyen and Vice President Ms Kate Hoang and the entire VCA NSW Chapter Executive for efforts in preserving the traditions and customs of the Vietnamese Australian community.

#### **KIRSTY EVERETT**

**Mr MARK SPEAKMAN (Cronulla—Attorney General, and Minister for the Prevention of Domestic Violence)**—I congratulate Caringbah resident Kirsty Everett on the publication of her memoir, Honey Blood. Once an aspiring gymnast, Kirsty has battled and overcome leukaemia twice. Despite the unimaginable adversity she endured as a child, Honey Blood is a book infused with humour and optimism. It is a poignant and powerful celebration of family, identity and self-belief, which I believe will resonate with readers from all walks of life. Kirsty is generously donating 7.5 percent of all book sales to her favourite charity, the Children's Cancer Institute. Having a book published is a remarkable achievement for an author. I wish Kirsty Everett every success and thank her for bravely sharing her story.

#### **RIDE2SCHOOL DAY**

**Ms YASMIN CATLEY (Swansea)**—I acknowledge the importance of Ride2School day, which took place on 19 March 2021. The day organised by the charity, the Bicycle Network promotes that students all across Australia either walk or ride a bike, scooter, or skateboard to school. Ride2School day helps promote a healthy lifestyle with riding to school being an easy way for children to contribute to their recommended 60 minutes of physical activity a day. Daily exercise also helps improve children's mental health and travelling actively has also shown to help improve a child's concentration. The last year has been very difficult on many children and Ride2School day promotes a social activity that can help return a sense of normalcy to everyday school life.

I would like to thank the Bicycle Network for their work in promoting Ride2School day and all those students and parents across the community that participated in the day.

#### **SHARE THE DIGNITY CAMPAIGN**

**Ms YASMIN CATLEY (Swansea)**—I rise to thank all those community members who have participated in and the organisers behind the Share the Dignity March Dignity Drive. The Share the Dignity March Dignity Drive helps provide period products to women experiencing homelessness, fleeing domestic violence, or doing it tough. Throughout March donation bins have been placed at local Woolworth stores and participating businesses, collecting a range of period products. My office has also played host to a donation bin and I am pleased to say the campaign has received a huge amount of community support, with the donation bin already nearing capacity. I would like to thank Share the Dignity for the work they do in supporting vulnerable women and tackling period poverty. Thank you also to all those within the Swansea community for their generosity and support of the March Dignity Drive.

#### **ARTIST, ELEANOR AMIRADAKI**

**Mr JONATHAN O'DEA (Davidson)**—I acknowledge Eleanor Amiradaki, a successful artist from St Ives in my electorate of Davidson. Eleanor's practice encompasses drawing and photography, and exploring the natural world in her art. On 17 April she will host a workshop at the Ku-ring-gai Wildflower Garden, teaching a historic photographic printing process called cyanotype printing. This method uses the light of the sun to expose light sensitive paper, resulting in unique and original artworks. She enjoys sharing her practice with others through a range of workshops and classes, suitable for artists at various levels of experience. Eleanor is a past finalist in the Ravenswood Women's Art Prize and Hornsby Art Prize. I congratulate Eleanor on her success as an artist, and for helping aspiring artists through her classes and workshops.

#### **ENLIVEN KU-RING-GAI EVENT**

**Mr JONATHAN O'DEA (Davidson)**—The coronavirus pandemic has had a significant impact on people's social lives, mental wellbeing and the economy. So I am pleased that a pop up live street event, called 'Enliven Ku-ring-gai', will be held in East Lindfield in my electorate of Davidson. The event will take place on 27 March, and include music, children's entertainment and roving performers. It is an opportunity for everyone to re-emerge, celebrate and engage with their local community. The initiative is part of the NSW Government's Festival of Place Summer Fund, which supports community wellbeing with safe options to experience public spaces, boosts foot traffic in local centres to support the local economy, and supports employment of food, beverage and creative workers. I commend community members in and around the Ku-ring-gai Council area for supporting our local economy, all those involved in setting up and operating the pop up stores, Ku-ring-gai Council for organising the event, and the NSW Government for its support.

#### **WALTER AND KAYLA KLINKE**

**Mrs TANYA DAVIES (Mulgoa)**—I wish to congratulate Glenmore Park couple, Walter and Kayla Klinke, who recently had their daughter Thea on January 1st of this year and was the first baby to be born at Nepean Hospital in 2021. Whilst most people were finding new ways to celebrate New Year's Eve in 2020, Walter and Kayla were at the hospital preparing for their baby girl. Thea came as a great New Year's surprise as she was not due to be born until the end of January. Thea was born at 10:55am on New Year's Day and has brought so much joy to the Klinke Family during what has been a very difficult time to have a baby. Like many couples, Walter and Kayla had tried for many years to start a family and were in the IVF system for almost 10 years before falling pregnant with Thea. Their journey was a raw, emotional time and the decision to name their baby girl, Thea, which means 'gift of god', was a fitting way to describe her. Congratulations to the Klinke Family! I wish you all the best for a healthy and happy 2021.

#### **HANNAH ROOTS**

**Mrs TANYA DAVIES (Mulgoa)**—Congratulations to Penrith Anglican College student, Hannah Roots, who recently was awarded the Penrith Valley Sports Foundation Junior Sport Star Award for her incredible efforts in athletics, swimming and triathlon. Hannah has always been heavily involved in the sporting field and has a passion for a variety of different sports. She has represented her school at Regional, State and National level athletics, swimming and triathlon and continues to dominate the field. Last year, Hannah placed seventh at the NSW All Schools Triathlon Championships and 16th at the Australian All Schools Triathlon Championships. Also in 2019, she placed fifth in the 13-15s division at the famous Nepean Triathlon and also finished sixth in the NSW State Little Athletics 300m race. In early 2020, Hannah was accepted into the Western Sydney Academy of Sport Triathlon program where she was nominated for the exciting Penrith Valley Sport Foundation award. The long list of her achievements is no doubt impressive and it is clear that Hannah's dedication to her training and passion for sport will set her up for a bright future. Congratulations and well done to you, Hannah!

### VINCE FORMICA - LIONS CLUB MURWILLUMBAH

**Ms JANELLE SAFFIN (Lismore)**—I wish to congratulate Vince Formica of Murwillumbah on receiving life membership of Lions International. A well-deserved award for over 46 years of service. His role in establishing the Lions Youth of the Year Awards has left a lasting legacy in our community and has been pivotal in the lives of so many local young people. Additionally, in establishing the International Youth Exchange he has given opportunities to young people in Murwillumbah that they would not have had otherwise, if it wasn't for his commitment and dedication. Throughout his membership of the Murwillumbah Lions Club he has been President, Treasurer, Director, Membership and Project Chairman. It is hard to find someone who has worn more hats for the good of the community than Vince. His initiative of providing catering to the workers and patrons at the Murwillumbah Saleyards is a well-known service that brings the Lions club to the wider community. It was also so lovely that his sons Neil and Tony travelled home to Murwillumbah for the presentation of his life membership. They must be so proud. Once again I congratulate Vince on his life membership and thank him for his years of service.

### CONGRATULATIONS SALLY FLANNERY - INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY

**Ms JANELLE SAFFIN (Lismore)**—I wish to acknowledge and congratulate Sally Flannery on being awarded a Lismore International Women's Day award for her economic contribution. Sally is a hardworking, passionate and dedicated community member. As the Agency Manager of Lion and Lamb in Lismore. Sally runs a professional graphic design business that has left a noticeable mark on our community and in our local businesses that are her clients. She works with a wonderful team in Ryan McCann and Michael Lewis. For her award Sally was acknowledged for showing incredible community spirit when COVID 19 broke out. Sally established the "Support Lismore Small Business" facebook group. The group was established to bring our community together during a difficult time and to rally around our local small businesses. She still manages the group and it has grown to 6,300 members. Through the group, many locals find new businesses they have never heard of and local businesses use this as a platform for exposure. This innovative initiative helped many of our local small businesses through COVID 19. I commend Sally for her work in business and our community. I cannot wait to see what she achieves in her future endeavours.

### JOSEPH POMIECKO

**Mr PETER SIDGREAVES (Camden)**—I would like to congratulate a local constituent Joseph Pomiecko on his retirement at Clintons Toyota. For five decades, Joe has been selling cars and making clients happy. On Friday 26th February, he retired as a business development manager after 28 years with the local dealership and 50 years with Toyota in Sydney. Joe started his career at Peter Williamson Toyota in Liverpool in 1971 and was hugely proud when the dealership consistently ranked as one of the most successful in the country. Since moving to the Clintons Toyota in Campbelltown, nearly 30 years ago, Joe had continued to love his work and was always proud to represent his company. Congratulations on your well-deserved retirement Joe.

### NRL CAME TO ELDERSLIE

**Mr PETER SIDGREAVES (Camden)**—It's not every day that you have your local National Rugby League (NRL) Team come to your home ground. The NRL came to Kirkham Oval at Elderslie on February 20th in a clash between the home-grown club West Tigers and heavyweights Sydney Roosters. A remarkable 2,880 supporters came to cheer on the home team, with COVID restrictions in place. Given the year that we have had, supporting teams with a crowd has been an issue. This day was a mark on how the community came together to support the home side. The close call of defeat in the last 10 minutes of 28-22 let the Sydney Roosters coming out on top. However, I commend the community for coming together as one to support the local West Tigers Team.

### ST PATRICK'S DAY VIRTUAL RECEPTION

**Mr PAUL LYNCH (Liverpool)**—I wish to acknowledge the St Patrick's Day Virtual Reception conducted by the Sydney Consulate General of Ireland on 17 March this year. It featured speeches by Consul General Owen Feeney and Taoiseach Michael Martin. There were also presentations from members of Generation Green, a new generation of Irish-Australians. They were also the subject of an exhibition by the Consulate at First Fleet Park. There were also excerpts from Brigid's Day events earlier this year. The reception was conducted online because of the complications created by the pandemic of course. The celebration of Ireland's national day has a long history in Australia since Europeans arrived. While for some it simply is an excuse to drink Guinness, it also provides an opportunity to consider more closely what it means to be of Irish heritage, and especially in the diaspora. It should also be an occasion to encourage enthusiasm for a united Ireland.

### RAY PRICE

**Ms SONIA HORNERY (Wallsend)**—Ray joined the RAAF in 1966 and in 1969 arrived in Vung Tau, South Vietnam, as an Airfield Defence Guard. He was a door gunner with 9 Squadron flying in the "Huey" helicopter, inserting and extracting troops, evacuating the wounded, resupplying units in the field with ammunition, water and food. Ray was on two helicopters that had forced landings due to malfunctions. On 26 October 1969, the helicopter was shot down by Viet Cong at Hat Ditch. Ray's helicopter received heavy ground fire from AK47 machine guns and rocket propelled grenades. Ray engaged the enemy soldiers by suppressing them with machine gun fire. The heavy ground fire caused the helicopter to crash with Ray badly injured. He and other crew were rescued and flown to the Australian Army Hospital at Vung Tau. Due to his injuries he was flown to Malaya and then on to Australia, where he spent a year in hospital. He was discharged medically unfit in 1970. Members of 9 Squadron, including Ray, were eventually awarded the Republic of Vietnam Cross of Gallantry with Palm Unit Citation for operations in South Vietnam. Thank you Ray for your service to our country.

### RAINBOW CONNECTION SINGING GROUP

**Ms SONIA HORNERY (Wallsend)**—It's no secret that both listening to and performing music can be therapeutic, offering a powerful avenue for mental stimulation and emotional expression. One local singing group has been making the lives of local aged care residents a little brighter by singing their favourite songs and doing some skits to make them laugh for the past 16 years. Formed in 2005, the Rainbow Connection singing group have been voluntarily singing for residents in homes right across the Hunter. The 16 women, Narelle Chesterfield, Hazel Pratten, Fay Holm, Pamela Fletcher, Nancy McLean, Rosalyn Burns, Roma Holmes, Patricia Kelly, Gwendolyn Adams, Moira Campbell, Liz Gibson, Kylie Bryant, Pat Oliver, Lesley Riddell, Judy Knox and Josie Broughton, aged between 47 and 83, spend every Tuesday practising their songs before hitting the road to visit local homes, clocking up thousands of kilometres at their own expense. The COVID-19 pandemic may have seen the group have a quiet last 12 months, but they are now back on the road and have begun to entertain the local residents once again. Congratulations and thank you for your tireless community work, entertaining the local aged care residents.

### KATHY JENNINGS AND CHARLESTOWN MEALS ON WHEELS

**Ms JODIE HARRISON (Charlestown)**—Charlestown and District Meals on Wheels is a vital part of our local community, delivering delicious and balanced meals to local residents getting on in years. I've had a lot to do with Meals on Wheels, and I am always impressed by their commitment to their work and their tireless efforts to help some of the most vulnerable members of our community. I recently had a chance to catch up with the Charlestown and District manager, Kathy Jennings, and her extraordinary team. Meals on Wheels has been serving the local community for many, many years, but 2020 posed new challenges, as it did for all of us—but I am pleased to report that the team was able to rise to the occasion. Kathy's leadership will be vital to ensuring their ongoing success, and I am sure she is more than up to the challenge. They are always looking for more volunteers, and I encourage everyone who can to get in touch and lend a hand. My thanks to Kathy, her staff and the many people who volunteer their time to Meals on Wheels. The Charlestown community appreciates all the work you do.

### KOTARA BEARS

**Ms JODIE HARRISON (Charlestown)**—The Kotara Bears will be running onto the field this season under new leadership. Dylan McInherny will be coaching the men's side and Jacqui Moriarty will be coaching the women's (league tag) team in the 2021 Newcastle and Hunter Community Rugby League competition. Both of them have a history of success on the field, with Dylan leading the Bears to a grand final appearance last year and Jacqui playing for the South Newcastle Lions in the Newcastle Rugby League (Real NRL) decider. This is a great sign of the Bears' prospects this season, but there's more. Not only will Dylan and Jacqui be partners in leading the Bears, but after ten years together they plan to get married in April. I wish Dylan and Jacqui all the best for their wedding and a very long and happy life together—and the pair told the Newcastle Weekly they shared similar hopes of a "happy ever after" for the Bears in 2021. All my best to the happy couple, and here's to a great season for the Kotara Bears.

### FIFTIETH BANGLADESH INDEPENDENCE DAY

**Ms JODI McKAY (Strathfield)**—I bring to the attention of the House the 50th Anniversary of Bangladesh's Independence on Friday 26th March 2021. It is a day of immense pride for not only our Bangladeshi Australian community, but the Bangladeshi diaspora across the globe. This year's Golden Jubilee Celebrations coincide with the centennial birth anniversary of the father of the nation, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. While placing on record this significant milestone, it is important to recognise the longstanding friendship between Australia and Bangladesh. Australia was among the first countries to recognise Bangladesh after it achieved Independence and

went on to assist in the admission of Bangladesh to the United Nations in 1974. In 1975, former Labor Prime Minister Gough Whitlam was the first and only Australian Prime Minister to visit Bangladesh. As we reflect on the founding of a new independent nation, we also recognise the immeasurable contribution the Bangladeshi Australian community has made to the betterment of our state. I extend my best wishes and that of the NSW Labor Party to all Bangladeshi Australians and the people of Bangladesh on this important and historic day.

#### **NEPEAN AQUATIC CENTRE AND EVA BORYS SWIM SCHOOL**

**Mr STUART AYRES (Penrith—Minister for Jobs, Investment, Tourism and Western Sydney)**—This year sees Nepean Aquatic Centre celebrating 10 years and Eva Borys Swim School celebrating 30 years of teaching children to swim and educating them on the importance of water safety. Special thanks to directors Alan and Karen Bentley who have had a long-term connection with Eva Borys since the 1970's and 80's when they began their learn to swim journey and attending squad training. Their passion for swimming saw them go on to manage the centre in the early 90's and they are the managers today. Ian and Karen were also both instrumental in the conception and design of Nepean Aquatic Centre. I acknowledge and thank the entire team for their commitment to teaching thousands of children the fundamentals required to enjoy the water safely. Congratulations on these fantastic milestones.

#### **BARRY ALCHIN**

**Mr LEE EVANS (Heathcote)**—Today I wish to draw the attention of this house to Mr Barry Alchin. Barry founded Shirebiz along with his dear friend Tony Blain to promote and support businesses across the Sutherland Shire. Barry has travelled the world through his career as a Chemical Engineer, founding and operating Austin Chemical. He has been an extremely active member of the community, in the past was President of State Chamber of Commerce & Industry (NSW) and Vice President of Australian Chamber and most recently Chairman of Shirebiz. In his role as Chairman of Shirebiz he met regularly with guest speakers and hosted events with the Premier. He was instrumental in successfully converting his great idea into a reality with the ANSTO Innovation Campus which has received a \$12.5 million investment from the NSW State Government. Barry recently resigned as Chairman of Shirebiz and it has been an honour to work with him over the years. I take this opportunity to wish him all the very best as he enters this new chapter of his life.

#### **BAPS SWAMINARAYAN TEMPLE - DINESH PANDYA**

**Ms JULIA FINN (Granville)**—During the COVID-19 pandemic, the BAPS Swaminarayan Temple packed and delivered over 18,000 hot meals and 1200 care kits to those families, migrant workers and international students who were either self-isolating or suffering from financial hardship. Dinesh Pandya volunteered to assist BAPS deliver thousands of food packaged to needy families. Dinesh's contribution made a real difference to the capacity of the temple to distribute much needed help to local people in need. I was delighted to nominate him for a NSW Government Community Service Award in recognition of his service to our community at such a difficult time for so many vulnerable local families. I was even more delighted to be able to present him with his NSW Government Community Service Award on 19 March 2021. Thank you Dinesh Pandya and BAPS Swaminarayan Temple for looking after those in need, as no one should be left behind.

#### **WORN OUT WARES OF SINGLETON**

**Mr MICHAEL JOHNSEN (Upper Hunter)**—I would like to congratulate Worn Out Wares of Singleton who were recently crowned the Australian Good Food Guide (AGFG) Readers' Choice Award Winners for best coffee in the Hunter and Newcastle region for 2020. The Australian Food Guide has long been acknowledged as Australia's most comprehensive restaurant, accommodation and travel authority. I again congratulate all the team at Worn Out Wares, a special mention to head barista Meg Christensen along with Laine Everett and Berry Shrestha on their exceptional achievement and wish them every success in their future endeavours.

#### **WILMA BAKER OF FINLEY**

**Mrs HELEN DALTON (Murray)**—Today I would like to recognise and congratulate Wilma Baker of Finley for 30 years of service with Finley Regional Care. Wilma was born and raised in Finley, completing her nursing course in Deniliquin. After graduating she spent several years in Alice Springs working in a child health unit and on an indigenous settlement. Wilma returned to Finley 30 years ago with her husband to start a family. Soon after, she was offered a full time position at Finley Regional Care and, to this day, Wilma can still found there working tirelessly for the community. I congratulate Wilma on her tremendous dedication and loyalty to Finley Regional Care.

#### **DAPHNE WALLACE RETIRES FROM ARMIDALE HOSPITAL**

**Mr ADAM MARSHALL (Northern Tablelands—Minister for Agriculture and Western New South Wales)**—I recognise and congratulate Daphne Wallace on her 50 years of nursing at Armidale Hospital. Having

commenced her nurse training at the hospital in 1972, Daphne retired from her role at Armidale Hospital on 14 March this year. Daphne will be taking some well-deserved long service leave and will be employed by Hunter New England Health until 2022. Daphne originally started working as a post-graduate nurse in the medical ward after training in general, surgical and paediatrics then moving into afterhours nurse management almost 30 years ago. Daphne recalls when she started nursing, the Armidale Hospital was split in two general wards – one male, one female. There was a medical ward located upstairs which accepted private, intermediate and public patients, the cafeteria had just opened and the intensive care unit just received their first monitor which was a real achievement for the staff and hospital. Nursing is Daphne's passion and always felt honoured to be a nurse. I commend Daphne on an impressive 50-year career in nursing, her commitment and dedication to the health sector and genuine interest in the well-being of her patients. Congratulations Daphne, I wish you a very happy and long retirement and thank you for your service to the Armidale Hospital and community.

#### **KEVIN DUPE' REGIONAL AUSTRALIA BANK**

**Mr ADAM MARSHALL (Northern Tablelands—Minister for Agriculture and Western New South Wales)**—I recognise Kevin Dupe' for his contribution as Chief Executive Officer of the Regional Australia Bank and congratulate him on his decision to retire from the position to explore other challenges. Almost 25 years ago, Kevin began his influence over what was then New England Credit Union with assets of some \$160 million, to grow to an asset range of some \$2.5 Billion as the Regional Australia Bank, despite the difficulties of the GFC and the COVID economic crisis. With the business in a healthy shape with good strategy and a strong balance sheet Kevin believes that it is a good time to step back. Kevin gives credit to his leadership team's achievements, but it is Kevin himself at the helm of the leadership team. I congratulate Kevin for the success he brought to the Regional Australia Bank which carries an overflow of benefits for his staff and bank customers. I commend Kevin for his work ethic, integrity and his expertise in banking.

#### **ST PATRICK'S DAY FESTIVAL**

**Dr MARJORIE O'NEILL (Coogee)**—I congratulate Karen Murphy, President of the Sydney St Patricks day festival and her committee on another fantastic St Patrick's Day event. Mr Speaker, the committee is amazing as they have navigated, rain, hail, extreme heat and a pandemic! This year, Sydney was one of the few cities in the world able to enjoy St Patrick's Day celebrations. With live music from some of Sydney's best-known Irish acts, world-class Irish dance performances, and an opportunity to taste some of the best Irish food in Sydney, all overlooking the iconic Sydney Opera House, the St Paddy's Day festival is a must attend event, whether you're Irish or not! The year's event also included Generation Green, a mixed multimedia project that featured stories that capture the unique experience of Aussies with Irish heritage, celebrating the profound links between our two countries, organised through the Consulate General of Ireland in Sydney. As someone with Irish heritage, the unique richly varied group of young Australians whose Irish ancestry spans the colonial era echoes strongly with me. Once again congratulations to the committee, let's hope next year the Australian weather can shine through more than the Irish!

#### **UNSW BLUES DINNER**

**Dr MARJORIE O'NEILL (Coogee)**—On the 12th of March, I was lucky enough to attend the University of New South Wales Blues and Sports Awards Dinner. Community sport was hit hard by the pandemic, with many competitions abandoned, shortened and delayed as we worked to contain the pandemic. The awards payed tribute to the resilience of the UNSW sporting community, including athletes, coaches, staff and volunteers. Congratulations to the UNSW Hockey Club were presented with the 2020 Club of the Year Award for their incredible resilience throughout their season. Female Student Athlete of the Year Matilda McDonnell relocated to Queensland with her Giants teammates for the entirety of the Super Netball season, continuing her Law and Psychology degree from the hub. Dylan Martin was awarded the Male Student Athlete of the Year after being added to the Australian Kookaburras men's hockey squad for the Tokyo Olympics. UNSW Taekwondo Club President, Miriam Abd Elmesseh, was the inaugural winner of the Alex Blackwell Award, recognising her contribution to women's sport and women in Taekwondo. A total of 26 Blues were awarded on the night, 13 of which went to some brilliant, up and coming female athletes. Congratulations to all.

#### **PRATTEN PARK COMMUNITY SPORTS AND BOWLING CLUB**

**Ms JO HAYLEN (Summer Hill)**—Ashfield's Pratten Park Community Sport and Bowling Club (or the Pratto) is getting a new lease of life through an exciting new multicultural music initiative. A \$54,000 grant from Live Music Australia has allowed the Pratto, one of Sydney's oldest bowlos, to host culturally diverse live music sets twice a month, with performances by Balkan jazz troupes, Indigenous Folk artists, Lebanese rock bands, and East African hip hop groups. This new chapter for the Pratto brings together an unlikely duo in 92-year-old club president Gladys Barnes and underground record producer Richard Petkovic, who are both eager for the Pratto to reflect the changing multicultural community of Ashfield. The Pratto has already made a name for itself on the

live music scene, hosting the Inner West Music Fest and Jazz at the Pratto series. The Club has also partnered with Metro Assist in a social enterprise providing refugees and migrants the opportunity to learn cooking and hospitality skills and a pathway to employment. Thank you to Gladys, Richard, and all the staff at Pratto, for creating a new live music space for up-and-coming new multicultural and POC artists.

#### **ST GEORGE SAINTS**

**Mr MARK COURE (Oatley)**—The St George area is a breeding ground for cricketing icons from legends like Sir Donald Bradman right through to current stars like Moses Henriques. Therefore, it is no surprise that the St George Saints had an excellent season last year. One match I would like to mention is the local derby between St George and Sutherland. This was yet another thrilling match in the rivalry between both sides who compete annually for the Norm O'Neill trophy. Tom Engelbrecht top-scored for the Saints with an impressive 58 off 64 balls and was supported by Mitchell Gray and Kaleb Phillips who helped reach 207 in 44 overs. The Saints fought hard taking the first five wickets for just 30 runs and were dismissed for 81 runs thanks to some outstanding bowling from Captain Nicholas Stapleton and Luke Bartier. I wish to see all players training hard during the winter season so that they can beat their Sutherland rivals again later in the year.

#### **GALA FOR LIFE**

**Mr GUY ZANGARI (Fairfield)**—It was my great pleasure to attend the Gala for Life, a fundraising event to raise money for the support of women in crisis pregnancies with the assistance of Diamond Women, an organisation which counsels and supports women in this situation. I was joined at this event by my Parliamentary colleagues the Reverend Hon Fred Nile MLC; Dr Hugh McDermott MP Member for Prospect; Mrs Tanya Davies MP Member for Mulgoa; and Mr Kevin Connelly MP Member for Riverstone. The event was well-organised and took place in a COVID-safe manner. I commend the efforts of Ms Bridget Spinks, Founder of Gala for Life and the organising committee for their successful efforts in raising funds for this cause. I would also like to take this opportunity to acknowledge the work of Ms Jennifer Gurry, Diamond Women Founder; and Ms Preethy Abraham, Diamond Women Counsellor and the team. Diamond Women does so much to support and counsel women and their families, who are facing and unplanned pregnancy. I congratulate Gala For Life and Diamond Women on a very successful event.

#### **PAULA CONTINENTAL CAKES**

**Mr GUY ZANGARI (Fairfield)**—I would like to commend the efforts of Paula Continental Cakes located in Barbara Street, Fairfield. Owners Victor and Aglae migrated from Chile South America 40 years ago and opened their first store in Liverpool in 1983. Paula serves delicious Chilean food including empanadas, hot dogs and sandwiches along with cakes, desserts and coffee and many more tasty treats. The store also offers takeaway for their customers. Daughters Daniela and Claudia, alongside with their parents, run the family business with Daniela being a local in the Fairfield area. Daniela and Claudia were very appreciative for the loyalty of their customers during the Covid-19 lockdown period. Although it was takeaway only, Paula Continental Cakes maintained trade, their delicious food still in demand. I commend Paula Continental Cakes for their perseverance during the COVID-19 pandemic and wish them every success in the future.

#### **REBECCA TORRANCE**

**Mr MARK COURE (Oatley)**—I acknowledge Rebecca Torrance from the Rotary Club of St George for all of her outstanding work on behalf of the organisation. I am always hearing from the Founder, Vimla Hayman that Rebecca is a fantastic volunteer and that both members of the organisation and the wider community are appreciative of her services. Rebecca is an active volunteer and she is always there to help out with barbecues, fundraising events and the Rotary Youth Leadership Program. It is for this reason that it was an honour to recognise her with an Individual Achievement Award as part of the 2020 St George Community Awards last year. These annual awards acknowledge some of the many hard working individuals and groups throughout the region who go above and beyond every day to make our community even better. Rebecca is a very deserving recipient of this award and I wish her all the best in her future endeavours. I would also like to thank Vimla Hayman for her role in mentoring Rebecca to allow her to achieve the things she has. Well done to both of you.

#### **KIDS OF MACARTHUR**

**Mr GREG WARREN (Campbelltown)**—There are a lot of people who undertake extraordinary work in Campbelltown that fly under the radar. The list is too long to name but I would like to particularly recognise the team from one of the Macarthur's regions most important charities – the Kids of Macarthur Health Foundation. Kids of Macarthur was founded way back in 2000 with a simple aim – to help improve the health of children in our region. The charity has certainly done this by fundraising and purchasing much-needed equipment. To date, equipment has been donated to eight units in Campbelltown and Camden hospitals. It's an incredible feat from the extremely dedicated and driven team at Kids of Macarthur. Importantly, much of the equipment purchased means

that children are able to be treated locally rather than having to travel to other hospitals. It makes a huge difference to not only the children but also their families. The Kids of Macarthur team have invested a lot of time and energy into making lives better for local children and their families. On behalf of those patients, families and the rest of our community, thank you to the team at Kids of Macarthur.

#### **EMERGENCY SERVICES**

**Mr GREG WARREN (Campbelltown)**—We have all seen the pictures over the past couple of days. Rivers overflowing, houses being washed away – the downpour and floods have been nothing short of devastating for many parts of our state. Many people have bunkered down inside, waiting for the rain to pass. However, there have also been thousands of others who have willingly done the opposite. Many of those thousands people are proud members of the State Emergency Services. Here in Campbelltown, we have our own band of passionate and dedicated SES members. They are an incredibly passionate and selfless bunch whose work often goes unheralded. However, I believe it would be remiss of me, given the current severe weather events, not to pay tribute to Campbelltown SES volunteers. While our community has remained largely unscathed compared to other parts of the state, our SES members have still been busy and more than willing to help. I know the members don't join the SES for the accolades. Nevertheless, it is important as a community that we acknowledge the contributions of those members. On behalf of Campbelltown, thank you for all your efforts.

#### **COOLAMON ROTARY CLUB FIFTIETH BIRTHDAY**

**Ms STEPH COOKE (Cootamundra)**—I take this opportunity to acknowledge the Coolamon Rotary Club on its 50th Birthday. This is an incredible milestone as we celebrate half a century of the Coolamon Rotary Club. For the past 50 years the members of the Coolamon Rotary Club have gone above and beyond to make life better for others. The Club's Rotarians are constant in our communities, whether it's managing markets, organising car parking, helping out at clearing sales, or being part of the all-important sausage sizzle. Time is our most precious resource, and the members of this club regularly give theirs to improve the experiences of others. I would like to extend my thanks to the members of this club for your amazing work.

#### **NARRANDERA SHIRE COUNCIL**

**Ms STEPH COOKE (Cootamundra)**—I take this opportunity to congratulate the Narrandera Shire Council for their recent success at the 2020 Sustainable Communities Tidy Towns Awards. The Narrandera Shire Council took out the Return and Earn Litter Prevention Award with the Narrandera Reverse Vending Machine. These awards are a successful long-time initiative of the Keep Australia Beautiful Council. I am so proud of the Narrandera Shire Council and acknowledge the hard work they do for the community in keeping the town tidy. This encourages people to visit the region and utilise the great facilities the town has to offer.

#### **CHARLIE CAIRNCROSS**

**Mr GEOFF PROVEST (Tweed)**—I wish to acknowledge a little legend from Fingal. Eight year old Charlie Cairncross was recently invited to attend NSW Parliament to receive an award for his volunteer efforts during the black summer bushfires. Charlie has become the youngest recipient to be awarded the Youth Conservation Award from the Australian Wildlife Society. Charlie and his mum have been a safe haven for injured and sick wildlife for some years now but during the Nation's worst bushfire season they both travelled south to help the wildlife shelters. This little legend came up with an idea to make a short film to present to preschools across Australia and asking children to help him by sponsoring a joey – this resulting in over \$13,000 being raised to assist in the recovering of the many injured animals. Congratulations Charlie, you truly are an inspiring young boy.

#### **MARY MORTIMER**

**Mr ALEX GREENWICH (Sydney)**—On behalf of the Sydney electorate, I would like to put on record another strong female community leader from Pyrmont – Mary Mortimer. Friends of the Pyrmont Community Centre group was an early initiative of Mary and partner Donald Denoon, liaising with the City of Sydney to make sure the facility meets local needs and expands as the community has expanded. The groups and activities Mary started or contributes to include Landcare, Pyrmont Sings, Pyrmont History Group, monthly community dinners and the huge fundraising effort Christmas in Pyrmont. She continues to be a strong advocate for sporting and recreation facilities on the peninsula, along with active transport. Mary has gone on to play a vital community coordinating role, bringing together local groups and initiatives to build a strong community voice through the Council of Pyrmont/Ultimo Associations and a strategic approach to planning for the area. I know Mary as someone who is always searching for ways to improve the area and build a stronger community. I thank Mary for nearly two decades of strong progressive leadership and active community building. Her contribution has made inner Sydney a more inclusive and more just place.

### **PUBLIC DENTAL HEALTH WORKERS**

**Mr ALEX GREENWICH (Sydney)**—On behalf of the Sydney electorate, I acknowledge the ongoing work of public dental health workers during the COVID pandemic. While there has been strong community support and public thanks for frontline health workers, I'm aware that many in the community may not have realised that dental health workers have continued to carry out their work with patients throughout. This is vital work, as problems with teeth can cause serious and long term health impacts. By its very nature, dental work requires very close personal contact and this proximity has increased risk during a pandemic with a virus that has many unknown features. Indeed we've been learning about its transmission as we go. I thank those frontline dental health workers for keeping these vital services going.

### **KOGARAH LEBANESE-AUSTRALIAN HSC GRADUATES 2020**

**Mr CHRIS MINNS (Kogarah)**—The Cultural Forum Sydney last night held their annual function to honour Lebanese-Australian graduates in the South-Eastern Sydney area who achieved outstanding results in the 2020 HSC. To achieve such outstanding results is an incredible accomplishment in any year, but particularly in 2020 given the exceptional challenges faced by these students. It is a testament to each students' ability as well as to the support of their schools and families that they were so successful. Congratulations to these young Lebanese-Australian students on your outstanding achievements, I look forward to seeing and hearing about all your future endeavours. Thanks to Sam Hoballah from Cultural Forum Sydney for providing an avenue to recognise and support these students and their families.

### **TUNCURRY BEACH BOWLING CLUB**

**Mr STEPHEN BROMHEAD (Myall Lakes)**—I congratulate the Tuncurry Beach Bowling Club which has been named as a finalist in two categories for this year's ClubsNSW Clubs and community awards. The club is in the running to take out the drought relief award thanks to their 'Give us a Break' competition and well as the health and wellbeing category thanks to its 'Man Walk' initiative. 'The Man Walk' is an amazing initiative which has created a safe space for men from all walks of life to open up about their mental health and find support in peers; as they take a stroll every Monday morning. I again commend the great initiatives of the Tuncurry Bowls Club and wish them luck ahead of the ClubsNSW Clubs and community awards on the 20th of May in Sydney.

### **OSSIE SELWOOD FORSTER TENNIS CLUB**

**Mr STEPHEN BROMHEAD (Myall Lakes)**—I recognise Ossie Selwood from Forster Tennis Club, one his outstanding volunteer efforts for the club. Ossie has been club captain since 1993 and is a life member of the club. He goes above and beyond for the club and has been running weekly raffles at the Forster Bowling club for almost 15 years. All the proceeds from the raffle go into a special fund for the development of Junior Tennis at the Forster Tennis Club. The program primarily helps kids starting out in the sport, with families able to apply for financial assistance to cover the costs associated with tournaments and coaching. The program also occasionally supports kids to purchase quality racquets or funds their first tennis lesson.

### **TERRY BOATSWAIN**

**Mr CHRISTOPHER GULAPTIS (Clarence)**—I offer my congratulations to Terry Boatswain who has volunteered for two decades with the NSW State Emergency Service. This is a huge achievement and the community owes Terry, and every one of our wonderful volunteers, a huge debt of gratitude for the incredible work that they do in saving lives and property during periods of disaster. On Behalf of the House I thank you Terry for your years of selfless service to your community.

### **CLEAN4SHORE**

**Mr MATT KEAN (Hornsby—Minister for Energy and Environment)**—Today I would like to acknowledge a small not-for-profit group making a big difference along our shoreline. Clean4Shore is based on the Central Coast and has been cleaning the foreshores of the Hawkesbury River, Brisbane Waters and Tuggerah Lakes for the past 10 years. They go out twice a week and with the help of students, youth groups, community and corporate groups they help ensure our waterways are free of litter and rubbish. I know there are a number of schools from Hornsby who participate in the program including Asquith Boys and Asquith Girls High School. They have also been acknowledged by Landcare for their amazing work with the People's Choice Award. Run by Graham Johnston, known to everyone as Jono, he has done an amazing job for the last decade running this organisation. Congratulations Clean4Shore and thank you for helping ensure our planet is better and cleaner than we found it!

### GWENDA MARY BOURCHIER

**Mr DUGALD SAUNDERS (Dubbo)**—On the 28th of January, Narromine local Gwenda Mary Bouchier celebrated her 100th birthday. Known as Gwen to her friends and family, she celebrated this considerable milestone surrounded by friends, her four children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren in her family home of 70 years. Gwen is a gem within our community. In 1987, she won an Australia Day Award for local Citizen of the Year, and in 1988, her musical excellence was recognised through the Community Good Deed Award for the Orana Region. When asked the secret to a long life, Gwen suggested, "keeping things simple and living happily". Gwen continues to be a great example to us all, and I wish her health, happiness and all the best in the future.

### TRIBUTE TO JOHN MILLER, OAM

**Mr RAY WILLIAMS (Castle Hill)**—It is with great sadness that I advise of the passing of John Miller OAM, a stalwart of the Hawkesbury community for decades, being both an advocate and historian of the local area. John moved to the area in 1955 and since then was a tireless advocate for the community, never slowing down in fighting for the betterment of the area, as well as being a great local historian. John was particularly passionate about reducing the risks of floods in the Hawkesbury, having risen to the rank of Chief Warden in the Hawkesbury SES. Mr Miller was also a passionate campaigner for raising the Warragamba Dam wall in order to mitigate the risk of large scale floods such as we are seeing at present. I'm sure Mr Miller would have been thrilled to know that the current NSW Government has committed to completing that project. John was also an advocate for a 3rd Hawkesbury Crossing, which is currently in the planning phase. John is survived by his wife of 67 years, Beryl, 3 children, 7 grand-children and 6 great grandchildren. I thank John for his service to the community.

### HAWKESBURY FLOODS

**Mr RAY WILLIAMS (Castle Hill)**—I would like to recognise the tremendous community spirit currently on display across the Hills and Hawkesbury regions during the current mass flooding event occurring in the Hawkesbury-Nepean Valley. As usual, the members of the Hawkesbury SES have been out in the streets through the night assisting with the 3000 evacuations of people caught up in flood waters in the region, and dealing with some of the 8000 calls for assistance that have been made across the Greater Sydney Region. Footage has been seen of SES crews in inflatable rescue boats, risking their own safety on the floodwaters, in order to get people out of their homes. These volunteers are, as usual, to be thanked for their work and dedication. Within my electorate of Castle Hill, I would like to thank the Castle Hill RSL for opening their doors as an evacuation centre, again proving itself a great community centre. I'd also like to thank the Castle Hill Showground for opening their stables for livestock impacted by the flood, currently housing 30 horses, 20 goats and a few dogs, with a mobile vet being available on site. If anyone is in need of assistance my Office is able to assist.

### ST JOHN AMBULANCE, BLACKTOWN DIVISION

**Dr HUGH McDERMOTT (Prospect)**—On Tuesday the 23rd of March 2021, I had the pleasure of visiting the St John Ambulance Blacktown Division and meeting the members of the team. Blacktown's Division is ably led by Superintendent Keith Avery, and it was great to meet with local members who are so willing to volunteer to benefit our community. St John Ambulance has an amazing legacy of volunteering to help save lives and prevent harm through First Aid. They provide the training, mentoring and resources that allow the thousands of volunteers around the country to assist our society. In Blacktown the team is on the front line at local community events and it was a great opportunity to see where they prepare, train and meet, in order to continue advancing the legacy of St John Ambulance. The history of the organisation dates back 130 years in Australia and it is fantastic to see the team of the Blacktown Division continuing with this amazing journey with everything they do. I commend and thank Superintendent Keith Avery and everyone involved in the St John Ambulance Blacktown Division. Thank you for your continued efforts to save lives through First Aid.

### ST THOMAS THE APOSTLE CHALDEAN & ASSYRIAN CHURCH

**Dr HUGH McDERMOTT (Prospect)**—On Friday the 19th of March, 2021 I had the pleasure of attending Mass at St Thomas The Apostle Chaldean & Assyrian Church in Bossley Park. We had the opportunity to hear Mass delivered by Parish Priest, Monsignor Paul Mingana who in combination with his parishioners were incredibly welcoming. It was a fantastic opportunity to celebrate Mass together. The Parish represents the Assyrian Chaldean community where many people have fled war and persecution to commence new lives in Australia. Prospect is home to the largest Chaldean community in the state and the country. Chaldeans are the indigenous inhabitants of Mesopotamia—today known as northern Iraq. We are fortunate that many have chosen Australia as their home. St Thomas' provides for the community including running Youth Groups, Urhi School to develop language, as well as local charitable works to help those in need. I would like to acknowledge and thank Bishop His Grace Archbishop Mar Amel Nona and Monsignor Paul Mingana for their leadership of the Assyrian Chaldean community, especially after a challenging 2020 and look forward to working together in the future.

### **MIDDLE HARBOUR YACHT CLUB WINS AT COMBINED CLUBS INSHORE SERIES**

**Ms FELICITY WILSON (North Shore)**—I congratulate Rob Aldis who recently won Division One aboard Khaleesi in the Sydney Harbour Combined Clubs Inshore Series. Rob lives on the North Shore and is the Chairman of Middle Harbour Yacht Club. The Combined Clubs Inshore Series was established to promote inter-club competition and provide the opportunity to sail in larger fleets. There are eight inshore passage races over six racing days, starting in September and ending in March. The 2020-2021 Series included members from five sailing and yacht clubs around Sydney Harbour, including Middle Harbour Yacht Club and Royal Sydney Yacht Squadron based in Kirribilli. Middle Harbour Yacht Club is one of Australia's largest yacht clubs and is recognised as a national leader in sail training and associated education programs. Overall the Club had a successful final racing day of this season's Combined Clubs Inshore Series. Congratulations to Rob and all the Middle Harbour Yacht Club boats who participated in the competition.

### **BALMORAL SWIM FOR CANCER**

**Ms FELICITY WILSON (North Shore)**—I would like to acknowledge the 'Balmoral Swim for Cancer', initiated by the Mosman community in my electorate, which has been raising funds for cancer related charities since 1990. A number of events are included in the calendar, all organised by the locally based Balmoral Beach Club and a number of founding members since 2005. The Balmoral Team Challenge is one of those events and it was held on Sunday March 14. Congratulations to the overall winners HMAS Penguin team 'Lay Flat Larry's', and thank you to all those in our community who contributed to the fundraising efforts. Unfortunately due to the inclement weather the Schools Relay Challenge on Sunday March 21 was postponed. A number of my local schools will be battling it out, both in the water and in their fundraising efforts. Good luck to Queenwood, Wenona, Mosman High, Sydney Church of England Grammar, Mosman Prep and Redlands. The next event will be Sunday March 28 for the 1, 2 or 5 km 'Around the Bay' swim. Good luck to all participating. Thank you to Balmoral Swim and all the volunteers for all that you do.

### **LUCAS HEIGHTS COMMUNITY SCHOOL**

**Ms MELANIE GIBBONS (Holsworthy)**—I acknowledge Lucas Heights Community School Year 8 students, Bronte and Ruby, for their talented work in creating murals to be displayed in the school's front foyer. The murals were created in correlation with the school's NAIDOC Week celebrations last year. The two students collaborated on the design of the murals, and they serve as a worthy backdrop for the foyer and for visitors to see when entering the school. The murals were designed to provoke reflection, in line with last year's NAIDOC Week's theme. The mural depicts the Aboriginal Flag, with the words 'Always Was, Always Will Be', as the main feature of the artwork. Once again I would like to congratulate year 8 students, Bronte and Ruby, for producing such a talented and contemplative mural for the school community. It will allow the school to always reflect on the shared past, present and future of our nations. Thankyou.

### **HOLY TRINITY ANGLICAN CHURCH LIVERPOOL**

**Ms MELANIE GIBBONS (Holsworthy)**—I acknowledge Holy Trinity Anglican Church Liverpool for being successful recipients of the 2021 COVID Community Support Grants Program. The Church's project is titled Ministry of Mercy, and funding will go towards assisting members of the community who need support. Funds will provide ethnic and cultural food supplies, groceries and toiletries to those in crisis around the Lurnea, Casula, Prestons and South Liverpool suburbs. Funding will also go towards providing nappies and milk formula to women who are victims of Domestic Abuse. They are supporting women from Syria, Iraq, Nigeria, Cameroon, Sri Lanka, Pakistan and Sudan. I commend Holy Trinity Anglican Church Liverpool for their Ministry of Mercy project – it will definitely go a long way in supporting vulnerable members of our community who need it most. Once again I congratulate Holy Trinity Anglican Church Liverpool for their successful project and thank the NSW Government for funding such a worthy cause. Thank you.

### **ULLADULLA SURF FUNDRAISER**

**Mrs SHELLEY HANCOCK (South Coast—Minister for Local Government)**—Six Ulladulla surfers will be using their skills and talents to raise funds this April to help remote communities in Indonesia and the Solomon Islands improve birthing and childcare services. Kurt Nyholm, Marty McGrath, Brett Burcher, Aidan Lewand-Parsons, Russell Bierke and Katharine Turk are all taking part in SurfAid, which started in 1999 on a regular surf trip to the islands off the coast of Sumatra. Dr Dave Jenkins was on a holiday which changed his life, realising that this incredible surf location was also home to malaria, malnutrition and inadequate living standards for women and children. To raise funds, the Ulladulla team is holding an online raffle which will be drawn at Cupitt's Winery on Sunday March 28, with the major prize a Heli Escapes helicopter trip from Sydney to the south coast, lunch at Cupitts and back to Sydney again. I encourage everyone to get behind this worthy cause and enter the raffle, and thank our local surf community for supporting this fantastic initiative.

### ALEXANDER PERRIE & CO

**Ms ELENi PETINOS (Miranda)**—I acknowledge Alexander Perrie & Co, a manufacturer of fire-fighting vehicles and equipment located in the Miranda Electorate. Since 1946, Alexander Perrie & Co has supported Australian manufacturing and the future of industry by upskilling young people. Despite the difficulties faced during the COVID-19 pandemic, the company was able to increase employment by 25 per cent due to NSW Government's investment in deploying new and upgraded fire trucks and vehicles. Importantly, Alexander Perrie & Co now employ 37 skilled individuals, 70 per cent of whom are local residents. On 5 February 2021, I toured the Alexander Perrie & Co facility with our Premier, the Hon Gladys Berejiklian MP and the Minister for Police and Emergency Services, the Hon David Elliott MP, to see some of the investment in the fleet program that will be deployed across NSW by July. I thank Managing Director Nicole Perrie and her team including Erin Horley, Rachel Rabawara, Steven Marelic, Peter Crumpton and Peter Mackintosh for their hospitality and shared insights into domestic manufacturing. I commend the team at Alexander Perrie & Co for building the fire trucks and equipment that will ensure brigades are equipped to best protect our communities.

### ANSTO BIG IDEAS COMPETITION

**Ms ELENi PETINOS (Miranda)**—I congratulate Alexe Usher and Tahlia McLellan of Gynea Technology High School who were among the six winners of ANSTO's 2020 national award as part of the Big Ideas Competition. The Big Ideas Competition invites students from across the country to investigate a major scientific discovery by an Australian scientist who inspires them, and draw from this inspiration for their own 'big idea' which must apply science to solve a modern-day problem. In order to combat ocean pollution, specifically microplastics, Alexe and Tahlia developed a Micropoly Anemone Fish which operates robotically to collect polymers from the sea. The girls worked tirelessly through their lunch breaks during terms 2 and 3 of 2020 to develop and create the project. The robotic fish relies on solar energy to move with the current, is tracked by GPS and is filled with bacteria to break down the polymer along with a double-carbon filter which will remove excess waste. I commend both Alex and Tahlia for their incredible work, alongside the teachers of Gynea Technology High School who nurture and grow these brilliant minds.

### HSC SHOWCASE 2020

**Mr NATHANIEL SMITH (Wollondilly)**—Each year we celebrate the exemplary art performances and projects submitted by Higher School Certificate (HSC) students and display those works during a virtual and travelling exhibition known as ARTEXPRESS, which forms part of the 2021 HSC Showcase. This year's showcase season highlights the resilience of 2020 HSC students who channelled uncertainty into creativity in the context of a global pandemic. Students in my own electorate of Wollondilly also had to contend with bushfires and floods. It is with a great sense of pride that I acknowledge from my electorate Matthew Hardy and James Doughty of Oxley College in Burradoo and Gianni Meyers of Frensham College in Mittagong. This is an incredible honour and a reflection of their amazing works in sculpting, painting and stage respectively. I encourage everyone to find some time to check out the works of Matthew, James, Gianni and the other 400 HSC students that will have their works on display.

### PHEASANTS NEST RFS

**Mr NATHANIEL SMITH (Wollondilly)**—Last month I had the pleasure of meeting members of the Pheasants Nest Rural Fire Service. Whilst there, I delivered three cases of hand sanitiser which had previously been donated by Good360, and chatted with the volunteers and thanked them for their continuous and generous contributions to our community in keeping us safe during the bushfire season. I want to pay tribute to each and every one of them and acknowledge their leaders Aunty Glenda Chalker and Captain Max Lazarus.

### HEADSHAVE FOR MUM

**Mrs LESLIE WILLIAMS (Port Macquarie)**—I acknowledge the 'Headshave for Mum' fundraiser at SeaSalt Café held on Saturday 6 March in support of Port Macquarie nurse Jenny Patterson who was diagnosed with breast cancer in November 2020. It is often said in my electorate that when the chips are down the community is first on the scene to roll up their sleeves opening their wallets to help others in need. This is precisely what occurred when tickets sold out in record time to support Jenny Patterson in the Headshave for Mum campaign. In an overwhelming display of support for Jenny, eight family members and friends joined together in unison to participate in what could best be described as a shave-athon to raise money for the Cancer Council NSW and the Mid North Coast Cancer Institute. Before the event, the community had already donated an astounding \$5,000 online to the awesome team of eight who sacrificed their beloved locks on the day to raise vital funds for cancer research and support services. A wonderful woman who has provided quality and compassionate healthcare for many years to her patients, I wish Jenny all the best in her recovery.

**CLAUDIA TODD - REACHOUT CHARITY**

**Mrs LESLIE WILLIAMS (Port Macquarie)**—I recognise a wonderful fundraising initiative by Hastings swimmer Claudia Todd for participating in the 'Laps For Life' challenge to support online mental health services. Taking a stand to create awareness on mental health problems effecting our youth of today is former State swimmer Claudia Todd who is preparing to embark on a massive 20km swimming challenge for the ReachOut online charity. Claudia has already commenced her fundraising campaign to complete two or three swimming sessions in the Port Macquarie Olympic Pool per week, with a goal to raise at least \$1000 for her charity. To date Claudia has achieved over 10 laps in the pool, through a rigorous training schedule that entails 50 to 100 laps each week to accomplish her objective before the end of March. Sadly, results show that suicide is the leading cause of death for young people in Australia, overtaking car accidents and cancer. The ReachOut charity offers self-help information, peer-support programs and referral tools for parents and young people experiencing some form of trauma or mental illness in their lives. An inspirational young women, I congratulate Claudia Todd for advocating for better mental health outcomes in our younger generation.

**BALLINA CHAMBERS OF COMMERCE**

**Ms TAMARA SMITH (Ballina)**—I congratulate the women of Ballina Chamber of Commerce for their successful International Women's Day luncheon at the Ballina RSL Club. I was proud to be a sponsor and support this worthwhile recognition of women in our community. Through the event the organisers encouraged their peers and colleagues to support women now and into the future by taking the "Choose to Challenge" pledge. The event attracted phenomenal women from around the region and a number of representatives from local schools, including Emmanuel Anglican College and Ballina Coast High School. Guest speaker was Cate McQuillen, award-winning writer and director of *Dirtgirlworld*, the empowering children's television series. Through her talks and TV series, Cate reflects positive and non-stereotypical representations of women and girls and promotes the full and equal participation of women in the community. Cate's work also speaks to the rights of nature and promotes a love and respect of nature for children into adulthood. Many thanks to Jacqui Patterson as MC, whose own life experiences model strong female leadership, and to the event's official charity - the breast cancer support group "Ballina Bosom Buddies" who do incredible work supporting survivors and patients through the cancer journey.

**#METOOBYRON SHIRE CIRCLE FOR WOMEN**

**Ms TAMARA SMITH (Ballina)**—I recognise the initiative of two Byron Shire women in setting up a support group for survivors of sexual assault. Margot Burton and Joana Sponsel, themselves survivors, have created a safe group to support women who have experienced sexual assault or abuse. Individuals that attend this support group are met with acceptance and compassion, are able to express themselves, find peer-to-peer connection and find recovery and healing. The group provides a space to connect with others who can understand and empathise with this type of traumatising experience and know the level of impact it has on their lives. With only a few such groups available, this Byron Shire initiative allows women to feel less alone, enjoy a sense of community and find validation on their healing journey. It is a meeting place for women but is also LGBTQ+ friendly, open to anyone who identifies as a woman, gender non-conforming or non-binary. I applaud Margot and Joana's project for creating unity and unquestioning support at a time when there is such a clear need for it.

**O'BRIEN CENTRE ORANGE**

**Mr PHILIP DONATO (Orange)**—I wish to recognise the O'Brien Centre in Orange. The O'Brien Centre is a dedicated sanctuary where people living with a mental illness, their carers, family and friends can safely meet and socialise. The O'Brien Centre is a mental health support group which is managed by the Mid-Western Consumer Advisory Group, and has been operating continuously at the same site in the Bloomfield medical precinct for the past 22 years. People from as far away as Bathurst and Cowra travel to join with others in activity each week in the tranquil atmosphere of the O'Brien Centre. The O'Brien Centre is run by a team of passionate and dedicated volunteers who provide services and activities to complement clinical and health services for people living with mental illness. The service offers transport to and from the centre for their patrons, providing respite for families and carers, and nutritional meals. Activities provided by the O'Brien Centre include listening to music, playing pool, cooking barbeque meals, gardening, art, kitchen and cooking lessons, bike riding, library, basketball, and carpentry work. Thank you to all the volunteers and supporters of the O'Brien Centre, who make it possible for the community to benefit from this fantastic service.

**The House adjourned, pursuant to standing and sessional orders, at 23:31 until  
Wednesday 24 March 2021 at 09:30.**