

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY

Wednesday 9 August 2000

Mr Speaker (The Hon. John Henry Murray) took the chair at 10.00 a.m.

Mr Speaker offered the Prayer.

ROAD TRANSPORT (SAFETY AND TRAFFIC MANAGEMENT) AMENDMENT (BLOOD SAMPLING) BILL

Bill introduced and read a first time.

Second Reading

Ms MEAGHER (Cabramatta—Parliamentary Secretary), on behalf of Mr Scully [10.01 a.m.]: I move:

That this bill be now read a second time.

When there has been a road accident involving a casualty or when the police suspect that a driver or supervisor of a learner driver may be under the influence of alcohol or some other drug a blood sample can be taken to determine the concentration of alcohol or the presence of any other drug. The requirement on medical practitioners and nurses to take a blood sample for the purpose of determining the concentration of alcohol or the presence of any other drug is described under the Road Transport (Safety and Traffic Management) Act 1999. As the provisions of this Act require a medical practitioner or nurse to take blood samples, it is imperative that the Act provides for blood collection practices that are safe. In recent years new and safer blood collection practices, accepted as world's best practices, have emerged. These practices are being progressively adopted in our State because they significantly reduce the risk of infection transmission from either a needle-stick injury or from the splashing of contaminated blood onto exposed surface areas, such as the eyes.

The relevant provisions of the Road Transport (Safety and Traffic Management) Act 1999 currently do not provide the framework by which these world's best occupational health and safety practices can be employed. Understandably, medical practitioners and nurses support the adoption of the new blood collection practices for the purposes of the Act. The Government is committed to applying world's best practice in relation to the potentially dangerous tasks of collecting and dealing with blood samples. Consequently, the Roads and Traffic Authority, the Department of Health and the New South Wales Police Service have been working in partnership to develop and implement a blood sample collection procedure that improves occupational health and safety practices without compromising blood sample evidentiary veracity. The amendments as outlined in the Road Transport (Safety and Traffic Management) Amendment (Blood Sampling) Bill reflect agency agreement on those issues.

This bill ensures that the procedure for collecting blood, as required by the Road Transport (Safety and Traffic Management) Act 1999, emulates other blood sampling collection procedures in the health system. There are three scenarios provided for under the Road Transport (Safety and Traffic Management) Act 1999 in which a blood sample can be taken for determining blood alcohol concentration or the presence of any other drugs. The first scenario is provided for in section 18 of the Act whereby a person who is required to submit to a breath analysis can request that a blood test be made by a medical practitioner of the candidate person's choice to determine the question of sobriety. The second scenario, as dealt with in section 23 of the Act, relates to the case in which a person is taken to a hospital following a road accident. A medical practitioner or nurse must take a sample of the patient's blood for analysis as soon as practicable for the purpose of ascertaining the concentration of alcohol or the presence of alcohol or any other drug. The third scenario is catered for in section 27 of the Act. That is where a person has been arrested and the police inform a medical practitioner that, for the purposes of a sobriety assessment and/or a related drug analysis, a sample of that person's blood must be taken.

Let me explain the current blood-sampling practice common to all three scenarios. Using a hollow-bore needle and syringe a medical practitioner or nurse takes a blood sample from the donor. The sample is then decanted or divided into two equal portions in separate containers. One container is then given to the donor. The

other is sent to the prescribed laboratory for analysis. The prescribed laboratory is the Western Sydney Area Health Service, Division of Analytical Laboratories [DAL]. This practice poses health risks in two areas. Firstly, the practice of dividing or decanting a blood sample into two containers requires manipulation or handling of a hollow-bore needle and syringe. This presents the risk of exposure to contaminated blood either through needle-stick injury or from blood splash resulting from too much pressure being applied to the plunger of a syringe. In the process of decanting the blood sample many medical practitioners remove the needle from the syringe. The manual removal of a needle from a disposable syringe is inconsistent with infection control standards set out in the Medical Practice Regulation 1998.

Secondly, providing containers of blood directly to the general public poses a community health risk either from accidental exposure to contaminated blood or from a deliberate criminal act when the blood sample is used to threaten an innocent member of the public. Exposure to contaminated blood leads to a certain risk of contracting hepatitis B, hepatitis C, HIV or other blood-borne virus. Clearly, those risks to our health care workers and the community are too high, and I present the opportunity, through this bill, to reduce those risks. The key feature of the bill is that the dangerous practice of decanting blood samples will cease. Only one sample will be taken and immediately sealed in a container. That will allow the use of closed vacuum blood collection equipment, which allows blood to flow directly from the vein into a closed blood tube, thus eliminating potential needle-stick injuries and blood splash.

The single sealed sample is then forwarded for analysis to the DAL in accordance with established security requirements. Positive samples will be stored for up to 12 months at the DAL. Under the new blood collection system the blood sample will only be divided if the donor applies to the DAL for a subsample of the original blood sample for independent analysis. The DAL will, on application, divide the blood sample under controlled laboratory conditions and forward the subsample to a laboratory or medical practitioner nominated by the donor. Improving the occupational health and safety of staff and the community at large by changing the blood sample collection procedures has some administrative costs. Consequently, a modest fee of \$50 will be made payable where a donor applies for a subsample of blood to be made available for independent analysis. That fee will go towards covering the additional costs of administering the new procedures.

I am also proposing analogous amendments to cognate legislation. The Acts include the Marine (Boating Safety—Alcohol and Drugs) Act 1991, the Marine Safety Act 1998 and the Rail Safety Act 1993 as well as to the Rail Safety Regulation 1999. Train drivers and the pilots of ships, ferries, boats and tugs covered by those Acts can be required to submit a blood sample to test for the concentration of alcohol or the presence of other drugs. I am sure that honourable members will agree that this bill incorporates occupational health and safety standards that improve the safety of health care workers and the community at large. At the same time the evidentiary veracity of blood sample analysis, necessary for prosecution purposes, is not compromised. With this bill the Government is taking a lead in Australia to ensure the community has the safest and most reliable means of taking blood samples for drink and drug driving offences. These changes are consistent with this Government's commitment to law and order, to justice and to the health and safety of those health care workers charged with the responsibility of collecting the blood samples as well as to the community at large. I commend the bill to the House.

Debate adjourned on motion by Mr J. H. Turner.

RURAL ASSISTANCE AMENDMENT BILL

Second Reading

Debate resumed from 21 June.

Mr R. W. TURNER (Orange) [10.12 a.m.]: In supporting the amendments to the Rural Assistance Act I acknowledge that the head office of the Rural Assistance Authority is based in Orange. From time to time I have had discussions with its officers, who have always been very co-operative and flexible in their dealings with me. The authority is very important to farmers. It has been around for a very long time under various names, and applications for assistance are increasing. The authority expects about 5,000 applications this year. Unfortunately, I suppose that is an indication that the economy in rural areas is not improving. So it is important for the authority to remain in place to assist farmers wherever possible with loans at interest rates some percentage points below bank rates.

The authority has more flexibility than other lending authorities. In the 18 months since 1998 the authority provided more than \$10 million in farm business training grants to more than 10,000 New South Wales farmers—almost 30 per cent of farmers registered in the State—through the FarmBis training program. I must admit that I was not totally au fait with the fact that the authority provides that sort of assistance. It also provided about \$300,000 in low-interest loans to the chicken producers at Mangrove Mountain to help them stay afloat until they got back into business. This is a subject dear to my heart. Unfortunately, those producers are still waiting for exceptional circumstances assistance, which may not be forthcoming. But at least they received some relief through the Rural Assistance Authority.

I was also unaware that the authority provided \$241,000 of assistance following the Sydney hailstorms. The authority also provided assistance following the Newcastle earthquake. So in addition to providing widespread rural relief, the authority can provide other assistance in times of need. Nearly three-quarters of applications received by the authority are approved, and in the case of FarmBis the proportion is as high as 90 per cent. This suggests that applicants were provided with good information from banks or accountants before applying and that the authority is very flexible in dealing with applications.

I note that the authority has the ability in certain circumstances, subject to the Minister's approval, to waive debts altogether, including principal and interest. I am not sure how often that occurs but I hope the authority exercises that ability with compassion. As long as there are farmers they will need assistance to maintain their viability in the face of exceptional circumstances and to upgrade their farms. In some cases the authority knocks back applications in the best interests of farmers so that their agony is not prolonged. The Opposition supports the amendments. We hope that the authority will be appropriately funded for many years to come and will continue to provide assistance to maintain the viability of worthy farming operations in times of exceptional circumstances and to provide other assistance in times of emergency.

Mr PRICE (Maitland) [10.19 a.m.]: I support the Rural Assistance Amendment Bill. I note the successful operation of the Act over a number of years. I will first highlight some of the reasons for the amendments and then turn to the special assistance that is provided to the farming community.

The purpose of the amendments is to implement the findings of a national competition policy review. As honourable members know, this State is subject, as are all other States, to national competition policy reviews. Sometimes they are of benefit, and sometimes one has to wonder. The review critically examined the impact on the wider market of the farm family welfare and farm business support aspects of the Rural Assistance Authority Act. The bill proposes a number of important amendments to the Rural Assistance Authority Act 1989. The amendments have arisen as a consequence of a review conducted in accordance with the requirements of the National Competition Policy Agreement.

The provision of special assistance to farmers has a long history in New South Wales. The New South Wales Rural Assistance Authority [RAA] has its origins in the Farmers Relief Board, which was established in 1932. That board in itself was based on the Moratorium Act introduced by the Lang Government in the early 1930s. A major role of the relief board was to issue a stay order that prevented creditors taking action against indebted farmers. Soldier settlers and other small holding farmers affected by the Depression were among those protected by these orders. In 1939 the relief board became known as the Rural Reconstruction Board, and then in 1971 as the Rural Assistance Board. In 1989, following passage of the Rural Assistance Act, it became the Rural Assistance Authority.

Being an Act with direct market impacts, the New South Wales Rural Assistance Act of 1989 is subject to the principles of the National Competition Policy Agreement. This agreement commits all governments to undertake a review of legislation that restricts competition by this year, 2000. Honourable members would recall the somewhat trying time we had with accepting the requirement for deregulation of the New South Wales dairy industry as a result of the implementation of that competition policy. The agreement further requires that this type of legislation should not restrict competition unless it can be demonstrated that the anti-competitive aspects of the legislation are justified; that is, that the benefits to the community resulting from the legislation outweigh the costs incurred by the community arising from the legislation.

The national competition policy review was chaired by New South Wales Agriculture. The review group comprised representatives of the Rural Assistance Authority, New South Wales Treasury, New South Wales Agriculture, the Cabinet Office, the Department of Land and Water Conservation, the New South Wales Farmers Association and the New South Wales Rural Financial Counsellors Association. The review was completed in February last year. The national competition policy review team determined that the RAA plays an important role in rural communities. It also made a number of recommendations that it believes will reinforce the underlying principles of the current Act.

The main changes recommended to ensure that the New South Wales Rural Assistance Authority can continue to play its role are, firstly, to address the lack of clear objectives in the current Act by defining the objectives of the RAA as to the delivery of programs that promote the adoption of more efficient and sustainable farming practices and support rural communities in times of crisis. The second change is to ensure that assistance provided by the RAA remains relevant to the circumstances, by making it a requirement that a public benefit test be applied to all RAA assistance programs. The third change is to provide more effective service delivery by amalgamating the current "general", "special" and "relief" assistance into one program of assistance.

The fourth change relates to protection orders. As no orders have been issued for more than 10 years, and as the protection that they afforded is now largely available through the Farm Debt Mediation Act 1994, it was recommended that those provisions should be repealed. The fifth change is to address the lack of a clearly defined role for the Rural Assistance Authority Board in the current Act. To do that the board's functions were explicitly set out as follows: to advise the Minister in relation to rural assistance and disaster relief; where appropriate, to determine program guidelines to give effect to policies of the Government; and to report annually to the Minister on the effectiveness of programs and service delivery of the RAA.

The sixth change is to assist the board to perform its new and expanded role, by requiring the RAA to provide necessary information to the board. The final recommended change is to ensure that the composition of the board adequately reflects community views, by reviewing the composition of the board every five years. If implemented, these changes will ensure that the RAA remains closely focused on rural assistance issues, is better able to provide advice to the Minister of the effectiveness of individual programs, and has better capacity to respond to emerging industry assistance needs.

If I could now turn specifically to one of those programs, known as FarmBis. The Government acknowledges that farmers operate in a challenging business environment. The modern farmer has to be an efficient and competitive business person. My experience with the Tocal Agricultural College indicates just how business focused and up to date the modern farmer must be to survive in the business environment that currently prevails. FarmBis is an Australia-wide joint Federal-State program providing farm business training assistance. As the Minister pointed out in his second reading speech, in the 18 months since December 1998 the authority has provided more than \$10 million in farm business training grants to more than 10,000 New South Wales farmers through the FarmBis training program. That is almost 30 per cent of all registered farmers in New South Wales.

The New South Wales program is regarded as the benchmark for the delivery of FarmBis in Australia. Financial assistance is available in the form of non-repayable grants to assist farm business managers to fund the improvement of their farm business management skills, and thus increase their ability to resist and overcome financial challenges. The New South Wales Rural Assistance Authority operates New South Wales FarmBis to support and help farmers to improve their farm business in two ways: first, by funding up to 75 per cent of the cost of eligible training activities; and, second, by operating as a reference point for farmers by maintaining a database of information about training providers who are registered with New South Wales FarmBis. This enables farmers to access information on available courses, training costs, training providers and contact numbers. It also enables groups of farmers with common training needs to come together for courses of mutual benefit.

Assistance is provided for training in areas such as benchmarking and best practice and quality assurance, business planning, climate risk management, financial management, marketing, natural resource management, and succession planning. This is a matter that I have had a little to do with, again through the C. B. Alexander Foundation, which supports the Tocal Agricultural College. I must say that the success of the programs being run is significant, a fact well understood and appreciated by the industry.

The New South Wales Rural Assistance Authority has a long tradition of providing assistance to the rural sector and to small businesses affected by natural disasters. The authority is one of the conduits that deliver assistance to rural communities affected by natural disasters, industry downturns due to drought, and falling commodity prices. The authority assists farmers in need of financial and other forms of assistance as they adjust to newer and more efficient forms of production or, unfortunately, as some exit the farming industry.

Apart from the low-interest loans and training assistance the authority, as the body administering the Farm Debt Mediation Act, also oversees discussions between creditors and borrowers when things get to the point where each party needs to take stock of their relationship. Honourable members would recall that this Act was introduced by the Carr Labor Government, through the present Minister, and would know that it has been

extremely successful in providing the circuit breaker that was needed to prevent forced farm closures and to enable rearrangement of financial matters for many people involved in rural industries and farming. Of course, the review noted that some aspects of the current Act are now obsolete. Those matters have been addressed by this bill.

This amendment bill will ensure that the authority is able to continue to be the most effective rural adjustment assistance agency in Australia and that it remains responsive to the challenging needs of the rural sector as we enter the new millennium. The bill provides the changes required to provide the authority with the flexibility to continue to deliver substantial public benefits, both to farmers in regional New South Wales and to the many support industries that rely on them directly and indirectly for employment. By ensuring the authority continues to deliver programs that promote the adoption of more efficient and sustainable farming practices, this bill will enable the authority to continue to play a part in the development of the agricultural sector in New South Wales. By way of example, in 1997-98 only nine approvals were granted. However, more than 233 approvals were granted in 1998-99, with an average approval of \$52,200. In 1999-2000 some 88 approvals have been granted with an average approval of as much as \$48,300.

I support the proposal to simplify the assistance provisions and remove the authority's power to issue protection orders as these have been replaced by the Farm Debt Mediation Act 1994—which, as many honourable members will be aware, was introduced by the present Minister for Agriculture, and Minister for Land and Water Conservation when he was in Opposition. I support the proposal to clarify the role of the board as its current reference in the Act is not clear. The proposed amendments recognise the advisory role of the board and seek to ensure that the composition of the board will adequately reflect community views. These changes will clearly ensure that the RAA remains closely focused on rural assistance issues, is better able to provide advice to the Minister about the effectiveness of individual programs and has better capacity to respond to emerging industry assistance needs. In light of the punishment that rural industries have sustained in the past few years, I fully support the bill and commend it to the House.

Mr MARTIN (Bathurst) [10.31 a.m.]: I am happy to speak in support of the Rural Assistance Amendment Bill. As previous speakers in this debate have said, the Rural Assistance Authority [RAA] has been around in one form or another since 1932. It has had the odd facelift along the way and this bill proposes to streamline and update the authority's structure and operation. The authority is commonly known as the agency through which much assistance is provided to New South Wales farmers by both the State and Commonwealth governments. It is important to point out that it is a joint assistance operation on the part of the Federal and State governments. Assistance is provided in the form of low-interest loans for productivity improvements, flood protection loans, drought relief subsidies on loan interest charges, individual and group training grants and natural disaster assistance. We all know from the history of both this State and this country how important it is to offer assistance to people in rural industries in times of natural disaster. There have been many such examples in recent times, and I am sure that the honourable member for Murray-Darling will outline several appropriate instances to the House when he speaks to this bill.

The loans assistance portfolio, which is probably the most well-known aspect of the authority's work, currently comprises some \$78 million. In the coming year, the authority will provide a further \$7 million in low-interest loans of about 4 per cent, which will be very important to farmers in light of the rise in market interest rates. It will provide assistance to farmers through the Special Conservation Loans Scheme for capital works such as soil conservation, serrated tussock control, irrigation and water supply works, which have a beneficial impact on both farm productivity and the wider environment. In view of the debate about the environment and the environmental impact of farming, it is important that the farming community receives assistance so that it can tackle problems and look after the environment—the great majority of farmers are keen environmentalists—while improving the productivity of properties, which is crucial to the economies both of this State and of Australia.

Approximately \$3.5 million will be allocated through West 2000 Plus, which is an extension of the current West 2000 Rural Partnership program. It will be funded by almost \$6 million over three years, as was announced recently by the Premier. I note the presence in the House of the honourable member for Murray-Darling, who has been actively involved in that initiative and who I am sure can speak about it with more authority than I. The program provides ongoing rural restructuring assistance, training and skills development, and natural resource management to people in the Western Division. It will help develop alternative industries and thus diversify the economy of the region—which, in itself, is an important facet of the authority's operations. The Carr Labor Government will make an initial commitment of \$1 million to the introduction of a new Rural Partnership program in the Murrumbidgee area that aims to achieve profitable and self-reliant horticultural industries in the region.

This legislation was prompted by a wide-ranging review conducted under the auspices of the National Competition Policy Agreement. To be honest, I am not the greatest fan of everything that the national competition policy has touched over the years, but this has been an extremely positive outcome. The review group comprised the authority, New South Wales Treasury, New South Wales Agriculture, the Cabinet Office, the Department of Land and Water Conservation, the New South Wales Farmers Association and rural financial counsellors. The last two groups are obviously very important as they represent the people who will benefit from this scheme.

The review found that the authority was performing well overall and that its role in the wider market could be justified on the basis that the farm family assistance and farm business support that it provides address gaps in the market. It is important that the authority has the flexibility to adjust and to identify areas where other established bodies are not providing services. The natural disaster assistance loans and special conservation assistance loans are good examples of the types of assistance that are not provided by the banks and other private sector lenders. The review also found that the authority enjoys a good reputation in the wider rural community. Almost three-quarters of all assistance applications received by the authority are approved. For example, in the case of the Farmbis training program the applicant success rate is about 90 per cent.

As it has an obligation to manage government assistance prudently, it is not surprising that not all of the authority's customers are satisfied 100 per cent of the time or that they become unhappy occasionally when the authority refuses an application for assistance or requires borrowers to pay their arrears. I suppose that any lending and recuperation authority—particularly one focusing on rural New South Wales—that forced people to repay loans would not be popular. The banks have fallen into disfavour in rural New South Wales because of their rationalist policies. Despite the authority's role as a moneylender and debt collector, the review clearly demonstrated that the RAA enjoys on the whole a very good reputation in regional New South Wales.

I support the proposed amendments to the current Act because they will ensure that the authority remains an important part of the New South Wales agricultural community in future. Most importantly, it will fill the gaps—some of which are in high-risk areas—left by the traditional banks. That is the sort of support that our rural industries need. The bill proposes some major changes. It will ensure that the authority continues to deliver programs that promote the adoption of more efficient and sustainable farming practice and support rural communities in times of crisis. As I said earlier, we hope that such crises do not occur too often, but history has taught us that a crisis for rural industry may be waiting around the corner.

The bill will ensure that assistance is delivered simply, by amalgamating general, special and relief assistance into one program of assistance and streamlining the operations of the authority. It will remove the redundant protection orders provision. No orders have been issued for more than 10 years, and the protection they afforded is now largely available through the Farm Debt Mediation Act 1994. I pay tribute to my predecessor, Mr Mick Clough, who was instrumental in the development of that Act. The Minister for Agriculture was the shadow minister at that time but it was Mick Clough who went around the hustings, organised meetings with farmer groups throughout the State and worked tirelessly to make sure that the Act became a reality. It is one of many legacies Mick can look back on with pride. It is certainly time that these protection orders were repealed.

The changes recommended in the bill address the lack of a clearly defined advisory role for the Rural Assistance Authority Board and seek to ensure that the composition of the board adequately reflects community views. That can be a changing scene and it is very important that the board is seen to be all-embracing and representing all parties. These changes will ensure that the Rural Assistance Authority remains closely focused on rural assistance issues, is better able to provide advice to the Minister on the effectiveness of individual programs that need to be reviewed constantly, and has better capacity to respond to emerging industry assistance needs. For all those reasons I commend the bill to the House.

Mr HICKEY (Cessnock) [10.41 a.m.]: Clearly, there is large scope for the Rural Assistance Amendment Bill provisions to work within the Cessnock electorate. The bill is being implemented because of the national competition policy, but it is interesting to look at history, as other honourable members have, to see how much rural assistance was given by the Lang Government in 1930-32 and by successive governments ever since. Assistance is needed in rural areas as a result of climate, and natural disasters, and for many other reasons. The New South Wales Rural Assistance Authority, or the authority as it is often referred to by its clients, provides financial and other assistance to farmers and helps small businesses in the wider community in times of natural disaster. The object of the Act introduced by the Lang Government was to provide a buffer between farmers and creditors during the Great Depression and allow people additional time to pay their debts.

Mr Amery: It is always Labor governments that look after farmers.

Mr HICKEY: What the Minister says is correct. It is great to see the Labor Government looking at country areas and changing Acts to implement benefits for farmers. The authority continues to play an important role in rural and regional New South Wales. It is good to see this bill being introduced for it will ensure that the tradition of help from the Labor Party continues. The modern farmer has to be an efficient, competitive and effective business person, as well as produce wool, grain, vegetables, cotton and many other lines of produce. Farmers, who produce commodities that are beneficial for the whole State, will benefit from implementation of this measure.

The New South Wales Government's response to natural disasters is to provide invaluable help to farmers affected by floods, bushfires or hailstorms. Hailstorms quite regularly come through the top end of my electorate. In the Singleton area in December 1996 the main form of assistance provided by the rural assistance scheme was business counselling and advice to farmers. A staff member was posted in the Singleton area for a week to counsel farmers and many other members of the business community. Disaster strikes anywhere, at any time, and when it is least expected. The authority provided \$14.6 million in assistance to farmers who were affected by flooding in 1998, and also provided assistance following the Newcastle earthquake. It is good to see assistance being extended to farmers and to the general community.

These changes are being implemented because of the national competition policy that is being forced upon us. I do not totally embrace it, but it has to happen because there is no alternative. This bill is a positive step and farmers will benefit from the changes in it. I commend the bill to the House.

Mr PICCOLI (Murrumbidgee) [10.46 a.m.]: I understand that the amendments contained in this bill will streamline the Act, and this has the support of the Opposition. However, I would make a couple of points generally about agriculture and the implications of the Rural Assistance Scheme. Probably never before have so many farmers required assistance. In many ways, that has occurred thanks to the current Government. A couple of problems that have arisen concern native vegetation and upcoming water reforms. It is perhaps timely that these amendments be made, because more farmers will be forced to access assistance. In addition to the natural disasters that befall farmers more often than they would like, the natural disaster of the New South Wales Government is having further impact on them. The upcoming water reforms and processes have created uncertainty that has severely affected the values of many irrigation properties. That level of uncertainty has not been remedied by the draft Water Management Bill.

Farmers are under continual pressure. If the New South Wales Government continues on its present course, farmers might begin to look forward to enduring natural disasters rather than the disasters that have befallen them courtesy of that Government. The native vegetation legislation has impacted severely on farmers throughout New South Wales. Many farmers purchased properties on the understanding they would be able to use their land, for which they paid fair value, but their use of that land has been restricted. I understand the intent of the legislation, but implementation of its provisions is having a huge impact on farmers. I question whether the effect of that implementation satisfies its initial objects.

We all understand the need to protect our environment. All farmers are environmentalists. Farmers would never seek to destroy that which they rely upon the most, their land and, for irrigators, their water. I claim to be a farmer, and I know that farmers are all very conscious of the environment. However, the Government needs to put a bit of money where its mouth is. Only a few weeks ago Parliament passed, at one o'clock one morning, additional funding of \$140 million for the Olympic Games. Whilst that is going to be a magnificent event, we would love to see some of the farmers affected by native vegetation and water reforms being granted the same sort of grace that our Olympic Games have been granted. Funding of \$140 million is pretty good. I would be happy with an amount less than that to assist farmers with the adjustments that they have been forced to make.

The adjustments are minor and will not be opposed, but the Government has a lot of work to do to support farmers in these difficult times. I was interested to hear Government members waxing lyrical about the Government's record on agriculture. Its record on the Rural Assistance Scheme might be okay, but that is a minor issue for the agriculture industry. All farmers would agree with that. I ask members opposite to spend a little more time lobbying the Ministers and the Government to make the changes that farmers need.

Ms ANDREWS (Peats) [10.51 a.m.]: I support the Rural Assistance Amendment Bill introduced by the Minister for Agriculture, and Minister for Land and Water Conservation, who is present in the House.

Perhaps I would be more convinced about the Coalition's commitment to primary producers if the Federal Coalition Government approved the exceptional circumstances assistance application by the unfortunate chicken growers at Mangrove Mountain. All honourable members would realise that the outbreak of Newcastle disease at Mangrove Mountain on 1 April 1999—an unfortunate date—was the worst outbreak of an exotic animal disease that Australia has known since the commencement of European settlement.

Despite the fact that the application, which was amended on more than one occasion, in my opinion and in the opinion of the Government met all the criteria of the guidelines for exceptional circumstances assistance, the Federal Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry, the Hon. Warren Truss, as recently as the end of last June, decided not to approve them. That assistance would have made a wealth of difference to those 57 chicken growers affected. I assure honourable members that they have suffered tremendously since the outbreak of Newcastle disease last year. On the other hand, the Rural Assistance Authority granted the Mangrove Mountain chicken growers some relief. Although the disease was not declared a national disaster, it was certainly a major disaster.

The chicken growers were able to apply to the Rural Assistance Authority for low-interest loans, at about 4 per cent, up to a maximum of \$20,000. I understand that a number of chicken growers took advantage of the low-interest loans. Had it not been for assistance given by the Minister for Agriculture, supported by Cabinet, the chicken growers would be in a much worse plight today. The contribution by the honourable member for Murrumbidgee was hypocritical. I am proud to support the Rural Assistance Amendment Bill. The objects of the bill are to clarify the objects of the Act and to clarify and further define the functions of the Rural Assistance Authority Board, which we have heard are very wide ranging.

Further objects of the bill are to require the Rural Assistance Authority to provide certain information to the board on request, to require the Minister for Agriculture every five years to review the requirements of the Act relating to the composition of the board to ensure that the board's decisions continue to reflect community views on rural assistance and disaster relief issues, to consolidate and clarify the provisions of the Act that relate to programs of assistance, and to repeal the provisions of the Act relating to protection orders.

The Federal Government is going to have a very hard time convincing the chicken growers at Mangrove Mountain that the outbreak of Newcastle disease did not meet the criteria for exceptional circumstances assistance. I am quite sure that had a Federal Labor Government, which established the exceptional circumstances assistance in the first place, been in office, it would have unreservedly put the seal of approval on the application for assistance. The battle-fatigued chicken growers at Mangrove Mountain are very disappointed with the Federal Government and the Federal Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry.

The Rural Assistance Authority provides a wide range of assistance not only to primary producers but also to small businesses following a natural disaster. In the 1998-99 financial year the following areas received assistance under the disaster scheme: Wollongong and north-western New South Wales, following severe flooding; Crookwell, following serious bushfires; Mangrove Mountain, following the outbreak of Newcastle disease, and some leniency was given according to the guidelines; Nambucca, Bellingen, Tweed, Ballina, Maclean and Hay areas, following severe storm damage.

Under the Rural Assistance Authority, assistance is available under the following schemes: Agriculture Advancing Australia; Disaster Relief Scheme; Drought Regional Initiatives; Rebate of Loan Security Duty; Rural Adjustment Scheme; Special Conservation Scheme; and the Water Reform Package. It is all very well having assistance schemes available to primary producers and small businesses, but they are not much good if people are not aware of them. Therefore, it is pleasing to know that the Rural Assistance Authority produces a range of information bulletins and brochures describing the various forms of assistance and guidelines available under various schemes.

During 1998-99 the authority was involved in more than 80 promotional activities including field days and meetings with farmers, small businesses, rural councillors, accountants, solicitors and other interest groups. The virtues of the Rural Assistance Authority are widely known in the Mangrove Mountain area, which is within my electorate of Peats. Moving with the times, it is also pleasing to note that the Rural Assistance Authority has developed a web site, which I am sure is widely used by primary producers and small businesses. It gives me great pleasure to commend the Rural Assistance Amendment Bill to the House.

Mr BLACK (Murray-Darling) [10.57 a.m.]: It is a delight to stand here this morning representing Country Labor and supporting my colleague the Minister for Agriculture, and Minister for Land and Water Conservation. I have a great respect for the Minister, whose Mount Drutt electorate would fit into one of my

paddocks many times over. Notwithstanding that, he has been a frequent visitor to the bush, to what I call the front paddock of New South Wales. He is always welcome there, because in the bush we get on with the job. I now refer to statements made in this place yesterday by the Leader of the National Party, the Hon. George Souris. If he wants to get into the gutter about what goes on in the real world, the bush, he can do it by himself. I will not be there. We should remember what happened on 27 March last year, when the National Party vote was 7.7 per cent. But a reading of recent *Bulletin* Morgan Polls shows that that party's vote is down to 3.5 per cent. That proves the relevance of Country Labor.

Mr R. H. L. Smith: Point of order: My point of order relates to relevance. This bill is about the Rural Assistance Authority; it has nothing to do with what was said yesterday. I ask you to bring the honourable member for Murray-Darling back to the leave of the bill.

Mr Amery: To the point of order: A few moments ago the honourable member for Murrumbidgee made a number of political comments relating to the general role of the Labor Government in agriculture, law reform, native vegetation and budget allocations for the Olympic Games. In other words, the National Party has opened up some of the rural and political issues in relation to this debate. I point out that the Rural Assistance Amendment Bill virtually covers all of those political and rural issues, which the honourable member for Murray-Darling is raising now.

Mr SPEAKER: Order! There is no point of order.

Mr BLACK: My point was simply that with the declining fortunes of the National Party—down from 7.7 per cent in March last year to 3.5 per cent, as published in the recent *Bulletin* Morgan poll—there is every reason for the National Party to attempt to distract us. However, it will not distract us. It certainly will not distract Country Labor because we in Country Labor believe in getting on with the job. If necessary, we will get on with the job by ignoring the Leader of the National Party, who is apparently having some difficulty in maintaining his job as Leader of the National Party. I believe he is under serious challenge from within his own party in terms of holding his leadership position.

The Rural Assistance Amendment Bill is an important bill, as other speakers have said. It is about finetuning; it is not about great revolutionary change. The provision of special assistance to farmers has a long history in New South Wales. The New South Wales Rural Assistance Authority, known as the RAA—it is a little confusing because in what I call the front paddock there are two organisations known as the RAA. In the front paddock we drive cars to the Royal Automobile Association of South Australia. In the west there are two RAAs. One of them does the same job as the NRMA in the east—the coastal villages, I believe. As there are two RAAs, we need to be clear about which one we are talking about.

As previous speakers have said, the RAA we are talking about today has its origins in the Farmers Relief Board, which was established as long ago as 1932. It was based on the Moratorium Act introduced by the Lang Government of 1931-32—another great Labor Government. We in Country Labor in the west are more than aware of the difficulties confronting the pastoral industry in particular and farming in general, with the notable exception of irrigation. We are aware that there is a great deal of real hurt in the bush. We are aware of the upshot of the McLachlan report relating to 22 micron. We were told in the clearest terms that producers growing wool with more than 22 micron should not stay in the business. Of course, out in the west our problem is that we have not yet created a sheep that is capable of producing fewer than 22 micron in the very harsh conditions in Murray-Darling.

We are also aware of the decisions of banks and similar organisations, which are leaning to a forced amalgamation of many properties. We are being told by one bank in particular that unless one has 16,000 sheep and one is debt free, one should not be in the business. We only have to go back to the break-up of the Kidman empire in 1946, when home maintenance areas of only 5,000 sheep were established, and to the 1950s when a pound of wool was worth £1. In the 1950s one could survive with 5,000 sheep. However, the simple upshot of the McLachlan report and similar is that unless farmers have 16,000 sheep they are in big strife.

Recent history relating to floods—and I shall return to floods in a moment—shows that \$510,000 was made available through the RAA to those who had suffered, and suffered grievously, as a result of the floods dating back to February. Today, we still have water coming down across the border from Queensland. Today, the road between White Cliffs and Wanaaring is still cut, after first being cut back in February. We are still awaiting to assist the Central Darling Shire in respect of flood damage. Unfortunately, the shire engineer has not been able to inspect many of the roads in the Paroo area simply because some parts are still under water.

I refer to the West 2000 program—the West 2000 plus program, as we know it now—which is administered through the RAA. Interestingly, over the three years of the West 2000 program \$4.6 million in assistance in interest subsidies has been provided to pastoralists and others, but mostly pastoralists. So this RAA program has great meaning indeed. Earlier this year I had the great honour of being invited to attend the annual conference of the Western Division of New South Wales Farmers at Balranald and to open that conference. It was a great honour. There are many outstanding leaders, primary producers, in the National Farmers Federation, as well as the West Darling pastoralists. In our front paddock, New South Wales, we have two organisations. Here in Sydney one tends to think about New South Wales farmers. On the other side of the Darling—what the Minister refers to as Blacky's brook—we have the west Darling pastoralists. So we need to have it clear in our minds that there are two organisations largely reflecting the interests of pastoralists in the front paddock.

The West 2000 program has been a magnificent program. I repeat: It has provided \$4.6 million in interest payments over three years. At the New South Wales Farmers western division conference at Balranald I announced that the New South Wales Government had agreed to fund an extension to the tune of just on \$6 million. Of course, we know what happened to that. Subsequently, the Federal Government brought down its budget, and to its absolute discredit—and, in particular, to the discredit of the Federal Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry, Warren Truss, it said it would not match that figure. What did we do in New South Wales? With the support of the Premier—and what a great bush Premier we have—we went ballistic with media releases and similar. Lo and behold! The Federal Government, after not providing the money in the budget, after a solid month of campaigning, led by New South Wales Farmers and the West Darling pastoralists, supported by Country Labor and the real opposition, the New South Wales Independents—those who contribute to this place—suddenly found \$6 million to match the New South Wales Government's funding and we got the West 2000 Plus program going.

The RAA has a vital role to play in this equation. The northern sections of the unincorporated area have been heavily benched by the RAA program. Earlier I mentioned the home maintenance areas that were established in 1946 after the break-up of the Kidman empire. The fact is that north of the line, probably east-west of Packsaddle—it is about that point of latitude—there would not be a single property that does not have at least two homesteads on it. However, the problem is that only one homestead is lived in. That is a most remarkable tragedy. The Murray-Darling electorate may not cover more people than any other electorate in New South Wales but it covers 45 per cent of the area of New South Wales—and it is increasing. The population is diminishing because industries, such as the greater pastoral industry, are now in serious strife. This is what the RAA program is about.

Tomorrow I will comment on an organisation established in Broken Hill that is known as the Western Infrastructure Corporation—the best "wic" decision in New South Wales! The Government is bringing the Broken Hill Water Board and Australian inland energy initiatives together, with a view to putting in place infrastructure to provide advice on financial matters, water and energy, all those things that people need to relocate to the bush. I thank the Minister for Agriculture, and Minister for Land and Water Conservation, who is a great Minister for western New South Wales. We are putting it together, not only for Broken Hill but for the Far West. Along with the RAA and all the other things that our great Government, our great Minister and our great Premier are doing, we have to address the issue of a declining population. I repeat that the RAA is going a long way towards doing that.

An amount of \$510,000 has been given to those people affected by floods which primarily culminated in February this year. The headline on the front page of today's *Barrier Daily Truth* reads "Keep insurers honest: Carr". The article states that the Government yesterday called for an ombudsman to pull some of these insurance companies into line, and make insurance companies cough up and not argue about the definition of floods versus inundation. Take, for example, the Max Hams case. Goodness gracious me! The Hams family had water up to the eaves of their property, yet Elders and CGU argued over whether it was flood or inundation and would not pay up. Country Labor is more than pleased to lend support to that sort of issue.

On 4 September at Ivanhoe I will chair a meeting of all the mayors in my electorate, and representatives of New South Wales Farmers, West Darling pastoralists and the Department of Land and Water Conservation. We will talk about the impact of the Kerin report and what we can do to make it work. The Minister has given an assurance—for which I thank him—that the Kerin report will not be brought forward during this Parliament until sufficient time has been allowed for discussion. The honourable member for Murrumbidgee, who I have said in other places is a little bit callow, talked about the Native Vegetation Conservation Act. It is interesting that the honourable member for Murrumbidgee does not know of the existence of the Western Lands Act. He does not know what is applicable for the infestation of woody weed out west or what is listed as native vegetation in the coastal village of Mount Druitt.

The Kerin report is based on a different Act, and we are going to try to make that work. I recognise the country Independents as the real Opposition in this place. I know that the honourable member for Tamworth, the honourable member for Dubbo and the honourable member for Northern Tablelands support us in these matters. They are not making callow, frivolous statements or throwaway lines; they are not getting down in the gutter, as the honourable member for Murrumbidgee and the Leader of the National Party did. I commend the Rural Assistance Amendment Bill.

Mr WINDSOR (Tamworth) [11.12 a.m.]: I support the Rural Assistance Amendment Bill. I was pleased to listen to the contribution of the honourable member for Murray-Darling because I recently spent some time in his electorate. Although he said that he was not prepared to get into the gutter on a number of issues, I can report to him that the other day between Wanaaring and Bourke I ended up in the gutter. I would encourage an engineer to get out and fix that road because, as the Minister would be aware, it has suffered a lot of water damage. An enormous amount of water goes down the Barwon River and other river systems. I was also in the area that the honourable member for Murray-Darling referred to where the Hams family resides. Massive amounts of water have come off that area.

From time to time there are disasters over which none of us has any control. The Rural Assistance Authority has become an important component in helping people through some of those disasters. Having said that, the authority has not always been as successful as it could be. I do not mean that in a critical sense. In an administrative sense it has sometimes been locked up. Hopefully, the amending bill will alleviate some of those concerns. The Minister would be aware that a few years ago Gunnedah and the Liverpool Plains were inundated with water from six floods within a few months. That sort of flooding had not occurred in that area in living memory. Various members of the community battled with the Federal Government in particular, seeking a declaration of disaster so that assistance could be given to the people in the area. They were unsuccessful. The Minister at the time attempted to assist in every way. Yesterday the Premier raised the Murray-Darling problem and the definition of flood verses inundation. Those concerns have to be addressed.

In terms of assisting the Rural Assistance Authority and coming to grips with the problems, such as those referred to by the Premier yesterday and the Gunnedah flooding I have referred to, an insurance scheme could be implemented to cover disasters such as flooding and mice and locust plagues, which are financially hard on the farming community. As the Minister said in his speech, farming is now a competitive business. Although the modern farmer may do everything right, because of the returns to the farming community, if a disaster suddenly hits he may experience financial difficulties.

A few years ago I was in Botswana looking at land and dryland farming techniques. Most people would not know that Botswana, which has a small population, has the highest level of income per capita of any country in the world. That income comes from diamonds, not from agriculture. Botswana has an interesting Parliament in that the Opposition has been in opposition ever since the Parliament was formed. The parliamentarians concentrate on resolving issues rather than arguing with each other, because the Opposition has assumed it will always be in opposition and the Government will always be in government. It has an in-built insurance scheme with government assistance to cover natural disasters. I am not sure of the full details but the scheme also provides assistance for abnormal crop failure due to, for example, a severe drought in a dryland farming area. The farming community contributes to the scheme. A few years ago Alan Jones talked about the scheme on his radio program. There has to be a better way to address natural disasters, otherwise we will run into problems such as the Hams family incident and the Gunnedah floods. People cannot build these abnormal circumstances into their farm budgets.

Earlier speakers referred to the contribution of the former honourable member for Bathurst, Mick Clough, to the Farm Debt Mediation Act. Honourable members should cast their minds back to that Act, to which there were 10 amendments. I was instrumental in moving those 10 amendments. Although the Act was improved by those amendments, I pay regard to the contribution of the former honourable member for Bathurst. That Act was never designed to be a panacea for farm debt, but it has helped many people come to grips with their circumstances. The Rural Assistance Authority conferencing facilities and the provision of an intermediary have been of assistance.

The Minister in his speech made reference to a number of individuals. He referred to Ellen Howard and John Newcombe in terms of the FarmBis program. Ellen is a Tamworth person who has been extremely instrumental in some very positive changes with regard to agricultural policy and the administration of such policy within the department. The Minister also referred to Steve Griffith, the manager of the Rural Assistance Authority. During my years in this place I have had dealings with Steve and the authority, as all members would have had, and I have always found Steve and his people to be extremely approachable with regard to particular issues.

Natural disasters will always be a part of the agricultural landscape. I should like to refer to some of the current issues before the House to which the honourable member for Murrumbidgee referred. I am particularly pleased that the Minister for Agriculture, and Minister for Land and Water Conservation is present in the Chamber. I wish to highlight two particular examples in respect of which I believe government policy can avoid natural disasters. The legislation currently before the House is obviously important legislation. I am told that the Government will make another major announcement reasonably soon with regard to salinity, and I imagine that the Minister for Agriculture will have carriage of that policy as well. Water, salinity and vegetation are obviously critical issues to the good management of the environment of this State.

The legislation currently before the House has, in a sense, put in place a forum that will enable us to examine how we are to come to grips with some of these major environmental problems. If we do not come to grips with those problems, we will have natural disasters and there will be calls on government to assist. I know that the director-general is today visiting country areas to talk to various groups of people, and I encourage him to do more of that. However, I draw the Minister's attention to two major areas of concern in relation to the legislation. The first relates to security provisions and rights to compensation if there is movement in those security provisions once a plan is put in place. The second, which is an important matter but one that tends to be forgotten from time to time, is the make-up of the committees that will deliver the plans and administer the policy that comes out of those plans.

Some departmental officers, and I am sure some government officers and some environmental officers, would like to maintain some degree of control that is away from those valleys. If we are to come to grips with these major issues, the Minister must give power to the valleys. The Minister may be able to remove that power and still have some regulatory capacity in relation to water. If we are to come to grips with the salinity issue the Minister must get the committee structures right with regard to water. If he does not, he will have no hope in the world of getting it right with regard to salinity. If there are to be load limits at the end of valleys with salinity, the people within those valleys must have ownership of the policy. I am sure that various people are making submissions on the matter. I encourage the Minister and the Premier, and indeed Country Labor and the Liberal Party, to examine that structure closely. Country people are sick of committees that look good on paper but are effectively useless. One has only to look at some of the vegetation management committees and water committees that are in place at the moment. They are absolutely useless. If we are to come to grips with these potential natural disasters—and I know that the Premier has been very concerned about the issue of salinity—we must have an administrative focus on the people who live within those valleys.

In conclusion I indicate my support for the bill. I know that honourable members have taken a bit of leave with regard to this legislation. However, I travelled through the western part of the electorate of Murray-Darling on my return from a holiday in the desert areas of Australia. Those who say that there are no trees left in Australia should go to the deserts. There is an enormous amount of vegetation in the deserts. To those who say the vegetation has all been cleared, as the *Sydney Morning Herald* would have us believe, I say it is absolute rubbish. In fact, in the Western Division, particularly the red country around Cobar, for example, there is an enormous amount of vegetation in the form of woody weeds which was not there some years ago. Over the past month I crossed nine deserts, and the amount of vegetation that is in some of the more arid areas of Australia is extensive. However, I say to the honourable member for Murray-Darling—and perhaps the message could be passed on to the National Parks and Wildlife Service—that something will have to be done about the kangaroo population between Tibooburra and Wanaaring.

Mr Black: Did you hit one?

Mr WINDSOR: No, I did not hit one. With the current explosion in seed in that area, and particularly in the Sturt National Park, a natural disaster of great dimension will occur to the kangaroo population there if control measures are not put in place; there will be massive starvation of kangaroos, probably within the next 12 months.

Debate adjourned on motion by Mr Brown.

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE

Private Members' Statements: Suspension of Standing and Sessional Orders

Motion by Mr Amery agreed to:

That standing and sessional orders be suspended to permit private members' statements to be taken forthwith.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' STATEMENTS

POLICE DRUG TRAFFICKING OPERATION

Mr STEWART (Bankstown—Parliamentary Secretary) [11.27 a.m.]: Last Wednesday and Thursday, as has already been widely reported in the press, a hugely successful police operation against local drug trafficking and associated crime was conducted in the Bankstown area, the Kings Cross area and various areas in south-western Sydney. This special police operation involved two major police drug forces with more than 300 police officers participating.

Today I take this opportunity, on behalf of the people of Bankstown, to wholeheartedly thank and congratulate all police involved in this successful operation, which to date has resulted in 22 people being arrested and charged with a series of mostly drug-related offences but also involving possession of various offensive weapons, such as firearms and knives. Raids conducted on certain premises in a very careful manner produced the evidence required to substantiate the arrests that followed.

Clearly, the success of this operation has broken the back of a major drug-pushing racket or network that has operated for some time in the Bankstown region. Police have been working for a long time towards this end; it is not something that occurred just as a result of activities last week. For many months now police have conducted investigations and research, and have participated in various areas in the local arena to ensure that when this campaign was finally conducted it was conducted in the most successful way possible. The Bankstown community feels refreshed and further protected as a result of the efforts of the police involved in the operation. Clearly, for a long time the Bankstown community has been crying out for something to be done about local drug problems.

As I have pointed out, police have been working towards this for a long time, but it had to be done very carefully and in a way that substantiated the evidence. It is sometimes hard for a community to understand this when they see drug trafficking taking place in residential areas, streets or local precincts. Not knowing how to deal with the problem is awkward. For some time the police have assured me that they were on the ball, and that was proved last week. I would particularly like to thank local police who were involved in the strike force, firstly through the Regional Commander, Ike Ellis, who has been a great leader of police in my local area for many years. Under his leadership police have had a strong focus on successfully achieving last week's objective.

David Madden, the area commander, has been in the Bankstown area for only the past two or three years, but during that time he has had a huge, constructive impact on policing in my local area. He has also been instrumental in enhancing community relationships, and harnessing the community as a tool to be used by police to achieve the objective of curbing local crime. As a result of what occurred last week my area can get on with a much more positive future, in the knowledge that the concerns that have been raised continually in this House, by the community and by the media have now been addressed. There is still a lot to be done.

As I have reported, the backbone of local heroin and amphetamine trafficking, in particular, in the Bankstown region has been broken as result of last week's successful campaign. Police also netted a lot of evidence for future opportunities to pursue other crime in the Bankstown area. At the moment more than 400 people are being investigated as a result of the activities that took place last week. It is a massive exercise. At this stage we have seen the tip of the iceberg, but I am convinced that the police have the iceberg harnessed and that they will take ownership of our local area by protecting the community and letting criminals know that they are not welcome. As result we are much better off.

Mr MOSS (Canterbury—Parliamentary Secretary) [11.32 a.m.]: I join with the honourable member for Bankstown in congratulating the police on this exercise. I come from a neighbouring electorate, so I am well aware of the problems with drugs in the region generally. It is sad to say that too often police are criticised for what may seem to be inaction, but as we have seen in this case they got their facts right and they did their homework, which just goes to show that when the police pounce they do it well. Sometimes it is better to hold back for the best result, which is precisely what happened in Bankstown. As the honourable member mentioned, more than 20 people were arrested and charged with possession of illegal weapons as well as drug-related matters. I join with the honourable member for Bankstown in congratulating David Madden and all those involved in this exercise.

GRIFFITH BASE HOSPITAL STAFFING

Mr PICCOLI (Murrumbidgee) [11.33 a.m.]: I wish to bring to the attention of the House the lack of medical personnel at the Griffith Base Hospital. A couple of weeks ago I was approached by an elderly gentleman who was having severe problems with his teeth. After going to the hospital dental clinic he was advised that the hospital dentist had recently left and had not been replaced. The only service available within the hospital dental clinic would be provided by a visiting dentist one or two days a week. Griffith has a population of about 35,000 and the catchment west means that the dental clinic serves approximately 60,000 or 70,000 people. Obviously, the waiting list for dental services is quite large, which is a significant problem for many pensioners and those who cannot afford what are very expensive private dental services in the Murrumbidgee Irrigation Area [MIA].

The problem is not easily solved. It is a problem that befalls not only dental clinics but hospitals generally, as evidenced by the well-documented shortage of doctors and nurses. Griffith Base Hospital is having so much difficulty attracting wardsmen that local police officers have been called in to assist the hospital with those duties. That situation is causing some problems for local police officers in carrying out their policing duties. I note that the solution to the problem is not at all easy. Many efforts have been made by State and Federal governments, and local governments in western New South Wales have had to purchase medical practitioners. Unfortunately, we are reaching the stage where there is almost a bidding war between local councils whenever there is a whiff of a medical practitioner looking for a job in western New South Wales and, beyond that, in country Australia.

It is of great concern for the community of Griffith and for many of the other communities in country New South Wales that are experiencing similar problems. I bring this issue to the attention of the House because not only the well-documented doctor and nurse shortage is causing problems; attracting all sorts of ancillary medical staff is a problem. In a growing area such as the MIA and the western Riverina the problem will only become more acute and impact significantly on the lives of our constituents. As members of Parliament it is a problem with which we are all concerned. I hope that further measures can be put in place by both State and Federal governments to resolve the problem.

EAST HILLS COMMUNITY ORGANISATIONS

Mr ASHTON (East Hills) [11.37 a.m.]: I endorse the comments of the honourable member for Bankstown and the honourable member for Canterbury in regard to last week's police operation. The East Hills electorate is very close to the electorate of the honourable member for Bankstown, and the success of that operation brought some joy to me and my constituents. I would like to speak about four organisations in my electorate that do very good work. In the last week of the recent parliamentary break I was able to visit these organisations. This year the East Hills Junior Rugby League Football Club celebrated its fiftieth year of participation in the Canterbury-Bankstown junior rugby league competition. On Saturday 29 July I was pleased to attend a large celebration of this anniversary.

Known locally as the Bulldogs, over the years this local club has produced many first-grade players for Canterbury-Bankstown and other Sydney first-grade clubs. Some of the club's original players include members of the Raper family, and Col Joye and his brothers, who played football before they went on to play musical instruments. For 50 years the local club has survived and flourished, and its committee has helped countless boys and young men in my area. Its success is larger, collectively, than the billionaire-sponsored clubs such as the Perth Western Reds, the Adelaide Rams, the Hunter Mariners, the Gold Coast Seagulls and the South Queensland Crushers. I congratulate the Bulldogs club on its fiftieth year and I congratulate its committee on the good work it is still doing.

Last week I also attended the annual general meeting of the Padstow Red Cross. Last year, through a shop that the Red Cross runs in Padstow, more than \$27,000 was presented to the Sydney office of the Red Cross. The annual general meeting was attended by nearly 100 people, mainly women, who voluntarily give their time for the good of the Red Cross and our community. As I noted in my address to the annual general meeting, the Red Cross organisation is mentioned virtually every night in our news. Hardly a night goes by when the work of the Red Cross in Bosnia, Iraq or any part of the world where problems are occurring—such as places reasonably close to our shores, including East Timor—is not mentioned. The Red Cross is recognised throughout the world.

As many honourable members would know, the Red Cross began in the 1850s at a battle scene when it was noted that the people who were alive but injured were being buried by some who took no interest in ascertaining whether the injured were alive or dead. That led to the Geneva Convention and many other things

which the time allowed for this debate does not permit me to address. I congratulate the executive and members of the Padstow branch of the Red Cross on behalf of my constituents. I also congratulate the past president, Mrs Judy Topfler; the new president, Mrs Joyce Gimbert; and the new secretary, Mrs Heather Heaton, on their efforts. I am very honoured to be one of the patrons of the organisation together with Pat Rogan who, as all honourable members would recall, is a former member for East Hills.

Mr Fraser: Bring him back!

Mr ASHTON: Bring back Pat Rogan.

Mr Merton: You make him look pretty good.

Mr ASHTON: I do. Pat is more of a gentlemen than I am, but I would have thought it is impolite to interrupt a private member's statement. Last Thursday I also attended the Condell Park primary school's fiftieth anniversary celebrations. Mrs Cheryl Glover and her staff are to be congratulated on the concert presented by the students using the music and events of the 1950s to 2000 to highlight the changes that have occurred in society. Unfortunately, there was no music from the 1920s and 1930s to suit the honourable member for Baulkham Hills. The school will soon benefit from the construction of a covered outdoor living area as a result of funding provided by the Department of Education and Training, the local trotting club, the local school's parents and citizens association and my very active support as the local member of Parliament. Last Friday I attended a social gathering at the Panania Senior Citizens Centre where more than a hundred people had lunch, sang songs, danced and celebrated. Those older citizens thoroughly enjoyed themselves. I congratulate Gwen Williams and her executive on the work done by the Panania senior citizens group.

Mr Merton: Are you the president?

Mr ASHTON: No, but some of the group are among my ALP branch members. The local Federal member of Parliament, Daryl Melham; the Deputy Mayor of Bankstown City Council, Dick McLaughlin; and Councillor Max Parker—who at different times has been an Independent, a Liberal and again an Independent—attended.

Mr Moss: He is not in the branch.

Mr ASHTON: He is not in the branch, although his father was in the Labor Party for a short time during the 1950s when he hoped to win preselection. That gathering was a credit not only to the organisation which held a tremendous morning tea and luncheon but also was very well attended by local State and Federal members of Parliament. I am proud to say that I was able to attend all of the events I have mentioned. I place on record my appreciation for the good work that is done by these organisations which, disparate though they may be in some ways, are all trying to do something for their communities.

RAIL FREIGHT NETWORK

Mr MERTON (Baulkham Hills) [11.42 a.m.]: I will address a matter that is a considerable concern to many business proprietors in western Sydney. Business organisations in western Sydney hold grave fears for the total collapse—and I use the term carefully—of the rail freight industry during the Olympics, given the ongoing spate of train derailments. Of the approximately 28 derailments that have occurred during the past two years, approximately 60 per cent happened in western Sydney. With the rail system seemingly in a state of disarray, businesses throughout western Sydney are vitally concerned that freight movements could gridlock if there is a hiccup in the restricted four-hour operating time during the Games. Rail freight movements will be severely affected by reduced operating times between 1 a.m. and 5 a.m. during the Olympics—a period when the rail networks will be clogged with a massive overload of approximately 26 trains an hour.

Extra hauling carriages will be added to freight engines which will create huge trains up to two kilometres long which will be trying to make their limited window-of-opportunity runs. One cargo train derailment or signalling problem during the Games could prove disastrous for the whole railway system and for businesses situated in western Sydney. The Greater Western Sydney Chamber of Commerce has expressed concern about this problem. I understand that the chamber has been informed by inside rail sources that there is a prediction of absolute chaos with poorly trained rookie drivers at the helm of many metropolitan trains during the Games. The sources state that if a freight train is derailed and cannot be put back on the tracks within three minutes, the cargo system will back up until it is totally clogged. It could end up being a disaster. The way

things are already shaping up, business is holding its collective breath for the safety and efficiency of a third-world rail system which is under increased pressure owing to the Olympics. I draw attention to what has been said by Betty Barrie, the President of the Regional Chamber of Commerce:

Safety is of paramount importance. The Government needs to get the ball rolling to identify where the problems are. The deterioration of rail services is especially worrying because the system is failing already. What will happen when you add the pressure of the Olympics and the Paralympics?

The General Manager of the Regional Chamber of Commerce, Jane Holdsworth, has stated that the success of the Olympics relies so heavily on the rail network that Sydney cannot afford to have things going wrong. She went on to state:

Businesses trying to operate during that period will face enough problems without having to deal with transport issues ...

It all comes down to accountability. Businesses need to see that the Government is taking a proactive and responsible approach to improving rail efficiency and safety.

Chaos in the rail system could certainly end up being a tragedy as far as businesses in western Sydney are concerned. For some time businesses have been planning for the Olympics. Everyone welcomes the Olympics. We all encourage as much as possible the activity associated with the Olympics because we all realise the overall benefits that the community, including the people of western Sydney, will surely enjoy. But there is concern about the transport issue because there is potential for an enormous backlog should something occur during that four-hour operating time to which rail transport will be confined. The reality is simply that with western Sydney receiving and sending the majority of containerised cargo that travels through Sydney's ports, many local businesses fear a freight crisis of epic proportions. This is certainly an issue which calls for a Minister who is prepared to be proactive. It also calls for a Minister who has his head above the sleepers.

ST GEORGE HOSPITAL FACILITIES

Miss BURTON (Kogarah) [11.47 a.m.]: I inform the House of four major projects that have recently been completed at the St George Hospital—the new psychiatric unit, the new Belgrave Street car park, the research and education centre, and the new pelvic floor unit. This month will see the opening of the new psychiatric unit at St George Hospital. The unit will allow for an increase in acute psychiatric bed numbers that will service the St George area. Presently the psychiatric facilities are old and dated, with insufficient beds. Patients who cannot be accommodated in this facility may have to be treated in other units such as the Rozelle Hospital, which is a considerable distance from St George. The units will allow treatment to be tailored to individual needs. For example, it will allow for the treatment of elderly people who often have complex medical and psychiatric problems.

The ward layout will also facilitate the treatment of a mother with her infant if necessary. The opening of the new unit will ensure that the St George Hospital's commitment to innovation in mental health is maintained and will be accompanied by increased standards of mental health care assessment and provision for continuity of care. The new ward is spacious in design and has a pleasant environment. Patients have individual rooms with adjacent bathrooms. There is provision for counselling and therapy rooms for diversionary activities. The new Belgrave Street car park provides offstreet car parking for patients and staff of the St George Hospital and other nearby organisations. For some time, parking has been an issue and the Belgrave Street car park will provide an additional 580 parking spaces to solve the problem. The car park began operating in two stages, beginning on 7 June 2000 with only hospital staff being able to park and then opening to the public in mid-June.

With the multistorey car park situated on the northern and southern perimeters of the St George Hospital campus, access to health services will be greatly improved for patients, visitors and staff. Other nearby organisations, such as the St George Private Hospital, will also benefit from the availability of convenient offstreet parking. Residents in streets adjacent to the hospital campus will also benefit from consequential increase in availability of onstreet parking for their friends and visitors, staff and customers of the hospital and other nearby organisations. The \$8.2 million research education centre at the St George Hospital was officially opened by the Minister for Health, Craig Knowles, on Monday 8 May 2000. The centre is the first dedicated research facility of its kind in the southern Sydney area. It will bring together researchers from the University of New South Wales and St George Hospital who are committed to ongoing research and education benefiting the local and wider community.

In his speech the Minister remarked on the importance of facilities such as this, which will ensure that quality medical research is carried out for years to come. He emphasised also that the research and education

centre would attract the skills and expertise required to ensure that St George Hospital continues to provide opportunities for medical research and development and delivery of high standards of medical treatments. It has the added bonus also of substantially enhancing its status as a teaching hospital. The occasion also marked the official fund-raising appeal launched to raise funds for the fitout of the top floor of the centre, which will house the research laboratories and offices.

On Monday 7 August I opened the new pelvic floor unit, which is a referral centre for the diagnosis and management of incontinence. Figures show that up to 40 per cent of women are affected by incontinence, and this centre provides a much-needed service. As can be seen, St George Hospital is working hard to provide the best possible service for the people of St George. I particularly thank the nursing staff at the hospital who do a wonderful job and are committed to their profession. In particular I congratulate Ms Anna Thornton, who is a member of the New South Wales Clinical Council. She is from the coalface of nursing and is assisting the Government with decisions that will directly benefit the health system in New South Wales.

GOULBURN RESPITE CARE SERVICES

Ms HODGKINSON (Burrinjuck) [11.51 a.m.]: I refer to the need to establish a respite care facility at Goulburn for the 18- to 50-year-old age group for both physically and mentally disabled people. Over the last few months I have held several meetings and telephone calls with a constituent of mine, Alan Saville, of 21 Grant Parade, Goulburn, whose wife, Karen, after giving birth a few years ago, was diagnosed with postnatal depression. As time went on and Karen's illness became worse, it became apparent that she was suffering from something more severe than postnatal depression. It turned out to be the debilitating illness Pick's disease. Pick's disease affects the sufferer in a cruel way. It was at that time that Alan discovered he really needed some respite care for Karen.

After making several representations to the Minister for Health we are grateful that Karen was able to be given full-time care at the Ron Hemming centre at Kenmore. However, this is a geriatric unit and Karen is only 37 years old. It was at this time that my attention was first drawn to the real need for a respite care centre in Goulburn for this younger age group, the under 50-year-olds. Private counsellor Neryl Wheatley said that ongoing respite care is desperately needed by up to 50 families in the Goulburn district. She said currently there is nothing available in the area. Lyn Terrey wrote an article in the *Goulburn Post* on Monday 24 July under the heading "Carer fights for cause". The article contains a quote by Alan Saville, which states:

If we had a centre, it would not only help solve an immediate problem, but help dilute an ongoing one, which creates physical and mental trauma on not only the patient, but also the carer and the carer's immediate family, extended family and friends, it shuts you down.

He said further:

I am not going to go away, I'll fight for this for as long as it takes. We want the average person in the street, people at all government levels and the carers to know someone out there cares. I cannot emphasise enough how desperately this centre is needed.

I have received letters of support since Mr Saville first raised this matter. Dr Peter Fleming, geriatrician from the Department of Geriatric Medicine at the Canberra hospital, states:

I am writing to you to lend my support to any efforts that may be able to be made to try to improve the care facilities available to younger people (that is, under the age of 60) who are unfortunate enough to be suffering a dementing illness. I have been talking recently with Alan Saville, whose wife as you know has seen me in consultation on a number of occasions, about the difficulty associated with finding appropriate care in the community for her.

On each occasion she has had to be admitted to Kenmore Psychiatric Hospital where she was I must also say very well cared for but it seems a pity that a person with a dementing illness has to be admitted to a psychiatric hospital, especially in New South Wales which has led the way in removing dementia as a mental illness.

I do know that Alan tried all over the state including the Australian Capital Territory to find appropriate care for his wife and was unsuccessful in doing so. Any help that can be given in this regard would clearly be appreciated by those people in need and those caring for them.

Another letter I received on this issue was from Heather Armstrong of Goulburn. She says that, like Alan Saville, she too is having a tough time. She states:

I am a 55 yrs old widow caring for my surviving twins. All of my family have Huntington's Chorea. I lost my dear husband aged 34 yrs in 1980, then my eldest son David aged 16 yrs. I cared for both [of] them. And now my twins Ken and Jen aged 30 yrs

both have this. Jen is in the last stage and now in "Waminda" nursing. And Ken is deteriorating so fast at home with me. We go everyday to feed our darling Jen.

The trouble is my health is starting to go. And I am to have surgery, but I have to keep putting this off as Ken needs me so badly.

I get no family help or support, as we get treated like we have the plague.

She writes more heart-wrenching paragraphs. However, time is running out and I hope the Minister will respond in favourable terms about the need for a respite centre for the under 50-year-olds in the Goulburn district.

CANTERBURY-BANKSTOWN RUGBY LEAGUE FOOTBALL CLUB TRAFFIC INFRINGEMENT

Mr MOSS (Canterbury—Parliamentary Secretary) [11.56 a.m.]: I have been approached by representatives of the Canterbury-Bankstown Rugby League Football Club concerning an \$817 traffic fine issued to a bus driver on 29 June. On that day the bus was conveying a group of Bulldog identities and supporters to the San Miguel Cup Day at Hawkesbury Racecourse. The San Miguel organisation is a registered charity that raises funds for the many and varied works of the De La Salle Brothers, and the cup day is one such event.

I am informed that on the day in question the bus driver was requested to drive along Old Windsor Road and was advised by two passengers that that road was no longer load limited. In view of traffic congestion on this day, coupled with the fact that some people on the bus were committed to making presentations at the end of the races, the driver took the bus along Old Windsor Road. Under these circumstances, the action taken by the driver was considered reasonable as his primary concern was to get dignitaries to this charity event on time. In view of information given to him by passengers—that is, that Old Windsor Road was no longer weight limited—any breach of traffic law was certainly not intentional.

The purpose of my representations is to request the Minister for Police to look sympathetically at this matter with a view to waiving the fine as I believe there are sufficient grounds to do so. Moreover, I emphasise that the bus company that supplied the vehicle did so by way of donation, as it has done on many prior occasions, and was not operating this vehicle commercially on the day; it had donated the bus services as a contribution to the San Miguel charity at considerable cost to the company.

I have been informed also that as the bus services were donated and the driver was encouraged to take Old Windsor Road, the De La Salle Brothers feel obliged to pay the fine. I know it is not this Government's intention to raise revenue which in turn reduces funds raised by charities. Therefore, in the interests of this worthwhile charity I trust the Minister for Police will give consideration to all the circumstances surrounding this unfortunate incident. I hope the Minister will waive the fine as that would overturn a decision that particularly marred an otherwise successful and enjoyable day.

PACIFIC HIGHWAY AND KISSING POINT ROAD, TURRAMURRA

Mr O'FARRELL (Ku-ring-gai—Deputy Leader of the Opposition) [12 noon]: I refer today to the intersection of Kissing Point Road and the Pacific Highway within my electorate. The honourable member for Maitland, who is in the chair, traverses that intersection on a regular basis and would know that the intersections at Ray Street, Kissing Point Road and Rohini Street, Turramurra cause incredible difficulty for traffic passing through that area. The issue I raise today relates to pedestrian safety at the intersection of Kissing Point Road and the Pacific Highway, Turramurra. I am concerned that unless the Roads and Traffic Authority [RTA] acts soon there will be the loss of life in that zone.

There is a significant aged community in the area surrounding that intersection, and shops are located on both sides of the Pacific Highway. A number of retirement villages, nursing homes, doctors' surgeries and other facilities are used by aged people. The current light phasings at the intersection do not give people sufficient time to cross the road. Less than one month ago a local doctor's receptionist, who was on her way to the chemist to urgently obtain medicine for a patient who was having a heart attack in the doctor's surgery, was hit by a car and badly injured. I am concerned that unless the RTA takes firm action other such incidents could occur. The phasings of the red arrow light at the Kissing Point Road intersection for vehicles that want to turn left or north onto the Pacific Highway do not give people sufficient time to cross the road. That causes conflict between cars and pedestrians, and it may well have fatal consequences.

The second matter of concern is that the traffic lantern on the eastern side, or the left hand side travelling south along the Pacific Highway, is rendered invisible at the intersection because of the curve in the

road. This is one of the few places on the Pacific Highway where there are six lanes and where the traffic lights facing north and south are not located on an overhead gantry to improve visibility. I urgently request that the RTA provide those facilities. Cars and trucks travelling south along the Pacific Highway see amber traffic lights at Ray Street and speed up to get through them; they do not appreciate that within a very short distance around a bend there is another set of traffic lights at Kissing Point Road, with the left lantern obscured by shop awnings. That causes great safety problems.

I raise these issues today, as I have for the past five years, in the hope that this matter can be remedied by the RTA before there is loss of life at that intersection. With every day that passes our luck is essentially running out. I am also concerned—and I am grateful to residents such as Mr and Mrs Moore from Kissing Point Road—about the line markings at the intersection with the Pacific Highway, which do not comply with existing RTA regulations. The markings of the crossing are closer to the stop line for vehicles than at other places that I have examined along the Pacific Highway.

As honourable members know, warning lights are often placed at difficult intersections in the metropolitan area to assist motorists, particularly those who are not familiar with an area. I make the point that 58,000 vehicles use the Pacific Highway in this vicinity on a daily basis, and many are driven by people who are not familiar with the area. Yellow warning lights, such as those at Lady Game Drive and Ryde Road within my electorate and in other parts of Sydney, to indicate that there are traffic lights in the vicinity may be one way to improve safety. I would also be happy to see a red light camera at the intersection because many vehicles go through amber and red lights at that intersection. The RTA needs to act urgently and respond to pressure from the local community to ensure passenger and vehicle safety at that spot, before lives are lost.

MANLY BEACH ROCK HAZARD

Mr BARR (Manly) [12.05 p.m.]: I refer to a topical and contentious matter in my electorate concerning Manly Beach. Last year proactive remediation works were undertaken on parts of the seawall at South Steyne using the specifications devised by a highly reputable firm of coastal engineers, Patterson, Britton and Partners. The works involved the placement of a rock apron at the base of the seawall and extending about 11 metres seaward. The planning for those works had been in train for some years, and the tender to carry out rock toe protection works was supported unanimously by Manly Council on 6 April 1998. Supervision of the project was not contracted out, but was undertaken by Manly Council.

After completion of the works, rocks and building debris were exposed, causing a strong reaction from segments of the public, including Manly Surf Club Incorporated. There appears to be little question that council, as project manager, failed to adequately supervise the works and accurately document details of the works. The seaward six metres of the apron, together with loose debris, were removed in July, August and September 1999. Manly Hydraulics Laboratory, in its advice to Manly Council on the matter on 7 July 1999, stated that there has been an ocean coastal climate conducive to higher than average beach erosion over recent months. The advice concluded:

... it is likely that the observed erosion at Manly Beach is the result of a series of storm events, leaving Manly Beach (and many NSW beaches) exposed to the subsequent complex interaction of oceanographic and coastal processes, most particularly that of sea level rise.

That unusual pattern has since reverted to the more usual pattern, and the portion of the beach affected has been replenished by natural processes. There are no visible rocks and the beach is looking healthy. The issue for council and the community is: Where to from here? Council commissioned a review from Professor Bruce Thom, Chairman of the Coastal Council of New South Wales, with technical input from Manly Hydraulics Laboratory. Two reports were furnished with different recommendations as to what to do. Manly Hydraulics Laboratory recommended a wait-and-see approach, advocating removal of rocks if and when they reappear. Professor Thom recommended removal of the rock apron and other rocks deposited during the years. That would leave the seawall more vulnerable and exposed to the elements than prior to the rock apron works being undertaken.

On 26 July, at a public meeting, Professor Thom said on at least three occasions that if the seawall collapsed it would not be a financial concern to council because the State Government would fund a new seawall. He said that that could be called a cynical approach but it is in line with the New South Wales coastal policy of moving away from property protection and focussing on beaches as entities in their own right. It is difficult to reconcile this ideological approach with a built environment such as that at Manly. If we do not protect the seawall it will collapse, as it has on a dozen occasions, and endanger the public, make a mess of the

beach and put at risk heritage Norfolk pines, the pedestrian promenade and properties which front the beach. I find this laissez faire approach to such critical infrastructure breathtaking in its cavalier attitude to the expenditure of public money.

It shows a reckless disregard for the spending priorities of governments of any political persuasion as they wrestle to obtain sufficient funding for schools, hospitals, policing and community services. Why would a State Government fork out money to repair a seawall which has collapsed after the council has deliberately removed its protection from storm events? Where would it leave Manly ratepayers if the Government refused to assist? The potential bill could be millions of dollars. I support the position of the Manly Hydraulics Laboratory because it is the commonsense approach. In order to protect the beach we need to protect the seawall—the two go together. They are not separate issues. Collapse of the seawall would have a catastrophic impact on the beach.

Since the new Manly council was elected in September 1999 it has attempted to blame the former majority group for everything that went wrong. The new majority seems hell-bent on political payback. The council has voted in principle to remove all the rocks and yet has not proposed an alternative seawall protection. The council is prepared to compromise the safety of the seawall, and thus the safety of the beach or promenade and expensive adjacent properties, as part of a petty political campaign to discredit the previous council. It is time Mayor Jean Hay showed leadership in this matter and put the safety of the beach and surrounding properties above petty politics. If she does not, the consequences could be disastrous for Manly beach and for the finances of Manly Council.

GOSFORD CITY COUNCIL RURAL FIRE SERVICE CHAMPIONSHIPS

Ms ANDREWS (Peats) [12.10 p.m.]: Today I report to the House on the recent Gosford City Council Rural Fire Service Championships, which were held at Mount Penang on Sunday 30 July. I pay tribute to Arthur Owens, Superintendent of the Gosford City Council Rural Fire Service, who brought back these championships after an absence of approximately four years. Because of the nature of the Central Coast, a number of rural fire services operate within the Gosford City Council area. I was pleased that a number of units from my electorate of Peats participated. The Deputy Mayor of Gosford City Council, Robert Bell, officially opened the championships. The honourable member for Gosford and I attended and saw first-hand approximately 200 firefighters demonstrate their skills in combating fire and dealing with emergencies in a competitive environment.

I note that the Minister for Emergency Services is at the table. Apart from local units participating, there were firefighters from Cessnock, Warringah, Pittwater, Baulkham Hills and Hawkesbury, as well as the New South Wales Fire Brigades unit from Ettalong station. Captain Vince Wiegold plays a very prominent role in firefighting and does a tremendous job among the local community on the Woy Woy peninsula. There were also units from the National Parks and Wildlife Service and State Forests. The displays throughout the day included one of the two forward command units—the one stationed at Rosehill. The other is stationed at Dubbo. The units cost approximately \$250,000 and were made available to the Rural Fire Service through contributions from the Lord Mayor's bushfire appeal fund following the 1994 bushfires.

The Assistant Commissioner Strategic Development of the New South Wales Rural Fire Service, Mr Mark Crowweller, also attended. He paid tribute to Mr Owens and all those involved in organising the championships. He feels that the holding of these championships annually helps firefighters to keep up their skills. The results of the major events are as follows. The tanker-handtool event tests the skills of the driver, chainsaw operator, firefighters and crew leaders. The winner was Pearl Beach Rural Fire Brigade, followed by Narara Rural Fire Brigade and Mount Penang Rural Fire Brigade. The winner of the pump and ladder event was Mount Penang Rural Fire Brigade, followed by Avoca Beach and Pearl Beach. The LPG firefighting competition was won by Kariong Rural Fire Brigade, followed by Somersby and Avoca Beach.

The winner in the breathing apparatus competition was Matcham Holgate Rural Fire Brigade, followed by Avoca Beach and Copacabana. In first-aid the winner was Avoca Beach, followed by Copacabana and Matcham Holgate. Of particular interest was the lunch break demonstration by Somersby Rural Fire Brigade cadet members, whose ages range from 14 years onwards. They demonstrated basic firefighting operations. The display was very much appreciated by those in attendance. It augurs well for the future of rural fire units throughout the area that the units encourage young members of the community to participate in local services. It gives them an appreciation of what firefighting and responses to emergencies are about. I also pay tribute to the Gosford City Council Rural Fire Service for providing canteen services and refreshments to all those involved.

CENTRAL COAST DISABILITY SERVICES

Mr HARTCHER (Gosford) [12.15 p.m.]: I draw to the attention of the House some of the personal implications of the Government's policies towards disabled persons and their families in my electorate. Jackson Lamb is one of my constituents. He is 19 years old and suffers from cerebral palsy, which severely affects his physical movements. He requires 24-hour care to dress and eat, and even to go to the toilet. His family attends to Jackson's needs but Mr and Mrs Lamb have other children in the family and need to work to earn a living. They have found providing such constant care very difficult. For instance, Mrs Lamb rises anywhere from four to 20 times every evening to turn Jackson over, cover him or tuck him into bed, or even to give him a drink.

For the past five years Jackson has been on a waiting list for respite accommodation. He has visited respite accommodation before—in Sydney—but has never been able to receive any respite care on the Central Coast. For the remainder of this year, while he continues at school, Jackson will receive respite care for two weekends a term at cottages run by the Northcote Society and the Spastic Centre at Castle Hill. When he finishes at Henry Kendall High School these time-out weekends will cease. As his family has said, while his schooling may have finished, his needs certainly have not.

Jackson enjoys his stay at the cottages. After each weekend his parents find him more independent and motivated. However, the opportunity of respite care is not available to him on the Central Coast. In November 1997 the family was offered an interview for a place in a group home on the coast. The Lambs were among the final six families but were unsuccessful in their application for supported accommodation for Jackson. Clearly, a person such as Jackson is deserving of a chance at assisted independence.

Jackson is very bright and clearly wants to spread his wings beyond the care provided by his parents—as indeed is normal for any young person. But Jackson is being denied that chance because of the drastic underfunding of the Disability Crisis Support and Accommodation Scheme—a State-administered scheme to which the Commonwealth Government annually contributes more than \$100 million. Mr and Mrs Lamb need to be given support to look after Jackson. They have other children who require the same amount of love and care as any other child but they often sacrifice their needs so that Jackson's needs can be met. They are not alone in their plight.

Another constituent, Julie from Avoca Beach, has written to me about her 44-year-old sister, who suffers from Down's syndrome and epilepsy and requires 24-hour care. Julie's mother, who cared for Julie's sister, recently passed away. Julie has been told that there is a 10-year waiting list for the homes to whom she has applied on her sister's behalf. She wrote:

I have been in touch with the Dept of Community Services here on the coast and they have made inquiries on our behalf as to availability of group homes on the coast, but there are no places available. They have also made an application for recurring funding from the Ageing and Disability Dept but we have been told they have no funds and no time frame has been suggested ... I have approached many other groups ... but the time frame we are looking at is 10 years.

Part of the problem is that the Government has consistently refused to address the fact that respite places around New South Wales are being filled by residents who effectively live in them full time. Of course, this inevitably creates an ongoing circle in which the needs for both permanent and respite accommodation are not met because there are no more places available. Society and the Government must no longer deny the desperate pleas of parents such as Mr and Mrs Lamb for their son, or Julie for her sister. As Mr and Mrs Lamb have said:

We are worn out and struggling to keep the family unit going ... please find funding and accommodation for Jackson, so he can grow up and we can enjoy his company instead of being worn out and tired.

I think that sums up the attitude of families with disabled children towards this current crisis in group and respite care. The Jackson family are concerned that the Government and the Parliament can find \$12 million to build a football stadium on the Central Coast but are not able to afford more permanent care cottages and respite houses to service the needs of Gosford. They deserve to know why their needs have been ignored for so long and continue to be ignored.

SWING FOR DISABLED CHILDREN

Mr GREENE (Georges River) [12.20 p.m.]: On Saturday 21 July I attended a function at the rear of the branch library of Hurstville City Council in Olds Park on the occasion of the opening of the world-first swing for disabled children. The swing provides an opportunity for children in wheelchairs to access an activity

that we have taken for granted, that is, to sit in a swing and be pushed by a carer or parent. The swing was developed by Wayne Devine, whose business, Jenways Industries, is in the electorate of Georges River. Wayne has worked conscientiously over a number of years and put his own finances into the development of the swing. I congratulate Wayne on the enormous amount of time, effort and research he has devoted to its development.

I take this opportunity to congratulate Hurstville City Council, which officially opened the swing on 21 July. The Mayor of Hurstville, Councillor Phillip Sanson, had the honour of opening that facility. I congratulate the council on having the foresight and courage to assist Wayne Devine to make this dream become a reality for the children. It is important to note that the swing has been set up correctly: all the necessary soft-fall facilities have been provided, with the swing cordoned off with a fence of the swimming pool variety, rendering the swing area accessible only by adults and therefore safe for children. The children are fastened into the swing so that the wheelchair cannot move away but carers can give the children a push.

On 21 July I saw children experiencing what we have all taken for granted. It was exciting to see the joy and amazement in their faces. The next day I again saw the swing being used by children with disabilities, with the carers sharing the children's excitement. I congratulate in particular the parks manager, Mr Andrew Sharp, who worked closely with Wayne Devine in the development of the swing structure and enclosure. I congratulate also former councillor Bryan McDonald, who worked tirelessly to encourage the council to take this idea on board. Councillor Phillip Sanson worked hard to bring about this important improvement for Hurstville city. I am aware that a number of other councils are considering setting up wheelchair swings in their areas. I encourage them to do so. Anyone who travels to Olds Park and watches the swing in action could only be as excited as I was to see the joy on the faces of children using a swing for the first time.

Another advantage of the swing is that it has a moulded plastic seat that can be folded down for use by children who are not necessarily confined to wheelchairs but have some other form of disability that prevents them from using a normal swing. Those children also can be fastened into the swing by a safety belt, enabling their carers to look after them. I am encouraged that many special schools within the St George district are already giving the children under their care the benefit of access to this swing for the disabled. This world first was reported on Channel Ten news a couple of weeks ago. It is great to see publicity for something as special as a swing for children in wheelchairs and children with other disabilities.

MACKSVILLE AND DISTRICT HOSPITAL FUNDING

Mr STONER (Oxley) [12.25 p.m.]: I refer to the downgrading of services at the Macksville and District Hospital. It is an issue that I have raised in this place on a number of previous occasions. However, unfortunately, nothing has changed as a result of my past representations on behalf of the people of the Nambucca Valley. Hence I must again voice the strong protests of a community united in support of its hospital. The Macksville and District Hospital has been the subject of the largest petition that I have encountered in my year and a half as the member for Oxley, with over 4,000 signatures from people in towns including Nambucca Heads, Macksville, Bowraville and the Nambucca district.

The community, led by the Macksville Hospital Action Group chairman, Mr Bob Provost, OAM, Mr Don Randall, Mrs Nola Ryce and others, has been galvanised into action by a series of cost-cutting measures at the Macksville and District Hospital over the past 12 months, particularly the removal of 10 beds, the regular temporary closure of another eight-bed ward, and the placing of restrictions on the availability and nature of surgery performed locally at the hospital. These measures are a deliberate attempt to increase waiting lists and time at the hospital to match those found at poorer performing hospitals—sort of a lowest common denominator approach to cost cutting. Unfortunately, it hits very hard at a community that has played a significant role in contributing to what was one of the State's best country hospitals.

Since the Minister for Health made his grandiose announcements of increased funding to public hospitals and equitable funding for the first time to the Mid North Coast Area Health Service, I have repeatedly called upon the Minister to channel those funds directly into patient care and not into the bureaucracy, and specifically to reopen beds and restore surgery availability at the Macksville and District Hospital. Alas, my calls seem to be falling upon deaf ears. Just last week a patient who was booked for a laparoscopic hernia repair was told the day before the operation that it was cancelled. The reason? No beds were available. But hospital administrators had just closed the eight-bed ward to which I referred earlier. So that is a furphy. Now this patient, who had been waiting a considerable period for this much-needed treatment and who was mentally ready for the operation, has to start the whole process over again and is back on the waiting list. Last week I received this letter from a constituent:

I am writing this letter concerning Macksville Hospital. I have a very close friend who was admitted to the hospital. She has bronchial asthma and is on oxygen. Being admitted at 3pm, it was 730 before she saw the doctor. She was then transferred to Coffs Harbour Hospital as a bed was not available at Macksville. On Thursday she was transferred to Kempsey as her bed was required. She was still on oxygen.

In four days, three different hospitals. And in the condition she was in, I think it was disgusting. It is disgusting to think our hospitals are in such a state—worse than in my eighty years.

To look back and see with our small hospitals we were never turned away. Our parents helped build our hospital, and now if I need hospitalisation am I going to be pushed around like this?

I hope something becomes of this matter.

Another constituent, who travelled half an hour from Bowraville last month with his four-year-old son who had severe asthma, was sent on to Coffs Harbour hospital, another hour away. He was told that the hospital had a policy that children under five years of age had to go to Coffs Harbour Base Hospital for treatment. These are just a few examples that illustrate the impact of the deliberate downgrading of services at Macksville and District Hospital on the community of the Nambucca Valley.

My message to the Minister is this: 4,000-plus signatures from a community whose three major towns have a total population of around 12,200; persistent and serious complaints about the level of services being provided; and distressed people in a community that has had great pride in its hospital. This should tell the Minister that there is more to this than his bureaucrats are telling him. Funding must be provided urgently to restore the once high standard of service offered by Macksville and District Hospital.

KIAMA SKATEBOARD FACILITY

Mr BROWN (Kiama) [12.30 p.m.]: The Kiama Skate Park is a great new facility which has been built for the youth who reside in the Kiama electorate and the Illawarra as a whole. Last Saturday the Mayor of Kiama, Councillor Joyce Wheatley, and I opened the new skate park. The development of the facility has taken some time and local youth have been extremely patient. I congratulate them on their input, which I will discuss later in my speech.

When I served on the Kiama young citizens council 10 years ago my colleagues and I decided that skateboard facilities should be provided in the local area. Many youths were skating on the streets or in derelict car yards, which was dangerous for them as well as for motorists and pedestrians. So we decided that that could not continue and that the provision of skateboard facilities should be a council priority. The council then came to the party by building skate ramps at the Quarry Leisure Centre. However, those ramps proved not to be the facilities that had been envisaged and they were not utilised properly.

During the 1999 election campaign the then Minister for Sport and Recreation, the honourable member for Parramatta, visited the Kiama electorate and presented the local community with a cheque for \$100,000 to build a skateboard facility. The occasion was greeted with much fanfare and generated excitement among the local youths, who then decided to design their own facility. Local skateboarders Jason Phillips and Trevor Cook attended the opening on the weekend. They should be complimented on the excellent design of the facility. The skateboard facility is built to an international standard. It has great viewing areas and hundreds of people attended the weekend opening. We hope that the skate park will attract skaters from not only all over the country but all over the world.

The facility provides enjoyment to both young and experienced skaters, through large and small ramps. I saw some seven-year-olds equipped with helmets and knee and elbow pads skating up and down some of the smaller ramps. It was a great family experience. A young councillor, Luke Twyford—who is only 20 years old—was elected to the council at the last elections. He is part of the Labor team, and that team worked with me and the State Labor Government to ensure that the facility was built as quickly as possible. I compliment Luke on his efforts to ensure that the facility was built on time and in consultation with the Kiama youth. I also congratulate the council social director, Mario Vallejos, and Michael Forsyth from Kiama Council. Kiama youth, with tremendous help and effort by the local youth workers, Pat O'Shae and Liz Pearce, realising the potential expense of the facility, organised Blowout concerts—so named because they were held close to the Kiama blowhole and because, if one stood too close to a speaker, one would be blown out.

Although the concerts proved to be a huge success among local youth, they could not raise sufficient funds. That is why I congratulate the Carr Labor Government on contributing the \$100,000. Other Labor councillors, Councillor McCarthy and Councillor Knott, and an Independent councillor, Ruth Devenney, were also involved in getting the project up and running. I urge skaters who use the facility to be responsible and considerate of their fellow skaters and the occupants of the nearby retirement village. If they do that, I am sure that the facility—which I took great pleasure in opening—will be a great success.

APPIN ROAD FATALITIES

Ms SEATON (Southern Highlands) [12.35 p.m.]: I draw the attention of the House to a very serious and sad issue in my electorate: two recent road fatalities on Appin Road, which connects the village of Appin in my electorate with Campbelltown, which is just outside the boundary of Southern Highlands, and is used by many people. In addition to the two recent fatalities, there were fatalities on the road in each of the two subsequent weeks. Many people are still coming to terms with the fatality involving 18-year-old Justin Field on 16 July 1994.

The Appin Chamber of Commerce is particularly concerned about the recent fatalities, as is the local school, which is located on Appin Road. The people of Appin have formed an action group led by Mr Mark Sheehy, and many people, including Mrs Coomber from Appin, have written to me expressing their concern. The two recent fatal accidents occurred in different areas. One involved a 65-year-old man in an area where the road alignment is curved and the road pavement is said to be in quite good condition with well-formed gravel shoulders, where there is no roadside vegetation and the road lanes measure considerably less than 3.5 metres. The second accident, which led to the death of a 22-year-old woman, occurred on a different site where the road alignment is straight with a slight crest, with excellent road pavement and formed, unsealed shoulders. There are BB barrier centre lines at both accident sites and there are reflectors and vibr-line edgelines.

In the second accident, a car was overtaking a truck and collided head on with the vehicle of the deceased. There is significant roadside vegetation at that site, but it did not appear to be a factor in the severity of the accident. These accidents have deeply affected the people of Appin. I visited Appin in the week following the first fatality, and I was informed of the second fatality while attending church the next weekend. It has hit people very hard. Mr Sheehy told me that when people hear of a fatality now they telephone others in the local community to make sure that it does not involve anyone they know and love. It is a serious problem. The Appin to Campbelltown road is a country road and, like many other roads on the outskirts of Sydney, has seen a huge increase in traffic volume and is simply not coping.

The Wollondilly traffic committee held a meeting on 21 July and made recommendations to the Roads and Traffic Authority [RTA] requesting that it undertake a stage 5 road safety audit of the entire length of the road; that the result be forwarded to council for information and review; and that a road safety campaign targeting Appin Road users be investigated and implemented. There are several problems, including the fact that the road traverses two council areas—Campbelltown and Wollondilly—and two RTA divisions, centred in Wollongong and in Blacktown. The people of Appin are concerned that council and RTA administrative divisions will inhibit an urgent and thorough review of the problem. We do not want to see administrative boundaries delay the process and result in buck passing. I hope that the Minister for Roads is listening to this statement and will take that point on board. We must find a speedy solution to this problem.

The Appin Chamber of Commerce, and particularly Mr Bob Donald, make the point that a permanent solution must be found. This is not just about signage or putting more speed restrictions on the road. Mr Sheehy also recognises that some physical improvements must be made to the road. We do not want to see simply more speed restrictions: we want an acknowledgment of the volume of traffic on the road and of the fact that motorists increase speed, when they should not, on straight stretches of the road. There have been near misses recently and people have pulled off the road to avoid an accident. However, the conditions on the edge of the road are also extremely dangerous and could contribute to other accidents.

Bob Donald particularly urges the RTA to look at the physical characteristics of the road and the configurations of the shoulder of the road, and to make sure that local knowledge in Appin and Campbelltown is taken into account by the RTA in finding a permanent solution. I urge the Minister for Roads to listen carefully and to do everything he can to expedite a speedy solution to this problem and prevent any further fatalities.

Mr DEBUS (Blue Mountains—Attorney General, Minister for the Environment, Minister for Emergency Services, Minister for Corrective Services, and Minister Assisting the Premier on the Arts) [12.40 p.m.]: The Minister for Roads has sent me a message in the last few minutes asking me to say that he will give attention to the matters raised by the honourable member.

BLACKTOWN RESPITE CARE SERVICES

Mr GIBSON (Blacktown) [12.40 p.m.]: I refer today to a couple living in Blacktown who have a 25-year-old son named Mark, who was born autistic. Although he is 25 years of age he has the mind of a one- or

two-year-old: he has a man's body but a baby's mind. He cannot feed himself, he cannot talk, he cannot comprehend, and his parents are his carers. His parents are really saints, and they are only two of the many thousands of carers throughout the country today. We must try as hard as we can to give a quality of life not only to Mark but also to the carers, his parents, who look after him not just for a few hours a day, but for 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year.

Luckily, for many years Mark has been attending an organisation at Prospect called Pecky's. It is a peer support group with programs to help people such as Mark. Unfortunately, in a letter from Pecky's dated 29 June the family has been told to explore other options. Pecky's can only cater for 12 adolescents between 13 and 18 years of age. Unfortunately, 10 of the 12 people who attend Pecky's are well over 18 years of age. As I say, Mark is 25, and people older than him attend there. There is nowhere else for them to go. We define adolescents on a physical basis rather than on an intellectual basis. We hope that the Minister will look at extending the age limit for people going to Pecky's. The worst thing one can do for someone who is autistic, like Mark, is to take him out of his routine. If that happens there will be chaos.

Unfortunately, respite care for Mark in the Blacktown area is a problem. Because of the special needs Mark has, the only place for respite care is at Wahroonga. From Blacktown to Wahroonga is a long way for the family to travel. In the short term I ask the Minister to look at extending the age limit for people going to Pecky's. The long-term solution is group homes, and Blacktown needs more group homes. Having spoken to those who look after people such as Mark in the Blacktown area, I understand that at least 25 respite beds are needed in Blacktown alone. They are required seven days a week, 365 days a year. Mark is entitled to the best quality of life we can give him, but his parents are entitled to that too. I often wonder what will happen to Mark when his mum and dad finally pass away. Does he become another statistic? I know the State will pick him up, but I hope people like Mark do not become statistics like the 30,000-odd people who do not have a home and sleep in the streets of Sydney every night.

I pay tribute to the Minister for Community Services. She has done a great job in the portfolio. She has given it a \$65 million kick along this year. She is a compassionate person and she has laid the foundation for support homes to become a reality in the future. We may not see them for five or six or even 10 years, but eventually there will be support homes for people such as Mark when their mums and dads pass away. The Minister started the idea for full-time support homes and I hope they come to reality some time in the very near future. The Government is doing a worthwhile thing for people such as Mark. There but for the grace of God go I.

LIFELINE SOUTH COAST

Mr CAMPBELL (Keira) [12.45 p.m.]: I want to talk about Lifeline South Coast, an organisation which, over the years, I have had the opportunity to support, encourage and learn from. It is supported by the Uniting Church but receives a great deal of support from others. Recently Lifeline South Coast had the good fortune of being supported by the community and being able to expand the counselling rooms at its centre in Court Lane, Wollongong. This expansion is needed as the call rate has jumped from 8,000 to 12,500 per annum over the past five years. The expansion in the telephone counselling area was made possible by refurbishing and converting the existing two telephone booths into four. Obviously, some capital costs are involved in a project such as this, and the Illawarra Sunrise Rotary Club took this project on, supported it very strongly, raised \$10,000 towards the project and encouraged others to support it.

A number of donations in kind were organised by Unanderra Timber and Joinery. Other donations came from Alpha Healthcare, Beechwood Homes, Collegians Rugby League Club, Cornford Painting, Gary Smith, Great Western Carpets, Green Electrical, Go Hire, Gunter Schwarz Design, Hansen and Cole, Illawarra Newspaper Holdings—the publishers of the *Illawarra Mercury*—Indent the Tile People, J. R. Lough and Associates, K. F. Williams & Associates, Kings Real Estate, Mant Glass, Marksman Homes, Maurice Hayler and Associates, Symes Warne and Associates, the Allied Group, Wideform Constructions, John Wiltshire and Wollongong City Council. All those organisations contributed in one way or another, with cash or goods or work in kind, to ensure the refurbishment of those facilities so that the volunteers who work at Lifeline and contribute so significantly to our community had a more appropriate work space and so that those on duty would be able to respond to calls. In the letter I received from Lifeline, the Executive Director, Grahame Gould, made the point:

Thanks to this wonderful help from the community, we now have the capacity to take more calls and provide greater support to the community and keep Lifeline "as close as the phone every day and every night".

That sense of community pride, support, involvement and participation makes Lifeline so strong in its support for people. All those organisations I mentioned earlier also add to that strength and that sense of place that is the community of the Illawarra, and Wollongong in particular. The board of Lifeline South Coast is chaired by the Reverend Gordon Bradbury, who is—I do not think he would mind my saying—a colourful character for a Uniting Church minister. Gordon leads his own parish, he leads Lifeline, he plays a very active role as the police chaplain in the region, and he puts a great deal of effort into our community.

I have known Grahame Gould for a number of years and I know of his dedication to and concern for the community. It is his choice to work for Lifeline. On many occasions we have discussed the growing number of suicides in the community. In his work with Lifeline he is determined to ensure that voluntary counsellors are available for people to ring when they need someone to talk to. Often during private members' statements in this Chamber we hear about community concerns. All of the work that has gone into this refurbished Lifeline centre is a demonstration of the commitment that people have to assisting others in the community and of their endeavours to make our communities stronger places in which to live.

Private members' statements noted.

[Mr Acting-Speaker (Mr Mills) left the chair at 12.51 p.m. The House resumed at 2.15 p.m.]

DEATH OF NEWCASTLE HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT

Ministerial Statement

Mr AQUILINA (Riverstone—Minister for Education and Training) [2.15 p.m.]: As a result of an accident which occurred yesterday while on an excursion to the Thredbo snowfields, a year 11 student from Newcastle High School died this morning in hospital. On behalf of all members of this House, particularly the honourable member for Newcastle, I express my sincere condolences to the student's family and friends, and to his classmates and the staff at Newcastle High School. Investigations are currently being made about the accident. Counselling support was immediately arranged for the group of students by the Department of Education and Training's district office. Additional support has been provided to staff and students.

The district student welfare consultant and the staff welfare officer have been at Newcastle High School supporting the staff and students. Additional counselling support has been provided at the school. I have personally spoken with the principal, who advised that he and his staff are grateful for the expressions of sympathy and offers of additional counselling and assistance which have been made. I am sure that the thoughts of all members of this House are with the boy's family and friends at this sad time.

Mr O'DOHERTY (Hornsby) [2.19 p.m.]: On behalf of the Leader of the Opposition and all Opposition colleagues I join with the Minister in expressing our deepest sympathy and in saying that the thoughts and prayers of all members of this House are with the family of Tim Smith and all the students and staff of Newcastle High School. I particularly commend the Principal, Peter McNair, for organising so quickly the provisions that come into play very efficiently by the Department of Education and Training whenever a critical incident takes place. We recognise that one of the things we value about our young men in Australia is that they are very adventurous and very physical, and that they enjoy sporting activities such as snowboarding, which is an increasingly popular sport and pastime.

We also need to recognise that an unusually high number of Australian males die through adventurous activities and other means. That is something society needs to continually work on; we value highly the lives of young men in Australia. As snowboarding becomes more popular it is appropriate that schools include it in their sporting activities and teach young men to do so safely. I hope that that is one of the issues that the Coroner takes into account.

BILLS UNPROCLAIMED

Mr Speaker tabled a list of legislation unproclaimed 90 days after assent as at 9 August 2000.

[Notices of Motions]

Mr SPEAKER: Order! The motion that the honourable member for Southern Highlands is giving notice of is too long. I ask her to edit it.

PETITIONS

Drug Reform

Petition praying that the establishment of heroin shooting galleries be opposed and that consideration be given to the introduction of legislation for drug reform, received from **Ms Hodgkinson**.

North Head Quarantine Station

Petition praying that the head lease proposal for North Head Quarantine Station be opposed, received from **Mr Barr**.

Willoughby Paddocks Rezoning

Petition praying that the Legislative Assembly will advocate for the retention of all vacant land in the area historically known as the Willoughby Paddocks and its development as public parkland for the enjoyment of the community, received from **Mr Collins**.

Firearms Legislation

Petition praying that a committee be established to review the Firearms Act, received from **Ms Hodgkinson**.

Surry Hills Policing

Petition praying for increased police presence in the Surry Hills area, received from **Ms Moore**.

East Sydney and Darlinghurst Policing

Petition praying for increased police presence in the East Sydney and Darlinghurst areas, received from **Ms Moore**.

Redfern, Darlington and Chippendale Policing

Petition praying for increased police presence in the Redfern, Darlington and Chippendale areas, received from **Ms Moore**.

Bondi Pavilion Olympic Stadium Proposal

Petition praying for opposition to the construction of a stadium at Bondi Pavilion for the volleyball event during the 2000 Olympic Games, received from **Ms Moore**.

Manly Hospital Paediatric Services

Petition expressing concern at the decision of the Northern Sydney Area Health Service to discontinue paediatric services at Manly Hospital and praying that full services at Manly Hospital be maintained, received from **Mr Barr**.

Coffs Harbour Health Services Funding

Petition praying for increased funding for health services in the Coffs Harbour area and a reduction in surgery waiting lists, received from **Mr Fraser**.

Macksville Hospital Funding

Petition praying that sufficient recurrent funding be allocated to Macksville and District Hospital to enable restoration of hospital services to the level that existed prior to cutbacks instituted by the Mid North Coast Area Health Service, received from **Mr Stoner**.

Queanbeyan Ambulance Station

Petition praying for the allocation of funds for the construction of a permanent ambulance station in the Queanbeyan central business district to ensure faster response times and prompt emergency care for the residents of Queanbeyan and the surrounding region, received from **Mr Webb**.

Seaforth TAFE Closure

Petition praying for opposition to the closure of Seaforth TAFE, received from **Mr Barr**.

TAFE Funding

Petition praying for opposition to any funding cuts to TAFE, received from **Ms Moore**.

Public Transport Fare Increases

Petition praying for opposition to the implementation of public transport fare increases, received from **Mr Barr**.

Illalong Deviation

Petition expressing concern at traffic management issues and potential safety risks associated with the Illalong deviation on the Burley Griffin Way, and praying that the House will call on the Minister for Transport to provide an accurate completion date, received from **Ms Hodgkinson**.

School Student Transport Scheme Subsidy

Petition expressing opposition to the proposed elimination of the school student transport scheme subsidy for boarding students of Trinity Catholic College, and praying that the House will ensure that the basic transport needs of students of the college are met, received from **Ms Hodgkinson**.

Windsor Road Upgrading

Petitions praying that Windsor Road be upgraded and widened within the next two financial years, received from **Mr Merton**, **Mr Richardson** and **Mr Rozzoli**.

Surry Hills Pedestrian Crossing

Petition praying that a pedestrian crossing be installed on Belvoir Street, Surry Hills, received from **Ms Moore**.

Oxford Street Pedestrian Crossing

Petition praying that an additional signalised pedestrian crossing be installed on Oxford Street, Paddington, received from **Ms Moore**.

Moore Park Light Rail

Petition praying that consideration be given to the construction of a light rail transport system for Moore Park, received from **Ms Moore**.

Woolloomooloo Wharf Redevelopment

Petition praying that the Woolloomooloo wharf redevelopment project include provision for a ferry wharf, received from **Ms Moore**.

Eastern Distributor Tunnel Ventilation

Petition praying that air purification systems be installed on the Eastern Distributor and cross-city tunnel, received from **Ms Moore**.

Moore Park Landscaping

Petition calling for the permanent removal of car parking from Moore Park east, and praying that Moore Park be landscaped to meet the increased need of local communities for passive recreation space, received from **Ms Moore**.

Surry Hills Bus Services

Petition praying for an urgent increase in the reliability and adequacy of Surry Hills bus services, received from **Ms Moore**.

Redfern Bus Services

Petition praying for an urgent increase in the reliability and adequacy of Redfern bus services, received from **Ms Moore**.

Old-growth Forests Protection

Petition praying that consideration be given to the permanent protection of old-growth forests and all other areas of high conservation value, and to the implementation of tree planting strategies, received from **Ms Moore**.

Ovine Johne's Disease Program

Petition praying for deregulation of the current Ovine Johne's Disease program and its replacement with a fair and workable alternative to facilitate trade and alleviate the social issues crippling the New South Wales sheep industry, received from **Ms Hodgkinson**.

Animal Experimentation

Petition praying that the practice of supplying stray animals to universities and research institutions for experimentation be opposed, received from **Ms Moore**.

Animal Vivisection

Petition praying that the House will totally and unconditionally abolish animal vivisection on scientific, medical and ethical grounds, and that a new system be introduced whereby veterinary students are apprenticed to practising veterinary surgeons, received from **Ms Moore**.

Septic Tank Inspection Fees

Petition praying that septic tank owners be exempted from inspection and registration fees, received from **Ms Hodgkinson**.

White City Site Rezoning Proposal

Petition praying that any rezoning of the White City site be opposed, received from **Ms Moore**.

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE**Reordering of General Business**

Mr LYNCH (Liverpool) [2.34 p.m.]: I move:

That general business notice of motion No. 166 have precedence on Thursday 10 August 2000.

My request for precedence is based upon the importance and significance of the issues and principles that are raised in the motion. Those issues and principles have been recognised on a number of occasions. They are underlined by the fact that similar, consistent motions have been adopted by many bodies and individuals,

including the House of Representatives of the United States Congress in March last year—a source I do not generally rely upon for support—the European Parliament and the Law Council of Australia in April of last year and in March this year.

Mr SPEAKER: Order! The Opposition has indicated that it will agree with the motion.

Motion agreed to.

POLICE INTEGRITY COMMISSION

Report

Mr Whelan, by leave, tabled a report of the Inspector of the Police Integrity Commission entitled "Review of the Law Enforcement and National Security (Assumed Identities) Act 1998".

QUESTIONS WITHOUT NOTICE

CRIME INVESTIGATIONS

Mrs CHIKAROVSKI: My question is to the Premier. Given the Premier's stated public sympathy for small retailers facing a wave of robberies, thefts and threats of physical violence, will he explain to Rosemary Bartholomew, a Menai businesswoman who is in the public gallery today, why police failed to investigate a recent ram-raid on her shop and a subsequent bombing, which she has now been told by police was not formally recorded?

Mr CARR: I welcome details of that matter.

Mr SPEAKER: Order! I call the honourable member for Pittwater to order.

Mr CARR: I will pursue it with all the seriousness it deserves.

Mr SPEAKER: Order! I call the honourable member for Hornsby to order.

Mr CARR: The Government's response yesterday to the case in Maitland affirms our intention to take the side of shopkeepers who are the victims of crime.

Mr SPEAKER: Order! I place the honourable member for Davidson on two calls to order.

Mr CARR: That is why we are increasing police numbers.

Mr SPEAKER: Order! I call the honourable member for Oxley to order.

Mr CARR: That is why my Government has backed the police in the full exercise of their powers. It is why police powers have increased so markedly in the last 5½ years under this Government.

Mr SPEAKER: Order! I call the honourable member for Hornsby to order for the second time.

Mr CARR: Bring to the Government any grievance that a shopkeeper has, and we will vigorously pursue it.

Mr SPEAKER: Order! I call the honourable member for Gosford to order. I call the honourable member for Hornsby to order for the third time.

POST-2000 JOBS PLAN

Miss BURTON: My question without notice is directed to the Premier. What is the latest information on the New South Wales Government's post-2000 jobs plan?

Mr CARR: More good news about jobs growth in New South Wales.

Mr SPEAKER: Order! I place the honourable member for Epping on two calls to order.

Mr CARR: I speak as the Premier of a State that has the lowest unemployment in Australia.

Mr SPEAKER: Order! I place the honourable member for North Shore on two calls to order.

Mr CARR: I speak as Premier of a State that has the best business climate in this country. I speak as Premier of a State that has brought jobs growth to rural and regional New South Wales. Let me announce our latest wins. After taking on the aviation industry, international businessman Sir Richard Branson will now tackle, from a base in New South Wales, the heavyweights of the telecommunications industry. We won it, for us—jobs here, in this State.

Mr SPEAKER: Order! I call the honourable member for Oxley to order for the second time.

Mr CARR: Sir Richard Branson will set up the Australian headquarters of Virgin Mobile in Sydney, creating 300 jobs over the next five years. Another win for New South Wales! It confirms Sydney as the undisputed communications gateway to Australia, one of the most desirable information technology and telecommunications investment destinations in the Asia-Pacific. Virgin Mobile is a joint venture between Cable 1 as Optus and the Virgin group. It will pump \$100 million into the New South Wales economy. This latest win belongs in that very impressive list of private and public sector projects that I describe as the Government's post-2000 jobs plan for New South Wales.

I spoke to Sir Richard Branson on Monday. The company's headquarters, which will include a major call centre, will market, sell and distribute mobile communications throughout Australia. Operations of the new headquarters will start before the end of the year. The director of Virgin Mobile in Australia, Mr Andrew Grant, expressed his delight that the company is coming to New South Wales with this cluster of 300 jobs. He said, "We see this as the beginning of a long-term relationship with New South Wales which we hope will include further initiatives in regional areas of the State."

During the past financial year the State Government has directly helped to track or assist in the expansion of 172 businesses in New South Wales. This has created or secured more than 9,000 jobs and injected \$1 billion into the economy. It shows the strong jobs and investment growth in New South Wales, which has an unemployment rate of 5.8 per cent, a full 1 per cent lower than the national average.

[Interruption]

The honourable member for Southern Highlands interjects. I might say, her foreshadowed motion on balloons is the most creative measure I have heard from the Opposition. I support it.

Ms Seaton: You should do something about it.

Mr CARR: You do not need to interject on me. I support it. Even though I have received assurances from Olympic organisers that there will be no mass release of balloons—which I hope means no release of balloons during the Games—I would welcome discussion with the honourable member for Southern Highlands about that legislation. My approach in this House is that if there is a good idea from the Opposition—and that is pretty rare—I will adopt it. The honourable member for Southern Highlands is welcome in my office at any time for a cup of tea and a discussion about her legislation.

Some of my colleagues are criticising me, but if it is a good measure we will adopt it. That is my approach. I have assurances from Olympic organisers, but if it needs statutory force for post-Olympics events, I will support that. The unnecessary death of any marine mammal is of concern. The Minister for the Environment sponsored the marine mammals protection Act, which prevented people taking dolphins from the wild—

Mr Souris: It's a pity the death of a woman didn't get you as excited. Ring up Brian Morse and tell him that.

Mr SPEAKER: Order! I call the Leader of the National Party to order.

Mr CARR: That is a disgraceful and shameful comment.

Mr SPEAKER: Order! I call the Leader of the National Party to order for the second time.

Mr CARR: This bloke is no hazard.

Mr Hazzard: If that's the best you can do, it's not real good.

Mr CARR: No wonder your party has added your name to the list of deadwood. You are part of the 60 per cent of the Liberal Party who are described officially by Hugh Heffernan as deadwood and whose branch has got him on six-monthly reports. So the good news on jobs continues to come in. It is a great win for New South Wales. Three hundred jobs have been created. We have worked hard to get it. This State has the lowest unemployment in Australia. To me, success like this is only an invitation for further effort.

HONOURABLE MEMBER FOR MURRAY-DARLING CONDUCT

Mr PICCOLI: My question is directed to the Premier. Is the Premier concerned that at the Small Tidy Towns Awards presentation at Byrock last year the Premier's representative, the honourable member for Murray-Darling, disgraced himself? Is this the spirit—

Mr SPEAKER: Order! I rule the question out of order.

PSYCHOLOGISTS ACT REVIEW

Mr LYNCH: My question without notice is addressed to the Minister for Health. What is the Government's response to the recent review of the Psychologists Act?

Mr KNOWLES: There are approximately 6,200 psychologists registered in New South Wales. They occupy a position of trust in our community that has been earned over many years, continuing a tradition of quality care for their clients. To practise as a psychologist in this State it is necessary to be registered by the Psychologists Registration Board under the provisions of the Psychologists Act. That Act establishes the framework for professional codes of conduct and disciplinary procedures.

Sadly, there are those in the profession who do not meet the standards set either in legislation or, perhaps as importantly, those expected by the community. Each year complaints about the behaviour of a minority of psychologists are made to either the board or, where necessary, the Health Care Complaints Commission. Complaints range from breaches of confidentiality to fraud and professional conflict of interest. Historically, the majority of complaints referred for investigation relate to psychologists who have had sexual relations with their clients or who participate in inappropriate sexual behaviour.

The breach of such a position of trust is clearly unacceptable. The sanctions against such complaints, apart from standard legal remedies, can range from practice restrictions to suspension or deregistration. In recent years there has been an average of 40 complaints each year to either the Psychologists Registration Board or the Health Care Complaints Commission. However, following the review of the Act referred to in the question, I believe that there is a capacity to further strengthen the regulatory and disciplinary framework for the profession. This view has the support of both the board and, importantly, the New South Wales Ombudsman, who had previously expressed concerns about the effectiveness of the 1989 Act to deal with past and present misconduct issues.

For example, there have been incidents of patients making complaints about sexual misconduct by psychologists who then remove their names from the register, thereby avoiding disciplinary action. In one case a complaint was made that a registered psychologist molested a minor in the course of counselling. The registered psychologist subsequently removed his name from the register. Although the police are investigating the matter, the Psychologists Registration Board is simply unable to take action against the psychologist under the provisions of the Act unless that psychologist seeks to be reregistered at some time in the future.

Clearly, that position is unacceptable and demonstrates the need to introduce a more rigorous process for initial registration, performance monitoring and renewal. This should extend to cover any criminal finding that would render an applicant unfit in the public interest to practise psychology. Equally, based on the history of complaints there is a need to regularly review the performance of psychologists. They should be required to submit annual declarations regarding their fitness, professional development and character when they seek to renew their registration. In regard to criminal findings relating to sex or violence, there is a clear need for courts

to notify the registration board when they are aware of registered psychologists being guilty of certain criminal conduct. The definition of sex or violence includes sexual activity, acts of indecency, child pornography, physical violence or the threat of physical violence.

Psychologists should be aware that they will no longer be able to avoid disciplinary action simply by removing their name from the register. These improvements to the Psychologists Act are necessary because consumers frequently lack the knowledge, skill and experience to assess their treatment needs. These problems are exacerbated because those in psychological distress at the time of the need for counselling are least able to determine whether the person claiming to have the appropriate qualifications is suitable for their needs. The changes proposed to the Psychologists Act will vastly improve consumer protection measures and reinforce the professionalism of the overwhelming majority of practising psychologists. Although there will always be complaints—they are unavoidable—the objective is to minimise them and remove the predators and the charlatans from the system.

Mrs Skinner: Point of order: I listened with great detail, care and interest to the answer given by the Minister for Health. I agree with him, and I would like an opportunity for the Opposition to respond. I believe it was a ministerial statement.

Mr SPEAKER: Order! There is no point of order.

DAVID HILL AND THE STATE RAIL AUTHORITY

Mr O'FARRELL: My question is directed to the Premier. At a time when he has refused to give the State Rail Authority one single extra dollar for maintenance, and when 100 State Rail Authority maintenance workers are sitting idle, can he tell the House how much David Hill is currently being paid for his consultancy at State Rail?

Mr CARR: I am not aware that David Hill is employed as a consultant at State Rail.

Mr O'Farrell: Find out!

Mr SPEAKER: Order! The honourable member for Ku-ring-gai has asked his question. He will remain silent.

Mr CARR: Let me quote official Liberal Party policy at the last election on maintenance expenditure, as outlined by Michael Photios. Remember Photios? He is now known as M. P. Consulting—Michael Photios Consulting (also lawns mowed). This quote, courtesy of Photios who was then the shadow Minister for Transport, is the official policy on maintenance with which the Coalition went to the people at the last election.

Mr O'Farrell: That is not true. You can't have it both ways.

Mr CARR: No, Photios was the shadow Minister. He went on record and what he said is policy. He said that the Liberals proposed an immediate "saving" in expenditure on rail maintenance of between \$100 million and \$300 million, out of this Government's half a billion dollars a year rail maintenance budget.

Mr SPEAKER: Order! I place the honourable member for Ku-ring-gai on two calls to order. I place the honourable member for Oxley on three calls to order.

Mr CARR: From our rail maintenance budget of half a billion dollars a year, the late-lamented Michael Photios proposed to carve out between \$100 million and \$300 million. There sits the Leader of the Opposition. That was the policy she endorsed in the 1999 State election. We know what a policy obsessive she was, with every "i" dotted and every "t" crossed, as she worked on those policy documents from inheriting the Liberal leadership on 6 December right through to the opening of the campaign. Document after document went over her desk. She finessed it and this was one that she ticked off.

Mrs Chikarovski: But you said he didn't have a transport policy.

Mr CARR: He didn't have a transport policy? This is her great defence now: you cannot attack our policies because we do not have any. This is the alternate armour-plated defence of the Leader of the Opposition.

Mr Hazzard: Point of order: Standing Order 87 requires that the Premier not mislead the House. The Leader of the Opposition is saying that this Government had no policies.

Mr SPEAKER: Order! There is no point of order.

Mr Hazzard: This Government, led by Bob Carr, has no policies.

Mr SPEAKER: Order! The member will resume his seat.

Mr Hazzard: That is what she was saying, and he is misleading the House. He should be put out.

Mr CARR: There seems to be a bit of a dispute over there.

Mr SPEAKER: Order! Premier!

Mr CARR: Did they have a policy or did they not have a policy?

Mr SPEAKER: Order! Premier!

Mr CARR: She now says they did not have any policies.

Mr SPEAKER: Order! Premier! The honourable member for Wakehurst was asked to resume his seat. He continued to stand and argue. The honourable member will be removed if he continues to act in that way. He is on three calls to order. The Chair is most dissatisfied with his attitude.

Mr O'Farrell: Point of order: My point of order is relevance. The question sought a simple answer. How much is a former Labor mate, a former head of the Water Board, being paid for his current consultancy at State Rail? How much is the Government wasting on consultants while the rail system buckles?

Mr CARR: What a pity he did not have that sort of persuasive force in the party room yesterday. Remember that for three weeks we witnessed the countdown to the approaching D-day in the Liberal Party room. The days were torn off calendars as if in a speeded-up movie. Day after day they were torn off calendars. D-day comes for the Liberals—but their allied force does not land. The point about D-day, 6 June 1944, is that it actually happened. The Allied armies landed on the Normandy Coast. They came across the English Channel and they landed. That, by definition, was D-day. What happened on the Liberal's D-day? If the Deputy Leader of the Opposition were Eisenhower he would probably still be sitting on the west wall.

Mr O'Doherty: Mr Speaker.

Mr SPEAKER: Order! No doubt the honourable member for Hornsby is going to take a point of order in relation to relevance.

Mr O'Doherty: Thank you for the opportunity to do so.

Mr SPEAKER: Order! But he is not going to take that point of order.

Mr O'Doherty: I am sorry, I thought you said I was.

Mr SPEAKER: Order! He was going to do that.

Mr O'Doherty: I was going to, and I will.

Mr SPEAKER: Order! I will rule on that. If members abuse the standing orders and provoke Ministers, Ministers are entitled to reply.

Mr CARR: That was their position on rail maintenance if they had won the last State election. Photios, as Minister for Transport, in line with their policy, would have carved between \$100 million and \$300 million out of the rail maintenance budget, and those are his words.

Mr Fraser: Point of order.

Mr SPEAKER: Order! I ask the honourable member to resume his seat.

Mr CARR: The source is Richard Glover's drivetime program of 5 June 1998.

Mr Fraser: Point of order.

Mr SPEAKER: Order! I asked the honourable member to resume his seat.

Mr Fraser: I have a point of order.

Mr SPEAKER: Order! I don't care what you have.

Mr Fraser: Point of order.

Mr SPEAKER: Order! The honourable member will resume his seat.

Mr Fraser: Point of order.

Mr SPEAKER: Order! Serjeant, remove the honourable member for Coffs Harbour.

[The honourable member for Coffs Harbour left the Chamber, accompanied by the Serjeant-at-Arms.]

FITNESS CENTRE CLOSURES

Mr GREENE: My question without notice is to the Minister for Fair Trading. What is the Government's response to recent fitness centre closures in New South Wales?

Mr WATKINS: At the outset, I inform the Premier that I remember fondly Michael Photios. I thank the honourable member for Georges River for a question which is of considerable interest to consumers who may be using fitness centres throughout the State. Unfortunately, New South Wales has a history of consumers losing their money when gyms are suddenly closed throughout this State. Many gym users found that their fitness centre expired before their membership did. Business failures such as these have caused financial hardship and inconvenience to people who simply wanted to keep fit.

Today I announce that the Government will take action to end these unfair losses. The Government will introduce legislation to reduce the risk to fitness centre members of severe financial loss when centres close down. That will be achieved by making it illegal to ask for, or to accept, fitness centre membership prepayments covering a period of more than 12 months. Today's announcement follows the development and implementation of a Code of Practice for Fitness Centres. The voluntary code was developed by the Department of Fair Trading and the Department of Sport and Recreation and was introduced in July 1998. A new body, Fitness New South Wales, was established to represent the industry.

The code was designed to enhance consumer confidence and improve the long-term viability of centres which adopted it. It has been administered and promoted by Fitness New South Wales. The code sets standards of business practice to protect consumers against financial loss, a standard of service to protect consumer health and wellbeing, and dispute resolution procedures. Since the introduction of the code, up to 80 fitness centres throughout New South Wales have adopted it. However, despite the code, the Government remains concerned about the number of closures of gyms which continue to occur.

Even though the eight centres that closed since the code was introduced were not members of Fitness New South Wales nor signatories to the code, the Government believes that tougher action to protect consumers is needed. In all eight cases, the closures were due to financial difficulty on the part of the operator. In all cases, gym users were severely inconvenienced and, in the majority of cases, consumers lost their money. In response to the ongoing problems and in view of the fact that the code had been in operation for more than 12 months, I asked the New South Wales Sports Advisory Council to independently review it. In undertaking a review of the code, the chair of the council and the President of Surf Life Saving Australia, Alan Whelpton, AM, worked with other council members and former Olympic gold medallists Dawn Fraser and Kevin Berry, and with Australian Olympic Committee member, Mr Doug Donaghue.

The review had two main purposes: first, to establish whether the code was achieving its broad objective of consumer protection; and second, to identify and examine ways to address specific issues of

concern to industry participants. The new law that the Government will introduce will implement the review's key recommendations. It will strengthen protection for fitness centre users by making the current voluntary financial provisions of the code mandatory. The new laws will require fitness centre operators to accept in advance no more than the value of a single year's membership and limit the period of prepaid membership and membership renewal fees to less than the unexpired period of the lease of a fitness centre's premises.

Mrs Skinner: Point of order: The Minister has clearly indicated that this is intended Government action. It is therefore not a response to a question but is a ministerial statement. I ask you, Mr Speaker, to rule accordingly.

Mr SPEAKER: Order! There is no point of order.

Mr WATKINS: The new laws will also impose restrictions on the acceptance of prepaid membership fees when a fitness centre has not yet commenced operations. The Government's plan is a sensible, measured approach to a specific problem in a particular industry. It focuses on the amount that a consumer can prepay rather than on the length of a membership agreement. That means that gym users will still be able to sign up for several years, but gym owners will not be able to take several years worth of fees. The plan is one which should receive the support of the industry, fitness centre users and, one would hope, the Opposition. In conclusion, I formally thank each member of the Sports Advisory Council who conducted the review, as well as the officers who contributed their time and talents.

DEPARTMENT OF CORRECTIVE SERVICES COMPUTER SYSTEM ACCESS

Mr HUMPHERSON: My question is directed to the Premier. Will he investigate allegations that the Senior Assistant Commissioner for Corrective Services, Ron Woodham, covered up an incident when a senior officer at the former Campbelltown periodic detention centre allowed an inmate access to the department's computer system which contains sensitive information about individuals on the witness protection program?

Mr CARR: Of course that most serious allegation will be properly investigated.

Mr Hartcher: Why don't you do something?

Mr SPEAKER: Order! The honourable member for Gosford will remain silent.

Mr CARR: It is a most serious allegation which, of course, will be properly investigated. I hope this question has a better basis than the little exposé that was presented to the Parliament yesterday, namely, an allegation that \$100,000 was spent on hiring a consultant to redesign the logo for CityRail—which turned out absolutely not to be the case—and I hope that this question is better than what honourable members heard in this House during the last session when the honourable member for North Shore stated that Bob Ellis had written an article defending the bashing of women—which turned out to be a film review. That was very funny. The honourable member for North Shore is a brilliant researcher!

The point I make is that any serious allegation of a lapse in the standard expected by this Government of any State Government instrumentality will be thoroughly investigated. At the beginning of question time, a serious allegation was raised in relation to police and that, together with this matter, will be fully investigated. This State has the Independent Commission Against Corruption [ICAC], an internal investigation capacity in the Department of Corrective Services, the Ombudsman and, in respect of police matters, the Police Integrity Commission to investigate independently, if required, any of these allegations. But, in giving that firm commitment to this House, as I hope any Premier would, I also warn against the pathetic performance by the Opposition of throwing up matters every question time that, upon investigation, turn out to be without foundation—matters such as the CityRail logo, which was referred to yesterday, and the article written by Bob Ellis which allegedly advocated the bashing of women.

Mrs Skinner: That is exactly what he did.

Mr CARR: The pattern emerging is as clear as it is sinister—namely, the honourable member for Kuring-gai, Barry O'Farrell, as Leader of the Opposition and the honourable member for North Shore as his deputy. That is what I call a ticket from the gates of hell. And I notice that the Opposition's Timothy Leary—the honourable member for Davidson—smiles.

Mr Stoner: Point of order.

Mr CARR: That is all I have to say. I do not want to detain the House any further.

Mr Stoner: Then there is no longer any point in my taking the point of order.

OLYMPIC GAMES VOLUNTEERS

Mr THOMPSON: My question without notice is to the Minister for the Olympics. What is the latest information on volunteers for the Sydney Olympics?

Mr KNIGHT: I thank the honourable member for Rockdale for his question. As the torch relay will soon enter New South Wales, enthusiasm is building among the many members of this House just as it is building among members of the general community. But I must say that the honourable member for Rockdale has been enthusiastic about the Olympic Games from the very beginning of preparations and I thank him for his ongoing interest.

Mr Carr: You should mention the honourable member for Gosford for his enthusiasm to the Games.

Mr KNIGHT: The honourable member for Gosford is a great enthusiast for the Games and makes a substantial contribution on the SOCOG board, much to the annoyance of some of his colleagues, and I thank him for that.

Mr Hazzard: You'll be able to sell insurance after this is over.

Mr KNIGHT: You will need to! The success of the Sydney 2000 Olympics is in no small part dependent on the efforts of our volunteers. Without a huge number of volunteers Sydney simply would not be able to put on the Olympics or the Paralympics. Just as important as the fact that they work without pay is the great skill, dedication and enthusiasm that volunteers bring to the Games. Many of them are already working for the Sydney 2000 team. Many more currently are giving freely of their own time to attend training for the specific roles they will fill during the Games. A large part of the success of the Games will be due to their efforts.

Some volunteers will have a chance to see some of the world's great athletes in action. However, many others will be involved in less glamorous but equally essential roles helping to ensure that park and ride sites work efficiently, distributing uniforms, and helping to ensure that the media get information on time, to name a few examples. Over the last five years I have been privileged to meet literally thousands of volunteers. It has been both an exhilarating and humbling experience. While Sydney 2000 cannot pay them for their services—indeed, by their very act of volunteering they reject such a notion—it is important that we recognise our volunteers, support them, nurture them, and make clear our admiration and gratitude.

Unfortunately, in recent weeks many of our volunteers have been distressed by confusion over their transport entitlements when travelling to and from their assigned duties for Sydney 2000. Today I hope to cut through that confusion, make clear the transport entitlements that volunteers will receive, and set out the other ways Sydney 2000 will express the community's thanks for their efforts. I am pleased to announce a package of measures that clearly sets out volunteer entitlements and recognises the valuable contribution made by our Olympic and Paralympic volunteers. Volunteers for both the Olympic Games and Paralympic Games will receive free public transport, a chance to win a Holden car, sponsor prizes, certificates of recognition and a special Gamesforce 2000 Olympic pin.

Mr Brogden: And a set of steak knives?

Mr KNIGHT: The interjection by the honourable member for Pittwater clearly indicates his attitude towards the volunteers. Like most members of the House, I find that absolutely pathetic and denigrating to the volunteers. In addition, Olympic volunteers will receive tickets to dress rehearsals or athletics and a chance to win a trip to Lausanne. Volunteers are essential to the running of the Games. With more than 40,000 volunteers it is not possible to have them all attend one dress rehearsal as many are involved in staging these important events. Consequently, a range of options has been developed to provide a well-deserved Olympic experience for every Olympic volunteer.

Volunteers working at Stadium Australia, the Superdome and the common domain will not be able to attend all at once because of the operational nature of their roles even during dress rehearsals. These volunteers

will be given a complimentary ticket to one of the two dress rehearsals or to a morning session of athletics at the stadium. All other volunteers working at competition venues during the Games will be given a complimentary ticket to a dress rehearsal of the opening ceremony. Volunteers working at non-competition venues, like drivers and those at the media centre, will receive a complimentary ticket to a morning session of athletics at the stadium.

Performers and each volunteer in a support rather than a performing role in the opening ceremony will be entitled to two free passes to one of the two dress rehearsals. I have asked the Sydney Paralympic Organising Committee also to come back to me with some ideas about how to increase the benefits to volunteers for the Paralympics. I am pleased to announce today that both Olympic and Paralympic volunteers who travel to or from rostered shifts will, in addition to free access to the Olympic transport network services previously announced, also have free access to State Transit Authority [STA] buses and ferries, other than JetCat, Explorer bus services and airport express bus services; and private bus services in the following areas, in partnership with the Bus and Coach Association—greater Sydney, Central Coast, Newcastle and Wollongong.

I thank Jim Bosnjak and members of the Bus and Coach Association who have reached agreement with the Government on a voucher system to enable that to take place. These entitlements will be available to volunteers dressed in their Sydney 2000 uniform and carrying an accreditation pass as well as a volunteer transport pass for STA services or a voucher for private bus services. These passes or vouchers will be distributed by venue managers. The system will apply from 26 August to 4 October for Olympic volunteers and from 5 October to 2 November for Paralympic volunteers.

At this stage the free public transport entitlements and tickets to events do not apply to volunteers whose duties are in other States. The involvement of the New South Wales Government has been central to the outcomes I have just described. In the case of volunteers working at interstate football venues, Sydney 2000 is in discussion with the Australian Capital Territory and other State governments to encourage their assistance in recognising the volunteers at their venues. All Olympic volunteers, including those at interstate football venues, who complete either their total rostered shifts or a minimum of 10 shifts also will go into the draw for six trips to IOC headquarters in Lausanne, Switzerland, and three Holden cars. Paralympic volunteers who complete either their total rostered shifts or a minimum of 10 shifts will go into the draw for two Holden cars.

Further recognition prizes from sponsors for both Paralympic and Olympic volunteers include thousands of Swatch watches, pallets of Cadbury products and Malvern Star bikes from Pacific Dunlop. All volunteers will be entitled to a special edition Gamesforce 2000 pin at the completion of five shifts or their total rostered shifts. In addition, all volunteers will receive commemorative certificates of recognition. There is one more volunteer group that needs mentioning: the families opening their homes to the families of overseas athletes competing at the Sydney Olympic Games.

In Atlanta many locals opened their doors to our athletes' families. In fact, Australia was in the top four participants in this program and it allowed our athletes to receive the type of support that only a family can give. Therefore, recognising their essential and deeply personal gesture, I am pleased to announce that host families also will be entitled to two tickets to one of the opening ceremony dress rehearsals. Of course, none of these things financially compensate the volunteers for the huge amount of work they put in, but it is not material rewards they seek.

Many volunteers I spoke with in Atlanta, as well as those who have already contributed to the Sydney Games, say their big rewards are the personal satisfaction of helping their city, State and nation put on the Olympic Games and Paralympic Games. To all of them I say thank you for what you have already done and what you will be doing during the Games. Volunteers may offer their services for free but their contribution is truly priceless.

PACIFIC POWER FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT

Mr SOURIS: My question is directed to the Premier. What responsibility is the Premier prepared to accept for the \$600 million debacle involving Pacific Power, which has cost every man, woman and child in New South Wales \$100 through his financial mismanagement?

Mr CARR: When he was in government he was responsible for the management of a little enterprise just across the other side of the harbour. He had ministerial responsibility for Luna Park. It would have taken an accountant of genius intellect to have conspired to have lost \$50 million of taxpayers' money on Luna Park, but the Leader of the National Party did it!

I can inform the House that the dispute between Powercor Australia Ltd and Pacific Power has been settled and that the new State-owned corporation Eraring Energy has taken over all electricity supply contracts previously held by Pacific Power. The parties announced the settlement yesterday. The research capacity of the National Party is such that when its members saw an article in today's *Australian Financial Review* about this matter their reaction was "Gong! Something in the newspaper! We had better ask Carr about that in question time," and a question was asked right on cue. What a pack of geniuses to be running the Opposition!

That is the National Party! It was with that great style that the Leader of the National Party was able to throw away \$50 million of taxpayers' money on Luna Park. However, Powercor Australia Ltd and Eraring have indicated that the settlement is mutually acceptable, providing commercial benefit to both parties. The Auditor-General will be reporting in relation to the dispute between Powercor Australia Ltd and Pacific Power. The Leader of the National Party should line up his backbenchers and read them a lecture on financial management. Coming from him, of all people, that is a bit rich!

DAVID HILL AND THE STATE RAIL AUTHORITY

Mr McMANUS: My question without notice is to the Premier. Is the Premier now in a position to advise of any additional information in relation to the supposed employment of David Hill by State Rail?

Mr CARR: I have been advised this is a question from the putative leader of the Liberal Party. This is a question from the challenger for Liberal leadership, whose credibility is on the line in the House when he alleges that David Hill is employed as a consultant for the State Rail Authority.

Mr O'Doherty: Point of order: The standing orders provide that supplementary answers shall be given after question time—

[Interruption]

Mr SPEAKER: Order! The member for Hornsby is entitled to put a point of order.

Mr O'Doherty: That preserves the rights of members to receive 10 different questions and answers during question time. I ask you to rule accordingly.

Mr SPEAKER: Order! There is no point of order. Members are entitled to ask any number of questions about a matter, and to ask supplementary questions.

Mr CARR: The question was from the Deputy Leader of the Opposition, somebody who trails his coat around town as the next leader of liberalism in New South Wales—he gave a well rehearsed speech at the Sydney Institute about the Menzies inheritance—the next leader of the Liberal Party. At all those lunches with editors, halfway through the entree the suggestion comes up that Kerry's polling is not doing too well; the little hint that might lead the editor to be encouraged, even to arrive at that decision himself, to publish an article suggesting there might be a challenge to the Liberal leadership should D-day come.

Today the credibility of the Deputy Leader of the Opposition is on the line when he, as the next leader of the Liberal Party, gets up in the House and asks: How can you justify making David Hill a consultant? How can you justify paying him money as a consultant to the State Rail Authority? As a result of that question today his credibility is on the line. I am pleased to inform the House that I have been advised by Simon Lane, Chief Executive, State Rail Authority of New South Wales, that David Hill is not employed by the State Rail Authority as a consultant or a contractor in any regard. Today's question is a little like yesterday's question on logos. The question yesterday was—

[Interruption]

The Minister for Police is kidding! Has he checked this one out? I will come to that later. The question yesterday was: Is \$100,000 being spent on the redesign of a logo by a consultant to CityRail? It turns out that CityRail is redesigning its publications and posters, publishing new timetables and doing work for the Olympics. That is being paid for, but the logo is not being changed. That was yesterday. Today, the big question: Is David Hill—Labor mate, they said—on the payroll as either a consultant or a contractor? The reply is "No, he is not". Kerry is smiling! Yesterday the editorial in the *Daily Telegraph*! Today Barry goes down in flames—no credibility! It is a great week.

It turns out that there is a voluntary body, called Celebrating Federation by Rail, that has David Hill on it. It is a group doing voluntary work—they are not being paid for it and David Hill is not a consultant. That could hardly be suggested as under the umbrella of Labor mateship because the inspiration for it, the patron, in fact, is the Hon. Tim Fischer MP. The governing council has a list of luminaries, including David Hill. That is the remotest basis for this question. David Hill is not being paid any money! He is not a consultant! He is not a contractor!

The Deputy Leader of the Opposition is absolutely wrong! Let us hope he was more to be believed when on 20 March he said, "I have no interest in going for the leadership." Let us hope he was more to be believed when on 2 March he said, "I have no intention of challenging Kerry Chikarovski." Let us hope he was more to be believed when on 28 February he said, "I support Kerry Chikarovski. She has my ongoing support and I'm not challenging her—end of story." Let us hope he was more to be believed when on 5 March he said, "Never, ever" to the suggestion of a challenge to Kerry Chikarovski. This is her best day in 12 months! She has seen him go down in flames. Let us hope his next question has more credibility than today's question and that, in turn, has more credibility than the assurance on 27 February, "I repeat, I am not running for leadership."

On 28 February he said "I am not challenging Kerry Chikarovski's leadership today, tomorrow, next year or the year after." That is a strong statement, almost as good as the one he gave on 28 February in another source, the *Australian*, which was, "There can't be a leadership challenge unless I am willing to be there, and I'm not willing to be there." Good, but not quite as good as what he is reported to have said in the *Newcastle Herald* on 28 February, "If there was a leadership challenge it would take co-operation on my part. There is no co-operation on my part." Good, but not as emphatic as the last one, "Kerry Chikarovski enjoys my full confidence and she will continue to enjoy my full confidence and for the umpteenth time I will not, nor do I intend to challenge for the leadership of the Parliamentary Liberal Party."

Mr Hazzard: Point of order.

Mr CARR: It is a great day for Kerry but let us hope the credibility of the Deputy Leader of the Opposition on all of these assurances is greater than his credibility in this question time today.

Mr SPEAKER: The Premier will resume his seat. The honourable member for Wakehurst has a point of order.

Mr Hazzard: Now that he has finished his mad rambling, there is no point.

FISHING INDUSTRY VIABILITY

Mr STONER: My question is directed to the Premier. In light of his statement about post-Olympic jobs, does he agree with the Minister for Fisheries, who told the industry this week that the \$90 million industry in New South Wales was not viable and could be replaced by imports, placing at risk 1,800 jobs in regional areas?

Mr CARR: I refer to the green paper on fisheries and the hard work and endeavours of my Ministers throughout regional New South Wales.

Questions without notice concluded.

COMMENTS BY Mr BOB ELLIS

Personal Explanation

Mrs SKINNER, by leave: Last session I asked a question in relation to comments made by Mr Ellis. During question time the Premier led this House to believe that Mr Ellis was referring to dialogue from a film script. In fact that is not the case. Mr Ellis made these comments in an article:

... it is better, I think, that the talented know what bitches they are up against, and can give them in the Festival Club a sneer or two or a curse or, better, a broken nose for this, at minimum, they surely deserve.

That is Mr Ellis, the Premier's speech writer, giving his opinion in an article, not quoting dialogue from a film, which is what the Premier led this House to believe.

Mr SPEAKER: The honourable member is now debating the matter.

CONSIDERATION OF URGENT MOTIONS

Bankstown Regional Airlines Proposal

Mr WOODS (Clarence—Minister for Local Government, Minister for Regional Development, and Minister for Rural Affairs) [3.32 p.m.]: This matter is urgent because the people of country New South Wales are fed up with the Federal Government's indecision on this issue. They are fed up with a weak excuse for a National Party leader who has demonstrated that he cannot take the fight on behalf of country people up to John Howard. This matter is urgent because for more than the year the Federal Government has stubbornly and arrogantly refused to rule out this absurd and discriminatory proposal. The longer this proposal is left hanging in the air the more uncertainty it brings to both country travellers and country airlines. It is urgent because it is about time for the Federal Government to lay its cards on the table and rule out this proposal once and for all. It is urgent because John Anderson needs to know whether he should buy a sword to fall on.

Rail Safety

Mr O'FARRELL (Ku-ring-gai—Deputy Leader of the Opposition) [3.33 p.m.]: My motion reads:

That this House condemns the Government for its failure to undertake the timely implementation of safety improvements to Sydney's rail system, especially those outlined in the interim report of the special commission of inquiry into the Glenbrook rail accident.

It is more urgent to debate my motion than to debate that proposed by the Minister. It is urgent because it is clear today that the timetable for the implementation of Justice McInerney's inquiry means that it will not be until 2002 that commuters across the Sydney system can have some satisfaction that the inquiry results have been put in place. My motion is urgent because every day 900,000 people use CityRail services in order to get to and from work. My motion is urgent because, according to a timetable that we have now flushed out of the Minister for Transport, train indicator boards, which control signal boxes across the CityRail system—one of the major causes if not the major cause of the Glenbrook accident—will not apply to the full city metropolitan area and be operational until the second half of 2002.

Notwithstanding the fact that this Government in this Chamber on 6 June pledged full acceptance and a commitment to fully implement the recommendations of the McInerney inquiry, the Government is going slow. My motion is urgent because hundreds of people each day use rail services to the Blue Mountains. In doing so they pass the site of the Glenbrook accident, in which seven people died. My motion is urgent because at present the Minister for Transport can only commit that the signalling system up to Springwood will be rectified in accordance with the recommendations of Justice McInerney's inquiry by the end of this year. Justice McInerney made three principal recommendations. The first was that the Blue Mountains signalling system be rectified all the way through to Lithgow. Senior rail executives indicate that there is no timetable for that being done beyond Springwood.

The document the Minister released today makes no specific commitment about timing on the matter. Secondly, Justice McInerney found that there was a requirement across the CityRail system to improve indicator boards and signalling systems to overcome dark spots, which are akin to an air traffic control system in which planes are lost off radar screens. That is the seriousness with which 900,000 commuters each day are confronted and that is why this issue is urgent. On the basis of what the Minister has subsequently said, that recommendation will not be fully implemented until 2002.

Thirdly, one of the most significant factors in Justice McInerney's report was the compatibility of train radios. My motion is urgent because in the documents that the Minister for Transport has handed out today it is clear that a bunfight is going on within State Rail about the compatibility of train radios. My motion is urgent because every day private rail operators and Federal Government rail operators are running across CityRail track putting rail commuter's lives at risk because the CityRail trains do not have compatible radio systems available. My motion is urgent because two months on from the report of Justice McInerney, nine months on from the accident in the Blue Mountains, nothing has been done to rectify the situation. My motion is urgent to allow the Minister for Transport to explain in this House why trains on the CityRail system, a big and complicated system, are operating without compatible radios.

My motion is urgent because it is important for the Minister for Transport to explain to 900,000 commuters why trains are still operating on the CityRail system going through what are described as dark spots on the signalling system—dark spots where they literally disappear from train operators' screens, where they

cannot be found. My motion is urgent because it is clear to anyone who has been in Sydney, New South Wales or Australia for the last six months that the New South Wales rail system is in crisis. To date the only interest shown by those opposite, by the Premier and the Minister for Transport, is in the public relations management of the crisis and not in providing actual solutions. My motion is urgent because it is long past time when commuters got some solid answers from this Government about changes to the system, about when improvements can be expected and, finally, when passenger safety can be guaranteed across the system.

Question—That the motion for urgent consideration of the honourable member for Clarence be proceeded with—put.

The House divided.

Ayes, 52

Ms Allan	Mr Greene	Mr Orkopoulos
Mr Amery	Mrs Grusovin	Mr E. T. Page
Ms Andrews	Ms Harrison	Mr Price
Mr Aquilina	Mr Hickey	Dr Refshauge
Mr Ashton	Mr Iemma	Mr Scully
Mr Bartlett	Mr Knowles	Mr W. D. Smith
Ms Beamer	Mrs Lo Po'	Mr Stewart
Mr Black	Mr Lynch	Mr Torbay
Mr Brown	Mr McBride	Mr Tripodi
Miss Burton	Mr McGrane	Mr Watkins
Mr Campbell	Mr McManus	Mr Whelan
Mr Carr	Mr Martin	Mr Windsor
Mr Collier	Ms Meagher	Mr Woods
Mr Crittenden	Ms Megarrity	Mr Yeadon
Mr Debus	Mr Mills	<i>Tellers,</i>
Mr Face	Mr Moss	Mr Anderson
Mr Gaudry	Mr Newell	Mr Thompson
Mr Gibson	Ms Nori	

Noes, 20

Mr Barr	Dr Kernohan	Mr Richardson
Mr Brogden	Mr Kerr	Mr Rozzoli
Mr Collins	Mr Maguire	Ms Seaton
Mr Debnam	Mr Merton	Mrs Skinner
Mr Glachan	Ms Moore	<i>Tellers,</i>
Mr Hartcher	Mr O'Doherty	Mr R. H. L. Smith
Mr Hazzard	Mr O'Farrell	Mr Stoner

Pairs

Mr Hunter	Mr Armstrong
Mr Nagle	Mrs Chikarovski

Question resolved in the affirmative.

BANKSTOWN REGIONAL AIRLINES PROPOSAL

Urgent Motion

Mr WOODS (Clarence—Minister for Local Government, Minister for Regional Development, and Minister for Rural Affairs) [3.51 p.m.]: I move:

That this House:

- (1) calls on the Federal Government to immediately abandon any proposal to divert regional airlines to Bankstown airport;
- (2) notes the comments of the Deputy Prime Minister, Mr John Anderson, that any such move would happen "over my dead body"; and
- (3) notes a recent survey by Australia Business Ltd that shows the majority of country people are opposed to this move.

I wonder whether this is a sign of a split in the Coalition and ultimately the end of the Coalition. What a sad and sorry lot they are. Surely the Liberal Party should tell the National Party that it cannot run with the hares and hunt with the hounds, as it is doing on this occasion, and as it does so often, as shown by the party's Federal leader, John Anderson. The Federal Government has shown its complete disregard and contempt for country people in relation to access to Sydney airport. For more than a year the Federal Government has done nothing to end speculation about a regional airport at Bankstown. For more than a year it has left country people in limbo, treating them as though their rights do not matter. For more than a year it has subjected regional airlines to the uncertainty that leads to a stalling of any plans those airlines might have to expand in the regions, or any plans they may have to purchase new aeroplanes, or plans to do anything into the future.

It is incomprehensible that one year later the same message must come from this Parliament to the Federal Government. That message is: Immediately rule out this absurd and discriminatory proposal. Why are those opposite unable or unwilling to convince their Federal counterparts? Why has the Leader of the Opposition not called on her mentor and political hero, John Howard, to put an end to this speculation? Is it difficult for her to contact him by telephone? She would lead us to believe that it is not difficult, yet there has been no response. What of the State National Party leader? Can he not get through to his Federal leaders? The people of country New South Wales deserve an answer to this question and they deserve it now. An editorial in the *Daily Liberal* of 27 July said:

Regional access to Mascot is more than just a political issue for people in the country. It's also economic.

The bulk of passengers on regional flights are either travelling to and from Sydney on the one day to do business or are connecting with other regional or interstate flights.

By necessity, their point of entry to Sydney should be Mascot.

An editorial in the *Western Advocate* of 31 July said:

The strongest possible protest must be made to any plans to shift commuter aircraft arrivals and departures from Kingsford Smith Airport.

Such a move will not be tolerated as it would mean the end of an airline service in Bathurst.

The editorial continues:

No-one in their right mind is going to pay the already expensive airfares to be deposited in the middle of the western suburbs of Sydney.

What has John Anderson been doing throughout this process? He has dropped hints that the idea does not have his support, but at no time has he said definitively that the idea is off the Federal Cabinet table for good—and he is a member of that Cabinet. The fact is that John Anderson is a toothless tiger—although he is not as bad as the State Leader of the National Party, who is just a puppy dog. Anderson has huffed and puffed continually about this issue yet absolutely nothing has been done. Do not think this will not happen. The Federal Government has talked in recent weeks about the sale of Kingsford Smith Airport [KSA]. In the *Daily Telegraph* of 28 July, the Federal Minister for Finance and Administration, John Fahey, said:

The Government would continue its privatisation of Australian airports.

That is a policy that John Anderson and the National Party support fully. One needs to look only at the Federal National Party home page, which states:

The National Party supports policies which where practical, transfer ownership of airports around Australia to the private sector.

Do not think that is not driving this debate. Any private operator focused on extracting a full economic return from a facility such as KSA would not give a second thought to removing the less profitable regional airline services. That begs the question: Why all this dithering and posturing by the Deputy Prime Minister if the Federal Government intends to sell off Kingsford Smith Airport anyway? If regional airlines were diverted to Bankstown, there would simply be more airline movements by bigger jets at Sydney airport. The most recent comments of the Deputy Prime Minister are an act of either utter desperation or complete confusion. At the end of last month, John Anderson told a group of business people in Mudgee that any Cabinet move to shift regional airlines to Bankstown would happen "over my dead body"—and, I would expect, over the dead body of the State Leader of the National Party. When reporters asked later for confirmation of his remarks, Mr Anderson's office said:

We do not deny the comment was made and neither does the Minister back away from it.

This absurd backtracking reveals a Deputy Prime Minister with no authority in the Cabinet room and a National Party with no influence on Coalition policy. On the other hand, this Government has stated from the first that such a plan is completely outrageous; we have dismissed it. The Premier wrote to John Anderson last year saying:

The New South Wales Government remains firmly opposed to any Federal Government proposal to forcibly transfer regional airlines away from Kingsford Smith Airport.

This is the only response that can be made to a proposition that discriminates against country airlines and their users. Let us have no illusions: such a move will cause undue inconvenience and frustration and dramatically increase travel time and costs for country travellers. This fact was documented by a survey conducted by Australian Business Ltd, which was released in April this year. Of the 600 people from country New South Wales who were contacted, almost 70 per cent opposed the movement of regional airlines from Mascot to Bankstown—and Labor agrees. As I have said throughout this debate, regional airlines continued access to Kingsford Smith Airport is simply not negotiable. Andrew Drysdale, the Chief Executive Officer of Hazelton Airlines, has no doubt about the detrimental impact on his business that a move to Bankstown would cause. Mr Drysdale voiced his concerns on the matter on 11 April this year in the *Dubbo Daily Liberal* and said:

If this decision goes through, we expect it to seriously affect our business and economic development.

Moving regional airlines from Mascot to Bankstown would reduce the number of Hazelton flights to Bathurst, Orange and Parkes as its potential customers would seek other less expensive options. This is a slap in the face for business and tourism in regional locations, which are already facing impediments; it is yet another blow to their existence by the Federal Government. Imagine an international investor wanting to visit Parkes, arriving at Mascot and spending 45 minutes to an hour in transit only to be told that he has missed his connection. That is not the way to attract and secure investment for country New South Wales.

The Federal Government thinks that, if more planes want to land, the only option is to move regional airlines to Bankstown—and Mr Anderson simply cannot admit that. It is time to call again on the Federal Government to make clear immediately its intentions regarding the operation of regional airlines at Mascot. We will continue to demand that country people have the right to access Mascot until that right is upheld by the Federal Government. A year ago this month I travelled to Bathurst with Mr Drysdale, members of Country Labor and the honourable member for Bankstown to voice our outrage at the proposal. On that occasion, the honourable member for Bankstown said:

We know country New South Wales is renowned for its hospitality. How can Bankstown return this hospitality when country families would be forced to wait for buses and trains just to get back to Mascot?

This is hardly the impression we would want our country neighbours to take away with them.

Guaranteed access to Kingsford Smith Airport is non-negotiable and Mr Anderson should prepare his resignation. The State National Party must realise that it does not have the support of its Coalition partner—that was made clear when Liberal members ran out of the Chamber seconds before the debate began, deserting their Coalition partner on this issue.

[Debate interrupted.]

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE

Urgent Motion: Suspension of Standing and Sessional Orders

Motion by Mr Whelan agreed to:

That standing and sessional orders be suspended to permit up to seven Government members and seven Opposition or Independent members to speak to the motion.

BANKSTOWN REGIONAL AIRLINES PROPOSAL

Urgent Motion

[Debate resumed.]

Mr SOURIS (Upper Hunter—Leader of the National Party) [4.01 p.m.]: An absolute farce of a speech was just delivered by the Minister for Regional Development. Talk about trying to fashion a Federal issue into

some kind of a split at State level! Never mind those sorts of splits, the House should focus on one thing: Country Labor has never delivered one thing at State level for the people of country New South Wales. It has never differentiated its product on the floor of the House, where it counts. Of course, the Opposition is not opposed to this motion. This is exactly what we believe in too. As far as the Opposition is concerned this issue is not negotiable. Access by country people to Kingsford Smith Airport is a matter of right. No-one has more right of access to their own airport at Sydney than country people. There is no differentiation between international travellers, student backpackers or anybody else—it is a question of equality, it is a question of access by regional passengers to be maintained at Kingsford Smith Airport.

We have had to fight with the New South Wales Tourism Taskforce and the Sydney Airport Corporation. The New South Wales Tourism Taskforce ran about the State peddling some kind of notion as if it were speaking on behalf of some government, offering a \$600 million package that would provide a massive upgrade of Bankstown Airport—it would involve a motorway to Mascot airport and a fast train link between the two airports just like that! As if anyone would be so stupid as to believe any of that was possible or feasible, or that the New South Wales Tourism Taskforce had any right to speak on behalf of anyone, least of all government. Can honourable members imagine the prospect of doing environmental impact statements and finding the money to build another freeway or very fast train across Sydney? It is absolute fairyland stuff. The people in country New South Wales do not buy that. We reject those pretenders who have a completely vested interest in trying to chase out regional commuter airlines from Sydney airport.

This proposal will not be supported by Sydneysiders anywhere near a flight path. They know that if the smaller planes go off those flight paths, much larger and noisier planes will use them. It is not as though this is a country versus city issue—there is just as much push to retain the existing pattern within those air traffic corridors. This is an issue of equity of access for country people. There is no difference of opinion across this Chamber. The Opposition will support this proposition. It is pleased to agree to suspend standing orders to allow more members to speak—that is only appropriate. It is appropriate to have a debate of this nature. We are pleased to have the opportunity to participate and to press strongly the case on behalf of country New South Wales.

The Minister quite rightly pointed out that the Deputy Prime Minister is exerting his leadership on this issue. I am pleased when I see newspaper articles in the *Sydney Morning Herald* and the *Daily Telegraph* which state "Anderson ties his future to airport", "Regional airlines stay at Mascot" and so on. The Minister says that the Deputy Prime Minister sits around the Cabinet table and can determine the whole issue. Of course he can have a great influence, just as the Minister for Regional Development can have a great influence on regional issues around his Cabinet table—but the Minister cannot do what he suggests should be done by another jurisdiction. He has never been able to do such a thing. I ask the Minister in his reply to give us an example of where he has plonked a suggestion on the table and members of his Cabinet have had to enjoy the pleasure of listening to his determination on a vital issue for regional and country people. The Deputy Premier has never done anything like that either, but the Deputy Prime Minister is prepared to do that. I am very pleased to support his position. Let us not mask this process in the way in which the Minister has tried to mask it, as though he would be able to perform what he is asking the Deputy Prime Minister to perform.

Mr Woods: We are opposed to it. We would rule it out immediately. That is the difference.

Mr SOURIS: Follow the line of discussion, follow the logic. One has to have a bit of lateral ability to follow through. I realise this is a little non-sequitous, but it is the equivalent of saying that the Deputy Premier of this State could jump up and make a unilateral decision and carry all his colleagues without any consultation and involvement. The Minister ought to know by now, because he has never had a victory in Cabinet, if he advocates something he will be rolled by his colleagues. It is a proud moment, really, to say on behalf of my Federal colleague the Deputy Prime Minister that he is fully supported by his National Party colleagues in New South Wales and he is fully supported by the Opposition in New South Wales who, by voting favourably for this motion, will offer the support of this Parliament to it.

Members of the Liberal Party are also committed to this issue. This strikes at the very foundation of our existence. The equity issue between country and city people is brought right to the surface in this matter. This is one issue that is not able to be compromised. It is a matter that would strike directly at our regional development effort, and the economic wellbeing of country areas, and our ability to do business in country areas, interstate, intrastate and inner-city. It represents one of the most vital communication connections that business must go through to keep country New South Wales in the forward progress mode we want it to be in. Anyone denied access to regional airlines, unless that person lives within a very short driving distance of the metropolitan area,

will suffer a significant impact against doing business, and against his or her economic wellbeing, and communities, whether they are travelling or not, in regional and rural areas would be adversely affected by the loss of this direct connection to the main airport in Australia. It is most important for commuters who are transferring onto other flights to have close access to the central business district.

In fact, it is more important for regional business people to have close access to the Sydney business sector than it is for backpackers on their once-in-a-lifetime tour of Australia—they have time at their disposal and have no need to rush into central Sydney within 25 minutes. Indeed, what would have been the point of building a railway system, the Eastern Distributor or the M5 East if Sydney airport did not have a long and significant future in the role of New South Wales and if country people were not to remain a vital part of it? *[Time expired.]*

Mr ASHTON (East Hills) [4.11 p.m.]: Today is a real test for the Leader of the National Party, for the party and, even more importantly, for its future in New South Wales. The Leader of the National Party just said that this is an important issue for his party, but they all skedaddled when the vote on urgency was taken earlier—one bloke was nearly decapitated by the Serjeant-at-Arms. When this debate commenced the Leader of the National Party said that he would not oppose the motion, which calls on the Federal Government to immediately abandon the proposal to divert regional airlines to Bankstown Airport. He noted the comments of the Deputy Prime Minister, who said that that would happen over his dead body. He also noted a recent survey that showed that the majority of country people were opposed to the proposal. The National Party skedaddled on the urgency vote, and now the Liberals have skedaddled and left the Nationals on their own.

Mr George: Russell is here.

Mr ASHTON: To his credit, the honourable member for Bega is always here, but that does not mean that he believes in this. What is at stake here is a proposal to move regional aircraft from Kingsford Smith Airport [KSA] to Bankstown Airport, and to build only a baby airport at Badgerys Creek. Mr John Anderson has intimated that this is a key area of opposition for the Federal National Party, but more than 12 months have elapsed since this ludicrous proposal was first raised. Since then there has been no evidence whatsoever to suggest that John Anderson and the Federal Nationals are likely not to be told to toe the Liberal line—which is a bigger KSA for huger jets, a bigger Bankstown for regional planes and a little Badgerys Creek for Liberal political convenience.

No money was set aside in the Federal budget for an environmental impact statement into Bankstown or for any expenditure on Badgerys Creek. Anyone who has recently visited KSA or who has driven along General Holmes Drive will have seen that the airport is being prepared for greater expansion and a future sell-off. In the days of real Country Party leadership—under Black Jack McEwan, Doug Anthony, Ian Sinclair and Tim Fischer—the Liberals would not have been able to force country and regional planes out of KSA. The present National Party is a rump party; an anachronistic group not prepared to represent the true interests of rural and regional Australia and who need to access Australia's greatest city, Sydney. Still, the best way to do that is to have access to Sydney's Kingsford Smith Airport.

Mr George: Surely you can do better than read this out of a book.

Mr ASHTON: My notes are all handwritten. The Deputy Prime Minister may soon be called a dead man walking if this Liberal-sponsored plan gets up, given that he recently said that this would happen only over his dead body. I suspect that he will be a dead body, because already the deal has been done. The State and Federal National Parties are dead. They represent only a few seats—and poorly at that. Who in the end favours this proposal to move regional planes to Bankstown? The Prime Minister, John Howard, in his nicely cocooned Bennelong protectorate—I will not call it an electorate, no planes fly over his area—the tourism task force, the airport corporation and the two big airlines favour it. Millions of people in Sydney's south-west, hundreds of thousands of people in New South Wales and across Australia want to fly into Sydney's KSA, not into Bankstown.

We are not unfriendly in that area, but we do not want them there. We want them to be able to fly to Sydney, and they want to do that too. Country mayors are against the proposal, as are the honourable member for Dubbo, the honourable member for Northern Tablelands, the honourable member for Tamworth, the honourable member for Bathurst and others. Mr Anderson has seen the writing on the wall—writ large—and this is what it says: regional aircraft are going to Bankstown, the huge jets will go to KSA. Mr Anderson has changed his mind again and again. On 15 March he said:

The people of regional New South Wales must have proper access to the capital city ... I have made sure that my Cabinet colleagues are aware of their views. I am acutely conscious of the needs of country air travellers.

However, a couple of weeks later he said:

It is impossible for Ministers to discuss with anyone outside Cabinet issues which are currently before Cabinet.

He is now taking this argument outside Cabinet, because he knows it has been lost. He is saying it will happen "over my dead body" to put pressure on the Liberal Party. Just like the Nationals were rolled on the GST, on caravan parks, and on privatisation when the Liberal Party wanted it, I hope that the Nationals in this place can finally stand up to the Liberal Party and that the dead wood in the Liberal Party is strong. Some dead wood can be pretty hard to move. If the dead wood opposite stand strong and do not move the Liberals will not be able to do this. I congratulate the Minister on moving this motion and I congratulate those who say that they will vote for it. But they should do more than that, they should get on the phone, threaten the Coalition as Black Jack would have done, and we might have a win.

Mr WINDSOR (Tamworth) [4.16 p.m.]: I find it quite sad that this motion is before the House once again; a motion of similar magnitude has been before the House in the past. Some assurances were given by the Federal Government in the past, including one by the Prime Minister some months ago, that a decision on this motion would be made within weeks. Time has dragged on. I did, and still do, support the raising of this motion by the Minister for Regional Development. I was absolutely appalled that those who purport to represent country areas nearly lost their heads getting out of this Chamber to abstain from voting on this crucial issue. When this matter was raised in 1996 the then Leader of the National Party, the Hon. Ian Armstrong, was very supportive of it through the country summit process as were the then Leaders of the Liberal Party and the Labor Party. It was shown to be an issue on which all in country New South Wales were supportive. John Anderson has allowed this issue to drag on for more than four years. The honourable member for East Hills raised some important points. John Anderson has been rolled in Cabinet and it is effectively a politically dead body.

Mr Slack-Smith: Challenge him.

Mr WINDSOR: He has been challenged. If John Anderson cannot deliver on this issue, on which country New South Wales is solid—and members of this House, including the honourable member for Barwon who left the Chamber on this paramount issue for country New South Wales, walked away from their constituencies—and he will not win that seat. The honourable member for Barwon wants to be very careful, because his seat is at risk as well. There should be no negotiation on this matter. A couple of months ago in reply to an article I wrote in the *Northern Daily Leader* John Anderson said, "Tony wins them over, but I cannot talk about issues before Cabinet." This issue is still before Cabinet. Last week he said that if aircraft go to Bankstown, that would be only over his dead body. He is hypocritical. The behaviour of the Coalition today demonstrates that what is happening here is exactly the same as what is happening in Canberra. The Liberal Party is telling people what to do. Costello and Fahey are telling John Anderson what to do. The National Party cannot make up its mind.

Mr George: Challenge him.

Mr WINDSOR: A Federal election will be held next year. The National Party cannot make up its mind whether to support country New South Wales, country mayors and others. The country summit process declared that this issue is not negotiable. The Leader of the National Party was quite right when he said that this is all about equity, but it is about time the Nationals stood up for equity within this Parliament and not run out of the place. There is a conspiracy on this issue. Honourable members should listen very carefully to the words of the New South Wales National Party and John Anderson who said, "Won't be forced to move". What does that mean? There is an airport for sale; the deal has been done. John Fahey said that to obtain the highest price you have to sell to the biggest bidder—like when the former Government tried to sell the grain handling industry. It is the same sort of operation.

The airport is for sale. The Federal Government will sell it. Politically, the Federal Government cannot legislate regional airlines out of Kingsford Smith Airport—and no-one is saying it will legislate regional airlines out of Kingsford Smith. It will use pricing policy. It is using a noise cap, which is an artificial instrument that is penalising regional New South Wales at the moment, because regional aircraft are not making a noise.

The Federal Government is using a noise cap to drive this issue into a pricing debate. John Anderson was probably right when he said that he will not force regional New South Wales out of Kingsford Smith Airport. However, he will use pricing policy; he will use his relationship and that of Chris Brown and others with one major airline to make the move. If that happens, that will effectively aid and abet a transfer of the equity issue they are talking about and get country people out of Kingsford Smith Airport. If John Anderson cannot support that, he will be dead at the next election.

Mr PRICE (Maitland) [4.21 p.m.]: I support the motion before the House. I have grave concerns about the situation we currently face. I represent the seat of Maitland. Yanda Airlines, which has just been badly punished by the petrol contamination problem, is the only commuter airline using Maitland airport. Where I live I am geographically half an hour away from Maitland airport, half an hour away from two major railway stations, an hour away from Williamtown and an hour and a quarter away from Aeropelican Air Services at Belmont. If those three airlines cannot land at Kingsford Smith Airport, I will be unable to function properly as a member of this House. It will mean that on every occasion I will have to drive from my home, which is not only inconvenient but not terribly intelligent, and I will be unable to undertake my role in a proper capacity in this House.

I agree with the comments made by the honourable member for Tamworth. One has only to consider the proposed sale of Kingsford Smith Airport, where the moneyed slots will be for international aircraft and large interstate aircraft. The Federal Government will certainly not consider the revenue raised from regional aircraft, so the sale will be price driven. And the airport is already on the market. I am concerned about a recent article in the *Bulletin*. I do not have the document with me to quote accurately, but the article referred to the very fast train [VFT] proposal. When I was shadow Minister for Public Works, part of my role was to study the VFT proposal.

Even at best, the VFT will only run between Sydney and Canberra, if it gets the go-ahead from the three governments concerned. That will be the greatest fraud ever perpetrated on country New South Wales in terms of air travel. It may relieve some of the pressure on Kingsford Smith Airport. It will be designed and promoted to the country as being the forerunner of very fast trains running between Sydney and Melbourne and, ultimately, between Sydney and Brisbane. How long will it take to construct the VFT program between Sydney and Canberra? It will take roughly five years and proceeding with the Melbourne proposal will be another seven years. How long will it take to extend the program to Brisbane? Who knows! Perhaps never! Country New South Wales will be blocked out of the program altogether. It will be a con job of the first order.

We need our country airlines, and they need to have access to Kingsford Smith Airport. Some 70 per cent of the New South Wales businesses surveyed by Australian Business Ltd—formerly the Chamber of Manufactures of New South Wales—strongly protested any change to their operations or their access to Kingsford Smith Airport through Bankstown. The bulk of them want to travel to Sydney and transact their business in one day. They want to get in and out of Sydney as quickly as possible. They do not need a two-step arrangement that will take them all around the city and add at least three hours travelling time, including the return trip between Kingsford Smith and Bankstown in peak periods.

John Anderson and the Federal Government are perpetrating a significant fraud—what almost amounts to a criminal proposal—on the people of New South Wales, and my constituents will be badly affected. It is impossible to say what damage will be done. In August this year I was privileged to attend the meeting of Country Labor members in Bathurst, where the matter was discussed with the chief executive officer of Hazelton Airlines, Andrew Drysdale. His comments were accurate, as the Minister for Regional Development said. Mr Drysdale is concerned that his business would virtually wrap up; it would withdraw runs from marginally profitable routes throughout country New South Wales. It would be impossible for Hazelton Airlines to function. Hazelton Airlines will not be the only airline affected. The airline in my area, Yanda Airlines, would suffer the same fate, as would a number of other country airlines.

What will happen to the Williamtown service? Williamtown is serviced by a couple of smaller commuter airlines and the two major airlines. Will they suffer as well? I suggest that they will. Again, that is another access route that is completely excluded from the air transport routes of country New South Wales. This motion must be supported. The Federal Government must understand that it cannot trade off the sale of Kingsford Smith Airport for a very fast train service that will not service country New South Wales but will service Sydney and Canberra. I rest my case on that point.

Mr J. H. TURNER (Myall Lakes—Deputy Leader of the National Party) [4.26 p.m.]: It is obvious when the Government has no work—and we can see clearly that it has no work—because it trots out the Federal line. A number of Federal issues were raised during question time, and another Federal issue has been raised in this motion. It would be much better if Country Labor members, who purport to represent country New South Wales, looked after State issues in country New South Wales, which is being decimated by the actions of the Carr Labor Government. The Minister's departmental staff should have their fingers on the pulse because in country local government a con job is being perpetrated through the Sydney Airports Corporation Ltd.

Earlier this year the Sydney Airports Corporation invited mayors from throughout New South Wales to attend a meeting at Sydney (Kingsford Smith) Airport [KSA]. I understand—although I have not had it verified—that representatives of the Minister's department may have attended the meeting. At that meeting it was proposed that the mayors should urge the airlines in their local government areas to give up their slots at KSA. They were assured that it would not matter too much—they would still have access to KSA. If the regional airlines gave up their slots at KSA, everything would happen. Of course, if an airline gives up its slot at KSA it is dead in the water. If an airline gives up its slot there is only one place for it to go—Bankstown. The Minister sat idly and allowed his department and the people he administers through the department to put forward the proposal at the meeting. It was a con job.

Mr Woods: Are you suggesting that I would stop a mayor from attending a meeting? That's rubbish!

Mr J. H. TURNER: Are you suggesting that State members of Parliament can influence the Federal Cabinet?

Mr Woods: What a joke!

Mr J. H. TURNER: You're the joke.

Mr Woods: What about the meeting attended by all National Party members?

Mr J. H. TURNER: The only reason the Minister wants access to KSA is to service his five departmental offices throughout New South Wales. He is wasting money. The Minister simply wants to be able to get in and out of Sydney. When this docile, sleeping Minister starts jumping up and down, obviously one has hit a nerve.

Mr SPEAKER: Order! The Minister will have a chance to reply.

Mr J. H. TURNER: The Minister knows that it is a con job, and he has sat back and done nothing about it. He will sit back and watch the slots go, and there will be a slow disintegration under his stewardship of the Department of Local Government. The other side of this matter is tourism. No way in the world can we allow country and overseas tourists to be deprived of accessing KSA.

I spoke out on this issue long before it was raised by this tardy Government. I spoke out in August of last year when the tourism task force put forward its proposal, and when I was acting Leader of the National Party I echoed what the leader of the National party said: KSA remains open for all the people of New South Wales. And KSA must remain open for all the people of New South Wales. The only way this can be done is to ensure that there is vigorous debate on the issue. The National Party at the State level—and certainly the parliamentary National Party—has not taken a backward step on this issue. We are dedicated to providing access to KSA. It is vital not only to tourism but also to the people we represent in country New South Wales. It does not matter whether they are travelling to Sydney on business or to join connecting flights to other States or overseas. It is an equity and access issue. We do not resile from this issue.

This is merely a stunt put on by a government starved of legislation. The Government is trying to sit something like 61 days this year because last year it sat only 35 days and copped a blast from the newspapers. It is about time the Government stopped the stunts and got on with dealing with decent legislation for the benefit of the people of New South Wales, rather than wasting time and dragging members here to discuss Federal issues.

Mr Martin: This is not important?

Mr J. H. TURNER: It is important from the perspective that, although the National Party at State level does not resile from it, the issue has to be resolved at Federal level. We have told the Federal Ministers responsible, including the Deputy Prime Minister, that the National Party at State level does not resile from an open comment that country commuters and people wanting to visit country New South Wales for tourism or other purposes must have access at all times in and out of KSA. We unequivocally support the continued use of KSA.

Mr SPEAKER: The honourable member for Bankstown. I am sorry, the honourable member for Bathurst.

Mr MARTIN (Bathurst) [4.31 p.m.]: I am not sure whether that is a promotion or a demotion. I can understand that faux pas because, to a large extent, the issue in this urgency motion is about Bathurst to Bankstown. It is timely, particularly in relation to my electorate, that this motion is being debated today because I have been invited by the Bathurst Chamber of Commerce to be a guest speaker at its general meeting next Monday. The other guest speaker will be Andrew Drysdale, chief executive officer of Hazelton Airlines, who will talk about airport concerns. Honourable members would be able to guess what the tenor of Mr Drysdale's comments will be.

As the Minister for Regional Development said, about a year ago Country Labor held a meeting at Bathurst, which was attended by the honourable member for Bankstown and Mr Drysdale, to discuss this issue and a report by the Western Institute that Bankstown should be mobilised as the access airport for regional New South Wales. Country Labor members quickly jumped on that suggestion. The Minister led the charge on that day and has been doing it ever since. There seems to be some confusion on the other side. I was pleased to hear the Leader of the National Party say that his party supported the motion. However, I assume there is some confusion because his deputy was a bit at sea.

It is generally agreed on both sides that rural New South Wales should not give up the right of access to Kingsford Smith Airport [KSA]. We need quick access into the city. The new rail link from the airport to the city is another reason why rural airlines should not go anywhere near Bankstown Airport. And it is a two-way street. The Minister has worked extremely hard. He has visited my electorate on a number of occasions to promote trade missions and bring overseas investors. Those investors need to move quickly from the Sydney central business district out into the regions. They will not be able to do that if the airlines are forced out to Bankstown.

The question is how long will the Federal Government take to make a decision. We all know that the Badgerys Creek decision will go on like *Blue Hills*—although *Blue Hills* had a termination date—and there is no guarantee that the Badgerys Creek decision will have. The points made by the honourable member for Tamworth are timely and go to the heart of the issue. It is all about dollars and cents and the big end of town. The word "privatisation" springs up. We know that the Prime Minister wants Badgerys Creek to go away and wants regional airlines to use Bankstown because there is no doubt that when he sets out to hawk Sydney airport to the private sector, the price will go up. If commuter slots are filled with jumbo jets, obviously the economics are much more attractive to investors.

This issue goes further than that. We are interested in protecting and developing regional New South Wales and continuing the surge that the Minister, through his work, has created. This crucial piece of infrastructure has to stay and access to it by rural New South Wales must be maintained. I hope that the Leader of the National Party has some influence with John Anderson. But, as has been pointed out, there is a breakdown. What sort of influence does John Anderson have? Not a lot, it would seem.

We saw the debacle in the Chamber this afternoon. I have not had as good a laugh since I watched Abbott and Costello. The honourable member for Monaro was almost decapitated as he tried to go under the swinging bar. I do not know what will happen to the honourable member for Oxley. He was marooned over there and had to go through the pain of being one of the tellers. I am sure that he will be reprimanded for being a bit slow in wandering out. I do not know where the National Party members went when they left the Chamber. They probably went into Macquarie Street and stood in the gutter, which would be typical of the way they have acted in the past couple of days.

We need to be united on this issue. Members opposite, if they have any influence, should talk to John Anderson and make sure that there is a bit of sting in the National Party tail. It does not appear that there is. This issue will not go away. The Deputy Leader of the National Party asked why we are raising this issue. We raise it because it is important. From the Federal Government's inaction and the Prime Minister's silence on this issue, one can draw the conclusion that the Federal Government is setting KSA up for privatisation for the big end of town and would be happy to see the regional airlines at Bankstown.

Mr SLACK-SMITH (Barwon) [4.36 p.m.]: The Opposition totally supports the motion. In response to the remarks of the honourable member for Bathurst, the Minister and the honourable member for Tamworth, I refer to a statement from the Deputy Prime Minister, John Anderson, which is being released today in a letterbox drop in the Gunnedah area. The letter states:

The National Party in government has shown its commitment to regional NSW by guaranteeing regional access to Sydney airport backed by legislation. The National Party will not go back on our guarantee. We will not force regional airlines to move to Bankstown; nor will we make it too expensive for them to land at Sydney airport.

I seek leave to table the document.

Leave not granted.

There has been a great deal of rhetoric accusing the Federal Government and National Party members of not supporting this proposal. We have been absolutely united ever since this proposal was announced. I place on record that the Opposition in this place is totally committed to regional airlines having access to Kingsford Smith Airport. In all the rhetoric during this debate, a few things have been missed. As to the claim that 80 aircraft movements per hour—a fictitious number that has been plucked out of the air—is the absolute maximum that can be moved at KSA, that number includes not only turboprop aircraft, such as the Saabs and Dash 8s which virtually make no noise at all, but also helicopters, the air ambulance service and many other small aeroplanes which do not make any noise. What is this debate all about? KSA still has plenty of room. The air ambulance and helicopters could be moved out of KSA and to another location—I believe that the air ambulance should go to Bankstown anyway. There is no room for more aircraft movements at Bankstown. We do not know where the rural airlines would go at Bankstown.

Mr R. H. L. Smith: It is dangerous.

Mr SLACK-SMITH: As the honourable member for Bega said, it is dangerous flying into Bankstown. It is a scramble, a mess. As a pilot, I do not like flying into Bankstown as it is at present. Two years ago the regional airlines conducted a survey to ascertain how many commuters would accept going to Bankstown Airport. About 90 per cent of the commuters surveyed said it would be impossible for them to do their business, get connecting flights, access Bankstown Airport, and then go to Kingsford Smith Airport or into the city for business. The survey also indicated that people who live less than six hours drive from Sydney would not go by air at all but would drive. As honourable members are aware, travelling on our roads is far more dangerous than flying, and it is also much more stressful. As a consequence, we will find that businesses in New South Wales will be at a great disadvantage. The Opposition is in total agreement with the Minister in this debate. I do not know why he is trying to bag us.

Mr Woods: I just don't want to see you done over.

Mr SLACK-SMITH: Just take your tablets and wait a minute. We totally support the Minister's motion. As I have said, today John Anderson has guaranteed—and we hope that he does not go back on his guarantee—that the Federal Government will not force regional airlines to Bankstown Airport and that it will not make it too expensive for them to land at Kingsford Smith Airport. The Opposition totally supports the motion, and I congratulate the Deputy Prime Minister on clarifying the situation once and for all.

Mr HICKEY (Cessnock) [4.41 p.m.]: I oppose any proposal to divert regional aircraft from Kingsford Smith Airport to Bankstown Airport. The issue of access to Kingsford Smith Airport needs to be guaranteed for country airlines—it needs to be guaranteed for their survival. The Leader of the National Party seemed very keen to bag Country Labor. At the commencement of his contribution he seemed to be more concerned about Country Labor than about the diversion of aircraft. The National Party argues equity of location on this issue. Would it not be equitable for the National Party to support this totally at a Federal level and to push it through at the Federal level?

The National Party seeks to deny ownership on this proposal, but it has direct access to the Government at the Federal level. The Leader of the National Party raised the issues of flight paths at Kingsford Smith Airport, the impact of regional and rural aircraft not flying there, and the airport being filled by larger aircraft. As the honourable member for East Hills pointed out, those matters need to be addressed in an environmental impact statement, which I would totally support. Mr Paul Rees, who runs Yanda Airlines of Singleton, has said on many occasions that if he is forced to use Bankstown Airport he will lose his airline because people will not utilise it due to the time restriction. People fly into and out of Kingsford Smith Airport from Cessnock airport, so the proposal would also have an impact on my electorate. Given the large number of tourists who visit the vineyard area and the benefit of such tourism, forcing them to use Bankstown Airport is not a forward move.

John Anderson's "dead body" statement needs to be watched very closely. As the honourable member for Tamworth said, John Anderson needs to watch himself because he is a dead man walking on this issue. The

regional and rural areas will condemn the National Party forever if it does not ensure that it becomes the tail wagging the dog, as it used to be, rather than merely fleas on the dog—an irritation, something to scratch. The regions should have access to the city area—not to Bankstown but to the main part of Sydney. The time delay that a move to Bankstown would cause would have catastrophic effects on all regional aircraft.

The honourable member for Tamworth stated that in 1996 the honourable member for Lachlan, together with many other groups, was very supportive of this proposal. Country Labor did not support it. John Anderson has allowed the proposal to drag on for four years. John Anderson needs to ensure that the Federal Government does not support the proposal. I am sure that, as the honourable member for Tamworth said, John Anderson will be rolled by someone just like the honourable member for Tamworth—an extremely dedicated, loyal representative of his electorate. The National Party needs a bit of dedication to the bush. The National Party should look at Country Labor. Both the honourable member for Tamworth and the honourable member for Armidale are clearly dedicated to their electorates—almost as dedicated as Country Labor.

Regional New South Wales will be forced out of Kingsford Smith Airport by noise caps and pricing policy. Country Labor has spoken on this issue on many occasions and is fighting to stop this proposal, and will continue to do so. It is sad that the National Party cannot be as dedicated as Country Labor. It is very sad to see a once great party reduced to a group of people who are interested in the city and are not concerned about the bush. They should urge their Federal colleagues to ensure that the Liberal Party does not allow regional New South Wales airlines to become extinct.

Mr R. H. L. SMITH (Bega) [4.46 p.m.]: I thank the House for the opportunity to speak to this motion. The motion, which has been raised in this House on other occasions, clearly has the support of all members of the House. The Liberal Party has a very strong rural and regional committee, which is chaired by the honourable member for Camden. Honourable members representing the electorates of Wagga Wagga, Albury, Southern Highlands and Hawkesbury are members of that committee. The proposal has been raised on a number of occasions in that committee. There is absolutely no doubt that people from rural and regional New South Wales want to fly into Kingsford Smith Airport.

On a number of occasions when expressions of interest have been called for, the residents of my electorate of Bega have indicated clearly to the airlines that if they do not provide early morning and late evening flights into Kingsford Smith Airport they do not want to use those airlines. It does not seem to matter how many other flights the airlines have during the day; people simply want to arrive to carry out their business at a reasonable hour in the morning and get out at a reasonable time in the evening so that they do not have to pay for accommodation. That seems to be the general feeling amongst business travellers in regional New South Wales, who make up the majority of people who fly from rural and regional areas.

If those people were not able to fly into Kingsford Smith Airport but were forced to go to Bankstown, I believe that most of them would choose to drive to Sydney rather than fly. There is no way that Bankstown would be suitable for regional and country people. In fact, I believe it is a furphy being put up by those who have another agenda, people who would like regional airlines to be forced to land at Bankstown to give city people greater access to Kingsford Smith Airport. The Opposition has no doubt that rural and regional people want to be able to fly into Kingsford Smith Airport. Bankstown Airport is overcrowded at the moment. I believe that if a small aerodrome were built at Badgerys Creek it would have the capacity to take some of the freight from Kingsford Smith Airport—for example, the air ambulance, which uses Kingsford Smith Airport but does not need to do so.

So far as members of the National Party are concerned there is no debate. Rural people would like to go Kingsford Smith Airport. It is non-negotiable. The current state of rural industries and the difficulties currently experienced by inland enterprises should be seriously considered in this debate. If we are not careful and if we do not seriously consider them in everything we do within this House and the Federal Parliament, we will return to the situation that existed in the 1940s and 1950s: we will have to resettle our rural areas and encourage people, through tax advantages and other means, to live there. People are moving to Sydney and the eastern seaboard at such a rate that if we do not address that problem and ensure that we put policies in place to make rural areas viable by improving their growth, we will be faced with a far more serious situation than city people realise. We must make it equitable to live in rural areas by ensuring that people who live there have the capacity to conduct their business in Sydney and not be inconvenienced by having to fly into Bankstown Airport.

Mr NEWELL (Tweed) [4.51 p.m.]: Since the Howard Coalition was elected to government in 1996, it has followed a process of privatising or selling off what was then called the Federal Airports Corporation and its

assets. It has pursued an agenda throughout Australia of selling off airports and, as we all know, Kingsford Smith Airport is certainly on that list. As has been alluded to by a number of previous speakers, the removal of private operators and small regional airlines from time slots at Kingsford Smith Airport [KSA] will enable more profitable aircraft to take up those timeslots and, therefore, render the airport a much more profitable facility for its owners. In other words, it would be in the interests of the proponents of those who wish to sell the airport to move regional airlines out of KSA and replace them with airlines flying larger aircraft, which obviously pay more in landing charges and therefore make the business more profitable.

If those changes were to occur, not only would regional airlines and the regions of New South Wales suffer, but the larger aircraft would create more noise for the residents of Sydney, and I am sure that is something they would oppose. For those reasons the motion moved by the Minister for Local Government, Minister for Regional Development, and Minister for Rural Affairs is supported by both sides of the House. Moving regional aircraft from KSA to Bankstown will impact not only on regional New South Wales but also on the Sydney Basin. The airport at Coolangatta has already been sold by the Federal Government, and I will point out the conditions of that sale to honourable members on both sides of the House so that they can be aware of what to expect from the Federal Government if KSA is sold.

There is no doubt that the sale of Coolangatta airport to what is now Gold Coast Airport Limited [GCAL] was on the basis that its new owners would be permitted to extend the airport to enable bigger aircraft to land and, therefore, make it more profitable. The Chairman of GCAL, if that is his correct title, Mr Dennis Chant, has admitted in private conversations that the group would not have bought the airport if it would not be allowed to extend it. Recently, GCAL had its draft master plan knocked back by the Federal Government, but a second master plan will be submitted in early September. I and others asked the Federal Government to extend the timetable for the draft master plan to be resubmitted because supplementary information will be included in that plan. After the announcement of a three-month extension, GCAL submitted a fresh draft master plan, which hit the deck only one month into the three-month extension period.

On the pretext that GCAL had to submit the plan by the end of September, it told people that submissions on its fresh draft master plan had to be with Tweed Shire Council by the end of this month. Tweed Shire Council is not the proponent of the extension of the airport; it is simply another group that has an interest in it. It is duplicitous of GCAL to impose that deadline on people wishing to make submissions. The Chairman of GCAL, Dennis Chant, has admitted to me that GCAL will continue to accept fresh submissions on the proposed extension of the airport into September. What annoys me and residents of the Tweed, particularly those in the Banora Basin, Banora Point and the surrounding areas that will be affected by the extension to the airport, is that the Federal Government, in its sale of the airport, was quite prepared to give tacit approval to GCAL to extend the airport without acknowledgement of that to the electorate. I reiterate my stance: I firmly oppose the extension of the airport because of the effect it will have on the amenity of life of the residents of the Tweed, and other matters.

Mr TORBAY (Northern Tablelands) [4.56 p.m.]: I thank the Minister for again bringing this matter before the House. One cannot put enough pressure on the Federal Government in respect of access to Kingsford Smith Airport for country commuters. Like some of the previous speakers, I could not believe what happened today when we voted to proceed with this motion. Members of the National Party could not wait to get out of the Chamber—I think they occupied the same area they occupied during the second reading debate on the Dairy Bill—they were out in the corridor trying to decide what on earth they were going to do. The Leader of the National Party spent most of his contribution to the debate criticising Country Labor instead of focusing on services to country people.

He said a number of things, but did he say that the Deputy Prime Minister had made an earth-shattering announcement today? Did he say that somehow this matter had been resolved? No, he did not. He did not know. That is how much in touch he is with the need for, and the ability of, country people to access Kingsford Smith Airport. It was only when a member from the other place came down and handed a piece of paper to the honourable member for Barwon, who then stood up and said, "I have an earth-shattering announcement," that the Leader of the National Party was aware of what was going on. Was it a press release? Was it television cameras filming people talking about aircraft noise? No, it was a letterbox drop in Gunnedah.

Let me enlighten honourable members about the credibility of the Deputy Prime Minister in this regard. When pressed on this issue he has said, on numerous occasions, two different things. First the Deputy Prime Minister said, "Of course we are going to look after country people. Absolutely, no problem." The Leader of the National Party referred to a couple of those articles today. But when seriously pressed on these matters by me

about the area around New England he had a different response. A headline in the *Northern Daily Leader* on 15 May read "Airport assurances declined". The first paragraph of the article stated:

FEDERAL Transport Minister John Anderson declined to say if regional Australian air commuters would be moved from Sydney's Mascot airport to a proposed second airport.

The front page of the *Northern Daily Leader* of 5 April stated:

MINISTER for Transport and Regional Services John Anderson said yesterday he was not in a position to promise that regional airlines would continue to have guaranteed access to Kingsford-Smith Airport.

I am happy to table those articles for whoever wants to see them. The Deputy Prime Minister was not in a position to give that guarantee of access, yet most members of the Coalition spent most of their time in the lobby outside this Chamber when it voted on whether the motion should proceed. The honourable member for Tamworth is absolutely right when he says that the Deputy Prime Minister has no credibility on this issue. The Deputy Prime Minister has misled the people. National Party members who could not bring themselves to vote in favour of having this matter debated also have no credibility. How could they interject to chastise the honourable member for Tamworth for bringing this matter before the House? Clearly they have been urging the honourable member for Tamworth to stand against the Deputy Prime Minister. If I recall correctly, the honourable member for Barwon said that the honourable member for Tamworth has no ticker. What an arrogant remark!

The honourable member for Barwon should hope that the Independent movement does not move in the direction of his electorate because I receive many representations from people in the Barwon electorate who are very concerned about facilities for country people. If the honourable member for Tamworth, Mr Windsor, decides to stand against the Deputy Prime Minister, the words spoken by the honourable member for Barwon will come back to haunt him. This issue is not about airlines, as the Deputy Prime Minister has indicated; it is about selling off Sydney's Mascot airport and ensuring that the Federal Government receives top dollar for it. If the proposal comes to fruition, country commuters will miss out. They will be either starved out by price or sold out—one or the other—under the plan. I urge the Deputy Prime Minister, John Anderson, to make a decision now.

The *Northern Daily Leader* did not want to become involved in the partisanship of the issue but instead posed the following question to the Deputy Prime Minister:

Dear Minister

Does the Federal Government guarantee that regional airlines will not be forced—either by legislation or financial pressure—to use Sydney's Bankstown Airport and that their continued access to Kingsford Smith Airport is assured—YES or NO.

That question was published on 5 April and we are still waiting for a response. That question was not posed by me, the honourable member for Tamworth, the honourable member for Dubbo, Country Labor or by anybody else; it was posed by a journalist from the *Northern Daily Leader* who was simply seeking the answer that had been promised for years on this issue. The Federal Government ought to resolve this issue immediately in the interests of country people.

Mr STEWART (Bankstown—Parliamentary Secretary) [5.01 p.m.]: I speak strongly against any move to transfer regional airlines from Sydney's Kingsford Smith Airport to Bankstown Airport. In common with the previous speaker, the honourable member for Northern Tablelands, I commend the Minister for Local Government, Minister for Regional Development, and Minister for Rural Affairs for again bringing this matter to the attention of the House. It is tragic and shameful that such an issue has to be brought to the attention of the House because resistance to the proposal has been raging in the community for about a year. It seems absurd that the proposal—absurd and worrying though it is—is still being bandied about by the Federal Government and therefore still has legs. Obviously there is still an agenda on this issue; if they were not, it would not be the subject of a proposal.

The proposal is absurd because it would so obviously result in extreme detriment to travellers on regional airlines. Without question, it would affect their travelling time and the amenities at their disposal, as well as the quality of life for my constituents in Bankstown. In this context, I inform the House that a year ago I travelled to Bathurst with the Minister for Local Government, Minister for Regional Development, and Minister for Rural Affairs, Harry Woods, where we met with members of Country Labor and regional airline officials. On that day, the Minister and I received a message that was simple, united and without distortion: those present

voiced their united outrage and opposition to the Howard Federal Government's "then" proposal. It was a "then" proposal which the Minister and I thought would be killed off overnight because of the extreme absurdity of moving regional airlines to Bankstown Airport.

The rationale behind the proposal is patently obvious and has been canvassed today by members of the National Party who have had the guts to be present in the Chamber during this debate, which I applaud. It is a shame that other members of the National Party did not take this matter up earlier, as it should have been. It is also shameful that the Leader of the Opposition, Kerry Chikarovski, bowed out of such an important debate. She has the power to go to John Howard with her shadow Transport Minister and say, "Enough is enough. This has been banded about for too long. It is absurd and it will not work. So kill it, and let's get on with a more positive agenda." At the Bathurst meeting I told those assembled:

We know that country New South Wales is renowned for its hospitality. How can Bankstown return this hospitality when country families would be forced to wait for buses and trains just to get back to Mascot?

I concluded by saying:

This is hardly the impression we would want our country neighbours to take away with them.

Bankstown is a terrific place in which to live, and Bankstown people love their country neighbours. Bankstown has a sister-city relationship with Broken Hill. During the past two weeks, children and adults from Broken Hill have been in Bankstown to participate in sporting activities. The people of Bankstown have a sisterly and brotherly kinship with country people and I would be damned before I would let that relationship be distorted or broken down by having to bus people from Bankstown to Mascot. It would be akin to giving them a packed lunch and a compass in the hope that they would make it from Bankstown to the city. The country airline facilities should remain in the city, and that is why the whole proposal is absurd.

On almost a daily basis I travel along the transport link between the airport and the city. On my guesstimation, on a good day my journeys take at least an hour and a half. Some spokespersons from the Federal Government have estimated that the journey takes 50 minutes or 45 minutes, and I have even heard an estimate of half an hour. I reiterate that the journey takes an hour and a half. After travellers are put onto a bus—if a bus is there in the first place, given how the Feds run the show—and after they negotiate the traffic bottlenecks and snarls that notoriously affect that area of Sydney, particularly along Canterbury Road, hopefully they will arrive in the city within an hour and a half. However, when they arrive at the airport they will be hot, frustrated and angry. That is of course if they make it to the airport, which would be a godsend. If they do not make it to the airport on time, they will be very hostile towards the Bankstown electorate, which I represent. They will think that they have not been given the service they deserve.

People in the Bankstown area know country people and know they deserve the best services, resources and facilities. Bankstown people will not stand by and let this proposal become reality. The people of Bankstown do not want regional airport facilities at Bankstown. They are opposed to the proposal because they know it is absurd and that it will not work, not because of aircraft noise. The proposal will also send country areas into decline. For the reasons I have stated, I very strongly support the motion moved by the Minister and I will continue to support the stand taken by this Government on this issue.

Mr R. W. TURNER (Orange) [5.06 p.m.]: As other honourable members who preceded me in this debate have already pointed out, the National Party will not oppose this motion. Members of the National Party support the motion, have always supported the principle of equitable access to Kingsford Smith Airport and will continue to do so. As has already been mentioned, Bankstown City Council has stated time and again that it does not approve of Bankstown Airport being used as an alternative to Mascot airport. Country people do not want to go to Bankstown either, and members of the National Party will continue to support their stand.

Reference has been made during this debate to the Deputy Prime Minister, John Anderson, being dead in the water on this issue. I assure the House that the Deputy Prime Minister is not dead in the water on this issue but, rather, is very strongly supportive of fair and equitable access to Kingsford Smith Airport. If anyone is dead in the water, I suggest it would be the honourable member for Cessnock, who ought to check what is going on in his electorate. I have been told that Councillor Katie Brazel, who worked for Joel Fitzgibbon, the Federal member for Hunter, has the numbers. It is already being suggested that the honourable member for Cessnock should practise getting out of bed at 4 o'clock in the morning to prepare for his return to being a milkman because he will not be a member of this Parliament for much longer. People who live in the Cessnock electorate are not satisfied with the performance of their State member of Parliament. The person who is dead in the water is certainly not the Deputy Prime Minister of Australia, who supports the retention of country airline facilities at Kingston Smith airport. Those facilities will be available at that airport for many years to come.

Hazelton Airlines also supports the retention of country airline facilities at Mascot. It has already been mentioned during this debate that the viability of Hazelton Airlines would be threatened and members of the National Party continue to hold discussions with the airline. Hazelton Airlines refers to itself as "the big country airline" and is based in Orange. The company has a call centre in Orange and its first commercial flight was from Cudal to Sydney. On a number of occasions I have informed the House that I was a passenger on Hazelton Airline's first flight into Sydney, in a Navajo. Other country airlines, including Hazelton, will continue to fly to Mascot. As other honourable members have pointed out, Mascot might be for sale, but so was Telstra. State and Federal members of the National Party fought for a better deal in relation to Telstra and they will continue to fight for a better deal for equitable access for country people to Kingston Smith Airport.

Kingsford Smith Airport is the premier airport in Australia; it is our No. 1 airport. Millions of dollars have been expended on that airport and it now has parallel runways and the capacity to accommodate more flights than previously. It has been conceded that 120 aircraft can safely land every hour compared with the 80-odd permitted at the moment. The National Party will make sure that the flexibility of Kingsford Smith Airport is taken advantage of as much as possible. This motion is an absolute waste of time because we have all made strong statements that Kingsford Smith Airport should remain in use.

If the Government expended as much energy on providing real money for a decent highway over the mountains as it has on access to Kingsford Smith Airport, Country Labor might get a few runs on the board. All it is supporting at the moment is a patch-up of that road, and it will continue to do that while ever it is in power. If Country Labor has some say in this Government, it should support the National Party in calls for a decent highway over the mountains. Many times we have made that call without moving such an unnecessary motion as this. Country Labor should support our motions and the Deputy Prime Minister, John Anderson, who has said that we must maintain fair and equitable access into Kingsford Smith Airport.

The time of the House today has been wasted with this motion. Perhaps plenty of time is available as there may not be enough legislation to debate today or tomorrow. If this is a ploy to fill in the day, it is an absolute disgrace. Country Labor should support regional New South Wales by providing real dollars and supporting the National Party in its fight to retain access to Kingsford Smith Airport because we support Country Labor by not agreeing to use Bankstown Airport.

Mr WOODS (Clarence—Minister for Local Government, Minister for Regional Development, and Minister for Rural Affairs) [5.11 p.m.], in reply: It has been an interesting debate. The National Party is getting done over but I am just not sure which of its members know that! The evidence today and on other occasions points to that. Comments today have been duplicitous. First we had the debacle of the National Party running out of this room while the Liberal Party remained to vote against the motion proceeding. Surely that must tell National Party members something!

We then had the Leader of the National Party say that Liberal Party members would speak in the debate, because there was no split on this issue, yet only one Liberal Party member, the honourable member for Bega, spoke—and he was careful in his remarks. The only time he expressed the Opposition's position was when he said, "The Opposition has no doubts that rural and regional people want to fly into Kingsford Smith." He said further that all of his party's rural people would like to fly into Kingsford Smith. Certainly he made no policy announcement or definitive statement of the Liberal Party's position.

The Deputy Leader of the National Party tried to prepare the ground further by saying that should this proposal eventuate it was not his party's fault, that it was the fault of the mayors who met with the airline service. He told me it was my fault because I allowed that meeting. That is a bit far fetched, but he was preparing the ground to lay the blame. I agree with the honourable member for Tamworth that this is a con job and that the words trotted out in the pamphlet about being forced out are very important. Earlier I said that John Fahey, the Federal Minister for Finance and Administration, said that the Government supported the privatisation of Australian airports. That policy is supported by the National Party. Last month the *Australian* hit the nail fairly and squarely on the head when it said:

John Howard and some Liberal Ministers are supporting the view that the option for a new \$8 billion airport at Badgerys Creek, which threatens marginal Liberal seats, should be abandoned and replaced by an upgraded Bankstown Airport for regional services.

National Party members should take that into account. Where does the National Party stand? Surprise, surprise, the *Australian* reported that John Anderson "appears to be willing to accept a plan that offers financial incentives to regional airlines to shift to Bankstown as long as those incentives fall short of compulsion". In

other words, it is the old steak knife deal, a deal you cannot refuse. I thank the honourable members who took part in this debate, but National Party members should wake up to the fact that they are getting done over. As we heard, the Federal Government should strike this proposal for a regional airline. The Leader of the National Party asked us to be patient. We have been patient for a long time, because this has been coming for a year. Goodness gracious, one would need unlimited patience to not accept that this is not a con job.

In the interests of fairness for country people we demand some action from the Federal Government on this issue. The proposal has caused enormous uncertainty, concern and anger in country New South Wales. The lack of a decision on the matter is holding back growth and earlier this month the Bathurst Chamber of Commerce held a crisis meeting of concerned residents and business people. On 31 July the president, Ken Sharp, said:

No-one in their right mind would fly to Bankstown when it would take just one hour more to driver all the way to Sydney.

This could almost turn Bathurst into a backwater.

Ordinary National Party members who try to tell the truth in this place are being done over by their leadership and by the Liberal Party. Wake up to yourselves!

Motion agreed to.

Pursuant to sessional orders business interrupted.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' STATEMENTS

CHAMPION HOMES BUILDING PRACTICES

Mr LYNCH (Liverpool) [5.17 p.m.]: I draw to the attention of the House the many problems experienced by the residents of south-west Sydney in their dealings with a builder called Champion Homes. I have received complaints from several families, all of whom wanted to build their dream home in south-west Sydney but whose dreams are teetering on the brink of becoming nightmares. These people include Elzbieta and Stefan Kucharski, Grace and Adam Salat, John and Jenny Albert, and Danielle Morris and Nathan Smith, but they are not the only people suffering in this way. My involvement with this problem commenced when I received a letter in July on behalf of some of the people. Part of the letter stated:

All the above are in the process of having a house built by Champion Homes. In each case the Champion Home' land and house package was sold with the verbal assurance that this package would not attract GST.

The letter advised that this assurance had proved to be quite untrue. The houses were not completed as promised, and thus attracted GST. I have been advised that the falsity of the promises has been readily admitted by Champion representatives. I refer particularly to admissions by Mr Malesev and Mr Steve Malony, both of whom were and are, I understand, directors of Champion Homes. They both conceded they had misled purchasers by initially advising at point of sale that the homes concerned would be completed before 30 June. The final comment of the letter is worth noting:

I am not only bringing these issues to your attention for our sakes but also to protect any of your constituents who may intend purchasing a home and land package through Champion Homes in the future. I find the business practice of this company appalling. Its unprofessional, unethical and misleading practices are extremely stressful and financially burdening for its clients.

If the only complaint about Champion Homes related to the imposition of the GST, one might be inclined to simply regard this issue as yet another appalling but understandable consequence of the unfair and regressive tax known as the GST. While that is undoubtedly true about the GST, the complaints go beyond that. Not only were purchasers misled by Champion Homes over the GST, the company's response to their concerns was quite inadequate.

Purchasers have reported to me that they found it difficult to contact staff as they were not available on the phone, rarely returned phone calls and infrequently responded to letters. Moreover, on numerous occasions purchasers received additional accounts for materials or building works from Champion. When challenged, and when someone could be found to respond, purchasers were then told that the invoices were a mistake.

The complaints do not end there. Purchasers point out that they were not given a copy of the contract for the sale of land until they demanded it. Moreover, often the plan of the blocks of land differed from what was shown at the point of sale and what appears in the contract. Usually no building program was provided to the purchaser. One of my constituents said that Champion Homes was also guilty of:

... incessant lies in the delivery times, building schedules. Blatant mistakes in building construction by contractors. Site manager having to be told of shoddy, incomplete or incorrect work. Contractors taken off job before completion of their stage and asked to go to another Champion Homes site. No communication between directors, staff and contractors of Champion Homes.

Specifically, Stefan and Elzbieta Kucharski had problems with Champion Homes in that they paid a deposit in June 1999 and were promised completion by March-April 2000. They were assured that no goods and services tax would be paid. They were not given a copy of the sale of land contract. They continually asked why building had not commenced but did not receive a satisfactory answer. Staff of Champion Homes refused to return their calls. The Kucharskis were invoiced for extra costs and Champion Homes, when challenged about that, told them that it was a mistake. Building defects were that four corners of the timber frame were too short and no dyna bolts were used to secure the timber frame to the slab. Ceiling joists were nailed only on one side of the brackets. In summary, they describe Champion Homes as a "very unprofessional business".

Mrs Grace and Mr Adam Salat also contribute to this catalogue of broken dreams. They signed a contract in September 1998 and were promised a move-in day about four months later. However, they were unable to move in until September 1999. Fences, turf and a driveway were promised in the contract but were not provided. There was a plethora of problems: architraves around doors were not properly finished; water leaked from the bathroom into a corridor; repairs were inadequate; the pipe for the kitchen sink was not in the correct position; ceramic tiles in the kitchen were laid in an unacceptable manner; Champion provided misleading advice about the standard of slab; and failed to take out the necessary insurance. Mr and Mrs Salat's conclusion on the matter is disturbing. They say, "Champion Homes takes advantage of vulnerable people—the very young, financially stretched and people from non-English speaking backgrounds."

John and Jenny Albert also have concerns about Champion Homes, claiming that Champion Homes provided no customer service and that phone calls were not returned. A plethora of problems occurred for Mr and Mrs Albert. Drains were initially positioned in the study, supports for the front verandah were constructed in the wrong place, a leaking pipe damaged the study, and fencing that had been promised was not installed, nor was turf laid. When they moved in there was a gas leak because plumbing work had not been properly carried out. Danielle Morris and Nathan Smith moved into their home at the end of June, having been promised a completion date in April. An immense amount of work, the details of which have been provided, still needs to be done on their property. I ask that the Minister for Fair Trading have regard to these matters and take appropriate action to ensure that dream homes do not turn into nightmares.

ILLAWARRA LINE TRAIN DELAYS

Mr KERR (Cronulla) [5.22 p.m.]: I am grateful, Mr Speaker, for your indulgence, which will be rewarded by my solving the mystery of why train drivers go through red lights. It is simply because it starts at the top. Question 943 of *Questions and Answers* reads:

- (1) How many trains were late or cancelled on the Illawarra Line between the city and Cronulla for the period 1 June 2000 to 28 June 2000?
- (2) What were the reasons for lateness or cancellation?

Those words signify the meaning that ought to be attached to them and are not even indicators. They clearly signal the answer required. The Minister answered:

- (1) and (2) I am advised by the State Rail Authority that on time running of CityRail on the Illawarra line in the first six months of 2000 has been consistently high, with an average of 91.2 per cent.

The questions specifically referred to a 28-day period. The Minister did not read the signals correctly but talked about a six-month period. It will certainly be news to the people of the Illawarra line that the service has been consistently high. Those commuters have been consistently left high and dry. In an article in the *St George and Sutherland Shire Leader* of 8 August entitled "Prosperity blues" the Premier explained that delays on the Illawarra line were because of full employment. Most people rejoice that Australia now has an unemployment rate that is considerably lower than the one in State Cabinet. The Premier's extraordinary explanation is that because the Federal Government has created more jobs, more people travel on trains. The honourable member for Port Macquarie is stunned by the Premier's response.

Mr Stewart: It is his normal response.

Mr KERR: In relation to the Premier it probably is, and most honourable members present would share that response. The honourable member for Port Macquarie knows that many of the delays are caused by faulty signalling and bad maintenance. The Premier said that rail transport is attracting more passengers. Will his new transport policy at the next election be to have no passengers on trains in order to ensure that trains run on time? If there are fewer commuters, trains do not need to run so often. Also, the same level of maintenance would not be necessary because the tracks would not be used. That would be great news for the Minister for Transport, who has trouble with days and months: one can only imagine the trouble he has with hours and minutes, which is what is required to master a railway timetable! It would be much better to have one train to Cronulla and one train to the city every six months. It is extraordinary that once again the people of the Illawarra have been misled. I will repeat the questions slowly not only for the benefit of honourable members opposite but to enable the Minister to understand—

Mr Stewart: For the honourable member for Port Macquarie to understand.

Mr KERR: No, I said "honourable members opposite". The questions are:

- (1) How many trains were late or cancelled on the Illawarra Line between the city and Cronulla for the period 1 June 2000 to 28 June 2000?
- (2) What were the reasons for the lateness or cancellation?

I hope I can get a truthful and honest answer.

READING RECOVERY PROGRAM

TWEED HEADS HOSPITAL AUXILIARY

Mr NEWELL (Tweed) [5.27 p.m.]: I bring to the attention of honourable members some good news in my electorate. In doing so I acknowledge the excellent work of two groups. On Thursday 1 August I had the privilege of attending a reading recovery training course at Murwillumbah Public School, involving eight teachers from different schools across the Tweed-Byron district, who met at this central point to undertake a year's training in reading recovery. The two trainers, Laurie Howe and Kim Cox, did a marvellous job training the teachers in techniques for reading recovery. I had the privilege of witnessing a lesson in progress of a young student from a neighbouring school who had been brought in by her dedicated and supportive mother, and I pay tribute to that mother for being part of the program.

As a former teacher I admired the techniques used and the professionalism showed, particularly during the lessons. I also appreciated the subtleties put in practice to keep the student on track, to prompt her to make corrections and to undertake reading recovery. The reading ability of this young eight—or 10-year-old was a tribute to the few lessons she had undertaken. This wonderful program will greatly assist many students. I commend the eight teachers participating in the course for their dedication and for updating their skills in order to implement the program.

The other good news is that on Monday 7 August I attended the fiftieth annual general meeting of the United Hospitals Auxiliaries of New South Wales Tweed Heads Branch. There has been a hospital at Tweed Heads for only 30 years so the branch obviously planned well. Just last year the branch donated \$116,000 worth of equipment including patient beds, recovery beds, patient monitors, audiometry equipment, pulse oxy meters and scopes. That amount might not be raised every year but in this financial year the branch will raise some \$60,000 to \$70,000 by running two shops at the hospital, the Coffee Break shop and a gift shop. The branch undertakes other functions such as raffles at the Border Park racetrack once a week and various functions throughout the year. To make a profit of \$66,000 in the year is remarkable and to donate \$116,000 to the community hospital is a fantastic achievement. I pay tribute to Dorothy Shepherd, the President, and Marion Kelso, the Treasurer, and other members of the executive.

At the function I had the pleasure of presenting 20-year badges to Jacqui Lawford and Shirley Lawler. The 10-year badges were presented by the chief executive officer of the hospital, Tony Beshel, to Sally Manicaros and Betty Tomkins. The New South Wales President of United Hospital Auxiliaries, Jan Maskill, presented a 25-year certificate to Valda Morse. To have operated for 50 years and to raise \$60,000 to \$70,000 a year is phenomenal. I challenge any other member in this House to find a hospital that is able to raise so much money and to give so much back to the community.

Mr STEWART (Bankstown—Parliamentary Secretary) [5.32 p.m.]: I also congratulate teachers in the Tweed area involved with the reading recovery program. I point out that the program was instituted under a Carr Government by the Minister for Education and Training, John Aquilina, who is very proud of the program's performance because it is delivering results throughout New South Wales. The honourable member for Tweed has seen tangible results. His background as a teacher enables him to acknowledge the merit of the program and to experience its benefits.

Importantly, the program addresses the fundamental reading needs of children in the school system in this great State. Importantly, the program emphasises an improvement in morale. Prevention is better than cure so the program looks at the needs of individual students. It is not delivered by an aerial drop onto a school and then everyone having to try to fit; it is fitted to the specific needs of the student. The honourable member for Tweed spoke about the performance of Laurie Howe and Kim Cox, who were involved in the training that he witnessed with several other reading recovery teachers. The program involves several hundred teachers throughout New South Wales. That is why it is getting results: it is addressing student needs in the front line and making sure that students are equipped for their reading needs into the future.

ORANGE ELECTORATE EMPLOYMENT AND SERVICES

Mr R. W. TURNER (Orange) [5.34 p.m.]: I should like to relate a few good news stories regarding the Orange electorate. Over the past couple of days Westpac has announced that it will make Orange the regional business banking centre for New South Wales, which is expected to result in multimillion-dollar benefits for the city. A report in the *Central Western Daily*, the local paper, states:

... general manager of NSW Regional Banking Barry Buffier said that 50 staff members and their families would relocate to Orange from various parts of the State [principally from Sydney].

The new centre, which will be operational by October, will involve a \$1 million upgrade and expansion of the bank's Byng Street regional premises along with an upgrade of the Summer Street branch.

Mr Buffier said ... "Our Orange-based team will support the network of agribusiness and business banking relationship managers dealing with customers face-to-face on the more complex finance and investment issues throughout the length and breadth of NSW" ...

"It will be staffed by people from the country, serving people in the country ...

He said Orange had been chosen over other regional cities because of its location and other advantages.

"Certainly other factors which influenced our decision were the fact that NSW Agriculture [head office] is located here, there is a university campus and other excellent facilities.

I note that it was an initiative of the National Party and the Coalition Government to locate the head office of New South Wales Agriculture in Orange. That is very good news as far as services and banking going back into regional New South Wales and it can only be good for regional New South Wales. Telstra has announced that it will set up one of its country-wide regional areas at Orange. That will involve more jobs coming into the Orange electorate and will be of benefit not only to the city of Orange but also to the rest of the electorate. These new jobs will help to generate other jobs. Much of the Orange economy is based on people coming from as far away as 100 kilometres to work in Orange, so there will be a benefit to the whole region.

Another great initiative is that CareFlight will set up its first regional base in New South Wales in Orange. The temporary helicopter is already there and the bigger one will be there in, I think, November. This is an initiative of NRMA CareFlight in co-operation with Orange City Council. It will donate land and spend \$400,000 on the facility to house the helicopter, the pilots, the support staff and the maintenance staff. It will also provide employment for the retrieval team, which is already based in Orange but it will operate more efficiently in conjunction with the helicopter. One reason for the helicopter being based in Orange is the enormous funding support NRMA received from the local people.

I am sure that the fundraising will continue, ensuring that the helicopter services Orange and areas as far away as Coonamble and Trangie. Patients will be brought in to Orange from outlying places and, if necessary, taken on to Sydney. The whole of western New South Wales will have a faster and more efficient service. In some circumstances a minute or two can mean the difference between life and death. Brownie points for the CareFlight initiative go to the people of the district who raised money and Orange City Council. The Telstra initiative has been made possible through the Federal Government. Westpac has made a private decision to start moving back into regional areas based on public pressure. I hope that it is only the first of other initiatives. However, as far as Country Labor is concerned, its initiative is nil.

ASHFORD AND EMMAVILLE SCHOOL BUS SERVICES

Mr TORBAY (Northern Tablelands) [5.39 p.m.]: There are two small schools in my electorate at Ashford and Emmaville. The principals of both Emmaville and Ashford central schools made inquiries of the department about the criteria for starting and sustaining a bus run but when they successfully met the criteria they were refused on the basis of a new set of criteria that they had not fulfilled.

As far as I am concerned, this is commonly known as shifting the goalposts. But, to the communities involved, it appears to be part of another agenda and that is causing concern for parents, students and the people who live in those communities. Both are central schools with students enrolled from kindergarten to year 10. High school students from those areas wanting to continue to year 12 have a bus service from Emmaville to Glen Innes and from Ashford to Inverell. The journey from Emmaville to Glen Innes one way takes approximately 30 minutes, and from Ashford to Inverell around 50 minutes. However, because the high school buses run from the smaller to the bigger centres a number of primary school students have no choice but to travel to schools in the larger centres. The service meant for students in years 11 and 12 also picks up these primary school children on the way.

For the small schools, this one-way traffic has become a problem. On the route from the smaller to the bigger centres are many students who want to attend the smaller local schools. In fact, parents of a number of students from the larger centres want to send their children to the smaller schools. However, this choice is not available. The Department of Transport, when approached about the criteria for establishing daily school bus services from Glen Innes to Emmaville, and from Inverell to Ashford, informed the principals of those schools that at least 15 school-age students living at least 3.2 kilometres from the school, with the majority over eight kilometres away, were required to attract a bus service.

After the numbers satisfying the criteria were supplied to the department, the schools received a return letter telling them that the services would not be supplied because it would be too expensive. This was not presented to the schools as a consideration in the first place. It did not form part of the original criteria. What we are seeing here is a lack of choice for parents and students, a departure from established criteria and discriminatory practices against small towns that are struggling to maintain their basic services. Should those small schools become unviable, then the bus trips to larger centres for young primary school children in outlying areas, some of whom already face two hours travel a day, will increase to unacceptable levels.

Anyone who has ever been in a small country town must be aware of the critical role that the local school plays in the local economy and its social activities. Teachers are usually leading members of service clubs and sporting teams and offer skills that add to the cultural and educational life of the community. In the case of both Ashford and Emmaville, I know this to be true and that both towns, with their never-say-die communities, are fighting hard to remain viable. It is particularly unfair that their schools should miss out on local students because of the universal application of the economic rationalist principles—the one-way traffic—which I believe to be outdated and not cost effective in the long term.

The Government has always promoted a partnership with local communities to assist them to sustain themselves. In this case there is justification for a reconsideration of the unfortunate decision made by the Department of Transport in respect to the bus services for those two schools. The outcome, if there is a drop in school numbers in those communities, is that teacher numbers and the level of resources will decline. It will become more difficult to attract doctors and other professionals, and thus the downward economic spiral will spin another country community unnecessarily into oblivion. The Government should keep faith with these tough-minded country people and work with them to maintain the viability of their schools through the provision of adequate bus services where they meet the official criteria. I call on the Minister for Transport to intervene and reconsider the matter on behalf of both the Emmaville and Ashford schools.

CULLEN BULLEN COALMINING INDUSTRY

Mr MARTIN (Bathurst) [5.43 p.m.]: I speak today on a matter of great importance to the residents of Cullen Bullen, a small village 25 kilometres north-west of Lithgow on the Castlereagh Highway. Cullen Bullen has had a long history of association with the coalmining industry. Recently the Department of Urban Affairs and Planning approved the commencement of the Cullen Valley mine on the edge of the village. This open-cut operation basically will be reworking the old Tillsbury underground mine, which ceased production about 50 years ago.

The residents of Cullen Bullen are keen to see the coal industry develop and provide much-needed jobs in their area—but not at any price. Today I introduced a deputation to the Minister for Urban Affairs and Planning led by the Mayor of Lithgow, Councillor Neville Castle, and Councillor Howard Fisher, Mr Barry Fitzgerald and Ken Bunyon—two Cullen Bullen residents—and council officers Iain Stewart and Andrew Muir. The deputation voiced its concerns to the Minister in regard to what it sees as breaches of the development consent by the operators of the mine. The main matters that concern the residents involve excessive blasting, dust problems, noise nuisances, and transport problems.

Action by the Environment Protection Authority in monitoring noise and blasting levels has confirmed that the residents' concerns are valid. Noise levels have exceeded allowable levels by a factor of four on some occasions, and blasting tests have shown a similar rate of exceeding allowable levels. The company has admitted that blasting has been on a trial basis to get the right levels. In this modern age, with the availability of sophisticated technology, that should not be necessary. As part of the conditions of approval, Lithgow council insisted on a road bypass to ensure trucks did not travel through the streets of the village. Cullen Bullen, which is located right on the Castlereagh Highway, for many years has been subject to heavy coal haulage from the nearby Baal Bone colliery and, further north, the Charbon and Kandos collieries, mainly involving cartage of coal to the Mount Piper power station. So it was an important condition of the new development that trucks be kept out of the village streets and off the Castlereagh Highway.

As part of the conditions, council insisted on the building of the road bypass in order to comply with the wishes of the residents. However, village residents are concerned that the route of the bypass differs from that shown in the original environmental impact statement and that it is very close to some residences, some of which are within 30 or 40 metres of the route, particularly at the exit from the mine site. Already there have been reported breaches of the operating hours of the trucks hauling coal to Mount Piper power station, which under the approval conditions are limited to operating between the hours of 7 a.m. and 5.30 p.m. Some trucks have been starting as early as 6 a.m.

To be fair to the operators of the open-cut mine, they have admitted to some of the breaches and are meeting with a community consultation committee to work through the issues. I am pleased that the Minister has agreed to have senior officers of his department urgently investigate the problems and ensure that residents' concerns are addressed. As Mayor Castle pointed out to the Minister, the council and the people of the area do not want the project stopped, but they want to ensure that operation complies with the conditions of approval.

The development has problems, first, because it uses the open-cut method and, second, because the contractors, who are imported from Queensland, have a two-year contract to extract 600,000 tonnes of coal a year for supply to the Mount Piper power station. The worry is that the price of their tender was so low that it is putting pressure on the operator to try to cut corners on some of the conditions. I hope that is not the fact. But, if it is, it would point to the need for organisations like Delta Electricity, when awarding contracts, to take into account whether operators who tender at the lowest price can meet the conditions of the development approval. I am sure that the Minister's timely action in sending senior members of the department to meet with representatives of the council, the residents and the company is appreciated. I commend the Minister for his action, and I look forward to a favourable outcome on this matter.

Mr GAUDRY (Newcastle—Parliamentary Secretary) [5.48 p.m.]: I congratulate the honourable member on the report that he has made to the House today. His representations to the House and to the Minister for Urban Affairs and Planning reflect a balancing of the need for economic development in his area and the amenity of residents of that area. Finding such a balance often requires a deal of representation and negotiation as well as the issuing of a contract, as has occurred in this case. His vigilance in bringing forward this matter today will, I am sure, be appreciated by the residents of Cullen Bullen.

PRECISION RUNWAY MONITORING

Mr O'DOHERTY (Hornsby) [5.50 p.m.]: I must express my opposition to precision runway monitoring [PRM], a system that I believe is inherently less fair than the long-term operating plan for Sydney airport, which involves noise sharing around a range of suburbs. Precision runway monitoring has begun in trial form and, even though it is only a few days old, my constituents are expressing significant concerns. I acknowledge the terrific work of the Hornsby Residents Aircraft Noise Group [HRANG] and of community leader Melinda Keresztes and her colleagues in bringing this problem to the attention of the community and in galvanising public concern. I have received correspondence from Keith and Sue White of Hornsby Heights, who say:

We are seriously concerned that tens of thousands of people in the community are to have their peaceful enjoyment of their homes shattered and will be subjected to significantly increased stress levels in their work or school environments ... According to the PRM spokesman it will reduce the costs of delays to operators by some A\$100 Million per year. Our quality of life is to be permanently reduced to increase the annual profits of a small number of giant corporations mostly overseas owned.

I have also received a letter from another family in Hornsby Heights who say:

My husband and I purchased a house in Hornsby Heights a mere seven months ago ... We were attracted to the area because of its peace and quiet and magnificent bush views.

That is what attracts many people to the area. The letter continues:

Had we known we would be living under a flight path we would never have purchased here.

We are extremely concerned at the increase in volume and frequency of air traffic over our house. Planes screeching overhead at two minute intervals, commencing 6 am!

On a day when PRM was operating I received an email from a constituent who, according to my email records, had managed to contact me at 6.59 a.m. My constituent said:

As I type this message ... this morning I have been subjected to a constant barrage of noise from low overflying aircraft, loud enough to wake me up and keep me awake from 5:55 this morning.

Not only are the aircraft low, but they are overflying me about every 3-4 minutes. They are loud enough INSIDE to wake me up. I have all of the windows closed.

To say that I am angry is a severe understatement. I am furious.

That resident, Mark Edwards, also contacted the authorities to point out that, while aircraft are flying at 3,000 feet above sea level under PRM conditions, Hornsby Heights is about 1,000 feet above sea level—and other parts of my electorate are even higher. Therefore, planes are flying less than 2,000 feet above the roofs of many of my constituents. That is only one of my many concerns about PRM and, in the short time available to me this afternoon, I will point out a couple more. Aircraft flying under PRM must be established at an altitude of 3,000 feet for a certain period of time—longer than is necessary under normal instrument landing system conditions—in order to be tracked by the PRM radar. In order to maintain that altitude, aircraft must often fly with flaps down and increase their power levels, depending on the conditions.

Mr Gaudry: Flying dirty.

Mr O'DOHERTY: They often operate in bad weather conditions and, as the Parliamentary Secretary said, they fly in dirty air. That means more noise for my constituents over a longer period from aircraft flying lower than they usually do. I raised the altitude issue with some of those involved in the PRM trial and asked why aircraft could not establish themselves at a higher altitude. However, the altitude is set by international conditions that state that aircraft must be on a three degree glide slope as they approach an airport. Apparently that protocol does not apply in fewer than half a dozen airports in the world, so it is set in concrete.

PRM is basically bad news for those people living under what I have described as a "highway in the sky" because it prescribes some very precise landing routes for aircraft. People who are presently subjected to aircraft noise on the fairer share basis under the plan put in place by the Federal Government will suffer under a much less fair system involving aircraft flying lower on a specific track for longer periods. As they are flying dirty, those aircraft will be noisier than at present. My Liberal colleagues representing North Shore electorates and I believe that is clearly unfair. The Leader of the Opposition has expressed her views about this matter publicly, as have other honourable members.

It would be grossly unfair to introduce PRM permanently. Like other honourable members, I understand the need to increase the capacity of Sydney airport during the Olympic Games—we do not object to that; we are fair-minded in my area. However, we understand that full-time PRM would be a disaster and is clearly not justified on a fair dinkum basis. The New South Wales Coalition believes the solution to these problems lies in the development of a second airport outside the Sydney basin, which would have important spin-offs for regional development. PRM is not the answer.

Mr GAUDRY (Newcastle—Parliamentary Secretary) [5.55 p.m.]: Another honourable member has put before the House an issue of amenity for residents and the impact of the precision runway monitoring [PRM] method of guiding aircraft into the city. As a regional member of Parliament who stays in Newtown when I am in Sydney, I well and truly understand the impact of aircraft noise. The planes are flying low and

dirty by the time they arrive at any angle over the suburbs of inner Sydney. Like the honourable member for Hornsby, I recognise that the need for air services for Sydney is bedevilling governments at all levels. That was evidenced by today's urgency debate. I am sure that all honourable members look forward to finding a long-term solution that will meet the transport needs of the people of Sydney and New South Wales and address the amenity of Sydney basin residents.

EDUCATION WEEK 2000

Mr MILLS (Wallsend) [5.57 p.m.]: It was my honour and pleasure last weekend to attend two Education Week 2000 celebrations for the school districts of Lake Macquarie and Newcastle. Lake Macquarie held a secular celebration at Glendale Technology High School. This is the time of year when we celebrate successes in schools and publicly acknowledge members of school communities for the valuable contributions that they make to outcomes for students. The recipients of the certificates of appreciation varied from teachers who had contributed to the establishment and success of teaching and cultural programs, to parents and grandparents who had dedicated many years of service to various programs and initiatives within the schools, and to former students who had returned to schools to provide learning opportunities for younger students. Their contributions were publicly recognised in the district.

At Edgeworth Heights Public School an award was made to Leonie Watson in the school-program category. Nancye Mulligan received an award for teaching-administration and Louise Lloyd received the parent-community award. Three parent-community awards were made at Glendale East Public School to Mrs Ruddy, Narelle Wollington and Garry Wollington for their contributions to literacy, the arts and technology in the school. At Glendale Technology High School the school-program award went to Annette Gromek and Carol Fischle for the peaceable school program—to which I shall return in a moment.

The teaching-administration award went to Jan McGeachie and Jan Hansen received the parent-community award. The Lakeside Special School made a parent-community award to Nance Dwyer. Although that school is not in the Wallsend electorate, Nance Dwyer is a netball legend from Cardiff Netball Club in that electorate. She received an award for her dedicated service in teaching netball skills to students with disabilities, which are often very severe. I thank those people for their work.

The peaceable schools program at Glendale Technology High School will run for two years. In its first year—last year—the program, which was called Violence is Intolerable [VII], was an anti-violence initiative designed to address concern about the level of physical and verbal violence used by students. It was intended to offer a means by which students could focus on resolving individual and group conflicts. It was hoped that students would gain an awareness of the legal view of violence, harassment and vilification and how they relate to school life. The program aimed to increase student understanding of school procedures that addressed violence and harassment. The program was conducted during term one and, at its conclusion, the school held a VII celebration assembly that involved all students and staff in a presentation about anti-violence.

The second stage of the program, which is being held this year, is entitled Growing Together Happy and Safe and is designed to give students the skills and the time to evaluate their own behaviour. By learning to behave in an acceptable manner, they will earn freedom. The program aims to support students' self-confidence and give them confidence to resolve effectively any day-to-day conflicts that may arise. Speakers from the Department of Juvenile Justice support the presentations. School principal June Hingston told me that the program's success has been highly encouraging—hence last week's awards.

The celebration in Newcastle was held at the Christ Church Anglican Cathedral and began with a cathedral service hosted by Dean Lawrence. There was an emphasis on performance, including singing and a dramatic performance by Lambton High School Drama Group on the theme of linking schools to work, which generated considerable laughter and enjoyment during the service. Many other local schools also participated in the performances.

Afterwards, outside the cathedral, district awards were presented to many people. The Newcastle service and the assistance given by students from a number of schools, including Merewether High School and the Hunter School of Performing Arts in the electorate of my colleague the honourable member for Newcastle, were reported in the newspaper. Among the recipients of awards were Robyn Daley from Maryland Public School, Jenny Miggins, head teacher of home economics at Wallsend High School, and Margaret Powell from Wallsend Public School. Pat Sleight, from Wallis Plains School received an award for Aboriginal education and reconciliation. Peter Webb, head teacher of English at Jesmond High School, received an award. The 2NC breakfast program led by Paul Turton received an award for its excellent work with schoolchildren, and Louise

Walsh, the Chair of the School Council of Jesmond Public School, received an award for her excellent work in community leadership on the school council. I commend all those people for their excellent efforts for education over the past 12 months.

Mr GAUDRY (Newcastle—Parliamentary Secretary) [6.02 p.m.]: It is a pleasure to listen to the honourable member for Wallsend lauding the work of teachers, students, parents and members of the community during Education Week in the Newcastle area. It is also a pleasure for me, as the member for Newcastle, to hear schools in my area praised as well. Those services are very important in giving the community the opportunity to see the value of public education in our area and to celebrate it, and to give recognition to teachers, parents and students for their contribution to our schools. As a former teacher of personal development I was particularly interested in hearing about the work done in schools to develop anti-violence programs within schools, and to have students developing their sense of self-confidence and worth and their capacity to resist actions that might lead to violence in schools and to live happily together.

The Newcastle cathedral is a focal point for both social and cultural activities in that city and a most appropriate place to bring together our schools in celebration of public education, and also to demonstrate in singing and drama, as the honourable member for Wallsend said, the value of student participation in our schools. Again, there was recognition of community participation. One of the highlights of the morning in Newcastle, and probably across the Hunter Valley, is to listen to the Paul Turton breakfast show on 2NC and to hear our primary school students giving their views of meteorology and what is happening with the weather on a day-to-day basis. Usually one finds them mentioning their school mates, what their parents are doing and their principal sporting and educational interests. I thank the honourable member for Wallsend for his report and I am sure every member in the House finds Education Week an enjoyable and interesting part of the duties of members of Parliament.

OXLEY HIGHWAY

Mr OAKESHOTT (Port Macquarie) [6.04 p.m.]: On behalf of the electorate of Port Macquarie I raise concerns from the community in regard to changed plans by the Roads and Traffic Authority [RTA] for one of the major transport links leading into the centre of Port Macquarie, the Oxley Highway. Considerable growth is occurring on the North Coast and Port Macquarie is very much at the centre of that growth. It is now the largest North Coast population centre. The honourable member for Newcastle, as a Kendall man born and bred, would know of the developments taking place in the Hastings Valley and Port Macquarie in particular. That is why the decision of the Roads and Traffic Authority has caused extreme concern and confusion. The original long-term plans that had been in place were to move the current route into town and make it a shorter, clearer route, a safer route that would have minimum effect on power, telephone, water and sewerage services, as well as meet the growth and residential development needs of Port Macquarie.

Anyone who has been to Port Macquarie knows that it is water-locked to the north by the Hastings River and to the east by the Pacific Ocean. Sensible development is one of the key issues for Port Macquarie. There is broad concern that the RTA took the decision to can its proposal to redevelop the Oxley Highway for penny-pinching purposes and to save dollars. There does not appear to be any safety logic to the decision and there does not appear to be any consideration of the future development needs of Port Macquarie. Current RTA activity would appear to be generated by people who are not familiar with the growth that has taken place in Port Macquarie. Many of us who live there know that the RTA office was based in Port Macquarie until it was recently moved. That disappointing decision was made several years ago. I know the honourable member for Oxley has similar concerns with regard to the Wauchope-Port Macquarie connections. Many would express the view that this decision has been made by people who do not understand the specific needs of Port Macquarie and the Hastings Valley.

I note the comments by the Minister for Transport in the local newspaper. He said he has asked for a comprehensive briefing from the RTA. I am pleased that the Minister is taking an interest and is asking for the briefing, but I hope he will not use this as an attempt to disenfranchise himself from the department that he runs, the RTA. He should have known of the decision before it was made. If the Government in which he is a Minister truly had concerns about the Hastings Valley and the mid North Coast, the original decision would not have been made. The Minister has an opportunity to have a comprehensive briefing. The opportunity is there for him to reverse the decision. I sincerely hope that the Minister, when he gets that comprehensive briefing, considers reversing the decision, in the long-term interest of the Port Macquarie community. That route is safer and better for the development and growth needs of the Port Macquarie area. There is no logic in the RTA changing a decision within a six-month period of it being made.

A huge debate has been going on in Port Macquarie about future development needs. Six months ago the decision to develop the Lindfield Park area was made. That included the rerouting of the Oxley Highway, and the RTA participated in good faith in that process. Those difficult decisions were made six months ago. It makes no sense whatever that within six months the RTA, despite having participated in difficult determinations about future growth needs, is telling everyone, from the Chamber of Commerce, to the local council, to the local Labor Party branch, that it has completely reversed its position. There is no logic to it, and I urge the Minister for Transport, after he has received the comprehensive briefing—and I hope that happens as soon as possible—to reverse that crazy decision.

GUARDIANSHIP TRIBUNAL

Mr GIBSON (Blacktown) [6.09 p.m.]: Tonight I wish to speak about a constituent of mine named Shirley. This is a very sad case. Shirley is a lady just 65 years of age but to look at her one would swear she is at least 85. She appears to be older because she has suffered illness for many years. Shirley suffers from chronic alcoholism, brain damage and dementia. Her debilitating diseases have been obvious for a long time. In March 1999 Shirley's two children, Steven and Debbie, applied to the Guardianship Tribunal for guardianship and financial management on behalf of their mother.

Attempts were made to have Shirley placed in care under the Inebriates Act. In January 1999 she was admitted to hospital with multiple medical problems as a consequence of chronic alcoholism, and was discharged later that month and given the assistance of multiple community care facilities. Between January and March 1999 Shirley cancelled those facilities and her health continued to deteriorate. In March 1999 a health and financial management authority from the Guardianship Tribunal was approved for six months. In September 1999 a 12-week extension of that authority was granted by the Guardianship Tribunal. In December 1999 another application was adjourned for two months for further medical evidence to be gathered.

In January 2000 the guardianship orders were revoked. The Protective Commissioner gave evidence that there were no financial worries, and relatives and a Home Care worker testified that there were no concerns about Shirley's health. In March Shirley's medical condition deteriorated drastically. Cerevascular events threatened her life and as a result her cognitive abilities were further reduced. In April 2000 the authority for Shirley's guardianship and financial management was given to Steven and Debbie and the Public Guardian allocated accommodation for her.

Today Shirley lives in a special home. Unfortunately, she will never return to her home. The process to have Shirley placed in an environment in which she could be cared for was lengthy—nine months of toing-and-froing with the Protective Commissioner. The commissioner has a case to answer: Shirley was placed under his care as a result of her impaired judgment. The commissioner failed to protect her interests. On one occasion she visited her property with a real estate agent and told him that she wanted to move to the country, that she had no idea of how to sell her property, what she was going to do, where she was going to go, and what would eventually happen. The commissioner eventually took the property from the real estate agent and took it off the market. That is the only time in that nine-month period that the commissioner came to Shirley's aid.

Shirley was in grave financial difficulty and management of her finances had to be arranged. During the time that the Protective Commissioner said that she did not need financial help, a tenant living in the garden flat at the rear of her property failed to pay rent. Property including a coloured television set, a washing machine and various tools were stolen. In addition, \$900 went missing from her account. She frequently gave her credit card to people to run errands and paid a taxidriver \$60 to get her a packet of smokes. During this time the Protective Commissioner told the family that the lady did not need extra help. It was obvious that she did need help. I spoke to the Protective Commissioner's office and was informed that her account was too small to worry about. In hindsight, the commissioner should have acted totally differently. The commissioner has a case to answer to Shirley and her family.

LAND TAX VALUATIONS

Mr DEBNAM (Vaucluse) [6.14 p.m.]: A matter of great concern in my electorate and in many other electorates across New South Wales is land tax valuations. In this House much has been said about this topic over recent years but the Government has gone quiet on it in recent months. I will recount briefly the history of land tax and the systematic rip-off of taxpayers by the Carr Government with its land tax and valuation system over the past three years. In 1995, the year the Carr Government came to office, the land tax rate was 1.5 per cent and that tax raised almost half a billion dollars. In 1994-95 that tax brought in \$510 million. In 1996 the Carr Government increased the tax rate to 1.65 per cent but, not happy with that, further increased it to 1.85 per cent in 1997. That resulted in considerable outrage in a number of electorates.

It was not only the land tax rate increase that caused concern but also the valuation changes that were implemented by the Government. In 1997 the Valuer-General's Office changed its approach considerably and the system of valuing properties was subtly changed. The effect of those subtle changes was dramatic in 1997 and 1998. The revenue from land tax in 1998 was \$908 million, almost a billion dollars. That record was exceeded in 1998-99 when \$958 million was raised. This year the revenue from land tax will be close to a billion dollars.

In 1998 the Opposition succeeded in establishing an upper House inquiry into land tax and the valuation system. That inquiry, which ran for months, raised many concerns about the way in which the Government was mismanaging the system and ripping off taxpayers. As a result of the inquiry the Opposition was committed to a total review of the valuation system in the run-up to the State election in March 1999. The Premier was forced to match that commitment, and he did so. Prior to that election he promised to review the land tax valuation system. With a little prompting after the election that review was put in place. In October 1999 a report entitled "Report of Inquiry into Operation of Valuation of Land Act" was produced by Julie Walton. The Minister finally released that report just before Christmas 1999.

That report contained a number of very disturbing conclusions and made 22 recommendations. As a result of that report the Government simply set up another committee. The Minister procrastinated on this for many months and in June this year he announced that he would institute many changes. He set up a legislative review group, or so he said. My understanding is that that group has not met, and that if it has met it has not done anything and is not likely to do anything in the next few months. Meanwhile in a press release of 28 June the Minister said that the reforms would be in place for this year's valuations. That simply will not happen. The Minister has a responsibility to give the House information about those reforms, including which of the 22 recommendations of the Walton report will be implemented, and when.

I ask the Minister to inform the House on what dates this so-called legislative review group actually met. I think he will find that it has not met. When is it to meet and when will it propose changes? When will this House see the proposed legislative changes to the valuation system? How will the Minister bring it into the valuation cycle for this year? When will the Minister get the valuations across to the Office of State Revenue so that land tax assessments can be issued? Will all future land tax assessments be based upon the new valuation system? Will the Minister finally agree to reimburse taxpayers who have been systematically ripped off by the Carr Government over the past three years? Will taxpayers who can demonstrate that they have been disadvantaged, when they compare the current valuation system with the new system, be repaid the excess tax that they have paid?

Private members' statements noted.

[Mr Deputy-Speaker left the chair at 6.19 p.m. The House resumed at 7.30 p.m.]

WESTERN SYDNEY TECHNOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENT

Matter of Public Importance

Mr YEADON (Granville—Minister for Information Technology, Minister for Energy, Minister for Forestry, and Minister for Western Sydney) [7.32 p.m.]: A technological revolution of historic proportions has hit New South Wales and this nation. For the first time in history information can be shared around the world and around individual communities literally at the speed of light. Technology is restructuring our industries and economies. It is reshaping some jobs and creating many more. In New South Wales this Government is helping the State to be the technological leader and building our information technology, telecommunications, biotechnology and multimedia advantages. This will help ensure that this State has strong, sustainable economic growth and jobs growth in the post-Olympics period.

But what most honourable members may not know is the vital contribution that western Sydney is making to the renewal of Australian industry, both as a creator and as an exploiter of new technology. The importance of western Sydney to Australia's technological revolution is a matter of public importance. It is time to recognise that western Sydney has a dynamic, globally competitive regional economy, and has many similarities to other renowned regions, such as Ireland, Bologna in Italy and even the Silicon Valley in America. It is vital for this State and for the country as a whole that governments of all persuasions, businesses and communities work together to reinforce the technological capacity of western Sydney. By doing so, we create many more jobs and investment in western Sydney, and help increase the diversity and vitality of the economy of this State as a whole.

Australia is linked electronically to the world by highly sophisticated telecommunications infrastructure. Two domestic and four international fibre-optic cables link Australia to America, Europe and Asia. In the near future our electronic links to the world will increase yet again. The Southern Cross fibre-optic cable, which is scheduled to be commissioned by the end of this year, will boost additional voice and data links to America. Other high bandwidth cables, such as the Australia Japan cable, are planned for completion in 2001. Internet service providers based in New South Wales carry the greatest proportion of Internet traffic, and New South Wales is the national leader in the Australian Internet industry. This electronic infrastructure gives our companies even more opportunities to communicate with, and export to, the world.

The information technology and telecommunications industry in Australia generates \$33 billion per year in turnover and employs some 100,000 people. The lion's share of this industry is in New South Wales. Some 70 per cent of Australia's top 250 information technology and telecommunications companies are based in New South Wales. Leading international information technology and telecommunication companies, such as Cisco Systems, Intel, 3Com, Compaq, IBM, Yahoo! and British Telecom, have their Asia-Pacific regional headquarters here in Sydney. Oracle Corporation, Microsoft, Dell Computers and America Online have set up their Australian headquarters here. We also have 44 per cent of all regional call centres in the Asia-Pacific region based in New South Wales. These global companies are creating new jobs for Australians, stimulating new skills and knowledge in our work force, and diffusing world-class technologies throughout our economy.

What is less well known is the national significance of western Sydney as the centre for Australian-based use of advanced technology. Unlike the North Sydney to North Ryde corridor, with its concentration of multinational information technology firms, the largest cluster of Australian information technology businesses and businesses using information technology is in western Sydney. For example, in 1997 western Sydney firms in information technology, telecommunications, multimedia, publishing, film and broadcasting sectors generated more than \$2.5 billion. These industries in western Sydney are predicted to generate \$4 billion by 2006. Within 15 years an estimated 15,000 new jobs will be created in western Sydney in the information technology and telecommunications sector alone. The technology sector in western Sydney is part of the 72,000 businesses that are based in the region which generate \$54 billion in turnover each year. This means that western Sydney is the third largest regional economy in Australia after the rest of Sydney and Melbourne.

The national significance of western Sydney to the Australian economy is becoming more widely known. Last year I had the pleasure of opening Australia's first Information Technology Industry conference, which was held at Parramatta. The conference was attended by information technology and industry leaders from across the country, including Bob Hayward, Vice President of the Gartner Group, which is one of the most respected independent information technology companies in the world. Mr Hayward pointed out that the importance of information technology to the growth of western Sydney has not been recognised because most western Sydney information technology firms do not identify as information technology firms but see themselves as firms in manufacturing, education, agribusiness or other industry sectors. However, many of western Sydney's 72,000 businesses, which generate more than \$2.2 billion per annum in exports, are technology sophisticated.

That is an important point. The terminology that is often used in today's society creates a dichotomy between the old economy and the new economy. One of the central points of this so-called information technology revolution is the fact that old industries or what are perceived to be old economy industries, such as manufacturing and the like, are embedding technology in their processes. That is the one aspect of the revolution that is occurring. It involves new ways of doing old business. It is a misnomer to draw a distinction between the old economy and the new economy in the stark way that it is often done in general discussion and in the media.

The huge success of western Sydney has also been shown in the Western Sydney Industry Awards. These awards were developed by the Government's Office of Western Sydney in partnership with industry, and identify excellence and innovation in firms in western Sydney. The awards are strategic because they highlight the factors that businesses need to succeed against global competition, including innovation, use of technology and improving the skills of the work force. This year 105 innovative companies, most of them world class and sophisticated users of technology, were finalists in the Western Sydney Industry Awards.

For example, Zone Digital Video Systems at Castle Hill has developed digital video surveillance systems for use in the security industry. In January 2000 the American Security Industry Association selected Zone Digital Video Systems as the "security industry's finest". This year's Western Sydney Industry Awards, which I launched on Friday, will continue to highlight the contribution that the innovative, globally competitive companies in western Sydney are making to innovation, jobs and investment. I should add in passing that the Western Sydney Industry Awards are a highly successful partnership between the State Government, businesses, local government, TAFE and the University of Western Sydney.

The Government and the Office of Western Sydney are seeking to create a new model of doing business in western Sydney through collaboration and partnership. That approach to regional development in western Sydney is based on previous models, perhaps the most well-known and well regarded being Silicon Valley.

The plan is going superbly in western Sydney. I cannot wax lyrically enough about the support we have had from business and the community. Clearly, they have been crying out for this sort of initiative. They are not dictated to by government or by the Office of Western Sydney. They are provided with forums in which they can come together and collaborate with each other. They network and find out what other people and businesses can provide. These new economy approaches provide major value-adding opportunities in a long value-adding chain. It is extraordinary to watch. The Western Sydney Industry Awards are a central part of the initiative. As well as an award ceremony held once a year, a range of networking lunches and other forums are conducted throughout the year. Hundreds of people attend those lunches and forums and the results are extraordinary and exciting.

Clearly, this initiative will continue, together with a range of collaborative approaches that the Government is taking. Under the Partners for Change program the Office of Western Sydney collaborates with major businesses in western Sydney to give young long-term unemployed people pre-vocational training so that they can get into on-the-job training courses and eventually obtain employment. We have put many young long-term unemployed people into jobs and will continue to do so in the future. I urge all honourable members to take note of the very exciting things that are occurring in western Sydney.

Mr MERTON (Baulkham Hills) [7.42 p.m.]: The Opposition supports this matter of public importance, which outlines the role played by western Sydney in relation to technological and economic development in New South Wales. It is my pleasure to be the Opposition spokesman for western Sydney, a vital place and one of the fastest growing areas in Australia. As the Minister correctly said, western Sydney has a population of 1.7 million people and 72,000 vibrant businesses, which generate \$54 billion annually. It is one of the fastest growing regions in Australia in which one-tenth of the population of the nation has chosen to live. The average age of one-third of the population of western Sydney is under the age of 19, which presents a vibrant, dynamic and exciting opportunity for governments and for business.

Western Sydney occupies an area of approximately 8,000 square kilometres and incorporates 14 local government entities. As the Minister said, some exciting business parks and technology concepts have developed in recent years. The whole area of western Sydney is growing, as well as the spread of business locations. There have also been changes as the technology revolution has hit the previously light to moderate industrial area. For many years the industrial estates housed traditional industries, such as motor repair shops, panel beating shops and electrical suppliers. Those important industries continue to operate, but one can see a change in the new areas. The buildings and the standard of industrial accommodation have improved. In many cases the basic factory unit, which was usually located on the best block, has been knocked down and a glass structure purpose built for a high technology industry has been erected in its place.

I am proud to say that the Norbrik industrial estate is in my electorate of Baulkham Hills. The Minister would be aware of that estate, which houses some outstanding high-technology developments, such as Schneider and Tattersalls. I commend the Western Sydney Industry Awards and the Office of Western Sydney. I believe with assistance from government, with a nurturing hand, advice and expertise, plenty of people out there are prepared to have ago. All they need is a little encouragement and incentive. That should come from the arm of government. Our political opponents may not entirely accept this, although from the tone of the Minister's speech I believe that he probably does. The Liberal Party considers that the role of government is to try to help people up the ladder. If we can do that, not only do we help the people who run the business, we also make and create employment opportunities. That is what it is required in western Sydney.

Government has an encompassing role to play—one of giving assistance and guidance and making things easier. The Opposition would very much like to see some avenues of red tape eliminated to make it easier for people to set up a business. We are proud of what is happening in western Sydney. I was born in Wentworthville and have lived all my life in western Sydney, having attended South Granville Public School and later Fairfield High School and having run a business in Church Street, Parramatta. I understand western Sydney. . As the Minister eloquently said, it is exciting to see the technological revolution that has hit western Sydney. The revolution is no longer confined to areas such as North Ryde. Technology is creating outstanding opportunities for young people in western Sydney to get involved in a dynamic industry and to get involved in a career opportunity that will lead to security of employment.

We must never overlook the fact that although technology plays an important part, \$54 billion is generated annually by income from businesses that are not involved in technology. Many hardworking Australian people—motor mechanics, bricklayers, carpenters and people in the manufacturing sector—work hard for themselves and their families. By and large, the people of western Sydney are genuine, hardworking people. All they want is a fair go for themselves and their families. They stick together. They are the kind of people who will assist a person whose car is broken down at the side of the road. . Tradition has resulted in a close-knit community.

In years gone by there has been a dividing line between western Sydney and other parts of Sydney. I do not like to accept that as the situation, but I often tell a story about growing up in Merrylands. We did not have sealed roads or concrete footpaths, and the street I lived in was separated by an open stormwater channel. My aunty lived across the other side of town in a place called Willoughby. We used to go and visit her in our 1936 Hudson car. Willoughby had sealed roads and there were no outside loos or dunnies there—they had the sewerage on! The situation is changing and governments of all persuasions now realise that western Sydney must be recognised for what it is: the fastest growing area of Sydney populated by good, hardworking, honest, basic Australians who care for their families and want to work. I do not mean to be critical but, as a local member and the shadow spokesman for western Sydney, I know there are obviously problems in a fast-growing area. My electorate is in the north-west sector. Within five to 10 years time the north-west sector will be a suburb the size of Canberra, with 250,000 people and 80,000 homes sites.

I note the presence in the Chamber of the honourable member for Bathurst. He, of course, would travel along the Windsor Road. I do not wish to inflict upon the House my concerns about Windsor Road, but it is a problem. I note that the Government has taken steps to do something about it. However, in 10 years time the stretch of road to Parramatta must consist of two lanes for more than one-third of the distance. Anyonewith commonsense would not dispute that. Windsor Road leads to areas that house people who have benefited from the technology race, who have taken advantage of opportunities and had the career promotions. One knows the wages that young people who have some kind of technological skills can earn these days. They are moving out to areas such as Rouse Hill, and they need transport. I know that the Government intends to put in a rail line, but the year 2010 cannot come quickly enough for the people of western Sydney, who desperately need transport.

The Opposition supports the importance of western Sydney to the technological and economic development of New South Wales. However, we believe that there is a lot to be done. We believe that the Government should do something about solving the problems associated with the dragsters. We believe that the people in the drag racing community should be provided with a facility that is acceptable to them and one that they can utilise with the \$30 million or \$40 million worth of machinery that they have sitting idle. In fact, it would generate approximately 1,000 extra jobs. Drag-racing involves highly skilled technology, but not everyone can be involved with technology; many people are involved in the motor and other trades. Let us look at some of the problems that exist; they will not go away. The problems with Windsor Road will not go away, nor will the lack of transport or the M4 toll. The Premier himself said it was unfair to have a toll on the M4.

Mr Yeadon: Who put it on there?

Mr MERTON: We never promised to take it off. You promised to take it off. The Minister and I have been very friendly so far in this debate, and I can assure the House we will end the debate on a friendly note. Let us have a look at some of the basics so that the people of western Sydney can prosper. As Opposition spokesman on western Sydney, I indicate the Opposition's support for this matter of public importance.

Mr ANDERSON (Londonderry) [7.52 p.m.]: I support this matter of public importance relating to western Sydney. I intended to say that I endorse the comments of my colleagues. However, I simply say that I endorse some of the comments of my colleague the honourable member for Baulkham Hills. I am delighted to speak to this very important matter, and in doing so wish to congratulate the Minister for Western Sydney. As the first Minister for Western Sydney, he is doing an outstanding job, and we, the people of western Sydney, benefit from it. I do not believe the Premier could have picked a better person when he appointed his Minister for Western Sydney. The Minister has shown a great deal of leadership in bringing together all the organisations that make up western Sydney, which is, as other speakers have said so eloquently, one of the powerhouses of Australian industry and the Australian economy.

As other members have said, 10 per cent of Australia's manufacturing value comes from western Sydney. For many years I worked in the manufacturing industry because my original trade was as a sheetmetal worker, and I know the importance of manufacturing industries to the western region. I believe that that is where

our future lies—not just in the provision of services, which is very important, but also in creating jobs in the manufacturing industry that will give fulfilment to people who want to work, and in producing products that we can sell in other places—which will also enhance the value of the work carried out by the people of western Sydney.

I had intended to highlight a number of matters, however time precludes me from doing so. I will therefore briefly highlight a number of important issues. I congratulate the Carr Government on its initiatives and the amount of money that it is investing in western Sydney. This financial year, for example, the New South Wales Government will spend approximately \$1.44 billion in operating costs for primary and secondary schools in western Sydney. I believe that the cradle of our future development lies in educating our young people, giving them the tools to go out and compete for jobs and giving them the opportunity to get the jobs. I believe that that will have a beneficial effect for all of us, because it will also lift their self-esteem and make our young people really appreciate that they are as good as anyone else in this nation. If we simply give them the chance to do it, they will prove just how good they really are. In addition, this year's budget has allocated around \$252 million in operating costs for TAFE institutes in western Sydney. As a result of our efforts, western Sydney is a youthful, multicultural region that thrives on education and training.

Businesses have certainly expressed confidence in what the Government is doing and the services that are being provided by educational institutions. The Western Sydney Institute of TAFE and the South West Sydney Institute have strong links with industry and are working to ensure that students get the best of learning through the theory and learning-on-the-job opportunities. TAFE has customised courses which link in with the needs of major firms in western Sydney—major employers such as Rondo Building Products, which is in my electorate of Londonderry, and the National Australia Bank. In Parramatta, the Western Sydney Institute of TAFE is delivering level III training in communications with the Parramatta head office. It is clear that big business is getting involved. Big business is certainly providing the opportunity for our young people to get involved in the sort of training that will benefit those businesses, as well as the people who live in our region. I commend the Minister for the great work that is being done, and I implore him to continue that work because the people of western Sydney will benefit from it.

Mr YEADON (Granville—Minister for Information Technology, Minister for Energy, Minister for Forestry, and Minister for Western Sydney) [7.57 p.m.], in reply: This Government was the first to recognise the fundamental importance of western Sydney to the State's economy, the environment and the community. Indeed, one of the key issues we have focused on in western Sydney is the whole new approach to business that is reflected in what is called the triple bottom line—that is, a company's fiscal performance, its community performance and its environmental performance.

I believe that over the next decade or so everyone will come to recognise the importance of that triple bottom line. It means that companies that are not performing well financially and are not paying attention to their role in the community and their role as a corporate entity will suffer in the market. Indeed, in like fashion, if companies are blind to the environment and are not conscious of their impact on the environment in relation to their activities, they will again suffer in the market as customers turn away from them. In recent times there have been some telling international examples of companies suffering dramatically on their community and environmental bottom lines. Nike footwear is probably one of the most classic examples in the last couple of years.

The Government very much recognised the fundamental importance of western Sydney to the State's economy; indeed it was the underpinning factor in the Government establishing the portfolio of Minister for Western Sydney. I was greatly honoured to be made the inaugural Minister for Western Sydney, a portfolio that has widely established the very successful Office of Western Sydney.

The Government was totally unlike the Opposition which, at first, refused to appoint a shadow Minister for Western Sydney. I note that in two years the Opposition has had three shadow Ministers for Western Sydney. The New South Wales Government realised that the good of the State and, indeed, the nation depended on western Sydney building on its strong industry and skills base. As previous speakers pointed out, that manufacturing base is absolutely vital, but technology is a fundamental part of it as technology becomes embedded in those companies and becomes the natural way in which they operate. A terrific example is Advanced Metal products in western Sydney, which is a traditional sheet metal manufacturing firm that has totally digitised its whole approach to undertaking its traditional manufacturing job.

Advanced Metal products receives all of its orders digitally over the Internet from international customers. It is then able to feed those specifications from client orders on to the shop floor into sophisticated

laser-cutting equipment, which is computer and digitally controlled. It then produces the product and the product is shipped to the client. The transportation of the product can be monitored all the way to its destination by using sophisticated Internet technology. That is a classic example of how the old and new dichotomy does not apply: what is regarded as old economy companies need to move up and embed this new technology in their processes. That is exactly what is occurring in western Sydney, and that is why the regional economy of western Sydney is and will be increasingly so important to the State and economy of the nation. To remain globally competitive and to keep up with rapid population growth in western Sydney, the region is continuing to modernise. It is beautiful to see.

The Government's Office of Western Sydney is playing a strategic role in western Sydney by providing leadership and acting as a catalyst for change, and a forum and a touchstone for networking and collaborating. The office organised Australia's first Information Technology and Industry conference, which was held in Parramatta last year. This year the Office of Western Sydney held another national first at Parramatta: a forum at which western Sydney councils considered how they could become fundamental and sophisticated users of information technology. Other initiatives in the region, such as the industry awards that I mentioned, are giving the information technology, biotechnology and other technology businesses in the State a national and international profile. The very successful Western Sydney Industry Awards are supporting individual firms and helping to position the region as the technological powerhouse of Australia.

Discussion concluded.

RURAL ASSISTANCE AMENDMENT BILL

Second Reading

Debate resumed from an earlier hour.

Mr W. D. SMITH (South Coast) [8.03 p.m.]: I support the bill. I would like to focus briefly on a little bit of history about farming business on the South Coast. Farmers on the South Coast are a major part of the community. The area was built around farming after the first white settler, Alexander Berry, opened the way in the early 1830s. He built the first settlement at the foot of the mountains and named it Coolangatta. The South Coast farming community began at that point, with Berry establishing a trading and manufacturing centre to support the swiftly advancing agricultural industry, using the river—now the Shoalhaven River—as a shipping route. Cedar cutting, cattle and grape growing were among the first pursuits, and as white settlement expanded the new land-holders cleared the way for horse breeding and fishing.

Despite the hectic and at times often brutal conditions—droughts, floods, bushfires, illnesses and deaths—most of the farming families held on stoically to establish the townships and communities we see today. We laud their courage and will to carry on, despite droughts and floods. The stories of our forebears lives are legendary; they are a quintessential part of the Australian psyche. One of the most favourable characteristics in some farmers is an ability to tune in to the nature of the land. With the passing of farms to children we have seen families build on their progress. Much of this progress has come about through the farmers: the children of farmers leave home to study agriculture at university and bring new knowledge to the farm; farmers who have seen the potential damage from neglect seek out better ways; and farmers who recognise economic benefit change their practices for better returns.

These changes began sometime ago, and the farmers deserve our praise and support. To this end it is crucial that changes to the Rural Assistance Authority recommended by the National Consumer Pricing Authority be given sincere consideration. We should view the Rural Assistance Authority as a force in place to ensure that farmers are given a most appropriate support base to continue their role as a major supporter of the national economy. I have been told by local farmers that many will rarely seek out assistance from government sources until they have reached the point where there is nowhere else to go. I know of a dairy farmer at Merroo Meadow who was almost at the point of ruination a few short years ago because of heavy drought. He had gone into debt and his family's lifestyle had been cut to the bare bones to enable his dairy cattle to survive and to sustain his milk production.

It was a dreadful time: his cattle were extremely thin. He told me that he had ordered hay from the west of New South Wales, but because farmers out that way were in even worse strife he did not think it would arrive in time. This farmer said that there had been some tough times, but they had managed. His father and grandfather, both dairy farmers, had experienced their fair share of tough times, mainly caused by natural forces.

Yet in the past few years demands on farmers to acquiesce to changing market forces and changing regulations have, in most cases, added much more anxiety to their lives. The Minister for Agriculture, and Minister for Land and Water Conservation and this Government have shown great support for and understanding of our farming communities. The Government has shown that it cares about these communities and understands their value to wealth of the State and the nation.

The Government has shown its concern for the livelihoods of farmers and admired their courage in establishing new land-management practices and new resources. Farmers are the very backbone of our existence. We cannot allow our farmers to slip into the background, particularly the smaller farming family units that are common in my electorate. We must respect their intelligence and their ability to accept new ways. We must value their experience in understanding the nature of the land, and we must support their move to adjust to the changing and demanding market. The amendments to the Act have evolved as a result of the review undertaken as a requirement of the National Competition Policy Agreement. The review examined the effect on farm family welfare and farm business support of the Rural Assistance Authority Act. The New South Wales Rural Assistance Authority [RAA] provides national and other assistance to farmers, and helps small businesses in times of natural disaster.

The authority provides some \$10 million each year in low-interest loans to primary producers in New South Wales. During 1998-99 it provided about \$20 million in low-interest loans to those in northern New South Wales after it was devastated by floods. These days farmers have to be good at producing their product, be it wool, grain, dairy products, cotton and so on. They also have to be good business people. For many farmers assistance provided by the Rural Assistance Authority can and does make the difference between success and failure. Since late 1998 the authority has provided more than \$10 million in farm business training grants to more than 10,000 farmers via the FarmBis initiative. Almost 90 per cent of farmers who applied for support through FarmBis have had their applications okayed.

In general, applications for assistance through the authority trebled between 1991 and 1996. At present the authority administers more than \$78 million worth of loans. Changes to the Act reinforce the principles of current practices and ensure that the Rural Assistance Authority can continue its fine work. The objects are more clearly defined to deliver programs which promote the adoption of more efficient and sustainable farming practices and to support rural communities in times of crisis.

A second important amendment reduces the distinction between general, specific and relief assistance programs to a single program of assistance which will provide more efficient service delivery. It will ensure the protection of agricultural land and water resources by facilitating the use of sustainable land and water management practices. It will also increase a farmer's likelihood of using strategies to manage changes in the industry and ensure that assistance is available if a natural disaster strikes. The role of the Rural Assistance Authority Board will now be clearly defined to advise the Minister in relation to rural assistance and disaster relief. Also, where appropriate, the role of the board will be to determine program guidelines to give effect to policies of the Government and to report annually to the Minister on the effectiveness of those programs and service delivery of the Rural Assistance Authority.

Another amendment requires the Rural Assistance Authority to provide necessary information to the board to assist it to perform its new and expanded role. The composition of the board is to be reviewed every five years to ensure that the board adequately reflects community views. These amendments will ensure that the Rural Assistance Authority continues to closely focus on rural assistance issues, is able to provide feedback on the impact and effectiveness of programs and is better able to respond to new needs of the rural community. I commend the bill to the House.

Mr SLACK-SMITH (Barwon) [8.12 p.m.]: The Opposition does not oppose the legislation; in fact, the Opposition supports the Rural Assistance Amendment Bill. Madam Acting-Speaker, I am sure that you will correct me if I am wrong but I believe this bill has its genesis in action taken in 1930-31 during the Depression by the Lang Government in response to increasing pressure from the farming community in New South Wales when many farms were threatened with foreclosure by lending institutions. The banks did not want the farms because they had no use for farms that were not producing an income. The purpose of the original Act was to provide farmers with low-interest loans to enable them to work their way out of their financial difficulties and to stop banks seizing the farms. When circumstances improved, the farmers again became viable and the crisis was over.

Unfortunately, since that time, the Rural Assistance Act seems to have lost its focus. It no longer intervenes to prevent banks from foreclosing on farms because in many cases the criteria act as a barrier to

farmers seeking relief. In many cases, the criteria are unacceptable, as evidenced by the incidence of an outbreak of Newcastle disease on the North Coast and Central Coast of New South Wales last year. The criteria did not fit that disaster and many poultry farmers found that they were ineligible for rural assistance funding. The honourable member for South Coast mentioned FarmBis, which was established as a result of rural assistance legislation.

It is really quite sad that producers who try to meet the eligibility criteria for rural assistance either have too much money or too much equity and, as a result, are ineligible for assistance. In other cases, the equitable interests of the farmer in the property are so low that farmers in that situation are similarly ineligible. Presently the Rural Assistance Authority targets only a very small minority in the middle of the spectrum of people involved in agriculture, which is rather unfortunate. Many producers could well do with an extra hand up to ensure that their businesses remain viable. Some of the criteria applied by the Rural Assistance Authority are in need of examination. That is why I welcome this amending legislation which will provide for the Minister of Agriculture to review the operation of the legislation every five years. If a Minister is fair dinkum, a review will reflect community views on rural assistance and disaster relief measures.

During the past few years massive floods occurred and wheat producers were totally devastated when the quality of the crop was so bad that they were unable to even recover their costs. The effect of the floods was not contemplated by the legislation, which meant that some farmers did not meet the criteria for rural assistance. To my mind, that is a matter that should be taken on board by the Government. One of the objects of the bill is to ensure that rural assistance legislation can be changed to meet prevailing circumstances, and that is one of the reasons why the Opposition supports the bill. When a bushfire swept through the south-eastern part of New South Wales and caused total devastation the number of people who were eligible for low-interest financial assistance was almost nil. Criteria pertaining to eligibility must be examined very carefully.

The point must be made that financial assistance provided by the Rural Assistance Authority is not a handout but is, rather, a loan which must be repaid. The only distinguishing features between a bank loan and rural assistance are that loans are provided at a rate of interest lower than the rate charged by banks and are repayable over a long period, but the difference that the provision of rural assistance funding makes can be the difference between a farmer going bust or being able to continue. I suggest that the legislation ought to contain a mechanism for amendment to adjust the criteria to fit changes in circumstances.

Three or four years ago practices and conditions were different from what they are now and in three or four years time they will be different again. In a sense, agriculture is an exciting industry because nothing remains fixed. If in five years time a farmer is still applying the practices that are suitable for today's conditions, that farmer will go broke. The pace of change is accelerating and innovative technology is being applied. Farmers who do not embrace every opportunity to increase productivity will be left far behind.

The object of the bill is not only to clarify the purposes of the Act but also to define the functions of the Rural Assistance Authority and require the authority to provide certain information to the board on request. The legislation also requires the Minister for Agriculture to review the requirements of the Act every five years. Frankly, I would have preferred shorter review intervals but, for the sake of passing the bill, the Opposition will support the legislation as it is presented. A review will examine the requirements of the Act relating to the composition of the board to ensure that the board's decisions continue to reflect community views on rural assistance and disaster relief issues. As I mentioned earlier, many of the disasters that have affected regional New South Wales did not meet the criteria that are currently applied. It is a sad fact of life that genuine farmers in a desperate situation are unable to obtain assistance.

It is often the case that farmers who are ineligible for assistance are capital rich but cash poor. Farmers who do not produce a turnover will find that lending institutions become very obstreperous with them—even farmers whose farms constitute a huge asset. In most farming areas of New South Wales it is common for some farms to be worth approximately \$2 million or \$3 million, but the farmers do not have any cash and cannot generate the necessary funds to produce crops which represent the full production potential of the property. Because this legislation provides for a review to be conducted by the Minister and empowers the Minister to amend legislation relating to the criteria to ensure that the criteria fit the circumstances prevailing in an industry at any given time, I believe that the bill has merit. For those reasons, members of the Coalition support the bill or, at least, do not intend to oppose it.

Mr NEWELL (Tweed) [8.19 p.m.]: I join honourable members from both sides of the House in supporting the Rural Assistance Amendment Bill. The honourable member for South Coast in his introductory

remarks related a little history about the agriculture of the South Coast. It is appropriate that I, the member for Tweed from the far North Coast, add to those remarks. The honourable member for South Coast mentioned Alexander Berry, the schooner *Coolangatta*, Mount Coolangatta and that spectacular part of his electorate. The connection with the North Coast is twofold: the schooner *Coolangatta* was wrecked on the North Coast at the point now known as Coolangatta—which is just over the border in Queensland; we will not claim it at this time—and many farmers who started out on the South Coast in the 1850s were the immigrants and pioneers who moved to the North Coast to start agricultural industries. The cedar cutters were first followed by other farmers whose names are now represented by relatives on the South Coast. My family and ancestors are included amongst them.

The proposed amendments to the Act result from a national competition policy review that critically examined the impact on the wider market of the farm family welfare and farm business support aspects of the Rural Assistance Authority Act 1989. The review required that this type of legislation should not restrict competition unless it can be demonstrated that the anti-competitive aspects of the legislation can be justified. In other words, the benefits to the community resulting from the legislation must outweigh the costs incurred. I believe, as I am sure all honourable members do, that community benefit should be given more weight, particularly if we examine some of the recent changes to the dairy industry through the national competition policy. One wonders how much weight was given to the community benefit in those changes.

The review found what we already knew: that the Rural Assistance Authority [RAA] plays an important role in rural communities, that that authority is a highly effective body, and that only minor changes to reinforce the underlying principles of the current Act are required. The following are the main changes that were recommended to ensure the New South Wales Rural Assistance Authority, commonly known as the authority or the RAA, can continue to play this important role. The first was that the lack of clear objectives in the current Act must be addressed by defining the objectives of the RAA to deliver programs that promote the adoption of more efficient and sustainable farming practices and support rural communities in times of crisis. The next was that to ensure assistance provided by the RAA remains relevant there be a requirement that a public benefit test be applied to all RAA assistance programs.

The third recommendation was to provide more effective service delivery by amalgamating the current general, special and relief assistance into one program of assistance. Honourable members spoke of the historical nature of some bills preceding this one as far back as the Moratorium Act 1932. Protection orders is the fourth recommendation. Because no orders have been issued for more than 10 years and the protection they afforded is now largely available through the Farm Debt Mediation Act 1994 it was recommended that these orders be repealed. While protection-type orders may be repealed, it is important that similar protection as offered under the Farm Debt Mediation Act 1994 be retained to assist farms and farm businesses in financial difficulties.

Another recommendation was to address the lack of a clearly defined role for the Rural Assistance Authority Board in the current Act. It was stipulated that functions of the board be set out explicitly as being those to advise the Minister in relation to rural assistance and disaster relief; where appropriate, to determine program guidelines to give effect to government policies; and to report annually to the Minister on the effectiveness of programs and service delivery of the RAA. The review recommended that to assist the board in performing its new and expanded role the RAA be required to provide necessary information to the board. The next recommendation was to ensure that the composition of the board adequately reflects community views and that its composition be reviewed every five years.

The honourable member for Barwon spoke earlier about this aspect. It was considered necessary to have a review of the board's composition every five years. If implemented, these changes will ensure that the Rural Assistance Authority remains closely focused on rural assistance issues, is better able to provide advice to the Minister on the effectiveness of individual programs and has a better capacity to respond to emerging industry assistance needs. The Rural Assistance Authority is one of the major bodies assisting rural communities to adjust to changing circumstances. Programs like the FarmBis business training program assist farmers to regard change as an opportunity rather than a challenge or something to be feared. Through its natural disaster relief program it helps farmers in times of crisis. This program provides assistance also to smaller farmers who may not have the capital base to finance necessary on-ground works that will reverse soil degradation or improve farm drainage. Therefore, in this way the program helps smaller farmers to remain viable.

For these reasons the Rural Assistance Authority programs help farmers cope with and adjust to the pressures of the increasingly competitive markets in which they operate. For this reason alone the authority

plays an important role in rural and regional New South Wales. In the 1998-99 financial year the total assistance provided by the authority was almost \$30 million. The overwhelming majority of this figure went to farmers and other small businesses in rural communities. Another indicator of the significance of the organisation to the regional economies in our State is revealed by the fact that in an average year the authority provides about \$10 million in low-interest loans to New South Wales primary producers.

The programs delivered by the authority can be divided into several categories described as farm family and farm business support; natural disaster assistance, which I referred to earlier; assistance with conservation works; and assistance to farmers to help them cope with seasonal downturns of an extreme or exceptional nature and which have an adverse impact on productivity. Farm business support is provided mainly through the FarmBis program, which is an Australia-wide joint Federal-State program providing farm business training assistance. Farmers operate in an extremely challenging business environment.

To put it bluntly, for some farmers the assistance provided through FarmBis and other Rural Assistance Authority programs can make the difference in viability. As the Minister pointed out in his second reading speech, in the 18 months since the FarmBis program began in December 1998 the Rural Assistance Authority has provided more than \$10 million in farm business training grants to more than 10,000 New South Wales farmers. I emphasise that the assistance was in the form of grants and not loans to help farmers obtain knowledge to put together farm business programs. Those 10,000 farmers represent almost 30 per cent of registered New South Wales farmers. Furthermore, the New South Wales program is regarded as the benchmark for the delivery of FarmBis in Australia. Honourable members will recall that in 1998-99 much of the northern part of the State was affected by floods and the value of low-interest loans provided to farmers doubled to almost \$20 million. The Rural Assistance Authority will provide \$7 million in low-interest loans to farmers through the special conservation loans scheme.

These loans are provided for on-farm capital works, for soil conservation, serrated tussock control, irrigation and water supply works. Farmers can borrow up to \$80,000 from the authority through this program at concessional interest rates. I am pleased that the authority provides that type of assistance. While these types of schemes obviously have a beneficial impact on productivity, they also benefit the wider New South Wales environment by helping farmers to arrest on-farm soil erosion and degradation problems. The current interest rate on those loans, which are repayable over 10 years, is approximately 4 per cent.

Assistance to farmers directly affected by natural disasters is one of the many ways in which the authority becomes involved in rural communities. Many members will recall that in 1998-99 much of the northern part of the State was affected by floods. In that single instance the Rural Assistance Authority co-ordinated the low-interest carry-on loans to the value of almost \$10 million to farmers and small businesses affected by floods. I am aware, for example, that the authority has actively sought out banana growers and other farmers in the North Coast region who have been hit by several seasons of poor markets and poor weather and as a consequence are struggling to make ends meet. I am pleased to say that the authority has attempted to do all it can for those people by offering to restructure their Rural Assistance Authority loans.

That type of assistance is significant when one appreciates that the loans may have been taken out as a direct consequence of some earlier disaster, such as a storm which knocked out their banana plants. That type of direct intervention by the authority not only makes things more manageable from a financial point of view but takes an enormous load off the farmer, and reduces stress. Other rural financial institutions should take notice of the example set by the authority of attempting to work with farmers to ensure that they remain viable and a part of their local economy. I commend the bill to the House, and I commend the Minister for introducing the changes and carrying out the review as required by the agreement with agriculture Ministers in Australia.

Mr OAKESHOTT (Port Macquarie) [8.32 p.m.]: My constituents at Port Macquarie certainly do not oppose this legislation but indeed strongly support various aspects of the Rural Assistance Amendment Bill, for example, clarification of disaster relief and on-farm rural assistance packages, as referred to by the honourable member for Tweed. There is no doubt that in areas such as the mid North Coast assistance for on-farm improvements is critical to farming and rural life to deal with soil erosion, serrated tussock and many other farm issues. Disaster relief is particularly important on the North Coast because every valley has a flood story in a particular year of significance to the local community. The mid North Coast is no different, and relies strongly on access to disaster relief at various times.

The Opposition does not oppose this bill. I therefore want to talk in more general terms about rural assistance and what this Government can do for the North Coast in particular. Many of the changes in this bill

relate to the national competition policy. In the past century there have been significant impacts on the traditional agricultural industries on the mid North Coast: the timber, beef, commercial fishing and dairy industries. At the moment the beef industry is doing well and we are pleased that the Wingham abattoir is improving and developing its site. Hopefully, the Wingham abattoir will undergo a major expansion over the next couple of years to make it one of the key centres for beef in New South Wales.

However, the dairy industry is probably one of the most recent examples of significant changes to on-farm life due to directions of government, not only on a State and national level but on an international level. Industry improvements and globalisation in general have led to significant impacts, which have not yet been felt on dairy farms on the mid North Coast. In regard to the dairy adjustment package, it has been reported that many farmers have not lodged applications. I take this opportunity to remind farmers on the mid North Coast to lodge their applications before 17 August. If they are to experience those changes it is critical that they access the money that is available to them.

In the past decade the timber industry has also undergone significant changes. To a large degree the dairy and timber industries were the lifeblood of agriculture on the mid North Coast. Many families have lost jobs and livelihoods because of the changes. Without gazing into a crystal ball, I would say that the next industry that will have significant changes thrust upon it by government and by the impacts of rationalisation and globalisation will be the commercial fishing industry. Three key industries on the mid North Coast—three of the most traditional lifeblood industries—have felt the impact of changes. This Government has the responsibility of not only picking up the pieces but providing alternatives and support for those farmers who have had the courage to remain in the traditional industries.

I would hope that this Government also has the courage to cut through the bureaucracy and provide support to those on the mid North Coast who have moved out of the traditional industries into new industries, or those who have moved to the mid North Coast to take up new farming opportunities. New industries include a wide range of growth farm activities such as the cut flowers industry and, ironically, new versions of older industries, such as harvest timber and aquaculture. Those industries are potentially the future of agriculture on the mid North Coast, but at the moment there is not enough government support in aggressively promoting them to ensure a viable rural scene.

The mid North Coast is experiencing the full brunt both of economic rationalisation in all industries and of world-wide globalisation and efficiencies in industry and in government. Traditional rural industries are at the coalface of those impacts. That is having a huge impact on individual farmers and families on the mid North Coast. I therefore encourage the Government to broaden the definition of rural assistance and to consider the alternatives. I hope that if the Government is serious about governing for the whole of New South Wales it will provide future employment opportunities in areas such as the mid North Coast.

Mr WEBB (Monaro) [8.39 p.m.]: I speak in support of the Rural Assistance Amendment Bill. Many previous speakers have addressed the issues I intended to deal with. I will refer particularly to the Monaro and the farming communities that I represent. The object of the bill is to promote the efficient delivery of programs of assistance to farmers and other persons engaged in rural industries, and people associated with those industries. Farming industries are vital to the State and nation and they should receive government assistance. The bill provides the Rural Assistance Board with authority to gather information. It also contains important review provisions to enable the board to carry out fundamental work under the Rural Assistance Act.

Regrettably, across much of the State and nation many farmers are doing it tough. They are on their own. They are trying to deal with natural adversity, often antagonistic governments, and a lack of understanding by the population at large. To make matters worse, the average age of Australian farmers is 62 years. Many are trying to adjust to all these factors and to hand on the family farm. It is absolutely imperative that the experience and knowledge that our farmers have gained over their lives in managing the Australian farm are passed on. Effective methods are necessary to enable governments to help farmers with financial assistance during exceptional circumstances. The term "exceptional circumstances" needs definition and should be well understood.

Ovine Johne's disease is affecting farmers in many areas of the State and costing New South Wales agricultural production in the sheep industries between \$58 million and \$170 million per annum. It has major ramifications for the future not only of agricultural production of wool and sheep meat products but also for the social viability of rural and farming communities, often with many generations of experience. These are certainly times of hardship, of exceptional circumstances. Farmers face adversity and they need the help of

governments. Previous speakers have spoken about droughts, floods, commodity price downturns and bushfires. All these natural events and disasters are exceptional circumstances. Governments have the fundamental role of providing financial assistance when it is needed and when farming communities are crying out for it.

The honourable member for Port Macquarie referred to the success of abattoirs in his electorate. At Cooma the Monbeef abattoir has broken new technological ground in the hot processing of beef. It is underpinning the cow market in the Monaro and across south-east New South Wales. At a recent cattle sale at Braidwood cow prices were up to 116 cents per kilo. Buoyant prices aid farmers in restructuring their beef herds. The honourable member for Port Macquarie also spoke about diversification within his electorate. In the Monaro a new organisation called the Snowy Mountains Agricultural Specialty Producers Association has been formed to aid farmers in diversifying into a whole host of different products. At a recent meeting at Nimitabel 65 people discussed all kinds of diversification, from truffles to alpacas, to sheep and other agronomic enterprises, to enable people to change with the times and carry out sustainable agricultural practices on their farms and become more productive for the benefit of our nation.

The provisions of the bill will aid farmers to run their businesses. There is assistance to increase the level of investment in sustainable land and water management practices. The State Government has different initiatives before it at the moment. Farmers certainly need aid to prepare themselves through technical advances and other means to overcome and deal with what has been set before them. There is also provision for self-preparedness in the adjustment processes to deal with industry downturns. This applies to both the beef industry and the wool industry. Drought, disease and drought can cause industry downturns. Farmers often need short-term assistance to deal with natural disaster. South of Dalgety this year there was some rain and green pick but unfortunately most of it disappeared because of wingless grasshoppers. Farmers in the area were thrust into drought times when trying to rebuild sheep flocks.

Farmers also need aid to effect permanent improvements to their farms, such as fencing, foddering, grain storage facilities, stockyards, water supplies and so on. I like the way in which the bill will allow farmers to obtain finance to carry out important improvements on their farms. Assistance is also needed for pasture improvement, fodder conservation and stock improvement through breeding. These are ways in which farming communities can remain sustainable, reduce negative impacts on their properties and increase the possibility of obtaining higher and more sustainable prices within a marketplace.

There is a conflict between the provisions of the bill and problems caused by the Native Vegetation Act. Farmers want to improve pastures and conserve fodder and water for times of drought or disaster but the provisions of the Native Vegetation Act and the threatened species legislation cause problems. On the one hand we are providing financial assistance to farmers to allow them to survive but on the other hand we are imposing severe conditions that prevent farmers doing what they want to do and what the bill gives them assistance to do.

Through pasture improvement and training farmers can better manage stock and pasture. Cell grazing initiatives are an example. Farmers can attend Prograze courses, a very valuable initiative conducted by agronomists from the Department of Agriculture. The courses provide farmers with up-to-date skills for pasture and stock management. They can then take the initiative to change their farms by fencing and watering differently and perhaps consider cell grazing. At home a change from old, traditional stocking methods to high-density, fast rotation stocking dealt with weeds and at the same time looked after the stock better, evened up the wool cut through the year, reduced intrusion of vegetation into the wool and enabled the running of sheep and cattle on a much more productive and sustainable basis. Such changes can help farmers to adjust and become sustainable and productive parts of the economy.

The bill will provide assistance for replacement of lost and damaged farm improvements to enable farming to continue. It may be necessary to provide fodder after bushfire or drought. Farmers certainly need our support. We have to think about farm family welfare. Small communities in New South Wales absolutely depend upon agricultural production. All those sectors of the community can benefit from training initiatives, as can the new generation coming along. The bill will help in that respect as well.

Farming communities and farmers must be urged to make application for assistance under this measure if they believe the benefit they can derive from that assistance will enable them to adjust to difficult circumstances and overcome crises. However, there are some problems with the eligibility criteria. I would like to relate some figures that give an insight to why our farmers are doing it tough. New South Wales farmers and Australian farmers generally do not have the level of support that most farmers get from our trading partners. The OECD average farm subsidy is 40 per cent of total farm income. In the United States of America in 1999 the average farm subsidy, again expressed as a percentage of total farm income, was 24 per cent, up from 19 per cent through the early 1990s.

In the European Union the average farm subsidy was 49 per cent of total farm income, in Japan it was 65 per cent, and in Canada 20 per cent. In 1999 the average subsidy for Australian farmers, expressed as a percentage of total farm income for 1999, was 6 per cent. Between 1990 and 1993 the figure was 8 per cent. So, while the subsidy for Australian farmers has fallen, subsidies to farmers given by our trading partners—the United States of America, the European Union and Japan—have risen quite dramatically. Support for New South Wales farmers and farming communities—not so much through subsidies but by conservation agreements, training initiatives and production incentives—would assist them to continue with their multibillion wealth generation enterprises, including wool, beef, dairying and many small agricultural industries in the Monaro, and continue to contribute to the wealth of this nation.

We must help our farmers improve their skills and manage their assets. We have to motivate our farmers, and enable them to continue to be productive while at the same time carrying out vital conservation work at much cheaper cost than it could be done by governments. That would ensure sustainable agricultural practices and production in New South Wales generally, and in the Monaro in particular. In supporting the Rural Assistance Amendment Bill I congratulate the Government, but we need to do much more to look after our farming communities.

Mr R. H. L. SMITH (Bega) [8.52 p.m.]: I support the Rural Assistance Amendment Bill. This legislation came about because of a review of the Rural Assistance Authority Board. The Rural Assistance Authority is a bank of last resort for farmers and small businesses in rural areas. The authority is very much appreciated. As all honourable members would understand, farmers and business persons in small country towns rely heavily on the seasons. Much of the time the seasons are very unpredictable, and at times farmers and rural communities are suddenly confronted with disasters caused by floods, fires and droughts, to which Australia is so prone.

Australia is very much a land of unpredictable seasonal patterns. One need only reflect back on seasonal conditions in the past few years on the far South Coast, within the electorate of Bega, and in the Monaro electorate to realise that those areas have suffered almost a decade of droughts. Unfortunately, that part of New South Wales is very much in a rain shadow. Notwithstanding that, I cannot think of a run of such bad seasons as we are presently experiencing. Of course, after the drought we are likely to have floods and fires, which are part of the general pattern of farming particularly in the South Coast and Monaro areas.

Once a natural disaster strikes, often at unpredictable times, even the most efficient farmer will not be exempt from its effects. Whether a farm is the best, the worst, the biggest or the smallest, devastating natural occurrences at times put a well-run business or farm into a situation from which there seems to be no recovery. The Rural Assistance Authority has given great support over many years. I was not aware until this evening that the authority dates back to the 1930s. However, the authority's assistance is not solely for those who need relief from natural disasters. The authority also provides relief to a number of people who simply cannot get ahead. They might be good managers of their land, and they might be doing a wonderful job, but a lack of capital or fragmentation of large family farms might render them unable to develop their land to the extent necessary to achieve adequate productivity improvement. It is in such circumstances that the Rural Assistance Authority will provide low-interest loans for works such as pasture improvement, erosion control and water storage.

I have been a farmer for most of my life; I have had 25 years of practical farming. Years ago I was granted a Rural Assistance Authority low-interest loan to do some dam building and erosion control works on the property. I was very pleased to get that loan. At the time, to be eligible for such a loan, on the one hand the farmer had to be almost destitute but on the other hand had to prove the farm viable, which is not easily done. Of course, as the amount of funds available was limited, people who could obtain bank loans or other types of finance were ineligible for assistance. Authority loans are last resort types of financial facilities. Generally, the assistance is given to farmers who suffer from disasters of one form or another, or else cannot possibly afford to improve their land without a low-interest loan. Of course, they must go through all the hoops that everyone must go through to prove that they fall into the category of persons eligible for these low-interest loans but, without doubt, the authority assisted quite a number of people.

Honourable members will recall that the Crookwell area was ravaged by fire only a couple of years ago. I am not personally familiar with the detail of that event, but I am sure that if many people in that area had not had the support of the Rural Assistance Authority they would not have been able to survive that fire. There were huge floods in the west. I have no doubt that the Rural Assistance Authority assisted many people who, but for those low-interest loans, would not have survived the massive floods that persisted for months and destroyed untold numbers of livestock and, along the way, the lives of many people.

Honourable members might note that authority loans are available not only to farming communities but to small rural businesses. That is because natural disasters—particularly droughts and fires—that strike a particular area result in a massive downturn in the local economy. Small businesses do not have the finances to spend locally. The effects of a disaster not only impact on the individual farmer or group of farmers but flow through to the whole of the local business community. Even though that does not often happen, it is good that in such appropriate circumstances low-interest loans are available for businesses in country towns.

If one looks back in history one will see that many farmers, particularly in the tablelands area, began with soldier settler blocks or closer settlement blocks. Although they were very small, those blocks were viable at that time. The honourable member for Murray-Darling said earlier that in the 1950s farmers received £1 for every pound of wool. Although that price lasted for only a year, everyone remembers those days. However, wool prices have been pretty ordinary every year since then. Farmers remain on the land because they love the land. That is why they become somewhat aggravated when they are told that they are doing something wrong. Farmers are not raping and pillaging the land; they love the land and want to pass it on to their children.

The achievements of those who received closer settlement blocks are a credit to them. The soldier settlers who returned from the second world war—I do not know what happened after the first world war—received largely non-viable blocks of land, but many of them made a real success of their small farms. They raised families, and their children, who developed the farms through love and good management, now probably employ others. The efforts of those early settlers who tried to make a living from small blocks of land while raising and educating children is incredible. They did not complain. If they suffered a drought, fire or flood—if they were lucky enough to live near a river—they appreciated a little assistance to get them over that hump while the banks were on their back. Farmers are extremely good at repaying loans because they want to keep their land in the family and pass it on to future generations in the same condition as they received it.

Land that was viable 10 years ago—a living area, as we call it on the land—is now very marginal. Wool prices have been low for a decade or more and the wool stockpile is hanging over our heads. Cattle prices are quite good at present and many outlying areas are wheat-oriented. However, inland New South Wales has always lived on the sheep's back. Wool profits—particularly in the tablelands area—have been woeful for several years, mainly due to the effect of low wool prices, the wool stockpile and occasional disasters. Those farmers will survive, but we must be conscious of the problems they face.

The honourable member for Monaro mentioned the Native Vegetation Conservation Act 1997. That legislation hangs over farmers' heads; it interferes with their general management practices and they think about it almost every day. It would have been wonderful if there had been more discussion and consultation with farmers about that Act. Everyone must obey the law but the native vegetation committees create problems by not releasing their vegetation plans and notifying farmers of what they can and cannot do. In the absence of such plans, farmers wishing to plough a paddock must go individually to the Department of Land and Water Conservation, which refers the matter to other departments. That interferes enormously with farmers' general management of their properties—whether it be planting crops, improving pastures or applying fertiliser.

I commend the staff of the Rural Assistance Authority, who have done a genuinely good job over time. They have rescued many people from difficult situations by means of low-interest loans, which recycle money back into the pool and make it available to others in a similar plight. I support the Rural Assistance Bill.

Mr GLACHAN (Albury) [9.05 p.m.]: I support the changes proposed in the Rural Assistance Amendment Bill. The Rural Assistance Authority has helped many farmers in this State over a long period. Those farmers deserve and need that assistance because farming is a very chancy profession. Farming has changed over the years and today's practices are quite different from what they were when the Rural Assistance Authority began its work. However, the conditions that inhibit farmers have not changed. There are still fires, floods and droughts. Despite the many changes and new techniques introduced to control them, rabbits still cause devastation. Low commodity prices always militate against farmers and the subsidies that overseas competitors receive from their governments also make it hard for them. Therefore, any support farmers receive is well deserved.

The honourable member for Bega referred to the rare occasion some years ago when producers received £1 for every pound of wool. We have not seen that sort of price for a long time. Much of the great wool stockpile that helped to keep down the price of wool has been reduced recently, which is good news. Wool that was stored in expensive storage facilities overseas has been systematically cleared and that will assist our wool producers. There is perhaps some money in fine wool sheep but the production of broad wool scarcely pays off. Shearing, cartage and sale costs often amount to more than farmers receive for their wool—it is not easy being a woolgrower these days.

We tend sometimes to dismiss farming and say that it has been superseded by other industries. We talk about the sale of minerals, such as coal, and tourism as great income earners for Australia—and those industries are certainly important. Albury is a sophisticated manufacturing area and one of the largest cities in inland New South Wales. Albury has big factories, such as the paper mill, BTR Engineering and Cooper Tools Pty Ltd, that employ many people and have an important effect on the local economy. However, the city's economy is also underpinned by the rural activities in the surrounding areas, and by farmers spending in town the money that they earn from producing rural commodities. We should never lose sight of the importance of farming and agriculture to the economy of New South Wales.

I sometimes think about the farms within a 30- or 40-kilometre radius of Albury. Most of them are reasonably small—1,000 to 1,500 acres—but they are well established and well run. Those solid farms have provided a good living for hard-working families over many years. The way things are in farming these days, very few of those families derive all their income from their farms. In most cases they have to depend on off-farm income. The wife has to go to work—she may be a nurse or school teacher—or the farmer has to get other work to subsidise the farm. That is sad. Not long ago those farms supported families, and the sons eventually took over the farms. Farmers in the Albury area now say that their sons are not keen to carry on farming; they are looking for other work in the towns, for education, and for other careers. I wonder where the farmers of the future will come from, because farming is not as attractive as it was a few years ago.

Techniques have changed. When I was wheat farming the key to growing a good wheat crop was constantly working the ground, building up the subsoil, sealing the moisture into the subsoil, getting rid of the weeds and keeping the moisture locked in. That has all changed. Now it is minimum tillage, using sprays to kill the weeds and direct-drilling the seeds in.

Mr Gaudry: Chemical farming.

Mr GLACHAN: Chemical farming, yes, all because it saves money and saves the structure of the soil. Saving money is the main thing, as the pressure is on farmers because of all the problems they face. Farming has never been easy but it is getting more difficult now, and it is less attractive to the sons of farmers, and that is worrying. This rural assistance scheme has a history of assisting many farmers who have been in difficulty to get over their bad times, and of keeping them in business. I support this bill, and I will certainly support any Government scheme that will assist farmers.

Mr MERTON (Baulkham Hills) [9.12 p.m.]: I am pleased to support the Rural Assistance Amendment Bill, which clarifies the functions of the Rural Assistance Authority. It also sets out certain procedures under which the Rural Assistance Authority is required to provide certain information to the board on request and the Minister for Agriculture is required every five years to review the requirements of the Act relating to the composition of the board. Even from a city perspective, life on the land is not all beer and skittles. With changing commodity prices and with rising cost structures it is no longer true to say that Australia is riding on the sheep's back. Those halcyon days when wool commanded £1 a pound have long gone.

Following World War II many properties were allocated to returned soldiers in soldier settlements. This gave many returned soldiers an opportunity to go on the land. They believed there was a great future ahead of them and many did very well, but it was certainly very tough. Often they were given properties that were barely improved, and they had minimum equipment and very little capital. They would take up their land with an old tractor if they could get one. Not many tractors were available just after the war and farmers often incurred considerable debts getting basic equipment to farm their properties.

The situation has changed dramatically. Woolgrowers have gone through difficult times. There was once a guaranteed floor price for wool but eventually that was no longer viable, the wool market collapsed and became deregulated, and woolgrowers were at the mercy of market forces. The sad fact about market forces is that whilst the price of the end product might be subject to demand or the buying habits of overseas consumers, or even the fashion of the day, the costs of running a property never seem to come down. We understand that shearers must be paid and overheads must be met, but after spending money for shearers many farmers—particularly those who had wool that was described as medium type, from 21 to 24 microns—found that the return per sheep was less than it cost to produce.

In times of drought, fire or other natural disaster it was necessary for some kind of rural assistance to keep the family farm going, to keep the family unit intact. Assistance was often needed to preserve a dream that had originated years before upon the granting of a soldier settlement block or the inheritance of a property.

Some families on the land in New South Wales and elsewhere in Australia can trace ownership back to original Crown grants. In recent years that has changed and many properties have been subdivided because they are no longer viable. When family members no longer want to stay on the land, the properties are sold and the families leave. I know of one property that was held by the one family since 1820. That property was a grant, alongside land given to Mrs Macquarie, the Governor's wife. That family held the property until recently, when it was sold. Can one imagine the emotion and feelings of the very last members of the family to hold that property as they drove down the driveway for the last time, knowing they would never return to that land?

During wartime our young men enlisted in the fighting forces. In years gone by the ability of our ladies to take up rural pursuits was very much underestimated, but many properties throughout New South Wales and Australia have been kept together by the efforts of our women. People in the Baulkham Hills electorate have a unique claim. We believe—and many people support this theory—that Merino sheep were first bred not at Camden but at Baulkham Hills. They were not bred by John Macarthur; they were bred by his long-suffering wife, Elizabeth, who kept the farm going when John had his various sojourns to England and during the other periods of despair that John Macarthur suffered. He was not a well man from time to time.

The Opposition supports the bill. We understand the difficulties people on the land have and we support any helping hand that can be given by way of the rural assistance scheme to allow them to continue on their farms. At the end of the day, their difficulties do end at the farm gate. We are not only talking about the livelihood of the people who run the properties; we are talking about the livelihoods of the shopkeepers in the nearby towns, the fuel suppliers and the people who sell agricultural equipment. There is quite a multiplier effect. The Opposition has great pleasure in supporting the Rural Assistance Amendment Bill, because we believe that the Australian dream, the Australian concept of life on the land—and so much of our wealth has been generated by primary production—should be maintained. We should at all costs fight to try to support our great rural traditions. We have enviable rural tradition, I believe we have an exciting future, and legislation like this bill can certainly help to achieve that future.

Mr STONER (Oxley) [9.20 p.m.]: It is pleasing that the Government is addressing the provisions of the Rural Assistance Act 1989 and conducting a tidy-up of the Act by way of the amendments contained in the Rural Assistance Amendment Bill.

Mr Campbell: That is congratulations to the Government, is it Andrew?

Mr STONER: Absolutely. In introducing the bill, the Government has shown that it has given some priority to agriculture and to rural communities. I congratulate the Government on giving assistance to the important rural sector, particularly in my electorate of Oxley, which has many primary producers. Dairy and beef cattle primary producers are important to the State and to the nation. Honourable members should try bananas from my electorate; they should stop at the fruit stalls around Nambucca run by Suttons and Usshers—they have the best bananas in Australia, without doubt. Geoff Gough, near Macksville, is a major producer of fruit and vegetables. This legislation is important to the many primary producers in my electorate.

The honourable member for Keira would be pleased to know that last July when significant floods impacted on the Nambucca, Macleay and Hastings catchments the Government responded positively. I approached the Minister for Agriculture for assistance under the Rural Assistance Act and he declared that a disaster had occurred there. He provided fodder transport relief, especially for the dairy farmers, many of whose paddocks were under water. I congratulate the Minister on taking that initiative.

During the recent debate into the dairy industry—which was said to be about dairy deregulation but was in fact a legislative response to industry developments in other States, particularly Victoria—the Government agreed to establish a committee to investigate the financial impact of changes to the dairy industry. The committee will certainly need to consider the full provisions of the Rural Assistance Act, as amended, and will need to provide much-needed assistance to dairy farmers whose incomes are likely to be cut dramatically as a result of changes in the marketplace. I cannot stress too strongly that farmers are not only feeding Australia but contributing enormously to its economy. They need all the assistance they can get.

Australia has a huge potential export market, because we produce more than we can consume. We should seek to export our products to Asia and other markets. The amended Act will assist primary producers during hard times to achieve that worthwhile national objective, which is important also to this State. I congratulate the many farmers, not only in my electorate but across the State and indeed the country, who are working not only harder, but smarter. They are employing world's best practice farming techniques, their

productivity is incredibly high and they need support and encouragement to continue. Genetically modified food production is the subject of a whole new debate, which I will not address at this time. Farmers and the industry are looking at ways of improving productivity and they are at the cutting edge of agriculture internationally.

However, I stress that primary producers find that some legislation is restrictive and, in some cases, unworkable. No doubt the New South Wales Farmers Association has raised those concerns with the Government. A number of State environmental planning policies, particularly SEPP 14, which deals with coastal wetlands, about which I have spoken in this House, the Native Vegetation Conservation Act, and the septic tank regulations, which impact severely on people on farms or properties that do not have access to town water and sewerage, work as a disincentive. Rural assistance is supposed to be an incentive; so some balance is needed. I certainly hope that the Government is sensitive and consults with primary producers and organisations such as the New South Wales Farmers Association so that the good work which is enshrined in this amending legislation is not negated by restrictive regulations. Overall, the Coalition supports the provisions of the Rural Assistance Amendment Bill. I am pleased that the Act will be tidied up and made more contemporary.

Debate adjourned on motion by Mr Gaudry.

ADOPTION BILL

Second Reading

Debate resumed from 8 August.

Mr CAMPBELL (Keira) [9.27 p.m.]: This legislation will replace the 1965 Act and, to use the words of the honourable member for Oxley, it is about time that Act was made more contemporary. Clearly when one considers that the roles of parents have changed in that 35 years, the legislation certainly should be updated. Years ago mothers were abandoned by partners and became single mothers, and society dictated that children be adopted in those circumstances. Today, partners still abandon mothers in the same circumstances, but today mothers choose to parent the children rather than give them up for adoption. The incidents of child abuse that are the catalyst for this legislation certainly occurred then but they were not discussed. The abuse of young children is now discussed, action is demanded, and action is taken.

I commend the Minister for taking up this difficult issue. Debate concerning children always becomes emotional, and that includes debate about adoption. This matter has been debated comprehensively and I will not go into the details of the bill. I will concentrate on what is known as intercountry adoption. A number of my friends and acquaintances have adopted children from overseas and have experienced the lows of that process but have celebrated and rejoiced in the highs of becoming parents.

In the absence of legislation in this State, the intercountry adoption arrangements entered into by adoptive parents residing in this State are regulated by the Australian Government. It is most reassuring to see that this bill will bring all adoption arrangements in this State under State legislation. Ratification of the Hague Convention on the Protection of Children and Co-operation in Respect of Intercountry Adoption and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child impose obligations on administrators and those exercising an authority under adoption legislation.

The intercountry adoption convention appears as a schedule to this bill in recognition of the status of the convention and its direct influence on the bill. The intercountry adoption convention responds directly to obligations that arise out of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. It is important that I refer to a few of the convention obligations. The preamble to the Convention on the Rights of the Child recognises that the child, for the full and harmonious development of his or her personality, should grow up in a family environment, in an atmosphere of happiness, love and understanding. These provisions are again stated in the intercountry adoption convention. Article 12 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child states:

1. States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.

Article 18 states:

1. States Parties shall use their best efforts to ensure recognition of the principle that both parents have common responsibilities for the upbringing and development of the child. Parents or, as the case may be, legal guardians, have the primary responsibility for the upbringing and development of the child. The best interests of the child will be their basic concern.

2. For the purpose of guaranteeing and promoting the rights set forth in the present Convention, States Parties shall render appropriate assistance to parents and legal guardians in the performance of their child-rearing responsibilities and shall ensure the development of institutions, facilities and services for the care of children.

Article 20 states:

1. A child temporarily or permanently deprived of his or her family environment, or in whose own best interests cannot be allowed to remain in that environment, shall be entitled to special protection and assistance provided by the State.
2. States Parties shall in accordance with their national laws ensure alternative care for such a child.
3. Such care could include, inter alia, foster placement, Kafala of Islamic law, adoption, or if necessary placement in suitable institutions for the care of children. When considering solutions, due regard shall be paid to the desirability of continuity in a child's upbringing and to the child's ethnic, religious, cultural and linguistic background.

Article 21 states:

States Parties that recognize and/or permit the system of adoption shall ensure that the best interests of the child shall be the paramount consideration and they shall:

- (a) Ensure that the adoption of a child is authorized only by competent authorities who determine, in accordance with applicable law and procedures and on the basis of all pertinent and reliable information, that the adoption is permissible in view of the child's status concerning parents, relatives and legal guardians and that, if required, the persons concerned have given their informed consent to the adoption on the basis of such counselling as may be necessary;
- (b) Recognize that inter-country adoption may be considered as an alternative means of the child's care, if the child cannot be placed in a foster or an adoptive family or cannot in any suitable manner be cared for in the child's country of origin;
- (c) Ensure that the child concerned by intercountry adoption enjoys safeguards and standards equivalent to those existing in the case of national adoption;
- (d) Take all appropriate measures to ensure that, in intercountry adoption, the placement does not result in improper financial gain for those involved in it;
- (e) Promote, where appropriate, the objectives of the present article by concluding bilateral or multilateral arrangements or agreements, and endeavour, within this framework, to ensure that the placement of the child in another country is carried out by competent authorities or organs.

These provisions are reflected in the articles of the intercountry adoption convention and are incorporated in provisions in this bill. It is essential that the Adoption Bill accurately reflect the provisions, and the Department of Community Services will be asked to account for its observation of the convention. The Family Law (Hague Convention on Intercountry Adoption) Regulation 1998 and the Commonwealth's Family Law (Bilateral Arrangements—Intercountry Adoption) Regulation 1998 provide for the recognition throughout Australia of adoptions overseas in accordance with the laws of the country concerned, on the provision that the adoption arrangements conform to obligations for the other country and Australia that arise out of this convention.

The recognition provisions in this bill will remove the necessity for an adoptive family to seek adoption orders in the other country and again on their return to Australia. Earlier I said that some acquaintances and friends have been through this experience. Having heard about their experiences, I have no doubt that when they understand the implications of this legislation they will rejoice in the fact that families that follow them will understand that appropriate provisions have been made to remove some of the distress from the process of intercountry adoption. This bill will ensure that all adoption arrangements are subject to the same standards of professional and administrative conduct, and are undertaken in the best interests of a child. This is difficult legislation. The issue of adoption is difficult, but it is entirely appropriate that we tackle it, that we try to make the legislation contemporary. As I said earlier, I commend the Minister for introducing this bill, particularly the provisions relating to intercountry adoptions. I add my support for this bill.

Ms MOORE (Bligh) [9.36 p.m.]: I support the Adoption Bill, which seeks to revise adoption laws that have been in place since 1965. The bill has been enacted in the spirit of recognising that the notion of the family has changed in that period. It is underpinned by the belief that adoption rulings must be made in the best interests of the child. This includes a recognition that personal, familial and cultural identity are of paramount significance for adopted children. This is particularly important in the following instances. The first instance is the adoption of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. In recent years we have learned of State and Federal government policies that involved removing a generation of Aboriginal children from their birth parents and putting them up for adoption, often—not always but often—with the specific intention of dissociating them from their aboriginality. It is pleasing that this bill displays sensitivity to the specific needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and their birth and adoptive families.

Second, the bill provides for recognition of a child's cultural heritage. Specific provision is made for taking into account the culture, any disability, language, religion and sexuality of the child, and for preserving as far as possible the child's given name, identity, language, cultural and religious ties. This aspect of the legislation recognises the multicultural nature of Australian society and the positive value of preserving a child's culture of origin. It also recognises that when children are adopted from other countries there is an imperative for the adoptive parents to maintain links to the child's culture of origin. As well, adoption processes should be open, not secret. This recognises the need for all interested parties—the birth parents, the adoptive parents and the child concerned—to be able, wherever possible, to participate in decisions about the adoption. It is intended that this aspect of the bill will simplify the process of providing and accessing information about birth parents and children.

Adoption laws should clarify the accreditation process for adoption agencies and list unethical adoption practices. The bill provides for an extension of time for a birth mother to consent to adoption. The time limit in which a birth mother can consider giving up her child for adoption has been extended from three days to 30 days. This recognises that the process of giving up one's child is traumatic and should not happen without reasonable time for consideration of all the issues. There is also acknowledgment of the need for paternal consent to adoption wherever possible. The bill extends the rights of single people and step-parents to adopt. It acknowledges that children over 12 who have been in the care of their adoptive parents for more than five years can consent to their adoption.

Despite these many positive aspects of the bill, there is one significant flaw in the legislation. This bill does not extend the same adoption rights to same-sex de facto couples as those extended to heterosexual de facto couples. The bill defines "couple" as a man and a woman who are married or have a de facto relationship. "De facto relationship" is defined as a relationship between a man and a woman who live together as husband and wife on a bona fide domestic basis although not married to one another. "Married" is defined as a man and a woman who are actually married or an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander man and woman who are living together in a relationship that is recognised as a marriage according to the traditions of an Aboriginal community or Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander group to which they belong. "Spouse" is defined as a person to whom the person is married or a person of the opposite sex with whom the person has a de facto relationship of at least three years duration. In the Law Reform Commission's 1997 review of the Adoption of Children Act 1965—a report which forms the basis of the changes for the New South Wales adoption laws that we are dealing with tonight—recommendation 57 states:

The legislation should permit an adoption order to be made in favour of either a couple whether married or living in a de facto heterosexual or homosexual relationship or a single person.

The commission argued that there was no evidence suggesting that a positive or a negative connection exists between a person's sexual orientation and their suitability to be an adoptive parent. Thus there is no reason to legislate to exclude people from being able to adopt on the grounds of their homosexual orientation or family arrangements. The most important criterion identified by both the Law Reform Commission and this bill is whether the applicants can meet the child's needs and can provide the child with the support of a permanent and nurturing environment. If a joint application is made, the quality and duration of the parental relationship must be established, not simply in the case of same-sex couples—any relationship must be examined to establish suitability to adopt.

Under the legislation as it currently stands, gays and lesbians can apply to adopt only if they present as single people. This is hardly in keeping with the bill's commitment to openness and stated abhorrence of the secrecy which has governed adoption processes in the past. I will move amendments in Committee to ensure that same-sex de facto couples have the same eligibility to adopt children as heterosexual de factos. Specifically, I will recommend that the definition of "de facto" be brought in line with the definition in the Property (Relationships) Act 1984, as amended in 1999. In this way adoption laws in New South Wales would be consistent with other State laws that grant legal recognition to same-sex couples.

Previous speakers have referred to the ideal of two parents, a mother and a father. Much has been said in recent years about the John Howard picket fence model family. Many could attest that behind those picket fences domestic violence, alcoholism, drug addiction and incest have too often been a reality. I repeat that the most important criterion identified by both the Law Reform Commission and this bill is whether the applicants can meet the child's needs and can provide the child with a supportive, permanent and nurturing environment. I support the remarks of the honourable member for Mulgoa last night when she said:

Gone are the days when people are prohibited because they are overweight or too old. The key criterion now is that a person is capable of providing a child with a loving, caring and safe environment. If we want to make adoption a viable alternative, we have to remove meaningless prohibitions against people who in reality would be terrific parents.

I refer to Hugh Mackay's commentary *Turning Point*, which relates to Australians choosing their future. He points out that in the past 30 years there has been an extraordinary rate of social, cultural, technological and economic change in Australia. He says that one million dependent children now live with only one parent and 60 per cent of preschool children are cared for by someone other than a parent. Hugh Mackay said:

The ABS tells us that the number of marriages registered in 1996 was the lowest since 1979, and that the crude marriage rate was the lowest recorded in Australia this century. Based on age-specific marriage rates for 1997, the Bureau is now estimating that about 42 per cent of men and 44 per cent of women will never marry.

As Hugh Mackay points out, we are developing a new way of thinking about Australia. He said:

We are in the midst of a significant culture shift in which old and new values, old and new attitudes, are finding ways to coexist in a genuinely pluralist society where, possibly for the first time, we are understanding what diversity really means.

Hugh Mackay said that things are not as black and white as they once were. He said:

... our culture—including the style of our moral judgments—is moving toward a more realistic, more genuinely inclusive assessment of life in the post-modern world.

He further said:

There are still many Australians whose emotional security depends so utterly on the bastion of personal prejudice that any dissenting view is treated as an outrage.

We heard them in this House last night. Hugh Mackay continued:

But the signs of a culture shift are sufficiently widespread to suggest that something significant is brewing. There is evidence ... that, in steadily increasing numbers, we are prepared to open our minds, to see our society in a new, more realistic light ... and to acknowledge that nothing is certain; and nothing is simple.

Last night the honourable member for Hornsby accused the Law Reform Commission of driving its own social objectives. On the contrary, the Law Reform Commission has recognised that society has changed and tried to come up with new laws that are more appropriate than the old ones. At a time when this legislation is catching up with the reality that single parents can raise their own children and de facto couples are not necessarily immoral and will not corrupt their children, it should also catch up with the fact that there are families with two parents of the same gender and that we ought to offer these families the same legal entitlements that we are offering other families.

The honourable member for Hornsby was also wrong to imply that the Law Reform Commission had not done sufficient research. Indeed, the commission cites five academic studies and two court cases which have found that there is no research evidence suggesting that children brought up in homosexual families are disadvantaged by the experience. I emphasise once more that there is no shortage of empirical research or academic studies on the effects of homosexual parenting on children which state that children are not disadvantaged by being brought up by homosexual parents. Examples of such research are found in the research paper entitled "Children of Lesbian and Gay Parents", by Patterson in 1995. The paper, which reviewed research evidence on the personal and social development of children with gay and lesbian parents, concluded:

Indeed, the evidence to date suggests that home environments provided by gay and lesbian parents are as likely as those provided by heterosexual parents to support and enable children's psychological growth.

Several United States of America court rulings in custody disputes involving homosexual parents have held that homosexuality alone does not render a parent unfit as a matter of law. Furthermore, it was ruled in Ontario, Canada, in 1997 that same-sex couples can adopt. Barnados Australia, in support of the proposal in principle, said:

As in all situations the focus must be on the needs of the child and the selection of the family, regardless of its composition, which is best able to meet those needs.

The Department of Community Services made the following comment:

A person's sexual orientation should not preclude them from expressing a personal interest in the adoption of a child. The assessment should focus on their capacity to parent a particular child taking into account the birth parent's views and the child's needs being paramount in the placement decision.

The Gay and Lesbian Rights Lobby said:

Currently when the "single person" applies to adopt a child, if the person is in a relationship, their partner is generally assessed by social workers as to her or his parenting abilities. The child will only be placed if both people provide an environment from which the child would benefit. There can therefore be no reason not to make an adoption order in favour of a lesbian or gay male couple jointly. Concerns about the relationship ending are no more applicable to lesbian and gay relationships than they are to heterosexual relationships.

I note in passing that regular advertisements are placed by Barnardos in *Lesbians on the Loose*, a monthly publication for and about lesbians, seeking foster homes for children who cannot live at home. Lesbians are deemed appropriate to foster difficult children, yet same-sex de facto couples are ineligible to provide permanent homes via adoption. This appears to be a double standard. I urge honourable members to keep this issue in perspective. We are talking about a small number of potential adoptive parents. [*Extension of time agreed to.*]

I also briefly refer to some comments made by previous speakers. I support the honourable member for Wakehurst and the honourable member for Hornsby when they said that the bill is moving too speedily through this Parliament without sufficient discussion. I also agree with their proposal for support services for adoptive families and the proposal put by the honourable member for Wakehurst about support for counselling services. However, I am concerned about their opposition to the word "sexuality". They maintain it should be removed from the phrase "the culture, any disability, language, religion and sexuality of the child".

Parents need to respect their child's sexuality, whatever it may turn out to be, and continue to be loving and supportive parents. This is what the word "sexuality" is meant to ensure. To suggest, as two members have, that it could be seen as a drafting error is, I believe, arrogant and insulting towards genuine concerns held by gays and lesbians. Removing the word "sexuality" would imply the opposite: that adoptive parents are not required to support their child's sexuality. I believe that the word "sexuality" ought to remain.

I am also concerned about the possibility that limits might be placed on the provision for singles to adopt, which I believe is discriminatory. I reject the honourable member for Wakehurst's dismissal of single parents. Rather, I believe that single people who have the emotional energy, the time and the financial security to welcome a child should have the opportunity to do so. Whilst the Adoption Bill recognises changes in Australian society since the Adoption of Children Act 1965, I believe it should be amended to ensure that same-sex de facto couples are recognised as legitimate, potential adoptive parents. Only then will New South Wales show a true commitment to eradicating discrimination and prejudice against gays and lesbians, by rejecting the notion that they are unfit to adopt.

Mr BARR (Manly) [9.51 p.m.]: I support the Adoption Bill, which I believe represents an enlightened approach to a difficult issue. It is an enlightened approach from the point of view of the child, the birthmother and prospective adoptive parents. As has already been said, last year 19 children were adopted out and there were 60 intercountry adoptions. On the other hand, there are something like 7,000 wards of the State, many of whom may be bounced around from foster home to foster home. I believe that the purpose of this bill is to provide for more children to have a stable, loving and permanent home environment, which is an important route to take. Obviously, the current legislation is not satisfactory; some of its restrictions need to be loosened up so that more children are able to be adopted out and more prospective parents are able to adopt children.

The objects and principles of the bill place paramountcy upon the welfare of the child, as emphasised in clauses 7, 8 and 9. Clause 7 (a) provides that the objects of the Adoption Act are to emphasise that the best interests of the child concerned, both in childhood and later life, must be the paramount consideration. The principles to be adopted under clause 8 emphasise that. Clause 8 (1) (b) provides that adoption is to be regarded as a service for the child, not for adults wishing to acquire the care of the child. In that respect the bill reflects some of the principles of custody in family law matters. Clause 8 (2) provides that, in determining the best interests of the child, decisions must be made with regard to certain matters, including the child's physical, emotional and educational needs, the attitude of each proposed adoptive parents to the child, and the suitability and capacity of each proposed adoptive parent, or any other person, to provide for the needs of the child.

As has been referred to many times in this debate, the current legislation, the Adoption of Children Act 1965, reflected the social thinking, customs and values of the time, which were much more restricted than the sorts of values that we have today, and was prejudicial to the rights of young women and lower socioeconomic groups. Young girls who became pregnant signed away their rights to keep their babies, often did not even see the child at birth, and forever more after that suffered the consequences of that cruel and callous way of dealing with young women who fell pregnant. There was no proper social backup for them because of the then conventional notions of morality and of people having done the wrong thing. A girl became pregnant, her baby was taken away, and the mother never saw the baby again and always wondered what happened to that child she bore.

The Adoption Bill gives far greater rights to birth mothers. Clause 60 provides that consent to the adoption of a child cannot be given unless it is given at least 30 days after the child is born and at least 14 days after the person giving the consent is given a copy of the instrument of consent and the mandatory written information. A further 30 days must elapse before a court can make an order, which in essence gives the mother up to 60 days of counselling. She can be taken through the options available to her, which can include foster care, offers of assistance and in-home support. It is important that a young mother has the opportunity and the support to keep the child if she so wishes.

From the perspective of the adoptive parents, some of the barriers to adoption have been removed and the net has been widened for those who can adopt. Ultimately, the adoption decision is a matter for the Supreme Court. However, age, marital status and matters such as obesity are no longer a barrier. In the past, people who were capable of providing a stable and loving home environment were precluded on fairly silly criteria. This bill has removed those criteria, and that is a very important step.

The bill also regulates intercountry adoption, a matter well traversed by the honourable member for Keira. It places more controls on such adoption, in the sense that prospective parents must be more closely vetted within New South Wales. Under the current legislation, intercountry adoption is basically determined on whether the child has the right to emigrate from its country of birth. It is important to ensure that people who are adopting children from overseas are suitable parents. The bill provides that intercountry adoption arrangements must be made through the Department of Community Services and that regard must be had for the child's culture. It also provides a requirement that links with the child's culture be maintained.

With regard to Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders, the link with culture is emphasised and very specifically mandated. Clause 35 (3) provides that an Aboriginal child is not to be placed with a non-Aboriginal prospective adoptive parent unless the court is satisfied that the prospective adoptive parent has the capacity to assess the child to develop a healthy and positive cultural identity and has knowledge of or is willing to learn about, and teach the child about, the child's Aboriginal heritage and to foster links with that heritage, and has the capacity to help the child if the child encounters racism or discrimination in the wider community.

Most of the issues have been well traversed in this debate. In conclusion, the bill represents a more enlightened approach to adoption from the point of view of the mother, the prospective adoptive parents and the child. The rights and welfare of the child are paramount. The bill recognises that persons who in the past have been precluded from adoption may provide a suitable and loving home environment. For those reasons I support the bill.

Mr MILLS (Wallsend) [9.58 p.m.]: I support the Adoption Bill. There are broad-ranging and compelling reasons for supporting such provisions in the adoption laws of New South Wales. The bill repeals and replaces the Adoption of Children Act 1965 and the Adoption Information Act 1990. It is based on the principal recommendations of the New South Wales Law Reform Commission in its report No. 81. The overview of the bill encapsulates the principal changes that have taken place in the new bill compared with the original bill. I commend that overview to honourable members and will seek to highlight a couple of items that I believe are worthy of mention.

The bill emphasises that the paramount consideration in adoption law and practice is to act in the best interests of the child. The bill makes it clear that adoption is to be regarded as a service to the child concerned, and will ensure that adoption law and practice can assist a child to know and have access to its birth family and cultural heritage. The bill recognises the changing nature of the practice of adoption, just as in the review we are recognising the changing nature of interfamily relationships. The bill will ensure that safeguards and standards equivalent to those that apply to children adopted from New South Wales will apply to children adopted from overseas. The bill will ensure that adoption law and practice comply with Australia's obligations under treaties and other international agreements. The intention of the bill is to encourage openness in adoption, to allow access to adoption information, and to provide for the giving in certain circumstances of post-adoption financial and other assistance to adopted children and their birth and adopted parents.

Earlier I referred to the changing nature of relationships in families. One could refer, for example, to the article in the *Sun-Herald* of 12 February under the headline "WANTED Babies to love". The reporter spoke of fewer and fewer babies being available and, therefore, the struggle for childless couples to adopt is becoming almost impossible. The reporter commented that the advent of the pill and an acceptance of single mothers have made adoption an increasingly rare phenomenon. The reporter provided some interesting statistics: in 1972 there were 9,800 adoptions in Australia; in 1980 there were 3,300; and in 1990 there were just 668. Obviously, there

would be even fewer these days. It is not just the pill and acceptance of single mothers that have made adoption difficult. So many other things have happened, for example, the emergence of de facto relationships, changing community attitudes towards ex-nuptial birth, and the different roles of men and women in society compared to what they were 35 years ago.

The attitude to the nuclear family, which was then the norm and almost the only acceptable form of family life, has changed. The reality has also changed. We did not consider ourselves a multicultural society 35 years ago. At that time the process of reconciliation with Australia's indigenous people had not begun. Things really are so different today that we need to review and implement the recommendations for family relationship law in these changing times. Earlier I mentioned new international law and children's rights. The recommendations of the Law Reform Commission constitute an essential part of the bill. We should acknowledge that other changes are happening.

The Legislative Council Standing Committee on Social Issues is reviewing the adoption practices of the 1960s and 1970s, and that review is continuing. The Government has implemented the Children and Young Persons (Care and Protection) Act, which creates a different scenario. The new openness and the attachment to secrecy that used to exist are both important elements of the background to the new adoption laws represented by the bill. Last night the Opposition spokesman, the honourable member for Wakehurst, referred to the question Philip Clark put to the Minister for Community Services yesterday on ABC radio about why she had not referred this matter to the Family Court. The honourable member for Wakehurst went on to say:

At the dawn of the new millennium why is the Minister not allowing the Family Court, which has the best knowledge of children and families, the opportunity to be involved in determining what are or are not the best interests of the child?

He was suggesting that the Government had not considered referring these matters to the Family Court. The Law Reform Commission considered whether the Children's Court, the District Court, the Supreme Court or the Family Court was the most appropriate court to exercise jurisdiction in adoption matters. The Law Reform Commission also considered an alternative, an adoption tribunal. The exercise of the adoption jurisdiction by the Family Court might have been preferred because that court was regarded as having wide-ranging expertise in children's matters and possessing independent assessment facilities, such as counselling. The commission's conclusion was not based on any criticism of the Supreme Court but on the specialist nature of the Family Court and the facilities already in existence, such as staff councillors, a national network of registries and that court's standing committee for consultation with Aboriginal communities.

However, transfer of jurisdiction would involve Federal and State jurisdictional issues, and at present the delivery of services in adoption is a State-administered service. The Chief Judge in Equity and the adoption judge, both of whom are judges in the Supreme Court of New South Wales, acknowledge the expertise of the Family Court. However, the transfer of jurisdiction was not justified for two reasons: first, the close link between adoption administration and other provisions for children in need of care; and, second, the constitutional problems involved in transferring adoption. State or Territory adoption services are based on uniform adoption principles, and at this time there is no national agreement for the transfer of the jurisdiction to the Commonwealth.

The Commonwealth's jurisdiction in intercountry adoption is vested in the New South Wales Supreme Court, and the Commonwealth has not yet considered if it wants the adoption jurisdiction. There are also practical considerations to be fully explored. No other aspect of the State's responsibility for children is being referred to the Commonwealth. The Government has accepted the recommendation of the Law Reform Commission that until issues of Federal and State jurisdiction have been resolved the adoption jurisdiction should continue to be exercised by the Supreme Court of New South Wales. I make those remarks in response to the comments made last night by the Opposition spokesman, the honourable member for Wakehurst. For those and other reasons, I commend the bill to the House.

Mr RICHARDSON (The Hills) [10.07 p.m.]: This most important piece of legislation will determine the welfare and upbringing of thousands of children. The bill is based on the Law Reform Commission's report on the Adoption of Children Act, although it does not incorporate all the recommendations of that report. The objects of the bill include an emphasis that the best interests of the child, both in childhood and later life, must be the paramount consideration of adoption law and practice; that adoption is to be regarded as a service for the child; that the changing nature of adoption practices must be recognised; and that safeguards and standards equivalent to those that apply to New South Wales children must apply to children adopted from overseas. I am sure that all members of the House would agree with those objects.

The bill also promotes openness in adoption. One of the objects of the bill is to ensure that adoption law and practice assist a child to know and have access to his or her family and cultural heritage. Just as for

some children a lack of knowledge of their birth mother can be enormously traumatic, it can also be equally traumatic for an adopted child to suddenly find a strange woman turn up on the doorstep and identify herself as the child's mother. Five or six years ago I had a dramatic instance of this brought to my attention by one of my constituents. Some years earlier she and her husband had adopted a girl. Somehow or another, information about where the girl lived and where she went to school had leaked out—we suspect from the Department of Community Services—and the birth mother was pursuing the girl on the bus to and from school and turning up at totally inappropriate places. That was enormously traumatic for the adopted child. I emphasise that this issue cuts both ways. The issue of the openness of adoption procedures is one that needs to be addressed in a very sensible fashion.

I telephoned a couple of close friends of mine with adopted children who are now adults in their early twenties and asked them about that issue. Both adoptive parents were happy for the children's birth mothers to meet their children, if their children wished to do that. Of course they had told their children from a fairly early age that they were adopted. Neither child expressed the slightest interest in meeting the birth parents, even though the family had discussed the matter at some length. For those children, the adoptive parents will always be their parents and I suspect that that will be the case until the day they die. Clause 136 (4) states:

A designated person may supply a birth parent with prescribed information ... if, in the opinion of the designated person, the information could not be used to identify the adopted person or his or her adoptive parents.

That clause indicates that the bill's procedures will not change the practices presently applying and that is extremely important. I emphasise the significance of that point because to date I have not heard a single other honourable member of this House who has participated in this debate refer to the effect on the adopted child of his or her birth mother suddenly appearing on the doorstep or chasing the child. Of course, the legislation provides appropriate sanctions to militate against leaking of information. If I remember correctly, a penalty of up to 12 months in gaol can be imposed in relation to leaks emanating from the Department of Community Services or other agencies.

Chapter 8, part 4, provides for contact vetoes to be exercised by a child who has reached the age of 17 years and six months or by a birth parent. That provision is significant because, as I mentioned earlier, some children do not want to have contact with their birth parents and will not want to do so when they become adults. A reunion and information register will be kept. Children under the age of 12 years will not be permitted to have their names entered in the register. When the children become older than 12 years, the decision then becomes the responsibility of the child's adoptive parents. I ran that provision past my friends who confirmed that it is consistent with what is acceptable to them.

Safeguards are provided by clause 167 (4) which provides that the director-general is not to enter into the register the name of an adopted person who is under the age of 18 years unless the director-general is of the opinion that to do so will promote the welfare and best interests of the adopted person. Once again, as the Minister stated in her second reading speech, the welfare and interests of the child will be the paramount consideration, which is a point I wish to emphasise.

When the child's name has been entered in the birth register together with the name of his birth mother and/or father in circumstances where all parties have agreed, the director-general may make arrangements for a reunion. The reunion cannot occur without the consent of the adoptive parents, which is also a sensible provision. I certainly have no problem with adopted children meeting their birth parents if everyone agrees but I reiterate that there should be consensus. Clause 90 contains the contentious word "sexuality" and the significance of that provision was canvassed extensively in the speech made by the honourable member for Wakehurst. I believe that the Government is prepared to make some concessions on that issue.

The issue that seems to have excited the most spirited debate surely relates to the marital status and family structure of the adoptive family. Under existing law, adoptions must be made in favour of a husband and wife jointly except in certain circumstances. De facto couples can adopt if they have lived together for at least three years and if the child they wish to adopt has been brought up by them jointly for at least two years or is a special needs child. A single person can adopt if a court believes that that is desirable in the particular circumstances of a case. By virtue of the provisions presently before the House, it would be possible for single people to adopt children and seemingly be invested with the same status as conferred upon couples. Having listened to the Minister's second reading speech, I have been led to believe that single people would be treated the same as couples which is certainly not the case currently.

Last year, only 2 per cent of 185 adoptions—the figures I have are not the same as the figures cited by the honourable member for Wallsend—concerned single people. In the early 1970s, literally thousands of children were available for adoption. The honourable member for Wallsend cited a figure in excess of 9,000

whereas I thought the figure was closer to 4,500. So perhaps the Minister can present accurate figures to the House. Of those 185 adoptions, almost half the adoptees came from overseas. It is pretty clear that the demand for children for adoption is greater than the supply. That really begs the question: Why would we change the law not to increase the pool of children who are available for adoption but to increase the prospective pool of adoptive parents?

As I have already stated, currently single people can adopt children in special circumstances such as when a widow, a widower or a grandmother wishes to adopt. I certainly do not have a problem with that. I just wonder whether we as members of Parliament want to go so far as to encourage single people to adopt children and I wonder whether that situation really provides the optimal adoption environment. This is a challenge to which the Minister for Community Services must respond. If we as members of Parliament encourage single people to adopt children, does that provide the optimal environment for the child from every aspect—financial, social and from the point of view of the provision of appropriate role models, male and female? If this legislation does not do that, how can this aspect of the bill be consistent with the object of the bill to which I have already referred, namely, that the welfare and best interests of the child are paramount?

As the honourable member for Wakehurst stated last night in his eloquent contribution to the debate, the Opposition supports single parents who are doing it tough against the odds. There is no question that many single parents do a fabulous job. Indeed, as honourable members have heard, married couples do not always provide an optimal environment for children when, for example, there is an abusive father within a marriage. Fortunately, that is the exception and not the norm. I take exception to some of the comments made by the honourable member for Bligh and other honourable members who participated in the debate. The honourable member for Wallsend tended to suggest that the nuclear family is on its last legs. He suggested that the nuclear family is unlikely to survive the few months that remain of this century. An article written by Miranda Devine in the *Daily Telegraph* last Monday 7 August suggests that what has been stated by the honourable member for Wallsend is not the case. Ironically Miranda Devine wrote:

Everyone knows that the nuclear family—mum, dad and their children—is an old-fashioned relic of the 1950s, headed for extinction ...

Except it's all a big lie. There is no new reality. In fact, 74 per cent of all Australian children live with both their natural parents.

That's an overwhelming majority in anyone's language.

The intact nuclear family is alive and kicking. But because we have an ageing population, the statistics can be twisted to demonstrate that nuclear families are disappearing, simply because children form a declining proportion of the population, 25 per cent in 1997 versus 34 per cent in 1971 ...

Yet the idea that the nuclear family is dead has taken hold.

It permeates all our institutions, and makes those involved in the pursuit of maintaining a nuclear family unreasonably pessimistic about their likely success.

There is an expectation that marriages fail and a belief, promoted by anti-nuclear family forces, that divorce doesn't hurt children. What it means to be a family is being redefined into meaninglessness by feminists, homosexual activists, social revolutionaries and misguided patsies.

I think honourable members will be able to get the drift of Miranda Devine's excellent article. She suggests that the nuclear family is alive and kicking. As I said earlier, I accept that many marriages end in failure, but it is an unfortunate fact of modern life. However, I suggest to the House that the optimum environment in which to raise a child is a traditional nuclear family—a loving man and woman both of whom bring special qualities to the relationship and both of whom act as role models for the children. The House would be aware of the crisis in boys' education and the concern expressed by many educators and others that boys are not performing as well as they ought to. Concern has been expressed also that many boys have no significant male role model in their lives because they come from single parent families, they go to primary schools where all teachers are female and they simply do not have those role models with whom they can identify.

The primary object of this bill is that the paramount consideration is the welfare of the child. If that is the paramount consideration, surely we should be aiming for that child to be placed in the optimum situation. After all, only 185 children come up for adoption each year. On that basis, single-person adoptions would be rejected except when special circumstances prevail. I understand that those special circumstances may mean that, in the interests of the child, a single person is the right solution. I propose, for the Minister's consideration, the following amendment to clause 8 under "Objects and adoption principles":

That this Act recognises that couples are in the best position to provide a stable and supportive environment for an adoptive child.

That amendment does not change the bill or make it impossible for single people to adopt children; it simply emphasises what I believe to be the optimum situation for the adoption of children.

Mr LYNCH (Liverpool) [10.22 p.m.]: I support the Adoption Bill. I shall make a brief contribution by stating the facts of a particular instance in Liverpool, which I believe highlights the issues that should be considered during debate on this legislation. At the end of May this year a baby was born in my electorate. The mother of that baby suffers a psychiatric disorder. At the time of the birth she was not on medication. She left the hospital without the baby. That baby was the eighth child born to this woman. Of the other seven, the eldest is currently in foster care, four more are in the care of their paternal aunts, and the other two, who are teenagers, are in the care of their and this newborn baby's maternal grandmother.

My electorate office became involved because the baby's grandmother wished that child to remain within the family. Specifically, the grandmother wished to have care of the child. That led to a discussion with the Department of Community Services [DOCS], which had custody and care of the child because of the mother leaving the hospital without the baby. The grandmother was told by DOCS officers that at 60 years of age she was too old to care for the child. However, DOCS advice did not end there. The grandmother was advised also that the baby would be placed in permanent adoption to a couple in their thirties who had money and that that was the best place for the baby!

At that stage, which was almost two months since the birth, none of the family, that is, neither the grandmother nor siblings, had had access to the baby. No proper consultation or case conference had been undertaken with the grandmother even though she had raised two of the baby's siblings and wanted to have the care of the baby. Things have improved a little since that time and I would like to think that is probably because of the intervention of my office, but I am worried about the underlying attitude that someone of the grandmother's age is too old to care for an infant. I understand the aim of this legislation is to perhaps get rid of that sort of nonsense. The concept that people who do not have a lot of money are unable to care for children is horrific and appalling. Certainly I would have thought that if this legislation were to do anything it ought to get rid of the misguided view that the poor and the working class are unable to look after children carefully. On that basis I am happy to support the legislation.

Debate adjourned on motion by Mr Stoner.

SPECIAL ADJOURNMENT

Motion by Mr Whelan agreed to:

That the House at its rising this day to adjourn until Thursday 10 August 2000 at 10.00 a.m.

House adjourned at 10.25 p.m.
