

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY

Thursday 8 November 2007

The Speaker (The Hon. George Richard Torbay) took the chair at 10.00 a.m.

The Speaker read the Prayer and acknowledgement of country.

GOVERNMENT SCHOOLS (INFRASTRUCTURE REGISTER) BILL 2007

Agreement in Principle

Debate resumed from 25 October 2007.

Mr JONATHAN O'DEA (Davidson) [10.00 a.m.]: The Government Schools (Infrastructure Register) Bill would require the Director General of the Department of Education and Training to keep a register of government school assets, including all buildings and demountables. The register would comprise school status reports that outline the status of the capital assets of government schools and three-yearly school building plans for building and maintenance works in those schools. These reports would be tabled in the New South Wales Parliament and made available to the public on the departmental website. The announcement in this year's budget of an additional \$120 million for school maintenance over four years was not surprising. It reflected the enormous damage created by the New South Wales Government in relation to school maintenance issues after years of neglect.

In 2005 the Auditor-General identified a \$115 million maintenance backlog. Professor Tony Vinson called for an additional \$90 million in maintenance payments each year over two years. I also understand that in real terms funding from the New South Wales Government is still less than the 1999-2000 year level of funding to the Department of Education and Training for public schools and colleges. Last year the President of the New South Wales Teachers Federation said:

Whilst the Federation welcomes the additional money, it is well overdue. The fact that it is over a four year period is disappointing. Why should children have to wait four years for overdue maintenance work which forms the maintenance backlog?

Earlier in this debate the member for Macquarie Fields suggested that the bill proposed by the Leader of The Nationals would require some 44,000 pages to be loaded onto the education department's website at an annual cost of over \$500,000. At first I thought that such a figure was ridiculously over-inflated but, given Labor's record of mismanagement, it is entirely possible that an inefficient education bureaucracy quoted such a figure. When I investigated where such figures might have come from I found the same figures quoted in a similar debate over 2½ years ago in the other place. Perhaps it is not surprising that the Government recycles the same old questionable figures. Perhaps it is also not surprising—

[Interruption]

The SPEAKER: Order! All members who wish to speak will be given the call at the appropriate time. The member for Davidson has the call.

Mr JONATHAN O'DEA: Perhaps it is also not surprising that New South Wales Labor is still talking about paper-based approaches when most significant service delivery organisations in New South Wales have generally moved to electronic records and systems. I caution the member for Macquarie Fields, whom I believe to be a decent man, not to blindly trust backroom Labor hacks. I have no doubt that a Coalition government would deliver the target outcomes under this bill far more cost effectively and utilise technology to much better effect than this tired, old, lazy Labor Government.

Mr Thomas George: Lazy, lazy, lazy!

Mr JONATHAN O'DEA: Indeed, it is lazy. While private sector business operations continue to strive to do more with less, this Government continues to demonstrate a record of doing less with more. It is

clear that rather than spending money this year on a worthwhile initiative, such as a public schools register, the Labor Government has higher priorities—like spending up to a reported \$500,000 on a new office suite for its New South Wales environment Minister. In contrast, the Liberal Leader of the Opposition, in his reply to the Budget Speech, committed the next Coalition government to allocate immediately \$2 billion from a proposed state infrastructure fund for the renewal of this State's public schools, which was on top of the usual capital allocation for education. As the Leader of the Opposition said:

Our obligation to future generations demands no less.

We need to build better for tomorrow and not remain stuck in the past, resisting sensible change. Many Coalition members have either attended or sent their own children to public schools, as I do. Public education is an essential government service and its teachers and school communities deserve proper support and financial assistance from the Government and our parliamentary representatives. It was disappointing to hear the member for Fairfield, the Minister leading for the Government on this bill, make absurd, immature and, quite frankly, offensive assertions that Opposition members never support public education. As we shall see later, it is hardly surprising that the member for Strathfield repeated that silly claim. In contrast, I am happy to recognise that the Government cares about public schools. However, the Government's actions suggest that it cares more about itself than the proper management of public school assets.

This Government is obsessed with spin rather than substance. Today Premier Iemma is a product of a school that no longer exists. This New South Wales Labor Government demolished Narwee High School just six years ago. If it keeps on its current track of this old school approach, the Government will self-destruct. The Premier and his Government are a liability and an impediment to the proper management of all public school assets in New South Wales. In addition to the Premier's alma mater, this Government has similarly demolished or tried to close other public schools, including Beacon Hill High School, which is located in the electorate of Wakehurst. That seat adjoins my electorate of Davidson and my local Labor opponent in the State election who was from Beacon Hill made clear statements against the school's closure.

This is yet another example of empty Labor words with a lack of equivalent action by the Labor Party in government. Catholic and independent schools should likewise be wary of Labor's recent words federally, assuring them of support. In introducing this bill the Leader of The Nationals showed determination for a good education cause taken up earlier by the member for North Shore and now Deputy Leader of the Liberal Party. In his speech Mr Stoner properly acknowledged his Liberal colleague. Even the member for Strathfield recognised that in her speech and said:

I acknowledge the Leader of The Nationals' moment of honesty, albeit sparse. At least he is not trying to pass off this bill as all his own work.

She then said that she would prefer it if he had "a few ideas of his own". The sheer irony and astounding hypocrisy of her words is revealed when we look at a speech delivered a month earlier in the same debate by the member for Fairfield. He said:

I acknowledge the Leader of The Nationals' moment of honesty. At least he is not trying to pass off this bill as all his own work. However, I would prefer if he got some ideas of his own.

This was not just a minor incidence of technical plagiarism or general imitation; the speech of the member for Strathfield is littered with direct plagiarism from the earlier speech on this bill delivered by the member for Fairfield. Material of substantive length is copied virtually verbatim without attribution. Most of her speech in this twice-adjourned debate was a slightly reordered repeat of the speech delivered by her Labor colleague one month earlier. I emphasise that we are not talking about introductory comments or just a few sentences; her speech contains many large chunks of blatant and direct plagiarism. This speech from the member for Strathfield demonstrates a lack of care that is becoming a trademark of this lazy Labor Government.

Mr Thomas George: Lazy, lazy, lazy!

Mr JONATHAN O'DEA: Indeed, it is lazy. I further question her sense of judgment in wanting to copy the member for Fairfield in the first place. Maybe she is just a bad Judge. And anyone would have to be pretty desperate to model themselves on Joe Tripodi. We are hearing too many "me tooisms" from Labor with Kevin Rudd copying John Howard's policies. Here too is a political party so bereft of ideas that now they are plagiarising each other, with Labor's "me tooism" disease spreading internally in this lazy Labor Government. Christmas is not far away and, yes, Virginia, there is a Santa Claus. However, despite the potential physical similarity, he is not Joe Tripodi.

Who really wrote the speeches that the member for Strathfield and the member for Fairfield delivered? It was probably neither of them. What is even worse is that the plagiarist, the member for Strathfield, is a former teacher and the current Parliamentary Secretary Assisting the Minister for Education and she was speaking on a government schools bill. I asked my 10-year-old son what would happen if a school student submitted an essay or project that was mostly a direct copy from another student in the same class. He told me that they would receive the same grade—a fail. What sort of example is this Labor Government setting to our New South Wales schoolchildren? In September 2003 the then New South Wales Minister for Education and Training, Dr Andrew Refshauge, responded to a question about plagiarism, and said:

The potential for plagiarism to cause serious damage is enormous and must be headed off.

He went on to say:

Cheats have no place in our universities, schools and TAFEs, and we intend to do all we can to eliminate plagiarism in our educational institutions.

We should eliminate plagiarists from Parliament as well. The member for Marrickville may care to listen to this. In November 2006 the then New South Wales Minister for Education and Training, Carmel Tebbutt, issued a press release announcing a new compulsory online course in the fight against cheating and plagiarism. The New South Wales Board of Studies developed the new course, called "HSC: All My Own Work", for years 10 and 11 students to help them understand the principles and practices of ethical research and use of information. The Parliamentary Secretary Assisting the Minister for Education, the member for Strathfield, should study this course herself. She should also apologise to the New South Wales education sector and this House for her intellectually and ethically unacceptable conduct.

Ms Carmel Tebbutt: Point of order: We have allowed the member for Davidson a fair degree of latitude with regard to relevance, but he is now straying way outside the leave of the bill.

The SPEAKER: Order! I uphold the point of order. I ask the member for Davidson to return to the leave of the bill.

Mr JONATHAN O'DEA: I recently asked a written question through the Deputy Premier as the relevant Minister in this House representing the Minister for Education and Training. I asked what public schools in the Davidson electorate have outstanding maintenance work requests, what the work was, and when it was scheduled for completion. The response basically said that the program of maintenance works was currently being prepared and that the Department of Education and Training would advise schools of maintenance works scheduled for completion once the program had been finalised. This answer suggests management incompetence, or an inability to answer clear questions, or an unwillingness to be accountable to Parliament, or a determination not to be properly transparent in allocating resources, or a combination of all those things. [*Extension of time agreed to.*]

Why will the Government not readily publish the current list of outstanding school maintenance works? I have now re-asked essentially the same question on notice and would appreciate a proper answer. Government members in this debate have told us that school maintenance information is already recorded in the department's asset management system. Why is this information not available? Has the Parliament been misled? I doubt that public schools in my electorate of Davidson receive their fair share of capital and maintenance funding. One local school has demountable classrooms that are over 50 years old, dating back to just after World War II. Another local school was told it had to raise its own funds to clear a blocked underground drain. Given the New South Wales Government's lack of transparency, it is reasonably open to people in Sydney's north to ask whether New South Wales Labor in part discriminates against them based on a perceived ability to pay, as we now know occurs with Royal North Shore Hospital? Exactly what criteria are involved in school funding allocations for capital works and maintenance under Labor? The public deserves transparency.

In conclusion, I ask: What are some of the main benefits of this proposed legislation? There would be cost savings from increased efficiencies in management practices; there would be improved confidence from relevant stakeholders in the public education system; and there would be better adherence to good governance principles, such as accountability and transparency. On any reasonable cost-benefit analysis the Government should support the bill, rather than continually trying to hide its mismanagement and underperformance as custodians of our valuable public assets.

Mr PHILLIP COSTA (Wollondilly) [10.16 a.m.]: I have deliberately kept away from the debate on the Government Schools (Infrastructure Register) Bill because my serial number is still current: I have just left

the school system after having been a school principal for 24 years. I understand the issues that are being raised in this debate and I therefore want to address a few key points.

First, I suggest that some of the members opposite who have spoken on the bill should find out what goes on in schools, so they are able to understand what happens in schools now and what is available in schools now. I can only speak from my personal experience as a principal in the public sector for 24 years, but I am aware of the work principals have to do in relation to school maintenance. I draw members' attention to one very important aspect. The bill proposes the establishment of an infrastructure register in relation to government schools. Who do members opposite think will do the work in providing the information for such a register? Establishing an infrastructure register would simply throw another administrative task to a principal who is already doing that task. The principals of our schools across the State would simply be given another task because of some other agenda.

A condition assessment is done every year. When I was a school principal, every year someone came to the school with their computer, and they walked around the school with me and we assessed the maintenance requirements of the school. That condition assessment was then re-prioritised, every year, and then funds were made available to do the work we could afford to do that year. A school maintenance register is already kept. It could be better resourced; there is no question about that. We are all doing our best in that regard. For example, I intend to discuss with the Minister for Education and Training ways of improving the system. But it is outrageous to propose the creation of a system that is already taking place.

Secondly, the proposed infrastructure register relates to the status of buildings on school sites, the number of demountables, the number of permanent classrooms, and school building and maintenance plans. Principals already collate that information and it is readily available. When I was a principal I shared both the maintenance schedule and the future planning schedule for the school with my entire school community. The most important people who need to know what is going on in terms school maintenance and planning are the local community members, the mums and dads of the children who go to the schools. No-one else really needs to know that information. At the end of the day, the Government's responsibility is to help communities resource schools so that principals and teachers can get on with the job they are paid to do—that is, educate our young people.

Last weekend, for example, I had the pleasure of announcing that a brand-new school will be built in my electorate at Wilton, which does not have a school. It is nice to see that we are building new schools. We look forward to the development of this project as part of a partnership program between the private sector and the Government. One of the most important and successful elements of good education is strong leadership. Our school principals need our support; they should not be given more unnecessary administrative and bureaucratic work that they are already undertaking effectively.

I will not apologise for my defence of education because I agree that we have to find resources to help our schools. My strong and personal view is that the more we put towards our public schools, the better. Of course, funds could be directed towards school maintenance—I have worked in schools that were built in 1901 and needed much maintenance work, however, such work requires an enormous amount of money and there are more than 2,000 schools across the State. Service, confidence and accountability from our public schools already are captured in an existing system. Additional burdens should not be imposed on school principals. Their one particular focus is to lead educational outcomes in their schools, not drive additional administrative services introduced by someone with another agenda. Leave our schools alone and let them get on with the job. We already have a system that works. No doubt that system certainly needs resourcing because there is no end to how much support can be given to schools. I do not support this bill.

Mr ANDREW CONSTANCE (Bega) [10.21 a.m.]: I support the Government Schools (Infrastructure Register) Bill 2007. I should like to acknowledge the significant honesty of the member for Wollondilly in his comments about the state of public schools and their dealings with the Department of Education and Training. As he said, it goes without saying that better resourcing of our schools is required. I commend the member for Wollondilly for having the decency to stand up in this place as a member of the Government and tell it as it is. One reason the Leader of The Nationals introduced this bill was to improve the openness and transparency with school communities regarding plans for maintenance of school buildings within a school community.

If I have to disagree with anything the member for Wollondilly said, it is that this requirement is not to be placed on school principals. Rather, the bill states that the requirement is on the school planners—the education planners in this State—starting with the director general. The bill seeks to establish a requirement for

the Director General of the Department of Education and Training to keep an infrastructure register in relation to government schools. I would hope the director general has an overall snapshot of what happens with public schools, but Moruya High School is a great example of the practical implications this bill is trying to achieve. A number of years ago I met with the former education Minister, now the member for Marrickville, together with the Moruya High School Parents and Citizens Association. It is pleasing to hear that only last week that school community was advised that its high school has been nominated for priority status to have conceptual planning undertaken for a new capital works program at the school.

It would be terrific if the school community received certainty about the funding of the project as well as a clear indication from the top of the department that this work will commence as quickly as possible and be completed within a reasonable time frame. This capital works program will include the construction of a new library as well as the establishment of a permanent special education unit and the installation of a two-module staff study. Of course, as always with these types of projects, funding is from a combination of Federal and State governments. We hear the nasty comments from the State Government that this side of the House—the Liberal Party and The Nationals—do not care about public education. That is wrong. No greater example can be shown of the commitment of the Liberal Party and The Nationals to education than by these significant funding contributions to public school developments.

Only two weeks ago the Federal Liberal Government announced \$2 billion for the stage three upgrade of Bega High School, after already having contributed a significant proportion of funding for the work that has been rolled out over the past few years. No doubt the nomination of Moruya High School for priority status means that it too will receive a significant component of Federal funding. Time and again we see the State Labor Government out in the community through local media statements telling communities, "Look at all this fantastic work we are doing," but those projects are being funded by the Federal Liberal Government. Some honesty about funding from the State Labor Government would not go astray. Hopefully then we would see more openness and transparency regarding proposals for school buildings and their maintenance.

We are all aware of school maintenance problems in this State. It has been identified in many reports. Is it being addressed? No. By introducing this legislation we seek to ensure that not only do we keep a register, but that it is open and available for the community to digest and will keep this Government honest and accountable through every step. The Moruya High School Parents and Citizens Association and staff were the catalyst for the Department of Education and Training taking action to improve the school. It is unacceptable that in some schools throughout this State students refuse time and again to use the toilets because of the condition of those facilities. It is unacceptable that school students are being taught in storage rooms. Despite these continuing problems this State has wonderful public education built on wonderful teachers, wonderful students and wonderful school communities, but they are being let down in basic services.

Our school communities are being let down by government failing to ensure appropriate school building infrastructure and resources to enable ultimate achievements and opportunities within public education to be fulfilled. No doubt the Moruya High School community is pleased that some action will be taken, but we are not there yet. The department is yet to finalise its priority across the State regarding the positioning of this vital project. A permanent special education unit will be so vital for the future of Moruya High School, a school that presently has a couple of demountable buildings and unacceptable toilet facilities. It is unacceptable that public schools lack adequate staffrooms to help fulfil the environment we all hope for our public schoolchildren.

A number of other schools will benefit should this bill be passed. Bega West Public School is classified as being on a temporary site because the school currently is located next to the route designated for the Bega bypass. As a result of the school being on a temporary site, the Government is failing to invest in basic infrastructure. The Minister is aware of this. The Minister is aware of the petitions and the publicity. It is time the Government had a change of heart in relation to Bega West Public School. The demountables on site are close to 25 years of age and are in an appalling state.

To top it off, instead of bringing new demountables on site, given the disgusting condition that they are in, the Government has decided to build a shed over the top of the demountables to stop the rain leaking in. Rather than replace the demountables, the Government will build covers over the top of demountables to provide a dry environment for our schoolchildren to learn in when it is raining. What is this State coming to if we cannot get the basics right? I agree with the member for Wollondilly that we have to invest more into public education. We have to invest more into school maintenance and infrastructure. To be putting sheds and covers over demountables is just extraordinary. There are other basic problems at Bega West Public School, including much-needed upgrades not only of classrooms but also of the library, the staffroom and those types of things.

The Government needs to talk more closely with the school communities in Bega. In the future Bega West Public School and Bega Public School might have to engage in a debate about whether both schools should be relocated into the one public school site. Unfortunately, that debate needs to take place. Like any member in this Chamber, I understand the close affiliation and love that individual school communities have with their school. There might be an opportunity to look at a greenfield site. There might be an opportunity to look at the building of a brand-new public school for Bega given the growth in the area, both in relation to the new regional hospital that is being built and the proposed civic development. Bega is going to grow. However, while we continue to have a school that is on a temporary site—with no openness and accountability in relation to school maintenance or school buildings—there remains a significant problem for the school community moving forward. The conditions of the school are appalling. We continue to see ongoing problems at Bega West Public School, as we do with many schools in country areas. I refer to appropriate air conditioning and the like.

Another school in my electorate that would benefit from the passing of this bill is Batemans Bay High School. That school was promised a demountable in May and there is still no indication as to when it will be on site. School communities want assurance from the department and the Minister that these actions will be undertaken. What better way to ensure that that occurs than by having an appropriate register in place that keeps the key decision-makers within the bureaucracy honest and keeps school communities informed? There is no doubt that school communities should be entitled to that information. Instead of politics dictating the show, instead of marginal seats held by the Labor Government receiving greater attention, it is time for us to have legislation such as this to enable communities to keep the decision-makers within the department open and honest.

I take on board what the member for Wollondilly said in relation to school principals, their workload and administration. This information is about bureaucracy being open and accountable. The member for Wollondilly knows only too well how frustrating it is for school principals to deal with the department and get things through. The principals in my electorate certainly are frustrated. I can only assume that other members would agree that on occasion there seems to be a disconnect between the asset management unit of the department and school communities. Time and again Parents and Citizens' Associations go public to get the department to jump. We see story after story in the mainstream press and hear story after story on talkback radio. Parents ring in about things that should not be happening but are happening, such as raw sewage flowing down school ovals. Those sorts of things are happening because there is no appropriate planning.

I also take on board the point made by the member for Wollondilly that we could put more and more money into education. That should be occurring, but it has to be well managed. The best way to manage it is to have a clear direction from within the department as to how the assets should be managed. That is what this bill is about. The key is for the Government to join with the Opposition to ensure that this bill passes. If it does not do so the Government is sending a clear message about openness and transparency. There is no doubt that school communities will continue to lobby hard. I have referred to a number of examples in my electorate of Bega. Moruya High School wants more information from the department as to timeframes. It wants to find out when two promised demountables will arrive on site. I hope they arrive by the end of the year in preparation for term one of 2008. Batemans Bay High School needs its demountable as quickly as possible. Overall, having such a register in place will be of great benefit to school communities across the State.

Mr DAVID HARRIS (Wyang) [10.36 a.m.]: Like the member for Wollondilly, I was a principal, but not for as long as he was. I was a principal for 18 years. Last year I finished my role as principal of the Kariong Primary School. I too have an intricate knowledge of how maintenance works in schools. The perception that the Government is doing nothing all the time needs to be cleared up. That perception is clearly not true. The way the system works, as the member for Wollondilly outlined, is that each year the school is approached by the regional assets people from the department. They come to the school and they walk around it with the principal. I always used to include my community in that process so it had a direct input into the asset and maintenance issues that needed attention. We were then able to prioritise the most important things that needed to be fixed.

As part of that process—this needs to be understood—there are always priorities in schools in regard to maintenance because they are places where children learn and teachers work. Schools are open to the weather and the conditions that affect all sorts of buildings, just as they do in any business or workplace. As part of the process the regional assets team prioritises the needs across the region. It may be—this is where the register would not work if it were made public—that although something comes up one year there is a bigger priority the next year, so it changes. It is not a stagnant process; it is very fluid. Priorities change. As a principal I always informed my community if things we had asked for were put off for a little while. We understood that there was a bigger priority somewhere else.

In my electorate of Wyong we have had five new or redeveloped schools over the last five years. That is in recognition of the growth in the area and in recognition of the growing and changing needs of the children in the area. I am pleased to inform the House that near where I live the Hamlyn Terrace Public School will be completed in mid 2008 to replace the old Warnervale Public School. The project is a public-private partnership and represents very good initiative by the Government. That project is proof that the Government is taking action to provide maintenance and new schools, and to ensure that students, teachers and parents have good facilities for learning. The Opposition gives no credit for that whatsoever and that is very dishonest.

Based on my experience as a former principal, one of the worries I have about a public register is that some people in the media, the community and the Opposition like to use such information to attack public education. A number of people deny that that is their motivation and claim that it is not true, but parents who are considering schools in which to enrol their children might give undue weight to maintenance issues listed on a public register. We should bear in mind that all schools—new and old—have maintenance issues and improvements that need to be undertaken. There will always be a list of maintenance tasks that need to be undertaken.

Parents who access an online maintenance register and focus on a particular school might see a long list of maintenance tasks to be completed, but the improvements might range from minor tasks to reasonably sized tasks. The result might be that the parents, having been influenced by the school's maintenance list, decide against sending their child to that school. Parents may make that decision not because the school does not provide a good education and quality programs, or have a good community that works together to improve outcomes for students, but because of the perception they have gained, correct or not, that the school might be falling down. Some groups may use a public schools maintenance register to attack public education. I wonder whether private schools would be willing to list all their maintenance issues for the community to scrutinise so that a comparison could be made between public and private schools.

Some members have referred to Federal funding. In recent years Federal funding has had strings attached and has been targeted to specific outcomes. When I was a principal I needed some maintenance tasks to be carried out at my school, but what was I offered? A flagpole! The school already had three flagpoles, but apparently that was not enough and we needed another one! If the Federal Government were fair dinkum about funding public schools it would allocate far greater amounts than is the case currently.

We all know that the percentage of public school funding from the Federal Government is declining. All major players—including parents, teachers and Professor Vinson—recognise, irrespective of what the Opposition says, that the remaining proportion takes the forms of tied grants. In other words, the funding has strings attached. Schools and education authorities are not free to decide local priorities. The funding has to be spent in the way the Federal Government wants it to be spent. The State Government does not receive unconditional funding, so the Department of Education and Training is unable to allocate funding for necessary projects.

In contrast to the Federal Government's funding approach, the most recent State budget demonstrates a genuine commitment by this Government to increase maintenance allocations to schools. The schools in my electorate will have new projects such as new halls, new science blocks and new performing arts centres. Against that background, it is dishonest for the Opposition to claim that this Government is doing nothing for public schools. That is simply not true. I will outline the way in which schools approach maintenance issues. When I was a school principal I compiled a report that I shared quite openly with the school's community to show the maintenance that needed to be undertaken. If there were important maintenance issues, the school was able to access its maintenance funds as well as regional maintenance funds to attend to emergency tasks and occupational health and safety compliance. Through that system, as principal I was able to work with my community to deliver the necessary short-term projects that needed to be undertaken.

The merits of that system deserve recognition, whereas a public register will do nothing to improve maintenance in schools. A public maintenance register would not result in one extra cent being allocated for maintenance. I am happy to stand corrected if people can prove otherwise, but my contention is that simply having a register will not result in one extra cent for maintenance of schools. The issue is not registers; it is how money is being spent and how priorities are determined in consultation with communities. Having said that, I recognise, as did the member for Wollondilly, that there will never be enough money to cover all the maintenance issues.

Of course all principals keep pushing to make sure that important maintenance priorities for schools are addressed. That is the main way in which maintenance is tackled efficiently, but registers do nothing. It is all

about working with schools and school communities to make sure that our schools are looked after. My electorate of Wyong will have new schools and existing schools will be redeveloped. As our school enrolments increase, we are provided with additional buildings. It is blatantly dishonest for the Opposition to claim that the Government is doing nothing for the State's public school system. I recognise, as did the member for Wollondilly, that more always needs to be done because of the dynamics of the public school system, the ageing of schools and the wear and tear on schools. There are always maintenance issues.

A public maintenance register will merely provide another means by which some people may attack the public school system and claim that it is not up to scratch. A public maintenance register will deflect attention from public education outcomes and the delivery of social outcomes through schools. It will just become another way of attacking public schools. For the reasons I have outlined, I absolutely oppose this bill.

Mrs SHELLEY HANCOCK (South Coast) [10.45 a.m.]: I support the Government Schools (Infrastructure Register) Bill, just as I supported the Government Schools Assets Register Bill in 2004. As the member for Wollondilly and the member for Wyong jumped at the chance to talk about their backgrounds in public education, I proudly state that I spent almost 30 years as a teacher at Ulladulla High School and that my three children received their education at the Ulladulla High School before embarking on careers in veterinary science, law and policing. I support the bill and commend the New South Wales Leader of The Nationals for again drawing this issue to the attention of the House. The former Minister for Education and Training has been complaining that the Opposition continually refers to its school assets legislation. Of course we do because it is good legislation that may resolve some of the problems associated with the continual maintenance backlog in public schools. I praise the shadow Minister for Heath, Jillian Skinner, for introducing the Government Schools Assets Register Bill in 2004.

This morning I intend to briefly restate the arguments I advanced in this place in 2004—perhaps one could say I will be plagiarising my speech! Before I deal with the bill in detail I pause to suggest that the arguments advanced in 2004 by other members and me are even more relevant today than they were three years ago. The Government does not seem to understand that the millions of dollars worth of unmet maintenance being inflicted on government schools will continue to increase unless the Government adopts a strategic approach to resolving the problem. The Opposition's legislation offers that solution, but the Government does not appear to be interested in finding a solution. The purpose of this bill is to require the Director General of the Department of Education and Training to keep a register of Government school assets, including all buildings and demountables. That sounds simple so I cannot understand Government members' opposition to this bill—unless they have something to hide, which I suspect is the case.

The register will comprise school status reports outlining the status of the capital assets of government schools and three-yearly school building plans for building and maintenance work in schools. The reports will be tabled in Parliament and made available to the public on the department's website. So what is the problem? The bill proposes to apply management practices and basic management principles to schools that are as good and as necessary as are those followed by local councils and the private sector for the protection and longevity of assets. The point of the bill is not merely to establish a register but more broadly to make school assets last longer through intervention with maintenance procedures at the optimally opportune time.

This bill has commonsense provisions. As a concept it just makes sense because it not only embodies principles of sensible strategic planning and a responsible approach to asset maintenance, but also embodies the most important principles of openness and accountability. It is undoubtedly those principles that have led to the Government's reluctance to embrace this legislation. The Government simply does not want to create evidence of its neglect that may be publicised for all to see. As with everything the Government does, it wants to sweep the problems under the carpet and hide its schools maintenance backlog. At all costs the Government will attempt to hide its failures rather than plan to resolve the problems in a professional manner.

School communities are entitled to have the information that would be publicised pursuant to the provisions of this bill. They are entitled to know about the status of the capital assets of their schools and plans for building and maintenance works. After all, as the member for Wyong would be aware, school communities are the ones who raise the money to assist their schools. They work hard to provide either new capital assets, which are unfunded by the Government, or long overdue maintenance work in their schools. They are partners with the Government. Yet, under this Government, school communities are not entitled to any knowledge of the Government's plans for their schools.

Mr David Harris: I always consult the principal.

Mrs SHELLEY HANCOCK: The member for Wyong may choose to share such information with his school communities but other members do not. School communities are entitled to that information. The Government, which opposed this bill on a previous occasion and no doubt will oppose it again, fails to recognise the important role of parents and citizen groups and individuals who donate money to their local schools or support them in many other ways. School communities are entitled to a more accountable system, as is embodied in this bill. They would benefit greatly from school status reports and school building plans. They could plan their expenditure and identify items of need, which they could reasonably fund in the absence of Government funding.

I use the example of Havenlee Special School and the desire back in 2002 to air-condition a number of classrooms for the benefit of students. The staff and parents made strong representations to the former member for South Coast for such air conditioning. In the absence of a response from the member or the Government, the school community proceeded to raise funds and air-condition the classrooms themselves. Prior to the 2003 election the local member turned up with a pre-election sweetening cheque to air-condition the classrooms, which had already been done by the school community. The member faced a humiliating media backlash in the local newspapers and the *Sydney Morning Herald*. That is an example of a school community not having knowledge of the Government's plans for its school and not being part of a partnership. This bill embodies those aspects.

Had the Government published its plans for the air conditioning of schools, the school community of Havenlee Special School would have known about the prospect of air conditioning and could have made alternate plans for other projects, if necessary. However, the Government prefers to work—and I do not use that word literally—in isolation from the very people who support and conscientiously work for improvements to their schools. Whilst speaking about Havenlee Special School, which is now in the electorate of Kiama, I take the opportunity to again raise the urgent need for security fencing around the school. In the face of continuing vandalism and theft at this precious and important school, I urge the Government to provide a security fence—as promised by the member for Kiama before the 2007 election—and to provide it without delay. If the Government does not do so, it may face a further humiliating debacle, as it did in 2003. Once again, the school does not know the Government's plans, except that it made a promise in 2007 to provide a fence.

As mentioned by previous speakers this morning, this bill is not as a result of the Coalition concocting a grand plan to resolve the situation or to criticise the Government about its actions or inaction. It is as a result of the Vinson inquiry into public education in New South Wales and a number of observations made by Professor Tony Vinson who chaired the inquiry. I ask Government members to note that, in particular, Tony Vinson stated:

... maintenance and refurbishment of the education estate has been neglected and fitfully managed.

He also referred to:

... substandard conditions in which teaching and learning are being attempted.

Professor Vinson clearly recommended that the Government should introduce an asset register of the type embodied in this bill and that plans for schools buildings should be publicised. He advocated a sensible, strategic approach to planning in New South Wales schools. Local councils and the private sector have adopted these strategic approaches as essential elements, not only to assist in their planning and budgets but, most importantly, so that local residents are aware of future plans and have the opportunity for input. Good strategic planning ensures that maintenance occurs at an opportune time and at a time that will avoid the need for the premature and costly replacement of assets. It is as simple as regularly servicing a motor vehicle. The same principles apply. By regularly servicing our motor vehicles we avoid the expensive replacement of motor parts, which occurs when we neglect our asset. If we do not pay attention to regular servicing, the engine could blow up.

Strategic planning, which is an objective of this bill, is a sensible approach that can prolong the life of an asset. But the Government wants to hide the state of neglect in government schools. It does not want to apply sound planning principles to its vast education assets. Its reluctance to do so is beyond belief. If this bill, which embodies sound planning principles, fails to pass the House, the Coalition will continue to raise this matter. Schools in New South Wales are disgracefully run down. Toilets leak or do not work. Sewer pipes explode. At Ulladulla High School, where I taught, sewer pipes exploded releasing sewerage across the playground. The Government had not paid attention to appropriate maintenance of the school's assets. Gutters are rusting, brickwork is deteriorating and buildings are crumbling.

Whether Government members want to admit it or not, this is happening. We all need to work in partnership to find a solution to this problem. I am sure that all members, many of whom are former principals and former teachers, would agree. As mentioned by previous speakers, the condition of our government schools is unacceptable for the children who attend the schools, for the parents of those children and for the school communities who raise funds for the schools and totally unacceptable for the face of public education in New South Wales.

Ms CARMEL TEBBUTT (Marrickville) [10.56 p.m.]: I will speak briefly on the Government Schools (Infrastructure Register) Bill. Having heard previous speakers' contributions, I feel the need to clear up some of the myths that are being perpetrated about the Government's record on and commitment to public education. The first thing I need to say is that every member of the House acknowledges that school maintenance is a challenge. There are more than 2,000 schools in New South Wales, many of them older schools. Many of the schools suffer a great deal of wear and tear as a result of the activities and actions of students. Maintenance is a challenge, as is acknowledged by all. Members should also acknowledge that our schools have undergone enormous improvements over the past few years as a result of maintenance programs and capital works. That is as a result of the Government's actions and its commitment to public education.

Having spent some time in schools over the past few years, I have seen with my own eyes and received feedback from parents, teachers and students about the improvements at our schools from the extra investment the Government has made in maintenance programs, minor capital works programs and major capital works programs and from the Government's joint funding program with school communities for particular initiatives. A great deal of improvements have been made through the Government's commitment to provide extra funding for maintenance—previous speakers have referred to the Government's commitment of an extra \$120 million over four years—and to improve processes. There is no doubt that funding is part of the equation, but we have also learnt from the numerous reviews that have taken place on maintenance how to improve our maintenance processes.

For example, the Government has put in place external audits of school maintenance needs, provided greater opportunities for school principals and school communities to have input and introduced regionalisation of the maintenance program. Schools and school communities come together across the region to get an understanding of the maintenance needs for the whole school region and to prioritise those maintenance needs. Two former school principals have spoken in this debate as to why this bill will not work. I take their words seriously, because they have worked in the system and know how it works. They know what will make a real difference on the ground for schools. Those principals say clearly that the bill will not work. We know why. This bill is full of old ideas. The Opposition has introduced similar legislation time and time again. The wording in the bill has not changed and it does not reflect the improvements that have been made to school maintenance over a number of years. The bill will simply add another layer of bureaucracy and divert important resources to developing a register.

If Opposition members truly want to see improved outcomes for public education in New South Wales they could do no better than lobby their Federal colleagues for a more collaborative approach to public education. The member for Bega talked about Federal funding for public education in Australia. The truth is that Federal funding for public education has not increased in real terms in the past few years. There has been no real growth in Federal funding for public education. Furthermore, the Federal Government links funding for public education with political outcomes, which is extremely detrimental to public education in New South Wales. If Opposition members want to improve public education and see better outcomes in New South Wales they should lobby their Federal colleagues and urge them to work in collaboration with schools, principals and school communities.

Programs such as Investing in Our Schools have produced some good outcomes on the ground. But there is a danger that because the Federal Government is bypassing the State public education system we are not working collaboratively and maximising the potential to gain extra funding and produce better outcomes. I urge Opposition members to take public education seriously and lobby their Federal colleagues to work collaboratively with their State colleagues to improve public education and to increase funding for it.

Ms GLADYS BEREJIKLIAN (Willoughby) [11.02 a.m.]: I am pleased to support the Government Schools (Infrastructure Register) Bill, which was introduced by the New South Wales Opposition. I would like to think all members in this place value the right of every child to have a sound public education and the right of all parents to choose where they send their children to obtain an education. The Opposition believes the capital works and infrastructure process should be open and transparent. What is wrong with giving the Government an

incentive to resolve some of the major problems in our public schools by making it accountable? A register would allow everyone in the community to take note of what is not happening. Parents could then make education choices and school communities could lobby the Government to fix many outstanding maintenance problems.

Opposition members who have spoken in this debate have referred to the comments of Professor Vinson in his report, which is now more than three years old. He pointed out the Government's bad performance in maintaining infrastructure in the public school system. The report also highlighted the impact that school surrounds can have on a child's psychology and education. That point is critical to this debate. In addition to referring to the lack of maintenance and infrastructure investment on the part of the State Labor Government, Professor Vinson drew a correlation between sufficient capital works provision and the impact on student learning. He stated:

... the observation that teaching and learning can be enhanced or retarded by the presence or absence of appropriate physical conditions; the school community's spirits can be uplifted or depressed by the presence or absence of well-designed and well-maintained buildings; good building quality and maintenance are associated with improved academic results; the quality of physical space affects self-esteem, peer and student-teacher interactions, parental involvement, discipline, attention, motivation and interpersonal relations; and the quality of school buildings and their surrounds can also be a potent symbol of the regard, or otherwise, in which public education is believed to be held by governments and the community.

That is a strong endorsement of the fact that there is an obvious correlation between a student's ability to learn in a positive environment and the physical structure of school buildings. That is a major issue for many schools across this State, whether they are in regional or remote New South Wales or in highly urbanised areas, such as my electorate. I am fortunate to have outstanding teachers, school communities and parents and citizens associations in my electorate of Willoughby. However, the State Government has let them down by refusing to upgrade major infrastructure in these schools.

I mention particularly Chatswood Public School and Chatswood High School. All members will be aware that Chatswood is a growing community. Chatswood is to get a new railway station but the Government has said that its funding is dependent upon the construction of 500 extra units along the railway line. The public school will be across the road from that development. The school is already bursting at the seams. It is functioning with demountable buildings and playground space is insufficient. The school will only continue to grow. For the past four years the school community has courteously and properly written to the respective education Ministers seeking funding for additional permanent classrooms. On every occasion that funding has been denied. That is not acceptable, and the public should be aware of it. On the one hand, the State Government has imposed high-density development on the Chatswood community and demanded that more apartments be built along the railway line while, on the other hand, for the past four or five years at least it has denied Chatswood Public School sufficient funding to build permanent classrooms to provide additional playground space and cope with increased enrolments.

The Willoughby electorate is interesting demographically in that many parents can afford to send their children to non-government education and many parents cannot. Interestingly, according to the most recent statistics made available by the Parliamentary Library the Willoughby electorate was ranked eleventh in relation to the number of children who attend public education at a primary level. That tells me that parents want to send their children to public education at a primary level, in particular, irrespective of their income. Parents in the electorate of Willoughby are ideologically disposed to send their children to public education at a primary level irrespective of income or demographics. However, the trend is now moving in the opposite direction because the State Government is not investing sufficiently in public education infrastructure.

Chatswood Public School has an outstanding academic record. It has a wonderful school band and students excel in extracurricular activities, such as chess, sports, and mathematics and science competitions. Some 68 per cent of students at Chatswood Public School come from non-English speaking backgrounds, particularly a Chinese-speaking background. It has a growing school community. Why for the past five years has the State Government refused to fund the construction of permanent new buildings at the school? It does not make sense. If this bill were law the Government would be forced to put that information on a public register, which would embarrass it into fixing the problem. While a register such as this does not exist there will be no accountability. Parents and the community will have no recourse to highlight the fact that a growing area such as Chatswood—upon which high-density development is being imposed—is being denied permanent classrooms.

This is notwithstanding the outstanding academic achievements at Chatswood Public School, and the efforts of its principal, Mr Dodds, and his hardworking staff and the parents and citizens association. The association is so connected with the local community that its newsletter is written partly in Mandarin in order to

support parents from a non-English speaking background and it celebrates important community festivals, such as the Moon festival, to link in with the community's needs. Yet year after year the Government has refused to provide any funding for important infrastructure at the school. I strongly suggest this bill will solve that problem by forcing the Government to make public what it has not done. It will force the Government to be accountable and transparent in relation to infrastructure needs—which it clearly is not at present.

I also highlight the plight of Chatswood High School. I am a product of the public education system in this State: I went to a comprehensive public high school very similar to Chatswood High School. A few years ago the State Government allowed that school to become so run-down that it was going to be closed. Fortunately, through lobbying by the community and by my predecessor Peter Collins, Chatswood High School remains open and is an extremely vibrant part of the community. I am very proud of what that school continues to achieve. In the past few years, under the stewardship of the very capable principal, teaching staff and school community, Chatswood High School's academic results have been outstanding. The school has done exceptionally well academically, in sport and in music. The school band toured Europe and won an award, which was presented by former Minister Dr Refshauge.

The State Government, rather than acknowledging the wonderful things that Chatswood High School is doing, is denying the school critically needed infrastructure. For at least four or five years the school has been applying for an upgrade of a number of classrooms, plus an auditorium. The State budget reveals that the school's request has been acknowledged by capital works funding, but not enough money has been allocated. This is an opportunity for the State Government to demonstrate whether it has any ethics in relation to public education. Chatswood High School, an outstanding exponent of comprehensive high school education, needs an upgrade. It is the only comprehensive public high school in my community, and I am very proud of it, but I am continually let down by the State Government dragging its heels in providing vital funding. Were this legislation to be passed in this House, the Government would be forced to list infrastructure items on a register and would be embarrassed into making the necessary financial commitments.

I will conclude where I started: this bill highlights the Coalition's commitment to valuing the right of every child in this State to have an effective education to enable them to reach their full potential. I note the comments by Professor Vinson in relation to the impact of the physical condition of a school on a child's ability to learn. Two schools in my electorate, a growing area—Chatswood Public School and Chatswood High School—have been denied vital infrastructure funding. I support this bill in the hope that schools such as Chatswood Public School and Chatswood High School will receive much needed funding once the Government is made accountable and is forced, out of embarrassment, to make important decisions. I appeal to the consciences of members opposite who are also concerned about the dilapidation of public school infrastructure in their electorates. I ask them to support this bill because it will enhance the quality of education in New South Wales.

Mr STEVE WHAN (Monaro—Parliamentary Secretary) [11.12 a.m.]: I oppose the Government Schools (Infrastructure Register) Bill, as other Government members have done, for a very simple reason: a public register, in whatever form, would not make one single extra dollar flow to public school maintenance. What makes extra dollars flow to school maintenance is the extra commitment that the Labor Government has made to the maintenance of schools, as is clearly evidenced throughout the regions of this State.

As previous speakers have said, there is always work to be done on schools. Schools are used every day by groups of fantastic kids who can sometimes be a little bit hard on the things they use, so wear and tear does occur and ongoing repair is needed. This bill will not make a single ounce of difference. We must ask the question: If the Coalition won government, would it publicly prioritise its intentions on its infrastructure register? Would it stick to its listed intentions? This bill, which raises many questions, is nothing more than an attempt by the Opposition to score political points by giving its members an opportunity to talk about public schools, denigrate the efforts of hardworking school communities and list the work they think should be done.

Great things are happening in the schools in the Monaro electorate, which gives the lie to doom and gloom stories from members opposite. I will start with the newest school, Jindabyne Central School, which was opened last week. I had the pleasure of officially opening that school with the Federal Liberal member, Gary Nairn. Jindabyne Public School has become Jindabyne Central School. For the first time public high school education is available to students in Jindabyne. They will be saved a 50-minute trip each way to Cooma each school day and will benefit greatly from this much-needed opportunity to further their education. Before this school was built Jindabyne's town centre, unlike many other town centres, did not have teenage kids in it after school hours. Now it does, along with a full cross-section of the community. Instead of sitting on a bus

travelling home from school, kids are now able to spend more time playing sport in their community or even doing homework; they might not think that is the best result, but never mind.

Jindabyne Central School now offers secondary education as a result of the Government's commitment and a great community campaign. Last week I was thrilled to announce this Government's further commitment to the school. In 2009 the school will take its first years 11 and 12 students, offering a full range of education right up to higher school certificate level. Jindabyne Central School will be working with Monaro High School, Bombala High School and Karabar Distance Education Centre in using information technology and video conferencing to ensure that a small cohort of years 11 and 12 students doing their higher school certificate will have access to full curriculum choices. They will be using technology that the Government has invested in and has worked with schools to put in place.

The teachers are very excited by this opportunity. Immediately after the opening of the school last week a number of teachers from different schools headed off to Karabar High School to discuss how they could implement the technology. These are very exciting times for Jindabyne, and it is all happening in a brand new facility that will have a state-of-the-art science lab, a state-of-the-art food technology section and facilities for high school students. Older parts of the building were used as a primary school and maintenance needs to be done on the toilet block. The school community—they did not need a list—raised that issue with me in February this year and the toilet block will be rebuilt over the Christmas holiday period this year. I would say to members opposite: You do not need a public list to do that; you need a proactive local member. That is what has happened in this case.

Karabar High School, where I have the pleasure of sending my children, was built some time ago. Like many high schools, it has areas that need to be upgraded, and one such area is the toilet facility. I am pleased to say that is on the upgrade list. New food technology areas and a science lab will be coming to that school this term. Queanbeyan High School has also been in need of maintenance work. Under the Government's increased capital works and maintenance budget Queanbeyan High School received upgrades to its covered walkways and also carpeting and painting of other areas.

As a result of the Government's great initiatives, Queanbeyan will get one of the trade schools. Construction—this is not just a throwaway election promise—has started. It is under way. The school will produce terrific results for young people in the area; they will certainly be a lot better than those achieved by the Federal Government's farcical technical colleges, of which there is one. It was announced well before we announced the trade school, but with few students, huge costs and limited results. It is being established in a converted industrial shed in Queanbeyan, rather than having a proper relationship with the State TAFE and school systems, as it could have had under a State Government submission. But that submission was knocked back by the Federal Government because it would not accept that our teachers did not want to work under Australian workplace agreements. That is a great example of ideology being put ahead of service delivery.

Jerrabomberra school, which is a few years old now, is a terrific school in our area. It has grown from having about 100 students in its first year to perhaps being the biggest school in the electorate with 720 students. Its enrolments are about equal with those of Queanbeyan South Public School, which is a fantastic facility. Jerrabomberra school is stretched a bit because it has double the enrolments originally predicted, and that is a great tribute to the quality of the staff and the school community. The Government, through its increased maintenance budget, is helping to provide a new canteen at the school. Recently, extra space has been provided for the staff and two prefabricated permanent classrooms have been provided to overcome the need for demountables. Speaking of demountables, this Government has ensured that all demountable classrooms are air-conditioned, which is something previous governments did not do. The provision of air conditioning has been of great benefit to schools in our area that need demountables.

Jerrabomberra school is a great example of the Opposition's attitude to public schools—always denigrate and criticise. When the shadow Minister for Health was the shadow Minister for Education she issued an appalling press release to the *Daily Telegraph* in which she criticised Jerrabomberra school. She said that absenteeism and truancy at Jerrabomberra school had doubled, that it was a disgrace, and that it was a failure of the State Labor Government. However, in her ignorance she failed to point out that at the same time as absenteeism from the school doubled school enrolments increased by 500 per cent. That did not help her score political points for bagging a State school. She did not acknowledge that, and she did not apologise to the school principal. Her effort was disgraceful. However, it shows that the Opposition puts scoring points ahead of working with our public schools and praising them for the great work they do. I am amazed that the Opposition spokesman on health still holds a senior position in the Opposition and still makes outrageous claims about everything without substantiating them.

Last week I had the pleasure of travelling out of the Monaro electorate and into an area I represented until the last State election. Together with the member for Bega and the Federal member for Eden-Monaro, I had the pleasure of helping Eden Public School to celebrate its 150th birthday, its sesquicentenary. It was a terrific day. Eden Public School provides a great education. The notes I took on the day show that Opposition members referred to how terrible everything is now. I ask them: Is it any better or worse than it used to be? One example is the story that Eden underwent a fair bit of growth in the late 1960s and early 1970s. During that time Eden Public School conducted classes off the school grounds in the local Country Womens Association hall, upstairs in a local business, and in other buildings around town because it had insufficient classrooms. Coincidentally, this happened under a State Liberal-National Government. The problem was rectified in 1978 when new school buildings were opened. Who was in Government in 1978? I think it might have been Neville Wran. That is one more example of Labor investing in school facilities.

The member for Bega did not say much about the terrific new Merimbula Public School provided by the State Government. That is a great new facility in the area. Indeed, the Labor Government has provided a number of great new schools in the electorate of Bega. The position of the Liberals and The Nationals on public education is fairly consistent. The Opposition spokesman on education, the Leader of The Nationals, jumped on the bandwagon with the Federal education Minister and bagged the State schools curriculum. The Federal Minister said that our teachers are teaching a Maoist curriculum. What a bizarre comment! The Federal Coalition Government has gradually grasped the freedoms that Australians believe in and tried surreptitiously to put across its point of view and indoctrinate people with that view. That is much closer to Maoism than what is being taught in our State schools.

Unfortunately the Leader of The Nationals jumped on the bandwagon; he said it was terrible that apparently in some schools kids had talked about the European settlement of Australia as invasion day and things like that. Part of a good public education is not to learn by rote and repeat things but to think about things, learn to analyse things, take different sides of issues and debate them. That is part of a healthy public education system. The Coalition, and particularly the Federal Howard Government, consistently put forward the conservative ideology. We look forward to having a Federal government that will provide a fairer distribution of funding for education overall and a better share of funding for public schools. That is critical if we want to ensure that our kids make a contribution in the coming years and are able to fulfil their potential. Education is all about helping our kids to fulfil their potential in life. Debate on this bill has given members opposite an opportunity to talk about the schools in their electorates, and I do not begrudge them that. I have done exactly the same thing. However, I resent the fact that the Coalition always bags our public schools. Coalition members always say, "This standard isn't any good."

When I visit private schools in my electorate I find that their building and facility standards are probably similar to, or in some cases not quite as good as, most public schools. Parents of students in private schools seem happy with those facilities. Of course, they would like better facilities and more money. Everybody always does. Coalition members always present a one-sided argument; they are always bagging public education when in fact our public schools provide increasingly good standards of education, with great results. I know from my experience of the school my kids attend that the results in local schools are terrific. Indeed, one student at Queanbeyan South Public School tied for equal eighth in the Premier's spelling bee last week. It was a great result for her, and I congratulate her on that. Yet again in this debate we are seeing a stunt. This bill is simply another example of the Opposition trying to score political points. Having a register of school maintenance would need a lot of resources and it would not deliver a single extra cent to maintenance. This Government is delivering extra money for school maintenance and we are seeing the results of that in not only the Monaro electorate but all electorates in New South Wales.

Debate adjourned on motion by Mr Thomas George and set down as an order of the day for a future day.

Pursuant to standing orders business interrupted.

DROUGHT ASSISTANCE

Mr ANDREW STONER (Oxley—Leader of The Nationals) [11.30 a.m.]: I move:

That this House:

- (1) notes the continuing impacts of this record drought upon farmers and local communities;

- (2) welcomes the recent extensions of drought assistance measures by the Federal Government; and
- (3) calls upon the State Government to do more to support our farmers and their communities, including waiving of fixed water charges to irrigators and providing relief from other State charges such as Rural Lands Protection Board rates.

I move this motion at a time when farmers in rural communities throughout New South Wales are doing it tough. They are doing it tough because this prolonged and protracted drought has seen little income in many districts of the State generated by way of agriculture. The drought is record breaking not only in terms of its duration but also in terms of its impact. It has affected the dry land farmers; it is now affecting irrigators. Normally irrigation farmers have some degree of reliability of access to life-giving water. However, due to the duration of this drought, water storages across the State are extremely low.

Yesterday when I sought precedence for my motion I mentioned that whilst there had been good rain in the preceding week across much of New South Wales, the rain had come too little too late for most of our farmers. In some districts where the crops had already failed the rain had come too late and had also ruined the quality of any available stock feed, which assists those farmers to diversify their sources of income away from crops, courtesy of their stock. The recent rain was not the blessing that many city people thought it might have been. In addition, there was no improvement in water storage as there was very little run-off, because the ground across the State is so dry.

It was for those reasons that The Nationals sought that the motion be given precedence and that it be debated first today. The drought is having a continuing impact across rural communities and it affects us all. It affects city people, who are already paying more for their produce, including bread, fruit, vegetables and milk. All produce prices are rising as a result of this terrible drought. The drought is also having a very severe impact on communities and families in country New South Wales. Late last year The Nationals organised a drought summit at which one participant was the beyondblue organisation, whose representatives spoke about the impact of drought on depression.

For farmers depression is caused not only by the continuing drought and the failure of rain to materialise, the failure of income generation season after season, but also by the threat of the loss of a property that in many cases has been in a family for generations. I have spoken to many farmers and I know that they depend on counselling and other support as well as on-the-ground resources to assist them through this terrible time. Many of those blokes cannot talk to their wives or to their neighbours about the terrible financial position in which they find themselves. The longer the drought continues, the worse their financial position becomes as farmers get deeper into debt.

In the past season many farmers forward sold their crops. They gambled that the rain would come. The long-range weather forecasters predicted that Australia would enter a weak La Niña period. That did not materialise through the important spring planting period. As a result, the farmers who took that gamble have gone further into debt. The threat is that their loans may become such a size that their debt-to-equity ratio, which is always considered by financial institutions, becomes a problem, and in some cases foreclosure may result. Things are very grim, very dire, in country areas.

Yesterday I mentioned that the Federal Coalition Government had come to the party with additional money over and above the \$1.9 billion in drought assistance it had already spent across the nation during the drought. John Howard and Mark Vaile have announced the allocation of an additional \$714 million and the easing of some criteria to access exceptional circumstances payments. That announcement was widely welcomed. It was a shot in the arm for rural communities, as were the statements of the Prime Minister at the time. In those statements he acknowledged the enormous value of agriculture to our nation—not just its economic value but also its social value. He acknowledged that agriculture is part and parcel of our wonderful Australian culture and heritage.

I contrast that positive statement, backed up by significant dollars, with the actions of the State Government. The Iemma Government has not extended its drought assistance to farmers, but has continued to offer the traditional forms of drought assistance, which are mostly subsidies for transport of fodder, stock and water. The State Government has not extended assistance into the areas that the farming communities have called for for a long time. It has not come up with new programs and new measures to assist when things are worse than they have ever been; it has continued to rub salt into the wound of farmers by issuing invoices for water that the farmers are simply not receiving.

Fixed water charges incur bills of \$10,000 and \$20,000. One property in the south of the State, a larger property with a larger allocation, incurred a bill for \$90,000. Farmers are getting assistance from the Federal

Government, but they are also getting bills in the post that will soak up much, if not all, of that assistance for something they are not getting. One can understand that frustration and its contribution to depression. The Nationals will continue to call on the Lemma Government to show some heart. In the past, as a result of sustained lobbying, the Government temporarily waived fixed water charges in the Lachlan Valley.

That sustained lobbying followed a drought meeting convened by the New South Wales Farmers Association in Parkes just a few years ago, so there is a precedent for waiving fixed water charges. I acknowledge the presence in the gallery today of Jock Laurie and Jeff Sorrell of the New South Wales Farmers Association. The Nationals ask that that precedent be extended, because this is the hour of need for rural communities and for the farmers who are the backbone of those rural communities. The Nationals are asking that the fixed water charges be waived where no water allocation is forthcoming and that in cases where the water allocation is substantially reduced, which is the case for most irrigation farmers across the State, that there be a pro-rata adjustment to reduce those bills.

My motion calls also for additional measures of support, because there is much more that the State Government could do to follow the lead of the Federal Government and the Victorian Government. The member for Murray-Darling, whose electorate borders Victoria, knows that farmers across the Murray River are getting terrific support, including a new \$100 million package from the Victorian Government. However, I am sorry to say that north of the Murray River it is only the same old transport subsidies.

The Nationals are calling for relief from other State Government charges, particularly rural lands protection board rates and local government rates, for which the State Government is responsible, courtesy of the Local Government Act. There is much more that can and should be done. At this time The Nationals say that if the Government wants to support rural communities, which make up one-third of the State's population, and the farmers, who have been the backbone of the State in the duration of the great history of New South Wales, it should agree with my motion and waive those fixed water charges and consider waiving other rates and charges. I look forward to the support of all members of this House for the motion.

Mr STEVE WHAN (Monaro—Parliamentary Secretary) [11.40 a.m.]: Although Government members are happy to debate the motion, I intend to move an amendment with which I am sure they will all agree. I move:

That the motion be amended by leaving out paragraphs (2) and (3) with a view to inserting instead:

- (2) welcomes the overdue extension of drought assistance measures by the Federal Government and the strong commitment from Kevin Rudd and Federal Labor; and
- (3) reaffirms the New South Wales Government's commitment to continuing drought support for farmers and rural communities.

From one end of our State to the other the drought is hurting our farmers. Despite the recent rainfalls farmers in many areas are still experiencing serious problems. Members who have been travelling around the country with bodies such as the rural and regional task force have heard first-hand from farmers about the difficulties being faced as a result of the failure of the rains to arrive in time to save the wheat crops, the difficulties being faced by people who rely on irrigation and the difficulties being faced by people across a range of rural industries. The Government is concerned about these serious issues.

Today the Government wants to reaffirm its continuing support for farmers and rural communities through its drought support measures. Currently 78.6 per cent of the State remains in drought, which is up from 71 per cent last month. Another 12.1 per cent of New South Wales is marginal, down from 15.7 per cent last month, while just 9.3 per cent of New South Wales is satisfactory. Last month's increased figures have meant that a number of new areas across the State have been drought declared, which is a matter of increasing concern to the Government. The Government, members of Country Labor and, importantly, the Premier and his Ministers are trying to do what they can to help farmers.

I understand that in some sections of the north-west the winter crop is estimated to be down by 75 per cent. August this year was the third warmest on record and also one of the driest, which is a cause for great concern. Although the rain commenced falling this week—and we still need a lot more—unfortunately it was too late for crops in many areas. It is a disappointing outcome for many farmers who are relying on this year's crop and who, in many cases, have gone further into debt to sow the grain. I understand that in many cases they have pre-sold the product, which will cause some serious problems given the high prices. The Government well understands these problems. It wants to try to address these problems and ensure that it is providing all the assistance it can afford to provide in New South Wales.

It is predicted that this year's cotton crop of about 45,000 hectares will be the lowest in 30 years, which is a far cry from the 300,000 hectares or more that were planted only six or seven years ago. This year rice farmers will sow less than 10,000 hectares because of the obvious shortage of irrigation water. I have said many times in this House that despite a reasonably good snow season we did not get follow-up snow in August and September, which meant that there was not a lot of run-off into important irrigation dams. That is further bad news for the many residents and farmers in irrigation areas to the west who rely on that water. To date the Iemma Government has committed about \$350 million in assistance. Premier Morris Iemma and Treasurer Michael Costa have made it clear that the Government will not stop providing that assistance until the drought is over. The Government has consistently made that commitment.

Mr John Williams: What about the rural counsellors? Are you going to cease funding at the end of the season?

Mr STEVE WHAN: I will deal with rural counsellors in a moment. That is an interesting example of the lack of cooperation from the Federal Government. I would like, first, to address a number of issues that were raised by the Opposition. Many irrigators have referred to the problem of fixed water charges, an issue that is acknowledged by the Government. New South Wales and Victoria have different systems. In Victoria the charges are payable per megalitre of entitlement. New South Wales has a two-tier system with a fixed component helping to cover the cost of maintaining infrastructure. All members would be aware that that infrastructure cost must be maintained even when there is a drought to ensure that infrastructure is in working order when enough rainwater is available to be distributed.

The Government has undertaken a number of drought support measures for industry, and an additional \$160 million has been committed to the Country Towns Water Supply and Sewerage Program, an issue of great concern to many rural communities. Irrigation entitlements are low because there is a serious danger that some country towns will not have drinking water, which is a high priority. This shortage of water has also impacted on the area that I represent. In some areas dams have been expanded and funding has been allocated for town water supplies and other schemes.

Mr John Williams: We are talking about farmers.

Mr STEVE WHAN: Country towns are also eligible for assistance with the cartage of water. As the member for Broken Hill said, we are talking about farmers, but we are also talking about rural communities, which have been seriously impacted by the drought. It is a sad indictment of Opposition members if they do not care about rural communities. This morning the Minister announced that the Government would allow a year for the payment of 2005-06 water bills and up to an additional three years for farmers who are having difficulty paying within the allocated time frame.

The DEPUTY-SPEAKER: Order! Members of the Opposition will cease interjecting.

Mr STEVE WHAN: I will repeat that statement for the benefit of Opposition members, as I do not believe they heard it. Opposition members are all about rhetoric; they not about making decisions or talking constructively. The Government will allow an additional three years for farmers who are having difficulty paying their water bills within the allocated time frame. The Government has undertaken a number of measures—

[Interruption]

The DEPUTY-SPEAKER: Order!

Mr STEVE WHAN: Whenever we talk about drought in this place Opposition members fail to listen to what is being said in debate; they insist instead on hurling abuse across the Chamber.

The DEPUTY-SPEAKER: Order! The member for Lismore will cease interjecting.

Mr STEVE WHAN: What a sad indictment of Opposition members! The Government has already put in place a number of measures. It has provided additional assistance for mental health services in rural areas, which is a serious problem. I look forward to debating a motion that will be moved by the member for Barwon as it relates to an important issue and one that the Government is seriously addressing. Many areas now have drought support workers who are assisting farmers in rural communities through this difficult time. However, it is disappointing that the Federal Government is playing politics with rural financial counsellors.

The Federal Government wrote to the State Government and said that it would pick up the costs but it then tried to score political points by stating that the Government was not providing assistance. At the same time, there was a unilateral change to the way in which rural financial counselling services work, with no consultation with rural communities. The Federal Government wiped out local community input into rural financial counselling and refused to accept the Government's input. The Minister quite properly said, "If you do not want the State Government's involvement in this, you might as well keep funding it."

Mr John Williams: Rubbish!

Mr STEVE WHAN: It is obvious that the member for Murray-Darling has not followed this issue or spoken to rural financial counselling service committees, which have had a lot to say about the failure of the Federal Government to consult with them when it unilaterally restructured those services. The State Government is more than willing to fund those financial services so long as communities and other levels of government get a say in the process. We do not believe in going along with a dictatorship or with out-of-touch Ministers in the Federal Howard Government. Yesterday, when we heard that there had been another interest rate rise, which will put a massive extra burden on farmers in this country, the Prime Minister said, "Sorry you have had another interest rate rise." All that we have had from Primer Minister John Howard is more broken promises and rising interest rates. The Federal Government is deliberately pursuing an inflationary policy and hurting the people of New South Wales. Today we witnessed the usual ignorance from Opposition members.

Mr Andrew Fraser: Point of order—

Mr STEVE WHAN: Opposition members are not able to contribute to constructive discussion.

The DEPUTY-SPEAKER: Order! I call the member for Coffs Harbour.

Mr ANDREW FRASER (Coffs Harbour—Deputy Leader of The Nationals) [11.50 a.m.]: Sit down, boy!

Mr Steve Whan: I ask for a bit more respect from the member for Coffs Harbour. I know he is ancient, but calling me "boy" is a bit silly.

Mr ANDREW FRASER: I have never seen a more disgraceful performance in this House.

The DEPUTY-SPEAKER: Order! Before the member for Coffs Harbour continues I ask him to refrain from speaking in that way. The House listened in a fair and reasonable way to the Leader of The Nationals. That was a respectful way of conducting debate. I remind the member for Coffs Harbour that it is unparliamentary to use the word "boy" when describing a member of Parliament.

Mr ANDREW FRASER: Sorry, the boy member from Monaro. That performance was an absolute disgrace. Recently I had the opportunity to travel to the north-west of the State with the member for Barwon and down to Mildura and the south-west of the State with the member for Murray-Darling. What I saw in both of those regions regarding support for farmers from the State Government was nothing short of pathetic. I note the presence of the previous Minister for Agriculture in the Chamber. It was a sad day when he lost that portfolio. In fact, I believe he understood what was happening with farming in this State; the present Government does not.

The south-west area I travelled to was in dire straits. A meeting held in Mildura regarding water supply was attended by 700 people, a large number of whom were from New South Wales. Those farmers had reached the stage of starting to remove trees and vines from their land and walking away. The Government did not even bother to send a representative to that meeting. The Government did not send a representative to the water meeting we attended in Lightning Ridge. The Queensland Government is putting forward policies and the New South Wales Government is not even looking at the implementation of those policies. The Government is not protecting the farmers of this State. When we visited the south-west region farmers told us exactly what this mob opposite were not doing.

The SPEAKER: Order! Government members will cease injecting.

Mr ANDREW FRASER: The mayor of one shire told us that dairy farms were closing because farmers could not afford the transport costs to get fodder to their herds, yet the Government was failing—and still fails even after I put out the call—to transfer to dairy farmers subsidies from crop farmers, who do not need a fodder subsidy, to ensure the dairy farmers can continue to feed their herds and produce milk. That is a fact.

Mr Steve Whan: It is not fact. You just make it up as you go along.

Mr ANDREW FRASER: That just shows what this fool opposite thinks about his own electorate. At the moment it is raining in Sydney. There are children in the Western Districts that have never seen rain because it has been that dry. There are paddocks where good farmers have invested huge amounts on the promise of a good season and are now looking at debts somewhere between \$250,000 and \$450,000. The Government will not return the fixed water charges to those farmers. Rural lands protection boards will give those farmers a subsidy on their council rates. When we visited Finley a group of people told us that people have stopped coming into town. Why? There were no water allocations for them, crops have failed and they would not bring their children into town because they thought they might have to buy them a sweet or a bag of chips, which they could not afford.

At the same time we were told that the Balranald Central School was to be closed because student numbers had fallen from 75 to 50 and 15 jobs and \$1 million in salaries were to be taken out of Balranald by the Government because of those falling student numbers. That was clean money coming into a community that is suffering desperately due to the effects of the drought, yet the Government has failed to react to the calls of that community to leave those salaries and jobs in place. The drought-stricken Balranald community is losing 15 jobs—\$1 million a year. We visited a number of farmers in Merriwagga. One fantastic bloke and his wife, who have done an extraordinary job, stand to lose \$450,000 this year because they planted crops on the promise of a good season.

Mr Thomas George: He is laughing about it.

Mr ANDREW FRASER: The laughter from the member for Bathurst and the member for Monaro on this issue is pathetic. I challenge the members of the so-called Country Labor faction to get over the sandstone curtain and go and talk to these farmers, many of whom are in tears, to see what they are facing. If we had floods tomorrow and the drought was over, those farmers still would have 12 months without any income from their farms. Breeding herds barely exist, crops are finished this season and the rain that has fallen means farmers cannot even harvest some of the hay they expected. They have hedged their crops. So they have a double-bunger. Fixed water charges will be paid out of the Federal Government subsidies when this lot opposite have paid only \$67 million a year since 2002.

Mr GERARD MARTIN (Bathurst) [11.55 a.m.]: I support the member for Monaro and the amendment to the motion. We welcome the contribution of the Federal Government. If we look at current prosperity that we are told about in this country and the outrageously high Federal surplus of \$17.6 billion, it is fairly obvious where the money is that could fix many of these problems. Certainly we on this side of the House are not walking away from the problems created by the drought. The State Government is continuing its drought assistance measures; from time to time it will review them and consider new measures. It is interesting that the member for Coffs Harbour is so keen to talk about regional issues. When the Premier's task force visited his electorate recently, he did not bother turning up. If he had, he might have heard a couple of people at Grafton saying from the floor that it was useless taking issues to him because he was a dud as a local member. He picks and chooses his arguments.

It is interesting that the Victorian example has been used when talking about New South Wales. One must compare apples with apples. I believe it was claimed that under the Victorian rebate proposal the Government would put \$100 million on the table, but rural water users receiving less than 40 per cent allocation of their normal entitlement as at December 2007 will be eligible for a rebate of up to \$1,000 on their fixed water charges, with a 50 per cent rebate on any balance above that amount. The Opposition fails to recognise that the rebate applies only to fixed water charges, which, in Victoria, are payable per megalitre of entitlement, irrespective of the volume actually delivered. As pointed out by the member for Monaro, New South Wales has a two-tier system with a fixed and variable component. The fixed component helps to cover the cost of maintaining infrastructure. The variable component is based on how much water is used. If no water is used, there is no usage charge; if a small quantity of water is used, there is only a small charge, and so on.

It is plainly wrong to suggest that irrigators in New South Wales are expected to pay for something they are not getting. The Iemma Government has devoted substantial assistance to support wider regional communities. That assistance is heading towards the \$400 million mark. We certainly have had meetings with the Minister in recent days and we will be extending our commitment to rural councils after December, despite what the member for Murray-Darling has suggested. As pointed out by the member for Monaro, the Howard Government has been ripping up the rules and picking and choosing the issues to support. The State

Government has been solid all the way down the line in its support for rural councils. When the Federal Government was waxing and waning, the State Government stuck by rural councils because it realises how important they are and that they will be needed for some time.

Even if the drought were to finish tomorrow, ongoing counselling will be needed, as well as the mental health initiatives about which we have been talking. If we look back at what we have been doing in recent years, particularly to drought-proof small towns, those opposite do not believe those things are all that important. The State Government has reacted quickly to support any community faced with problems—from larger communities such as Goulburn, where we have invested over \$20 million, along with the Federal Government, to a range of small communities where it has been necessary either to sink new bores or transport water into the community. The problem is addressed daily by the Government. We are standing behind country communities and we are looking at various regions.

Fixed water charges will be deferred for 12 months. They will then be considered on a hardship basis and, if necessary, deferred for a further three or four years. That may change as the Minister continues to review the situation. It is wrong to say the Government is not doing anything. The Opposition talks about council charges. I wonder whether it ever talks to the Local Government Association and the councils? They are the rating bodies.

Mr Steve Whan: They want someone else paying for it.

Mr GERARD MARTIN: Of course they do, because someone else is paying for it. I have been in local government; I now how the system works. There is no question, if the Government were to offer to take over that responsibility, that the response from local government would be, "We'd love it!" As I have indicated, as events unfold, the Government will continue to assess the need for drought assistance.

Mr JOHN WILLIAMS (Murray-Darling) [12 noon]: I acknowledge the presence in the public gallery of the President of the New South Wales Farmers Association, Mr Laurie. I refer to his acknowledgement on 20 October of the association's disappointment over comments made by the Minister for Climate Change, Environment and Water, Mr Koperberg, in an interview on ABC Radio when he indicated that charges cannot be waived. Mr Laurie quoted the Minister as having said:

We cannot waive them because to do so would leave us with no revenue to carry out essential maintenance and the servicing of the entire water structure and if we don't do that, then when it does rain, when the drought is over, whenever that might be, then the system will fail and people will be even worse off.

I assure the House that if some farmers who are adversely affected by the drought do not obtain relief from having to pay fixed water charges, they may no longer be around to use water resource facilities. This is a major issue. The Government definitely must examine this issue closely and immediately. Deferral of payment is not the answer. The Government needs to recognise that farmers are experiencing severe financial difficulties and need financial assistance in the form of up-front cash. In times of drought, it is not necessary for farmers experiencing severe drought to pay government charges for water.

Unfortunately the State Government relies on the Federal Government subsidies paid to farmers so that the State Government can send farmers a bill. Irrigators in Victoria must be breathing a sigh of relief because the Victorian Premier, Mr Brumby, while announcing a drought relief package and acknowledging that Victoria is in the grip of the worst drought on record, said that the Victorian Government has a responsibility to do all it can to help the struggling farmers, rural communities and businesses. Farmers in New South Wales do not have that type of encouragement. The Victorian Premier, Mr Brumby, visited Victorian irrigation areas and examined the circumstances at firsthand, but where is the New South Wales Premier? Our Premier has not left the eastern side of the ironstone curtain.

Mr Andrew Stoner: Sandstone.

Mr JOHN WILLIAMS: Now it is ironstone.

Mr Steve Whan: That is not true. He was in Armidale last week. Will you acknowledge that?

Mr JOHN WILLIAMS: What did he do?

Mr Steve Whan: He took the Cabinet to Armidale. Is that not a rural community?

Mr JOHN WILLIAMS: Did he get some dirt on his boots? I bet he did not. Let me examine the Victorian drought relief package comprising water rates rebates for irrigators. I know of no irrigators in my electorate who are asking for a full rebate. Most irrigators who have spoken to the Opposition are paying approximately \$15,000, and relief from some part of that payment would be of great assistance to them. But Government members do not understand. When I look around the Chamber, I do not see a risk-taker among Government members. Not one has been in private enterprise.

Mr Barry Collier: I have.

Mr JOHN WILLIAMS: Not one of them has had any experience in taking risks.

Mr Barry Collier: I have.

Mr JOHN WILLIAMS: I know. The member for Miranda represents the most vulnerable electorate in the State, and that is why he has Nationals paranoia. The Victorian Government's farmer support package includes \$10 million for on-farm improvements grants, with up to \$3,000 to assist farmers to undertake drought-proofing works. The Victorian Government has given farmers the opportunity to explore alternative sources of water, set up a network of piping, and organise a water supply for stock and domestic use. The Victorian Government has given farmers some support whereas farmers near Merran Creek in my electorate have had their water supply from the creek cut off. They have lost their stock and they have no alternative but to give up because they are being denied access to their water supply. Despite having an entitlement and a water resource, they cannot access the water supply. The New South Wales Government has given them no way of getting water to meet their stock and domestic water needs.

The Victorian Government's farmer support package also includes \$587,000 to establish mental health and early intervention teams. Depression in rural areas is a very serious problem. The member for Monaro and I agree that the motion moved by the Leader of The Nationals is very important. The House should recognise that people in rural communities are suffering from severe stress as a result of the drought and their circumstances. They have taken a risk to take up farming, and this House should support them.

Mr RICHARD AMERY (Mount Druitt) [12.05 p.m.]: In expressing support for the amendment moved by the member for Monaro on behalf of the Government, I welcome State and Federal government drought relief assistance and acknowledge the cooperation between the New South Wales Farmers Association and the State and Federal governments in the extremely difficult task of formulating policies to deal with the drought. I should also note an additional complicating factor illustrated by this debate: the politics of drought. A major challenge for State and Federal governments in the formulation of drought assistance programs is not to send mixed messages to the farming community.

Both Federal and State governments have been working for a number of years on programs to assist farmers to factor drought into the everyday risks associated with running a farm. Federal Labor and Coalition governments as well as State Labor and Coalition governments have supported that risk management strategy. The provision of assistance to the farming community must be handled very delicately. I make the point that while many people in the farming community very efficiently factor in drought management by putting aside large sums of money in good years for silage, water storage and drainage, others who perhaps are not in a financial position to prepare for the adverse effects of droughts are unable to do so.

Among all the variables and factors associated with drought, one factor that remains consistent is the Coalition's reaction to drought debates, particularly members of The Nationals. As a former Minister for Agriculture for more than eight years, I am familiar with that reaction and sadly the reaction is the same today as it was years ago. We all recognise that severe drought has a disastrous impact on many farmers. Although some members of the Opposition properly have drawn attention to the loss of farm revenue, Coalition policy is always the same: the Government should waive water rates, water accounts, land rates, Rural Lands Protection Boards rates and, every now and then, throw in some cash assistance. That reaction is typical of the Coalition. While I recognise that some farmers would welcome those benefits, the issue is: Do they really expect the Government to implement short-sighted policies?

The facts are that the authorities that control water supplies and feral animals, provide local government services and facilities and cope with other commonplace rural difficulties exacerbated by the drought must continue to exist throughout drought periods. Therefore, they have to keep drawing funds from services and charges. In particular, Rural Lands Protection Boards must continue their operations throughout the

extreme circumstances of a drought. The glib responses that the Opposition puts forward as drought strategy should be rejected because they amount to nothing more than lip-service and are cold comfort to farmers who are already confronting extreme difficulties. Depending on the seasons, the farming industry is valued at approximately \$9 billion in this State alone, so farmers deserve a better response than the Opposition's catch-cry, "The Federal Government is great, but the New South Wales Government is doing nothing."

Government members have appropriately highlighted the amount of money being put into transactional subsidies to ease transport costs. But that is not the whole story of the State Government involvement in ameliorating the effects of drought. Other members in this debate have already referred to the State Government's provision of rural counselling services, but I highlight the Rural Assistance Authority's low interest loans that assist farmers to finance the acquisition of silage, water storage and pasture improvement to mitigate the effects of drought. This type of State Government assistance is ongoing, irrespective of whether the State is 80 per cent adversely affected by drought or 20 per cent adversely affected by drought. The State Government continually provides this high level of assistance. Through New South Wales agriculture and primary industry departments, the State Government constantly works in conjunction with the Federal Government and the New South Wales Farmers Association to formulate policies that will be of assistance to farmers.

The facts I have outlined reveal the short-sighted nature of the attack launched by the Opposition on the State Government. I am sure that farmers who work with the State and Federal authorities to formulate appropriate responses to the drought will see the Opposition's attacks for what they are—an attempt to score a couple of political points against a Labor Government during a Federal election campaign. If I had 30 minutes available for my speech, I could highlight the proud history of Labor Governments' responses to farmers who are adversely affected by drought—a history featuring moratoriums, farm debt legislation and exceptional circumstances relief—but as time is short, I make the point in conclusion that although exceptional circumstances relief was instigated by a Federal Labor government, it is also a form of State Government drought relief assistance. I support the amendment.

Mr ANDREW STONER (Oxley—Leader of The Nationals) [12.10 p.m.], in reply: I thank members representing the electorates of Monaro, Coffs Harbour, Bathurst, Murray-Darling and Mount Druitt for their contributions to the debate. The member for Mount Druitt—a former Minister for Agriculture who was certainly better than the incumbent—spoke with some knowledge of the issues but his remarks offered farmers and rural communities little comfort. The contribution by the member for Monaro was a disgrace. He instantly moved an amendment that not only would neuter the motion and end any hopes of additional support for farmers and their communities but introduced a political game-playing element into the debate. The amendment moved by the member for Monaro seeks to congratulate the State Government and makes a sycophantic reference to Kevin Rudd federally. Of course the Opposition will not support the amendment.

The member for Monaro and the member for Bathurst read from notes written by the legion of staff of the Minister for Primary Industries and then launched a predictable political attack on the Federal Government. As far as country people are concerned, actions speak louder than words. The actions of the member for Monaro in seeking to delete from the motion the reference to any further assistance and making a sycophantic reference to "Krudd" will go down like a lead balloon in country New South Wales. It is a betrayal of farmers and country communities. At no stage did Government members attempt to address rate relief, which is occurring in Victoria, or seriously address fixed water charges. There was simply a statement about the deferral of payments in the event of hardship. No wonder the number of so-called Country Labor members in this place halved at the last State election.

The member for Bathurst made a Freudian slip when he referred to the "outrageously high" Federal surpluses. That is a clear indication of what Federal Labor thinks about Federal surpluses: It will get rid of them real quick because they are "outrageously high". The member for Bathurst then went on to spout economic rationalist gobbledygook in an attempt to justify fixed water charges. The member for Monaro referred to the State Government's paltry drought assistance of an average of \$67 million per annum—much of which is spent on bureaucratic salaries. All Government members missed the point of the motion. This is a record-breaking drought. Country communities—particularly farmers, and related industries such as machinery dealers, contractors and small businesses—have never had it so tough. The same old, same old is not good enough. Now is their hour of need.

We do not want to hear what the Government has done; we want to know what it will do. We want to hear about additional assistance measures. The member for Bathurst confirmed that funding for rural counsellors

would continue beyond December. Thank goodness we have heard something about that! The Government has left it until now to make an announcement. Rural counsellors had no idea what was happening so many of them have looked for jobs elsewhere. We will be in big trouble if we lose their experience. It took a motion from The Nationals to get some information about that issue. It also took this motion to get some words about a possible deferral of fixed water charges.

But why should we defer a bill that should not exist in the first place? If people are not getting something they should not pay for it. I will ask the Minister for Fair Trading to investigate her colleague the Minister for Climate Change, Environment and Water. It is no wonder the Iemma Labor Government is known across country New South Wales as the most Sydney-centric government in the history of this State. It is happy to spend \$1.9 billion on a desalination plant at Kurnell but it will not put its hand in its pocket—unlike the Federal and Victorian governments—to help our farmers in their hour of need.

Question—That the amendment be agreed to—put.

The House divided.

Ayes, 51

Mr Amery	Mr Greene	Mrs Paluzzano
Ms Andrews	Mr Harris	Mr Pearce
Mr Aquilina	Ms Hay	Mrs Perry
Ms Beamer	Mr Hickey	Mr Rees
Mr Borger	Ms Hornery	Mr Sartor
Mr Brown	Ms Judge	Mr Shearan
Ms Burney	Ms Keneally	Mr Stewart
Ms Burton	Mr Khoshaba	Ms Tebbutt
Mr Campbell	Mr Koperberg	Mr Terenzini
Mr Collier	Mr Lynch	Mr Tripodi
Mr Coombs	Mr McBride	Mr Watkins
Mr Corrigan	Dr McDonald	Mr West
Mr Costa	Ms McKay	Mr Whan
Mr Daley	Mr McLeay	
Ms D'Amore	Ms McMahan	
Ms Firth	Ms Meagher	<i>Tellers,</i>
Ms Gadiel	Ms Megarrity	Mr Ashton
Mr Gibson	Mr Morris	Mr Martin

Noes, 39

Mr Aplin	Ms Hodgkinson	Mrs Skinner
Mr Baird	Mrs Hopwood	Mr Smith
Mr Baumann	Mr Humphries	Mr Souris
Ms Berejiklian	Mr Kerr	Mr Stokes
Mr Cansdell	Mr Merton	Mr Stoner
Mr Constance	Mr Oakeshott	Mr J. H. Turner
Mr Debnam	Mr O'Dea	Mr R. W. Turner
Mr Draper	Mr O'Farrell	Mr J. D. Williams
Mrs Fardell	Mr Page	Mr R. C. Williams
Mr Fraser	Mr Piccoli	
Ms Goward	Mr Piper	
Mrs Hancock	Mr Provest	<i>Tellers,</i>
Mr Hartcher	Mr Richardson	Mr George
Mr Hazzard	Mr Roberts	Mr Maguire

Question resolved in the affirmative.

Amendment agreed to.

Motion as amended agreed to.

STATE LABOR GOVERNMENT ELECTION PROMISES

Mr BARRY O'FARRELL (Ku-ring-gai—Leader of the Opposition) [12.23 p.m.]: I move:

That this House notes the Government's cynical abandonment of election promises.

I am delighted to debate this motion, which relates to the State Government's cynical abandonment of election promises. Today we are in the midst of a hospital crisis, not just within this city but also across New South Wales. Government members who deny that there is a problem might like to talk to the doctors, allied health professionals and patients at Mt Druitt Hospital. Madam Acting-Speaker, as a member who represents Western Sydney, you might like to reflect upon people who use Mt Druitt Hospital who, because of revelations today of an \$18 million cost overrun in Sydney West Area Health Service, will face a longer wait for surgery because another 21 surgical beds will be closed. Fifty per cent of surgical beds in that hospital are to be closed at a time when 653 people are waiting for surgery.

However, today the State Government is saying that surgery will continue. Well, that is the sort of cute use of language for which this Government has become known. Of course surgery will continue—half the beds are still open—but it will take much longer for people to get the surgery they need. It is the sort of playing with language that sees life-saving cancer surgery described as "elective". I suppose, if you elect not to have it, you die. It is the sort of crisis that afflicts this city. We have seen it in relation to Royal North Shore Hospital and other teaching hospitals. An upper House parliamentary inquiry has been established in the hope that, having identified problems at Royal North Shore Hospital, we can start to learn lessons not just in Sydney but also across the State.

During the election campaign the Government made promises about fixing our hospital system. The Premier repeated those promises the day after he won the election. On the Sunday he said, "It is now back to work to fix the State's problems." Last week the Deputy Leader of the Opposition, the Deputy Leader of the Opposition in the Legislative Council, the member for Barwon, the Hon. Jennifer Gardiner and I visited Dubbo to talk to people in the Greater Western Area Health Service—which is larger than Victoria—about the quality and adequacy of care they are receiving. I extend my compliments to the member for Barwon on organising that event and on his knowledge of the pressing health needs in that area—given the fact that his electorate comprises about a third of the State.

If we want to talk about the cynical abandonment of election promises when it comes to the seat of Dubbo, we can talk about Morris Iemma's cynical abandonment of his promise not just during the last State election campaign but during the by-election for Dubbo, when he promised that Forbes and Parkes hospitals would be rebuilt. The people who rely upon hospital services in that region are still waiting for that promise to be delivered. As I said in Dubbo last Thursday, my Liberal and National party colleagues and I will work with the Independent member for Dubbo to achieve better health outcomes. We understand that the hospital crisis in New South Wales extends beyond the city. We cannot afford to be Sydney-centric or New South Wales-centric—that is, Newcastle-Sydney-Wollongong-centric—when it comes to health services. People who live outside those areas, people who live west of the divide, deserve equality of treatment when it comes to the provision not just of health services but also of other services provided by the State.

What came home to me last week, what was reinforced to me during two days of discussions with a variety of people who use the health system in one way or another, is that that is simply not happening. Dubbo Base Hospital is endeavouring to provide its community and the broader community that uses it with first-class medical care. I pay tribute, as the Deputy Leader of the Opposition always does, to the staff who work in our hospitals—be they medical professionals, allied health professionals or lay staff—for the way in which they achieve for their communities and the way in which they provide caring services to their communities, despite the enormous resource and funding restrictions placed upon them.

I ask members to look at Dubbo Base Hospital and the job it is trying to do—the member for North Shore will talk about the waiting list, the delays in the emergency department and the other issues at that hospital—and to contrast it with Lourdes Hospital, an equally important facility within the Dubbo region, which largely provides care to older patients. If it were an aged care facility, if it were another facility regulated by the Federal Government, I suspect it would struggle to keep its doors open. Due to a lack of decision making by the Greater Western Area Health Service and due to a lack of funding from the State Government, Lourdes Hospital is in a deplorable state.

However, it still endeavours to provide quality care to the people who use it, despite the enormous constraints that it faces, and I pay tribute to the Catholic health services that run it. When one visits the heated hydrotherapy pool in the region, which has been closed for almost two years—there is no water in it; there is no other heated pool in the area and no other pool in the area has an assisted lift to get people into and out of the water, yet the State Government does nothing about it—one understands how dire the health situation is in a place such as Dubbo.

We visited the physiotherapy section of Lourdes Hospital. We talked to the physiotherapist and we saw patients receiving physiotherapy treatment. The point made to me was how much more difficult it is for staff and patients alike because of the lack of a hydrotherapy pool. The State Government, in its cute use of language, says that other pools are available. However, those other pools are not heated in the way that hydrotherapy pools in this city are heated, and those other pools do not have assisted lifts to get people with disabilities and other locomotion problems, including issues of age, into and out of the water. It is simply not a first-class service. There is no service in the region because the pool is closed; and physiotherapy and other rehabilitation work must be done in the old-fashioned way, which involves great difficulty for staff in terms of lifting and for patients in terms of exercises and great pain at times.

When I was in Dubbo last week I said that we would continue to bring those issues to this place in the hope that this State Government will get the message and do something about them over the next 3½ years. It is the reason why, when I was in Dubbo last week, I established a rural health task force, to be chaired by the Hon. Jennifer Gardiner with the member for Wagga Wagga as the deputy chair; we want to bring to this place the concerns of country people, people living in rural areas west of the divide and in remote areas, about the difficulties they are experiencing in accessing health care for themselves and their families, the difficulty that causes for economic development in those areas, and the difficulty that causes for the retention of population and businesses in those areas. We hope that we can get this Government to start fixing the problems. We believe that by using that information we can put together the program and policies needed to offer people hope for the better at the time of the next State election campaign.

We need only understand what is happening in hospitals, whether in Dubbo, Forbes, Parkes, Auburn or Mount Druitt, to pledge to work together to fix the State's health crisis and to pledge that there will be some accountability in the system. We want to ensure that the almost 28 per cent of the State budget allocated to health is not chewed up in bureaucracy but finds its way through to the front line to support doctors and nurses in city and rural areas to provide the care that the public and patients have a right to expect, regardless of where they live, how they vote and who is in office. Until we do that, we are failing in our duty to those people.

Mr BARRY COLLIER (Miranda—Parliamentary Secretary) [12.33 p.m.]: The Government is proud of its election commitments. We went to the election with a platform of new and improved public services for working families. The Opposition went to the election with a platform of 20,000 public sector job cuts. Shame!

ACTING-SPEAKER (Ms Diane Beamer): Order! The Leader of the Opposition was heard in silence. I ask members to extend the same courtesy to the member for Miranda. I am sure Opposition members do not want to miss question time.

Mr BARRY COLLIER: The Opposition went to the election with a platform of \$28 million in unfunded pork barrelling and the viscount for Vacluse in his Speedos. It is not hard to work out why Labor was re-elected. Since the election we have been working steadily to implement the Government's election commitments: law and order reforms, health expenditure, education programs to help our kids, measures to meet the skills shortages, and improved public transport measures. We are working hard for New South Wales. What have members opposite done? What has the Coalition done since 24 March? That is anybody's guess. The Leader of the Opposition, who is leaving the Chamber, has established himself as Mr Invisible, alienating himself in his party room. And the Opposition still has not come up with any policies or any sensible contributions to the public debate.

All Coalition members have done is fight with each other—they are doing so as I speak. Historically, it is no surprise; everyone knows that they cannot stand one another. Talk about the Coalition of the unwilling! It was not surprising to read that The Nationals were upset with the Liberals recently, particularly when the member for Davidson proudly announced that he had "applied for external scrutiny" of his electoral office operations and that his electorate office appeared to be the first electorate office in Australia to achieve an international standard of excellence from the local performance rating group Global-Mark. That is from the *North Shore Times* of 9 August 2007. The member for Davidson was thrilled to bits. He fired off a press release

giving himself a big pat on the back. However, the celebrations stopped pretty quickly when the member for Upper Hunter, according to the *Australian*—

Mr Andrew Constance: Point of order: My point of order relates to relevance. The member's speech has nothing to do with the motion before the House. I am happy to sit here and listen to the member talk about the huge swing he had at the State election. I ask you to uphold my point of order.

ACTING-SPEAKER (Ms Diane Beamer): Order! Although the speech of the Leader of the Opposition was wide ranging, I ask the member for Miranda to return to the motion.

Mr BARRY COLLIER: When will members opposite get used to the idea that I actually won the seat of Miranda three consecutive times? They cannot get over it. They lost the crown jewel of Miranda and they will not get it back.

Mr Steve Whan: Who did you beat?

Mr BARRY COLLIER: I beat a bloke called Phillips, the Deputy Leader of the Liberal Party. The celebrations stopped pretty quickly when the member for Upper Hunter, according to the *Australian* of 9 August—

Mr Barry O'Farrell: Point of order: My motion, which I think you have now read, refers to the State Government's cynical abandonment of its election promises. The last time I checked the list of members, the member for Davidson was not a Government member. He was not a member of the Labor Party. What the Parliamentary Secretary is talking about is not one of the State Government's cynical election promises that it has abandoned. I ask you to bring him back to the leave of the motion.

ACTING-SPEAKER (Ms Diane Beamer): Order! I read the motion before I took the chair. Opposition members should remember that their interjections invite further interruptions.

Mr BARRY COLLIER: The member for Davidson is now a member of the House. The celebrations stopped pretty quickly when the member for Upper Hunter—

Mr Barry O'Farrell: Point of order—

Mr BARRY COLLIER: I listened in silence to the rubbish you went on with.

Mr Barry O'Farrell: I will listen in silence to the member for Miranda if he wants to talk about the promises Labor took to the election campaign, and I will listen in silence if he has some solutions to the State's health crises. If the member starts talking about those I will sit down. Until then, Madam Acting-Speaker, I raise for the third time the fact that the member is not referring to the motion. It is a simple motion of about six words. The member is supposed to be a barrister but he cannot make a speech without notes.

ACTING-SPEAKER (Ms Diane Beamer): Order! Opposition members will remain silent. The member for Miranda should confine his comments to the motion. He has said only about four words since the previous point of order. To facilitate the debate he may continue.

Mr BARRY COLLIER: Obviously this mob does not want to hear some good news. The Leader of the Opposition—

Mr Barry O'Farrell: Tell us the good news!

Mr BARRY COLLIER: Members opposite are a rude lot. The Leader of the Opposition's motion relates to election promises. Let us talk about some election promises in my electorate. The State Government promised and is delivering the \$231 million duplication of the Cronulla railway line. The last time partial duplication was undertaken was under a Labor government. The \$231 million duplication of the Cronulla railway line involves an easy-access upgrade to both Kirrawee and Woolooware stations—and I point out that Woolooware is in the Cronulla electorate. The duplication will add two extra trains per hour in the peak on the Cronulla line and that will mean less crowding, more on-time running and better services for the people of the Sutherland shire. That is an election commitment that the Government is delivering, and delivering well. That builds on our previous election commitments, including the upgrade of Gympie and Miranda railway stations.

Those commitments were given by a Labor government and are being delivered by a Labor government as we speak. Recently I was out on the job with engineers at Kirrawee railway station. I saw a lot of work going on, workers everywhere. The framework for the easy-access lift at Kirrawee station is well underway. That will give the community better access to rail services, particularly families with young children, disabled persons and seniors. That is an election promise on which we are delivering. The motion moved by the Leader of the Opposition was not confined to Health, it referred to election promises; promises that we are delivering on.

Mr Andrew Constance: What about Queanbeyan Hospital.

Mr BARRY COLLIER: The member for Bega should just listen; he might learn something.

Mr Andrew Constance: We haven't so far.

Mr BARRY COLLIER: Well, mate, you have to have an IQ to learn something.

Mr John Williams: Well why didn't they get someone with an IQ to deliver the speech?

Mr BARRY COLLIER: If that is the best the member for Murray-Darling can do, he should go back to selling used cars. Sutherland Hospital is going from strength to strength. The Government is building a comprehensive health campus for the Sutherland shire. We are building on our \$88.9 million redevelopment of Sutherland Hospital, which really began shortly after I was elected in 1999. The redevelopment began with the opening of the accident and emergency service. Since then we have added two cardiac catheter laboratories to the hospital so that people do not have to leave the shire to get treatment for heart conditions.

We have added a joint replacement unit and recently added a \$5 million community health unit, which is providing a large range of services to shire residents and their families. Very shortly we will open a \$1.2 million renal dialysis unit, which will have up to 12 chairs and will provide facilities for up to 36 patients. That means that shire residents who have kidney problems will not have to leave the shire to get treatment.

Mrs Jillian Skinner: What about orthopaedic patients?

Mr BARRY COLLIER: If the Deputy Leader of the Opposition had listened, she would have heard me say that a joint replacement unit was established as part of the Sutherland Hospital. She asked about joints, that is the answer. Regarding renal dialysis, the hospital will have facilities for patients to learn home dialysis. Work is just about to start on a non-acute mental health unit as part of Sutherland Hospital's new facilities. Regarding aged-care facilities, something that the Federal Government does not care about, we are adding 112 aged-care facilities to the hospital in the Sutherland shire. Ten aged-care beds will be reserved for Sutherland Hospital patients. Our health campus at Sutherland Hospital—and the Deputy Leader of the Opposition should stop shaking her head—is going from strength to strength. We are getting better and better, but she cannot hack it. Now she is quiet!

Mrs JILLIAN SKINNER (North Shore—Deputy Leader of the Opposition) [12.43 a.m.]: I am afraid that the time I have available will not allow me to list all the cynically abandoned election promises. The member for Miranda commenced his speech by saying that the Government had promised new and improved public services. He should tell that to the 56,000 patients now waiting for elective surgery; he should tell that to the people who cannot be treated in emergency departments because the Government has closed so many beds; and he should tell that to the people at Dubbo whom we met last week at a wonderful seminar organised by the member for Barwon. Over two days in Dubbo we met many different people, including representatives from Lourdes Hospital.

Mr Steve Whan: What was he doing in Dubbo?

Mrs JILLIAN SKINNER: The member for Barwon was in Dubbo because half of his constituents try to use the hospital there. However, the Government has run it down to such an extent that more than 700 people are waiting for elective surgery and many people are waiting extremely long times to get into the emergency department. Dubbo hospital has doctors who cannot get necessary resources to treat patients. I note that the member for Monaro is trying to shout me down because he is so ashamed of the delays in building Queanbeyan Hospital. No wonder his constituents complain frequently to me about his lack of action.

Mr Steve Whan: Point of order: My point of order is relevance. As pointed out three times by members opposite, the motion is very specific. Queanbeyan Hospital is absolutely on time, as promised. It is due to be finished in mid-2008, as promised before the 2007 election. If members opposite cannot tell the truth, they should not speak.

ACTING-SPEAKER (Ms Diane Beamer): Order! The member for Monaro will resume his seat. The Deputy Leader of the Opposition may resume.

Mrs JILLIAN SKINNER: I think the member for Monaro doth protest too much. The people we met in Dubbo included representatives of Lourdes Hospital, which we visited and saw the fantastic work of its staff. It was interesting to talk to the nurses there; they have a very stable work force and stay in their jobs for a long time because they are so committed to providing health care and they are treated very well. On the other hand, some doctors and nurses in our public hospitals are coming out in droves and saying how disappointed they are with the State Labor Government, which has abandoned them and will not listen to their concerns. The State Government has layered the health system with bureaucrats to such an extent that they are taking scarce resources from front-line services. So much for improved public services.

In Dubbo, we met the Acting Dean of the Rural Health Campus of the University of Sydney. He is a fantastic man, whom I have met several times, and we talked about what is needed in Dubbo. We talked to nurses, to people working in the aged-care system, and to a marvellous young woman from a cancer action group. She had some fantastic ideas and I hope she will stay around, because she is the kind of person who really has her finger on the pulse and could give Labor members of this House some ideas, if only they were willing to listen—but, of course, they are not. I found it extraordinary that the member for Miranda had to refer to his notes as he stumbled around some initiatives in his electorate. Honestly, he missed the whole point.

Any member of the Labor Party who thinks that the State Government has credibility in its claims that it has improved hospital care is obviously living on a different planet from me and the media representatives who receive many calls from the hard-working, committed doctors and nurses in our hospital system. I have met dozens and dozens of them in my time in this portfolio, including many at the Royal North Shore Hospital. They will come forward in a few weeks to say how desperate they are to get resources, to open some of the 2,500 hospital beds that have been closed by the Labor Government, to enable them to open the emergency departments in many hospitals. The Government really should listen to people in country New South Wales, and that is one reason why I am very proud of the Coalition's rural health task force, which will be chaired by the Hon. Jennifer Gardiner. The member for Wagga Wagga is the deputy chair of that task force. The task force will listen to rural patients and clinicians, unlike the Labor Party, which thinks they do not exist.

Mr STEVE WHAN (Monaro—Parliamentary Secretary) [12.48 p.m.]: I have been inspired to speak in this debate by the constant, ridiculous comments from members opposite. They are disgraceful ambulance chasers and they are trying to highlight everything negative they can find. I will highlight some positives in the promises delivered in New South Wales, because they are very important. I will start with the big lie from members opposite about the Queanbeyan Hospital. When former Premier Bob Carr visited Queanbeyan in 2003 he promised that the Queanbeyan hospital would be finished in mid-2008.

Mrs Jillian Skinner: After we promised it. If you have such a promise show it to us.

Mr STEVE WHAN: I have the former Premier's press release in my files. The Queanbeyan hospital project is right on track. If members of The Nationals and Liberals ever bothered to visit the Monaro electorate they would see the progress that is being made on the construction of that hospital. Staff at that hospital are thrilled with the progress of its construction. More importantly, the hospital is providing additional services. This Government made a commitment to deliver more services in hospitals in our region. Every few months the Opposition's health spokesperson, who does not understand the figures or the background to these issues and who does not bother to get to the bottom of them, states that waiting lists are longer, which is appalling. However, she does not tell us that more surgery is being delivered which results in more people waiting for 30 days. Cooma Hospital and Queanbeyan hospital are now delivering much more elective surgery than they were delivering in the late 1990s.

Mr Andrew Constance: Point of order—

Mr STEVE WHAN: The member for Bega is about to take a point of order, but the same thing is happening in Bega.

Mr Andrew Constance: The member for Monaro is misleading the House. Last week podiatry services in his electorate and in the Bega electorate were cut.

ACTING-SPEAKER (Ms Diane Beamer): Order! There is no point of order. The member for Bega will resume his seat.

Mr STEVE WHAN: The member for Bega comes to me quietly and says, "Steve, can you help me to fix this problem?" However, he gives me no credit for doing so. I give as an example the Government's election promise of new operating theatres for Bega hospital. They were finished this week and they are open for business. This Government is about to build a \$100 million hospital in Bega. I give the member for Bega credit for working well with the Government to ensure that the hospital is built in a good location. When the member for Bega is not in the atmosphere of this hothouse he can be quite cooperative.

Mr Andrew Constance: Point of order—

Mr STEVE WHAN: The member for Bega does not even like to receive praise!

ACTING-SPEAKER (Ms Diane Beamer): Order! The member for Monaro will resume his seat.

Mr Andrew Constance: The member for Monaro is again misleading the House. In this case Treasury is yet to approve that \$100 million hospital project.

ACTING-SPEAKER (Ms Diane Beamer): Order! There is no point of order. The member for Bega will resume his seat.

Mr STEVE WHAN: If the member for Bega does not believe that this project will go ahead I will take credit for it when it happens. I am happy to do so because Bega hospital services a lot of people in the Monaro electorate. This Government is delivering on its promises. This Government promised a hospital in Bombala and that project is almost complete. Queanbeyan hospital is well on its way to completion. Construction of a trade school to be built in Queanbeyan has already commenced, which is another promise that was made by this Government. The State Office Block, which is a great investment, has been delivered as promised.

Opposition members hate it when Queanbeyan gets something but I think the economic development and progress of Queanbeyan and other regional centres around New South Wales is positive. This Government is delivering on its promises. Earlier today I referred to other projects that are being completed by this Government. Jindabyne Central School has just been completed and opened. However, I admit that the Government broke its promise in relation to that project. It promised that classes in that school would go to year 10 when in fact they will go to year 12—another plus for the electorate.

Mr Barry Collier: Another big tick.

Mr STEVE WHAN: The Government might have broken its promise, but it exceeded its service delivery. That is the way it goes. All these promises are being delivered in the Monaro electorate and in electorates right around the State. This Government has made a number of promises. We have a record level of funding for health but we now need the Federal Government to come on board and supply us with staff. Anyone who has read the recent rural health newsletter would be aware of a terrific article about heads not beds. Hospitals in New South Wales need more staff. Members of the Coalition—those hypocrites opposite—talked earlier about beds. When the Coalition was in government it closed 7,500 beds and 20 hospitals were either downgraded or closed. This Government is building new hospitals, improving facilities and delivering more services. This Labor Government is all about service delivery—not the rubbish that we heard from Opposition members today. [*Time expired.*]

Mr KEVIN HUMPHRIES (Barwon) [12.53 p.m.]: I support the motion moved earlier by the Leader of the Opposition relating to the current Labor Government's cynical abandonment of election promises. Recently, the Leader of the Opposition and the Deputy Leader of the Opposition and health spokesperson attended a health forum on needs analysis that was held in Dubbo. The two biggest issues that were spoken about this morning were health and water but nothing is more important than rural health. It was terrific to have the Coalition leadership team attending that forum in Dubbo because people in rural New South Wales want leadership on rural health issues and, in particular, service delivery and access.

Prior to the election this Government promised that it would bring health care closer to home. In rural New South Wales nothing could be further from the truth. I convened that forum in Dubbo because Barwon is the only electorate in New South Wales that does not have a regional hospital. Barwon relies heavily on major city centres and rural city centres such as Dubbo and to an extent Orange, Tamworth and even Toowoomba for its health services. Forty per cent of the surgical procedures undertaken at Dubbo Base Hospital are for constituents in the seat of Barwon. Up to 60 per cent of people access health services in Dubbo for things such as rehabilitation, so we rely heavily on health services in Dubbo. People in Dubbo said to me and to some of my colleagues, "We need some advocacy for rural health services based out of Dubbo."

We need a hand because the current Government is not delivering and it is not bringing health care closer to home." That is why I convened a forum in Dubbo, which was fully booked out for two days. Representatives from organisations representing local government attended that forum. Fourteen councils right across western New South Wales are now conducting a survey relating to access and equity of access to health care services on which they rely in areas such as Dubbo—something that NSW Health has failed to do. This Government promised to bring health care closer to home but it has no plan. There is no plan for health in rural New South Wales in this Government's State Plan. In particular, there is no plan for health in central western New South Wales. There is no cancer action plan for cancer sufferers in central western New South Wales, which is a disgrace.

These problems must be rectified, which is why I convened a forum in Dubbo. The week before I went to Dubbo—the forum was held three weeks ago—the member for Bathurst publicly stated on ABC radio that the Greater Western Area Health Service was not delivering health services in western New South Wales and that Western Sydney Area Health Service should service people in his electorate. What a bipartisan approach, cynical though it might be, from a Government member who is bucketing his own Government and saying that his constituents are not receiving the health services that they deserve! That tells me that it is time for change. Some people in Dubbo have a plan for health. Prior to the last election Lourdes Palliative Care Services, via Catholic Health Care, said that it would allocate \$6 million if the Government allocated \$12 million to provide rehabilitation and palliative care for western New South Wales.

From day one this Government sat on its hands and virtually undermined that plan, which goes against community wishes and the wishes of clinicians and non-government organisations that want to partner with the State and Federal governments in the delivery of health services in western New South Wales. This State Government is walking away from that plan. If it were fair dinkum about showing some real commitment to providing health services in rural New South Wales, that is one project to which it would commit. This Government must be held accountable and that is what Coalition members will endeavour to do.

Mr ALAN ASHTON (East Hills) [12.58 p.m.]: One of the election promises we committed to was that we would not sack 29,000 government employees. We did not sack 29,000 government employees. We have not sacked one teacher. We have not put one teacher on an Australian workplace agreement. We have not sacked anybody from the Department of Community Services. We have not sacked any nurses.

Mr Barry O'Farrell: Point of order. I agree with the member for East Hills. They have not sacked over 600 people. That is why they are being paid \$18 million a year with no jobs to do.

ACTING-SPEAKER (Ms Diane Beamer): Order! There is no point of order.

Pursuant to standing orders business interrupted and set down as an order of the day for a future day.

[Acting-Speaker (Ms Diane Beamer) left the chair at 1.00 p.m. The House resumed at 2.15 p.m.]

QUESTION TIME

MINISTERIAL CODE OF CONDUCT

Mr BARRY O'FARRELL: My question is directed to the Premier. Was the adoption of non-compulsory guidelines instead of the Independent Commission Against Corruption's recommended formal changes to his ministerial code of conduct following the 2005 Orange Grove inquiry a deliberate decision to shield him and his Ministers in dealings with lobbyists such as Peter Barron and Graham Richardson from findings of corrupt conduct under the Independent Commission Against Corruption Act?

Mr MORRIS IEMMA: No.

EARLY PREGNANCY SERVICES

Ms NOREEN HAY: My question is to the Minister for Health. Can the Minister update the House on the Government's initiatives to provide improved care for women in early pregnancy?

Ms REBA MEAGHER: I said on the day the review undertaken by Professor Hughes and Professor Walters was published that the Government would accept its recommendations and develop an implementation plan: a comprehensive response for women with problems in early pregnancy; a response that supports women, offers dignity and privacy. That was the commitment I gave on behalf of the Iemma Government and today I am pleased to deliver on it. New funding of \$4½ million will now be provided to expand early pregnancy services available to women across New South Wales. Further funding will be announced in the 2008-09 budget following the initial rollout of these new services.

Women with early pregnancy problems who present to an emergency department will be provided with rapid assessment and advice from special new early pregnancy units. These units will exist in major hospitals and be staffed by trained and skilled specialist nurses, nurses who can give prompt care and attention to women who have miscarried or who present with the risk of miscarriage. New nurse positions for these services will be provided through new funding of \$2 million. The new program will be developed and implemented in consultation with the Emergency Physicians Task Force, chaired by Professor Rod Bishop, the Maternal and Perinatal Health Priority Task Force, and the Critical Care Health Priority Task Force.

A network of early pregnancy assessment services will be made available to offer clinical assessment and advice, providing a network of specialty services including ultrasound, scanning, diagnosis, and other support and advice services. Referrals will be accepted from emergency departments, general practitioners, midwives and women with early pregnancy problems. Early pregnancy assessment services will be established in major metropolitan hospitals and major rural referral hospitals throughout New South Wales at a recurrent cost of almost \$1 million per year.

The additional funding provided by the Iemma Government is over and above the record budgets provided for current programs and will provide a wider network of care and a greater consistency in our approach. The additional funding will mean an increase in the number of hours of care available for medical and midwifery services in the centres. We will also provide 14 new portable ultrasound scanners to areas that do not already have that type of service. Scanners will be established in the early pregnancy assessment services at Blacktown, Campbelltown, Royal North Shore Hospital, Coffs Harbour, Wagga Wagga and others.

The SPEAKER: Order! Members will cease injecting.

Ms REBA MEAGHER: In addition, all women who present with early pregnancy problems will have an opportunity to access a social worker or qualified counsellor. Funding of \$200,000 will be provided to increase social worker hours in facilities with an early pregnancy assessment service and provide support and counselling for women and their partners. The report by Professor Hughes and Professor Walker highlights the need for improved information and support for women in the first trimester of pregnancy. The Government's funding package will mean that all women will be able to obtain better information and improved care through expanded publicly funded antenatal clinics throughout rural New South Wales, ensuring early and improved access. Women will receive medical and midwifery assessment, support and advice as well as information about preventing problems during pregnancy.

Forty-seven rural and remote hospitals will also benefit from expanded services and improved access to an antenatal clinic so that pregnancy is managed well and any problems are identified early. The Government will provide \$1.3 million to establish or expand services in regional and rural communities, including Lismore, Broken Hill, Cootamundra, Temora, Bega, Cooma, Queanbeyan, Dubbo, Bathurst, Lithgow, Parkes, Bourke, Maitland, Armidale, Tamworth, Coffs Harbour, Murwillumbah, Casino, Macksville, Manning Base, Mullumbimby, Shoalhaven and others. Strong partnerships with general practice are also critical for the provision of quality care to pregnant women. This year \$450,000 in new funding will be provided to the Alliance of Divisions of General Practice to work with NSW Health in implementing expanded services.

Pregnant women now will be able to access support via a designated round-the-clock telephone advice line that previously was available only to general practitioners. To complement these new services the Government will provide new information to families in 2008 about pregnancy planning and what to do when experiencing problems in early pregnancy. The Government will also get on with the job of improving signage,

improving privacy when patients are being treated, and establishing a system-wide policy. The Hughes-Walters review has given us a template for improvement. We are getting on with the job of putting those recommendations into practice. This is a comprehensive fully funded response to this critical area of care for women in New South Wales.

INTERNET BETTING EXCHANGES

Mr ANDREW STONER: My question is directed to the Premier. Did his mates Graham Richardson or Peter Barron organise or facilitate meetings between him and principals of Betfair, including the dinner shortly after he became premier in 2005—yes, or no?

Mr MORRIS IEMMA: Last week in answer to questions, I mentioned the dinner at Mr Packer's residence at which Betfair was raised. This question is the same question that I was asked at press conferences last week.

Mr Andrew Stoner: You refused to answer.

Mr MORRIS IEMMA: No. In relation to Mr Barron and Mr Richardson, it is the same question as those I was asked last week.

The SPEAKER: Order! The Leader of The Nationals will cease interjecting.

Mr MORRIS IEMMA: The simple point I make is this—

The SPEAKER: Order! The member for Upper Hunter will cease interjecting.

Mr MORRIS IEMMA: I had dinner at the Packer residence and had discussions on a whole range of issues and matters, and Betfair arose. My response was, "Put a proposal to the Government and it will be considered fairly and on its merits." As much as the Leader of The Nationals or any other member of the Opposition wants to go on, the fact is that two years down the track the status of Betfair is no different from what it was two years ago.

LUNG CANCER DEATHS

Dr ANDREW McDONALD: My question is addressed to the Premier. Will he advise the House of the Government's latest efforts to decrease the number of people in New South Wales who die from lung cancer?

The SPEAKER: Order! I remind the member for Upper Hunter that he has been called to order.

Mr MORRIS IEMMA: I thank the member for Macquarie Fields for his question on National Lung Cancer Day. Lung cancer is the largest single cause of cancer deaths in New South Wales and is responsible for one in every five cancer deaths. Lung cancer will surpass breast cancer as the leading cause of cancer deaths in women by 2010. It is a fact that smoking causes the vast majority of lung cancers. Approximately 80 per cent of people who die from lung cancer are smokers. That is why we need to constantly remind the community about the incredible dangers of smoking. The Government is continuing to invest in high-impact public education campaigns to encourage approximately one million people in New South Wales who currently smoke to quit—and to quit now. Recently we launched a remake of the Wran Labor Government's highly successful sponge commercial, one of the first major quit-smoking campaigns produced by any Australian government. It was the subject of controversy and debate when it first aired in the early 1980s.

The Government spends about \$12 million a year informing our community about the very real dangers of smoking. Today we mark National Lung Cancer Awareness Day by announcing a new campaign to highlight again the fact that the prognosis for lung cancer patients is extremely poor. One in two people diagnosed with lung cancer will be dead within 12 months. Only 13 per cent of men with lung cancer and 15 per cent of women are expected to survive five years after diagnosis. These are the sobering facts. In the new advertisement we hear the whistling noise of a smoker's breathing, indicating the presence of an advanced lung cancer almost completely blocking the airway. The viewer then sees the tumour located by a doctor. It is not nice, it is not pretty and it is hardly dinnertime viewing. But it is clear and confronting, and it is real. No smoker can breathe easy.

Our research shows that the ad is viewed by smokers as being very effective and will help them take the decision to kick the habit. Our ads are so effective that they have been picked up by other States, and even internationally. The Government has made significant progress in the fight against tobacco-related disease. Our smoking rate is at 17.7 per cent, which is among the lowest rates in the world and a full 2 per cent lower than Victoria. The progress to date is a significant victory for the New South Wales Government's comprehensive tobacco action plan. We plan to reduce the smoking rate in New South Wales to 13 per cent by 2016. This new advertising campaign is a \$1.4 million investment in the future health of our community. It will be broadcast in December across New South Wales. It is also tailored for non-English speaking background communities. On National Lung Cancer Awareness Day it represents a practical investment by the Government in preventing this lethal disease.

CHILDREN AT RISK INTERAGENCY COORDINATION

Mr ANDREW STONER: My question is directed to the Minister for Community Services. Given that both the Department of Community Services and the Department of Education and Training were aware of problems relating to Shellay Ward's care and in view of the New South Wales Ombudsman's repeated warnings about a lack of interagency coordination regarding children at risk, would Shellay not be alive today if the Minister had acted on those warnings?

Mr KEVIN GREENE: Like everyone in the House, I am deeply disturbed by the circumstances of this young girl's death.

The SPEAKER: Order! I call the member for Clarence to order.

Mr KEVIN GREENE: I share with the community its shock that a death such as this could happen in modern Australia. Senior caseworkers from the Department of Community Services have said they have not witnessed anything like this in their 30-plus year careers. Those involved in the case are personally devastated. Naturally a case such as this generates strong public interest. There is a lot of speculation circulating about the case and many assumptions are being made. As tempting as it is to correct some of the misinformation currently circulating, it is essential that we be disciplined and make sure this inquiry is not compromised in any way. I have confirmed that the family is known to the Department of Community Services. I can confirm also that action has been taken to ensure the safety of the little girl's siblings. The department has undertaken a preliminary review of the records on this family, and it continues this work. I am advised that the case is very complicated and it would be irresponsible to draw any conclusions until it has been investigated comprehensively.

Mr Barry O'Farrell: Point of order: My point of order relates to Standing Order 129. The question related clearly to the repeated recommendations of the Ombudsman, telling the Department of Community Services to start getting its act together. When will the Minister for Community Services start to take responsibility for the 440 children who have died since those four reports were produced?

The SPEAKER: Order! The Leader of the Opposition will resume his seat. There is no point of order. The Minister's answer is relevant to the question. The Minister has the call.

Mr KEVIN GREENE: The early advice is that there has been longstanding involvement with this family by the department and other agencies and numerous referrals have been made to services. The director general formally asked the Ombudsman to undertake an external investigation of this case. He will have the full cooperation of the department in this process.

The SPEAKER: Order! The Leader of the Opposition will cease interjecting.

[Interruption]

The SPEAKER: Order! The House will come to order. This is a very serious matter and the Minister's reply should be heard in silence.

Mr KEVIN GREENE: I have said previously in this place that our child protection system is not perfect. While we now identify and respond to more reports of abuse and neglect than ever, when a child known to the department dies in suspicious circumstances we must find out whether the system has let the child down, and, if so, how it can be improved. We all want answers, and right now it is critical—

Mr Andrew Stoner: Point of order: My point of order relates to relevance—Standing Order 129. The question was specifically about the lack of interagency coordination that has been identified by the Ombudsman. The Department of Education and Training knew. It is a horror movie in this State: a two-year-old dead in a suitcase—

The SPEAKER: Order! The Leader of The Nationals will resume his seat.

Mr Andrew Stoner: —a seven-year-old starved to death—

The SPEAKER: Order! The Leader of The Nationals will resume his seat.

Mr Andrew Stoner: —and you are asleep at the wheel!

The SPEAKER: Order! The Leader of The Nationals has taken a point of order and I have asked him to resume his seat. I will not allow a repetition of his behaviour. I place him on two calls to order.

[*Interruption*]

The SPEAKER: Order! I call the member for Wakehurst to order.

[*Interruption*]

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

[*Interruption*]

The SPEAKER: Order! I call the member for Wakehurst to order for the third time.

Mr KEVIN GREENE: We all want answers, and right now it is critical that we let the police investigate without any interference and we let the Ombudsman conduct an independent review of the case.

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Mrs KARYN PALUZZANO: My question is addressed to the Minister for Police. Will the Minister update the House on the latest initiative to help front-line officers combat domestic violence?

Mr DAVID CAMPBELL: I acknowledge the continuing concern of the member for Penrith for the women who are victims of the dreadful crime of domestic violence. Everybody should be able to feel safe in their own home. Sadly, too many families in New South Wales have their safety, their security and their happiness blighted by domestic and family violence. Statistics show that every month more than 2,000 domestic violence assaults are reported to the New South Wales Police Force. It is a shocking figure. That is why last November the Premier announced \$28 million over four years to make women and children safe in their homes through new laws, more staff, better services and greater resources. Today I am delighted to inform the House of the rollout of award-winning police kits that improve the evidence gathered against domestic violence offenders.

The kits have been trialled in three local area commands—Macquarie Fields, Campbelltown and Wagga Wagga—and their success is clear. In the three trial areas the number of guilty pleas by domestic violence offenders has doubled from 20 per cent to 40 per cent. In addition, charge rates have increased significantly at both Campbelltown and Macquarie Fields, and there has been an increase in the reporting of domestic violence offences in Macquarie Fields. The evidence kits contain a digital still camera, a digital video camera and a victim support pack. They are fitted into first-response general duties police vehicles. On arrival at the scene of a domestic violence incident officers will be able to take on-the-spot digital photographs of the victim's visible injuries, damage to the house and any other evidence of the attack.

Mr Brad Hazzard: It's the twenty-first century; you've really done well.

Mr DAVID CAMPBELL: We hear more from the member for Wakehurst, who is undermining the Government's good policy work and the determined front-line work of police officers. The childish, inane interjections from the member for Wakehurst undermine the very hard work of the police. The kits will ensure that the full impact of this cowardly crime can be shown in court. Officers are also able to set up a video camera

to record the victim's statement on the spot. This evidence, which is usually very compelling, is provided to defendants before their prosecution begins. These kits are making sure offenders see the weight of evidence against them, making it more likely that they will plead guilty to the crime. This not only reduces the time spent at court for magistrates and police officers, it significantly reduces the emotional strain on victims.

The reduction of the impact on victims is, to me, an important part of this project. It also means that police have the evidence to proceed with prosecution of offenders even when victims become reluctant to proceed with a matter or have been intimidated by the perpetrator not to go through with laying charges. When incidents result in a full court case, the visual evidence taken just after the attack gives a jury or a magistrate a better reflection of the situation that the victim faced and the despicable nature of the crime. There have been 13 local area commands identified as priority locations for the first stage of rollout of this new program, including Sutherland, Hurstville, Miranda, Penrith—I know the member for Penrith will be pleased that that is included—St Marys, Mt Druitt, Quakers Hill, Shoalhaven, Far South Coast, Manning-Great Lakes and Tuggerah Lakes. By the end of the next financial year the kits will have been rolled out to every first response police vehicle in every command across the State.

This is another election commitment that the Iemma Government is delivering for the protection of families across New South Wales. I have already mentioned the outstanding impact that these kits have had in increasing guilty pleas at court. In addition, this Government's commitment to equipping all first response cars with these kits will save significant amounts of police time, reduce pressure on police cars and equipment, reduce stress for the victim, encourage victims to make statements, reduce court times and costs and improve the quality of evidence-gathering in all domestic violence cases. I congratulate New South Wales police on their success at last month's 2007 Australian Crime and Violence Prevention Awards. These kits were recognised as a key part of the anti-domestic violence model. They were short-listed as a top five finalist and won a national certificate commendation.

The SPEAKER: Order! I warn the member for Wakehurst for the final time.

[Interruption]

The SPEAKER: Order! I ask the Minister to resume his seat. I ask the Deputy Serjeant-at-Arms to remove the member for Wakehurst.

Mr Brad Hazzard: I would like to have five minutes to address you, Mr Speaker.

The SPEAKER: Order! If the member refuses to leave the Chamber, certain procedures will be followed. He is not entitled to five minutes at this time.

Mr Brad Hazzard: I am absolutely entitled to five minutes. I will leave, but the rule has to be fair for them too because they are interjecting and they get nothing.

The SPEAKER: Order! I ask the member to watch the tape of his performance and report back to the House. He will leave the Chamber.

[Interruption]

The SPEAKER: Order! That behaviour is grossly disorderly.

[The member for Wakehurst left the Chamber, accompanied by the Deputy Serjeant-at-Arms.]

Mr DAVID CAMPBELL: I think what we have seen is a reflection—

Mr Barry O'Farrell: Point of order: Can I take you to the video of the Minister's earlier answer when he deliberately singled out the member for Wakehurst? He is about to do the same thing. If answers were directed through the Chair, as they are meant to be by standing orders, these situations would not occur.

The SPEAKER: Order! I can assure the Leader of the Opposition that I will watch the standing orders very carefully. If they are breached members are entitled to take points of order and I will rule on them. I ask the Minister to comply with the standing orders.

Mr DAVID CAMPBELL: What we have seen in that point of order and in the interjection that saw the member for Wakehurst thrown out is the Liberal Party's continued undermining of the efforts of police in New South Wales. But I want to contrast that—

The SPEAKER: Order! The member for Epping has a point of order. Members on the Government benches will remain silent.

Mr Greg Smith: To the point of order: Despite your clear ruling, the Minister has ignored you and started to attack the people making points of order, which they are entitled to do, and completely rubbishing them. If he gets away with this, he just makes a farce of the standing orders and your authority.

The SPEAKER: The Minister had just resumed and, as I said, I will listen very carefully. The Minister has the call.

Mr DAVID CAMPBELL: As I was saying, I contrast that undermining by the Liberal Party of the efforts of police with the praise that has been heaped on police and the Government by the Leader of The Nationals. It is a bit unusual, I know, but I am pleased that the Opposition has started to support government policy in policing because we know that it has given up on its own policy. I quote from the member for Oxley, who said recently how he was chuffed to see money in the budget for a new police station at Kempsey. He went on to say:

\$1.1 million is a serious whack of money and Kempsey people certainly by 30 June next year will see there should even be a bigger whack of money and soon after that we'll be in possession of a lovely new police station.

Thanks to the Iemma Labor Government! The Iemma Labor Government is spending capital funds on new police stations right across the State. It is also spending capital funds on domestic violence kits and in a policy sense supporting police who are winning national awards for their determined work in this area. Yet, we see continued inane and stupid interjections from the Opposition benches in relation to this very strong policy and important initiative that will have a huge impact on domestic violence in families right across the State.

The SPEAKER: Order! The member for South Coast will remain silent.

Mr DAVID CAMPBELL: This is best practice policing on the front line in New South Wales. Such nationally recognised innovative programs are a credit to the officers involved. They are making our communities safer. These kits are valuable and effective tools for police and this new equipment is only one of the many initiatives the Government is investing in to tackle domestic violence. The Iemma Government has committed to 40 new police officers dedicated to working on domestic violence. It might be funny to the member for Terrigal, but New South Wales police have developed an intensive program of specialist training for all front-line general duties officers in responding to and investigating cases of domestic violence.

Over the next two years we will ensure that training is rolled out to all front-line officers. This training will equip all general duties officers with the skills and specialist knowledge needed to support victims and investigate cases. We will also bring forward legislation to give police new powers, including the power to search for and seize potential offensive weapons from domestic violence situations, such as baseball bats or knives. Because we know that domestically violent situations are often extremely difficult for victims to leave, it is crucial that we provide the right support to those seeking to leave violent relationships. That is why this Government is extending programs such as Staying Home Leaving Violence, which ensures that victims can remain safely in the family home while the offender is forced to leave.

The Iemma Government is delivering on its commitments. It is investing in police, courts and support services, and all of this work is delivering our commitment under the State Plan to reduce violent crime to meet our target of 10 per cent fewer personal crime victims by 2016. Domestic violence is a cowardly and despicable act. We are giving police the tools, the tough powers and the resources that they need to put offenders before the courts and to make New South Wales a safer place for all families. I am confident that all members on this side of the House will support those initiatives and I thank the member for Penrith for her question.

DEPARTMENT OF COMMUNITY SERVICES LISMORE OFFICE

Ms KATRINA HODGKINSON: My question is directed to the Minister for Community Services. Why is the Department of Community Services at Lismore so starved of funding that it can only respond to two of twelve daily reports of endangered children, including a recent case in which children had been hidden from

police and last year had to be saved from a burning house by their neighbours after being deserted by their parents?

Mr KEVIN GREENE: I place on record the commitment of the New South Wales Government to providing the resources we need to address the needs of families in New South Wales.

The SPEAKER: Order! The House will come to order. The member for Murray-Darling will cease interjecting. The member for Clarence will cease interjecting.

Mr KEVIN GREENE: Members well know our commitment to the \$1.2 billion reform of the child protection system and the boost to front-line caseworker numbers, but I am more than happy to outline this again. In 2002 we committed to an increase of 875 caseworkers by the end of 2007-08. In 2005 an additional 150 out-of-home care caseworkers were added to this commitment, bringing the total to 1,025.

Ms Katrina Hodgkinson: Point of order: My point of order is under Standing Order 129. We know that the Minister is chronically short of caseworkers.

The SPEAKER: Order! The member for Bathurst will cease interjecting.

Ms Katrina Hodgkinson: We want to know the answer to the question, which relates to the Department of Community Services office in Lismore and little children who were not deemed important enough to be rescued by the department, despite the fact that their lives were clearly in danger.

The SPEAKER: Order! The Minister's answer is relevant. I ask him to continue.

Mr KEVIN GREENE: This is effectively a doubling of front-line caseworkers, and it is the largest increase in child protection caseworkers in Australia. Some 750 of these positions were due to be created by the end of 2006-07. We are doing well with our recruitment program, with 1,897 people employed as caseworkers as at September this year. Members opposite may not like to hear these figures.

The SPEAKER: Order! The member for Burrinjuck will cease interjecting. Members on the Government benches will cease interjecting.

Mr KEVIN GREENE: These are the facts.

The SPEAKER: Order! The member for Burrinjuck has asked her question. I suggest she listens to the Minister's answer.

Mr KEVIN GREENE: That is a net increase of 695 caseworkers employed since June 2003.

The SPEAKER: Order! I call the member for Blacktown to order.

Mr Steve Cansdell: Point of order: Under Standing Order 129, the Minister is not answering the question, which relates to an issue at the Department of Community Services office at Casino. A young girl ran into the backyard and wet herself in fear. Where were departmental staff? Nowhere to be seen! Where was the Minister? He was asleep at the bloody wheel. These are important issues.

The SPEAKER: Order! The member for Clarence will resume his seat. If he wants to take a point of order he should ensure that he has one. I call him to order for the second time.

Mr KEVIN GREENE: The member said that this question related to Casino. In fact, the original question of the member for Burrinjuck related to the Lismore office. I take this opportunity to remind the member for Clarence that when I visited the Grafton office of the Department of Community Services—

The SPEAKER: Order! The House will come to order. It is Thursday and this seems to happen a lot on Thursdays. Debates should not take place across the Chamber like screaming matches. It reflects poorly on the House.

Mr KEVIN GREENE: When I visited the Grafton office of the Department of Community Services I took the opportunity to call into the member for Clarence's office. Unfortunately, no-one was there to greet me. Indeed, I had to leave my card because he was not available.

The SPEAKER: Order! I call the member for Myall Lakes to order.

Ms Katrina Hodgkinson: Point of order: The Minister is not answering anything in relation to the question originally asked of him. I ask that you request that the Minister direct his answer appropriately and leave the member for Clarence out of it.

The SPEAKER: Order! I ask the Minister to ensure that his answer is relevant to the question asked.

Mr KEVIN GREENE: In light of the member for Clarence's interjections it is important to point out that if I visit an office in the middle of a week I expect someone to be there to speak to me.

Mr John Turner: Point of order: This pertains to honesty. Perhaps the Minister can say when he visited—

The SPEAKER: Order! The member for Myall Lakes will resume his seat. I call him to order for the second time.

[Interruption]

The SPEAKER: Order! I call the member for Myall Lakes to order for the third time.

[Interruption]

The SPEAKER: Order! I ask the Serjeant-at-Arms to remove the honourable member for Myall Lakes.

[The member for Myall Lakes left the Chamber, accompanied by the Deputy Serjeant-at-Arms.]

Mr KEVIN GREENE: As I was indicating before numerous interruptions, the department undertakes rolling recruitment drives. In 2006-07, there were 2,000 applications for caseworker positions. Since a new online application system was introduced in August this year, 1,500 applications have been received. The rate of offers of employment has also significantly increased. For example, 43 offers were accepted in the single week ended 12 October. Caseworkers must have high-level qualifications, with a university degree in social work or welfare.

Ms Katrina Hodgkinson: Point of order: Earlier you ruled that the Minister should answer the question directly. He is deliberately flouting your ruling. One of these children could be the next victim. They have been notified to the Department of Community Services. I ask that you call on the Minister to answer the question he was asked.

The SPEAKER: Order! The Chair has no discretion to direct the Minister how to answer the question other than to direct that the answer should be relevant. The Minister's answer is relevant to the question. I ask the Minister to consider concluding his remarks.

Mr KEVIN GREENE: I am happy to do so. As you have asked me to conclude, I will not refer to the Opposition's record with the Department of Community Services before 1995.

WATER INFRASTRUCTURE CHARGES

Mr NINOS KHOSHABA: I direct my question to the Minister for Water Utilities. What is the latest information on cutting water infrastructure charges on housing developments in the Blue Mountains and across Sydney?

Mr NATHAN REES: I thank the member for his longstanding interest in this important matter. As members will be aware, over the past two years the Iemma Government has cut taxes on 15 occasions and reduced workers compensation premiums five times. Among other things, we have removed vendor duty on the sale of investment properties, increased the land tax free threshold, and provided payroll tax concessions and tax relief for the clubs industry. The broader community and business groups alike have welcomed those changes.

More recently the Premier, the Treasurer and the Minister for Planning announced a reduction or the elimination of 42 different charges levied on property developers. All of these measures are a demonstration of

our commitment to encouraging investment and economic growth in New South Wales, which is the engine room of the Australian economy. It is \$320 billion a year, and growing at a sustainable and healthy rate. In September, Standard and Poor's endorsed our approach. Referring to the State's performance, Standard and Poor's said:

... improving financial performance, driven by the Government's fiscal discipline.

Last month Moodys reaffirmed our triple-A status and highlighted our "long record of sound financial performance ... underpinned by fiscal prudence and strong revenue growth". I advise the House that, consistent with our fiscal framework, we will reduce charges for water and sewerage infrastructure in new suburbs on Sydney's fringes and in some parts of the Illawarra.

The SPEAKER: Order! The member for Lane Cove will cease interjecting.

Mr NATHAN REES: Earlier this year Sydney Water introduced new developer contributions that enable Sydney Water to build water and wastewater systems in new development areas. However, because in some cases only a small number of new homes are being built, those contributions are higher than the average one might expect in more highly populated areas. For example, in the Blue Mountains where there are fewer than 200 developments each year, often in mountainous terrain, that presents additional challenges for the provision of services. Consistent with the Government's desire to boost investment and economic activity, earlier this year I asked Sydney Water to review contributions made by developers for water and wastewater services.

I advise the House that contribution increases will be capped at \$5,000 per single dwelling in the reviewed areas. For contributions that have been paid since 1 July this year, there will be very significant reductions. For example, in Winmalee, in the lower Blue Mountains, that will mean a reduction of more than \$12,000 for each new home. For another large project in the Blue Mountains the levy would drop by about \$700,000. The reductions apply not only to the Blue Mountains. Richmond and Richmond North will receive reductions of up to \$3,500 per lot, and in parts of Kiama and Shellharbour, in the Illawarra, there will be reductions of up to \$5,000. I would have thought that this was good news to the member for Hawkesbury and the member for Hornsby.

Charges will be reduced in West Hornsby, Hornsby Heights and Dural by up to \$1,300, and in the south-west of Sydney, charges in Liverpool and Cecil Park will be reduced by up to \$600. The capped charges will be backdated to 1 July 2007 and anyone who has paid a higher charge in the meantime will receive a refund. I pay tribute to my colleague the Minister for Climate Change, Environment and Water, who represents the Blue Mountains electorate, for initially raising this issue with me. The Government is ensuring that a commonsense approach is taken to fees and regulations to encourage growth and investment. Earlier today my office spoke to Peter Poulos of Theo Poulos Real Estate at Katoomba, the largest real estate agency in the Blue Mountains. Mr Poulos described the changes as "... great news ... these changes are going to benefit the whole Blue Mountains community."

The SPEAKER: Order! There is too much audible conversation in the Chamber.

Mr NATHAN REES: Councillor Tony Hay, the Chairman of the Western Sydney Regional Organisation of Councils said that these changes would be a great boost to investment in Western Sydney.

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

Mr NATHAN REES: Councillor Hay said that the Federal Government should reflect our approach and should deliver concrete assistance to promote housing affordability rather than rhetoric and rate increases. The Government and Sydney Water are getting on with the job of ensuring that New South Wales remains the most prosperous State in the nation, and these measures are great news for hardworking families in greater Sydney.

MOUNT DRUITT HOSPITAL BED CLOSURES

Mrs JILLIAN SKINNER: My question is directed to the Minister for Health. How can the Minister possibly justify closing 21 surgical beds at Mt Druitt Hospital, as revealed in a leaked memo, when 653 patients are on the waiting list for surgery at Mt Druitt Hospital? Mat Wiley signed the memo, which I can table if the Minister wishes.

Ms REBA MEAGHER: The Iemma Government is investing record amounts to provide surgical services in Western Sydney. This year's record health budget includes funding of \$1.29 billion in public hospitals and health in the Sydney West Area Health Service. That is an increase of \$75.5 million, or 6.2 per cent more than last year. Our investment this year funds a total of 62 additional beds and bed equivalents across the area health service, which builds on the 50 extra beds and bed equivalents we opened in the previous year. This year the Government is investing more than \$163 million on surgery, which includes an extra \$7 million from this year's budget to boost surgical services this year.

The nine hospitals in the Sydney West Area Health Service are networked to provide a range of surgical services from day-only surgery to the most complex neurosurgical and transplant procedures. Mt Druitt Hospital is a key site for elective and planned surgery for patients who need a joint replacement or surgery for conditions such as hernias or gallstones. Most of the surgery performed at Mt Druitt Hospital is day surgery and does not require an overnight stay in a hospital bed. Bed numbers can vary according to the type of surgery undertaken. The key performance indicator for surgery is not the number of overnight beds but the number of procedures conducted. I am advised that in 2006-07 Mt Druitt Hospital undertook 2,984 planned surgical procedures.

The SPEAKER: Order! Members on the Government benches will remain silent.

Mrs Jillian Skinner: Point of order: I am asking you to rule on relevance. This is a memo for doctors. Is the Premier denying that doctors are telling the truth? Is he saying that doctors are lying?

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

Ms REBA MEAGHER: I will repeat for the benefit of members that in 2006-07 Mt Druitt Hospital undertook 2,984 planned surgical procedures, which was an increase of more than 200 operations on the previous year. Contrary to what the Opposition chooses to believe, Mt Druitt Hospital is increasing the amount of elective surgery it performs. I am advised also that Mt Druitt currently has zero patients waiting longer than 12 months for surgery and zero patients who are classified as urgent waiting more than 30 days for surgery. I am advised that, consistent with health systems across the State and the country, there is some reduction in activity over the Christmas-New Year period. That will allow doctors and nurses to take annual leave, to allow operating theatres to receive essential maintenance, because patient demand for elective surgery decreases over the holiday period.

The SPEAKER: Order! The Deputy Premier and the Deputy Leader of the Opposition will cease interjecting.

EVENTS NEW SOUTH WALES PTY LIMITED

Ms VIRGINIA JUDGE: My question is addressed to the Premier. Will the Premier update the House on the Government's plan to increase major events and economic activity in New South Wales and related matters?

Mr Adrian Piccoli: Point of order: My point of order relates to Standing Order 128, which provides that questions cannot ask for the announcement of government policy. The question clearly asked the Premier to outline to the House the Government's plans for the major events committee. If that is not asking for an announcement of government policy, I have never heard one. The Government gets plenty of opportunities to announce policy. Question time is an opportunity for members to ask questions.

The SPEAKER: Order! The point of order was well made. The question refers to a plan. I will not prejudge the Premier's answer. We will hear what the Premier has to say.

Mr MORRIS IEMMA: As part of the Government's plan to boost events in New South Wales, today we announced the make-up of a board, for which the policy was announced many months ago.

Mr Adrian Piccoli: Point of order: My point of order relates to the question, not necessarily to the answer.

The SPEAKER: Order! There is no point of order. The question is in order. If every plan that is put forward were ruled out, we would not be here. I will listen to ascertain whether the answer digresses into policy.

Mr MORRIS IEMMA: Following a review conducted by rugby union boss and former soccer boss, John O'Neill, Events New South Wales Pty Limited, a new corporation, a new company, was formed to develop a schedule of major events for New South Wales and to tie that schedule to the State's economic strategy. Consistent with that review, and the policy announced a few months ago, today I can reveal the make-up of the new board. I am proud to announce that Mr John O'Neill, AO, will be the Chair of the board, and Gavin Brown, AO, from the University of Sydney—

Mr Adrian Piccoli: Point of order: Under Standing Order 128 questions cannot ask for an announcement of government policy. Mr Speaker, you said, "Let us listen to the answer." Part of the Premier's answer was, "I am pleased to announce X, Y and Z", which is an announcement of government policy.

The SPEAKER: Order! This is the final time I will rule on this matter. Under the standing orders the Premier is entitled to comment on who is being appointed to a board. I ask him to continue.

Mr MORRIS IEMMA: The following appointments will be made to the board: Gavin Brown, the University of Sydney; John Coates, the Australian Olympic Committee; Richard Colless, Chairman of the Swans; Peter Ivany, Ivany Investment Group; David Richmond, New South Wales Coordinator General; Kim Williams, Foxtel; Johanna Griggs, former Commonwealth Games medallist and broadcaster; Charlotte Vidor, the boss of Medina Serviced Apartments; and Belinda Seper, a fashion industry entrepreneur. The first meeting of the board will take place in mid December and an extensive search for a chief executive has commenced.

This top-flight board will cement the position of New South Wales as Australia's number one State. It also will cement Sydney's position as Australia's one and only global city. The job of the new Events Corporation Board will be to develop a calendar and a schedule of events for New South Wales, to aggressively get New South Wales back in the business of big events. The next task that the board will have is to integrate those first two tasks to the State's economic strategy. We have already had a lot of success in attracting major events to New South Wales. For example, next year we will have the Fédération Internationale de Football Association World Congress. Later this month we have the—

Mr Andrew Fraser: Do you have free tickets to that one?

Mr MORRIS IEMMA: Ask George.

The SPEAKER: Order! The member for Coffs Harbour will wait until the end of question time before asking for free tickets.

Mr George Souris: I now want tickets to *Wicked*!

Mr MORRIS IEMMA: Only if your next prediction is better than your last one.

Mr George Souris: It is opening in Melbourne in February—a five-year blockbuster on Broadway.

Mr MORRIS IEMMA: George, I promise you two tickets to *Wicked* if your next prediction is better than your last.

Mr George Souris: Okay, deal!

The SPEAKER: Order!

Mr MORRIS IEMMA: This statement was given to your local paper in 2002:

It really isn't feasible for Australia to bid to host the World Cup. Australia did not qualify to play in the recent World Cup, ie 2002, and it is not likely to in the near future.

The SPEAKER: Order! Government members will cease interjecting, no matter how appropriate their interjections are.

Mr MORRIS IEMMA: You did not want Becks.

Mr George Souris: I know. I want him now.

Mr MORRIS IEMMA: I said to you before that we have Becks and that there is more to come. We have the Spice Girls.

Mr Andrew Fraser: Which ones are they?

Mr MORRIS IEMMA: Let me tell you.

The SPEAKER: Order! I ask the House to come to order. We were having difficulty with Government announcements and we are now talking about the Spice Girls. I am confident that question time will conclude soon.

Ms Linda Burney: All of us.

Mr MORRIS IEMMA: As the Minister says—

Mr Andrew Fraser: Which one is Old Spice? Noreen? She is Scary Old Spice!

The SPEAKER: Order! The member for Coffs Harbour will cease interjecting.

Mr MORRIS IEMMA: We have Posh Spice from Vacluse and Baby Spice from Manly. We do not have Ginger Spice, but we have Sporty Spice. I do not know who is Scary Spice.

Mr Barry O'Farrell: Point of order: My point of order relates to tedious repetition. Former Deputy Premier, Andrew Refshauge, gave the exact same answer in this Chamber in 1996.

The SPEAKER: Order! On that note, the time for questions has expired.

Question time concluded.

COMMITTEE ON CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

Report

Ms Carmel Tebbutt, as Chair, tabled report No. 1/54 entitled "Review of the 2005-2006 Annual Report of the Commissioner for Children and Young People", dated 8 November 2007.

Ordered to be printed on motion by Ms Carmel Tebbutt.

PETITIONS

CountryLink Pensioner Booking Fee

Petitions requesting the removal of booking fees charged to pensioners on CountryLink services, received from **Mr Greg Aplin**, **Mrs Shelley Hancock** and **Mr John Williams**.

Hornsby and Berowra Railway Stations Parking Facilities

Petition requesting adequate commuter parking facilities at Hornsby and Berowra railway stations, received from **Mrs Judy Hopwood**.

Hawkesbury River Railway Station Access

Petition requesting improved access to Hawkesbury River railway station, received from **Mrs Judy Hopwood**.

Bus Services 272 and 273

Petition requesting that the Government reinstate bus services 272 and 273 to ensure reliable services in both peak and off-peak times, received from **Ms Gladys Berejiklian**.

South Coast Rail Services

Petition opposing any reduction in rail services on the South Coast, received from **Mrs Shelley Hancock**.

Ku-ring-gai Municipal Council Planning Powers

Petition requesting that Ku-ring-gai council retain its planning powers and that the Government cease to direct the council on planning matters, received from **Mr Barry O'Farrell**.

Breast Screening Funding

Petition requesting funding for breast screening to allow access for women aged 40 to 79 years, received from **Mrs Judy Hopwood**.

Hornsby Palliative Care Beds

Petition requesting funding for Hornsby's palliative care beds, received from **Mrs Judy Hopwood**.

Shoalhaven Mental Health Services

Petition requesting funding for the establishment of a dedicated mental health service in the Shoalhaven, received from **Mrs Shelley Hancock**.

Tumut Renal Dialysis Service

Petition praying that the House support the establishment of a satellite renal dialysis service in Tumut, received from **Mr Daryl Maguire**.

Lismore Base Hospital

Petitions requesting funding for stage 2 of the Lismore Base Hospital redevelopment, received from **Mr Thomas George** and **Mr Donald Page**.

Murwillumbah District Hospital Services

Petition requesting reinstatement of services at Murwillumbah District Hospital and the maintenance of future health care for the Tweed Valley area, received from **Mr Thomas George**.

Mental Health Services

Petition requesting increased funding for mental health services, received from **Ms Clover Moore**.

Shoalhaven Local Area Command

Petition requesting additional resources for the Shoalhaven Local Area Command, received from **Mrs Shelley Hancock**.

Licence Laws for Older Drivers

Petitions asking for an inquiry into licence laws for older drivers and the implementation of a suitable licensing system for senior citizens, received from **Mr Greg Aplin**, **Mrs Shelley Hancock** and **Mr John Turner**.

School Crossing Safety

Petition requesting that all school crossings be upgraded to improve safety, received from **Mr Greg Aplin**.

Tomerong Traffic Arrangements

Petition requesting an upgrade of the Island Point Road and Princes Highway intersection, Tomerong, received from **Mrs Shelley Hancock**.

Termeil Bridge Realignment

Petition requesting that the Princes Highway and Termeil Bridge be realigned to the east of the existing road, received from **Mrs Shelley Hancock**.

Rural School Bus Safety

Petition requesting the provision of seats and seatbelts for all students on rural school buses travelling in speed zones of 80 kilometres per hour or higher, received from **Mrs Shelley Hancock**.

Pet Shops

Petition opposing the sale of animals in pet shops, received from **Ms Clover Moore**.

Shoalhaven River Water Extraction

Petition opposing the extraction of water from the Shoalhaven River to support Sydney's water supply, received from **Mrs Shelley Hancock**.

Liquor Licensing Process

Petition asking that the liquor licensing process be amended to encourage and promote the development of small, local venues and a diversity of venues, received from **Ms Clover Moore**.

ADMINISTRATION OF THE GOVERNMENT

The SPEAKER: I report the receipt of the following message from His Excellency the Lieutenant-Governor:

J J SPIGELMAN
Lieutenant-Governor

Office of the Governor
Sydney 2000

The Honourable James Jacob Spigelman, Chief Justice of New South Wales, Lieutenant-Governor of the State of New South Wales, has the honour to inform the Legislative Assembly that, consequent on the Governor of New South Wales, Professor Marie Bashir, being absent from the State, he has this day assumed the administration of the Government of the State.

8 November 2007

CONSIDERATION OF MOTIONS TO BE ACCORDED PRIORITY

Federal Minister for Health and Ageing Interview Comments

Ms NOREEN HAY [3.19 p.m.] This motion deserves to be accorded priority because of the outrageous attack on Bernie Banton, a terminally ill campaigner, by the Federal Minister for Health and Ageing, Tony Abbott. Due to a decision today Bernie was justified in pursuing the inclusion of Alimta on the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme. Today he had a victory with the decision by the Pharmaceutical Benefits Advisory Committee that Alimta should be subsidised. I congratulate Bernie. I fail to understand why the New South Wales Opposition would want to congratulate a man who took an opportunity to attack Bernie, who has tirelessly campaigned on behalf of many people whilst being very ill. Bernie has been campaigning not just for compensation for his suffering from mesothelioma but also for many asbestosis victims.

The Opposition wants to congratulate the person who attacked Bernie Banton and outrageously suggested he was not pure of heart. The Federal health Minister was not prepared to receive petitions that Bernie Banton was trying to give him so that the drug that is needed could be listed on the pharmaceutical benefits list. I will not take up any more time of the House other than to say that this motion speaks for itself. It deserves priority. I will be interested to hear from the Opposition.

Ministerial Code of Conduct

Mr BARRY O'FARRELL (Ku-ring-gai—Leader of the Opposition) [3.20 p.m.]: My motion should have priority because after two years we have another controversy about unexplained and unannounced policy changes and the role of Ministers, minders and mates. Two years ago it was Orange Grove, now it is wagering. Until 2005 this State led the nation in arguing against the entry of betting exchanges and corporate bookmakers, but when Morris Iemma became Premier that began to change. We dropped our opposition to pooling totes with States that allowed betting exchanges to operate, legislation proposing a ban on betting exchanges was stopped from going into Cabinet, and race field legislation announced by the Premier and passed by the Parliament a

year ago has never been proclaimed. All these changes were made without announcement before the State election campaign.

Immediately after the election the Premier again intervened in a targeted way to support betting exchanges. He picked up the phone to the Minister for Gaming and Racing and told him to get on with it. When the Minister blew the whistle, it was revealed that Peter Barron and Graham Richardson had been involved. That helps explain why someone who normally is so disengaged from the process of government in this State was taking a close and targeted interest in this issue. The Premier has refused to answer questions on this whole affair. He and his mates continue to chorus "no comment". He has refused to detail in this place his involvement and that of his staff and his friends. What is he hiding? What is he so embarrassed about? What has he been doing that he is so determined to keep out of public scrutiny?

Parliament and the public deserve to know. We know there is nothing in it for taxpayers or the racing industry because of his answer—or non-answer—to the question yesterday from the member for Upper Hunter. In 2005 the Orange Grove inquiry recommended formal changes to the ministerial code of conduct to specifically encompass lobbying. We know that there were no formal changes to the code. Instead, a memo simply was issued with non-compulsory guidelines covering Ministers, their staff and lobbyists. In other words, despite the lessons of the Orange Grove affair and serious concerns about this issue, matters involving the Premier, Ministers, their staff and their dealings with lobbyists remain outside the scope of the ministerial code of conduct. As a result, a Premier or Minister who does not act appropriately in relation to lobbying is shielded from any finding of corrupt conduct under section 9 of the Independent Commission against Corruption Act.

It is too convenient to be inadvertent. The current arrangement fails any public interest test and simply acts to protect this Labor Government. The fact that the Independent Commission Against Corruption has not either understood or protested the failure to amend the formal code demonstrates again how after 12 years of Labor even the State's anticorruption agency has turned from watchdog to lap-dog. The Premier should recall the origins of the Independent Commission Against Corruption. The Premier should reflect on the establishment by a Coalition government of the Independent Commission Against Corruption because of a corrupt Labor administration: a corrupt Minister in a former Labor government feeding another Labor gambling habit. The Premier should remember the parallels and recognise that his first duty is to deal with the public openly and honestly in relation to the administration of this State.

So far the Premier has refused to do so. He should come clean and put all the details of this affair on the parliamentary record as soon as possible. He needs also to close the lobbying loopholes in his ministerial code of conduct. Above all, the Premier needs to remember that he is running the Government of New South Wales in trust for the public of New South Wales. He is not running a family company or cooperative for the benefit of himself, his Ministers or his mates. This whole affair stinks. There are plenty of questions to be answered. We are not getting a single answer out of this bloke in Parliament. It cannot continue. It is too serious for taxpayers, the public and the State's racing industry.

Question—That the motion of the member for Wollongong be accorded priority—put.

The House divided.

Ayes, 49

Mr Amery	Mr Gibson	Mrs Paluzzano
Ms Andrews	Mr Greene	Mr Pearce
Mr Aquilina	Mr Harris	Mrs Perry
Ms Beamer	Ms Hay	Mr Rees
Mr Borger	Mr Hickey	Mr Sartor
Mr Brown	Ms Hornery	Mr Shearan
Ms Burney	Ms Judge	Mr Stewart
Ms Burton	Ms Keneally	Ms Tebbutt
Mr Campbell	Mr Khoshaba	Mr Terenzini
Mr Collier	Mr Lynch	Mr Tripodi
Mr Coombs	Mr McBride	Mr Watkins
Mr Corrigan	Dr McDonald	Mr West
Mr Costa	Ms McKay	Mr Whan
Mr Daley	Mr McLeay	
Ms D'Amore	Ms McMahan	<i>Tellers,</i>
Ms Firth	Ms Megarritty	Mr Ashton
Ms Gadiel	Mr Morris	Mr Martin

Noes, 34

Mr Aplin	Ms Hodgkinson	Mr Roberts
Mr Baird	Mrs Hopwood	Mrs Skinner
Mr Baumann	Mr Humphries	Mr Smith
Mr Cansdell	Mr Kerr	Mr Souris
Mr Constance	Mr Merton	Mr Stokes
Mr Debnam	Mr O'Dea	Mr Stoner
Mr Draper	Mr O'Farrell	Mr J. D. Williams
Mrs Fardell	Mr Page	Mr R. C. Williams
Mr Fraser	Mr Piccoli	
Ms Goward	Mr Piper	<i>Tellers,</i>
Mrs Hancock	Mr Provest	Mr Maguire
Mr Hartcher	Mr Richardson	Mr R. W. Turner

Question resolved in the affirmative.

FEDERAL MINISTER FOR HEALTH AND AGEING INTERVIEW COMMENTS

Motion Accorded Priority

Ms NOREEN HAY (Wollongong—Parliamentary Secretary) [3.33 p.m.]: I move:

That this House:

- (1) condemns the thoughtless attack by the Federal Minister for Health and Ageing, Tony Abbott, on asbestos victims campaigner Mr Bernie Banton;
- (2) recognises the New South Wales Iemma Government for its continued and ongoing support of asbestos victims in their battle for recognition compensation; and
- (3) congratulates Mr Banton for refusing to be intimidated by the Federal Minister for Health and Ageing and for displaying continual courage in the face of such attacks.

On 30 October the Federal Minister for Health and Ageing, Tony Abbott, made a scurrilous attack on Bernie Banton, a mesothelioma victim and hero of the compensation claim for victims of James Hardie's asbestos. Tony Abbott should hang his head in shame for attacking the integrity of a man such as Bernie Banton, who, although unwell, became a tireless campaigner to ensure that James Hardie Industries, which was once Australia's largest manufacturer of asbestos, did not avoid its liability to thousands of victims of its products. The victims included employees, tradesmen, contractors and innocent bystanders who all were exposed to deadly asbestos dust. The New South Wales Government, together with the Australian Council of Trade Unions, Unions NSW and Bernie Banton, succeeded in signing heads of agreement with James Hardie Industries for compensation for the victims of its asbestos. Some may recall the months of negotiation with the Australian Taxation Office that created additional uncertainty as well as extra cost to New South Wales taxpayers.

The Prime Minister, Mr Howard, and the Federal Treasurer, Mr Costello, had to be dragged kicking and screaming to a resolution. Eventually they gave support to the ruling in November 2006, which was mentioned by the Premier, Morris Iemma, in his second reading speech on the James Hardie Former Subsidiaries (Winding Up and Administration) Amendment (Trust Funds) Bill 2006 in which he paid tribute to victims groups, the union movement and Bernie Banton, among others. The Premier said that it had been a long and difficult journey but together we had been able to right a monstrous wrong. All involved congratulated Bernie Banton for his courage and for the tireless and selfless efforts he made, sometimes at great personal cost. Bernie Banton is a man of the highest calibre and integrity.

Let me compare his actions to the actions of the Howard-Costello Federal Government's Minister for Health and Ageing, Tony Abbott, who refused to meet with Bernie Banton and receive the petitions that Bernie, a terminally ill victim, was trying to present to him. No, the Federal Minister was not available. But in an interview that took place elsewhere, Mr Abbott took a cheap shot and questioned whether Bernie was "pure of heart". What a disgraceful slur! The Minister insulted Bernie because he had been lobbying for the listing of Alimta on the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme. Today Bernie can claim victory because the Pharmaceutical Benefits Advisory Committee has recommended that Alimta should be subsidised. I congratulate Bernie. The advisory committee's decision proves that Bernie was right in fighting for the drug to be subsidised. Before

Tony Abbott seeks to take the moral high ground, he should note that some serious questions emerge regarding his integrity when discharging his responsibilities as the Federal Minister for Health and Ageing.

I will not discuss Mr Abbott's rudeness to Nicola Roxon and the national press by turning up 35 minutes late for a nationally televised debate on health or his swearing at Nicola Roxon when she pointed out that, as the Minister, he could have controlled his itinerary if he wanted to. Instead, I will discuss the additional pressures placed on New South Wales health services because of the Federal Government's failure to maintain its share of funding. The New South Wales public health system is the largest healthcare employer in Australia, with more than 90,000 full-time equivalent staff. Doctors, dentists, nurses, ambulance officers and allied health professionals who are involved in direct clinical care make up more than 66 per cent of the health workforce. In the face of rising demand for health services in this country, we need an increasing supply of graduates from our universities. Unfortunately, it is a fact that the Howard Government has ignored our universities throughout its decade of neglect.

Tony Abbott, should apologise to the people of New South Wales. This year New South Wales asked for an additional 1,769 university nursing places from the Federal Government for 2008, but received only 200. Tony Abbott should apologise! New South Wales also asked for 122 additional medical places, but none was allocated. Part of our request was for 37 additional dentistry places, but none was allocated. From a request for 66 additional allied health staff, only 50 places were allocated. The States and Territories published a joint report, "Caring for our health? A report card on the Australian Government's performance on health care", which highlights a number of serious concerns with the current system. The pressure on public hospitals continues to increase with the number of emergency admissions between 2001-02 and 2005-06 increasing by more than 11 per cent, or 67,000 admissions. The number of people being educated and trained to work in the health system is not keeping up with the demand for health services caused by population growth, the ageing of the population and the increased prevalence of chronic disease. Tony Abbott should apologise.

There are few meaningful performance measures for Commonwealth Government expenditure relating to private health insurance, the Medical Benefits Scheme and the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme. One of the central planks of Commonwealth-State funding arrangements is the Australian Health Care Agreement. These are bilateral funding agreements under which the Commonwealth Government provides funding to the States and Territories to share equally the cost of providing public hospital services. Yet this Federal Government has failed to share the funding equally. The current agreement covers the period between 2003 and 2008. Historically, these agreements have been based on a 50:50 split of funding between the Commonwealth and the State and Territory governments. However, based on the Commonwealth Government's own funds-matching formula, New South Wales increased its funding by 42 per cent between 2003-04 and 2005-06 while the Commonwealth Government increased its funding by only 14 per cent over the same period. Tony Abbott should apologise.

According to the latest data from the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare for 2005-06, based on the Commonwealth's contribution, the States and Territories funded 55 per cent of public hospital expenses and the Commonwealth funded just 45 per cent. This data shows that the Commonwealth's funding of Australian public hospitals was \$2.2 billion less than the funding provided by the States and Territories in 2005-06. Based on a simple population share, the share for New South Wales equates to about \$750 million. The Commonwealth Government is reducing its funding for public hospitals at a time when the health sector is experiencing the highest inflation rate in the decade. Yet we get nothing but hypocrisy from New South Wales Opposition members, who complain at every opportunity but refuse to demand that their mates in Canberra lift their game in relation to health funding.

We are also working closely with universities to boost clinical skills. We have spent an extra \$28.7 million over the past two years on postgraduate medical training. As the New South Wales Minister for Health stated recently, this funding has meant that more than 700 trainee specialist positions in psychiatry, surgery and medicine have improved access to training and built networks in rural and regional hospitals. At a conference the New South Wales Minister for Health, as Chair of the Australian Health Ministers Conference, called on Tony Abbott to begin negotiations immediately for the next Australian Health Care Agreement so that we can find a way to bring about vital reforms in the health system. But Mr Abbott refused to talk to the States and Territories, saying that he had to focus on winning the election. Tony Abbott is a sorry excuse for a health Minister. The Commonwealth Government is about politics before people. Hopefully, after 24 November a change to a Rudd Federal government will provide a framework for cooperative negotiation and a better future for our health system through appropriate funding arrangements. As Premier Iemma stated:

Peter Costello has bluntly refused to play his part in delivering justice to Bernie Banton and other asbestos victims ...

It is a testament to the courage and tenacity of the victims, represented by Bernie; the Australian Council of Trade Unions, represented by Greg Combet; and the New South Wales Government and its superb negotiating team that we are now in a position to lay the matter to rest with the introduction of the legislation that secures a lasting funding agreement between James Hardie and the victims of its asbestos products. The best apology that Tony Abbott can give to Bernie Banton and the people of New South Wales is to resign. Through some of his statements and actions he gives the impression that he has no experience of any kind. Yet this man continually appears on television talking about lack of experience. What kind of experienced person would attack a terminally ill campaigner who has done nothing but seek to achieve justice for asbestos victims?

Mrs JUDY HOPWOOD (Hornsby) [3.42 p.m.]: I can barely believe my ears! The member for Wollongong has made a huge fuss about a disagreement based on a misunderstanding for which there was an apology. While we are on the subject of victims, let us talk about Vanessa Anderson and her family. Today is the second anniversary of Vanessa Anderson's death. Her family has suffered for two years and is no closer to learning the cause of her death. Vanessa died needlessly in Royal North Shore Hospital and her family has suffered mercilessly. My heart goes out to them and I extend my condolences to them for the loss that they have suffered. Let us consider also the mental health victims in New South Wales. A mental health intensive care unit in my electorate has been standing empty for months. It was completed in March 2007 but people with a mental illness cannot access its 12 beds. I move:

That the motion be amended by leaving out all words after "That" with a view to inserting instead:

this House:

- (1) congratulates the Federal Government on its initiative to work with State governments to improve health care for Australians;
- (2) condemns the New South Wales State Government for its failure to meet the health needs of the people of New South Wales and for not providing a safe workplace environment for all; and
- (3) congratulates the Federal Government on approving Alimta on the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme.

Tony Abbott announced today that the Pharmaceutical Benefits Advisory Committee has recommended an extension of the listing on the pharmaceutical benefits schedule of Alimta for patients with malignant pleural mesothelioma. Given this advice, the Federal Government wants Alimta to be listed for the treatment of mesothelioma at the earliest opportunity. It will be the subject of negotiations between the Department of Health and Ageing and the sponsor company regarding price and guarantee of supply. This most important listing will start from next year and will make a significant difference to the treatment of people with mesothelioma. In making this recommendation, the Pharmaceutical Benefits Advisory Committee noted that since the last submission received about Alimta in November 2005 the company had addressed wastage issues by introducing a 100-milligram vial and submitted improved data regarding quality-of-life concerns. So, many concerns about the drug have been addressed.

Let us take a snapshot of the health system in New South Wales and its management by the Iemma Government. As of September 2007—these are the latest figures available and were posted on the NSW Health website on 30 October —

Ms Noreen Hay: Point of order: The member for Hornsby is not addressing her remarks to the motion before the House.

The DEPUTY-SPEAKER: Order! The member for Hornsby is well and truly in order.

Mrs JUDY HOPWOOD: As at September 2007 56,266 people were waiting for elective treatment in our public hospitals, compared with 53,424 a year earlier. Obviously the waiting lists are increasing. As for emergency departments, in September 2007 24 per cent of patients were not treated within the required emergency department benchmarks. The latest figures reveal that of 33,779 patients admitted to hospital from the emergency department 8,107, or 24 per cent, waited more than eight hours for a bed. It is an absolute disgrace that that is happening in our public hospitals today, despite the protestations and pontifications from the other side of the House.

Mesothelioma is a form of cancer, and lung cancer generally will soon become the cancer most commonly diagnosed. However, the Iemma Government has put aside only \$1.4 million to develop and air new public health campaigns. The Coalition is committed to spending \$2.6 million on a campaign to reduce the incidence and impact of smoking. The Iemma Government obviously does not share the same aims and policy

directions as the Coalition. I congratulate Tony Abbott, the Federal Department of Health and Ageing, and the Federal Government on many initiatives—

Ms Lylea McMahon: Point of order: The member for Hornsby is misleading the House by praising the Federal Government for any initiatives.

The DEPUTY-SPEAKER: Order! That is not a point of order. The member for Hornsby may continue.

Mrs JUDY HOPWOOD: In relation to the National Tobacco Youth Campaign, the Australian Government is investing \$25 million over four years in a new campaign to address youth smoking rates. If that is done at an early enough age it will have a major influence on the incidence of lung cancer in later years. In relation to bowel cancer, which is one of the most common forms of cancer in Australia and about 90 Australians die each year of the disease, the Federal Government has introduced its Strengthening Cancer Care initiative. In the 2005-06 budget the Government announced \$43.4 million over three years to phase in a nationally coordinated, population-based, bowel cancer screening program. Congratulations to the Federal Government. The National Cervical Screening Program is a fantastic success.

Ms Noreen Hay: Point of order: I would repeat the member for Shellharbour's point of order that the member opposite is misleading the House.

The DEPUTY-SPEAKER: Order! I have already ruled on that point of order. There is no point of order. The member for Hornsby may continue.

Mrs JUDY HOPWOOD: The bowel cancer Strengthening Cancer Care initiative is going to make tremendous inroads into the prevention and management of bowel cancer. The National Cervical Screening Program, which I was talking about before I was rudely interrupted, aims to demonstrate an increase in the percentage of eligible women who have ever been screened, establish more reliable and accessible services for taking, interpreting and reporting Pap tests, improve management of screen detected abnormalities, and monitor and evaluate these preventative efforts.

In relation to immunisation, the immunisation schedule is fantastic. The Australian Government currently funds the following specific immunisation programs: the human papilloma virus program, the meningococcal C program, the chickenpox program, the pneumococcal program, and the hepatitis A program for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island children, as well as many other free childhood immunisation programs. They are fantastic initiatives of the Federal Government. Coming to the pitiful state of the New South Wales Government, we see in the *Sydney Morning Herald* this morning: "Beds cut back to ease deficit: hospital chief". This is a report by Natasha Wallace, and it states:

The Sydney West Area Health Service has overspent \$18 million on surgery and Mt Druitt Hospital has had to halve its overnight bed numbers as a result, according to a memo by the hospital's head of surgery.

Auburn and Westmead hospitals, in the same health area, will also close up to half of their operating theatres for up to six weeks from Christmas, and Nepean and Blacktown hospitals will also cut back. "Christmas slowdowns" are commonly used by administrators to control the budget blowouts.

Mt Druitt Hospital's head of surgery, Mac Wyllie, sent a memo to surgeons on November 1 saying he had been told at a management meeting that "the surgical network over the area is in the red by \$18 million".

Ms Noreen Hay: Point of order: I find offensive the constant attack on our nurses, doctors and hospitals.

Mrs JUDY HOPWOOD: I am not attacking them, I am attacking the management of the health system.

The DEPUTY-SPEAKER: Order! That is not a point of order. I ask the member for Hornsby to speak a little more slowly for the benefit of Hansard.

Mrs JUDY HOPWOOD: It is very hard to get a word in when they are wasting time on the other side, but I will address that. In relation to nurses, two-thirds of the nurses in this State will not work in these hospitals, for whatever reason.

Ms Noreen Hay: We haven't got enough nursing staff.

Mrs JUDY HOPWOOD: There have been enough nurses trained in universities over the last six or seven years to adequately staff the hospitals if they wish to work in these hospitals. They do not. They are choosing to work somewhere else. That is why this Government is letting down the people of New South Wales in relation to health.

Ms Noreen Hay: They are not being trained.

Mrs JUDY HOPWOOD: If this Government had initiatives to draw nurses into public hospitals there would be more nurses, and therefore more beds, and ambulances would not be banked up at emergency, waiting for up to 1,000 hours per month.

Mr DAVID BORGER (Granville) [3.52 p.m.]: I join with my colleague the member for Wollongong in condemning the smart alec remarks of Tony Abbott, who suggested that asbestos campaigner Bernie Banton has impure motives because Bernie was seeking a better deal for the sufferers of asbestosis and mesothelioma, because he wanted access to better medications for these victims and because he wanted to improve their quality of life. This was the cheapest shot of all by someone who should have known better. I congratulate Bernie for his fighting spirit and for refusing to be intimidated by the stupid comments of the Federal health Minister.

As we all know, Bernie has a legendary fighting spirit. He has been the public face of a remarkable public campaign to win compensation for victims of asbestosis and mesothelioma. Bernie's connection to this cause started a long time before Tony Abbott became Minister for Health and Ageing. It started in fact in the James Hardie factory in Camellia, just a stone's throw away from my Granville electorate. James Hardie opened its factory in James Ruse Drive in 1917. It was the first Australian plant to produce the roofing and lining slate product called "fibrocement". Other plants opened soon after around Australia, but Parramatta was the home base. Hardie's asbestos factories in Camellia employed hundreds of people who lived in this area and in my electorate. What is more, asbestos lined, and still lines, the walls of thousands of houses across Parramatta, Granville and Western Sydney.

Bernie worked as a planer between 1968 and 1974 in a factory at Camellia producing insulation. It was a badly ventilated part of the factory with intense exposure to asbestos dust. There were 137 people who worked with Bernie in that factory. Today fewer than 10 are still alive. The factory closed in 1974. Asbestos, though, was still produced for another decade in other factories for brake lining and cement, despite the fact that Hardie's management knew that this product and the manufacturing techniques caused people to die prematurely. It was already too late for Bernie and his workmates.

In 1999 Bernie was diagnosed with asbestosis and soon after he became what we recognise now as the public face of a remarkable campaign to win compensation. Bernie may have been the union representative for the Miscellaneous Workers Union during his time at James Hardie, but in his role as vice-president of the campaigning body, the Asbestos Diseases Foundation, he continues to show incredible fortitude, strength and stubbornness in the face of Tony Abbott's smart alec attacks. He showed these determined qualities when, despite his illness, on almost every day of the commission of inquiry in 2004 he sat opposite the judge, staring him out for 42 days.

Two years ago Bernie showed real compassion and determination when he spoke at the funeral of Phil Batson, another Parramatta victim. Batson was superintendent when Bernie worked at James Hardie, a boss's man with whom Bernie, as a union representative, had big problems. The two, however, buried the hatchet just before Phil's death from the more virulent cancer, mesothelioma. Worker or boss, this deadly asbestos makes no distinction. The struggle for justice for individuals, families and communities who are affected by asbestos continues and involves many community fighters. I am certain that they were all offended when Tony Abbott sidelined Bernie. I am pleased that the drug has been or is going to be listed, but would it have been listed if Bernie had not turned up in Manly on that day? That is the question.

People such as the president of the Asbestos Diseases Foundation of Australia, Barry Robson, secretary Elaine Day, many activists such as Ella Sweeney and Reg Stephenson, many unions, indigenous communities and countless others have been involved in pursuing justice. They would be offended by Tony Abbott's comments. Organised labour has been central to the battle. If Tony Abbott and John Howard want to question the role of unions they should talk with Bernie Banton and others sharing his fight. Bernie was born in Parramatta and he grew up with his brothers and sister just around the corner in Trott Street; the semi-detached cottage is still there. As a boy he jagged eels on Parramatta River, just near Lennox Bridge, not far from the Marsden Street bridge which now bears his name: Bernie Banton Bridge.

The local community of Parramatta and Granville honoured Bernie last year when, as lord mayor, I presented him with the keys to our city and named a bridge in the middle of our central business district after him. Bernie is pretty chuffed about his new bridge, and so is his family, although his family, like the communities of Western Sydney, have been ravaged by asbestos. I encourage Tony Abbott and the Howard Government to show some compassion and meet with victims of asbestos disease in the same way that Bob Carr and Morris Iemma helped in words and actions to find justice for these people.

Mr RAY WILLIAMS (Hawkesbury) [3.57 p.m.]: In speaking in favour of the amendment and against the motion, I place on record that I believe the comment Minister Abbott made about Bernie Banton may have been that he was not pure of heart. I would probably be the first member to put up their hand and say that I do not think anyone in this Chamber could claim to be absolutely pure of heart. I am certainly not pure of heart and I will be the first to put my hand up to say so. However, Bernie was big enough to accept Tony Abbott's apology, and that goes to the credit of Bernie Banton. The member for Wollongong, in her opening comments, said that the new treatment, Alimta, has now been listed under the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme. I must put on the record that the Federal health Minister, Tony Abbott, has been the most proactive member of the Federal Government in getting more medicines and treatments for all diseases but particularly asbestos-related diseases listed under the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme.

The Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme provides people with the opportunity to improve their quality of life and, indeed, to extend their life when they are affected by asbestos-related diseases, such as mesothelioma, lung cancer and emphysema, to name a few. I have met Bernie Banton; I think he ran a great campaign. As a lobbyist on behalf of the people of my electorate, and certainly the people in the council area of Baulkham Hills shire, I appreciate and respect anyone who is prepared to stand up. It is commendable that Bernie raised these issues. It is unfortunate and a shame that many years ago when the unions were fighting hard for wages and conditions for employees working with asbestos that these people and companies could not raise the dangers relating to asbestos. This is not new; asbestos and asbestos-related diseases were recognised in the early 1900s. Unfortunately, it takes a long time for the symptoms to appear in people affected by asbestos; they are diagnosed too late.

Once people began to be diagnosed with symptoms of asbestos-related diseases, asbestos was removed from workplaces. It is always better to prevent these things from happening in the first place. As the old saying goes, prevention is better than cure. As for that comment, it would be fair to say that the New South Wales Government has been less than proactive in preventing some of the problems caused to people who may have been in the vicinity of asbestos. Recently the *Sunday Telegraph* highlighted that asbestos-related materials had been used in the construction of a building at Maraylya Public School in my electorate.

Ms Lylea McMahon: Point of order: I am not sure where the member for Hawkesbury is going with his comments about the school and, indeed, how they are relevant to the topic under discussion today.

The DEPUTY-SPEAKER: Order! There is a broad ambit in this discussion so I will allow the member to continue.

Mr RAY WILLIAMS: That is a relevant point. The member for Shellharbour might like to refresh her knowledge of the standing orders. Maraylya Public School has an old building that was constructed of asbestos-related materials. More than 12 months ago the school and the parents and citizens association approached the Department of Education and Training—this is the new parents and citizens association; this matter goes back a long way. Both the Department of Education and Training and the Department of Health said that the building should be removed because it presents a danger to the children and a health risk to anyone who comes into contact with it. They further said that, under all the occupational health and safety standards put in place in New South Wales, the building should be removed.

The departments then asked who should pay to have the building removed. Who should pay? They said it should be removed at the expense not of the Department of Education and Training or the State Government, but of the school and the parents and citizens association. The departments expect the parents of students at the school to pay to remove that dangerous health hazard in the school. That is an absolute disgrace. That is why I am questioning whether Government members are fair dinkum when they move rubbish motions condemning the Federal Government when that Government is providing record funding for health across the country.

Ms LYLEA McMAHON (Shellharbour) [4.02 p.m.]: The behaviour of the member for Hawkesbury in this Chamber, in repeating the smear against Bernie Banton through inference, is disgusting and appalling.

I fully expect the member to be brought to account by his constituency, his party and the greater public on this issue. It is simply appalling behaviour. Rather than shun an Australian hero, a dying man, and rather than follow the gutless footsteps of the Federal health Minister, Tony Abbott, the member for Hawkesbury should return to the Chamber and account for his comments. The New South Wales Government, on the other hand, has taken up the baton on dust diseases and shown the Federal Government the way.

The DEPUTY-SPEAKER: Order! I remind people in the public gallery that the taking of photographs in the House is prohibited.

Ms LYLEA McMAHON: Last year the New South Wales Government announced the foundation of a dedicated research facility, the Asbestos Diseases Research Institute, focusing on the study of asbestos and other related dust diseases. This research institute is a practical and compassionate initiative to help alleviate suffering, find better treatments and work on earlier diagnosis. Since 2001 the New South Wales Government has also committed more than \$11 million to the research of dust diseases, including capital expenditure on the Asbestos Diseases Research Institute. The New South Wales Government, through the Dust Diseases Board and WorkCover, is also funding an outreach worker responsible for the development and implementation of educational programs.

The New South Wales Government is leading the way on dust diseases by subsidising the cost of a drug known as Alimta to victims through its Dust Diseases Board. Until today's announcement, sufferers outside New South Wales sadly faced annual bills of up to \$22,000 for the drug. Research has shown that this drug can prolong the lives of mesothelioma sufferers. So last week Bernie Banton, wheelchair bound and with the assistance of breathing apparatus, courageously took his fight to the electorate office of the Federal health Minister, Tony Abbott, in an attempt to have the drug Alimta approved for the pharmaceutical benefits scheme.

Rather than looking at this sick man's protest as a means of buying himself and sufferers like him some extra time with their families and loved ones, or as an attempt to alleviate some of the financial burden that is compounding these already suffering families, and rather than address Bernie Banton's concerns on that day, Mr Abbott deflected from his own negligent position by making comments to Channel 9 that Bernie's protest was "a stunt". Mr Abbott further said, "I know Bernie is very sick but just because a person is sick doesn't mean that he is necessarily pure of heart in all things." As is the case with most people I speak to, I am disgusted and appalled by those comments, which show an obvious lack of compassion and humanity.

Tony Abbott has been given the privilege of overseeing the national health system—a system that under his hand is suffering from a chronic shortage of doctors and nursing staff. Why? Because the Federal Coalition Government has capped the number of places at universities for these desperately needed professionals; because the Federal Government's funding for health is \$2.2 billion less than the funding provided to the States and Territories last year; because the Federal Coalition is refusing to take responsibility for the crisis it has created through years of underinvestment in education and training; and because the Federal Coalition is ripping off the people of New South Wales to the tune of \$750 million a year by refusing to pay its fair share of the Australian health care agreement. If Mr Abbott took as much interest in addressing the imbalance of funding in our health system as he does in mocking and belittling its dying consumers, maybe some small glimmer of hope could be offered to sufferers. Instead of shunning an Australian hero, a dying man, the New South Wales Government has led the way in supporting him.

Ms NOREEN HAY (Wollongong—Parliamentary Secretary) [4.07 p.m.], in reply: I thank the member for Granville and the member for Shellharbour for their contributions to this debate. For the member for Hornsby to congratulate the Federal Government when speaking to a motion that congratulates Bernie Banton, a victim, and condemns Tony Abbott for his attacks on him is nothing short of disgraceful—but it is nothing more than I would expect. The member for Hornsby criticised the New South Wales Government; she spoke about cancer treatment and mental health services. She completely ignored the fact that the Iemma Government spends \$1 billion a year on cancer treatment and \$1 billion per year on mental health services. How dare the member for Hornsby criticise the Government! She ought to be ashamed. She is an impostor; she does not represent the people of Hornsby. There are people in Hornsby who deserve better representation.

Mrs Judy Hopwood: Point of order: I ask you to request the member for Wollongong to withdraw her remark that I am an impostor.

The DEPUTY-SPEAKER: What does the member for Wollongong wish to say? I was in dialogue with the Clerk and did not hear the comment.

Mr Daryl Maguire: She claimed the member for Hornsby is an imposter.

Ms NOREEN HAY: I withdraw. I meant she was an impostor in trying to represent the people of Hornsby. I did not mean she is not who she is.

Mrs Judy Hopwood: Point of order—

Ms NOREEN HAY: I withdraw.

The DEPUTY-SPEAKER: Order! Members will focus on the debate.

Ms NOREEN HAY: The Opposition continues to ignore the \$1 billion in funding from the New South Wales Government for mental health services. I suggest that is an unheard of amount of investment in mental health care. The Opposition, as usual, congratulates the Federal Government, which has cut health funds across the board in New South Wales. I have not even mentioned the \$3 billion of GST funding that is ripped off New South Wales. However, I acknowledge the commitment of the State Government to do its absolute best. The member for Hornsby criticised the inadequate number of nurses in public hospitals. The statistics reveal that New South Wales requested 1,796 places in universities to train nurses, but only 200 places were allocated. That was a decision of the Opposition's mates in Canberra, not of the State Government. As far as the low comments of the member for Hawkesbury that reiterated the slur on Bernie Banton are concerned, that is all that could be expected of him. I will not repeat what he said, but he is a low individual.

Question—That the words stand—put.

The House divided.

Ayes, 47

Mr Amery	Ms Firth	Ms Megarrity
Ms Andrews	Mr Gibson	Mr Morris
Mr Aquilina	Mr Greene	Mrs Paluzzano
Ms Beamer	Mr Harris	Mr Pearce
Mr Borger	Ms Hay	Mrs Perry
Mr Brown	Mr Hickey	Mr Piper
Ms Burney	Ms Hornery	Mr Rees
Ms Burton	Ms Judge	Mr Sartor
Mr Campbell	Ms Keneally	Mr Shearan
Mr Collier	Mr Khoshaba	Ms Tebbutt
Mr Coombs	Mr Lynch	Mr Terenzini
Mr Corrigan	Mr McBride	Mr Tripodi
Mr Costa	Dr McDonald	Mr West
Mr Daley	Ms McKay	<i>Tellers,</i>
Mr Draper	Mr McLeay	Mr Ashton
Mrs Fardell	Ms McMahan	Mr Martin

Noes, 32

Mr Aplin	Ms Hodgkinson	Mr Roberts
Mr Baird	Mrs Hopwood	Mrs Skinner
Mr Baumann	Mr Humphries	Mr Smith
Ms Berejiklian	Mr Kerr	Mr Souris
Mr Cansdell	Mr Merton	Mr Stokes
Mr Constance	Mr O'Dea	Mr Stoner
Mr Debnam	Mr O'Farrell	Mr J. D. Williams
Mr Fraser	Mr Page	Mr R. C. Williams
Ms Goward	Mr Piccoli	<i>Tellers,</i>
Mrs Hancock	Mr Provest	Mr Maguire
Mr Hartcher	Mr Richardson	Mr R. W. Turner

Question resolved in the affirmative.

Amendment negatived.

The DEPUTY-SPEAKER: Order! It being after 4.15 p.m., under the standing orders the House would normally proceed to the giving of general notices followed by private members' statements. As a consequence of the division on the amendment not being completed until after 4.15 p.m., the question on the original motion cannot be put and the motion would lapse. Should the House require, with concurrence I will put the question on the original motion, which is, That the motion of the member for Wollongong be agreed to.

Concurrence not given.

The DEPUTY-SPEAKER: Order! There being no concurrence given the motion lapses.

Motion lapsed.**BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE****Notices of Motions**

General Business Notices of Motions (General Notices) given.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' STATEMENTS

ST VINCENT DE PAUL SOCIETY GYMEA FIFTIETH ANNIVERSARY**ST CATHERINE LABOURE CATHOLIC PARISH FIFTIETH ANNIVERSARY**

Mr BARRY COLLIER (Miranda—Parliamentary Secretary) [4.26 p.m.]: On Sunday 28 October 2007 my wife, Jeanette, and I attended a very special mass at St Catherine Laboure Catholic Church, our parish church in Gymea. The mass celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of the establishment of the St Vincent de Paul Society in the parish, and it also marked the beginning of the celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of the St Catherine Laboure Catholic parish. The celebrant was the parish priest, Monsignor Brian Rayner, assisted by former parish priest Father William Hannon and retired resident priest Father Reg Wilson.

We were honoured to have the Governor of New South Wales, Her Excellency Professor Marie Bashir, attend the mass and address the parishioners. Her Excellency and her husband, Sir Nicholas Shehadie, celebrated their golden wedding anniversary this year and Monsignor Rayner invited the Governor to speak on marriage and families during the mass. Her Excellency's speech was simply inspirational. She spoke of children as the catalyst that brings families together and of the important role that faith plays in our lives. She also emphasised the importance of speaking with respect to children, especially teenagers.

As we sat and listened I have no doubt that every member of the congregation thought as Jeanette and I thought: How fortunate we are in New South Wales to have Professor Marie Bashir as our Governor and how delighted we are that she has accepted a further term as our Head of State. After mass, Her Excellency met parishioners in the nearby hall, including many children from the adjacent St Catherine Laboure Catholic School and its principal, Maree Curry, as well as Michael and Rita Jordan, who are celebrating their sixtieth wedding anniversary this year. I congratulate all involved who helped to make Her Excellency's visit to our parish so memorable—people like our parish President, Mr Jim Willis, and our church choir, which gave an outstanding performance under the leadership of Mr John Harris.

The celebratory mass acknowledged the 50-year contribution made to our shire by the Gymea Conference of the St Vincent de Paul Society. Members of the society visit people in need in their homes and provide friendship, support and material assistance. Volunteers from local St Vincent de Paul Society conferences carry out those visitations. These parish or school-based groups respond to calls for assistance from local community members and work closely with the society's retail centres, or Vinnies as they are affectionately called. Conference members often assist those in need by providing food, clothing, furniture and household goods free of charge through the Vinnies centre. Money raised by Vinnies from the sale of stock is used to provide resources and support for those in need.

The Gymea Conference of the St Vincent de Paul Society was formed in 1956 and, one year later, on 28 October 1957, it received official accreditation from the society's headquarters in Paris. The conference has been operating continuously ever since and is one of 12 conferences comprising the Sutherland region. Several original members of the Gymea conference are still active, including Mr Neil Shanahan and Mr John Morahan, who also became national president in the 1970s. President John Bain currently leads the 15 members of the Gymea conference. Five of the past Gymea conference presidents have also been regional presidents, including Mr Peter Cobcroft, who is both the current regional president and president of Margaret House.

The Gymea Conference assists between 500 and 600 people every year with food, cash and goods, most of which are in the form of donations from parishioners of Gymea St Catherine Laboure parish. Gymea Conference members also visit people in hospitals and nursing homes on a weekly basis. Their work reflects part of the broader mission of the society, shaping a more just and compassionate Australian community by sharing themselves, who they are and what they have, with the poor and needy on a person-to-person basis. All society members are volunteers and give their time willingly to help the poor and the needy. They give of themselves, seeking neither recognition nor honour: they understand that giving is its own reward.

In the Sutherland shire the St Vincent de Paul Society also conducts five special works. First, Margaret House provides weekly respite services for families caring for children with a disability. The State Government assists this service by providing annual funding. Last year I had the privilege of presenting Mr Peter Cobcroft with a \$5,000 State Government grant to upgrade its facilities. Second, Amelie House is a refuge for women and children who are victims of domestic violence. Third, the Como Leisure Centre is a combined project with the Sutherland Hospital for the intellectually disabled. Fourth, the Mount St Vincent facility provides low-rent units for those who find it difficult to find accommodation in the open market. Finally, Glasson House provides rent-assisted accommodation for refugee or migrant families for short periods so that they can save to purchase their own property.

I visited all of those facilities in my electorate and was most impressed with the work being done by the dedicated staff and volunteers. I pay tribute to and thank each member of the Gymea Conference of the St Vincent de Paul Society, both past and present, for their wonderful contribution to the people of our parish and shire. I congratulate the members of the Gymea Conference on their fiftieth anniversary. With them, our priests and my fellow parishioners, I look forward to celebrating the golden anniversary of St Catherine Laboure Catholic parish in the Sydney suburb of Gymea.

Ms VIRGINIA JUDGE (Strathfield—Parliamentary Secretary) [4.31 p.m.]: I congratulate the hard-working member for Miranda on bringing to the attention of the House the great charity services of the St Vincent de Paul Society, particularly the voluntary work the Gymea Conference carries out in his electorate. It is wonderful to know that a local member works so closely with an organisation of such high repute. It is through such a close association that the different aspects of community need can more easily be met.

COFFS HARBOUR WOMEN'S HEALTH CENTRE

Mr ANDREW FRASER (Coffs Harbour—Deputy Leader of The Nationals) [4.32 p.m.]: This year the Coffs Harbour Women's Health Centre is celebrating its twenty-first birthday. On 9 October Ms Bronwyn Chalmers came to my office to express her disappointment that the carers program run by the centre has now ceased. In a letter to me she said:

Dear Andrew

Please find enclosed a copy of the final evaluation of our Carers Project funded for a three year term by NSW Health Dementia, Carers & Disability Unit.

I trust you will note the project has delivered its objectives in an efficient and effective manner considering both quantitative and qualitative data.

We had a final morning tea for local carers and a carer spoke impromptu noting that her life as a carer had been in a place of darkness and then there was light, and it was Julie and the Carer's Project. This was a touching and timely reminder of the invaluable service carers provide everyday in our community and how their need for support and education is pivotal in maintaining their physical, social and psychological wellbeing and ensuring continuance of their vital role.

I know a number of carers have contacted you or your office with regard to ongoing funding for this project. I ask you to support us with opportunities for ongoing funding for this vital, outcome driven and cost efficient project in building social resilience and capacity.

The service was a three-year project that cost only \$101,000. After reading the report, which is far too comprehensive to be included in *Hansard*, and bearing in mind the great work the Women's Health Centre carried out, I appeal to the Government to consider refunding this project, if not for another three years at least annually, because the funding amounts to only \$34,000 per annum. I praise the great work of the Coffs Harbour Women's Health Centre. We are all aware of the rises in costs. That is especially so in a growth area like Coffs Harbour and, unfortunately, the rent paid by the centre is \$48,000 a year, having increased by \$12,000. That means that this vital service will have to close one day a week.

The centre has seven visiting doctors, two welfare health nurses, two psychologists, one sexual health and family health planning educator and provides 15,000 services a year to 8,000 women in Woolgoolga, Dorrigo and Bellingen. That impressive record warrants the Government looking not only at refunding this carers project but also looking at increasing that funding. The North Coast Area Health Service provides \$260,000 a year to help run this vital service, but it is the bulk-billing by the doctors and other funds raised that enable the centre to meet the total cost of service provision of \$640,000 a year. The centre also has a youth outreach clinic at the Coffs Harbour Youth Service. The doctor who attends that service is a wonderful woman who talks to young ladies on health issues, from sexual health matters through to general personal care and hygiene. The number of young girls she comes into contact through this service is phenomenal. She basically provides a bulk-bill service, which means that money is returned to the centre.

I congratulate Bronwyn Chalmers and all those associated with the Coffs Harbour Women's Health Centre. I appeal to the Parliamentary Secretary, the member for Strathfield, who is seated at the table, and the Minister for Health to reconsider providing funding for this carers project. All electorates have carers for people with different types of ailments. These carers provide a fantastic service at minimal cost. Such support services are absolutely vital to our communities. The Coffs Harbour Women's Health Centre has done a great job for 21 years. I wish the centre a happy twenty-first birthday. I ask the Minister to make this twenty-first year something to remember by increasing the funding, looking at the great service the centre provides and ensuring that this vital service does not have to close for one day a week and, instead, continues to operate seven days a week, 52 weeks a year.

Ms VIRGINIA JUDGE (Strathfield—Parliamentary Secretary) [4.36. p.m.]: I thank the member for Coffs Harbour for his contribution. On behalf of all sides of the House, particularly the Iemma Government, I congratulate the Coffs Harbour Women's Health Centre on its twenty-first anniversary. I am sure the centre has done fabulous work helping the community for many years.

CRANEBROOK HIGH SCHOOL ROCK EISTEDDFOD 2007 AWARDS

Mrs KARYN PALUZZANO (Penrith) [4.37 p.m.]: I inform the House of the fantastic achievements of local schools and school students in the Rock Eisteddfod Challenge this year, paying particular attention to those in the Penrith electorate. On 6 September I had the privilege of attending the 2007 Rock Eisteddfod Challenge Premier Grand Final at the Sydney Entertainment Centre. Schools from the Penrith region have always had a strong presence in this competition, but none more so than Cranebrook High School. Over the past three years this school has won numerous awards in different categories. In 2006 Cranebrook High School were winners in the open division of the competition. This year the school was placed in the premier division, which is the highest division in which a school can be placed in the eisteddfod.

I am happy to report to the House that in its first year in the premier division Cranebrook High School finished in fourth place, but it won also two other very important awards on the evening. It won an award for choreography and also the award of excellence for the behind-the-scenes crew. This is the school's first time competing in the premier division and achieving fourth place is a credit to all involved. I publicly congratulate all staff, students and parents involved in this year's production.

Over 100 students at Cranebrook High School took part in this year's rock eisteddfod production, with another 20 students making up the vitally important back-stage crew. I particularly acknowledge teacher Sue Dawson, who is responsible for putting together the entire production. She is a marvellous teacher at a wonderful school. Sue Dawson has contributed countless hours of her own time to ensure the success of the production. I also acknowledge the Principal of Cranebrook High School, Mrs Deb Summerhayes, who started at Cranebrook High School only this year. I also acknowledge the parents who volunteered and made this performance such a spectacular success.

I know members are probably wondering about the theme of Cranebrook High School's performance. The performance was entitled *Coppélia* and was based around an eccentric toy maker Dr Coppelius who

brought one of his creations to life. The costumes and staging were quite magnificent. The performance commenced with the crazy Dr Coppelius bringing one of the dolls to life. The story was based on a ballet and the dancer mimicked a doll's movement. Toys popped out of toy boxes and toy soldiers marched back and forth across the stage and along the stairs. The staging of the performance was absolutely magnificent.

Cranebrook High School's rehearsal was booked for 6.00 a.m. The school is approximately 50 kilometres from the Sydney Entertainment Centre, which meant that cast and crew had to be on the road no later than 5.00 a.m. to allow for make-up and preparations. By the time the group received their award at midnight, they had been awake for nearly 24 hours. I commend all the staff and students of Cranebrook High School for their dedication and energy in staging the performance, and in particular for being awarded fourth place. I thank people behind the scenes who also contribute to the performance—the people we do not see. The stage crew had only four minutes between each segment of the premier division to put the stage sets in place and locked in for each performance. The stage crew had to be awake from 3.00 a.m. and had to work hard to meet the four-minute staging deadlines. They are a living example of the theme of the Rock Eisteddfod, and achieved incredible effects.

The Penrith Police and Community Youth Club also entered a team in the eisteddfod and received the Award for Environmental and Social Awareness in the open division. I applaud the State Government's sponsorship of various segments and its promotional theme of the benefits of an active lifestyle without drugs and alcohol. I congratulate all the schools that took part. I acknowledge the Werrington Public School in the Londonderry electorate, which is celebrating its twenty-fifth anniversary. I also send greetings to staff and students of the former Werrington County Public School where I once was a teacher.

Ms VIRGINIA JUDGE (Strathfield—Parliamentary Secretary) [4.42 p.m.]: I congratulate the hardworking member for Penrith on her presentation of her account of the wonderful production by Cranebrook High School, which is in her electorate, at the Rock Eisteddfod. These school events are fabulous. I have attended the Schools Spectacular and the Rock Eisteddfod that are held each year. It is wonderful to see public schools giving such fine performances. The interesting and comprehensive details of the production conveyed to the House by the member for Penrith reveals her keen interest in the arts. It is excellent that she has acknowledged the teachers involved. I know that the member is a great supporter of local schools in her electorate.

PITTWATER BUSINESS LIMITED

Mr ROB STOKES (Pittwater) [4.43 p.m.]: I inform the House of an organisation that is playing a valuable role in supporting and promoting small business in Pittwater. I commend it to the House as a model that could potentially provide huge benefits in other areas of the State. Pittwater Business Limited is a not-for-profit company that was formed to provide support for growth and development of sustainable small businesses in my electorate. It emerged from an initiative by the Pittwater Council when it recognised the need to encourage local businesses. However, Pittwater Business Limited is independent of the council. Its founders shared the vision of an organisation whose role would be to support small businesses and provide assistance in a range of areas such as networking, promotion and training. The driving forces were local business owners Geoff Mullins, Andrew Blunden and Ian Thompson. I pay tribute to their work today, particularly to Geoff Mullins who has just stepped down as Pittwater Business Limited's chairman, and Andrew Blunden who continues to serve as a director.

Small business is the bedrock of any successful local economy, and this is particularly so in my electorate. Ninety-seven per cent of all commercial organisations in Pittwater are classified as small businesses, employing fewer than 20 people; 82 per cent are very small businesses, with fewer than five employees. Based on those figures, it is estimated that in Pittwater small businesses employ approximately 15,000 people and, without doubt, they are punching above their weight. Nearly two-thirds of all businesses in Pittwater have a turnover of less than \$100,000 and more than 30 per cent have turnovers of less than \$50,000. But despite these modest figures, small businesses are a vital part of our economy and our social fabric. They cover a huge range of business activities, including retail, information technology, marketing, small-scale manufacturing, finance, design, catering and personal services—not forgetting all the surfboard manufacturers!

The average day of a consumer in Pittwater is almost certain to involve a transaction with one of the area's small businesses—when at a café buying a cappuccino, when dealing with a plumber who is mending a tap, when visiting a computer company that fixes laptops, when at the shop buying a carton of milk. The chances are that all those enterprises will be a small business. It is not too dramatic to say that without small

businesses the economy in Pittwater would grind to a halt, and that is true of many other areas in New South Wales. That is all the more impressive that many of these businesses are so small. Many of them might be referred to as mum and dad businesses or just very small family enterprises—they are operated from a small commercial unit, from a space above a shop or even from the family kitchen table. They are not glamorous, they do not have big shopfronts and they can result in a very lonely existence for the hardworking and dedicated people who run them.

That is where Pittwater Business Limited comes in. It has pioneered a novel approach to furthering the needs of all these small business operators who often find themselves isolated and without the support networks that are enjoyed by larger organisations. Chambers of commerce and similar organisations do a great job, but many smaller businesses need something different. They need real, practical help and support, irrespective of size, status or where they happen to be clustered. Pittwater Business Limited has the advantage of being a regional body that is able to connect small businesses with the broader community and introduce them to important networking opportunities beyond their immediate neighbourhood or their immediate high street. Pittwater Business Limited fosters a collegiate atmosphere that can be vital for small business owners who might otherwise feel detached, isolated and left on their own.

Pittwater Business Limited also carries out a great deal of community and charity work. Recently I was delighted to attend a function organised by Pittwater Business Limited to raise money for our great Mona Vale Hospital. The Spring Ball was held at the Mona Vale Golf Club to raise funds for a foetal monitoring machine. I congratulate organisers, such as Richard Morgan, Leanne Buttrose, Tanya Mottl and Kylie O'Callaghan, as well as all those who attended and gave so generously. Pittwater Business Limited says of itself, "We are committed to growing and developing successful businesses in Pittwater." It has just completed its first year and has established a great record in achieving just that. It is playing a vital role in the economy in my great electorate of Pittwater. It is a model that could be replicated with great benefit in the electorates of many other members. I commend Pittwater Business Limited to the House.

Ms VIRGINIA JUDGE (Strathfield—Parliamentary Secretary) [4.48 p.m.]: I thank the member for Pittwater for bringing to the attention of the Chamber a new organisation, Pittwater Business Limited, which is proving to be a dynamic force in his local community through its role of connecting and networking small businesses. Small business employs approximately 85 to 90 per cent of Australians. It is not just the big end of town that does business! Small businesses do not have large numbers of employees; they often operate with only two people who would not be employed by a large multinational company. It is really heartening to hear that in only one year Pittwater Business Limited managed to raise funds to donate to a local hospital. That is great. I am sure that Pittwater Business Limited will continue to prosper and thrive. The Department of State and Regional Development has a section known as NSW Small Business that runs a number of interesting programs. Perhaps the member for Pittwater may wish to mention those to Pittwater Business Limited.

JOHN HUNTER CHILDREN'S HOSPITAL KIDS CLUB

Mr ROBERT COOMBS (Swansea) [4.50 p.m.]: I inform the House of a small but active and highly productive charity group working in my electorate, the John Hunter Children's Hospital Kids Club. The group has 22 retiree members and they raise money in all sorts of ways for the benefit of the children's hospital. Last year the group raised more than \$100,000 to purchase lifesaving equipment and to enhance support services that are available for children and their families. In 2006-07 children with a range of conditions—including cancer, cystic fibrosis, diabetes and eating disorders—and premature babies benefited from the support of the John Hunter Children's Hospital Kids Club. Some 32 separate items were purchased for the hospital. Let us take a minute and put that effort into perspective: In one year 22 people donated 5,211 volunteer hours and raised \$100,000. That is a lot of raffle tickets! One hundred per cent of the money went to John Hunter Children's Hospital. That is just one year. In 13 years this dedicated group has raised almost \$2 million. As the primary fundraising group for John Hunter Children's Hospital, it has achieved this result by having stalls at the hospital, running raffles, staging theatre nights and holding other events, and applying for grants.

The children's hospital at John Hunter includes a medical ward, surgical ward, adolescent and day surgery ward, sleep unit, neonatal intensive care unit, outpatient clinic and a schoolroom. In 2008 it will also include a new oncology day unit. It treats youngsters from a wide geographical area—stretching from Wyong, north to the Queensland border and west to the New England tableland—and accepts children up to the age of 19 years. The John Hunter Children's Hospital treats about 7,500 children as inpatients each year and performs some 18,000 occasions of service in outpatients. But what does the unique partnership between the kids club and the children's hospital really mean for sick children?

When Rebecca Papadopolous went into preterm labour at 32 weeks at Manning Base Hospital the neonatal intensive care retrieval team from John Hunter Children's Hospital was quick to respond. Baby William, born eight weeks premature, was extremely sick and had breathing difficulties. The retrieval team provided over-the-phone support to the local obstetrician and paediatrician, while it travelled by road ambulance from Newcastle to Taree. When it arrived it helped the local team to stabilise William and provided fluids and antibiotics and ongoing ventilation before transporting him back to the children's hospital for intensive care.

The team arrived faster because of a new \$180,000 transport unit purchased with community donations. The transport unit allows the team to take intensive care services to babies like William around the State. John Hunter Children's Hospital Kids Club was one of the major donors, contributing \$15,000 for the transport unit. William is now home, healthy and happy, with his parents in Taree. William's story demonstrates the close relationship between the kids club and the children's hospital, which work together to ensure that children from the Hunter and beyond receive treatment, comfort and care of the highest calibre. I congratulate all members of the kids club and I will continue to support the John Hunter Children's Hospital.

In line with the above, both my wife and I recently had the outstanding pleasure of attending the annual function of the Swansea (Kids with Cancer) KC Club. It was held at the Sticky Rice Restaurant at Raffertys Resort, Cams Wharf. The kind hosts of the restaurant, Ross and Scott Brogden and Gary Price, kindly donated use of the premises and a wonderful selection of food free of charge to ensure that the Swansea KC Club was in the best position to maximise its fundraising capacity. The function raised close to \$5,000. When that is added to the \$30,000 already raised this year it is apparent that the group will be able to make a significant contribution to kids cancer facilities at John Hunter Hospital.

This wonderful group of people has been busy now for the past 10 years. It has raised more than \$100,000 and continues to raise more through luncheons, raffles, sausage sizzles and so on. I offer my special congratulations to Carol Jones, co-ordinator of the group. I am sure that the House will join me in congratulating these hardworking individuals and recognising the significant contribution that they have made to ensuring that kids with cancer are able to access the best possible support available. Their ongoing efforts will ensure that we are better placed to comfort kids who need all the love and support that our community can muster. Well done, folks!

Ms VIRGINIA JUDGE (Strathfield—Parliamentary Secretary) [4.55 p.m.]: I commend the member for Swansea for bringing to the attention of the Chamber some wonderful organisations that do so much good work in his electorate. I have heard the member speak several times in the Chamber. He is a newly elected member who has hit the deck not walking but running. The member for Swansea is actively involved in his community and pushes and supports local causes. The people of Swansea are very lucky to have him as their local member.

LICENCE LAWS FOR OLDER DRIVERS

Mrs SHELLEY HANCOCK (South Coast) [4.56 p.m.]: Various proposals are outlined in the July 2007 discussion paper of the Roads and Traffic Authority, which is entitled "Licensing of Older Drivers". I must convey to the House the following concerns expressed by residents of the South Coast through letters, a survey that I devised, many telephone calls and a public meeting attended by almost 400 people. In July I began to receive a number of telephone calls and letters related to the discussion paper. As a result of the concerns expressed therein I devised a survey that on 14 August was sent to all residents of my electorate aged 70 and older. I convened a public meeting on 30 August to which the Roads and Traffic Authority was invited—and which it attended. The Leader of the Opposition also attended the meeting at my request to listen to the views of South Coast residents.

The survey, to which approximately 2,000 residents responded, asked three questions, and the following responses were received. Question No. 1 asked: "Do you agree with the RTA's proposals to reduce the age for annual medical testing from 80 to 75?" Some 75 per cent of respondents disagreed. Question No. 2 asked: "Do you agree with the 10 kilometre radius restriction to be placed on all drivers at age 85?" Some 95 per cent of respondents disagreed. Question No. 3 asked: "Do you agree with a 'home to town' restriction to be placed on rural drivers?" Some 97 per cent of respondents disagreed. An invitation was attached to the survey indicating that we would endeavour to have a Roads and Traffic Authority representative at the public meeting. Approximately 400 people attended the public meeting and raised the following issues.

First, attendees identified the fact that there is no flexibility in the proposed 10-kilometre radius restriction and all agreed that, if introduced, the proposals should be assessed further. General concerns were

expressed about the mandatory nature of the proposed radius restriction and the fact that, once imposed, it might be difficult to return to an alternative system of annual driving tests—which is most unpopular anyway. Secondly, there was concern that the proposals were placed on the Roads and Traffic Authority website when fewer than 10 per cent of those who attended the meeting used, or even had access to, the Internet. Many residents felt this was an inappropriate way to seek widespread comments from older residents. Thirdly, concern was expressed about the lack of clarity regarding the proposed home-to-town exemptions in rural areas. Residents questioned how a "rural area" would be defined and pointed out the problems associated with being restricted to their hometown when they might need to travel to larger towns in the South Coast electorate to attend medical appointments or visit large shopping centres.

Fourthly, there was widespread concern about the lack of public transport on the South Coast. Most older drivers rely on their cars for mobility and independence. Fifthly, widespread concerns were expressed about the impact of the proposals on volunteers in the South Coast electorate, many of whom rely on their cars to deliver services to the needy in the area. They include Meals on Wheels, Neighbour Aid and Anglicare volunteers—to name just a few. Sixthly, there was widespread comment that the proposals were insulting and discriminatory and showed a lack of respect to older drivers, the majority of whom have faultless driving records. Seventhly, there was widespread concern that the New South Wales Government and the Roads and Traffic Authority should do more to target young drivers, many of whom had been seen to speed and drive in a reckless manner by those present at the meeting.

I received written correspondence in addition to the survey, which provided space for further comments. The 90 to 100 letters enunciated a diversity of view but all expressed opposition to, and dissatisfaction with, the Roads and Traffic Authority older drivers licensing proposals. I am pleased to say that in response to widespread consultation undertaken by the Coalition we have devised our own policy position. We will abolish mandatory age-based driving tests for older drivers, bringing New South Wales into line with States such as Victoria and Queensland; we will continue annual medical testing from age 80 because we believe that is important; we oppose very strongly Labor's proposed 10-kilometre radius restricted licences, which have disturbed and concerned a great many older people in the community; and we will improve education for all drivers, including older drivers. Turning to the correspondence I received, a resident of Culburra Beach wrote:

We are very upset over the changes proposed for car licences. We both drive and have good reputations. Why aren't bad drivers being targeted leaving good drivers to carry on? We travel to Nowra weekly for our shopping as it's too expensive to buy local. We have to go to South Nowra to pay for our car licences, the big shops are located at South Nowra and we have no way of getting there at all.

Also volunteer drivers are mostly the oldies who have retired and they travel a lot.

Another resident from East Street, Nowra wrote:

We find this whole debate insulting. The finger seems to be squarely pointed at rural drivers with the 10km or home to town restriction that is biased and unfair. It would restrict work and social opportunities for people over 85. Not all older drivers are unsafe drivers. We live 20km from town but as local graziers we travel to Nowra (50kms) to sell our cattle. If anything happened to someone on our property, it would be quicker to drive to the hospital than wait for an ambulance—huge safety issue.

Ms VIRGINIA JUDGE (Strathfield—Parliamentary Secretary) [5.01 p.m.]: I thank the member for South Coast for bringing to the attention of the Chamber the discussion paper that was made available for public viewing and comment by the Minister for Roads, Mr Roozendaal. It is great that the member organised a forum. That is what the paper was about: giving people a chance to express views. I am sure that those views will be passed on to the Minister for his consideration.

PADSTOW COLLEGE HORTICULTURE AND FLORISTRY FACILITIES

Mr ALAN ASHTON (East Hills) [5.02 p.m.]: Last Thursday I had the privilege of opening the new horticultural facilities at Padstow College with the Federal member for Macarthur, the Hon. Pat Farmer. Also in attendance was Mr Garry Browne, the institute director of TAFE New South Wales South Western Sydney Institute; members of the TAFE New South Wales South Western Sydney Institute Advisory Council; Mr Dennis Krilich, the Padstow college manager; and Ms Christine Williamson, faculty director of tourism and hospitality. I also acknowledge the welcome to country by Janny Ely.

Padstow College opened in 1981. There were then three teaching rooms, one head teacher and one teacher of horticulture. In 1982 a teacher of horticulture trades was appointed and the small section began

teaching landscape, nursery and park gardens. In addition, a floristry teacher was appointed and floristry delivery was started. In 2007 this section has grown to three head teachers, 12 full-time teachers and 30 part-time teachers. With more than 600 enrolments per year the section delivers training in landscape, parks, nursery production, arboriculture, horticulture, floristry, conservation and land management. The section also delivers TAFE vocational education and training programs for schools and many commercial activities.

The new facility includes a double-storey building that has the capacity for 12 classrooms and teaching areas. It has a large computer room with computer-aided drafting software installed, a double lecture theatre that can be converted to two individual classrooms, conference facilities, a fully equipped teacher resource room, a fully equipped first aid room, lifts, ramps and toilet facilities for the less mobile. Padstow College is a tremendous college. The member for Menai, who is in the House, would be familiar with it as it was part of her electorate before the recent redistribution. The college is well run, state of the art and well represented by its teachers and students. I remember fondly that I was on the original board of management in 1981—I think I was appointed straight out of high school! It was a great privilege.

The State and Federal governments jointly funded these new facilities, as was the case with the new facilities at East Hills Girls High School to which I referred last night. The facilities cost almost \$6 million and the funding split was 50 per cent each. It is good to see that. The horticultural section of Padstow College has strong links with industry. Some groups include the Landscape Contractors' Association, the Nursery Association, the Australian Institute of Horticulture, the Tree Contractors' Association, National Arborists Association, International Society of Arborists, Flower Growers Association and Professional Florists Association.

It is beautiful that this horticultural extension is close not only to the Flemington markets, which is important in floristry as well as horticulture, but is also close to Padstow railway station, which makes it easy for students to get to and from the college as it is a quick walk down the road. As I said, it cost almost \$6 million and it was split pretty much fifty-fifty between the State and Federal governments. I give credit to the Federal Government as it actually paid \$1,000 more—we are appreciative of that extra funding.

We watched intently as Pat Farmer decided to test his skills at climbing a high rope and do a highwire trick. Daryl Melham and I did our best not to yell out, "Fall, fall!" or "Jump, jump!" It was interesting. Pat Farmer made a nice speech paying credit to Daryl Melham, the Federal member for Banks. We wish Pat all the best too. It is not surprising that Padstow College graduates are in great demand. They have won many awards and many recommendations from the horticultural section. One of the success stories is Ms Jodie Rigby, who started as an apprentice at Padstow College and has gone on to become a television presenter on *Backyard Blitz*. Well done Padstow College. I also say well done to the New South Wales Government and thanks to the Federal Government for the fifty-fifty funding arrangement for the new horticultural facilities at Padstow College.

TWEED DISTRICT VISIT BY THE HON. MARK VAILE

Mr GEOFF PROVEST (Tweed) [5.07 p.m.]: Once again I inform the House that I am 100 per cent for the Tweed. On 5 November I had the pleasure of accompanying the Hon. Mark Vaile, the Deputy Prime Minister, on his visit to the Tweed district. Mr Vaile was visiting the area to assist The Nationals candidate for the Federal seat of Richmond, Dr Sue Page, in her campaign efforts. Dr Sue Page was previously the head of the Rural Doctors Association of Australia and we value her input. The day began with a tour of the \$2 million federally funded Tweed Clinical Education and Research facility that is being constructed at Tweed Heads. It is important because up to 210 clinical staff—doctors, nurses and others—will train there each year. It is a joint facility between Bond University, Griffith University, the Federal Government and the State Government.

The tour then moved to the Tweed Heads hospital complex. We visited the proposed breast screening facility and the new and old oncology wards, where we saw firsthand just how hard it was to manage in the cramped old ward area. We then moved to the outpatient ward. Staff explained that when the ward becomes overcrowded patients are forced to sit outside. Hospital staff have erected a makeshift screen to provide these patients with some protection from the elements, but when the wind and rain blows from an angle they will get wet in that area. On visiting the haemodialysis unit we were told by staff that 48 patients are treated each week by two daily shifts. This unit is currently operating at maximum capacity and, like all the other units and wards at the Tweed Heads hospital, the staff are extremely professional and totally committed to providing the best care possible to their patients.

We then accompanied the Deputy Prime Minister to the maternity unit of the hospital. The Tweed Hospital currently operates three birthing rooms. However, in the event of a fourth woman going into labour,

hospital staff are forced to move the woman into a tearoom to conduct the birth. The maternity unit at Tweed Heads hospital currently delivers an average of 1,200 babies each year and has delivered 23 babies in the first five days of November. This brought home to us all the real pressures that are put on these dedicated staff. We were informed by maternity ward staff that it is not uncommon for new mothers to spend only a day and a half in the hospital after giving birth before being encouraged to go home. This occurs only if the mother is not ill after the birth. It is a case of lack of resources rather than a lack of compassion. In order to treat incoming patients, others need to be moved to free up the clinic. However, they are provided with excellent support at home by a clinical support nurse.

We then visited the hospital's nursery facility, which can care for a maximum of only 12 babies at any one time. The staff at the hospital stressed that the facility urgently needs upgrading to cope with the large number of births. Currently the accident and emergency area treats around 47,000 patients per annum—50 per cent Queensland residents and 50 per cent New South Wales residents. The tour of the hospital concluded with a visit to the proposed radiotherapy bunker. I again commend the wonderful staff at Tweed Hospital for their amazing work and dedication to providing first-class patient care to patients in the Tweed district.

The Deputy Prime Minister, Dr Page and I then visited the new Banora Centro shopping centre where we met with the highway action group, a dedicated group of locals who are urging the Government to look further into option C for the Sexton Hill upgrade. The group explained to Mr Vaile the surrounding details and facts. The group provided him with a copy of the petition that I have presented to the House, which contains more than 5,000 signatures. The highway action group also voiced concerns regarding the Government's preferred option B to the Deputy Prime Minister, who showed deep interest. At that point he announced that the Federal Government would be conducting independent costing inquiries into both options—the Roads and Traffic Authority option and the community option.

We then visited Tweed Heads, where Mr Vaile announced \$100,000 in funding for a skate park to be built in the area by mid 2008. The announcement was enthusiastically received by a large number of local skateboarders, who will no doubt be pleased to have the new facility. I commend Tweed Shire Council, our great local clubs that contributed a significant amount, and the Federal Government, who together under the Regional Partnership Program made this \$350,000 program possible. The Deputy Prime Minister's visit concluded with a visit to Murwillumbah hospital before continuing on the campaign trail. Once again, I am 100 per cent for the Tweed.

JANNALI PUBLIC SCHOOL BEFORE AND AFTER SCHOOL CARE CENTRE

Ms ALISON MEGARRITY (Menai) [5.12 p.m.]: The Jannali Public School Before and After School Care Centre has been providing before and after school care for the students and families of Jannali Public School under the auspices of the school's parents and citizens association since 1998. In June 2005 the former principal of Jannali Public School, Katherine Spencer, asked the former principal of Yarrawarra Public School, Heather Causley, to assist her in managing the centre, which was experiencing serious financial difficulties at that time. Ms Causley is a Fellow of the College of Educators, and is greatly admired in the Sutherland shire community. She has been managing the centre on a voluntary basis since that time. But with her trademark professionalism, to perform this role Heather has undertaken training in MYOB in order to pay wages, prepare a business activity statement for the Australian Taxation Office and reconcile accounts, as well as handling the whole administration of the centre, writing letters to school community members, going to the centre at least twice a week to liaise with the coordinator and staff, and running staff meetings and parent meetings.

Heather may prefer that I did not highlight this point, but the huge amount of time and energy she has devoted to getting the centre back on track should be recognised. It is also greatly appreciated by the school communities served by this before and after school care centre. Reviews of the staffing, management and financial practices of the centre were undertaken, and significant changes were made to improve the efficiency of the centre and to prepare it for quality-assurance accreditation by the National Childcare Accreditation Council. Undoubtedly over the past two years the biggest impact on the centre's funding has been the 20 per cent increase in wages since 2005; and while the centre has increased its fees to help cover these costs, it is highly conscious of the need to keep fees at an affordable level for local families. A further 8 per cent wage increase is due next year.

In 2006 Jannali Public School invited students from Como Public School to use this before and after school care service as Como does not have such a facility. Jannali Public School provided a small bus to transport children from Como, the cost of which was partly provided through the Sutherland shire community

grants program. To have passed on the full cost of this service to parents would have been prohibitive, but Como families pay a small surcharge. The centre is licensed for up to 20 children in the morning and 30 children in the afternoon. The staff are enthusiastic and friendly, and provide a warm, homely and safe environment for the children. But with so little funding, there have been occasions when it seemed the centre would not have sufficient funds to pay its staff. Fortunately the staff have always been paid each fortnight, but members can only imagine how extremely stressful this situation would be from a management point of view.

It must be said today that the centre is at a critical stage of its operation. However, Ms Causley is confident that with an injection of emergency funds the centre will be able to continue its operations, and continue providing this vital service for the Jannali and Como school communities. Recently Ms Causley took the initiative and approached 12 local businesses and four clubs to see if they could assist with funding. Unfortunately the strategy has not been successful. I am aware that the centre has also sought assistance from the local Federal member for Hughes, Dana Vale, as funding for the centre is a Federal responsibility under the Commonwealth Family Assistance Act. I am sorry to say that to date Ms Vale has been unable to provide that assistance, but I have made urgent representations to the Federal Minister for Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, the Hon. Mal Brough.

On behalf of myself and my colleague the member for Miranda, I have emphasised to Minister Brough that the centre provides a vital service to the Jannali and Como school communities. Working families, especially those with mortgages, are doing it tough these days. They have suffered no fewer than 10 interest rate rises in recent years, six of those since John Howard promised, with hand on heart, to keep interest rates low, only to break that promise repeatedly. Family budgets are constantly being stretched by ever-increasing fuel and grocery prices. We cannot stand by and see fees for the before and after school care centre increase to a point of non-viability. Already, Jannali families could be paying up to \$26 per day and Como families up to \$30 per day. If it gets to the point that families cannot afford it, or the service is no longer viable, there would be significant ramifications for both school communities.

Local families would most likely have to move their enrolments to other schools where this service is available. Under the current arrangements for the child care rebate, the highest rebate a family could hope for on a sliding scale is about \$3 per hour, which could be, say, \$6 in the morning and \$9 in the afternoon. I hope that Minister Brough will consider my plea, on my behalf and on behalf of the before and after school care centre and the member for Miranda, to look at some emergency funding or increase child care funding for the benefit of everyone who needs to use these services to keep the family budget afloat.

HAWKESBURY ELECTORATE DEVELOPMENT

Mr RAY WILLIAMS (Hawkesbury) [5.17 p.m.]: I have spoken previously about the vast rural areas in my electorate of Hawkesbury and how there exists an opportunity to subdivide some of the larger blocks of land, such as the 25-, 50-, 60- and 100-acre lots into smaller rural blocks of two hectares or five acres under the old scale. As I have said publicly, this type of subdivision not only allows people the opportunity to live on a larger block of land; it also opens up the housing market to other residents wishing to purchase a new home on acreage and provides children of families in these areas the opportunity to purchase land and live in the area where they grew up. At present in New South Wales and across my electorate of Hawkesbury there is a severe downturn in housing activity. Because of this downturn, people are moving to Queensland at a rapid rate because they cannot purchase a home.

It is reported that 1,000 residents are leaving this State each week, and we have the lowest building figures in New South Wales for more than a decade. Along with these residents goes an enormous number of builders, carpenters, bricklayers, et cetera, all seeking work, which is a loss not only to my electorate but to the New South Wales economy and its skilled work base. That is further evidence that Labor fails when it comes to economic management. The continuing failed urban consolidation policy of the New South Wales Labor Government has never been more evident, affecting residents across New South Wales. In every suburb we hear residents complaining about overdevelopment or, indeed, inappropriate development.

The Minister for Planning is currently imposing on every council across New South Wales a statewide local environmental plan. A local environmental plan is for a particular area, but the Minister wants to implement the same local environmental plan for every council area and suburb across New South Wales. This means that a council in a rural area of Western New South Wales will have the same restrictions and criteria regarding its planning instruments as a council on the coast. One can only imagine how councillors in rural areas would deal with restrictions in the same way as councillors would in coastal areas. It is an absolute nonsense.

The Minister, by imposing this one-size-fits-all approach, is taking the "local" out of local environmental plans. These plans were originally implemented to protect local areas from inappropriate development.

How can we have the same plan, all parcelled up in one template, representing residents in suburbs across New South Wales? It is stupid. Yesterday the Minister came into this Chamber and told us about his plans to put independent decision-making panels into councils in Sydney to make decisions on behalf of local residents. But it is not about making decisions on behalf of local residents; it is all about making quick decisions on behalf of developers. The Minister spoke about the length of time it takes for some councils to approve development applications. What he did not tell us is that councillors are taking the time to talk to the residents they represent who are incensed by the amount of overdevelopment that is being shoved down their throats and forced on them by the State Labor Government and the Minister in particular. That is where the delays are coming from.

Every day we hear residents screaming about a new high-rise apartment block being built on their doorstep. Yesterday we heard about more than 1,000 residents objecting to a proposal in the rural areas of Camden. Every day it is a different suburb and a different issue. The Minister is not only taking "local" out of local environmental plans; he is taking "local" out of local government by ignoring local councillors and appointing his mates to decision-making roles on local councils on behalf of their developers. Just as Federal Labor wants to put every employee in Australia on a wages award that would be completely controlled by a union, the Minister wants to control every development application that is presented to local councils. In the current metropolitan strategy across New South Wales, the State Labor Government is demanding that an additional 445,000 infill residences be built in suburbs across Sydney.

Five years ago Baulkham Hills council implemented a housing strategy, which was accepted by the State Government, that restricted high-density development to certain areas surrounding roads. The development could not be restricted to land around rail lines because the New South Wales Government refuses to build the north-west rail link. Now, less than five years after accepting this strategy from Baulkham Hills shire council, the State Government has thrown it out the door and demanded the development of an additional 25,000 infill residences in suburbs such as Baulkham Hills and Castle Hill, which will be gross overdevelopment in those two beautiful suburbs and will be hated by the residents who live there.

This all comes at a time when there is adequate room for more greenfield development in areas surrounding and in my electorate, such as Box Hill-Nelson, Maraylya and Oakville and across the road in Vineyard, where residents would be happy to see sustainable development on larger blocks. Large blocks of land can be revegetated with healthy, large trees, dissimilar to the amount of development that we have seen progress across the north-west and south-west areas that have been stripped of natural vegetation, where housing blocks are too small and houses restrict the growth of good vegetation.

REMEMBRANCE DAY

BATTLE OF BEERSHEBA

Mr JOHN AQUILINA (Riverstone—Leader of the House) [5.22 p.m.]: I also acknowledge the members of the Wiradjuri nation and pay my respect to their elders, past and present. At 11.00 a.m. on Sunday 11 November along with many of our colleagues I will observe Remembrance Day at a Remembrance Service. This year I will attend the Windsor Memorial. I take this opportunity to highlight the importance and significance of Remembrance Day. It is important that we have a thorough understanding of the historic events that have inspired our nation and why those historic events remain important for us, for our children, and for those who follow.

Remembrance Day and Anzac Day are important recognitions of our history and of the sacrifices made by Australians before us to ensure that our role in the world is significantly appreciated. That recognition defines us as Australians with the kind of character and citizenship that we all enjoy and appreciate. We should recognise also that such ceremonies help project to our young people and those who follow the importance of who they are and what has made this great country as great as it is. It is important to remember the origins of Remembrance Day.

Remembrance Day, 11 November, was not always known by that name. Some people may recall that years ago it was known as Armistice Day. Its history is that at 11.00 a.m. on 11 November 1918 the guns of the Western Front fell silent after more than four years of continuous warfare. On the first anniversary of the

armistice, 11 November 1919, two minutes' silence was instituted as part of the main commemorative ceremony at the new Cenotaph in London. It should be recorded and remembered that that silence was, appropriately, proposed by an Australian journalist who was working in Fleet Street, Edward Honey.

On the second anniversary of the armistice, 11 November 1920, the commemoration was given added significance when it became a funeral, with the return of the remains of an unknown soldier from the battlefields of the Western Front. Unknown soldiers were interred with full military honours in Westminster Abbey in London and at the Arc de Triomphe in Paris. The entombment in London attracted more than one million people within a week to pay their respects at the unknown soldier's tomb. Most other allied nations adopted the tradition of entombing unknown soldiers over the following decade.

After the end of World War II the Australian and British governments changed the name to Remembrance Day. Armistice Day was no longer an appropriate title for a day that would commemorate all war dead. In Australia on the seventy-fifth anniversary of the armistice, 11 November 1993, Remembrance Day ceremonies again became the focus of national attention. On that day the remains of an unknown Australian soldier, exhumed from a First World War military cemetery in France, were ceremonially entombed in the Australian War Memorial. Remembrance Day ceremonies were conducted simultaneously in towns and cities all over the country, culminating at the moment of burial at 11.00 a.m. and coinciding with the traditional two minutes' silence. This ceremony, which touched a chord across the Australian nation, re-established Remembrance Day as a significant day of commemoration.

Four years later, in November 1997, the then Governor-General, Sir William Deane, issued a proclamation formally declaring 11 November as Remembrance Day and urging all Australians to observe one minute's silence at 11.00 a.m. on 11 November each year to remember those who died or suffered for Australia's cause in all wars and armed conflicts.

This year it is important to note that we commemorate another important event, the Battle of Beersheba, which took place on 31 October 1917. I am sure honourable members would have read of the descendants of the valiant members who took part in the Battle of Beersheba, who have re-enacted some events that took place during that battle. The Battle of Beersheba was part of the Sinai and Palestine campaign during World War I. The Australian 4th Light Horse Brigade, under Brigadier William Grant, charged more than four miles at the Turkish trenches, overran them and captured the wells at Beersheba. That is often reported as "the last successful cavalry charge in history", although the Australian Light Horse Brigade was mounted infantry, not cavalry.

I congratulate the Windsor RSL Sub-Branch and the enormous work it has done. I thank especially its young general manager, Jason Moore, who has done a grand job on behalf of the club. I look forward to participating with the Windsor RSL Sub-Branch on Sunday for Remembrance Day in honouring all past Australian veterans.

Ms LINDA BURNEY (Canterbury—Minister for Fair Trading, Minister for Youth, and Minister for Volunteering) [5.27 p.m.]: I congratulate the member for Riverstone on his contribution. It is really important to remember and mark historic events such as Remembrance Day and the Battle of Beersheba. Those commemorations give us a sense of who we are and define us as a nation. As Minister for Youth, I agree with the Leader of the House that giving young people a sense of who they are is also important.

I take this opportunity to welcome to Parliament House the Wiradjuri women, June and Margaret Murray, and representatives involved in the Wiradjuri Youth Kulture Exhibition, which is to be launched in the Fountain Court tonight. It is a great honour for me, as another Wiradjuri woman, to have them visit the House of the people; they make me very proud.

LISMORE BASE HOSPITAL RADIOTHERAPY UNIT

Mr DONALD PAGE (Ballina) [5.29 p.m.]: I bring to the attention of the House the issue of the proposed radiotherapy unit for Lismore Base Hospital. The honourable members representing the Lismore and Clarence electorates and I are extremely supportive of the establishment of an integrated cancer care unit at Lismore Base Hospital. The member for Lismore and I were part of a delegation, which included the former member for Page, Ian Causley, Dr Austin Curtin and Vahid Saberi, who met with the Federal health Minister Tony Abbott in Sydney in April 2004 to get Federal money for the project.

Subsequently the Federal Minister and the former New South Wales Minister Assisting the Minister for Health (Cancer), Mr Sartor, announced that a jointly funded \$16 million radiotherapy unit would be built at Lismore. The proposal was to build the unit on the site that currently houses the Richmond Clinic Mental Health Unit once the new mental health facility was completed. I must stress that this radiotherapy unit will be a regional facility catering for people on the coast in my electorate as well as inland in the seat of Lismore and beyond. Unfortunately, the new mental health facility is taking longer to put in place than anticipated, which has in turn delayed the construction of the radiotherapy unit. Lack of action by the State Government is the main cause of this delay.

The capital budget for the radiotherapy unit has now increased from \$16 million to \$23 million. It was hoped that construction of the radiotherapy unit could commence at the completion of the mental health facility, due in 2008. However, the State Labor Government has failed to allocate any funding in the budget handed down this year, effectively dashing the hopes of our region that the unit would become a reality in the timeframe originally envisaged at the time of the joint announcement by the Federal and State Ministers back in 2004. The failure of the State Labor Government to provide funding in its latest budget comes despite the Premier stating in this Chamber in November 2005 that his Government had a commitment to "ongoing investment in the infrastructure and service development of Lismore Base Hospital". Clearly, we need to get on with this project quickly. Both the State and Federal governments must maintain their commitment to the project, even though its projected cost has increased because of delays.

Public cancer patients who are living in the North Coast region of New South Wales and who are undergoing radiotherapy treatment must travel for treatment to Coffs Harbour, which is over 300 kilometres away; to Brisbane, which is over 400 kilometres away; or to Sydney, which is over 1,000 kilometres away. They must pay for the cost of travel and accommodation for what is usually six weeks treatment. Sadly, some patients choose not to have any treatment because of the distance and costs involved. Private cancer patients must travel for radiotherapy to the Gold Coast, which is over 200 kilometres away. That is an extremely expensive treatment, as an outpatient service is not covered by any current private health fund. Radiotherapy treatment often involves a minimum of 60 seconds daily for 31 days over six weeks. Unfortunately, as I said earlier, some people choose not to have treatment at all for that reason.

The Northern Rivers region is a low-income area. The ratio of public patients to private patients in this area is approximately 65 per cent public and 35 per cent private. A radiotherapy unit is an extremely important piece of infrastructure critical to cancer sufferers and their families. In this region in excess of 1,700 people are diagnosed with cancer each year, and that number is growing. The New South Wales State Government promised that stage two of the Lismore Base Hospital redevelopment would be completed by January 2008. Clearly, that will not be the case.

Cancer sufferers from the Northern Rivers region of New South Wales need a radiotherapy unit now. Having inspected the excellent radiotherapy facilities at Coffs Harbour I am more determined than ever to see similar facilities located at Lismore Base Hospital. As I said, the current situation means that local residents requiring radiotherapy treatment under the public system must travel to Brisbane, Coffs Harbour or Sydney. The requirement to travel large distances adds to the stress of dealing with a diagnosis of cancer.

The 2002 Commonwealth radiation oncology report identified the Northern Rivers area as one of the top three areas nationally needing better oncology services. That is because of population growth, the ageing profile of that population, high cancer rates, low utilisation rates for radiation oncology, lack of access to radiotherapy services and the need for significant travel by patients and family. The report recommended that three machines would be required to meet the demand of the Northern Rivers area. As far back as 2002 the radiotherapy unit had the support of nine local mayors, the regions, State and Federal members of Parliament, and 16,000 local residents who put their names to a petition. Those local residents are continuing their campaign of petitioning as a result of the failure of this Labor Government to provide funding for stage two of the redevelopment process in its latest budget.

I am strongly supportive of the Integrated Cancer Care Unit for Lismore Base Hospital as it is a much-needed regional facility. I will continue to lobby both the State and Federal governments to maintain their joint commitment to the project and to bring it to fruition as soon as possible. I note that Deputy Prime Minister Mark Vaile today announced that, if re-elected, the Federal Coalition Government would add \$2 million to the \$8 million it has already committed to help to fund this project. Funding will be provided on condition that the State Government commences construction in 2008. That would mean completion of the project by 2009. I call on the State Government to commit to this project and to expedite its construction as a matter of urgency.

CENTRAL COAST ROADS EXPENDITURE

Mr GRANT McBRIDE (The Entrance) [5.34 p.m.]: On Tuesday 16 October I gave an account of a massive road program being implemented on the Central Coast. Today I wish to give an update on the road program announced by the Minister for Roads, Eric Roozendaal, on Tuesday 30 October. In the 2006-07 State budget the Central Coast received a massive 69 per cent increase in capital road expenditure, bringing the estimated road spending on the Central Coast to \$73 million. This commitment was further enhanced with an increase to \$79.5 million in the 2007-08 budget. This increased commitment to funding means that key projects throughout the Central Coast arterial road network will significantly improve road safety and traffic flow.

Over the next four years we will have the biggest road-building program that the Central Coast has ever seen for local arterial roads. The Pacific Highway at Ourimbah is being widened to improve access to the F3 freeway and safety around Ourimbah Public School, with further work over the next 12 months. On Tuesday 30 October the New South Wales roads Minister, Eric Roozendaal, announced a call for tenders for major upgrades of the Pacific Highway at Ourimbah and at Tuggerah. Mr Roozendaal said:

The Iemma Labor Government is delivering on its commitment to improve Central Coast roads.

We are investing \$79.5 million this year into Central Coast roads—working hard to improve traffic flow and safety for local motorists.

Tenders are being called to upgrade Tuggerah Straight between Mildon Road and Johnson Road—part of our \$42 million investment for this vital part of the Pacific Highway.

The other tender is for the upgrade of the Pacific Highway between Glen Road and Burns Road Ourimbah.

This is part of our plan to upgrade the Pacific Highway to four lanes between Lisarow and the F3 and comes on top of the nearly completed \$15 million Dog Trap Road, Pacific Highway intersection ...

... the upgrade would increase capacity and improve traffic flow.

The upgrade would also make roads much safer for those people who are using them. Mr Roozendaal continued:

The Pacific Highway between Glen Road and Burns Road at Ourimbah provides the main connection from the north between the F3 Freeway and Gosford, carrying about 30,000 vehicles per day ...

That is equivalent to the number of vehicles travelling on the F3 and on that section of the Pacific Highway at Ourimbah. Mr Roozendaal then said:

As well as capacity, safety will be improved with dual carriageways separated by a raised median or wire rope safety barrier.

Traffic lights will also be installed to improve traffic efficiency and safety for pedestrians at Glen Road, Station Street and Ourimbah Creek Road/Yates Road ...

Work on widening the Pacific Highway between Anzac and Milton Roads is progressing well ... the next stage from Mildon Road to Johnson Road is getting under way.

New traffic lights at Johnson Road will include bus priority measures and pedestrian crossing facilities, providing improved safety for pedestrians and public transport users.

The provision of a new, dedicated footpath, wider shoulders and parking bays along the western side of the highway as well as an off road cycleway along the eastern side of the highway will go a long way towards enhancing pedestrian and cyclist safety.

It will also provide access to the many businesses located on that section of the road.

In summary, as of today, \$150 million of road works are under construction or going out to tender on the Central Coast. Approximately \$70 million of new road works are going out to tender. Contrast that with the Government's commitments in 2007-08. In its 2006-07 budget this Government committed \$73 million for new road works and in its 2007-08 budget it committed \$80 million—a total of \$150 million. The Government is meeting its commitments in both budgets. Stage two of Tuggerah Straight—that is, the Mildon Road to Johnson Street section—is going out to tender. Work on that section should commence early in 2008.

Glen Road, Ourimbah, part of the old Pacific Highway south of Ourimbah shopping centre, is also going to tender. That project will also include new work on Burns Road near the Big Flower retail store just before the connection with the F3. The Tuggerah Straight section of roadwork will cost \$20 million and the second section of roadwork will cost \$40 million. Work on the Pacific Highway at Ourimbah will complement work that is already being on Dog Trap Road near Ourimbah RSL and Ourimbah Public School. When the

second stage is completed there will be dual carriageway from Burns Road off the F3 and all the way down to Glen Road—a massive improvement for traffic facilities in that area. The Government has allocated \$9 million for roadwork on Avoca Drive, \$15 million for Terrigal Drive, \$40 million for Ocean View Drive, and \$15 million for stage one of Dog Trap Road. In summary, \$70 million of new works are out to tender and \$80 million of works are nearing completion. [*Time expired*].

KU-RING-GAI COUNCIL PLANNING POWERS

Mr JONATHAN O'DEA (Davidson) [5.39 p.m.]: Tonight I refer to governmental cooperation with Ku-ring-gai Council, with which I am pleased to have a good working relationship. The Ku-ring-gai Council area constitutes most of my electorate of Davidson. Issues of local planning powers, development and the environment are of huge importance to local residents. As I outlined in my speech on 17 October, Minister Sartor has issued a show cause notice, asking Ku-ring-gai Council to explain why it should not be stripped of significant planning powers. In doing so, the Minister relied on figures that are incorrect or out of date.

Community leaders in my local area are understandably concerned and council has now lodged a formal response. At the recent Local Government and Shires Associations annual conference in Coffs Harbour, Ku-ring-gai Council succeeded in having a motion passed unanimously opposing the State Government overriding local government with planning panels. Clearly, Ku-ring-gai Council has the support of other councils that are concerned about threats to centralised planning controls within the planning department. In the words of one of the many constituents who contacted me on this matter:

If Frank Sartor's bully boy tactics prevail, then the built and natural environment fostered in Ku-ring-gai for over a century will be destroyed.

I am reliably informed that the planning department has never taken time to sit down with Ku-ring-gai Council planners and workshop the issues. Surely that would be starting point to properly explain, understand and address any concerns. Many believe that the Minister is not interested in a local resolution and that he is going through the motions before making an adverse decision after the Federal election. There is also a concern that the New South Wales Government will try to take over significant section 94 funds for investment in local infrastructure.

Somewhat hypocritically, Minister Sartor has himself taken more than a year to resolve certain developments that he has called in under part 3A. It is understandable that my colleague the member for Wakehurst, the shadow Minister for Planning, has called for the Premier to serve a show cause notice on Minister Sartor, calling on him to explain why he should not be sacked. It is perhaps also no coincidence that the Planning Institute of Australia has just delivered a damning report into NSW Planning. Ku-ring-gai Council and other councils are asking: Where is the Minister for Local Government? They ask: Why is he not better representing his local government constituency in areas like Ku-ring-gai? I understand why such questions are being asked.

Fortunately, Ku-ring-gai Council is supported by the Federal Coalition. A petition organised by Federal member of Parliament, the Hon. Dr Brendan Nelson, has resulted in signatures being collected from some 4,000 households in the local council area. While Minister Sartor has quoted one local person being in favour of a panel, I can point to over 4,000 local residents, the whole local council, the Federal member of Parliament and the two State members of Parliament who are asking the State Government to allow the council to continue with the substantial progress it has made over the past year or two. If the Government does truly listen to the community, then council's progress should be allowed to continue in a democratic fashion.

The admirable Federal support from Minister Brendan Nelson has extended also to protecting the Blue Gum High Forest in St Ives, reflected by a recent announcement of increased Federal funding for this cause. The commitment of what is now hundreds of thousands of dollars from both Ku-ring-gai Council and the Federal Government makes clear that they recognise the importance of purchasing the missing piece of the jigsaw at 102 Rosedale Road, St Ives. I have previously requested, both through written representations to the Minister for Climate Change, Environment and Water and in this Chamber, that the State Government make a financial contribution.

I understand that about \$200,000 contributed by the New South Wales Government would bring the amount raised to a total the owners of the land would accept. This would represent less than the amounts contributed by the other levels of government, and equal only about 20 per cent of the total purchase price, but would be gratefully received by the local and wider community. Furthermore, I understand that other parties

involved, particularly Ku-ring-gai Council, might be perfectly happy for the State to own the whole of the land by adding to the adjoining national park the area of Blue Gum High Forest. I hope that the State Government can work constructively with Ku-ring-gai Council and other parties on such important issues to the local people in my electorate of Davidson.

PARRAMATTA RIVERCAT SERVICES

Ms TANYA GADIEL (Parramatta—Parliamentary Secretary) [5.44 p.m.]: Last Friday the people of Parramatta celebrated 219 years since Foundation Day, when Governor Phillip rowed up the Parramatta River and settled our great city in 1788. Parramatta is incredibly proud of its past. The first vineyards in Australia were established at Parramatta, the first horse race was run at Parramatta, the first wheat was harvested in Parramatta and wool was first spun by convict labour in Parramatta. Likewise, Parramatta is a city that is incredibly proud of its future. Under the Labor State Government and premiers Carr and Iemma Parramatta has certainly made incredible progress.

For instance, the police headquarters have been relocated to Parramatta, the Justice Precinct has been built in the city, as has the bus-rail interchange and, of course, Sydney Water is in the process of making its headquarters in Parramatta. However, today my community and I are concerned about the report of the Special Commission of Inquiry into Sydney Ferries by Bret Walker, SC. We are specifically concerned about the recommendation to cease the ferry service between Rydalmere and Parramatta. On page 318 the report states:

... the River begins to narrow and it becomes increasingly shallow. Upstream of the Silverwater Bridge, it is so narrow that two vessels are unable to pass one another except at three specific points (Rydalmere wharf, Parramatta wharf and near the Camellia Railway Bridge). According to the General Manager Operations—

That would be of the Sydney Ferries Corporation—

—the depth of the River is only between 1.4-1.5 metres at low tide. The RiverCats have a draft of 1.35 metres. This leaves only five centimetres clearance when water levels are at their lowest. The riverbed was dredged in 1993 to allow the RiverCat vessels to complete the journey to Parramatta.

Another part of the report states that it takes 40 minutes to complete the final leg of the journey from the city between Rydalmere and Parramatta. On the same page the report states that the Sydney Ferries Corporation suggests also that the service operates only as a ferry service to the upper Parramatta River outside of peak hours; the corporation informed the inquiry that the service is used predominantly by tourists as a leisure trip. The report recommends that operations from Rydalmere to Parramatta cease for the following reasons: the service is very costly to operate, due in part to higher maintenance costs and lower patronage; river class vessels are experiencing increasing groundings between Rydalmere and Parramatta, suggesting the riverbed needs to be dredged again; environmental concerns in relation to ferry wash and dredging; and the ferry is not a commuter service. I am concerned that on page 319 the report talks about a saving of \$4.1 million if the service were stopped at Rydalmere. Significantly, the report says:

This Inquiry was not shown any figures that supported the proposition that the upper Parramatta River was more costly to operate than other routes, although this may well be the case. According to SFC's Chief Financial Officer, the quality of available data is questionable due to poor data collection. In addition, it is difficult to separate out the cost of operating on the upper Parramatta River from the total cost of operating the Circular Quay to Parramatta route.

The great concern of myself and my community is that the Sydney Ferries Corporation always has been obsessed with cutting off the Parramatta RiverCat service. I fully support the views of my community. We believe that the RiverCat service has never been given the chance to operate as a commuter service. It is an incredibly unreliable service: if it so much as spits water anywhere near Parramatta, the RiverCat service is cancelled. I call on the Government to reject absolutely the proposal by the Sydney Ferries Corporation contained in the Walker inquiry report to cease RiverCat operations from Rydalmere to Parramatta. The proposal is completely unacceptable to my community and should be completely unacceptable to the Government.

WILLOUGHBY ELECTORATE BUS SERVICES

Ms GLADYS BEREJIKLIAN (Willoughby) [5.49 p.m.]: I raise the issue of bus services in the Willoughby electorate, or the lack thereof. Many constituents in the Willoughby electorate rely on public buses to get to and from work. Regrettably, massive cuts in these bus services last September have had a huge impact on many commuters in the electorate. I place on record the comments of constituents in recent weeks outlining their concerns. I thank the many Willoughby electorate residents who supported my petition to reinstate the bus

services and my calls on the Minister for Transport to reinstate those services, particularly those in peak hour as well as the off-peak services that have been slashed. A commuter from Naremburn who uses the 272 and 273 bus service says:

As a bus commuter from Naremburn to Sydney CBD we experience large delays every morning on our way to work and our bus queues are very long all the way down the street. Being the last bus stop before heading into the City the very few buses that appear are always full and they do not even stop at our stop and those rare few buses that do stop are over crowded and then we have to stand all crammed up squeezing as many people as the bus can hold and this makes it a very uncomfortable journey.

Considering the distance between Naremburn and Sydney CBD is less than 3km it should not be taking us over 40 minutes waiting for a bus and resulting in arriving to work late daily due to unpredictable buses not knowing how long each day we have to wait to actually get on an available bus.

Another commuter said:

I am writing to support your actions for working towards better service on the bus route through Naremburn. My experience on the 273 is that it rarely runs on time and sometimes does not seem to arrive at all.

Another commuter from Naremburn wrote to the *North Shore Times* and said:

Each morning I too wait 30 to 40 minutes for a travel spot into the city on a 272 bus. My bus stop is the last one before the freeway into the city. We have a long queue of people as the buses just go past ... Each morning I get into work late. Why should I have to do overtime to compensate for State Transit's errors? All this, plus each year we experience fare hikes. I don't understand.

Another commuter from Naremburn wrote:

... along with numerous other commuters I have a daily struggle to determine when (or if in some cases) our bus arrives. I am talking about the 272 and 273 routes from Chatswood to the city ... It's simply not good enough.

Another commuter wrote directly to the Minister and said:

I would like to bring your attention to the decline of the peak hour Willoughby bus service to and from the city, namely service no.272. While the timetable states that buses run every 6 minutes this is far from reality. Every morning there is a huge gap between services and at my bus stop ... the wait is a minimum of 20 minutes and up to 40 minutes. This morning there were approximately 100 people waiting at this stop, some for more than 40 minutes. I had to wait 30 minutes.

Another commuter said:

Yesterday I just missed the 8 am bus. Naturally, because of the wet weather, one can expect delays. ... I phoned the 131... number to advise them of the situation ... I am supposed to start at 8.30 a.m. I have decided to catch the 7.50 a.m. bus. This will put extra pressure on me to get out the door and get my son to care. The bus service is essentially a 30 min. service without the advantage of knowing when to expect a bus.

These concerns also relate to other bus routes. I would like to mention the 205, 206 and 210 bus route. One commuter who has written to me about those bus routes said:

Unfortunately the timetable has deteriorated. It is now very difficult to catch a bus which arrives in the city before 9 a.m. when waiting for a bus at the Eastern Valley Way, Middle Cove stop – which is the second stop after McClelland Street ... According to the timetable, there are buses scheduled for 8.18 am, 8.24 am, 8.29 am, 8.33 am and 8.42 am. Often these buses are either full (and will by-pass you) or simply DO NOT OPERATE leaving people stranded at the bus stop. This is a regular occurrence. Many passengers are inconvenienced by this poor service.

Another commuter wrote to me about her problems with this bus route, and another constituent from Middle Cove said:

I am writing to complain about the government bus service, in particular the 206 bus route. There are more and more people using this service but the number of buses servicing the route appears to be diminishing! Yesterday I had to wait 25 minutes for a 206 and I was able to board only through the generosity of the driver who had an illegal number of standing passengers onboard.

These concerns also extend to route 255. One commuter wrote:

I am writing to you on behalf of all pensioners/senior citizens/residents of this neighbourhood who catch the bus route 255 – the only affordable transport available.

That commuter is concerned about the service deteriorating. Other constituents in the Lane Cove part of my electorate have written to me in similar terms. This is a regular occurrence, and I call on the Minister to reinstate these bus services. It is an important form of public transport.

INTERDEPENDENT HEALTH FUNDING

Mr PETER DRAPER (Tamworth) [5.54 p.m.], by leave: Most people in the north-west were not surprised when the Australian Medical Association recently released its Public Health Report Card 2007, which said that Australia-wide public hospitals were in crisis and that more funding, better management and improved Commonwealth-State cooperation was needed to turn this situation around. Health consumers are acutely aware of this crisis and the disadvantage that country people in particular face. They do not require reports to realise we require better management plus Federal- State cooperation. What they do want to know is whether any government is capable of delivering a successful model, one where interdependence works in the consumers' favour rather than against them.

Our health system relies on interdependence. State Emergency Service or Rural Fire Service volunteers in isolated areas are trained to use defibrillators to help keep people alive until an ambulance arrives. Community nurses play an important role in places like Premer and Nundle, and these services dovetail through hospitals like Barraba, Werris Creek, Manilla and Boggabri, in conjunction with ambulance services, to feed to the Tamworth Rural Referral Hospital. This, in turn, feeds to Newcastle and Sydney for serious cases. Our hard-working health professionals dovetail these services so that anyone in Tambar Springs requiring open-heart surgery is treated at the most appropriate facility. The community expect governments to provide appropriate funding and staffing so our health professionals can deliver their vital services.

Yet as the Federal election looms, health issues are being raised to buy votes in marginal electorates with piecemeal, big-ticket promises that simply will not fix the national crisis. The Nationals candidate for the Federal seat of New England even surveyed constituents and seemed surprised to discover that the health system was a major issue of concern to local people. Surprise, surprise! What a revelation! He failed to tell the electorate that his Federal colleagues have overseen a billion dollars a year reduction in the proportion of funding provided to health, despite their record budget surpluses. Recently it has been suggested that by 2037 the entire New South Wales State budget will be required merely to fund the health system. If that does not spur Federal-State authorities to develop cooperative interdependence of health provision urgently, the crisis will only deepen.

Yet another new report by Tony McMichael from the Australian National University says that climate change will also cause a rise in deaths, especially from heart attacks and strokes. Rates of asthma will rise, and gastroenteritis and food poisoning will become major problems. In addition, extreme climatic events will cause even more mental stress and depression. In the next 30 years, the number of people aged over 65 years is expected to rise from 13½ per cent of the population to 23 per cent, including 1.1 million aged 85 years and over. This will place massive additional stresses on our health system. When the entire national health system is under stress, the problems become exponentially worse in rural and regional areas. Over the last 20 years Federal governments of both persuasions have failed to fund sufficient training places for new doctors, leading to the critical shortages we are facing today. Australians are angry that not only have we failed to train our own kids to fill these roles, but also we have plundered overseas countries' limited resources to meet our own needs.

The latest Medicare Australia annual report indicates a government scheme to attract young doctors to work in rural areas has failed to realise its potential, with less than half the funds allocated to the Higher Education Contribution Scheme being spent during the 2006-07 year. The scheme offers doctors working in rural and remote areas an opportunity to claim back one fifth of their Higher Education Contribution Scheme fees for each year of service in these areas, but just \$2.7 million of an available \$5.95 million was spent. The Rural Doctors Association and the Australian Medical Association are urging the Federal government to commit to a major rescue package of rural-specific support incentives to get more doctors working in country areas. These include a rural isolation payment to be paid to all rural doctors, including general practitioners, specialists and registrars, to reflect the isolation associated with rural practice.

A rural procedural and emergency on-call loading is also suggested to better support rural procedural doctors, including procedural specialists, who provide obstetric, surgical, anaesthetic or primary emergency on-call service in rural communities. Next year students will commence their studies through the medical school at University of New England in Armidale. An important part of that program is the students gaining experience and on-the-job training at Tamworth Rural Referral Hospital. At the recent March State election Premier Morris Iemma promised to redevelop the hospital in Tamworth to meet the needs of these students. Many constituents have expressed their concerns to me that pressures on funding to drag the health system out of its current quagmire may mean this project will be delayed.

The people of the New England and north-west are truly sick of the health blame game. There are many reports and recommendations but, most importantly, people want action and true interdependence that results in a properly funded health system that can meet the community's needs and expectations. The Governor of the Reserve Bank has warned that large tax cuts will drive inflation. The feedback I am receiving very strongly from my electorate indicates that people are looking for leadership on the issue. The message is they do not want superficial tax cuts; they want budget surpluses invested in fixing the health system to benefit all Australians.

LICENCE LAWS FOR OLDER DRIVERS

Mr GREG PIPER (Lake Macquarie) [5.59 p.m.], by leave: I wish to bring to the attention of the House concerns raised by many of my constituents in relation to changes proposed in the Roads and Traffic Authority's discussion paper on older drivers. In forming a view of the proposal I have considered the benefits and impacts of the reduced age for medical testing, of the automatic radius restrictions and of the optional driving tests. My concerns are that any changes should deliver a benefit and that they should be fair. The 10-kilometre radius restriction is highly questionable. There can be a lot of unfamiliar streets within 10 kilometres and a lot of familiar main roads extending hundreds of kilometres. The use of distance from home as a predictor of risk is not necessarily valid, and the 10-kilometre limit seems arbitrary.

Under the proposal, anyone over 85 can pass an optional test to remove the 10-kilometre radius restriction. Under the current system anyone over 85 must pass a compulsory test. The introduction of a test is not a problem per se, but I cannot support the introduction of restrictions on drivers over 85 as a replacement for testing them. The replacement of tests from age 85 by a 10-kilometre limit would create the opportunity and motivation for undetected, unsafe drivers to continue driving. I feel the proposed changes have great potential to impact on older drivers, but are not certain to deliver the benefits anticipated.

I remind the House of a recent media story about the suicide of an 85-year-old man on the day he failed a driving test for the fifth time. At his age he would have compulsory testing under the current system or face a default restriction to the limiting 10-kilometre radius under the proposed system. I acknowledge that there may be more involved in this tragic incident. However, it would seem that the loss of independence and dignity in failing this test was the paramount trigger for his action. This should be a salutary reminder to us all of how important independence and dignity are to this age group. People regard the radius limit as a huge threat to their lifestyle, independence, and dignity.

I have been informed that 25,000 responses to the discussion paper have been received. I have some confidence that these will almost exclusively oppose the changes, particularly the 10-kilometre radius. I still have unanswered questions about the Roads and Traffic Authority's proposal. At my request on 7 September my electorate office contacted the Roads and Traffic Authority through its web-mail service on its website and asked two questions. Two email replies on 11 September confirmed that the query had been forwarded to the appropriate department for attention. After nine weeks, the query has still not received a reply.

I sought information on whether a driver who failed a driving test would still have a licence that was valid for 10 kilometres. I also sought details of the standard by which older drivers would be tested. It is important for the public to know the level of skills required for drivers older than 85 and how this will be equitable vis-à-vis the untested skills of a driver under 85. Based on the experience of my own staff, I am now concerned that people who need information from the Roads and Traffic Authority to respond during the comment period will miss out.

In late October my office contacted the Roads and Traffic Authority by phone to seek answers and to discuss the matter with someone suitably qualified and authorised. One of the most interesting pieces of information from the Roads and Traffic Authority is that there is much evidence showing that older drivers are safer than others when they drive in a familiar environment, and that frequently they self-restrict their driving movements. If that is the case, there is a diminished potential benefit in changing the current system. Older drivers are able to decide on familiarity without an arbitrary limit. They are also able to set their own limits. The licensing system should acknowledge and accommodate this. There is much evidence that many younger drivers pose a threat to themselves and others, yet there are so few reports of harm done by older drivers. Older drivers feel that they are under attack when all they ask is to maintain their lifestyle, independence and dignity.

Private members' statements noted.

The House adjourned at 6.04 p.m. until Friday 9 November 2007 at 10.00 a.m.
