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Madam Speaker Lambley took the Chair at 10 am.

VISITORS
Sattler Christian College

Madam SPEAKER: Honourable members, I advise of the presence in the gallery of Year 6 students from Sattler Christian College accompanied by their teachers. On behalf of honourable members, I extend a warm welcome.

Members: Hear, hear!

MINISTERIAL REPORT
Public Housing Reform

Mr EDGINGTON (Housing, Local Government and Community Development): Madam Speaker, I present a ministerial report on public housing reform in the Northern Territory.

I move that the report be noted.

One of our key focuses this year is public housing reform. Public housing is essential to provide safe, affordable homes for low-income and vulnerable individuals and families across the Territory. It helps to reduce homelessness, supports economic participation and ensures access to essential services.

Over the last eight years we have seen the erosion of acceptable behaviour in public housing; a loosening of holding tenants to account; and adherence to policies, plans and procedures that have become outdated.

It is no secret that antisocial behaviour and serious incidents of crime in public housing have risen to an unacceptable level, as has the level of rent arrears. We are fully aware of what is happening and are focused on dealing with the root causes of crime in public housing around the Territory.

First, I will tell you a story. It is not a children's fairytale; it is a factual account. The inaction towards antisocial behaviour can be traced back to the wishy-washy philosophical ideology left behind by Labor to water down accountability. Under Labor's eight-year term there was a serious lack of consequences. Public housing tenants who caused repeated disturbances, threatened their neighbours and each other and blatantly disregarded community standards with drunken screaming, yelling and fighting were allowed to remain in public housing with little or no repercussions.

I have given the example of the tenants with 62 Red Card demerit points. A total of 203 reports of antisocial behaviour were recorded for a previous tenancy they held. Rather than being held accountable, they were relocated to a three-bedroom house in May 2024. Since then, 158 reports of antisocial behaviour have been recorded at that tenancy.

How is this fair to the decent, hardworking families and pensioners on the public housing waitlist? That is not fair. Residents in a suburb in the greater Darwin region submitted a petition to the former Labor Housing minister in June 2019 complaining of parties, drunken behaviour, fights and threats of violence to neighbours. The tenant was moved to another property where similar behaviour continued. Neighbours reported not feeling safe in their own homes, living in fear and an inability to go to work or take their children to school due to a lack of sleep.

One tenant was moved three times, with taxpayers footing a bill of nearly $83,000 on transfers and modifications to properties, and another refused to relocate from her property despite it being deemed unsafe.

Meanwhile, the percentage of complaints where antisocial behaviour was substantiated dropped by more than half from 48% in 2019 to 2020 to just 22% in 2022 and 2023. These case histories and statistics are just the tip of the iceberg. Law abiding Territorians have been forced to endure neighbours from hell while the system under Labor bent over backwards to accommodate those who repeatedly broke the rules.

Another rule that has been repeatedly broken is paying rent. The current state of rental arrears across the Northern Territory public housing portfolio is appalling. On 7 December 2021 Cabinet, under Labor, considered the submission of the remote public housing rental framework and approved a policy position to waive the entire remote rent debt balance of $69.71m. The waiver was on the basis that it was considered irrecoverable.

In just the two-and-a-half years since that write-off, Housing is now carrying an accumulated rental arrears debt of over $39m. An astonishing 1,422 tenancies across the full urban Northern Territory social Housing portfolio have accumulated debt of over $10,000. The highest is $40,000, followed by a couple at $36,000, another at $34,000 and one at $39,000. I stopped asking after that. There are 1,422 tenancies with an accumulated debt of over $10,000. This is clearly unacceptable. What I have not stopped asking since then is what this recovered money could have delivered to improve the lives of so many Territorians. Unacceptably, all of this happened while there has been an eight to 10-year waitlist for public housing in the Northern Territory. This 'compassion without consequences' approach has been a never-ending story left behind by Labor.

The CLP said that 2025 will be a year of action, certainty and security; this includes making public housing safer and more secure. We are putting a stop to eight years of Labor inaction. There will be no more slaps on the wrist or sympathy without safeguards. Already there has been an increase in substantiations of antisocial behaviour. From 1 July 2024 to 31 December 2024 there were 5,060 reports of antisocial behaviour across the Northern Territory, of which 1,081 were substantiated; that is an increase of 844 reports and 451 substantiations when compared with the previous reporting period.

We appreciate that some public housing tenants are vulnerable due to mental health issues and domestic violence incidents, and we are not about to turf people onto the streets, but there needs to be more balance. The scales need to be tipped back towards individual accountability and responsibility for the wellbeing of all Territorians and the security and safety of communities.

Our action plan for public housing reform includes strengthening policy to fast-track the pathways to eviction; a full review of the visitor management, tenancy management and Red Card policy; debt management policy reform; review of the *Housing Act 1982* to align with community expectations; and recommendations to the Attorney-General's Department for changes to the *Residential Tenancies Act* to align with community expectations.

Public housing reform will empower our staff to refine processes to deal with antisocial behaviour and tenancy termination, ensuring these matters are well-prepared, supported by strong evidence and align with legislative requirements. Our reform includes:

- short and long-term measures over the next six to nine months

- strengthening the Red Card policy to align with accountability for excessive rent debts, untidy yards, property damage and ongoing antisocial behaviour

- strengthening the capacity of the CEO of Housing to deal with multiple and serious breaches of tenancy agreements swiftly

- updating the termination of tenancy policy, including requiring tenants with ongoing antisocial behaviour issues to undertake supported accommodation programs and provide at least two rental references to determine they had passed programs, such as the ability to sustain a tenancy and manage visitors, prior to regaining eligibility for public housing

- updating the tenant damage policy to implement processes to effectively deal with tenants who are damaging or failing to maintain public housing properties

- reviewing the department's tenancy agreement policy to implement a structured leasing model aligned with interstate jurisdictions, rather than the current automatic lapse from a six month to a periodic agreement. Examples include an initial six-month probationary agreement, a one to two-year lease agreement and then a graduation to a five to 10-year agreement.

We will be reviewing transferring tenants with demonstrated antisocial behaviour to consider termination for tenancies with ongoing antisocial behaviour. Transferring tenants is not an option. In addition to the use of acceptable behaviour agreements and the Red Card demerit point system, we will introduce statutory breach notices where tenants are required to maintain a period of compliance and not breach their tenancy agreement.

Streamlining and strengthening policy to fast-track the pathways to eviction cases before the Northern Territory Civil and Administrative Tribunal (NTCAT) can take from six months to one year, with the option of appeals. Ensuring that all required information is gathered before submission is critical to preventing delays in the NTCAT process and improving the likelihood of successful outcomes.

We are reviewing the tenancy management policy and visitor management policy to empower our outstanding frontline Housing staff. Priorities include:

- additional clauses to the standard tenancy agreement that require a tenant to engage with support services due to antisocial behaviour

- failure to maintain rent arrears—if not, it can be considered as a breach of the tenancy agreement and action taken

- reinforcement of a tenant's accountability for managing their visitors and consider action that can be taken for unapproved visitors

- updating the complaints policy and processes to introduce a minimum threshold for investigation and confirm a zero-tolerance approach to staff abuse by tenants

- amending the extended absence policy to prevent long-term incarcerated tenants from retaining their tenancy and ensuring that tenants approved for extended absences must maintain the condition of the property in their absence

- working with the Fines Recovery Unit and Northern Territory Police to develop procedures to support public housing safety officers to use their legislated powers to issue and enforce infringements to tenants engaging in antisocial behaviour and other proscribed offences on public housing premises

- working with Licensing NT to seek approval from the registrar to deem the common areas of public housing complexes with ongoing antisocial behaviour issues as alcohol-restricted premises without the requirement to gain majority tenant agreement.

- update signage on the common areas of public housing complexes to advise that trespassing is prohibited so that public housing safety officers can issue notices of direction to trespassers in line with their powers to act, including the *Trespass Act* and the *Housing Act 1982.*

We are working on developing a memorandum of understanding with the NT Police and the Department of Children and Families to improve the complaints, mandatory reporting and compliance activity processes. We will explore options for a joint complaints process that prevents the requirement for complainants to report antisocial behaviour, criminal behaviour and child safety concerns to three separate departments. This process needs to be streamlined.

We will be putting greater accountability on tenants to ensure rent is paid or rental arrears are at least diligently pursued. Current policy allows a person to apply for housing with no limit to the debt and does not specify a debt amount that triggers the CEO to review the debt. The debt management policy, under 'Policy detail', states:

> *A client with a debt must be making repayments on the debt before housing assistance will be provided.*

However, without further stipulation this allows a new tenant to set up an agreement to pay the week after allocation and cancel several weeks in.

Our proposed actions include that a client with previous debt must sign an agreement to pay if one does not exist at the time of submitting their application. An application will not be approved if the agreement to pay defaults before assessment and approval. An applicant must have paid a minimum of 30% of their debt prior to being offered housing and cannot have more than $1,500 in debt at the time of allocation. We will review debt exceeding $1,500 and seek termination for rent debt of $5,000 or more if there is ongoing nonpayment of rent and debts. We will review the threshold of rental arrears when tenancies are referred to housing compliance to issue a notice to remedy, which is currently set at 21 days rental arrears.

There will be a debt validation process review, including training for relevant staff, to provide a clear expectation of applicants and tenants who owe debt to the department. There will be a review of compliance processes to ensure a streamlined pathway to issue a notice of remedy or lodge an initiating application with NTCAT.

We are reviewing the *Housing Act 1982* and seeking recommendations from the Attorney-General's Department to strengthen and align the *Residential Tenancies Act 1999* with community expectations. One

proposal under consideration is increasing the powers of public housing safety officers, which I mentioned. These provisions sit under the *Housing Act 1982*. It is recommended that they are provided with similar powers to those of transit safety officers under sections 26, 27A, 27B, 27C and 28 of the *Public Transport (Passenger Safety) Act*. We also want to determine whether public housing safety officers can have increased powers to issue banned drinker orders in line with NT Police.

We will ensure legislation and public housing policies are tightened and enforced properly. We will back our hardworking staff 100%. We will not expect them to turn a blind eye to unacceptable behaviour but will take into account the required training and additional resources needed to carry out this important work. Our housing staff are out there to ensure compliance; they are not meant to be doubling up as social workers. Some of these changes will occur within six months; others may require a little longer.

The important thing is that we are taking action. Antisocial behaviour, serious incidents of crime and rental arrears in public housing have been allowed to spiral out of control for far too long. The time for excuses and rolling out the red carpet for repeat offenders is over. There will be no more compassion without consequences. There will be no more slaps on the wrist. There will be no more putting up with tenants who are disturbing their neighbours, committing offences and antisocial behaviour, playing music at all hours of the day and night, keeping hardworking people up and preventing children from getting the sleep they need to go to school. Enough is enough.

I travel the Territory—Alice Springs, Tennant Creek, Katherine and the greater Darwin region—and hear a number of complaints about antisocial behaviour in public houses and unit complexes.

I reiterate that there are many good tenants out there; we need to keep that in mind, but we can no longer allow those who want to disrupt the privacy, safety and security of others in neighbourhoods throughout the Northern Territory. We will rein in the debt and take action to ensure antisocial behaviour is dealt with swiftly and in accordance with new policy and legislation.

Mr PAECH (Gwoja): Madam Speaker, housing is one of the most important aspects to a healthy, stable and thriving community. I acknowledge that for several Territorians living in the Northern Territory, housing is difficult to access and maintain, but it is a fundamental right for all Territorians. Having access to a good-quality home is important.

Over several years we have seen the rollout of investments between the Northern Territory Government and the Commonwealth to improve living conditions for many people in the Northern Territory. Giving them access to a safe, secure and affordable home is incredibly important.

In our homelands, remote communities, urban centres and cities, we need to provide access to good housing. About 6% of the Northern Territory's population experiences homelessness. That is 13 times more than any other jurisdiction, so it is important.

This government has no plan to overcome the social determinants that cause homelessness. The minister took an opportunity to demonise a large portion of our community who experience financial hardship and homelessness for a variety of reasons. We heard members in this Chamber rejoicing when the minister talked about evicting people and introducing punitive measures.

News flash: when you evict people from a home and kick them out without providing services or support, they end up on the streets, sleeping in the entryways of the shopping centres—like the Member for Karama continues to remind parliament—in our parks, having to live with other family members and then causing pressures on that household.

The best way to overcome the challenges is to invest in social determinants and in Territorians. If people have issues paying rent, work with them to do payment plans and understand financial literacy to make it better, rather than simply kicking people out. If there are issues with overcrowding, work with people to support them and look at alternative accommodation options. When you evict someone from a house, they end up on the streets or having to go to another public housing complex and stay with family, thereby adding pressure.

You are not actually addressing anything; you are just perpetuating the cycle of disadvantage and homelessness. The best way to overcome these challenges is to invest in people and in housing.

The minister spoke for almost 20 minutes, talking people down and not providing any productive solutions to the housing issues we face. The minister did not talk about why we have not seen the second lot of tenders

go out for the transition of public housing stock to social and community housing providers. The minister has not committed to renewing the Northern Territory Homelessness Strategy, which ends in June this year. The minister has not told Territorians why the tenders have not been released for the development of Shiers Street. The minister did not say why the government dropped the targets of the national partnership agreements, providing less housing in the Northern Territory. The minister just made a statement so that he can look as though he is talking tough on the issues people face.

We need to work together on reform that empowers people to have more control and say in their lives. We heard firsthand from many people in our local communities that they need help with managing their tenancies.

You can help someone to sustain a home by providing intensive family support for Territorians to have a safe, healthy and thriving tenancy. There has been nothing from the minister today about what happens when a tenant who has a family is evicted and has nowhere to go. You are potentially forcing children onto the street because there is nowhere for them to go. There is domestic and family violence. The Member for Nightcliff recently spoke about Rocket, who has been a strong advocate of the Justice Reform Initiative. Rocket talks about how many women in the Northern Territory have to face homelessness as they have been unable to maintain tenancies because they have not had the support they needed. These are all things we need to address to help people maintain tenancies.

The Northern Territory housing story is unique. As the Member for Mulka highlighted yesterday, we have homelands and outstations. We need more houses in those places because when we invest in them we create thriving places for people to be back on country away from humbug, community infighting and family issues that they do not want to be involved in.

The Commonwealth gave money to the Northern Territory Government to invest in homelands across the Northern Territory. I have not heard from the minister about where that money is going and why there are no new homes on homelands. The federal minister, Malarndirri McCarthy, provided additional funding to the Northern Territory Government to build homes on homelands. It was a CLP government that cashed out and took money to maintain homelands. That government sold out remote Territorians on homelands.

The minister can talk about all this great stuff, but let us not forget that a large amount of homelessness in the Northern Territory was driven because not enough homes were built in remote communities when the CLP was last in government. In the last two years of the CLP …

Mrs Hersey interjecting.

Mr PAECH: I hope the Member for Katherine is listening, because in the last two years of the CLP's term of government under Adam Giles and Bess Price—the failed Northern Territory Housing minister—one new house was built in the bush. You wonder why remote Territorians were travelling to town and having to stay with family and friends at that time. It is because there was no investment.

There will always be the need for continued investment in housing.

We transitioned 500 public housing dwellings in the greater Darwin region to two community housing providers—Mission Australia NT and Venture Housing—that do a fantastic job. That represented the first large-scale transfer of government assets under long-term leasing arrangements to the community housing sector.

The *Housing and Related Legislation Amendment Act 2024* introduced legislative arrangements and a regulatory framework to facilitate the smooth transition of public housing tenancies to community housing providers. That was to support the growth of a diverse and sustainable social housing system. We all acknowledge that government is not a good service provider nor the best entity to help people thrive and survive in public housing. There are amazing social and community housing providers in the Northern Territory. We need to continue to invest and support them in that transition. That started the transfer of 1,100 public housing dwellings to the community and social housing sector.

There was $6bn in funding for remote housing, which at last count under the former Labor government saw 1,413 homes built and 1,820 upgraded. That was a bit more than when the CLP was last in government.

We want social and community housing across the Territory, so we need to continue the rollout of money across the Northern Territory to support that.

We do not need a punitive approach that does not support people to maintain tenancies. No-one is saying that people should not have consequences for poor behaviour and actions, but simply kicking people out and putting them on the street is bad policy because it does not address the root causes that escalate inappropriate behaviour. Helping people into health programs, housing programs and programs to address addictive behaviours and money matters will address bad behaviour. That is what we need, not making more people homeless.

We acknowledge that investment is needed. The Commonwealth Government has made that investment through HAFF 2, which will ensure that we can allocate new housing and provide funding. It is important to continue that.

We do not need to continue saying tough words that will not deliver any action. That will not change; it will only move the problem on. If you evict someone from a suburb in Darwin, the chances are that they will pop up in another Darwin suburb and will then put pressure on someone else in their tenancy. Under the rules the Housing minister spoke about this morning, they will pick on the person in that other tenancy who will then be evicted. Suddenly, there will be 25 people in a three-bedroom or two-bedroom unit in a suburb. You will have perpetuated that problem, enabling that problem to happen rather than supporting the individual to correct their behaviour.

I spoke to the Housing minister about how nearly everyone here—apart from probably the bush members—has public housing complexes with multiple people living in them. I said that he should look at clearing out one of those units and work with the community housing sector to have a caretaker live in these complexes so they can be reporting and addressing behaviours when they appear to escalate. Imagine having a public housing complex with someone living there who can contact government and work with police to say, 'Behaviour has been escalating over the last two or three days or 12 hours. In this unit the children have not been to school for three days; let's work with Education to get them to school.' These ideas are much more beneficial than evicting people and putting them through the Fines Recovery Unit. Checking in on people, working with people, addressing behaviours and having caretakers are measures that can help.

The minister spoke about supporting department staff; we will support any measure that supports staff in the agency to feel empowered and have conversations with their staff and tenants. This is an important issue—no-one is denying that—but we believe there are different ways to address this critical issue. We have always said we believe that supporting and transferring to community housing providers is one of the best ways we can do it.

Having staff who can understand the barriers, challenges and relationships is incredibly important. One of the most effective tools I have seen is having community housing providers with a large number of Aboriginal Territorians working for them to help people manage tenancies. They can have those conversations, whether it be in language or regarding them and their understanding of the cultural inclusions and barriers. Addressing that is incredibly important. We can address housing not by making more people homeless but by empowering people, providing intensive family support and getting better—I do not think a government in the Northern Territory's history has ever got this right, so there is an opportunity for this government and future governments to fine-tune that, but agencies need to talk to one another more.

One of the issues we hear when visiting people is, 'I have reported this to the police 10 or 20 times', then you talk to the Housing staff who know nothing about it—'We do not know that'. There is an opportunity through what the minister is talking about to draw better communication and information sharing across agencies. Child Protection and Police should have a seamless and strong connection with the Housing department so we can ensure our kids have access to good homes, can get a good night's sleep and can get up and go to school the next day. If people are calling the police, the Housing department can be made aware of the issues.

The minister talked about people whingeing; if they are talking to the wrong agency, that information is not being shared and Housing is copping it because it is reported to the police. That is the importance of good information sharing. This was the original reason the former government tried to put Territory Families and Housing together in one department. We wanted to try something different and have it so that children and Housing were together and kids had access to a good house.

I say again that we need to look at lifting people out of poverty. Some of the issues—I am not saying it is the reason there is a rental debt; we need to address that, but when people are breached and then cut off from social welfare, they cannot pay rent because they are not getting any social benefit or assistance. That rental debt starts to accumulate because they have been cut off from Centrelink and do not have access to money. If there is a death in the family or they are providing for lots of people in their family unit, they need support.

The best way we can do that is intensive tenancy support, education on financial literacy and numeracy, lifting people out of poverty, having agencies share information better and building more houses in the Northern Territory.

We do not want to come in with a big stick and kick people out onto the street. That will only perpetuate the issue of homelessness and create more of a problem, because more people will be homeless and forced to sleep in parks, alleyways, empty houses and on the doorsteps of shopping centres. We need to review the housing strategy. These are all important aspects we have not heard the minister talk about.

Mr HOWE (Drysdale): Madam Speaker, it amazes me that the opposition clings to this ideology. We heard about homelessness; it is occurring in Drysdale with working families who have sold their property to get out. They cannot handle how bad the behaviour has gotten and are now living in temporary accommodation. They have had to sell at massively reduced cost and are now looking to re-enter the market somewhere else, with less money in their pocket to do so.

Even when I was campaigning I quickly learned that housing is a major issue in every suburb throughout the electorate. I have endless examples; there are horrific cases occurring in Drysdale. At one property, there has been violent crime occurring on an almost weekly basis, and it has been ongoing for two-and-a-half years. The previous tenant at that address had the same problems for six years.

Residents are living in a nightmare. Home has not been a place for retreat, only a place of suffering over a long time.

A nurse came to me who is living next to a housing tenant who blasts loud music and drinks almost every night. She has to get up and go to the hospital where she serves NT patients, and that is what she deals with every night. I hear the same things from teachers. It is across the board.

How did it get to this point in Drysdale, where we have the foundation for a beautiful suburb? There are large blocks in Driver and Gray—large open spaces, mature greenery and amazing primary schools next to the CBD. In Drysdale families should be pushing each other over to get into the market. We should be seeing house prices grow, but we are seeing the exact opposite. Because of it, we are all poorer.

Long-term policy has created ghettos. It is that simple. There is 17.1% of greater Darwin public housing in my electorate. It is concentrated mainly in Gray and southern Driver. Many residents who have bought there are good families who have worked and paid their taxes, and now they are surrounded by chaos and dealing with the fact there is no return nest egg—being their home—in their retirement.

There is a crushing effect on housing tenants. A number of tenants come to my office weekly requesting a transfer out of Drysdale because of these problems. They want to go to a suburb where there will not be alcohol and drug use, screaming and fighting. I have driven around while doing my electorate rounds, and I have lost count of the number of times I have called 000. It would be immense. I drive around and see people fighting with machetes; I see open drug use and partying. It beggars belief how we got here.

There are vulnerable tenants throughout public housing. A lot of young women who have families simply do not feel safe in their house. They deserve to feel safe in their public housing home. It is having an effect on residents who are renting and owners. In Gray is ‘sin city’, which is a large complex. I will use its colloquial name because that it is what it is referred to by everybody, including those who live there. This is 62 apartments across from a primary school, which last year had over 1,300 reports to police. Multiple times a day police are being called to that tenant block. It will be a good day in Drysdale when a wrecking ball goes through sin city.

A single mum from southern Driver recently had to leave; she could not put up with it. She had been in housing. She got a job and was proud to start privately renting for her and her children. After 12 months she has had to leave. Here is a young woman trying to get ahead in life. Because of poor public planning under Labor’s 19 years, they have destroyed our community.

We have a strong need for housing in Drysdale. I want to be giving people a house so they can be safe and raise their children. A number of single mums and families come to see me; I hate to say that they are on an eight to 10-year waitlist.

That is why I support these reforms. In the short term I want hard rules because it is a minority who are causing these problems. The majority of my housing tenants want these reforms. That is how I know we are doing the right thing; they are telling me. They want to be safe in their neighbourhood. They do not want their

kids seeing this stuff when they go to school each morning. They are trying to get ahead in life, and I will support them.

We heard that we are only using the stick; I believe in the carrot and the stick. I do not have an issue using the stick, but I will also back any measure for incentives. I would love to see home ownership a reality for good long-term tenants, and I would support measures into the future so that public housing tenants who engage and look after their home and community have a path to home ownership.

I also want more land releases and developments with new and dispersed housing models to increase supply. When we increase supply in a dispersed, well-planned model we can then lower the supply in the ghettos that Labor has created in Drysdale. I want to see that through selling old stock and having a better spread and dispersed model.

I believe in investing in affordable housing, and we could do this by selling old stock. Affordable housing would work well in Drysdale. We have spoken about visitor management. Our government will look to any measure and how we can information share across agencies so that the people in Drysdale can have a smoother streamlined process when reporting issues. However, our government will hit the cause instead of focusing on the reporting. If you cause problems in Drysdale, you will not get to hold on to your home. If you are a good tenant, we will want to reward you.

There are some protections, which our government is mindful of. It has become clear that young women are particularly vulnerable in the electorate. There can be a young mother who has visitors coming in from community and has no say in the use of her property. The minister and I are aware of this and will protect vulnerable people in the community.

I am pleased to hear the minister's report, and I fully support him.

Mrs ZIO (Fannie Bay): Madam Speaker, I am happy to talk about these reforms. I will read out some details from the former Labor government's Red Card policy about managing antisocial behaviour. The statement says:

> *The Department of Territory Families, Housing and Communities takes public housing safety seriously and has a Public Housing Safety Strategy in place to promote community safety in and around public housing.*
>
> *As a part of this strategy, the Department has a Red Card policy to help manage antisocial behaviour in and around public housing only.*
>
> *The Red Card policy allows the Department, represented by Public Housing Safety Officers (PHSOs), to respond to and investigate complaints of antisocial behaviour in public housing tenancies in a consistent manner, and take action against tenants who regularly, or seriously, interfere with the peace and safety of other tenants, neighbours and those in the vicinity.*

If this process allows people to acquire six demerit points before initiation and action to terminate, how is it that we have tenants in these properties getting up to 60 demerit points, destroying the lives of people in the surrounding areas and still able to stay in those properties? How is that happening?

How can somebody who has a $40,000 debt remain in public housing? How can someone who fails to maintain their property stay in public housing? Somebody who continually threatens residents, contributes to or attracts antisocial behaviour and ends up being incarcerated for a long sentence can maintain their tenancy.

When law-abiding, respectful and well-behaved tenants are continually threatened, we continue to see examples of how the former government put the rights of criminals above the rights of victims. We all know that shelter is one of the most basic and fundamental human needs, and we have heard people in this Chamber talk about how housing may have supported people on a different path than incarceration.

We have community standards, and there has been a failure over the last eight years of the former government to make sure the community understands them. For all the dollars the former government sent out to people, communities and departments in the Northern Territory, they have failed to ensure that every member in the community understands the needs for basic standards. Simple standards learned in the early stages of education can help children grow into responsible, mature adults who then take up tenancies in our public housing system.

Kids are not going to school anymore. School attendance was not a priority for the former Labor government, but it is a priority for ours. If a child goes to school they learn basic standards like the reasons for washing their hands, cleaning up after themselves and being respectful to other people, but school attendance is reducing across the Northern Territory, which means that they are not learning those standards which support growth in people's abilities to look after themselves and the tenancies they maintain. It is interesting that the Member for Gwoja talked about education and the importance of getting the community ready to take on these tenancies. That includes making sure children attend school and that parents understand their children's need to attend school.

Over the last eight years education in the Territory has fallen far, and I am keen to see this escalated as a priority to make sure that children attend school and learn the skills to live well. We have much to offer; all it takes is lifting education standards, school attendance and growth across the Northern Territory to understand that we all need to live together.

Many residents in the Fannie Bay electorate live alongside public housing tenants. People come into my electorate office every day to complain about public housing tenants. These people have lived there for 20 to 30 years, failing to maintain their properties and understand how to respect their neighbours.

Our government needs to ensure that people are living to the standard that is expected. We want people to understand that they need to respect their neighbour, no matter who it is. That is why I support these government reforms.

Mr O'GALLAGHER (Karama): Madam Speaker, it will come as no surprise to the Assembly that I congratulate the minister on his excellent report.

I believe this is a preliminary step to rectifying the public housing crisis that has been inflicted on our community by a negligent Labor government, including destroying the lifestyle of many residents living in Karama and Malak. Members would be aware that I have raised this issue on their behalf many times in this Assembly, including in my maiden speech as well as in many statements, questions and adjournment speeches. I will continue to do so until this crisis is fixed.

I will address this issue through the lens of empowerment. It is worth noting that empowerment was the key theme of the CLP plan we took to the last election. For example, yesterday the minister highlighted how we will empower our bush communities and restore control to local Aboriginal people to help strengthen service delivery—control that Labor took away. This government is focused on empowering our private sector to drive our economy forward, as highlighted in the successful passage of the Territory Coordinator Bill earlier this week. We have empowered our wonderful police force and Corrections to better deal with crime across the Territory, with real consequences introduced by various legislative measures passed over the last six months. I am proud to be a part of the team that did this.

This empowerment also needs to be given to residents in Karama, Malak, Knuckey Lagoon and elsewhere. They need to be empowered to live their lives free of the trauma and anguish of the crime and antisocial behaviour associated with some—I emphasise that it is some—public housing tenancies across my electorate. They need to be empowered not to have:

- continual fighting, violence, screaming and drunken behaviour in the adjoining property
- adjoining public households hosting 20 to 30 additional visitors every evening, causing chaos and neighbourhood destruction
- continual sleep deprivation for them and their children as a consequence of this unacceptable behaviour
- adjoining public housing tenancies in a state of disrepair, blighting their neighbourhood and destroying the value of their properties.

I will give an example of some Malak residents who have struggled to sell their well-maintained house for over two years, despite having significantly reduced the price. Recently they thought they had a sale, but just before the sale was finalised the potential buyers visited the property in the evening and witnessed the neighbouring chaos and violence. They immediately contacted the real estate agent to withdraw their offer, much to the despair of the owners.

We need to empower our neighbourhoods so that neighbouring public housing is not being used as drug houses. We need to empower taxpayers not to have to carry the cost of sheer vandalism of public housing. I am not talking about wear and tear but vandalism in the order of $50,000 or $100,000 per house.

We need to empower neighbourhoods—particularly those in Karama and Malak—to have public housing density lowered to more community-acceptable standards rather than creating ghetto areas in these suburbs. I use Fawcett Court and Tabletop Place in Malak as an example of this over-density.

I was pleased that the minister mentioned the need to empower Housing staff to genuinely enforce consequences for such bad behaviour. Believe it or not, minister, early this morning when I was taking the dogs for a walk I was approached by a constituent who wanted a chat. He told me that he was a previous employee of the Housing department with responsibility for managing public housing tenancies. He also told me that he left the agency eight years ago due to frustration because the Labor government had essentially disempowered him and his fellow officers to address unacceptable behaviour and enforce consequences. He agreed to send me an email to document his views. I will pass that on to you and your staff, minister.

I will address some of the comments the Member for Gwoja made. He said that housing is a right. Let me tell you, Member for Gwoja, public housing is a privilege and needs to be treated as such. He asked about the efficacy of evicting irresponsible tenants, citing that they would end up on the street.

I remind the member that there is an eight to 10-year waitlist. There are many deserving homeless people on that list who would cherish the opportunity of being granted public housing. I make it clear that if it comes to a choice of removing irresponsible tenants who continually destroy their neighbourhoods and replacing them with homeless people who will respect the local community, I choose the latter. I have no doubt that once the first 10 irresponsible tenants are evicted word will quickly spread that the government will not tolerate such criminal and antisocial behaviour.

The Member for Goyder knows a constituent who told him—she also contacted me, as she lives in Malak—that she works in Wadeye, which sometimes has a reputation for a bit of violence and so on. She said that she would much prefer to stay at Wadeye than in Malak because of the violence in Malak. That is not good for Wadeye, but it is certainly not good for Malak.

The population in my electorate is 15% Indigenous. Many of the Indigenous people in my electorate are fed up as well. Long-term Larrakia who have been here for 30 to 40 years share the same frustrations. They say, 'Brian, we have to stop this. Come and bring your minister to sit in my yard at night and let him hear what I have to put up with.' We may do that if we need to. Maybe I should take the Member for Gwoja along so that he can see it firsthand.

In closing I go back to my maiden speech for a reminder:

> *… for Jim, Barbara and Linda, who have continual antisocial behaviour occurring in neighbouring units in Tabletop Place in Malak, I am still here for you.*
>
> *For the wonderful Moore family in Connor and Magdelene Courts in Malak, who have suffered sleep deprivation for many years from neighbouring antisocial behaviour, I am here for you.*
>
> *For Kia and Tony, who had to spend about $40,000 to improve the safety of their own house in Fig Court, Karama, I am here for you.*
>
> *…*
>
> *For Foula and Drosso, who have almost had to turn their verandah into a prison to stay safe in Koojarra Court, Karama, I am here for you.*

To all the other residents I have sat down with in the electorate—including those living in Dorrigo, Karama, Mahogany and Copra Crescents; Mistletoe Circuit; Sedge Court; Manunda Terrace; Applegum and Kalymnos Drives in Karama; Abbott, Chambers, Dalwood Crescents; Hummel, Maddock, Marshall and Squier Courts; Darwent Street in Malak; and Lagoon Road in Knuckey Lagoon—I am still here for you.

I commend the minister. What you have outlined echoes the concerns of my constituents. We are flagging that we will do it; we need to rectify it. You have my full support and, I believe, of my electorate.

VISITORS

Madam SPEAKER: Honourable members, I advise of the presence in the gallery of young adults from YouthWorX NT accompanied by their leaders.

I also advise of the presence of Project21 students from the Down Syndrome Association NT to celebrate World Down Syndrome Day.

Welcome to Parliament House and to the Chamber. It is so lovely to see young Territorians enjoying what we do.

Members: Hear, hear!

Mr PATEL (Casuarina): Madam Speaker, I welcome everyone. I rise with a heavy heart to speak on a matter that is deeply affecting the lives of countless Territorians—the ongoing public housing crisis, which impacts not just the individuals on waitlists but also the communities where public housing exists, including my electorate of Casuarina.

Under the previous Labor government, legislation and policies were put in place that have created an environment in which managing public housing and the tenants residing in these properties has become a tremendous challenge. Unfortunately, this is a challenge many of my constituents face on a daily basis. We must confront this challenge head on.

In my electorate there are multiple properties where tenants are abusing the privilege of public housing. These individuals are not upholding the values that should come with such a privilege, causing endless problems for their neighbours. Issues such as pest infestations, antisocial behaviour and the deterioration of community safety have become a daily reality for those who live nearby.

These tenants are not only causing harm within the community but are devaluing the real estate value of the surrounding properties. Many long-term residents who have lived in their homes for decades are now in a position where they are desperate to move, sell their property and escape the nightmare that their neighbours have become, yet they find themselves trapped.

Their properties are essentially unsellable because the behaviour of those in nearby public housing has made the area undesirable. This is not just a personal inconvenience for these home owners; this is a tragedy for our communities. At the same time we are seeing an increasing number of individuals on the waitlist for public housing who are ready, willing and able to respect the privilege of being housed.

These are people who understand the value of stable housing, and they are prepared to care for the property and be good neighbours. Yet they remain on the waitlist while the existing housing stock is being misused and abused by those who do not treat it with the respect it deserves.

I want to be clear: my priority is to fight for those on the waitlist who need a house and are prepared to uphold their responsibilities as tenants. The current legislation—the laws that have been put in place and the policies of inaction that go with them—has left me with my hands tied. These laws prevent us from properly addressing the issues of antisocial behaviour, the abuse of public housing and the deterioration of our neighbourhoods. We need to ensure public housing serves its intended purpose to provide shelter and security for those who need it most while maintaining the wellbeing and safety of the communities where these homes exist. It is time for us to take action. We cannot allow the current state of affairs to continue. We will support those who need housing, while holding tenants accountable for their behaviour. We will deliver solutions that are fair and that protect the rights of the residents and community at large.

We are taking immediate steps to review the current legislation and structure within the Territory Housing department. We will continue to work with local communities and put in place policies that allow us to manage public housing more effectively. The people of Casuarina and across the Territory deserve better. They deserve safe, respectful and thriving communities, and it is our job to ensure that is what they receive.

The CLP government says that 2025 will be a year of action, certainty and security. We need to do something about this in Casuarina and all the other suburbs. I fully support the minister.

Mr KERLE (Blain): Madam Speaker, I support this ministerial report on public housing and speak up for the people of Blain who, for too long, were lacking a voice to speak for them. For too long they were the victims of the previous government's failed policies on law and order and public housing.

I agree with the Member for Karama that public housing is a privilege, not a right. I will be fighting for the rights of the people of Woodroffe, Moulden and Bellamack to enjoy their homes and a good night's sleep without having to suffer the noise and abuse carrying on all night and without having to suffer threats of violence for the simple act of talking to their neighbour and saying, 'Hey, mate, I have to get up tomorrow for work; do you mind turning it down?' People have things thrown at them, are threatened with sticks and are calling the hardworking police who have assaults and other things they need to worry about. Instead, they are responding to public housing disturbances because of the failed policies of the previous government.

I lived in public housing when I was a child. My mother was escaping domestic violence, and we went into public housing until we could find our own. I understand the value of public housing. I understand the need it fulfils, but public housing is a privilege, not a right. We are a compassionate, wealthy society, and we seek to look after those who are less well off. We seek to give people a hand up, not a handout. This is not a privilege without limitations or a licence to terrorise your neighbours. This is not how we live in society.

All we ask is the simple expectation that we live in society together. People who must get up at 5 am or 6 am to get ready and go to work all day—providing services to our society, educating our kids and looking after our sick people—deserve a good night's sleep. They do not deserve to be kept up by people yelling, screaming, fighting, carrying on and taking away from the hard work of our police who have better things to do than tell people to quieten down and take it inside.

The citizens of Blain have told me many stories, and they all have a common theme. Michelle who lives in Moulden came to me at my mobile office on the verge of a breakdown. As she was talking to me, she had tears streaming down her face. This poor woman could not sleep because of the carrying on from the house across the road from her. She lives by herself; she is not a young person—she is middle aged—and is too scared to say anything. In fact, she was terrified to say anything at all to anyone but me or the police. She told me that she calls the police, they come, things quieten down and then the police have to go and it fires up again. She was crying and begging me to do something, and she said she could not live like that. That is why I am here.

I am here to speak up for the people of Blain. Al in Woodroffe is an Indigenous man who works on a mine site delivering the precious metals that we need for our society. He comes home, and all he wants to do is enjoy a beer in his own house. Instead, the public housing next door, with people coming in from out of town—during the campaign I sat with him one night, and what I saw through his fence was disgusting. There were stolen cars coming and going, drinking, fighting and, worst of all, young children and toddlers being exposed to all this violence, which is not the way for children to live.

I understand what it is like as a child to be exposed to domestic violence and this kind of behaviour, and it is not something children should have to deal with. The Member for Gwoja talks about rights; children have a right to grow up in a house that is calm, peaceful and has consistent rules, food and an environment where they can grow and thrive to their fullest potential without being scared of physical or sexual assault.

Al from Woodroffe, I am here for you and will continue to fight for you. Sibbald Crescent in Woodroffe is another address that I have been to many times, and I would love to be there for happy reasons. I would like to be there celebrating, announcing pizza in the park or a breakfast, but unfortunately more times than I care to think about I find myself there late at night talking to the neighbours while my family is home. One time there was even a stolen car set alight and burning across the road. These people bought a home many years ago in the 1990s under the CLP government when Woodroffe was an upmarket and desirable place to live. It was the equivalent to what Zuccoli or Muirhead are now. These people are suffering. We worked with the local police and things quietened down, but all it takes is a trigger event, such as a group coming in from out of town, and everything fires up again.

To the people in Baldwin Drive in Woodroffe, I hear you and will stand up for you. To the people in Bombax Street, Melastoma Drive and Staghorn Court in Moulden, I am working with the community housing providers to improve the amenity there.

The Member for Gwoja said that we will be evicting people from public housing into homelessness. What about the people in the 10-year backlog who are already homeless? Right now there are people who will have to wait 10 years for a home, while at the same time there are tenants and visitors who do not respect their homes or neighbours.

The system the previous government set up continues and empowers that behaviour and shields them from consequences. No more—this government has drawn a line in the sand. Public housing is a privilege, not a right. With privileges come responsibilities. Basic responsibilities, which most people would accept, are to maintain the yard and not damage the house, to manage visitors to the house and their behaviour and to manage the consumption of alcohol.

I have spent a lot of time with the tenants of some of these properties. Quite often, visitors are as much a victim of other visitors as the neighbours are.

A point of order, Madam Speaker! Pursuant to Standing Order 43, I move an extension of time to continue my remarks.

Madam SPEAKER: There are no extensions for a ministerial report.

Mr KERLE: I endorse our government's response to public housing.

J DAVIS (Johnston): Madam Speaker, I have a deep concern about the public housing reforms proposed by the CLP government. These reforms are far too focused on punitive measures and fail to address the underlying causes of social inequality, structural disadvantage and systemic failures within the housing sector.

We all know and have heard in this House that safe and stable housing is essential for the wellbeing of any community. It impacts everything—health, education, employment and community safety. We heard that from the minister this morning. Overcrowded, inadequate and inappropriate housing is a major factor contributing to our health, domestic violence, safety and education crises. Without a safe and appropriate place to live, we put our most vulnerable people at risk. Children cannot get up and go to school if they are living in overcrowded and inadequate shelter.

Having a safe place to live is a basic human right and a foundation for people to live happy, healthy lives. If we want to improve safety in our communities, I agree that we need to address the housing crisis head on. There is no question that we must do something to address it, but a better-resourced and effective way of managing long-term, ongoing and systemic issues in how we deliver public housing in the Northern Territory is needed.

As the minister and other members said, there are empty, unsafe and uncared for houses; vulnerable and at-risk tenants; inappropriate behaviour; tenants crying out for support who are left without it; damage to properties, which is not repaired for months on end; and a huge waitlist.

The number one issue in my electorate is housing, and the number one complaint my constituents have is that they call all the right people at the right times, trying to prevent and respond to issues with their own public housing or a neighbour's, and the system lets them down every time. Police does not talk to Housing, and Housing does not talk to mental health services, despite this being its obligation.

The minister is right that solutions require accountability, but that accountability rests first with him and his department. Evicting people because you failed to provide adequate support is not the recipe for a healthy or safe society.

We all need to be accountable for our behaviour, including in the Chamber. The current situation in public housing is totally unacceptable, but blaming individuals in those houses for systemic issues in the mismanagement of housing properties by the government department inappropriately shifts the accountability from those who are responsible in government to individuals and does nothing to fix the situation.

Let us talk about proper accountability. Accountability means taking responsibility for your behaviour and doing something to address it. Evicting and fining people does not create accountability, and if we fail to implement proper accountability, we risk an increase in homelessness, overcrowding and social dislocation.

Like everyone in this Chamber, many of my constituents raise issues with me about public housing—tenants, neighbours, families, people who are incredibly frustrated about what is and is not happening, people who have reached out for help over and again and not received it and people who try to raise concerns about what is going on with police and Housing to no effect.

In my electorate in the last fortnight, there was an alleged domestic violence killing in a public house. So many people have come to me with the list of times they contacted police and Housing and looked for help to no effect. Housing staff told them they had not heard anything from the police. People told me that there were so many chances for intervention in this situation that did not happen, and tragedy ensued. We cannot have any more houses where people are killed because the support they need is not there, but evicting tenants without addressing the reasons behind rent arrears or antisocial behaviour will not fix this.

Evicting people only displaces the problem. The social costs of homelessness, such as increased reliance on emergency services, healthcare costs and social instability, are far greater than the costs of supporting tenants to meet their responsibilities.

Homelessness leads to deteriorating health, increased crime and social isolation; strains social services; and affects the quality of life for many families within and outside public housing. These outcomes are preventable when accountability is coupled with support and intervention.

To hear the minister say that there will be no more compassion and to hear that receive cheers across this Chamber saddens, distresses and angers me. When did compassion become a dirty word? There is no reason we cannot approach this issue with compassion, clarity and processes that will ensure accountability, safety and real change for our community.

Yesterday we heard the Member for Mulka say that we need acts of kindness and respect. That is what we need most in the Northern Territory. What happens to families who cannot afford to pay rent due to the increase? Will the head tenant be held responsible for the household debt? Will they be saddled with that or eventually jailed? Locking up people because you failed to provide adequate support, which you are obligated to provide, is not the answer.

We know this is not just about putting a roof over people's heads; it is about giving families the stability they need to escape cycles of violence and instability. We cannot have a thriving community if people are living in overcrowded homes or houses that are falling apart. Secure, quality housing is directly linked to better outcomes in regard to safety, mental health and community cohesion. When families have a safe, stable place to live, they can focus on the incredibly important areas this government is committed to, like education and employment.

I also heard the minister say that there will be increased powers granted to public housing safety officers. Of course, safety in public housing is essential, but we must avoid militarising the response to social issues. I heard the minister say these people will not be social workers, but will they be trained in conflict resolution, cultural competency and how to support vulnerable populations? We need proper approaches to address these issues so that we can deal with them, not continually make them worse and continue in this cyclical, ineffective and punitive response to the housing crisis.

I agree that we need to address the public housing crisis as well as the homelessness and community safety crisis. In the spirit of the Member for Mulka's motion on the Aboriginal Justice Agreement last night, we need to work together. I call on the government to work with the expert and longstanding housing service providers to better understand the complex nature of the Northern Territory's housing and homelessness crisis.

I urge the government to work with NT Shelter, NTCOSS, Aboriginal Housing NT, Yilli Rreung, Mission Australia, the YWCA and many others. The specialist workers in these services will be impacted by this government's decisions. We need to keep these specialist workers in the NT and look after them. We need to make sure that changes to the approach in housing homelessness policy does not impact negatively on these workers and they can do their job. This proposed approach will not support hardworking frontline public housing staff or the sector workers. It will put additional pressure on them.

This kneejerk response will only lead to an increase in homelessness, overcrowding and social dislocation. Just as we are talking about accountability for public tenants, all of us in the Chamber must be accountable to make decisions on complex social issues that will make our community safer. I urge the minister to reconsider this approach and think carefully about its long-term consequences.

Mrs CARLSON (Wanguri): Madam Speaker, I support the Territory housing reforms the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Community Development is proposing. For far too long residents in Wanguri and Leanyer surrounding these public houses and units have had enough with the antisocial behaviour, mistreatment of the public assets and the financial burden of non-payment of rent, including maintenance of the damaged properties.

I support housing for those who are vulnerable and social housing, because I am a product of social housing. I lived in a house in Rapid Creek for the first nine years of my life, and my father lived in that house for decades before raising his older children, but our family did not abuse the opportunity of living in this public house. My parents ensured they paid their rent on time, maintained their property with pride and did not commit any antisocial behaviour.

I wish to share a constituent's concern regarding antisocial behaviour in my electorate. She brought to my attention her terrible experience of living next door to a public house. She reached out because she previously wrote to the Labor Housing minister and the previous Labor member, and it fell on deaf ears. She wrote:

'I am writing to you to bring to your attention and plead for your assistance on the matter of continued and ongoing distress caused by antisocial behaviour from a resident of public housing. I have also been writing to the department of public housing over the years, and sometimes, like my recent attempt on 15 August, I do not even receive a response.

'I live in Leanyer, and the behaviour of our neighbour has completely and utterly ruined our first experience of homeownership and demolished any quality of life we hoped for as a couple. I have attached correspondence, of which there are many dated from 11 March 2024, which I sent to the minister for Housing and the Member for Wanguri, which details the events we have been subjected to until to the point for your reference.'

There were many incidents listed on those reports. It goes on:

'I have also attached a response from the minister's office and a recent letter addressed to you, which details events up to and highlights the impacts in our lives.'

She wrote in one of the letters that there were 22 incidents within a seven-week period. Her letter continued:

'My partner and I purchased our home nearly two-and-a-half years ago in the hopes of making this our first family home. We have since agreed to postpone these plans. I cannot, in good conscience, willingly expose any child to the type of behaviour we are subjected to on a weekly basis. Our dreams have not been utterly crushed but directly mocked by the perpetrator of the behaviour. We have been completely and deeply hurt by everything that has happened in the last few years. I do not think we can continue to live in the house, but we are not in a financial position to get out. I honestly do not know what else to do anymore, but I cannot keep living like this.

'The letters enclosed are long, so I appreciate your time in understanding the full scope of the ongoing issues.'

I thank that resident for following up on this matter with the new government. I assure her and her family that we are reforming public housing and taking action to give certainty that her first home-buying experience is fixed and that in the future she can raise her family in peace and come to love living in Leanyer.

Another constituent, who is 63 years old, came to my office three weeks ago and wanted to ensure that this government does something about antisocial behaviour. He explained to me that in his small court of 13 houses, four are public houses—once there were five—and to him it seems to be an unfair ratio. Over the years every one of those houses has been involved in drug activity and antisocial behaviour in one way or another. Most recently, one of the occupants in the street was raided and taken into custody. Another who had a hydro setup was also charged a few years ago, with plants confiscated.

This constituent's correspondence said:

'We have been subjected to antisocial behaviour over many years from constant fighting, foul language, persons armed with knives running up and down the street and a recently vacated house was frequently visited by police to deal with a male individual who was constantly arrested, once in the front yard on his verge.

'Prior to that, we had a tenant who, at the same house, had a small LED light on her gate to alert people she was open for business. She was also arrested and taken to custody for drug possession. She had a young male friend who used to visit, and every time was fighting from the moment he arrived, often early Sunday mornings.

‘Territory Housing seems to introduce these unsavoury people time and again. Frequent non-resident traffic in the street is ongoing, with a lot of short visits. Dogs are at large with no care factor, given they were removed by council and, shortly after, they got another two.

‘Only last night they had a group of five individuals around midnight, yelling and screaming for an hour and a half.’

He had to get up at 4.30 am to go to work. This constituent is not singling out anyone, as he has another public house behind him which is terrific. He has resided there for about 25 years and understands the issues and logistics of the welfare system, but he feels it seems to favour them and not him, as a working taxpayer. All he wants, as do a few of the elderly residents in his area, is a quiet lifestyle in his later years and not feeling uncomfortable in his own home.

These are only two examples, but there are numerous stories across the Wanguri electorate and the Territory, as we have heard from my colleagues. Many other public housing residents in my electorate do the right thing, like the wonderful senior village people on Leanyer Drive and in the Wanguri units on Trower Road. As these units age, they have asked for maintenance but have been waiting for years and just give up. Social housing should empower the most vulnerable members of our community, and it does for those who do not abuse the opportunity of living in public housing.

I support the public housing reforms the minister has proposed so that the Wanguri electorate can return to its previous wonderful reputation as a place to raise your family in peace and live and work safely.

K McNAMARA (Nightcliff): Madam Speaker, I start by saying yes, it is important—crucial, in fact—that the government is taking action on public housing.

People who live in public housing talk to me every day, raising concerns about their safety, wellbeing and the general quality of life in public housing and of those around it. Helping public housing residents and people around public housing makes up the bulk of the work that my staff and I do in my electorate office.

There are serious problems with public housing. We have damaged housing that is unsuitable for people with disabilities and people waiting up to six years before getting transferred.

I was glad to hear the minister and others in this Chamber say that the so-called problem tenants are in the minority. That is true and must be emphasised. We in this Chamber must not play into the demonisation of people living in public housing; they are our constituents, too.

I am concerned about calls to hasten the eviction process for people with rental debts, which effectively means forcing them to become homeless. How is this a solution? I do not understand. They will continue to have a debt and not have a home. I also heard calls for a range of other vulnerable people to be pushed out of their homes, seemingly onto the street. How will this solve anything?

I am concerned about the oversimplification of this issue in the CLP’s rhetoric. It is not that Labor was weak on this issue and the CLP is strong; trying to frame this as, ‘You can either be strong or empathetic and weak’ is an unhelpful framework from which this can be viewed. I fear that we will never solve this problem if that is how it is continued to be seen. Labor failed on housing; I am not disputing that. However, previous CLP governments also failed on housing. That is the truth.

Of course we need accountability for people living in public housing. They deserve to be safe. Once again, I speak to them every day. Sure, pushing people onto the streets to be homeless is not a solution, but neither is failing to address the structural problems that got us here in the first place.

My question to the CLP is: what are your structural solutions? What are your investments in strong alcohol policy in the NT? You repealed the minimum floor price; that is not an alcohol policy. Where are your investments in alcohol programs and education, youth diversion programs and more housing? Instead of the big complexes where many vulnerable people are shoved in together with no support networks, where are your investments in domestic, family and sexual violence services and program for young parents to help them become good role models for their children? Where are your investments in increasing wages and reducing the cost of living so that hardworking people can own their houses—not just handouts for property investors—and not have to live in public housing?

Where is the real plan? All I and my constituents have seen so far is this new government full of bluster, passing legislation that is all stick and no carrot. I have seen nothing before this Assembly that tackles the

source of the issues we are facing. It is of continuing frustration for members of the public to see this; they want action. I do not want to just talk about action being tough; I want action that solves the core issues. We have not seen this.

I also point out that probably one of the biggest factors is the increasing privatisation of public housing. One of the largest issues is that the department of Housing has a duty of care, whereas private sector providers do not or think they do not. People living in privately run affordable housing do not see the investment in safety for residents because the private organisations do not want to spend money and are not obliged to.

That is a big problem in my electorate. Previous governments wanted to rid themselves of the responsibilities of running public housing. Both Labor and the CLP have been notorious for selling off public housing or contracting it out to private organisations. This has created a problem because these housing providers are not providing the same levels of security because they are not obliged to. The government knew this when it contracted them. Now innocent tenants are falling through the gaps where no-one is responsible to ensure their security and safety in the housing complexes run by private groups.

I speak to these tenants every day. I hold meetings with tenants, providers and representatives from other organisations. I am trying to get the police and the local community safety representatives to come to the meetings because this is such a problem, and I am working so hard in my electorate to solve this. It will not be helped by punitive measures or a lack of action on the real drivers.

I am concerned that these changes will lead to higher levels of incarceration. If people do not have a safe home there are more risks of them becoming incarcerated; the statistics play this out. The other day in one of the panels on crime and safety that I run in my electorate, Rocket Bretherton, a formerly incarcerated woman who now works for Justice Reform Initiative, told me that the number one thing that women in jail say would prevent them from returning to prison is safe housing.

What will become of these women when they leave jail and, under the changes we have just heard, their house will be taken away from them? What will they do for nine years while they are on the waitlist for public housing? We know that this will make improving their lives almost impossible, and they will end up incarcerated again. It is not the solution to our problems.

I want us to remember two things. The challenges we are seeing in public housing come from a minority of people. We have been hearing the hardworking taxpayers who own their homes or rent privately throughout Darwin, and they deserve to be safe. Taxpaying, hardworking Territorians also live in public housing. An elderly retired man who worked in trades for his entire working life and is paying taxes told me that he is living in public housing and feels totally let down. Why is he forced to become stigmatised and suffer just because he lives in public housing? He deserves better from our government.

I thank the minister for bringing housing reform; we need it. I am concerned about the stick rather than carrot approach. The framing of this like, ‘We cannot have empathy; that is too weak. We are the strong ones’ totally misses what the issues are, so I strongly encourage the CLP to have less rhetoric of how tough they are and actually have more meetings with organisations and public housing tenants to look at the structural issues that we should be tackling to see a difference.

Mr CHARLS (People, Sport and Culture): Madam Speaker, I support the minister and his new department for the proactive work that has been done over the last six months. A house is more than just a structure; it is a fundamental human need, a place of safety and stability and the foundation for a family’s future. Public housing plays a crucial role in ensuring that every individual, regardless of their financial situation, has access to safe and affordable shelter. It is a system designed to support our most vulnerable, families on low incomes, seniors, people with disabilities and those experiencing hardship, but when the system is not working as it should and public housing becomes a source of community distress rather than stability, we must act.

In my electorate of Sanderson we see the benefits of public housing every day. It allows hardworking families a place to call home, provides security for seniors and offers a fresh start to those in need. However, we also see the challenges. Some public housing properties are being misused. Some tenants, instead of valuing the home they have been given, are creating serious problems for their neighbours and the wider community. Loud parties, vandalism, drug use and antisocial behaviour are not the values we want in our neighbourhoods. Unfortunately, some tenants are allowing visitors who bring crime and disorder into our streets. This is not just a housing issue; it is a community safety issue.

I have spoken to residents across Sanderson, families who cannot sleep because of the noise, parents who fear letting their children play outside and elderly residents who feel trapped in their own homes. This is unacceptable. Public housing should be a place of security, not a source of fear

At the heart of this issue are our children. A home is meant to be a place where children feel safe and can study, rest and grow into responsible adults. When public housing is used irresponsibly and homes become hotspots for crime and violence, the ones who suffer the most are the innocent children caught in the middle. Imagine a child trying to do homework when fights break out in the front yard. Imagine a young person growing up thinking that violence, drug use and disorder are normal parts of life. When children are exposed to this kind of environment, their future is at risk; they struggle in school, their mental health suffers and they are more likely to become involved in crime. We cannot allow this cycle to continue. What can we do?

Firstly, we must strengthen accountability, which is exactly what the minister and the department are doing. Public housing is a privilege, not a right to be abused. If tenants are engaging in criminal activity or allowing antisocial visitors there must be consequences. We need stricter enforcement of tenancy agreements and swifter action against those who repeatedly break the rules.

Secondly, we must support those who want to do better. Not every struggling public housing tenant is a problem. Many simply need guidance, support and access to services to help them turn around their lives.

Thirdly, we must stand together as a community. If you see something that threatens the safety and wellbeing of your neighbourhood, speak up. Report issues to the authorities and support initiatives that promote safer and stronger suburbs.

Public housing is meant to be a solution, not a problem. It should provide stability, not chaos. It should be a place where children thrive, not where they learn the wrong lessons about life. We must ensure that public housing in Sanderson and across the Northern Territory serves its true purpose of providing safe, stable and respectable living conditions for those in need while protecting the wider community from harm. Together we can make public housing work for the people who need it most and build a community that is safe, supportive and strong.

I thank the minister for the proactive steps to address these issues. I commend the work of the department on this matter.

Mr MACKAY (Goyder): Madam Speaker, I talk to my colleagues in this Chamber and, by and large, the issues I hear are with public housing. When I ask the passionate Member for Karama how it is going, he lets me know in no uncertain terms that it is like a war zone.

What has been allowed to occur for a significant period is a travesty. Ordinary people who want to get on with their lives, go to work, come home and have a beer and a nice sleep are disturbed time and again.

The Member for Drysdale shows tremendous courage and leadership. When I ask how it is going in Drysdale, he says, ‘Not as good as Goyder’. When I ask what he means he says that it is public housing. There are significant issues. I believe his electorate has more than 17% of all the public housing in the Territory, and Blain has about 18%. The Member for Blain is a passionate advocate for improvement. For too long the people of Moulden, Woodroffe, Rosebery and Bellamack have suffered under the lack of enforcement in the public housing space.

It is not all doom and gloom. I have public housing in my electorate, and the tenants are fantastic. The people who have these houses in Humpty Doo look after them, have lovely gardens and are great. When I have doorknocked the few houses I can get to, they say hello, invite me in for a cup of tea and have a chat. These people are using the service the way it should be used; they are respectful and incredibly grateful to be provided this service. They are nice tenants, look after the place and are respectful neighbours. They do a fantastic job. They are the bastion of what public housing should be—helping people who may not be able to afford their own home to get on their feet, get a roof over their head and have stability in their lives. I love it.

I wish it was being treated the same way across all of the Territory. It breaks my heart to know that there are families sleeping rough and in their cars who would be ideal tenants, as the Member for Karama said. Instead, they are forced to live without public housing because we do not have enough yet.

Meanwhile, there are people abusing the privilege of being housed by the government or at a reduced cost by destroying the place. It is horrendous. When I ask the Member for Casuarina how it is going in Casuarina,

he tells me, 'Not great'. I ask, 'What is wrong?' Time and again he says that it is public housing. When I talk to the Member for Wanguri and say, 'Oly, how is life in Wanguri?', she says time and again, 'Not as great as Goyder'. I say, 'What is wrong, Oly?', and she says, 'It is public housing again'.

It is an issue that takes up a significant amount of time. Honestly, people who have reached out to me who live in or next door to public housing have described some nights where it is 2 am and their baby cannot sleep because there is music blasting. They have called the cops and tried everything. They have knocked on the door begging neighbours to please turn down the music, and they refuse or threaten violence. People are scared to go to work. They do not want to leave their house in case their neighbours retaliate against them for wanting to have a good night's sleep.

It is simply not good enough. I have complete faith that the minister for Housing will take the steps needed to improve the situation across the Territory. It will not be an overnight fix. Unfortunately, there is no magic bullet; however, we have a series of reform that will take time. Everything in government takes a bit of time, but we will start to see change.

I am incredibly proud to be a member of this CLP team that is part of that change. I want to make sure that when we reflect on our time here in three years, I can say to the Member for Drysdale, 'How is life in Drysdale?' and he will say, 'Almost as good as Goyder'. When I talk to the Member for Blain, he will say, 'I have not had a housing complaint in a whole day', rather than saying he had six in the morning.

When I talk to the electorate officers and ask them what the main issue is that they deal with on a day-to-day basis, they say public housing. Unfortunately, the people in Drysdale and Blain have not had the luxury of being able to talk to me about their pet crocodiles and how important it is to them in the rural area. Instead, they are dealing with a war zone day-in and day-out.

We live in what is meant to be a first-world country—a place of paradise, hopes and dreams—not a place where you cannot go to bed or have friends and family visit out of embarrassment that your neighbours might be fighting, drinking or blasting music.

It breaks my heart to know that those families and people who need the services are being excluded from it, because the current tenants have been warned repeatedly—I believe some of these people had warnings up to 60 times. If you are warned 60 times about anything and are still allowed to stay there, why would you change your behaviour? If there are no consequences for your actions, why would you do anything about it?

We will bring in the consequences. We will show people—I believe the Member for Karama said earlier that once we make one eviction, the second and the third, everyone else will realise, 'Oh, no, the consequences are coming; we need to respect the place we have been given.' The lack of action over the last eight years caused what we are now dealing with. This issue has not popped up overnight; it has been growing.

I credit the minister for Housing for the public housing in my electorate being wonderful; they are lovely, great people. It is a sad story every time I talk to my colleagues about what is happening in their electorates.

Motion agreed to; report noted.

The Assembly suspended.

MOTION
Reorder of Business

Mr EDGINGTON (Leader of Government Business): Madam Speaker, I move that Government Business Order of the Day number 2 relating to the Education Legislation Amendment Bill has priority over Order of the Day number 1.

Motion agreed to.

PAPER TABLED
ICAC Report – Operation Sirocco

Ms BOOTHBY (Attorney-General): Madam Speaker, I table a report from the ICAC delegate Patricia Kelly SC titled Operation Sirocco dated 11 April 2024 and seek leave to make a short statement.

Leave granted.

Ms BOOTHBY: Madam Speaker, Operation Sirocco outlines the mess which occurred under the former Labor government's watch regarding the prosecution of former Children's Commission, Colleen Gwynne.

This is an issue which has continued to generate nationwide public interest since the investigation into Colleen Gwynne first began under Labor in November 2018.

On Monday this week the Chief Minister was asked on Katie Woolf's radio program what action the new CLP government would take to ensure the Colleen Gwynne issue can be resolved. The Chief Minister said publicly that all options were on the table and this government would not rule out an inquiry into the Colleen Gwynne issue if it was required.

This government has already taken strong action to improve the transparency and accountability in recruitment processes across government agencies. This includes Acting Justice Alan Blow's independent inquiry into senior police appointments following the ICAC's finding relating to the former Police Commissioner Michael Murphy.

As Attorney-General I have been considering what further action I take in response to the issues surrounding the prosecution of Colleen Gwynne. Both the Children's Commissioner and Director of Public Prosecutions fall within my portfolio responsibilities.

Yesterday my office formally wrote to ICAC to determine whether the Colleen Gwynne issue had been previously examined by ICAC. The ICAC confirmed it had investigated the matter previously. Yesterday afternoon it provided me with the Operation Sirocco report. I had the report overnight and have provided it to the Assembly today.

Now that the report has been tabled I will be asking the Attorney-General's Department for a full briefing on the matter to determine what further action, if any, is appropriate.

The ICAC Operation Sirocco report states that the police investigation into Colleen Gwynne began under the former Labor government in November 2018. The Operation Sirocco report was finalised on 11 April 2024, more than four months before the former Labor government was removed from office.

The ICAC investigation into the Colleen Gwynne issue was delegated to Patricia Kelly SC on 18 September 2023, nearly one year prior to the election. This period covers the tenure of the now Leader of the Opposition, Selena Uibo, who previously served as Attorney-General, and concluded under the Member for Gwoja's tenure as Attorney-General.

The Operation Sirocco report also outlines a secret deed of settlement the former Labor government entered into with Colleen Gwynne in August 2023.

We have repeatedly heard concerns about the lack of transparency, integrity and timeliness of responding to matters of this nature. Given the ICAC's Operation Sirocco report has now been tabled, the public has a right to ask questions of those opposite. What did the two previous Attorneys-General and their staff know about Labor's secret ICAC report into the Colleen Gwynne issue? Why was it hidden from the public for so long?

Today it is 343 days since ICAC's Operation Sirocco report was finalised. Only today is this report being put on the public record by the new CLP government.

QUESTION TIME
NT Police Force – Parliamentary Inquiry

Ms UIBO to CHIEF MINISTER

When you were in opposition you called for a parliamentary inquiry into the police seven times, including issues of morale and wellbeing. When the outcomes of the Kelly review were released you said that it did not go far enough. The fallout from the ICAC's Operation Apollo on your watch has left a crisis of confidence and trust within the NT Police Force. Now that you are the Minister for Police, will you show leadership and seize the opportunity to hold the full parliamentary inquiry into police morale and wellbeing that you were so keen on when you were previously in opposition?

ANSWER

Madam Speaker, I do not know where to start because the Opposition Leader is right. I stood in this parliament time and again begging the former Labor government to stop destroying our police force. There was survey after survey from the NT Police Association—I think three in the end—showing debilitating low levels of morale, a lack of confidence in the former Labor government and historically high numbers. I cannot remember them off the top of my head, but they were in the 1990s. Over and over we asked what you were doing about it and said that you need to back our police, that the laws are too weak and to stop destroying police powers, demoralising them.

There was issue after issue, and those opposite did nothing. Labor watched our attrition rate rise through the roof; I think we got to 11%. The police were leaving in droves, and we could not recruit as fast as they were leaving. It was horrific. There was the churn in Police ministers; this government demoted the Police portfolio down the line and ended up with their newest minister, Brent Potter, who had no idea what he was doing. It was a mess. I watched former Deputy Chief Minister, Nicole Manison, rock up at the NTPA conference every year promising this and that. Every year she would promise the same thing.

How dare you come in high and mighty; you are a disgrace. The CLP has made sure that the Chief Minister holds the Police portfolio because we care about police and law and order. We will deal with crime and support them. You are a disgrace. You held a review, which we accepted, and who knows how much you paid for that. We now have a process in place, and we moved swiftly to deal with and mop up another Labor mess with our police recruitment processes.

Ms UIBO: A point of order, Madam Speaker! Standing Order 110; whilst I know the Chief Minister is passionate about our police, the question specifically was will the Chief Minister support the full parliamentary inquiry, which she called for when in opposition?

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: You are a joke to say that. In the last couple of weeks we have seen an ICAC report into a methodical termination of a Police Commissioner and an independent inquiry into recruitment going back to August 2023. We are supporting police, giving them certainty, the security and powers they need and the backing of a government that cares about community safety more than anything.

ICAC Report – Operation Apollo

Mrs ZIO to CHIEF MINISTER

On Tuesday this week you tabled the Operation Apollo ICAC report, which was the first sitting day after you received it. Since receiving the report, you have taken decisive, considered action culminating in the termination of the Police Commissioner and launched an independent inquiry into the recent recruitment of senior police officers, led by Justice Blow. How does your strong action in the past three weeks compare to the lack of action on this issue by the former Labor government in which the Members for Arnhem and Gwoja were both senior ministers?

Members interjecting.

Madam SPEAKER: The Chief Minister will be heard in silence.

ANSWER

Madam Speaker, I pick up on the ridiculous interjections from the opposite. Clearly, Member for Fannie Bay, you have been reading the same stories in the paper that I have been reading this morning, scratching your head in disbelief at the hypocrisy of those opposite.

Why am I surprised? We have the Opposition Leader leading with her chin this afternoon in Question Time. We have listened to those opposite criticise us; they thought we were too slow. We will never apologise for putting in place methodical processes and making decisions in the best interests of the Northern Territory. Those opposite have no idea about the meaning of the word. They are jeering from the sidelines with, ‘This was too slow’, and ‘I would have done this and that’, yet we find out that their government knew about it all along.

Let us face facts. Who was the former Attorney-General? Anyone put up your hands. Okay, thank you. I am not getting hands up, but I can tell you who it was. It was the Opposition Leader and the Member for Gwoja.

We now know that their previous government was told about hiring practice concerns when they were both senior ministers 12 months ago, and they did nothing.

Members interjecting.

Madam SPEAKER: Silence!

Ms UIBO: A point of order, Madam Speaker! Standing Order 35; I would like the Chief Minister to withdraw the imputations that I knew something I did not.

Madam SPEAKER: No, that is not a point of order; Standing Order 35 is Relevance to Subject. You pointed out the wrong standing order. If you …

Ms UIBO: Exactly; it has no relevance to the subject, Madam Speaker.

Madam SPEAKER: What she said is not disorderly. It is not a point of order.

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: What a hypocrite. She stood up and said, 'You are trying to say that I knew something I did not'. Yes, I know the feeling, Opposition Leader. I have been the subject of that from you for three weeks.

Anyway, let us not stop the truth getting in the way of a good story. Maybe those opposite are confused because of the chaos, as they had three Chief Ministers, three Police ministers and two Attorneys-General.

Make no mistake—you can read it in the paper yourself—that your government knew about it and did nothing. It is rich for you to come in here as if you care about police or processes or transparency all of a sudden. In eight years, you proved to Territorians that you did not care about any of those things.

You think Territorians have a short memory; they do not. Actions speak louder than words, which is why this is our year of action, certainty and security. It is why we are having an inquiry from Justice Blow, doing the work that needs to be done to give certainty to our police, the community and the officers who have been subject to the discussion. We will never apologise for putting police first and for making the right decisions on behalf of Territorians. Quite frankly, you need to take a good hard look in the mirror about what you are doing to support police.

Schools – Swimming Lessons

Mr YOUNG to MINISTER for EDUCATION and TRAINING

Can you confirm that schools will be expected to pay for your free swimming lessons election commitment from 2026 onwards, including lessons, travel and accommodation costs for remote students? Is this a case of you taking money out of classrooms to pay for an unbudgeted, uncosted election promise?

ANSWER

Madam Speaker, I love talking about commitments that we took to the previous election. Swimming for all students between Years 1 to 6 in schools will be free; we said that before the election. We are now elected, and it is rolling out across Territory schools.

Many schools have already done their swimming lessons. I have been to the Casuarina pool and witnessed schools having swimming lessons. In Katherine we do not have a pool, as I have explained many times, so we are using the RAAF pool and the pool at one of the caravan parks to do the swimming lessons in Katherine. A lot of the schools in the Member for Barkly's electorate have had an excursion and had their swimming lessons in Tennant Creek.

This is a great initiative. The drowning rate in the Territory is extremely high. We have a lifestyle where people spend time outdoors. We have backyard pools or go to the Waterfront, Litchfield or Kakadu, and swimming is the number one thing in this weather.

I will not shy away from the fact this was a free, ongoing commitment to schools. The additional funding for swimming will be allocated through the school resourcing model. We will not cut anything to make sure swimming is on the agenda in schools; it is an important initiative that we …

Mr YOUNG: A point of order, Madam Speaker!

Madam SPEAKER: Member for Daly, do not repeat the whole question; I know what you want to ask. Is it accommodation and travel?

Mr YOUNG: Yes, are there extra costs associated with the policy, including accommodation and travel for remote students?

Mrs HERSEY: I was answering the question, but they clearly do not like the answer or the fact we are delivering our election commitments. We are doing what we said we would do. We are getting on with the job and doing the heavy lifting, which we listened to for eight years while the previous government did nothing to help schools and children. They did not give them the opportunity to have free swimming lessons.

Mr YOUNG: A point of order, Madam Speaker!

Madam SPEAKER: I know what you will say: relevance. You want more information on travel and accommodation.

Mr YOUNG: Relevance—exactly. It has not been answered; it was about travel and accommodation that could bring extra costs to remote students.

Mrs HERSEY: We have been through this many times, so I am happy to put on the record our free swimming lessons. All schools will work with the department to work out what is right for their school, whether they are on an island or whatever, for example at Galiwinku. There are lots of variations in the ways swimming lessons can be done. You can get massive blowup pools from Clark Rubber. It is about water awareness and safety for students all over the Territory.

Government Integrity

Mr O'GALLAGHER to DEPUTY CHIEF MINISTER

Territorians expect the highest standards of integrity from their elected representatives. I note that opposition members have spent Question Time this week lecturing this government on matters like integrity, transparency and appropriate conduct in office, yet we all know that while in office, Labor members—like the Member for Gwoja—were engulfed in misconduct and malfeasance and presided over a deep integrity crisis.

The Member for Gwoja's shares scandal when he was Attorney-General, the Territory's top lawmaker, obliterated public trust. How does the CLP government's approach differ from the former Labor government's, when the Member for Gwoja was—but luckily no longer is—a senior minister in our Northern Territory?

ANSWER

Madam Speaker, the Member for Karama is a man of integrity. A minister who buys shares in a liquor wholesaler that supplies Alice Springs with liquor just two months before alcohol bans were lifted has an undeniable conflict of interest and lacks integrity. It demonstrates that the Member for Gwoja was prepared to put his own financial interests ahead of the health and safety of Territorians.

In just the first week after Labor allowed the Stronger Futures policy to lapse, there were 180 domestic violence callouts. That is 25 a day, which is one per hour. This Labor failed Territorians. There were 82 reports of neglect and seven reports of sexual exploitation of children in the first week.

Our CLP government is doing things differently. We are being open and transparent, not like the former Attorney-General who bought shares in a liquor supplier two months before the end of Stronger Futures whilst sitting in the Labor Cabinet that made that decision.

Ending Stronger Futures was against the advice of peak Aboriginal organisations. Federal Labor's Marion Scrymgour said that it was a bad idea. She described it as negligent to suddenly pull the pin without any protection or plan for vulnerable women and children. We all know the carnage that caused across Alice Springs while the Member for Gwoja made money out of misery.

My colleagues behind me and you, Madam Speaker, witnessed the chaos firsthand in Alice Springs. It was not until the Prime Minister came to Alice Springs and told the then Chief Minister how to do her job and forced Labor to do an embarrassing backflip that it finally reinstated those alcohol bans. Sadly, for many victims of alcohol-related assault, crime and harm, it was too little too late.

Federal Senator Jacinta Price called for the Member for Gwoja to resign, and of course he did not have the integrity to do that. She said:

> *It is sickening to hear that an NT Minister may have deliberately allowed alcohol to flow where it is killing our people because it would deliver a profit to a company that he was invested in.*

He had shares, and what did then Chief Minister Eva Lawler do? Nothing. In fact, she moved to block ICAC investigations. Labor ran protection for the Member for Gwoja. These are all conflicts of interest, and it seems to be a theme that shows …

Madam SPEAKER: Your time has expired, minister.

Schools – Swimming Lessons

Mr BROWN to MINISTER for EDUCATION and TRAINING

Can you explain how funding was allocated to meet the free swimming lessons election commitment, for example, in my electorate? Why have Darwin schools within walking distance of a pool been allocated $150 per student, the same amount that has been allocated to students of Mamaruni School who will need to fly and stay in Palmerston or Jabiru to attend their lessons?

ANSWER

Madam Speaker, I thank the member for the question because it means that I can again say that we are delivering an election commitment. I am not sure what the opposition does not understand about the fact that we are delivering for all students in Years 1 to 6 across the Territory. It does not matter whether you are in Galiwinku, Palmerston or Maningrida, you can …

Mr Edgington: The Barkly.

Mrs HERSEY: Or in the Barkly—sorry, Member for Barkly; we cannot forget about the Barkly. All students in Years 1 to 6 will have swimming lessons delivered to them.

What those opposite do not understand is all situations in their communities are unique, and it will be tailored for their communities. It does not matter whether you are in Galiwinku or Maningrida; if you do not have the capacity to come in, the School of Sport Education will be working with those communities and delivering these programs.

I reiterate that these are essential swimming and water safety skills as part of education. It is part of the broader initiative to provide cost-of-living relief, reducing the financial burden for families. This is in addition to the Back to School vouchers that families do not have to fork out of their hip pocket for.

I am not sure how many times I can explain to the opposition how swimming lessons will be delivered in remote areas, but the School of Sport Education will work out what is best for a community and how they will get out there—whether it be Royal Life Saving, the YMCA or whoever—to deliver the programs.

I know that the massive Clark Rubber pools have been looked at. It is about water safety awareness. It is a lot easier and more efficient to take the pool to the communities and deliver it there as opposed to bringing all these people into communities.

Ms Uibo: That is not free. How much will that cost?

Madam SPEAKER: Order!

Mrs HERSEY: I note that the Opposition Leader continues to yell across the Chamber. I am unsure what those opposite do not understand about the fact we …

Ms Uibo: How much will it cost? That is what we do not understand.

Madam SPEAKER: Silence!

Mrs HERSEY: These are free swimming lessons. This was a $3m commitment at the election to deliver it for free. Do you understand that? It means zero dollars. I am not sure how else I can explain that to you. All schools will be getting free swimming lessons.

Government Integrity

Mr KERLE to MINISTER for HOUSING, LOCAL GOVERNMENT and COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

Integrity in government is incredibly important. I know how much you value it as a member of this Assembly for the past nearly five years. This week we heard those opposite question our government's integrity. Can you explain to the Assembly how our government is restoring trust and not falling into the same traps as the previous Labor government?

ANSWER

Madam Speaker, the Member for Blain shares the same values as me.

We heard Labor question the integrity of the CLP government. Labor members relentlessly scrutinised us over the handling of the ICAC report into the former Police Commissioner and the termination of his employment and questioned our integrity over the Territory Coordinator Bill.

It is a bit rich coming from Labor, considering the allegations surrounding former Chief Minister Michael Gunner and the $40,000 taxpayer-funded travel scandal in the lead-up to the 2020 election. The CLP grilled the former Chief Minister in parliament about the alleged misuse of taxpayer funds in December 2021. He did not answer any direct questions, but he did not deny that the taxpayer money had been used for his election travel, approved by his brother-in-law.

Mr Gunner also refused to answer four written questions through the parliamentary process about Labor's taxpayer-funded 2020 election campaign travel in contravention of the rules meant to protect us against the misuse of public funds. Under caretaker conventions elected officials are not permitted to charge taxpayers for travel for party political purposes during an election campaign.

This scandal was originally exposed by the *NT Independent* in November 2021. It revealed that the Chief Minister's brother-in-law, Ryan Neve, approved tens of thousands of taxpayer dollars for Mr Gunner to travel to remote communities in marginal seats during the 2020 election campaign, which Labor hoped to win, on the same day remote polling was occurring in those communities. That is how Labor members lowered their standards. It was a direct contravention of caretaker provisions established to prevent the misappropriation of public funds.

Documents released through freedom of information laws also showed that Mr Gunner and Mr Neve claimed trips for ministerial travel during the caretaker period despite no record of meetings taking place. One trip to Timber Creek was clearly a campaign photo op, which would also fall under party political purposes.

I remember him coming to the Barkly during the election campaign in 2020. The facts are that Mr Neve worked in the Chief Minister's office at the time of the trips. He was not working in the department, although later he was promoted to an executive-level position.

The former Chief Minister may have escaped ICAC but has not escaped the notice that sums up this blatant hypocrisy of Labor.

Clyde Fenton Long Day Care

Ms UIBO to MINISTER for EDUCATION and TRAINING

On 6 December las year you announced on social medial that Clyde Fenton Long Day Care would remain open in Katherine. I understand that parents have been notified that it will close in just a few weeks at the end of Term 1. Minister, in your own electorate, why have you not done more to support parents and carers to help keep the doors of Clyde Fenton Long Day Care open?

ANSWER

Madam Speaker, that is a great question so I can update the Assembly on what is happening with Clyde Fenton. Clyde Fenton Long Day Care was going to close down, and there was some confusion with the day care and the school.

At the end of the day, it came down to a funding model; there were not enough children to stay in the long day care. The department has been working with Clyde Fenton Long Day Care to get those children to another day care centre. That is still in progress.

Yes, there is a time coming up. I am not aware of that date, but the long day care centre will finish up. It is a preschool centre—all preschools get a teacher in them. Those children, whether they are in long day care or at preschool, are getting the same care. Those families will be offered another care centre; I think they are working with the Kentish childcare centre in Katherine, which will be an option for the school.

It was the case that it did not work out for the school to carry on with the long day care centre. As a funding model for the school, we tried to work with them to keep that there, but it could not carry on.

Cost of Living

Mr MACKAY to TREASURER

Territorians are struggling with the cost of living, particularly for things like fuel. Of course, not everyone has access to a taxpayer-funded fuel card.

Can you please update the Assembly on how the CLP government is in touch with Territorians regarding the cost of living?

ANSWER

Madam Speaker, I recently saw the Leader of the Opposition on *Stateline*; she was right to say that the previous Labor government had lost touch. She was right and still is. The four remaining members of the Labor opposition are from the very government the Leader of the Opposition claims lost touch with Territorians.

There is no new talent in the Labor Party parliamentary wing; there are no new members in parliament who were not part of that trainwreck of a government. We constantly get lectured by those opposite about integrity and how they are the 'new' Labor Party that rose from the ashes, if you like. It sounds like the phoenix rising from the ashes, but I think it is more like the smouldering of that trainwreck.

When half of the Labor opposition uses taxpayer-funded fuel cards like Bunnings gift cards on Boxing Day, I just laugh. We can never forget when in 2022 the Member for Daly charged taxpayers more than $2,600 on his fuel card for a scenic road trip from the Northern Territory to Noosa in Queensland along the New South Wales northern coast. We also cannot forget when the Member for Gwoja charged taxpayers $800 for interstate travel to visit South Australia's wine country in December 2022 while Alice Springs was seeing a significant increase in crime.

It also appears the Member for Daly charged taxpayers for a healthy amount of beef jerky and iced coffee, with the numbers not adding up on his fuel purchases. Maybe he can ask the Member for Gwoja to help him with the numbers and work on his accounting. We constantly sit in this Chamber listening to the Member for Gwoja's 40-minute yap sessions while he tries to lecture us on the integrity of politics, but he is the biggest hypocrite of them all.

We heard to Leader of the Opposition on *Stateline* talk about internal politics; we all know the Member for Gwoja wants the Leader of the Opposition's job. The Member for Gwoja fancies himself; he loves the limelight, but I can tell you now that the people of the Territory do not love him very much.

Unlike those opposite, the CLP government got straight to work to deliver cost-of-living relief and put money back in the pockets of families in the Northern Territory. Thousands of people have already taken up the free one-year licences, and our first home and FreshStart New Home Grants are seeing over 400 Territorians into their dream home. The CLP government is listening to Territorians—something those opposite do not have much practice in.

Gas and Mining Industries in the NT

K McNAMARA to MINISTER for MINING and ENERGY

Yesterday in Question Time you told activists, who are Territorians who care about the climate, that they are not welcome here and should go back to where they came from. Firstly, I want to assure all Territorians that despite this government's rhetoric, you are welcome here no matter where you come from.

Secondly, I want to assure you, minister, that despite your thinly veiled threats, I am not going anywhere. I have been inundated with messages on this. There are too many to name, but the following hardworking Territorians who want climate action and do not want gas expansion would like to know if you want them to leave: Emma, GP, mother of three who has been here 11 years; Cam, electrician, father of four who has been here one year; Greg, interpreter who has been here 23 years; Megan, pharmacist who has been here two years; Beryl who has been here for 30 years; Jess, primary school administrator, mother of two who has been here 14 years; and Sam, scientist, father of three. What about the people born and bred here, like Imogen, a social worker; Sam and Jo, veterinarians; and Miliwanga, a cultural leader? What about every traditional owner fighting fracking on their country? Go and tell them. Where do you want them to go?

ANSWER

Madam Speaker, the gas industry pays for the health, education and police systems. Most of the people you just mentioned work in the public service or in a health system. Their jobs are because of the gas and mining industries. They are the industries that prop up and pay the wages. They pay for these microphones. They are the industries that keep the Territory afloat.

The previous Labor government failed the gas and mining industries. It seemed to think that the money to pay for the health, education and police systems magically appears out of thin air. I will give the Member for Nightcliff an education lesson: it does not appear on trees; it comes from the ground, gets sold and is used to pay for …

K McNAMARA: A point of order, Madam Speaker! Standing Order 110; relevance. I specifically asked if you are telling the people I named to leave the Territory?

Madam SPEAKER: Member for Nightcliff, you have allowed him one minute. There is plenty of time for the minister to answer the question.

Mr MALEY: I appreciate how much the mining industry brings to the Northern Territory. It brings action, certainty and jobs. Your own partner made money out of the gas industry. It paid your mortgage and for you to be here. You should thank them as well. That is what the gas industry does. It provides jobs in the Northern Territory and for the people you just called out.

K McNAMARA: A point of order, Madam Speaker! Standing Order 110; relevance in so many ways, mostly to the question that you seem incapable of answering. Put on your big boy pants. Answer the question from these Territorians. Are you telling them to leave?

Madam SPEAKER: Member for Nightcliff, what he is saying is relevant to the question you asked.

Mr MALEY: I support the gas industry and thank it for being here, putting money into the Treasurer's bank account to pay for the Chamber we are in today, the vehicles you drive, the fuel, the mechanics and the hairdressers. It gives them jobs.

I say to anyone out there who wants to support the gas industry, 'Welcome to the Territory. Please come here and stay. Bring your families. Why not take advantage of our nation-leading first homebuyer's scheme? Come and buy or build a house in the Territory.'

K McNamara: They did, and you are telling them to go.

Mr MALEY: That would give more jobs to contractors. More jobs …

K McNAMARA: A point of order, Madam Speaker!

Madam SPEAKER: Member for Nightcliff, there is no point of order. The answer may not be to your liking.

K McNAMARA: There is a point of order. I asked him if he is telling those people to go.

Madam SPEAKER: Sit down, Member for Nightcliff.

K McNamara: He cannot back up his own words. He is a coward.

Mr MALEY: I say again that I support the gas industry.

Mr MACKAY: A point of order, Madam Speaker! Standing Order 31; disorderly language. I ask the Member for Nightcliff to withdraw her comment.

Madam SPEAKER: I did not hear it. Let the minister finish his answer, and let us move on.

Mr MALEY: I have my big boy pants on. I am ready to go. I support the gas industry.

K McNamara: Tell those Territorians that you want them to leave.

Madam SPEAKER: Silence, please.

Mr MALEY: This government supports the gas, mining, agriculture, Defence and tourism industries. Those industries will make the Territory a better place. The Territory is worth fighting for. That is probably the reason I am here. The previous Labor government destroyed what I appreciate, the Territory lifestyle. We are here to fix it. We support the gas industry. Drill, baby, drill.

Government Integrity

Mr O'GALLAGHER to ATTORNEY-GENERAL

This week there has been significant media and political commentary about conflicts of interest, integrity in government and decision-making processes. Labor tried to paint our government as lacking transparency; however, its record on integrity tells a different story. Another example is that Natasha Fyles had to step down as Chief Minister for owning shares in South32, the company that runs the GEMCO mine on Groote Eylandt, and in the major gas company Woodside Energy group. As the Chief Minister, she was making decisions about a company in which she owned shares. Is it a bit rich that Labor questioned our integrity, knowing they do not practise what they preach?

ANSWER

Madam Speaker, this is a great question and an example of the ultimate hypocrisy. There are four Labor members sitting over there on their high horses, questioning the CLP over integrity, yet they sat on their hands supporting their Chief Minister, who had shares in companies she was making decisions on. That is a disgrace.

The Labor government's legacy is a government of chaos, corruption and cover-ups. That is exactly what they did for the last four years, and Natasha Fyles was the queen of cover-ups. The four of you are saying that we have no integrity, whereas your government covered up every step of the way. Why did you not come clean on the ICAC report I tabled today, and why did Natasha Fyles not say anything? You wanted to cover up everything, and it is a disgrace.

Madam SPEAKER: Minister, talk through me.

Ms BOOTHBY: It is a disgrace that the four Labor members sit there as if they are squeaky clean, but they are not. They knew what was going on but did not do anything about it; they are a bunch of hypocrites and have no credibility. They ask questions about integrity, and Territorians know they have no credibility. They just have to read the room, watch the commentary on the news and read the newspaper. Unbelievable! Labor only acted and came forward when found out by the media.

I ask the Leader of the Opposition why she said nothing when her constituents on Groote Eylandt complained about their health concerns with the mine. She backed her Chief Minister and said nothing because she knew that Natasha Fyles owned shares in the mine. That is disgraceful.

Natasha Fyles dug herself into a hole, and the four of them sat there listening to her trying to unwind everything that happened. On their watch everything was unravelling because they were busy focusing on

themselves and trying to cover up everything. They let the Territory go to rack and ruin. It was a disgrace. Territorians knew about it, and they had enough. That is why those opposite are now the opposition and why Territorians voted emphatically for change; they were sick of the cover-ups and would not put up with it.

Holtze Youth Detention Centre

Mr GUYULA to MINISTER for CORRECTIONS

At the Holtze Youth Detention Centre are there intentions to raise more than one child in a cell? I am very concerned that it could be dangerous for children who share a cell with another person, especially if they are not from the same community, clan or family. Is there any intention for young people to share cells?

ANSWER

Madam Speaker, this gives me an opportunity to talk about the chaos and debacle of the youth justice facility under the Labor government's watch. Youths in the Northern Territory need wraparound support and special treatment to make sure they have the best start in life to become people who can add value to our community.

The former Labor government attempted to deliver that project, and it was two years delayed and $70m over budget. What does that mean? For two years people in the youth justice system were not getting state-of-the-art services. They were in a facility that the Labor government said was not fit for purpose. They put them in a former jail at Berrimah. For two years those youths were not getting the wraparound services they expected.

They need that. Some of these children come from communities which are terrible—some, not all. Those communities are terrible because Labor failed to look after them and spend money where it was needed. It failed to protect vulnerable people, and the children fell into the justice system and put in a place that was not fit for purpose.

As of the 12th—just a few days ago—there were 32 youths in that facility. It can fit up to 80, so there is a lot of room. That means these young offenders have the wraparound services and go to school. I have been there and seen the facilities in Alice Springs and Darwin. As part of our master plan we are moving these young offenders to Darwin to give them better support and services to allow them to have better opportunities and be better citizens as they grow older.

This side of the Chamber, unlike that side, does not want to see them in the adult prison. We want to give them an opportunity to have an education and make better decisions. We want them to come back to the community and be good people with opportunities for work, to have a family, get a job and pay taxes so we can spend their money. It is important that we look after these young offenders. The Labor government was two years late and $70m over budget.

Fiscal Management

Mr KERLE to TREASURER

Over the past six months in government you have been open and honest with Territorians about the tough decisions we have had to make due to Labor's financial mismanagement. You have a huge role to play in bringing the budget into line. Can you provide to the Assembly some examples of failures of fiscal management and integrity issues from the previous government?

ANSWER

Madam Speaker, the Member for Blain is a committed local member, and I know how much he values the importance of fiscal management in government. He is right; Territorians deserve honesty, integrity and transparency when it comes to decisions about their hard-earned tax dollars.

Day-in and day-out, this government is uncovering more and more of what those opposite were hiding from Territorians, from cost blowouts to hiding funding and avoiding their own debt cap. I have spent six months wading through it all.

As the member knows, we are committed to being transparent with Territorians. We are continuing to be open and honest as we make tough decisions regarding all Territorians. When it comes to the budget, sometimes it is not clear if Labor was being underhanded or egocentric or if it was just pure incompetence.

When it comes to the Amphibian Aerospace Industries, Labor members treated Territorians to an unholy mix of both. Those opposite should be well aware of the failure of honesty and integrity that was bound into this deal. I am sure they thoroughly enjoyed batting away media inquiry after media inquiry, and I am confident they will enjoy this walk down memory lane; we know they love talking about integrity.

Let us start from the top. This one starts across the country in New South Wales. Labor took one look at how poorly this project played out in other jurisdictions and said, 'Perfect! We love to lose money. Here's $10m; let's go!'

It is like watching your neighbour put a fork in the microwave and thinking, 'Mine is probably built a bit differently'. In this case it was not built at all. You have to wonder if Labor asked if they had ever built a plane.

That covers the financial idiocy. Let us go to the opposition's favourite topic, integrity. The *NT Independent* reported that former Member for Fannie Bay, Brent Potter—who at the time of the deal was a senior ministerial adviser—was crucial to securing this deal. Why is this relevant? I would love to have the opposition members answer that for me, but we all know they get stage fright when it comes to talking about responsibility.

Amphibious Aerospace Industries is headed by Brent Potter's former boss at another business. While mums and dads were battling the cost-of-living crisis back home in Darwin, Brent Potter was galivanting across Asia for a private company on their hard-earned money when he became a minister and when he was an adviser.

In case those in opposition did not understand the first time, the former Labor government handed $10m over to a company that had not got off the ground—no pun intended—in other jurisdictions as it was headed up by a former colleague of a senior ministerial adviser turned minister. Then that minister was jetsetting around Asia on taxpayers' dollars.

Those opposite would not know integrity from a bar of soap.

Mining – Economic Management

J DAVIS to MINISTER for MINING and ENERGY

I have heard you say several times in the Chamber this week, 'Drill, baby, drill'. I understand this is a quote from Trump. You said it in relation to the Territory Coordinator. Is this the leadership and economic model that you want for the Northern Territory?

ANSWER

Madam Speaker, I thank the member for the opportunity to speak about the mining and gas industries. I am proud to be the minister in charge of this industry because it will bring the Territory out of the chaos, despair and debt that the previous Labor government put us in.

I will go back in history. The Labor government has been in power for 19 out of the last 20-odd years. I go back to the last eight years. When it came into office, we had a $1.8bn debt. In eight years, can you imagine what it would be? Would you have a rough guess? I will tell you—$11bn. That is over $1bn a year overspent. You might get $6 and spend $7; that is basic. Imagine overspending $1bn each year.

If a private business—whether it was a small business, a partnership or a company—overspent $1bn in a year, do you know where you would be? You would be unemployed and out the door. In fact, you would probably be in jail. You could not afford that.

On a serious note, that is what the previous Labor government did to the Territory economy. They overspent taxpayers' money by about $1bn a year for eight years in a row.

The mining and gas industries will help us get back on our feet to be able to—get this—pay for the health system, the education system and our police to keep us safe. That is another story. Unfortunately, I do not have an hour to talk about community safety and how it went to the dogs under the previous Labor government. People were being robbed, there were assaults, the crime rates were going though the roof …

J DAVIS: A point of order, Madam Speaker! Standing Order 110; relevance. Is Trump the model that you want to follow for the Northern Territory?

Mr MALEY: I want to follow sound management of money for the Northern Territory. We have to manage our resources and our money so we can afford to buy healthcare, police cars and swimming pools. Making sure our community is safe, rebuilding our economy and restoring our lifestyle is important.

That is what the mining industry will do …

J DAVIS: A point of order, Mr Speaker!

Madam SPEAKER: I think the minister has answered your question in a roundabout way.

J Davis: That Trump is the model you want to follow in the Northern Territory. Thank you, minister.

Mr MALEY: I have 27 seconds to talk about how well the Lia Finocchiaro government will look after Territorians. We will keep Territorians safe and fix the housing issue. The minister for Housing will talk about the Red Card policy and how living in a public house is a privilege.

We need to protect all Territorians. The gas and mining industries and the health system all need that.

Workplace Safety

Mr MACKAY to MINISTER for CORPORATE and DIGITAL DEVELOPMENT

All Territorians deserve to feel safe in their workplace, free from threats, intimidation and standover tactics. As Members of the Legislative Assembly we are expected to uphold the highest standards of workplace behaviour and respect for the parliament and its leadership role in the Northern Territory. How has your experience in the Northern Territory parliament and the experience of your colleagues aligned with these expectations? Can you highlight any failures to meet these standards of which you are aware?

ANSWER

Madam Speaker, feeling safe in the workplace is a fundamental right of every working man and woman, regardless of their role.

I remember a distinct failure to uphold these standards, and it is one that I was a victim of. Upon exiting Parliament House following parliamentary sittings on an evening in 2020 I came across an individual who verbally abused and sought to intimidate me regarding comments I had made in this parliament. They were vicious and threatening comments. I was a new member of this parliament at the time, and the experience shook me. It was confronting. I am sure many people in this Chamber would agree that they would feel the same way in those situations.

It should come as no surprise to anyone that the verbal abuser was a Labor adviser to the then Attorney-General, Selena Uibo, who is now the Opposition Leader. He is now also the Member for Daly and Deputy Opposition Leader. I wish I could agree with the Leader of the Opposition, who in 2020 said that it was out of character for the now Member for Daly, but I would not be speaking honestly.

Ms UIBO: A point of order, Madam Speaker! Standing Order 109(5); the question is critical of character or conduct. Madam Speaker, I ask you to rule on that, as a question critical of the character or conduct of persons must be asked in writing.

Madam SPEAKER: As you were speaking, minister, I was conscious that this was treading on a sensitive area. The standing order that the Leader of the Opposition referred to states:

> *(5) Questions may not be asked which reflect on or are critical of the character or conduct of those persons whose conduct may be challenged only on a substantive motion and questions critical of the character or conduct of other persons must be asked in writing.*

I ask you not to proceed any further with your discussion on this point regarding the conduct of the Member for Daly. It allegedly happened before he became a member. We need to be a little careful of how we proceed in this phase.

Mr BURGOYNE: I respect your ruling, Madam Speaker. It is interesting that the Opposition Leader does not want to speak about integrity.

Let me refer to the Leader of the Opposition's adjournment speech from 13 February in which she highlighted the 'disgusting arrogance, lack of honesty and poor behaviour on display by CLP members'. Those are words that the Opposition Leader spoke in this Chamber, along with accusations of pure nastiness. Then the Leader of the Opposition's referenced during the same speech that the standard you walk by is the standard you accept. Where along the way, Opposition Leader, would you say your standards have changed? I would say that they are the same as they were in 2020.

Ms UIBO: A point of order, Madam Speaker! I remind the Member for Braitling to direct his comments through the Chair. He is reflecting on the Chair in his commentary as he fires up on his answer.

Madam SPEAKER: I do not think that is a point of order.

Mr BURGOYNE: I would say they are much the same as they were in 2020 when the now Opposition Leader accepted and then rewarded poor behaviour and pure nastiness. The Opposition Leader also said that she felt unsafe in this workplace.

Ms UIBO: A point of order, Madam Speaker! Standing Order 109(2)(d); there are imputations by the Member for Braitling in his manner of answer.

Madam SPEAKER: There is no point of order. There is no imputation.

Mr BURGOYNE: The Opposition Leader said she felt unsafe in her workplace; just imagine having to come to work after being verbally abused and intimidated after dark as a new member of parliament and not knowing if it will happen again. How is that for feeling unsafe in your own workplace?

The opposition has been slamming us about integrity. I have not experienced integrity from the opposition since I first entered this parliament in 2020. Accusing us of being nasty and making us feel unsafe, there is more integrity in the Chief Minister's pinky finger than in the Opposition Leader and her deputy.

Yipirinya School Review

Mr PAECH to MINISTER for EDUCATION and TRAINING

Yipirinya School is an important educational facility in Alice Springs, particularly for children from town camps. Can you confirm that the Department of Education and Training recently reviewed Yipirinya School, including its use of government funding and finances? If so, what were the parameters of the review, and will you table a copy of the report findings?

ANSWER

Madam Speaker, I am not sure how much I can say about that because it is under review. I have not received the report from the department, but they are looking into it and doing that. I can potentially give the Member for Gwoja an update on that at another time if he likes, but I do not have that information in front of me.

Mr PAECH: A point of order, Madam Speaker! Relevance; I appreciate the member's response in highlighting there is a review. Can you advise the Assembly what the parameters of that review are?

Mrs HERSEY: That is an operational issue for the department, and I do not have that in front of me. I am happy to give you that information when I get it.

Mr PAECH: A point of order, Madam Speaker!

Madam SPEAKER: I do not think the minister has any more to say. Have you finished your answer, minister?

Mr PAECH: I am simply confirming, is it in relation to school attendance or financial and administrative arrangements?

Mrs HERSEY: There is a lot of delving into the school as a whole, and I remind the Member for Gwoja that was under the previous government. It is on my watch that I have asked for this report, and we are trying to work with the school to fix this issue. It is ongoing. I do not have any further information.

Mr PAECH: A point of order, Madam Speaker!

Madam SPEAKER: Any more than three points of order is usually a distraction, so this better be good, Member for Gwoja.

Mr PAECH: Standing Order 110; Yipirinya School is an independent school. Will you table all the report findings when they are completed?

Madam SPEAKER: That is the same question you have asked pretty much three times. There will be no more points of order.

Mrs HERSEY: I do not have the information in front of me. It is an operational issue, and when I get the information I will share it with the Member for Gwoja.

Auditor-General's Report

Mr HOWE to MINISTER for HEALTH

The Auditor-General released a report earlier this week that looked into, amongst other things, the inappropriate use of public resources by the Leader of the Opposition. This is the same Leader of the Opposition who, as we have heard today, did not table ICAC reports, supported bullyboy tactics and then tried to silence them today when we discussed them. It is the same Leader of the Opposition whose staff seem more focused on pinning up rainbow flags in the bathrooms than delivering for Territorians.

Can the minister please provide an update to the Assembly on this important matter?

ANSWER

Madam Speaker, the Member for Drysdale is interested in focusing on the integrity issues of the opposition. This incident is another example of Labor members' moral and professional failings. Sadly, it appears to be in their DNA. Labor's pattern of dysfunctional reign over eight years has continued under the Leader of the Opposition. We continue to see the same failure to lead, lack of ethics, lack of decision-making, moral ambiguity, hypocrisy and a complete lack of self-reflection.

On Thursday 30 January this year a staffer from the Opposition Leader's office was captured on CCTV entering a lift near the fourth-floor offices of the Opposition Leader and then exiting on the fifth floor. Once on the fifth floor, this staffer skulked his way to the toilet to put up a poster of my image. It was superimposed over a rainbow flag in the men's toilet. The issue happened nearly two months ago, and to date the Leader of the Opposition has continued to run a protection racket for bad male behaviour in Labor's ranks.

Sadly, this continues the Labor tradition of acceptance, condoning and sweeping poor behaviour under the carpet. Was this staffer instructed to make the poster and take it to the men's toilets? If so, by whom? We still do not know other than the wet-lettuce brief response of the Opposition Leader at the time, what action was taken?

Over the past hour, we have heard a long list of documented poor behaviour, rorts and absence of moral integrity:

- Operation Apollo revelations
- the Member for Gwoja's share scandal
- Labor's 2020 election campaign rort of taxpayers' dollars
- the Chief Minister, at the time of the election, flying to the Barkly electorate on taxpayers' dollars
- the former leader Natasha Fyles' share scandal
- the amphibious aeroplane scandal
- failure to address the Deputy Opposition Leader's behaviour
- a federal Labor staffer's threatening behaviour towards one of the MLAs in this House at the last sittings.

This is not the standard that Territorians should accept, and the CLP will continue to call it out.

Madam Speaker, I ask that further questions be placed on the Written Question Paper.

EDUCATION LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL
Serial 14

Continued from 13 February 2025.

Ms CAHILL (Trade, Business and Asian Relations): Madam Speaker, I support the amendments to the *Education Act 2015.* Attending school and actively participating in the school community is crucial for our children. The consequences of non-attendance are poor literacy, numeracy and outcomes, setting those children on a path that, if not interrupted, will likely see them, in a best-case scenario, doomed to a future dependent on welfare. In a worst-case scenario, it would be a future of less than positive interactions with our justice system.

There is a reason school attendance for all our children is compulsory. It ensures they have the opportunity to develop life skills, setting a framework that will hold them in good stead for their adult life. It helps them understand the values of routines and provides a nurturing environment in which they can forge lifelong relationships with peers, be mentored by educators and learn vital communication skills. It prepares them for a future in our workforce, teaches them the importance of punctuality and understanding their actions have consequences and sets a foundation for a successful transition from child to adolescent to adult.

It immerses them in a community that nurtures them academically and socially, equipping them with skills to navigate their life journey, develop resilience and social skills. It fosters a sense of belonging, which is important for children's emotional welfare. However, all too often in the Territory children are not attending school, with parents failing to take responsibility for their children attending.

Children not at school are children at risk. They are at risk of reaching adulthood unable to read and write, communicate effectively and secure employment. They are at risk of falling into patterns of bad behaviour and not having the resilience needed to navigate life challenges.

The data on school attendance in the Northern Territory is abysmal, especially in remote areas, and most especially for Indigenous children. In Term 4 of 2024, attendance in the Barkly region for Indigenous children was 43.8%; in Big Rivers, 48.8%; in Central Australia, 51.5%; and in East Arnhem, a disappointing 38.9%. It was little better for the Top End region, at 60.8%, with attendance in Darwin topping the list at 71%. Averaged across the Territory, however, it was 55.2% compared with non-Indigenous children's attendance at 84.2%. Most disturbing in the statistics was that school attendance dropped off in the most critical periods for children in the middle to late high school years when they should be progressing a pathway to their future, into a job and a healthy and fulfilling life for themselves and the families we hope they plan on building.

This situation cannot continue. For this reason, the amendments to the legislation are critical. Enshrining the role of school attendance officers in legislation ensures there is no doubt as to the importance of this role and that the role is clearly established, delivering our election commitment to ensure children attend school. When parents fail to make that happen, they will be held to account.

As the Minister for Children and Families I commend my colleague the Minister for Education and Training for her efforts in this space. The role of school attendance officers will play a pivotal role in the work our Circuit Breaker team is doing as they work to ensure that children are safe, happy, well cared for, healthy and attending school.

When a child is found on the streets when they should be at home safe in bed—getting a good night's sleep so that they are rested and can attend school—they are returned to a safe place for the evening, and the next day the team follows up with the family and investigates what the child's family situation is, including whether the child is attending school. This is where school attendance officers play their part, working with the team to work out what is happening with that child.

School attendance officers identify whether the child is attending school. If not, in conjunction with the Circuit Breaker team, they work with the child's family to reach an agreement about what is required to ensure that child attends school. Keeping in touch with the team, they help to ensure the child remains supported and attending school, giving that child a fighting chance.

As the Minister for Children and Families, I all too often see the consequences for children who are not actively attending school. Too often I am advised of situations where children are finding themselves before the justice system. When looking into those situations, more often than not I find they are children who have

not had the benefit of an education or experienced the opportunities being part of a school community can provide. It is for this reason that I support the amendments to this Act.

Mr PAECH (Gwoja): Madam Speaker, the Territory Labor opposition opposes this legislation. As a signatory of the Better Fairer Schools Agreement, Territory Labor supports the school identifier amendments to the *Education Act 2015* in isolation.

The main focus of this legislation shows that the CLP members are once again failing to consider the complexities surrounding the issues of school attendance in the Northern Territory, as they try to address it as a one-size-fits-all punitive approach.

Children across the Northern Territory are legally required to attend school or other approved education and training from six years old to 17 years old. If they fail to attend, the Act provides the tools and powers necessary to investigate and sanction failing attendance. But the CLP's focus on truancy officers—rebranded as school attendance officers under these amendments—with the sole overarching aim to punish parents and students with infringement notices and quarantining of welfare payments, further threatening the most disadvantaged, is not the answer.

Education is a crucial component in ensuring all Territory kids have the skills and the knowledge they need to get the best start in life. Solely focusing on school attendance is based on the flawed assumption that attendance leads to engagement in the classroom and increased academic performances.

An important aspect of education is also being engaged and motivated in your learning. Rather than presenting a credible plan to engage Territory kids with their education, the CLP is touting this fear-based mechanism which overlooks the root causes of absenteeism—strained relationships between communities and authorities—and applies overwhelmingly to Aboriginal Territorians in remote areas.

Territory Labor knows that work needs to be done when it comes to education and attendance. It must be done in genuine partnership with communities with a focus on helping to empower them. Labor believes that delivering quality education for every child and young Territorian requires a system that is relevant, engaging, culturally responsive, flexible and appropriately funded, particularly those in remote areas where attendance has long been a challenge.

There are 153 amazing schools across the Northern Territory. Forty of those schools are in remote areas, and another 91 are in very remote areas. That is around 71% of government schools in geographically remote areas and which experience the greatest challenge with school attendance throughout the year for a host of complex reasons.

Punitive approaches are not the answer to increasing school engagement and attendance in these remote areas and in long-term solutions because they fail to support, motivate or inspire students to engage in their learning.

Sanctions may be a legit last-resort mechanism to encourage families to assist their children to attend school, which is why powers already exist under the Act, as in every jurisdiction across Australia. But we must also differentiate between voluntary disengagement and non-attendance, resulting from cases or factors outside the child or the family's control—something the CLP continually fails to understand.

The Policy Insights paper on Indigenous school attendance from the Australian Council for Educational Research summarised barriers to school attendance and completion amongst Indigenous students, including physical barriers of geographical isolation; cultural barriers—for example, discrimination; economic barriers; information barriers; and out-of-school factors, including funerals, health and ceremonial obligations.

National data also shows that Aboriginal children and young people are more likely to experience family violence, mental health issues, overcrowded housing, contact with the juvenile justice system and disability.

Considering all these factors together, it is clear that solving the issue of non-attendance in Territory schools is a broader social policy and challenge that cannot be solved by the education or truancy officers on their own. That is why we must invest in remote housing, health, infrastructure and other elements which will have a positive and tangible impact in our remote communities, including better supported school attendance and engagement.

I point out again the disgraceful rhetoric coming from the Education minister. She has consistently inferred that every Territory Labor member wants to deprive Territory children of their education. What I have found

more disgraceful is the simplistic and derogatory narrative surrounding parents and their parental responsibilities, touting that you will somehow improve school attendance by punishing already disadvantaged families, particularly Aboriginal women and women who are victims of domestic and family violence. The CLP is willingly ignoring the broader system and structural challenges faced by families in remote communities.

In her recent op-ed in the *NT News* from 23 February 2025, the minister for Education said:

> *The major factor restricting Indigenous children from attending school is the level of responsibility of some parents ...*
>
> *… no apologies for having a strong emphasis on parental responsibility, enforcing the fact that it is the law for parent to send their children to school ...*
>
> *… we believe unpaid fines should come out of parents Centrelink payments.*

With these amendments, it is clear that the Education minister has little vision when it comes to improving education outcomes for Territory children. So far, all we have is fines for vulnerable families and swimming lessons that schools need to pay for themselves.

The CLP is reverting back to the good old strong-arm days, straight out of their playbook, taking points from years gone by.

Research and failed policy has shown that withholding welfare payments from socioeconomically vulnerable families if their children fail to attend school has little to no impact in that area but further sends families into disadvantage and abject poverty.

This CLP government has learned nothing from the failed Commonwealth school enrolment and attendance measure (SEAM), which operated between 2013 and 2017. The SEAM program initiative reduced welfare payments to parents whose children did not attend school. SEAM was evaluated by the Commonwealth Government, with a study by Harvard University and a randomised control trial. It showed statistically that there was significant difference in attendance before and after the interventions in the schools taking part in the study. SEAM integrated truancy officers and welfare suspension, but there was no consensus or evidence about these sanctions working as a mechanism to increase school attendance over the long term.

Then CLP senator and Indigenous Affairs minister, Nigel Scullion, said in an *NT News* article in 2017:

> *… all of the evidence continued to show that the measure was ineffective in getting kids to school.*

The Education minister wants to trick Territorians into believing that this policy mechanism and rhetoric works, but linking school attendance with welfare payments does not work; it can only cause further disadvantage and harm. The Education minister does not even have the jurisdiction to remove Centrelink benefits she has touted on multiple occasions and has failed to get the Commonwealth to go along with her scheme.

There are serious questions surrounding this legislation and policy. What will change surrounding the enforcement and recovery of penalties? How will some of the Northern Territory's most economically disadvantaged people, who rely primarily on their welfare payments to live, be expected to pay a fine plus buy food, look after their house and pay their rent, as we heard earlier?

We have already seen the policy cause distress in remote communities, such as Maningrida, because the government did not work with the community to communicate the new policy. We have heard about mothers fleeing violent homes with their families ending up with a fine. We have heard about mothers whose family members are on renal dialysis, with the child attending with them for that important appointment, receiving fines for not sending their child to school.

How will the 24 school attendance officers work across 153 government schools? Whose responsibility will it be to cover the remote schools? How will parents be informed of an infringement notice coming via the post? Let us be clear: not every remote community house has a letterbox. The mail is centralised. Sometimes people will not even know that they have been given a fine. What are the plans to engage kids proactively in schooling in remote areas? What is the CLP government's plan for school engagement? What is the student attendance officer's role in providing wraparound support for vulnerable families?

Following the failure of the SEAM program, the former Territory Labor government collaborated with the Commonwealth Government to address attendance through a stronger focus on engagement in remote communities. The former Territory Labor government worked with the Commonwealth Government to fund and deliver programs such as the Remote School Attendance Strategy, which employed local community members to support students and family engagement in education in more than 30 communities. The Children and Schooling Programme commenced in 2024 and has delivered support for student and family engagement in schools in more than 30 communities.

The former government also shifted its focus to staff working with families to identify and overcome the barriers to attendance rather than issuing punitive infringement notices, recognising that there would be some circumstances where sanctions were considered appropriate and applied, which is why the power still exists under the Act.

When families and communities are engaged, student learning outcomes are better. Collaboration and engagement with families help build patterns of attendance. Investing in the earliest years of child's life with programs like Families as First Teachers promotes positive education experiences and establishes good habits and patterns of attendance. Providing more support for students with additional needs such as flexible schooling options re-engages students in learning. Resourcing schools appropriately so that they can offer engaging programs and initiatives helps to keep kids in school. It is important to put communities at the forefront of decision-making for their children through local decision-making agreements, such as the Groote Archipelago Local Decision Making Agreement.

We launched the Northern Territory Education Engagement Strategy, which was informed by 72 consultations across the Northern Territory, including in remote communities, and 52 online submissions. Ten million dollars was allocated to phase 1 of the strategy, delivering the expansion of the successful Remote Aboriginal Teacher Education (RATE) program to ensure its ongoing sustainability and increase Aboriginal educator numbers.

Through the strategy we also improved cultural responsiveness training for education staff and improved school counselling services through a partnership-centred approach to improving cultural responsiveness. A partnership with Miwatj and Yirrkala School delivered culturally appropriate wellbeing and mental health services.

We strengthened the inclusion of First Nations languages through the Indigenous Languages and Cultures curriculum. We delivered the Youth Voice Peak Group and the regional Aboriginal education advisory group. An agreement between APO NT and the Department of Education supported the establishment of a peak Aboriginal education advisory group.

All six regions developed engagement goals in their regional strategic improvement plans, demonstrating the value of place-based approaches and regional responses to supporting student engagement.

We have not heard a peep out of the Education minister regarding the continuation of this strategy. The former government focused on improving patterns of attendance through youth engagement programs, place-based initiatives and school infrastructure projects, which were all designed to meet the needs of each student. We focused on improving patterns of attendance through programs, including the Top End School of Flexible Learning campuses in Malak, Palmerston and Don Dale Youth Detention Centre; the Katherine Flexible Learning Education Centre; St Joseph's Catholic Flexible Learning Centre; Centralian Flexi; Learning on Country programs; Alice Springs Follow the Dream; Palmerston Youth Skills Centre; Healthy Life Creative Life; Back on Track, which was cut by the CLP; the Yipirinya and Shepherdson College Sunset Schools; the NT Youth Voice Peak Group; Leaders of Tomorrow Aboriginal Students Aspiration Program; Clontarf Academy; Stars Foundation; and On the Right Track.

Every government school has a target relating to increasing student engagement in their annual strategic improvement plans. Twenty-nine service-based student engagement advisors work directly with students and families across the Northern Territory to remove barriers to engagement in education by coordinating access to services. In addition to student engagement advisors, there are 10 school-based enrolment officers working across 12 schools. These officers work with students who have low levels of attendance and students who are chronically disengaged.

Other notable achievements include:

- securing the $1bn Better and Fairer Schools Agreement in partnership with the federal Australian Government to fully and fairly fund all 153 public schools across the Territory

- announcing a new enterprise bargaining agreement to deal with public school teachers and support them in mid 2024, delivering a salary increase of about 13% over the next three years

- establishing the Families as First Teachers (FaFT) program across 55 sites and providing $12.28m for continued delivery of the program to ensure children and families are engaged in in early childhood learning

- implementing community-led schools and local engagement and decision-making (LEaD) committees—50 LEaD committees have been established

- providing $40m towards on-country learning initiatives to boost attendance and engagement in all 46 Central Australia schools

- reinstating and supporting school-based police programs across 13 NT Government schools, which was cut by the then CLP Giles government.

- providing $300,000 to every school for upgrades under the Building Better Schools program

- the 'No School, No Service' campaign with Territory businesses

- increasing the Back to School vouchers for Territory families from $50 to $200.

The CLP will deliver its first budget in May. When the CLP was last in government, it cut $52m from education in its first mini-budget. We cannot trust the CLP minister to do that important work when she has the Treasurer on her back chopping away. The previous CLP ripped $135m out of Territory schools, and 500 teachers were sacked.

Investing in schools is critical, and we acknowledge that investment needs to continue. Investing in government educational infrastructure should always be a priority. We know that the CLP's failed strategies, such as truancy officers who punish parents and students with infringement notices and prosecutions of parents, will not work. Instead of crafting an educational plan, the minister for Education is crafting photo opportunities.

It is blatantly clear that the minister for Education has never worked in the education sector before and should not be making critical decisions on our children's future. It would also be fair to point out that from 2012 to 2016 the CLP had six Education ministers.

I have spoken at length about the importance of this; I reiterate that the government has now been in for a significant time, but when it comes to education investment, initiatives and policy development opportunities, we have heard little about what they will do to engage and improve educational outcomes rather than dragging children to school with a punitive approach and fining families.

We heard in the briefing that a number of people have already experienced the fine. A number of parents, predominantly Aboriginal women, are the people who have been issued with fines—not the fathers, even though they are equal caregivers. This policy is directed at targeting vulnerable Aboriginal people.

We have heard time and again in this Chamber that a punitive approach is needed, but it is not needed when it comes to education. Empowering and supporting families and providing them the necessary steps to get their children to school so that their children thrive and survive is incredibly important.

A number of schools in Gwoja are fantastic. The amazing school at Yuendumu runs programs in the morning so they can ensure that our young kids have access to food for breakfast. Kids coming to school to fill their tummies with food helps them last the day at school. Good schools with good engagement support and wrap around families. We often know that when you can get the parents, guardians, nannas, grandfathers, uncles, aunties, cousins, big brothers and sisters coming to the school to help support the classroom they are also learning. That is the environment we should be seeing—one that is fostering belief of getting children to come to school to engage, learn and take on the goals and aspirations they have for their future.

We will see a process of fining parents or caregivers for children not going to school rather than addressing the root causes. Members talked earlier today about the ministerial report on housing and the need and mandate to kick families out of houses for problems. We do not need to do that; we need to invest in supporting them to flourish. We should not be kicking families that have children out, because that will impact

their educational outcomes and ability to learn, to grow and to become a model citizen in the Northern Territory.

We should be investing in housing because every new house we build in the Northern Territory is a safe place for a Territory child. There can be a bedroom for a young student to sleep in every night, to call their own and to get a good night's sleep so they can learn the next day in school.

The additional money that has been provided to Territory schools through the Better and Fairer Schools Agreement that the Territory Labor government secured with the federal Labor government to fund Territory schools had, and will have, a huge impact into the future.

I have seen programs on country for learning and ranger groups working with young people to look at how they can interpret the national curriculum through a cultural lens to get young children engaged in the curriculum requirements in a learning environment that is conducive to the children's cultural and community aspirations and goals. It is incredibly successful.

One of the biggest answers in the education system is to support the most amazing people in the Northern Territory, teachers, who are the heroes in the education system. They are teaching the next generation of leaders, politicians, scientists, doctors, business owners and, need I say, the next generation of environmentalists. They are all being taught in our Territory schools. We need to acknowledge the outstanding work and contribution that Territory teachers make and support them through enterprise bargaining agreements and entitlements.

One of the biggest things I did as a minister was to change the entitlement for government employee housing in remote communities so that if Aboriginal people were working for the Department of Education in a remote community, they would be entitled to government support for housing. That is a way of encouraging people into the education system, because we need more Aboriginal people to participate in it.

Yesterday I said that you cannot be what you cannot see. We need to see more Aboriginal teachers, principals and academics. The best way to do that is by providing a solid grounding in education. If a young person's first interaction with the education system outside of school is their parents being issued with a fine by a truancy officer, it will not leave them with a good impression of the system. That further disadvantages and pushes that young person away from education. It further scares young people and communities.

Like the Member for Mulka, I grew up experiencing the Northern Territory intervention in remote communities. My family in Mutitjulu, Papunya, Santa Teresa and Yuendumu were terrified when child protection, Territory Families workers and people from Education would rock up. They were frightened that they would be like the Stolen Generation and have their children removed. I acknowledge that much work by both parties has been done over many years to try to repair that stigmatisation and the impact on young kids.

The government is bringing in policies whereby young children, who are often helpless, are exposed to environments where families who are already living below the poverty line and struggling will be left to deal with another thing to worry about—another fine to find the money to pay. How do these fines work when people are probably already being penalised through Centrelink and the CDP? How do these fines work when parents are trying their hardest to get their children to school and, rather than being supported, they are being penalised?

We have heard of a number of families who were issued a fine, but there were reasons why their children were unable to attend school. We could present many better ways of doing things in education. There are existing provisions in the Act that would allow an infringement as a last resort, so the Act does not need to be changed.

We need to invest. I am interested to hear from the government about where development of the peak organisation for early childhood education is at. That is important work which must be done. We need to invest in health, education, housing, economic development opportunities, road networks and getting kids to school. There are always reasons children cannot attend school. We need to address and overcome those.

There are amazing things. I was heavily involved in one project at the time when Lauren Moss, the former Member for Casuarina, was the Minister for Education. We often spoke about what good-quality reform was needed in the education space. There were many conversations about that with families, because often you get the best ideas from the people who experience it on the ground.

A point of order, Madam Speaker! I move an extension of time to continue my remarks.

Motion agreed to.

Mr PAECH: One important initiative came from the remote communities in the Mulka and Arafura electorates regarding different school times. Not every kid can go to school between 8 am and 3 pm, and there are different seasonal requirements that prohibit kids getting to school. That was an initiative born from the communities; we value education and children, and we want to see them thrive. We may need to look at revisiting school times.

Another initiative, which I pushed for with the Minister for Education at the time, was what I referred to as sunset schools. We heard that young kids were up until all hours of the night, and the Alice Springs community suggested a school that opens after hours. When the other schools close, we could have a school after traditional school hours. We always hear there is not a safe place to take kids who are out on the street; if Territory Families workers come in contact with kids they would have a safe place for them, and we can engage them in VET courses and wraparound supports and provide food. The idea of funding for a trial was from Yipirinya School in Alice Springs; it was also tried at another Top End school. It is important to trial it. Shepherdson College led the second sunset school.

I would be interested to hear from the minister for Education if we should invest in that initiative and look at rolling out more sunset schools across the Northern Territory or work with Aboriginal leaders to revisit the hours of schools in remote communities. It is worth investigating.

The Member for Mulka and I know that for a large portion of the year, a lot of our family members are in ceremonial business—cultural or sorry business. I will not go into it because it is sacred for our culture, but I make the point that it is not just a holiday. Our kids are learning when they are away for ceremonial and cultural business. They are learning important stories and aspects of their being, identity and culture. That helps them when they are older in day-to-day life. These amazing on-country learning programs have been demonstrated and incorporated to put a cultural lens on something and turn Western theory into a practical theory on country. That is innovation and learning.

Every remote kid has aspirations to be something amazing and remarkable. When I go out bush and visit schools I ask young kids what they want to do when they grow up. They say ‘Boss, I want to be an Army man’—or a hairdresser, policeman or teacher. Thankfully, not too many want to be a politician because I tell them it sometimes is not that great a job. I think many of us probably did not think so as well. There is so much aspiration in their eyes; reinforcing to these young children why it is important to go to school so they can take the role of being the shopkeeper or doctor is important. That is what we should be doing.

Labor is supportive of the first part of the legislation about the school identifier amendment. Those changes do not need to come into effect until 2027. It is disingenuous to put the school identifier in with the Bill about truancy; they should have been two separate Bills.

Recently I went back to my community of Yuendumu, where a number of my family members are from in Gwoja. I celebrated with them 50 years of Yuendumu School delivering bilingual education. It was an amazing ceremony. All my old grandmothers and grandfathers were there celebrating and talking about its importance.

To be at that school as the Member for Gwoja—the only member of parliament who was at that school for the celebration. I acknowledge the CEO of the department of Education, who was there sharing in the celebration. The most remarkable thing about sharing that celebration was that 90% of the community were in the school that day, looking at photos of themselves from years gone by, talking about when they all studied at that school and how they go to the school every day with their kids. To get every *yapa* from that community in that school, talking about it and celebrating it, and seeing Warlpiri educators being recognised in their own right as teachers, was a wonderful achievement.

The Member for Mulka, who has been around a long time, and the Member for Johnston will probably remember—the amazing programs that were born out of Batchelor, providing and growing the Territory’s own Aboriginal teachers getting their degrees to teach our kids. It was an amazing achievement.

This government should be quarantining a portion of funds from the Treasurer and going to Territory schools where kids are about to finish Year 12 and say, ‘Hey, do you want to be a teacher? We will pay for any kid who is in Year 12 to go get your education degree, but you have to come back and give us a minimum of two years of service in a Territory school.’ We should be supporting that innovation; it will grow education.

When I look at remote schools across the Territory, I acknowledge two deadly teachers in Nitjpurru (Pigeon Hole). That is probably the only school in my electorate—actually Bulla Camp School as well—where all the

teachers are Aboriginal. That is amazing. Those kids love coming to school. Pigeon Hole (Nijtpurru) is a beautiful little community, and they love coming to school because their teachers engage with them. They understand.

I acknowledge and thank every remote Territory teacher because most teachers do not work 8 am to 3 pm; they work before and after school. Territory schools often become the lifelines of many communities—the heartbeat—where people come to get assistance with paperwork. I have been to a few schools where they sometimes help families with NetBank or Centrelink.

Territory schools do a great job. Whether it is a government, independent or a faith-based school, they all do an amazing job in the Territory providing quality education for kids. That is what we should be celebrating. We should empower people to get their children to school and to live healthy, sustainable lives, understanding the value of education.

We used to run fabulous ads of young kids talking about going to school. All my cousins used to giggle at themselves on the big screen when they were talking about going back to school. It is an effective tool. Running events in communities before school, like big community barbecues, sports days, ceremonies, concerts, talking, singing and reminding everyone, 'Hey, next week is school'—proactive engagement is far better than punitive approaches, such as fining people who are already significantly disadvantaged. That is how we do important work and grow the numbers.

The government talks about school rates, but it is the first term of the year. Let us monitor education attendance rates throughout the year and see how they are tacking.

K McNAMARA (Nightcliff): Mr Deputy Speaker, I think we can all agree that education is the key to greater outcomes in life. After looking at this Bill and getting those who work in the field to look at it, unfortunately there is nothing that provides for identifying and addressing the causes of poor school attendance. What I see here is the government caring about a top-down, do-as-I-say approach.

School attendance officers have already been shown not to work, so not only is this program a waste of taxpayer money, but we are doing the same thing over and again, expecting a different result. We have seen this exact policy come and go across the last few decades, depending on what government was in at the time. This exact policy has been coming and going since the 2000s. It is the same, rewashed, recycled policy being dredged up again. I find that pretty disappointing.

The Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet's report found that this program, which ran in 2009 and was assessed in 2012, did not work. It was found that it had no statistically significant effect on reducing the rate of unauthorised absences.

Here you are, doing the same thing again and expecting a different outcome. This is why the public is sick of the two-party system. They just flip-flop between each other, and when a new one gets in they scrap everything the other one did based purely on ideological differences, not evidence. It is performative governing. Nothing ever changes; people's lives never improve. On behalf of the general public, I can say that we are a bit sick of it.

As an aside, this government will be punished at the next election for this hopeless, unimaginative rehashed policy as more and more Independent and minor party candidates get elected, because we are sick of how the two-party system is failing Territorians.

I am curious about whether the CLP government consulted with anyone in education. Did they speak with unions or staff in the rural areas on this program? My suspicions are that they did not. Because this program has come and gone over the last 15 years, there have been many conversations about the effectiveness of school attendance officers and potential alternatives. Often what comes out in these conversations is the lack of staffing, which drives lower school attendance rates. More teachers equals smaller class sizes, which equals better teaching and more engaged students. Let's invest in schools.

I have heard from parents in Katherine who said that, whilst this program may be working to get kids to show up, it is not successful in getting kids to engage at the school. It is using the stick instead of the carrot approach, with threats of fines to force kids to turn up without anything being done to address the issues of why they are disengaged in the first place. Instead, it is making school more disruptive for everyone else, failing all the kids there.

This is an example of this government again using the stick instead of the carrot. We need to make school a place kids want to go. If there is greater support, schooling in not only English—bilingual and multilingual education is important—and engaging programs that incorporate culture, kids might be more excited to go to school.

I cannot support a Bill that is seeking to fine or disadvantage parents; I do not think anyone in the Assembly should. We all voted in favour of the motion brought by the Member for Mulka yesterday to reaffirm the principles of the Aboriginal Justice Agreement. Part of the agreement's actions is to expand non-financial options for the payment of fines. This builds on the recommendation from the 1991 Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody that the default on the payment of fines should not pose a risk of imprisonment. Defaulting on fines in the NT can end up with a term of incarceration. We should be reducing obstacles that lead to imprisonment, not increasing them. I feel that this is another example of the CLP government trying to punish a problem away rather than engaging with those on the ground who have actual solutions.

While I agree that we need to prioritise accessible education for children in the Territory—and I desperately want that—this Bill is not the solution. I will never support a Bill that seeks to financially punish people in poverty, so I cannot support this Bill.

Mrs ZIO (Fannie Bay): Mr Deputy Speaker, I am excited to talk about a topic I know a lot about and have worked in. These important amendments are designed to consolidate powers and functions associated with enrolment and attendance, providing much-needed clarity and efficiency in our education system.

I remind those opposite of a few things they may have forgotten about over the last eight years or so. The right to education is recognised in key international agreements and national laws. Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that everyone has the right to an education.

Articles 28 and 29 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child establish that all children have the right to a free primary education and that education should develop their abilities, respect for human rights and prepare them for a responsible life in society.

Article 13 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights affirms that everyone has the right to education and the progressive introduction of free secondary and higher education.

We also have our own Northern Territory laws. The *Education Act* states that it is compulsory for kids between the ages of six and 17 to attend school every day, unless they are enrolled or attending an alternative eligible option.

Section 40 of the *Education Act* is about compulsory attendance. It details information about what kids and parents need to be doing. Parents who have daily care and control of a child need to ensure that kids attend school.

Attendance officers in the Department of Education and Training talk to families about their child's attendance. They are not walking up to the door and issuing an infringement notice; they are having a conversation. If you are preparing your speech now saying that people are handing out fines willy-nilly, they are not. It is a shame that people think that attendance officers who work in schools in the department as part of the public service would just give a fine to somebody because their kid is not attending school. It is a mistruth.

These hardworking attendance officers are working with families to remove barriers. They are talking to families, identifying barriers, trying to support the removal of those barriers and then supporting re-engagement in school. It is essential work.

I have done this work. In 2012 I moved into a role of the manager of attendance and truancy team in Alice Springs. My staff and I travelled around Central Australia working with families to try to improve attendance. It was hard work. We did not issue fines unless we had a reason. If a family was talking about sorry business or cultural business—there are reasons people do not attend school. The Department of Education and Training supports those reasons. Many families do not have a reason for not sending their kids to school; they simply refuse to send them to school.

The Member for Gwoja was talking about Gunbalanya School, where they have alternative term dates and school start times. The attendance in that community is still low. He was talking about things he does not have any contextual information about.

We are doing things to put changes in place to support different ways of working; it does not always work. There are things that work and things that do not.

The *Education Act* has different powers for attendance officers to work with families. They can issue directions to enrol because, believe it or not, a lot of kids are not even enrolled in a school in the Northern Territory. They can work with a family to get a child enrolled. They can issue information notices and have a chat with the family and say, 'We need to have a conversation about this'. They can issue compulsory conference notices so they all meet at the school and try to remove those barriers. The attendance officers work with schools and families to try to re-engage children in school.

If that does not work, there are compliance notices. We can issue a compliance notice and say, 'We are implementing these things, and you are not putting in the effort, so here is your compliance notice'.

Then there are infringement notices and then prosecution. I have done all of these things and worked with so many families across the Territory to try to re-engage kids in school. I have issued infringement notices. I was responsible for the delivery of prosecution against not sending your kids to school in the Northern Territory.

Mr Young: Shame!

Mrs ZIO: It worked. Do you know what? The outcome in court was not infringement notices. I like that you are saying 'shame' across the Chamber, but it worked, and attendance improved from around 20% to 80% with the appropriate case management. You say 'shame', but attendance under your government did not rise at all; it went backwards.

I was also in Alice Springs when they rolled out what the Member for Gwoja spoke about, the School Enrolment and Attendance Measure (SEAM). That project also worked, but the implementation was flawed. There were rules and requirements in the implementation that meant that program failed. I worked with many families whose children's attendance improved dramatically if their Centrelink payments were stopped. When kids went back to school, their money was reinstated.

There were consequences for people's actions, and people understood that. Parents would go to Centrelink, and the social workers who worked in Centrelink would turn their payments back on. If their money was suspended—for example, for nine weeks—and a family went into Centrelink and the social worker was ready to turn their money back on, even though the child had not re-engaged, they would get their money turned back on. They would also get nine weeks' worth of back pay.

What happens when a family receives nine weeks' worth of back pay, plus the additional Centrelink payments? That child is not going to school from thereon in; you can guarantee that money will not be spent on a child. The system was flawed, and the implementation was flawed. I saw it, lived it, worked it and dealt with those families a couple of weeks later trying to go back through the same process again. I understand and have been brought through this system.

When I went through the prosecution process with families, the re-engagement level was huge. I undertook over 80 prosecutions of people from all different locations around the Territory and different races. I had a lot of success with all those families. It is all about the implementation of the process, the program, the delivery and the case management. That is what will support programs in the Northern Territory.

Over the last eight years the Labor government did not implement and case-manage these families appropriately. It did not happen. Proper implementation and case management will work and support these families. That is what our school attendance officers are doing.

The Member for Nightcliff spoke about whether anybody has gone out and spoken to people about this process. I can tell her that I have spoken to many people over the years.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER: Honourable members, as you know we have three new Acting Deputy Speakers appointed. I am now inviting the Member for Blain to take over the session.

Members: Hear, hear!

Mrs ZIO: Mr Acting Deputy Speaker, welcome.

I have spoken to people on the ground, workers and teachers many times. They want to be able to do their jobs. In my maiden speech in parliament I spoke about the need to reduce red tape. Over the last eight years teachers have been required to be everything to everybody. They are required to be disciplinarians, teachers, counsellors, youth workers and lifeguards and are picking up kids and dropping them off.

They are teachers, and their job is in a classroom to educate our children. We need other people working with these families to support re-engagement in school. I have lived and breathed this work for a long time, and I support what is happening today.

The Member for Gwoja spoke about cultural and on-country learning. I say again that these attendance officers will not go out to families and just issue fines; they are working with families and identifying barriers. I will say this again and again, so please, if you are aiming to say in your speech that you think they are just giving out fines left, right and centre, they are not. They are working with families, mediating and making sure that they do their best to get that child back to school by removing the barriers the family identifies.

These proposed amendments will streamline enrolment and attendance processes. These powers and functions will reduce bureaucratic hurdles and enhance the overall efficiency of our schools. When I worked in that space authorised officers were responsible for doing those jobs, which meant the Office of the Parliamentary Counsel had to draft instruments for authorised officers to do that work. We are removing that barrier so that the attendance officers do not have that additional burden.

There will be clarity on the issuing of notices. The Act will ensure that all stakeholders, including schools, parents and students, have a clear understanding of the procedures involved. We are already doing that through the media we are sending out. Families know that they must send their kids to school and that they can work with school attendance officers to try to get their kids to school. It is everybody's right to have a school education, and this work will support that.

The school identifier has been on the board for a long time, and I cannot wait for 2027 when it will come into play. Kids who transition across borders can be followed. Their details will be transferred between Queensland, the Northern Territory and South Australia, such as in the Pitjantjatjara lands. It will be a game changer for schools in the Territory.

I have spoken about my passion for this work. It is not all about punitive measures. The case work that goes into this is amazing. I send my best wishes to the attendance officers who work hard across the Territory, travelling to remote areas and working with families. They are butting their heads against a brick wall a lot of the time, but there are successes, and we will push to get this right for the families and children.

Everything comes back to education, whether it is about washing your hands, learning to be respectful and polite or learning how to clean up after yourself. Every child in the Northern Territory has a right to be educated. We have amazing teachers and amazing schools. I support this.

These amendments reflect our commitment to improving educational outcomes. They address enrolment and attendance challenges comprehensively. They balance enforcement with practical support, ensuring that every child in the Northern Territory has access to consistent schooling opportunities.

I commend these reforms to the Assembly and urge my colleagues across the Chamber to support them.

Mr YOUNG (Daly): Mr Acting Deputy Speaker, welcome to the Chair for the first time. I hope you enjoy it and keep the Assembly under control when it is needed.

It has been said many times in this Chamber that every school-aged child deserves a quality education that gives them the skills needed to turn every challenge they encounter in the world into an opportunity.

Territory Labor knows that more work needs to be done on education and attendance. We need to get our kids back in schools; however, this cannot be done by forcing our kids into classrooms and fining and threatening to withhold welfare payments from families who are already at a financial disadvantage and under stress. History tells us that this does not work. Instead, we need to look at the root causes of why kids are not going to school and develop a strategy in partnership with their communities.

When families and communities are engaged in the education of their young people, education outcomes start to flourish.

This government is under the assumption that attendance equals engagement in the classroom and better grades and that truancy officers, under the rebrand of student attendance officers, will be the silver bullet to get kids back in the classroom.

When this Bill to amend the *Education Act* and Education Regulations 2015 was introduced, the Minister for Education and Training mentioned variations of the word 'enforcement' 14 times and the word 'support' twice. This indicates that the government has no interest in addressing the root causes of why students are not attending school, but instead wants to resort to legislation that is punitive, fear based and further discriminates against low-income families and Aboriginal Territorians living remotely.

There are 196 schools across the Northern Territory, 153 of which are government schools. Forty of those schools are in remote areas, and another 91 are located in very remote areas. About 71% of NT Government schools are in a geographically remote area and make up a majority of the schools that experience lower attendance through the year.

Knowing those facts, do you not think this government should develop policies that consider the external and internal factors that may affect school attendance of those who live in the bush? These are factors such as geographical isolation, cultural differences, economic disadvantage and language barriers. Not to mention that data shows that students who live remotely would be more likely to experience family violence, remote health issues, overcrowded housing, contact with the juvenile justice system and disability.

I have a feeling that the government has considered those factors and is yet to understand that school-aged kids and their families require a system that is relevant, funded, culturally responsive and flexible for students to engage in and thrive. Instead, the government has chosen to reintroduce truancy officers in schools and give them the power to punish children and their families for circumstances that are beyond their control.

It is becoming increasingly clear that this government, particularly the minister for Education, has no plan for education in the Territory. No thought is being put into remote attendance, and they are recycling decade-old ideas, which have been called ineffective in getting kids to school by none other than the former CLP senator and Aboriginal Affairs minister, Nigel Scullion.

The former Labor government valued education and investment in the education and wellbeing of all Territory children. We learned from the failures of past governments and made adjustments. We worked with communities and families to find ways to improve school attendance and keep students engaged in the classroom.

Some of those underlying issues were addressed by the former Labor government when we signed a local decision-making agreement with the Emu Point (Nganambala) community. I understand that the Minister for Aboriginal Affairs will continue the agreement only until the expiry date. This is concerning, considering that the community put a lot of work and effort into ensuring that this agreement got up and running. The agreement signed by the NT Government and the Emu Point community outlines the community's aspirations clearly. It states:

- *NTG representatives listen to and respect … residents' views and understand that residents are best placed to make decisions and advise the NTG on services in the area.*

- *Nganambala residents listen to and learn about government systems and decision-making processes from NTG representatives.*

- *Parties work in partnership to co-design local approaches to address local needs.*

- *The Agreement's Strategic Priorities will be implemented at the pace set by Mulyung.*

That is the Aboriginal corporation in Emu Point. I continue:

- *The NTG will support capacity building in Mulyung and Nganambala to ensure they have a strong foundation to make informed decisions and have the capabilities required to implement agreed actions.*

- *The NTG will support Mulyung in its focus on local workforce development and capacity building and local employment opportunities.*

This agreement lays out some of the strategic priorities which we know will address the underlying issue of school attendance. The first priority laid out in the agreement for the community of Emu Point is housing. All members understand the importance of housing to getting our kids to school.

The agreement states:

This Priority requires action to support Mulyung in:

- *Additional houses to address overcrowding and maintenance to existing housing to bring them up to standard*
- *Exploring options for the development/transition of housing service delivery, including tenancy and property management with Mulyung or NTG*
- *Exploring options to support Mulyung in construction of additional houses to support local employment*
- *Planning for current and future housing needs.*

Another priority is health, and the agreement states:

This Priority requires action to support Mulyung in:

- *Setting up a space for visiting health staff*
- *Providing accommodation for visiting health staff*
- *Constructing a facility for medical services to operate within community*
- *Maintaining health facilities and assets*

Other actions listed in the agreement include transitioning early education and childcare services delivery from Murin to Mulyung, constructing additional education facilities and establishing a school council, which has now been done.

Agreements like these and the continuation of them is needed from this government to ensure good school attendance, like in Emu Point. This is a wonderful example of working with communities and looking at the broader issues to address things like school attendance.

The community also explored establishing a ranger service, options for a recreational hall to provide a space for youths, sustainable use of water supply to maintain grass on the oval, focusing strongly on local employment and building the capacity of local workforce, establishing and maintaining a regular sports and recreational program and establishing a cultural space for men and women.

I have spoken to many of the signatories of this agreement, and they are concerned that it will end in 2026 after all their hard work, as the Minister for Aboriginal Affairs has outlined. Terry Sams, a senior Elder, called me to ask what was happening with these agreements after the work he has done, and I told him, ‘I am sorry, Terry; it is only until 2026. The new CLP government has decided that they will not continue this agreement.’ Yet the signatories of these agreements have not heard from the minister or had an explanation.

Has the minister written to them? No, he has not. He does not even have the dignity to write to people from those community agreements. So much for the Minister for Aboriginal Affairs who is listening to his constituents.

The programs and initiatives we invested in include:

- investing in the earliest years of a child’s life with programs like Families as First Teachers, promoting positive education experiences and establishing good habits and patterns of attendance
- providing more support for students with additional needs such as flexible school options to re-engage students in learning

- resourcing schools appropriately so that they can offer engagement programs and initiatives that keep kids in schools

- putting communities at the forefront of decision-making for their children through local decision-making agreements such as the Groote Archipelago Local Decision Making Agreement.

Collaborative and community-driven solutions are needed to get Territory students engaged in our schools. On top of policies to help raise engagement and attendance in remote schools, the former Labor government invested in the education sector by negotiating and securing the $1bn Better and Fairer School Agreement in partnership with the Australian Government to fully and fairly fund all the 153 public schools across the Northern Territory.

We provided $40m towards on-country learning initiatives to boost attendance and engagement in all 46 Central Australia schools. We increased the Back to School vouchers for Territory families from $50 to $200. We reinstated and supported school-based police program across 13 NT Government schools, which was cut by the CLP Giles government, and we provided $300,000 to every school for upgrades under the Building Better Schools program.

Those were some of the initiatives the former Labor government invested in because we know education is a critical component in ensuring all Territory kids have the skills and knowledge they need to get the best start in life.

Sanctions are a legitimate mechanism to encourage families to assist their children to attend school, but we must also differentiate between voluntary disengagement and non-attendance resulting from causes or factors outside of the child's or family's control. I look forward to seeing the CLP's policy in relation to this.

The CLP government and its minister for Education need to come up with a better plan for education that is not just about punishing families and forcing children and young people into classrooms without the right supports. This is why I echo my Labor team's position and oppose this Bill in its current form. It enshrines truancy officers into legislation and brings punitive measures in focus, further disadvantaging low-income families and Aboriginal children and families who live remotely.

Dr RAHMAN (Fong Lim): Mr Acting Deputy Speaker, might I begin by congratulating you on your promotion to the Chair. You are the one member of the Assembly who I am seldom able to make eye contact with, and it is delightful to see your face in front of me for a change.

I reaffirm sentiments expressed by the Member for Port Darwin and thank the Member for Fannie Bay for sharing with us the benefit of her professional experience in the education sector. It is important to remember the experiences we have had outside this place and bring to bear the benefit of our wisdom and experiences, whether that be in the private or public sector and other organisations. We are lucky to have a diversity of opinions in this room and are blessed to have a respectful debate on these issues.

I hear a debate genuinely interrogating policy, which is a welcome development. It is important that we respectfully agree to disagree on things, and that is possible to do. One thing that none of us disagree about is the importance of education.

Education is the key to long-term futures for young people as well as society at large. There is, for once, no need for me to exhaustively cite the academic literature in respect of anything to do with the virtues of attending school.

I am fortunate to represent urban schools with extremely positive school attendance rates. I was recently at the school board meeting for Stuart Park Primary School, which is near and dear to me. I commend them on how successfully they encourage kids to come to school. Likewise, Haileybury Rendall School has fantastically positive school attendance rates. In both those places, the attendance rates are high for students of every disposition and background, including those who identify as an Indigenous cohort.

They are two fine and high-performing schools in urban areas. I take on board the points made by members of the Chamber that we need to provide incentives for people to want to attend school and make it an attractive place to be, making learning a positive experience.

It is my heartfelt belief that the Education minister is committed to making those things happen, but we are here today to discuss …

Mrs Hersey: I am.

Dr RAHMAN: Thank you, minister. I believe with sincerity that you are committed to those aspirations.

I return to why we have risen today: to speak about a specific Bill with a specific remit. I will confine my remarks to reflecting on the remit of the Bill. Prior to doing so, I note that I was the beneficiary of the fantastic, high-quality public education in Darwin at five different primary and secondary schools. I am extremely grateful for that educational privilege and hope that future generations can benefit from educational opportunities, the likes of which I was afforded.

I will note in the same breath that, sadly, attendance figures at the school I attended are not what they once were. There is the rub; that is why we are having this discussion. How can we improve school attendance and reduce disengagement?

The proposed reform constitutes a clear measure by the government to encourage regular attendance in compulsory education and reduce disengagement. Enshrining the school attendance officer position in legislation will ensure the role of attendance officer is defined, which is also a positive development.

As the Member for Fannie Bay reflected, the ability for the Education department's CEO to now appoint authorised officers under the Act is maintained, and that reinforces a multifaceted system of support which factors in a range of roles, methods and tools that are required to address disengagement, truancy and absenteeism. The amendments, to my understanding, will make the issuing of infringement notices under the Act safer and more efficient, but not the de facto standard.

We reflected on the fact the national school identifier has been incorporated in this legislation, and I think it is an appropriate place for it to be included, contrary to what has been said previously. Updates to the regulations will ensure schools can collect the information required to support the national rollout of the school identifier, which will occur in 2027. Once implemented, the unique identifier will enable the tracking of students across jurisdictions and provide a safeguard for students at risk of disengagement from education.

These are the purported key aims and features of the Bill. I believe they are reasonable aspirations within the Bill's remit.

A charge was made that this Bill fails to address complexity. It may be the case that this Bill is unable to solve all problems in our education system. Fair enough; time will tell. However, I am happy to support an affirmative action by the Minister for Education and Training in this space. I am grateful for the fact that we are constructively making a move in a positive direction, and I am willing to give the Bill my support on that basis.

There were reflections in prior debate about carrot and stick. I am happy to be clear about this. I will not launch into talking about rights and responsibilities, political philosophy and John Locke, but I will say this: the balance has been lost on carrot and stick in lots of areas of civil society in the Northern Territory. That is why we see levels of social and economic dysfunction, the likes of which we have previously not been a party to. I do not think anyone in the government is contending that we are anything but a government that is committed to being tough on crime and will reaffirm that actions have consequences. The government is willing to stake its governance on the statement that we believe actions have consequences and that we need to restore the balance of carrot and stick.

Withholding welfare payments in isolation, indeed, may or may not strongly correlate with improving attendance. But let us be clear: this is not a measure in isolation; this measure of restoring a balance of rights and responsibilities is consistent with the totality of this government's legislative agenda to date. All that we have done here since October testifies to that fact.

School attendance officers alone may not be enough to improve the precarious state of public education. Good things are happening in public education. Good people work in public education. This government wants to support them and our young people in attending and enjoying school because educational futures are the key to uplifting our economic and social futures.

Even if school attendance officers are not a silver bullet at this juncture, on the advice I have on good authority, I believe that they may help.

On that basis, I commend this Bill to the Assembly.

Mr GUYULA (Mulka): Mr Acting Deputy Speaker, I do not support the creation of truancy officers or fines for families whose children do not go to school. I do not support the Education Legislation Amendment Bill.

This is a Closing the Gap issue, which requires the department and the government to look at priority reforms. The first priority reform that every government has agreed to is formal partnerships and shared decision-making, but governments and departments are failing to do this, then are left wondering why the gap is widening instead of closing. I will discuss my experience in this.

I went to high school and worked as an aircraft maintenance engineer, then learned to fly planes. At the age of 19 I found myself away from home, down south. I was studying to fly, going to the engine shop and working on aeroplanes to give them overhauls and paint them. One day my family said, 'Yingiya, where are you?' I said, 'I am in Melbourne and Ballarat working'. They said, 'We need you because your next training is here to take up leadership on land to learn about who you are and what you need to do'.

By then I was far away, and I looked at myself like a dog between two masters. I learned to educate at home on my country. I studied, learning to know who I am, and then I took up studies which took me away.

We need to close the gap and get bilingual education going. I am talking about my experience because I learned at a bilingual school—balanda and Yolngu—and this is where I am. This is what I have achieved because I learned and still achieve both ways.

The government is telling people, 'This is what we think is best and right for you' and getting it wrong. Do not think you know what is best for our people; we know what is best for our people. We can tell you what we want and need. The Australian Government does not know how to help us and sort us out unless we tell it what we need to educate our children. Our children will learn; I learned in two-way education.

I have previously called for a regional education meeting for all Yolngu educators and elders so that over several days our experts can sit together and discuss the problems and solutions.

I first called for this when Minister Moss was the Education minister. That was a long time ago. In 2022 I even brought a motion to the Chamber about the need for proper consultation on education.

During the past eight years I have been in this Chamber I have not seen any proper consultation with community members about bringing kids to school. There are just Bills being worked out here and sent out that way. Come and explain it first. Sit down with people and clan groups. Listen to us. Let us work on it together. Of course we want to send our children to school. We had schools for many years in our lives well before your system of education came. We had schools on our land. It has been, 'We know what is best for you', which is a root cause of the problem.

Sending balanda truancy officers to our communities once a month to tell our people what to do is not good and will not work. Do the truancy officers speak our language? I speak English. Do they understand our culture? Do they understand the priorities of Closing the Gap? Are they there to listen to our community concerns? The least they could do is sit down and listen. I have never seen people from the department stay overnight in the bush. Engage in community partnerships and shared decision-making about education.

I am not talking to anyone in particular, because the government changes all the time. I am talking about the system that is not working for us.

I tell the government to look at the people in the department who are pushing this attendance officer strategy. They are the people who need to go. Clean out your department, and let new shoots grow so that people understand what is in Aboriginal communities. These strategies are a failure. We need to learn that when something fails two, three, four or more times there is something wrong. The strategies have been tried before, and they failed. They do more damage in the long term.

The biggest problem in education is that you are failing to make space for a program that is truly two-way education. I will read from my speech that I gave to Chamber on 31 August 2022. I have been saying the same things over and again for the last eight years, so I may as well read from my previous speech:

> *When I was elected into parliament, if children did not attend school the government policy was to fine parents and take them to court, while the Commonwealth Government would suspend their Centrelink payments at the same time. This meant that some of the poorest families in the Northern Territory struggled to feed their children and pay their power bills, and it made life harder. It did nothing to*

address the issues of why children were not attending school. It did not put resources into programs … that included the community and made our kids feel safe at school.

It is clear that these degrading strategies did not work. They simply broke relationships further and did not improve school attendance in the long term.

From my position as a senior Yolngu leader, I see problems with relevance and connection for our families and community. Ultimately, our schools are still mostly about assimilating our children. As we see the push for school attendance begin younger and younger, we see the traditional Yolngu educators, grandparents and other family being pushed further and further away.

I used the metaphor of the campfire to explain a child's education. All the family who come around the campfire for meals play a role in educating a child as they grow. The mother and father are often still learning …

That is, to be elders and leaders and to understand. I continue:

The grandparents and extended family take on the role of educating the child every day. One example is the use of the child's first language.

I have great concerns about the assimilation of our culture whereby some of these key educators in the child's life are no longer recognised. I have concerns about language development and the loss of languages in our community. I have concerns about Yolngu education falling away because it is overwritten by balanda institutions.

Unfortunately, we are seeing the effects of this in our communities, as children are lost and confused, increasingly turning to brewing alcohol, smoking ganja and committing crime. I believe this is because our communities are not included in a partnership approach to two-way education. This is because self-determination, local decision-making and respect for our sovereignty are not happening. These vital elements need to run through every government department.

I have concerns that without a proper two-way education process we will not see children engaging in school. We will not see children gaining literacy in their first language or gaining the English literacy and balanda knowledge that they need to be part of in a modern Yolngu community. If you consider the ESL resources that the NT Education department wants allocated for students learning English as a second language up until 2015, you will immediately see why the literacy outcomes have gone down.

The implementation of appropriate programs like Direct Instruction and Read Write Inc has seen attendance and learning rates go down since they were introduced. The Education department does not even keep data on the number of qualified EAL/D teachers working in the NT. I urge the minister to ensure that the collection of this data begins now so we know what skills the current teachers have and how much support they need to be able to work successfully with EAL/D students.

Elders in our communities desperately want to see our children succeed. We desperately need Yolngu teachers, nurses, doctors, lawyers, peacekeepers, pilots, CEOs, businesspeople, plumbers, mechanics and tradespeople and leaders—but we are not seeing our communities engaged in the education process that gives our young people access to two-way education and will see them gain the education needed for these vocations.

I trained as an aircraft maintenance engineer, learning how to fix aeroplanes, electrics and motors. There were many young people in various training at this time. Even though we may not have finished school, we had enough literacy and numeracy to continue on with these opportunities and be successful.

Our communities are unique and diverse. A balanda school does not meet our needs. We need to see significant support and investment in two-way schools. We do not need programs from America or England; we need community-designed programs. This should be happening with our RATE students, elders and Yolngu teachers working on a Yolngu curriculum that sits side by side with the Australian curriculum.

When I talk about raypirri *camps, I am not talking about sending a child to a camp for a week or a month; I am talking about camps that sit side by side with school, which run throughout the year and are for all children. They are about imparting Yolngu knowledge, language, philosophy, self-discipline*

and self-worth and giving strong identity as well as confidence and courage to learn balanda knowledge and become the leaders in both worlds.

This year is the first year that remote schools are seeing more funding. In 2022 I said:

In Darwin, the bilingual manager position was cut in half when it was combined with the EAL/D manager position. These are two enormous areas of work that require experts to assist our schools, and they have been cut to a degree where the job is unmanageable.

This bilingual manager position should be three managers where there is only one.

I went on to talk about the United Nations research and reports that clearly show the importance of learning in mother tongue languages. I continue:

We need this government and the Department of Education to stop treating us like children and making decisions for us. Accept and embrace that we are extremely talented in our knowledge of many languages, and this should be a fundamental part of our education system because it is unique and special.

Our children are talented and capable of understanding multiple worldviews. Our children can survive on country. They have knowledge of complex kinship systems, songlines and ceremonies, seasons, weather systems and law.

There is science and geology through Yolngu studies. We learn how to work things out; we know our ecosystem. I continue:

It is simply that our identity, knowledge and successes are not understood by a mono-cultural assimilationist education system. Consequently, our children and communities are being punished.

Mr BROWN: A point of order, Madam Speaker! Pursuant to Standing Order 43, I move that an extension of time be granted to the member.

Motion agreed to.

Mr GUYULA: Look at the education key performance indicators. Is this department measuring how well they work in partnerships or measuring the success of two-way learning?

Look at the MK Turner report on First Nations education. MK Turner was a well-known leader and elder from Arrernte country. The report comes from many educators including my *yapa*, Yalmay Yunupingu, the former Senior Australian of the Year.

The report makes six recommendations. I will not read them all, but the first includes the recommendation that governments commit to establishing First Nations education systems that are overseen by a First Nations governance body in partnership with government.

This is about closing the gap by bringing kids into learning environments where they can learn and be successful.

MK Turner said, ‘Everyone is always saying that we need to make our kids ready for school, but why can’t we make schools ready for our children?’

This is what this government needs to focus on if it wants to build a successful education space.

How can you plant a waterlily from the billabong out on the saltwater reef? The answer is you cannot. These are the things we look at. The waterlily does not grow in the saltwater because it is a different environment. It needs a different kind of fertilisation.

I have said this time and again, and people have asked questions. One time a Queensland Premier asked, ‘How do you find a spirit in a goanna?’ I said, ‘Come here and sit down with us to learn through our education, and you will know what we are talking about. You cannot see it over there. We are made of that, and we have studies with land to find out who we are.’

Another question was, ‘How do you find blood? You cannot get blood out of a rock.’ People made jokes in the workplace with me like, 'Money does not grow on trees, and you cannot find blood in a rock’. I would say, ‘Hang on, these are the studies you are missing. You need to come and learn two-way education from our language. We will show you that rock has blood, and it connects with my veins and my connection.’ That is what we need to look at.

This is the Yolngu education we are calling for about the songlines and the spirit things that we sing. I would have taken you to a classroom when I had my *dhulmu-mulka bathi* during the first time that I walked in here. People would have thought, ‘Hey, that is good. It is out there; you can watch it.’ No, there is more to that.

That is what our children need to learn alongside the education that government is creating. I do not believe the government understands what we are talking about. The government talks about the system of people saying, ‘You come to school’. You write your stories on paper; we write our stories on paintings. It tells the same story. This is why we need to go through the system of balanda education and still accept our own. That is the only way we will be independent Yolngu people who are full. Understand that we have a spirit and an education and knowledge system that comes from the land that can connect with other education.

Mr O’GALLAGHER (Karama): Mr Acting Deputy Speaker, this is an important Bill, and I congratulate the minister for bringing it forward.

I pick up on some comments and suggestions in the Member for Nightcliff’s commentary. She seems to think that we have not consulted on these initiatives. I cannot believe she said that. She also thinks that we do not have a social licence to do this. Once again, I do not understand why she said that. I do not know what reality she is living in or what planet she is living on. It could possibly be Uranus, Neptune, Saturn or some other faraway planet, but it is not Earth and the Northern Territory, because it is so far removed from understanding what happened at the last election.

We consulted with the whole Territory population when we went forward. You have seen it before: I am holding our plan that we openly went out to everyone with. A whole page of that plan is dedicated to fixing the education system. Three key initiatives were raised. The picture is the then shadow Education minister, Jo Hersey MLA, who is now the Minister for Education and Training. The electorate said, ‘We like this. We think you are on the right track. You need to do what you say.’

Let us touch on what we said we would do. We said that we would get back to the basics:

> *For our kids to get the jobs of the future and be competitive, we must improve academic results. Our focus is on boosting literacy and numeracy by getting back to basics.*

I know that the minister and her department is working on that. The plan continues:

> *Keeping and Attracting Teachers*
>
> *We will give teachers financial certainty by moving them off short term contracts into permanent places, so they can have the confidence to put down roots in the Territory.*

That is another good initiative. Here is the number one thing that was raised:

> *Raising School Attendance*
>
> *Under Labor, school attendance continues to go backwards. The CLP will get kids to school and will not be afraid to hold parents accountable for depriving their child of access to education. We will create Truancy Officers with the power to get kids to school.*

I do not know what anyone has read in that Bill—like the Member for Nightcliff—but that is exactly what it is doing. The plan goes on to say:

> *We will hold parents accountable if they break the law and fail to send their kids to school. That means compulsory case conferences, fines and in extreme cases prosecution. We will also refer families who deprive their child of an education to income management with the commonwealth. This will ensure money is spent on children’s needs such as food, clothing, health and education.*

Our clear focus is the children; they are our priority. We need to get kids to school, and we are doing them a disservice if we do not. I heard the Member for Fong Lim say that a number of schools there are prosperous

and doing well, but in my electorate I cannot say we have the same demographic; in my electorate we have over 15% Indigenous people and a lot of multicultural families.

There is the Sanderson education network, which is a group of about seven schools in the area, including Manunda Terrace, Karama Primary School, Malak Primary School and other schools like Sanderson Middle School. I had the pleasure of going to see a number of those schools with the minister last year. The teachers are doing a good job; they are working their hardest, but they outlined some of the challenges of the demographics. The biggest challenge they told us was, 'We've got to get the kids to school. If they come to school, they are a lot better off.'

There are too many examples, especially in my electorate, some of which is also associated with public housing, whereby you travel the streets and see the kids are not at school. They are roaming the streets and outside, not learning. We need to change that.

That is why we have school attendance officers. It is not punitive; it is to get kids to school. When you get them there, they can be engaged, but if they are not in the school system, they will be lost, which is a disservice to the children.

This government puts children and their education first, and we make no apologies for doing what we said we would do. I commend the Bill to the Assembly.

Ms UIBO (Opposition Leader): Madam Speaker, the Territory Labor opposition firmly believes that every child deserves the opportunity to thrive, be safe and have a quality education, no matter their circumstances or abilities.

This is and should be our greatest priority when it comes to safeguarding the Territory's social and economic future: our kids. The government will tell you that this is important to them as well and that they want every child in school learning. Unfortunately, the way they are going about it is completely and utterly wrong.

In 2022 the Labor government undertook a comprehensive process of consultation with families, communities, educators, academics and researchers to underpin a new approach to student engagement and educational outcomes across the Northern Territory. The government was not sitting around with its head in the sand about education. It recognised that more needed to be done, and the things needing to be done differently to engage every child in schooling should always be of utmost priority.

That process resulted in a comprehensive strategy that was informed by 72 consultation sessions across the Northern Territory and 51 written submissions. Unless there has been a secret consultation process about this, the CLP government is quite lazy and has not undertaken to do any such work to get the views of Territorians regarding education in a process such as the one I have outlined.

Through the process undertaken by the Labor government we heard the importance of embedding cultural and two-way learning in the curriculum and increasing the number of Aboriginal educators and cultural advisers in the classroom.

I was proud to be part of a Labor government that reinstated the Remote Aboriginal Teacher Education program (RATE). The Member for Mulka advocated tirelessly for this program in his role. There are many former RATE educators who still work in education many years after their training from the 1990s in the Northern Territory. They were so proud to see this important and successful program reinstated in the Territory. It is still in its training wheels at the moment—in its infancy of return—but that program is essential to ensuring we have Aboriginal educators in remote communities supporting education for remote students across the Northern Territory.

Through the process, a range of urgent actions were also identified across four key areas:

1. ensuring education is a real partnership

2. getting the right people and doing the right things

3. providing students with meaningful learning

4. looking after the wellbeing of our kids.

Truancy officers fining parents was not one of the actions in this extensive consultation undertaken by the Department of Education. No-one—no families, communities, educators or experts—raised this action as a viable option for engaging children and young people in their schooling or learning.

The CLP members like to rubbish experts and convince themselves that they know better than the experts. I challenge the CLP to find any evidence whatsoever, anywhere in the world, that says that fining and punishing parents and carers makes a difference to the child's attendance and engagement at school. I put that challenge out there.

We do not have to look hard or far to see that the former CLP colleague, the former Minister for Indigenous Affairs, Nigel Scullion, had to concede in 2016 that:

…all of the evidence continued to show that the measure was ineffective in getting kids to school.

There are not a lot of things I have quoted or agreed with from former senator Nigel Scullion, but I believe what he said at the time was right. We commend trying something new, but to repeat the mistakes of the past—I believe Albert Einstein said it—is the definition of insanity.

That is what we are seeing today. The CLP is rebranding and dusting off an old policy that did not work and that a senator for the Northern Territory, a CLP member, said did not work. Yet here we are, back to the future in the Northern Territory parliament. The CLP is grasping at desperate actions to try to show it is doing something but completely failing and missing the mark once again. I do not understand why the Member for Katherine is bringing the failed CLP policy of the past and trying to revive it to make it look like it is a good policy that will work.

If you respect education as a community member, you will know that improving student engagement in schooling requires partnership, not a punitive approach. It requires children and young people to see how their formal education fits within the context of their culture, language, environment, social and economic circumstances.

There needs to be a connection between a family, a carer, the young person or young people and the school community. Students need to see that their teachers and assistants are those from their community who will support them no matter what, not disempower them in the process of their learning journey. There needs to be a welcoming environment for all our kids that is culturally supportive and able to operate within a two-way learning system.

As a former educator I can give many examples of how local community school-driven initiatives are the way to improve school attendance. Unfortunately, I think it will fall on deaf ears.

I commend the Education minister, who learned what bilingual education was. She said that she is a big supporter of this. I am looking forward to seeing bilingual education and revitalisation programs across the Northern Territory grow and flourish under her carriage. Two-way learning is essential when it comes to remote First Nations schooling to support remote Aboriginal Territory students. I am glad to see that she is passionate about it.

This legislation is not the right way to support kids, especially those who are not turning up day-in and day-out. Punitive measures like the one that this legislation highlights—the truancy officers, fines and punishment of families—contradict the two-way partnership approach. Rather than the CLP applying the 'we know what is best' approach with its low credibility in education, we want to see families supported and family-led solutions that empower engagement with education, not the disengagement and punitive measures the CLP has revitalised from the history of failed policies.

We all want the best for our future and for our kids' education.

It is concerning to share some stories we have heard in the last seven months of families that did not know this policy was to be a government reaction to a complex issue in the Territory. The CLP said, 'Look at our plan. We have one page.' Sure, it is in English and probably online, but how many Territorians would have accessed that and then made a decision about voting for their local member based on that?

I am certain that there was only one community in my electorate that any of the CLP members, when they were in opposition, visited in the lead-up to the Territory election. I can assure members of the time I have spent trying to, definitely not defend what the CLP is doing but explain that it made this decision about education to families that did not know the changes were coming and had the right to ask about this policy

and for the information in their first language so they could fully understand what the changes mean. They definitely did not do it before the election in my electorate.

We are hearing on the ground that the vast majority of people receiving fines are Aboriginal women. From the conversations we have had across our electorates, we know some of these women have been victims of domestic violence and may have had a good reason for having their children at home with them, concerned for their safety, rather than ticking them `off on the roll to be at school that day.

I do not think the CLP has considered some of these more sensitive issues in its decision to mandate its policy. I want to be reassured by the minister that people in such circumstances across the Territory, whether they are remote, regional or urban—it does not matter—are supported in any challenges of getting their child to school. I have not heard from the CLP on any of those matters, and I would like to hear that in the minister's wrap-up speech.

To be clear, I believe every child should be in school, but we should have room in our system to be flexible and compassionate to understand the circumstances of families and carers who may be struggling with a range of issues rather than pushing personal judgment and accusations without understanding somebody's situation in full, then adding the consequence and punishment the CLP has enforced.

It is concerning that much of the CLP's agenda is about ripping out the heart of how the government interacts with the community. It is a 'my way or the highway' approach to governing and is not who we are as Territorians. It is hard to believe that this government's number one priority is education when it is legislating for truancy officers.

Other than mandated swimming lessons, which schools are now forced to pay out of their school budget, the only thing we have heard the Education minister talk about is this. Even today, she could not answer two questions, which should have provided a response about the costing for remote schools who will have to travel and pay more than a school in an urban area with access to a pool.

With the two-way education initiatives we know work, there is a lot of work to do in education. There are no quick fixes; if there were, they would have been done already. Dusting off an old, failed CLP policy on attendance and truancy is the wrong path to follow. Perhaps the minister will enlighten us about how many truancy officers are currently in the Territory and why they are operating. How much is it costing taxpayers? Does this interface with the federal funding on school attendance and engagement? How many information sessions have been held with schools, communities and homelands about this new—well, rebadged, old, revived—initiative by the CLP?

It raises more questions than answers, so I hope the minister will be prepared to tell us so we can share it with people who have not had information provided to them and are directly affected. I ask the Education minister what her vision for education is over the next four years. I want to understand the Member for Katherine's strategic objectives regarding improving the education system and how we can expect it to be over the next few years.

The work of the former Labor government gave a boost in the right direction in securing a $1bn schools agreement with the federal Labor government to see all Northern Territory public schools fully funded. The former Labor government also negotiated the enterprise bargaining agreement to ensure Territory teachers are the best paid in the country. This is fertile ground for building a strong education system in the Territory for all students. Yet, we are still to hear anything positive from the minister.

We have not heard a single word about the minister's vision for education and training or the work that was invested to lay the groundwork for her to walk on for more training and employment pathways for young people across the Territory. Perhaps she could enlighten us on that. This is critical in ensuring young people's hope, prosperity and success in life is supported as they walk through their education and training journeys and keep them from going down the wrong path.

Education and training are the most powerful tools we can give children for the future. A quality education provides choice, opportunity or a pathway out of disadvantage and poverty. I encourage the CLP government to shift its mindset about education away from negativity and deficit narratives and towards something more positive and constructive for Territory kids.

Last week when there were a number of violent incidents at Katherine High School, the minister said that they were just 'little things'. We urge the minister to lead in this space and not to trivialise things that are important to Territory families, kids and young people.

Is there a vision from the minister? If can she share it with us, we would be happy to partner and support a positive vision for education and training. So far, we have heard nothing. The reality is that media events in the front of shopping centres in your local member shirt, photo ops with truancy officers will not improve the lives of young people and children in the Territory, nor will legislation focused on grabbing headlines that is meaningless to real engagement of kids in schooling.

There is no quick fix, no matter how hard the CLP members try to hang their hats on a single solution. There are complex challenges facing all children and young people across the Territory for different reasons, and this unfortunately impacts school attendance and engagement.

We need to ensure the CLP government will work on real solutions; commit to partnerships on education; and continue to support two-way learning, bilingual education and more Aboriginal educators with a strong focus on student wellbeing. This will take time, and it should always be an ongoing focus regardless of which government is in power. I encourage the CLP to think about the critical investment I spoke about yesterday; housing makes a difference to supporting successful education pathways.

Our Labor opposition supports the government's extension of the unique school identifier component of this legislation. I commend the Department of Education and Training for this work because I know it is an organised department. I understand from my briefing last week that this component will not come into effect in the Northern Territory until 2027. This department does its homework and has incorporated that aspect of a future amendment in the *Education Act*.

The Labor opposition feels that it is inappropriate to lump in the benign and supported school identifier aspect with the truancy officer's legislation, and it is disingenuous for the government to do both when they are different aspects of the legislation.

Given all this evidence, the history and what we know works and does not work, the vision for education so far has failed and will fail Territory kids. The Member for Katherine is responsible for that failure. We will not support this Bill because of its failure for the future for Territory kids.

Mrs CARLSON (Wanguri): Madam Speaker, I support the Education Legislation Amendment Bill 2025. Although some of the changes are technical, education is crucial to empower all our children in the Territory. School attendance is mandatory for all children between the ages of six and 17 in the Northern Territory, and parents under the previous Labor government thought it was a choice to send their children to school. We heard some stats from the minister which showed attendance decline, therefore disempowering students.

It was alarming that some statistics were from 2016 to 2023. Attendance in the Barkly dropped from 62.8% to 46.2%; Big Rivers dropped from 71.1% to 58.9%; Central Australia dropped from 75.9% to 66.3%; East Arnhem fell from 59.9% to 54.6%; the Top End dropped from 83% to 78%; and Darwin fell from 88% to 83%.

It is important that children have an education that provides them with pathways to employment. Employment empowers people. With figures like these, it is great to see the minister bringing in these amendments early in her ministerial role, as she is passionate about education for our children. The improvement of these numbers means more children attend school, learn and move into pathways for employment.

The amendments consolidate various powers and functions associated with enrolment and attendance that currently exist in the Act, specifically the role of school attendance officers. It now provides clarity regarding the process of issuing non-attendance notices.

Attending and staying in school is closely associated with reducing crime through mechanisms such as employment opportunities, developing social skills and improving critical thinking and decision-making. Attending school provides access to resources and learning in an environment that will see students have purpose and direction.

The student engagement advisors' primary responsibility may be the issuing and enforcement of infringement notices; however, this role also performs a critical function of supporting disengaged students and providing support to families and young people to overcome the barriers of non-attendance.

Although my local schools do not have 100% attendance rate, I am grateful that this government is supporting our school attendance officers to help families in those schools and ensure children can succeed post their education.

I am lucky that my three government schools have high attendance rates: 90% at Leanyer; 89% at Wanguri; and 85% at Dripstone Middle School. If I break it down and work out the numbers, between the three schools that is 181 students who are not attending school, are not empowered and who will not have the opportunities we all have today.

To the Member for Mulka, I wish to extend that I have been to your land and have attended the schools of Yirrkala, Nhulunbuy High School, Nhulunbuy Primary School and Dhupuma Barker. I have spoken to the students there. Luckily enough, at Yirrkala School they were running a session about what they wanted to see for the future of their area, post the Rio Tinto closure.

I wish to share some things. They did a brainstorming activity and had good conversations regarding the jobs they wanted to do. One of the jobs was a police officer. Some wanted to be preschool teachers, and some wanted to work in adult education. Students wanted to be doctors, rangers, dentists, teachers or work in a zoo, the arts centre, McDonalds, Woolworths, Anglicare, Centrelink and in childcare centres. One, specifically, wanted to become a leader for his community.

These students attend school. They have the opportunity to be engaged with their teachers and work out what they want to be in the future. I congratulate Yirrkala School on 50 years of bilingual education, which it recently celebrated.

To the Labor opposition members, this government is listening to remote schools. We are working with schools, and we want children to be empowered and able to have an education.

Mr CHARLS (People, Sport and Culture): Madam Speaker, I support the Education Legislation Amendment Bill 2025, which is designed to strengthen and enhance the Northern Territory's educational framework.

This Bill makes amendments to the *Education Act 2015* and Education Regulations 2015, which are primarily of a technical nature aimed at improving regulatory clarity and enforcement mechanisms. At the heart of this legislative reform is the consolidation and clarification of provisions relating to school enrolment and attendance.

I will highlight the importance of education with an uplifting account. It is with immense pride that I acknowledge the extraordinary achievements of Monishi Tripura, whose journey stands as a testament to perseverance, patience and excellence. Witnessing individuals from our community reaching remarkable milestones is truly inspiring, and Monishi's accomplishments are among the most distinguished. Arriving in Australia in 2017 with limited English proficiency, Monishi overcame significant challenges to become the Northern Territory's first-ever recipient of the prestigious Hansen Scholarship at the University of Melbourne.

Through unwavering dedication, resilience and support from the teaching fraternity he transformed adversity into opportunity, excelling academically and beyond. Hailing from Wulagi, Monishi demonstrated exceptional aptitude in extracurricular endeavours. He proudly represented the Northern Territory at the International Science and Engineering Fair in Los Angeles and was awarded the NT Young Historian Award. Now pursuing a Bachelor of Commerce in actuarial studies, he continues to distinguish himself in the fields of finance, economics and mathematics.

As the Member for Sanderson I take immense pride in Monishi's achievements, which serve as a powerful reminder that dedication, perseverance and passion unlock extraordinary opportunities. His success is a source of inspiration for the Wulagi, Sanderson and Northern Territory communities. Congratulations, Monishi. Your journey is a shining example of what can be achieved when students have access to consistent education, dedicated teachers and a supportive learning environment.

His success underscores the importance of school attendance and engagement, which are key priorities addressed in this Bill. By reinforcing attendance measures and ensuring students can remain connected to their education, we can create more opportunities for young people to reach their full potential.

A child is like a sculpture in the hands of many artists, with each artist—be it a teacher, mentor or family member—contributing to shaping their future. Every lesson taught, moment of guidance and opportunity to learn adds another layer to their development. However, for the sculpture to take its full form the child must be present in the classroom ready to receive the support and knowledge that only an education can provide.

Teachers play an essential role in this process. They are the architects of knowledge shaping young minds with dedication, skill and patience. It is our duty to support them, listen to them and ensure they have the necessary tools to do their jobs effectively.

When teachers tell us that truancy and disengagement are challenges in the classroom, we must act. This Bill strengthens the framework that ensures students are where they need to be, which is in school learning, growing and preparing for a successful future. By following the guidance of teachers and reinforcing the importance of school attendance, we are not just enforcing rules; we are securing the futures of our children. We must ensure every child has the chance to be sculpted into their best self, with education as the foundation of their success.

A pivotal aspect of the Bill is the formal recognition of the school attendance officer role, which will be vested with the authority to issue notices under the Act and ensure that national schools maintain accurate and comprehensive enrolment and attendance registers. These requirements are set to take effect in 2027.

The fundamental objective of this legislation is to affirm the Northern Territory Government's commitment to fostering regular school attendance in compulsory school education and to addressing the pressing issue of student disengagement.

The Bill underscores the integral role of school attendance officers within the broader legislative and policy framework, ensuring alignment with the government's election commitments. Crucially, the Bill reinforces enforcement mechanisms as a cornerstone of maintaining satisfactory attendance rates.

In the last six months in this Chamber I have heard a lot about experts. If the information is correct, the NT must be the smallest population with too many experts. I am not sure of this, as members on the other side of the Chamber seem to be receiving expert advice on everything. I truly wish they are real experts, because I worked in a field where people used to claim to be the experts and scientists, but some of those people needed assistance and support.

I commend this Bill to the Assembly.

Mr BROWN (Arafura): Madam Speaker, I join my Labor colleagues in opposing the Education Legislation Amendment Bill.

This legislation is a return to the CLP's old approach to education; it is built on punishment rather than partnership, confrontation rather than collaboration and fear rather than genuine engagement. Those opposite will say that these are small amendments, but make no mistake that these changes are troubling and return to an outdated and punitive policy that has proven to be ineffective in addressing school attendance and engagement.

This legislation seeks to reintroduce school attendance officers—effectively, truancy officers—tasked primarily with enforcement and compliance. These officers will be empowered to issue infringement notices, imposing fines of up to $370 on parents and guardians for noncompliance.

The Member for Fannie Bay said that this was the last resort after engagement. Unfortunately, we have not had a team come to the West Arnhem region to talk about this. We want to know the steps and engage and talk to the government. Unfortunately, we do not know this.

Far from promoting meaningful attendance, this approach criminalises families—mainly mothers—increases poverty and risks deeper division between communities and authorities. The CLP is trying to tell us with this Bill that school attendance can be solved through harsh measures, coercion and the threat of financial hardship. We know that this does not work. How do we know? We have seen this approach before, and the results speak for themselves; it did not work then, and it will not work now.

Do not take my word for it. The former CLP Indigenous Affairs minister Nigel Scullion said about truancy-based measures, 'All evidence shows the measure is ineffective in getting kids to school'. I do not usually agree with Uncle Nigel, but he was spot on with that one.

The evidence is clear that punitive truancy programs serve to only increase tensions between communities and the education system. These changes will disproportionately impact Aboriginal students and families and make it harder for government schools to build relationships with families, which we know helps with attendance.

Make no mistake: these changes will do little to resolve the complex factors underlying poor attendance, such as poverty, overcrowded housing and family trauma. This is about politics, not good policy. Education outcomes, particularly in remote schools, are improved only by working collaboratively with families and communities, not by employing methods that threaten or intimidate.

Progress is slow, and it frustrates us all. My family and I live in an Aboriginal community, and I want to see our next generation do well. The former Labor government understood this and implemented initiatives such as Families as First Teachers, the Remote Aboriginal Teacher Education program and the on-country learning initiatives which focus on culturally responsive, inclusive and supportive education environments. These programs address the root causes of absenteeism by fostering engagement, providing culturally appropriate learning environments and genuinely supporting students and families.

What do we see from our new government? As soon as it got in, the CLP cut some of the most successful engagement programs, such as the Back on Track initiative, and returned to the heavy-handed enforcement strategies that did not work.

What frustrates me about this is that it fails to acknowledge or address the difference between truancy and absenteeism resulting from social and economic disadvantage. Instead of offering tailored supported interventions that address the underlying reasons kids are not at school, the Bill offers the stick. This approach will only further marginalise and alienate already vulnerable families.

I feel like a broken record, but unless you engage with families and understand the reasons kids are not at school, you will not fix attendance. This is not just Labor and Uncle Nigel saying this; Australian Education Union President Michelle Ayres called these measures ‘fear-based’ and ‘a school-adjacent policy’ that distracts from the core mission of education. To improve student learning outcomes, surely you should be listening to your teachers and the union.

When we were in government we recognised that every child in the Northern Territory deserved a high-quality, culturally responsive education system that is adequately funded, flexible and inclusive. Did we make mistakes? Sure, but at least we took advice from people in the sector. They told us that engagement cannot be forced through compliance notices. It needs to be built with meaningful relationships, genuine partnerships with communities and evidence-based interventions.

We talk about engagement. In remote regions people speak multiple languages. In my community there are upwards of 12 languages. We need interpreters so that people understand what is being passed down. Yesterday I said that if any ministers or members want to come out, I will be there to roll out the red carpet for you.

My colleagues have spoken about our support for the amendments regarding the national schools identifier. We support this measure because it aligns with the Better and Fairer Schools Agreement, which the previous government signed with the Commonwealth. It ensures that by 2029 every government school in the Territory will be fully and fairly funded. The agreement is the most significant education investment we have had in the NT, with over $1bn additional funding for schools. Crucially, this is needs-based funding, meaning more resources will be directed to disadvantaged and remote schools. That is great for the schools in my electorate.

I hear concerns as I travel and meet with my constituents and leaders in Maningrida, and other communities in Arafura have spoken out about these measures. They tell me that these fines punish families who are already facing economic hardship, turning poverty into crime. They say that without genuine engagement this policy could reinforce harmful historical cycles of surveillance, punishment and disengagement, particularly in remote Indigenous communities, rather than supporting meaningful improvements in educational outcomes.

Friends, this Bill is not fit for purpose, does not offer solutions and risks doing more harm than good. The government needs to listen to Uncle Nigel and pull this Bill.

J DAVIS (Johnston): Madam Speaker, I oppose this Bill. While the explanatory statement describes this Bill as being of a merely technical nature—which was what we were also told in our briefings—I must be clear that just because something fixes a technicality does not mean we should pass it if it is fundamentally flawed.

I am in strong support of looking after young people, especially our most vulnerable. Like every person in this Chamber I recognise the critical importance of education and that every child has the right to appropriate

education. This Bill, which seeks to enshrine school attendance officers in legislation, will not achieve that goal.

I thank the Member for Fannie Bay for sharing her extensive experience working in this space. I was heartened to hear her say that we need to work with families and address barriers to education, but I have not seen anything about that in this Bill.

This Bill, as described in the explanatory statement, is about streamlining and improving existing enforcement practices. There is no evidence that fining parents improves school attendance in the long term. This Bill will not achieve what we need, which is to ensure the significant percentage of children who are currently disengaged from the education system can be a part of it. Our education system should be for all children. We need to address why kids are not going to school and then implement solutions to address this.

Penalising parents with fines of up to $2,775 under the guise of improving attendance is a punitive approach that risks criminalising parents—particularly Aboriginal and low-income families—who already struggle to make ends meet. A fine of even $370, at the lower end, is significant for families in the Northern Territory, many of whom live in remote or economically disadvantaged areas. For these families, fines like this might mean cutting back on food, housing or other basic needs, creating further hardship. We also know that for those unable to pay, consequences escalate, leading to more severe penalties. This does not address the root causes of absenteeism; it only punishes those who are already struggling the most.

We may not need to look for evidence that education is important, as the Member for Fong Lim said, but we need to look for evidence about whether this approach will work. I searched for that evidence, and I found none. A report from the Indigenous health and policy framework highlights that penalising families for absenteeism is ineffective and can worsen outcomes from students.

A study by the National Bureau of Economic Research found that punitive measures, including fines, might lead to a short-term increase in attendance but do not sustain long-term engagement with the education system. Research by the Australian Institute of Family Studies on children's educational outcomes and the role of parents' financial stress highlights that fines disproportionately impact low-income families, exacerbating financial stress and potentially leading to more significant social issues without improving attendance rates.

Studies conducted by the University of Melbourne found that after implementing fines for non-attendance in Victoria there was minimal improvement in attendance rates, though families reported increased anxiety and disengagement from the school system. The UK Department for Education reported that fining parents for school non-attendance did not lead to a significant increase in attendance. Instead, schools that focused on engagement and support saw more substantial and lasting improvements.

Punishing parents, particularly from vulnerable communities, does not make children more likely to attend school. As can be seen from all that research it may further alienate families from the education system and deepen the distrust between schools and communities. This approach overlooks the root causes of poor attendance such as poverty, health problems and lack of engagement with school. Research shows that coercive measures alone do not create lasting changes without parallel efforts to engage students and their families in the educational process.

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development recommends that improving school attendance requires addressing barriers such as socioeconomic status, mental health and family circumstances, rather than punitive measures.

We heard from members in this Chamber that we need to work with communities and families to make sure education is culturally appropriate. As seen in local decision-making and community-led education reforms in the past in the Northern Territory, real investment in community involvement, cultural sensitivity and a focus on relationships are crucial elements that must be integrated in any strategy aimed at improving school attendance in a sustainable way.

Rather than investing in this approach that addresses the real issues behind school absenteeism—such as lack of resources, inadequate school environments and cultural disengagement—the Northern Territory Government is prioritising a punitive approach and using language like 'patrols', 'compliance' and 'enforcement'.

This approach views families as suspects, not as partners. It sees them as problems to be solved and controlled through penalties rather than working together to find lasting solutions. In fact, this approach

echoes a broader punitive mindset which ignores the fundamental role of trust and collaboration between schools and the communities they serve.

We have heard about Katherine High School. I have many friends in Katherine who have talked about what is happening at Katherine High who say it is an amazing school that is doing its best, but it clearly does not have the resources to meet the needs of the young people attending. As a result, students and teachers are feeling unsafe there.

If the CLP government was genuinely concerned about improving school attendance it would be focusing on building relationships, not imposing fines. It would be allocating resources to underfunded schools in remote and disadvantaged areas, ensuring children have the support they need to succeed. It would be working alongside community-led organisations to understand the real reasons children are disengaging from school, then it would address those reasons, not punish families for them.

The government should be investing in wraparound services that we need so desperately in our communities for mental health support, transportation systems and family engagement programs that can help parents engage with their children's education in a positive and meaningful way. We all want our children to succeed and get a good education.

This is not the answer. This Bill is not the way forward for the Northern Territory. We are failing our children, and we need real solutions. We need to invest in education. If the government truly wants to improve school attendance and educational outcomes it must stop looking for ways to punish families and start looking for ways to support them.

We must always put children first. Their education, safety and future cannot be sacrificed for political expediency or punitive policies. Our children deserve better, and we must deliver.

Mrs HERSEY (Education and Training)(in reply): Madam Speaker, I thank everyone who participated in the debate on the Education Legislation Amendment Bill.

The Member for Port Darwin raised that children who are not at school are children at risk. I could not agree more. As the member said, the engagement officers and the Circuit Breaker team in Katherine are working with and following up the next day with families of children who are at risk and on the streets. That is the most important thing.

Everyone spoke about punitive measures. We need both. People can say that they think this is punitive, but the fact is we had eight years of a Labor government that has seen attendance and literacy and numeracy rates go to shocking levels. This is one way we will change that.

The Member for Gwoja's contribution tells me all, because he contradicted himself quite a bit. This morning he said during the housing debate, 'Let's get these kids in school and work with Education', yet this afternoon he went on with his concerns that it is punitive and that we need to work with families. We are working with families. This is not about fining people; the fine is the last resort we will go to in this approach.

The Member for Gwoja spoke about taking funerals and ceremonies into consideration. We will. Those things are all taken into consideration. He said that I do not care about all students; it is the opposite. We can agree that we all care about the best outcomes for children, learning and changing what we have been left after eight years of Labor.

Members spoke about bilingual education; there are four schools in the Territory that have had 50 years of bilingual education. We have great schools and teachers, and a lot of schools have only 30 or 35% attendance. A lot of schools with the Better and Fairer Schools Agreement are getting extra funding, some with considerable extra funding. It is about working with schools and ensuring they do their part in getting kids to school and talking to their community members.

Opposition members said that we had not consulted remote schools; we consulted widely when we took this to the election, as the Member for Karama said. It was no surprise to anyone that we would bring back attendance officers and boost literacy and numeracy should we get into government, and that is what we are doing.

We are here to provide solid ground in education, and we need children to get to school. If kids do not go to school they do not learn and cannot grow to be like the Member for Mulka, who had a good education, went

on to achieve other educational outcomes down south and then was called back to his community. I commend the Member for Mulka for speaking on his educational journey.

Opposition members should talk to people in their community about the importance of education. It takes everyone doing that: families; members of parliament; and school attendance officers to engage with families every day.

The Member for Nightcliff agreed to prioritise education but says there was no consultation. Perhaps the Member for Karama could give her a look at our plan, as he is always talking about the plan we took to the election.

It was great to hear from the Member for Fannie Bay, who spoke about her work in education because she has lived experience. She spoke about the SEAM program, which the Member for Gwoja talked about. While it was good, the implementation was poor. The implementation on quite a few things was poor, which is why those opposite are sitting on that side of the House and are not in government.

The Member for Daly said that we need to get kids back to school; that is what we are doing. It is about getting kids to school and addressing root causes. This amendment speaks about valuing education and cultural differences, addressing all these things and making sure kids get to school because at the end of the day, kids need to be in school to be educated.

The Member for Fong Lim spoke about the five different public schools he went to and the education outcomes he experienced. The Member for Mulka spoke about bilingual education; I have had conversations about this with him. Four schools have done 50 years of bilingual education—I visited to Shepherdson College last year.

Those opposite say that bilingual education is great and we should do it more. It is great; I have seen it in practice, yet only 30% of children were at Shepherdson College that day. While it is great, maybe the Member for Mulka needs to talk to families in his community and let them know the importance of getting their children to school. If they do not get their kids to school and boost the attendance, they will not be educated. He spoke about great leadership, which is what we have. We have great principals, teachers and schools; we have bilingual education, yet we still cannot get children to school.

He wanted to clean out the department. I thank the people in the department for all the work they do in education. We have special measures to get more Aboriginal people into the workforce. You cannot get those people into the workforce if they do not attend school.

I understand the Member for Mulka's frustration. He says that he has sat here for eight years and has not seen people working with him. I beg to differ because when we spoke about bilingual education and when the Member for Mulka has asked things, we have been open and happy to give him the information he required.

The Member for Arnhem said that every child deserves to thrive and have a safe education—100%; I could not agree with her more. That is what we are doing. As the Minister for Education and Training, I want to make sure every child and teacher in a school feels safe in that environment—as the Member for Johnston said, even at Katherine High School. It is about making sure kids get to school, do the right thing and get an education.

The Member for Arnhem spoke about needing to do things differently. Exactly; we are doing things differently. The opposition kept talking about the CLP government; we had eight years in between with a Labor government. There was a reason that CLP government was voted out and Labor got in. Labor was in government for eight years, but it chose not to do anything about this. We saw poor literacy, numeracy and attendance rates across the Territory.

I thank the Member for Arafura. He did not attend the briefing and clearly was not briefed by his colleagues, so what can I say about that contribution?

I thank everyone for their contributions. In Term 4 last year 476 compliance notices were given out. Territorians elected this government with a clear mandate to tackle youth crime head on. This means addressing the root causes, starting with getting kids back to school and onto a better path. We are committed to doing that. These reforms are not just about enforcing school attendance; they are about safeguarding the future of our young people.

The overarching goal of these reforms is clear: to increase attendance rates; protect vulnerable children from falling through the cracks of our education system; and ensure every child in the Territory has access to the education they deserve. Under the current law, school attendance is mandatory for children aged six to 17 in the Northern Territory. It is the law, but under the previous Labor government attendance rates steadily declined, with compliance measures underused and enforcement falling short.

Compliance measures exist to hold parents accountable and remind them of their legal obligation to send their child to school. I remind those on the opposite side that it is against the law to withhold your child from school.

I have spoken before about the children on the intensive support rolls. There were 1,600 on the intensive support roll. We have seen a reduction of about 350 since we have had school attendance officers, and we have been working with those families. The intensive support roll was on the side, hidden from us when we were in opposition. The attendance rates were out there, but there was the separate intensive support roll with those children.

Compliance measures exist to hold parents accountable, remind them of their legal obligations to send their children to school and ensure there are real consequences when they fail to meet that responsibility. It is not about punishing families with children who are struggling with legitimate challenges such as anxiety or medical issues. This is about holding accountable the parents who consistently fail to send their children to school without justifiable reason, depriving them of their right to an education and a chance for a better future.

Under the previous Labor government attendance rates across the Territory plummeted. Compliance notices dropped by a staggering 73.4%, and infringement notices fell by a shocking 93.1%. It is unacceptable.

This Bill sends a strong message that we are serious about improving school attendance. We are reinforcing existing attendance measures in the *Education Act* to bring clarity, accountability and tougher enforcement to the system.

One of the key reforms in this Bill is to enshrine the role of the school attendance officer in legislation. This ensures there will be a dedicated focus on boosting attendance and engagement as part of the government's wider strategy. Although the chief executive will still have the authority to appoint other authorised officers, this reform guarantees that the priority remains getting kids back to school.

We are also streamlining enforcement processes to make them more efficient and effective. We are clarifying that when an authorised officer exercises their powers, they need only present their ID when directly interacting with that individual. This will allow us to send notices by post when parents cannot be reached or when it is unsafe to approach them directly.

Finally, this Bill supports the national rollout of the schools identifier system, which will come out in 2027 and allow us to track students across jurisdictions and safeguard those at risk of disengagement. Although the system will not be fully implemented until 2027, we are preparing now by updating the Education Regulations to ensure schools are ready to collect the necessary information when the time comes. This means that when children go interstate—I know that near Lajamanu people go across the border to Western Australia; in the bottom of the Northern Territory, they go into the APY lands; and at Lake Nash they go across to Queensland—those students will be tracked to make sure that they remain engaged in education.

The results of our focus on school attendance are already evident. In Term 4 of 2024 after reintroducing school attendance officers we saw a significant rise in the number of compliance and infringement notices issued. In Term 4 alone we issued 476 compliance notices, more than the 454 issued in 2023, with 38 infringement notices matching the total for all of 2023.

Importantly, many of these notices have already led to parents complying with the directions given, showing that these measures are working and driving real change. I reiterate to those opposite who think that this is punitive and not working that this is clearly a benchmark to say that this is working. It is a start, continually engaging with families and having those conversations to make them aware of the importance of education.

These reforms are an essential part of our government's ongoing efforts to ensure every young person in the Northern Territory has the chance to succeed and reach their full potential.

So far, 48 of 54 frontline authorised officer positions are filled and 17 of 24 school attendance officer positions filled.

This is our opportunity to show our commitment to a brighter future for all Territorians. I thank all the department staff and the members who have contributed.

I commend the Bill to the Assembly.

Motion agreed to; Bill read a second time.

Consideration in detail

Clause 1, by leave, agreed to.

Clause 2:

Mr PAECH: When do you intend the legislation to commence?

Mrs HERSEY: It will commence on a date to be advised by the Administrator.

Mr PAECH: Can you confirm that prior to the commencement of this legislation infringements have already been issued?

Mrs HERSEY: Yes.

Clause 2 agreed to.

Clauses 3 and 4, by leave, taken together and agreed to.

Clause 5:

Mr PAECH: Can you articulate the functions that have changed in relation to this role?

Mrs HERSEY: This enshrines the school attendance officer role in legislation, which will ensure that a dedicated position with a focus on enforcement will continue to exist as part of our government's ongoing commitment to improve student engagement and attendance.

Mr PAECH: Is that the only change being enshrined in legislation? Are there no additional changes?

Mrs HERSEY: Yes, it is all existing.

Mr PAECH: Has there been no change to the functions and roles other than simply enshrining it in the legislation?

Mrs HERSEY: Correct.

Mr PAECH: Which stakeholders—whether educators, unions or legal experts—were consulted about this change?

Mrs HERSEY: We consulted with schools, communities and at the election, so we have consulted quite considerably.

Mr PAECH: As part of those consultations, was there any concern about enshrining this aspect into legislation?

Mrs HERSEY: No.

Mr PAECH: What arrangements were made or are being planned by the Department of Education and Training and the Department of Children and Families to ensure smooth implementation of the amendments in this legislation, particularly for families in remote schools?

Mrs HERSEY: They are already occurring with the powers under the Act.

Mr PAECH: Is there no need for a transition because it is already happening?

Mrs HERSEY: Correct.

Mr PAECH: If the chief executive officer currently has and retains the ability to appoint persons as authorised persons under section 172(2) of the Act and student attendance officers are currently in operation, why do they need to be enshrined in the legislation?

Mrs HERSEY: It is so that the school attendance officer does not have to get permission from the CE of the Education department and can do their job on a daily basis.

Mr PAECH: Is this a process currently by which the chief executive officer has to issue or sign off individually on a case-by-case basis?

Mrs HERSEY: That has been the case, but that is why we are enshrining school attendance officers in the legislation.

Mr PAECH: From this amendment, will the Chief Executive Officer no longer be required to do that on an individual basis?

Mrs HERSEY: No, not on an individual basis.

Mr PAECH: What lines of accountability have been put in place to ensure integrated and effective wraparound services are still being provided to families who interact with student attendance officers prior to receiving an infringement notice?

Mrs HERSEY: When the student attendance officer sees the young person out in the community they can, after showing them their identification, get their name and confirm with the school that they are enrolled there. Then they follow up with the family the next day. They can also follow up with the Children and Families department.

This is about educating and working with families. It is not about the stick straight up. We want to make sure that all children attend school and that school attendance officers are doing their job of educating families of the importance of getting their children to school.

Mr PAECH: Sure. What specific mechanisms will be used to monitor the compliance or the measure of the impact of this amendment on attendance?

Mrs HERSEY: As in, whether they are getting a compliance notice?

Mr PAECH: This process is being enshrined in legislation. Apart from the only measure, being school attendance, what are the additional measures to evaluate whether this is being successful or not?

Mrs HERSEY: The enrolment and attendance data is collected and monitored. Also, the school attendance officers are required to maintain a high level of data to ensure recordkeeping, so we know how it is going. That is a measure we use to develop and analyse the information to see how well the students are getting back to school. The requirement to review is not embedded in this legislation.

Mr PAECH: In relation to the school attendance officers, can you step everyone in the Chamber through the eligibility requirements and if there are any mandatory tertiary or education requirements for school attendance officers?

Mrs HERSEY: The training requirements for the school attendance officers include—this is training delivered by the department—student record management, education database and data reporting, safe and supportive de-escalation training, trauma response practice and education, first aid training, four-wheel drive training, Department of Education and Training orientation, appropriate workplace behaviours especially when dealing with people, mandatory reporting of domestic violence, reporting of child abuse, foundational cross-cultural training and code of conduct. There is quite a lot of on-the-job training. That is the orientation of the employment of the school attendance officer.

Mr PAECH: Is there no tertiary requirement for the functions of this role?

Mrs HERSEY: No.

Mr PAECH: I would not like to assume, but is it a mandatory requirement that school attendance officers have to comply with a police check and a working with children check?

Mrs HERSEY: Yes. Sorry, I was about to say that.

Mr PAECH: That is okay. It has been a big week.

In the speeches today we heard the number of school attendance officers. Can you outline how this can occur on a day-to-day basis in 153 schools across the Territory, given we only have a limited number of those staff? Will that be done on a case-by-case basis? Given there are currently lower rates of attendance, will they be prioritised?

Mrs HERSEY: There are some school attendance officers in Darwin, Palmerston, the Big Rivers area and Katherine. Two are starting shortly in the Barkly.

Mr Edgington: Hear, hear!

Mrs HERSEY: I thought the Member for Barkly would be excited about that.

We also have them in Central Australia in Alice Springs. They have a roster system of where they go. In Alice Springs the go to Yuendumu and different communities. That is determined in the operation of their day-to-day work.

Mr PAECH: Will the performance of the school attendance officers be evaluated? Will remote communities be consulted if there is an evaluation, and what mechanisms are in place for regular review feedback or constructive action if necessary? Is there an evaluation plan?

Mr MALEY: A point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker!

Mr PAECH: I am sure the minister can answer for herself. She does not need a man to do it for her.

Mr MALEY: Standing Order 155 is about confining questions to the clause; we have been giving a bit of latitude for these questions. I want to be careful that we are sticking to the clause and how it works, not all this stuff on top of it.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER: I take the point, but if the minister is happy I am happy for her to answer.

Mrs HERSEY: I have spoken about that. It is not really about to be reviewed, but it is looked at.

Mr PAECH: I thank the minister for responding and acknowledge that she can answer the question and does not need the Member for Nelson to do that for her.

Is there a provision for an evaluation?

Mrs HERSEY: I answered the question; no.

K McNAMARA: This clause says:

(2) A school attendance officer has the following functions:

(a) to monitor and enforce compliance …

What does ‘enforce compliance’ mean?

Mrs HERSEY: The school attendance officer, as I said, is about engaging with families and speaking to them about the importance of getting their child to school. There is a process that they go through. After talking to the families they can issue a compliance notice. If they continually flout the system and do not get their child to school, they can get a fine. That is the last resort. What was your …

K McNAMARA: On the scope of enforcement, could they pick them up in their car and drive them to school? I am wondering what the word ‘enforcement’ meant.

Mrs HERSEY: Yes, if that child is happy to go to school with the school attendance officer—I have seen that happen in my community. That can happen but only if that child is happy to do so.

Clause 5 agreed to.

Clauses 6 and 7, by leave, taken together and agreed to.

Clause 8:

Mr PAECH: Can you outline how this amendment will practically enhance the efficiency of issuing notices by mail, particularly in remote communities across the Territory?

Mrs HERSEY: How will they receive their fines—is that the question?

Mr PAECH: Yes. It talks about enhancing the issuing of fines, so the challenge or concern for bush members is that we do not have communities with fixed addresses. When you are issuing the fine they will go to a council or school, but unless there is someone physically telling them, they will not know they have fine.

Mrs HERSEY: For example, a school attendance officer may give a fine in the mail. We all get mail. I know remote communities get mail, and it is up to that person whether they pick up their mail.

Mr PAECH: I accept that people get mail, but remote communities do not have letterboxes or a mail service, and in some cases the mail is dropped off in a pigeonhole, which is not secured. Are there additional mechanisms in place to ensure people are aware of or being informed about that process?

Mrs HERSEY: As I said, all remote areas get mail, whether it is in a mail bag or a pigeonhole in a council office. It can go to them in the post. It is also covered under the *Interpretation Act*; it is not relevant under this Act.

Mr PAECH: There are obviously postal services, but a school attendance officer can also hand-deliver an infringement.

Mrs HERSEY: Correct.

Mr PAECH: Given there might not be the reliability of mail service, they could deliver it to the school and then deliver …

Mrs HERSEY: I think it would go in the mail, or the school attendance officer could deliver it in person. I know the school attendance officers, for example, go to Yuendumu. I have spoken to Tui, and he knows a lot of families at Yuendumu. If it was the case that they would get a compliance notice or a fine, it could be delivered.

Mr PAECH: Aboriginal people can be transient at times. How do you maintain the person is still a resident of that community? Is that through the electoral roll or the enrolment of the child for the infringement?

Mrs HERSEY: Under the *Interpretation Act* there is a requirement for them to have an address.

Mr PAECH: It will be the last known address via the *Interpretation Act*?

Mrs HERSEY: It is up to people to make sure they give the correct information to the compliance officer, or when the attendance officer is communicating with the family they will be getting the details. If the family chose to give the incorrect details, it would go to the address they gave.

J DAVIS: In the case whereby the child is under a protection order, who will the notice be delivered to?

Mrs HERSEY: They are under an order from the court, so it would be whoever is their responsible adult.

J DAVIS: If it was the CEO of Children and Families, would it be delivered to them?

Mrs HERSEY: No. If the child was under Children and Families, one would hope they would not be getting a fine, but if they did we would work with them as part of the compliance with school attendance officers. It is about working together with agencies and not working in silos.

J DAVIS: Would no-one be issued a fine for a child in care who did not attend school?

Mrs HERSEY: We are already working towards a child protection response.

J DAVIS: What about a child who is defined as living independently? Who will the fine be delivered to?

Mrs HERSEY: If the child is living independently over the age of 14, the child will receive the fine.

J DAVIS: And under the age of 14?

Mrs HERSEY: It goes to the responsible adult.

J DAVIS: To my understanding, a child can be defined as living independently under the age of 14, so where would the fine go then?

Mrs HERSEY: I do not think so. A child is not living independently under the age of 14 under our Act.

J DAVIS: Not under the *Education Act*?

Mrs HERSEY: No.

K McNAMARA: How do you ensure that when it is sent, it is received? I am just thinking when someone has not paid the fine or there has not been a response; my understanding is fines then go to the Fines Recovery Unit. What mechanism is in place to make sure they have received that fine?

Mrs HERSEY: We have answered that question for the Member for Gwoja.

Mr PAECH: Following on from the question from the Member for Johnston, if there is a child who has a joint custody arrangement with the mother and the father and there is an issuing of a fine, who receives the fine?

Mrs HERSEY: It would go to the responsible parent with daily care and control, whether that be the mother or the father.

Mr PAECH: We have seen through Family Court that there can be joint custody arrangements, so would both parents receive an infringement?

Mrs HERSEY: It goes to the parent with daily care and control—whichever one is nominated.

Mr PAECH: Are you suggesting there can only be one nominated primary care giver?

Mrs HERSEY: Mr Deputy Speaker, I think I have answered the question.

Mr PAECH: I do not think you have. I will rephrase. If an infringement needs to be sent in relation to a child and there is a custody arrangement …

Mr MALEY: A point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker! Standing Order 158; repetition. This is simply the same question asked a different way, and it is repetitive.

Mr PAECH: But we want to know who. You have not provided any legal provision.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER: I think there is a bit of both here, but I remind people that this clause 8 is about the production of an identity card. We are starting to stray into some other clauses.

Mrs HERSEY: Member for Gwoja, it is also an operational issue.

Mr PAECH: I understand it is an operational issue. I am trying to understand because, as the Member for Mulka has highlighted as well, sometimes the primary care giver might not be in the community. The child could be in a kinship relationship being looked after by another member. Would they be responsible, or is it still the primary care giver who is not even in that community for a variety of reasons?

Mrs HERSEY: Mr Deputy Speaker, I have answered the question. It is operational and a matter for the department to manage based on the circumstances. Some circumstances change, so it just depends. The department would do that.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER: I take your point. The minister has answered this a number of times. She has stressed that this is an operational matter.

Clause 8 agreed to.

Clause 9:

Mr PAECH: What are the reporting requirements for the issuing of the information notices?

Mrs HERSEY: It is an operational matter.

Mr PAECH: Are principals consulted before a student or a family of a student enrolled at their school is issued an information notice?

Mrs HERSEY: Yes.

Mr PAECH: How many information notices have been issued since the school attendance officer roles have commenced?

Mrs HERSEY: It is in the other compliance notice.

Mr MALEY: A point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker! Standing Order 155; it is not relevant to the clause we are talking about.

Mr PAECH: The minister has agreed to get the information.

Mrs HERSEY: It is embedded in the compliance.

Mr PAECH: Thank you for answering your question and not letting the Deputy Chief Minister bully you into not doing that.

Do school attendance officers engage with Children and Families? What is the process for them working together? Do they engage and advise Children and Families when an information notice is being issued?

Mrs HERSEY: A school attendance officer talks to the young person and their family. Each family situation is unique, so it depends on the family's circumstances, but if there are things that need to be spoken about with Children and Families staff, then absolutely, the school attendance officer will be speaking to them.

Mr PAECH: Is there an information-sharing arrangement in place?

Mrs HERSEY: Yes.

Clause 9 agreed to.

Clause 10:

Mr PAECH: In what circumstance are compliance notices issued, and what is the training for those?

Mrs HERSEY: We have spoken about the training already.

Clause 10 agreed to.

Clauses 11 to 16, by leave, taken together and agreed to.

Schedule, by leave, agreed to.

Remainder of the Bill, by leave, taken as a whole and agreed to.

Bill agreed to.

Mrs HERSEY (Education and Training): Madam Speaker, I move that the Bill be now read a third time.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 17	Noes 7
Ms Boothby	Mr Brown
Mr Burgoyne	J Davis
Ms Cahill	Mr Guyula

Mrs Carlson	K McNamara
Mr Charls	Mr Paech
Mr Edgington	Ms Uibo
Mrs Finocchiaro	Mr Young
Mrs Hersey	
Mr Howe	
Mr Kerle	
Mr Mackay	
Mr Maley	
Mr O'Gallagher	
Mr Patel	
Dr Rahman	
Mr Yand	
Mrs Zio	

Motion agreed to; Bill read a third time.

FISCAL INTEGRITY AND TRANSPARENCY AMENDMENT BILL
Serial 15

Continued from 12 February 2025.

Mr YAN (Treasurer): Madam Speaker, I move that the Bill be now read a second time.

Ms UIBO (Opposition Leader): Madam Speaker, the Territory Labor opposition does not support this Bill.

There is a clear and concerning pattern of behaviour of cover-ups and cop-outs from this CLP government. The CLP tried to cover up the ICAC police leadership mess rather than address it. Spouting about consequences and having credibility, the CLP in no way, shape or form exhibits the best behaviour.

It took Chief Minister Lia Finocchiaro many weeks and considerable pressure to buckle and take action—which is what she promised Territorians in August 2024—to look at restoring confidence in the institution. That is critical to ensuring safe and liveable communities across the Northern Territory.

The CLP is systematically shutting down the voices of Territorians and dismantling legislative and regulatory safeguards to protect critical environmental, social and cultural values, not to mention our lifestyle those opposite pretend to care so much about. We have seen them do this through their dodgy, rushed consultation on the Territory Coordinator Bill, which passed in the late hours of Tuesday and early hours of Wednesday.

There are many community members with questions still remaining unanswered about the concerns that they genuinely expressed through 300-plus public submissions and 550-plus government submissions. Many of these concerns are completely ignored by the CLP government.

We continue to see the CLP rip up important legislation that safeguards regulatory processes like third-party merits review. This is an important layer of scrutiny in the assessment of new development in the Northern Territory. This includes a safeguard for traditional owners, landholders and others who have genuine interest in the community impact of a developmental approval …

Mr EDGINGTON: A point of order, Madam Speaker! This is a debate on the Fiscal Integrity and Transparency Amendment Bill. Standing Order 35; it is time to talk about this Bill, not every other Bill she would like to talk about.

Madam SPEAKER: Members are usually given some latitude. If you could steer back onto the specific topic we are debating, Member for Arnhem.

Ms UIBO: I extend a learning opportunity to the Member for Barkly, who has been in this place for over four years now and is now privileged to be in a position of a decision-making role in the CLP Cabinet. Alas, it is not the role he wanted; he wanted to be the Attorney-General. We know he was shafted because he is a threat to the Chief Minister.

This Bill is about integrity and transparency, highlighting the lack of credibility, integrity and transparency that the CLP government has already shown in just seven months of decision-making and power in the Northern Territory. Now it is removing this legislation which provides a measure of accountability regarding Territory

dollars, the coins that belong to Territorians. That, Member for Barkly, is why this is all relevant. I am happy for him to learn and understand his job better. After four-plus years in this place he does not understand his role as minister. It is a bit of a shame job.

The CLP dished up a sham lobbyist register. It promised transparency, accountability and openness, yet do not have it. This ridiculous, gammon lobbyist register does not require the Chief Minister or any of her CLP ministers to be open with the community about which private companies or organisations they are meeting with.

The CLP government made a huge farce and song and dance about bringing back the Legislative Assembly scrutiny committee, but it picks and chooses what it wants scrutinised. If that is not a sham, I do not know what is. When it comes to integrity and accountability …

Mr MALEY: A point of order, Madam Speaker! Standing Order 35; as the Leader of Government Business said, we are talking about the Fiscal Integrity and Transparency Amendment Bill. We are going way off track here. We are dealing with this Bill, and that is what the debate should be confined to.

Madam SPEAKER: To be frank, I do not think she is. The member is talking under the general theme of fiscal transparency and integrity in general terms, which people are usually allowed a lot of latitude to do. If you could steer it back eventually to the direct topic, I will give you time to do that.

Ms UIBO: I appreciate that observation by the Member for Nelson who is now the Deputy Chief Minister and another person who might listen and learn about accountability and integrity.

The dollars we spend matter, and Territorians deserve to know what regulates that, what decisions are made and what safeguards, measures and protections Territorians have that they expect of their government. We are seeing an erosion of safeguards, protections dismantled and regulatory frameworks obliterated by the CLP government. That is why it is pertinent in this debate. Madam Speaker, you have been in this House longer than all of us and have seen good, bad and all governance in between.

The learning of the past is an opportunity for the future, and the Labor opposition feels the CLP government members have gone into this term, for the last seven months, with their eyes and ears closed but are driving 130 kilometres per hour down the highway with not a care in the world of what is on the road and what they could hit along the way.

Mr Edgington: We do not break the rules; we stick to the speed limit.

Ms UIBO: I hope you do, Member for Barkly. I would be worried if the CLP minister was speeding past on the highway with the many kilometres you travel.

It is a lack of integrity and accountability and the removal of another measure that Territorians have not been privy too. What is the CLP government replacing when it makes this decision that impacts the budget? What measures of accountability will the CLP Treasurer and government under Chief Minister Lia Finocchiaro's leadership have? What safeguards and measures will they instil to reassure Territorians that they will spend in a responsible way. When they start cutting projects—which we have already seen; we will wait until the budget goes through to see the figures in black and white—that mean the difference of life and death when it comes to roads and infrastructure improvement, better housing, healthcare and education. When they make those cuts—because that is what they will do; it is in the CLP DNA—what other mechanism is the Treasurer providing to Territorians so they have reassurance the CLP government is doing the best job it can for the Northern Territory.

Mr Boothby: You have no credibility.

Ms UIBO: We wish it was accountability, Member for Brennan, but I do not think we will get that.

Coming back to the point, the Legislative Scrutiny Committee is another accountability measure where the CLP government picks and chooses what it scrutinises. That does not sound like a democracy; it sounds like a dictatorship. There are 17 CLP members of parliament and three CLP members of a five-member committee; what are they afraid of? We have just seen with the Territory Coordinator Bill passed this week that the CLP government did not adopt the recommendation that its own government-dominated committee proposed, signed off on and presented to parliament.

CLP members talk about accountability, integrity and transparency, but they have no credibility so far in the seven months of governing the Northern Territory.

Ms Boothby: At least there is a scrutiny committee; you scrapped it.

Ms UIBO: I hear the Attorney-General piping up to defend the lack of scrutiny, integrity and accountability. When people start getting rattled and defend their bad history, you know you have struck a chord and it must be true.

We have seen smoke and mirrors and no substance from the CLP government that is terrified of scrutiny, which is why this next step of the Bill brought in by the Treasurer—the Bill that the Territory cannot afford—is the avoidance of accountability rather than moving the Territory forward. That is what the government is most frightened about.

The appearance of doing things and trying to be busy, dodging scrutiny, covering up things and hiding is not the future vision of the economy that Territorians want to see. We have not seen much more of the CLP's legislative agenda other than the erosion of transparency and accountability, which this Bill provides again—another clear example to Territorians of what the CLP is afraid of: transparency and accountability.

CLP government members promised the three-pronged slogan that looks increasingly flimsy to many people, particularly to us and the Territorians we speak with every day. They promised community safety, yet their bail laws do little to prevent or reduce crime, which the Chief Minister promised. CLP members promised to restore the economy, yet their only plan for economic growth seems to be to take credit for projects that got underway years before they came to government under the former Labor government. They now seek to remove the debt ceiling with no form of public accountability mechanism in its place. CLP members promised to protect the Territory lifestyle, yet they are busy stripping back all sorts of environmental, social and cultural protections that are integral to sustaining our pristine natural resources which underpin our way of life in the Territory.

Seven months into this government it is becoming increasingly difficult for the CLP to maintain the illusion that it is doing anything to improve Territorians' lives. The CLP government's shallowness has become clearer every day, particularly this week, because these empty promises of transparency and accountability have been exposed more and more.

No doubt those opposite had the plan to win the election, but now they are in government and do not even have a plan to govern. Maybe we will see one come out next week. When we asked about the Corrections plan the Deputy Chief Minister said, 'We do not have a plan'. The next week he had a plan document to share with the parliament. We expect the same for a governance plan.

There are a few examples—rather large ones—of the CLP government working overtime to remove transparency and accountability measures conveniently before its first budget, which will be announced at the next sittings in May. The CLP's quest to become less answerable to Territorians for its actions is becoming reality.

We have all seen the Treasurer wringing his hands and feigning shock over the Territory budget, even though year on year everything is published in black and white. He obviously did not read anything in the last four years in opposition. That is a big shame for not doing his job properly. It sounds like Treasurer Bill Yan has never scrutinised a budget paper. I feel for the amazing staff in Treasury for having to start from scratch and provide a 101 on how to read a budget to the Treasurer just months before the first CLP budget will be announced.

It is worth telling a bit of a lesson. We go back to not a great time in the history of this place—again, Madam Speaker, I do not want to speak for you, but I know you were around in those days—when the now Chief Minister, Lia Finocchiaro, was part of the Adam Giles CLP team during their huge decision to sell off and lease a number of significant public assets. That was the CLP government's legacy—not a good legacy. The two large and impactful decisions that the CLP made at the time—the Chief Minister was a part of the team that made these decisions—were selling the Territory Insurance Office, a public asset, and leasing the Port of Darwin. The CLP then did not even have the ability, grace, credibility or guts to tell the federal government what it did. That happened when the CLP was last in government, so we will brace ourselves to find out which public assets it might sell to make a quick buck in the Territory, particularly ahead of the first budget in May.

The Treasurer has the gall to try to gaslight Territorians and weirdly thought it was clever or politically strategic to point the finger at the federal Labor government for leasing the Port of Darwin to a Chinese company. The Treasurer was on the news blaming the federal Labor government, when it was the NT CLP government under Adam Giles with the current Chief Minister on the team.

The Treasurer must think he can reinvent history and tell lies to Territorians, which is laughable. Territorians have not forgotten, and they will not forget. The community will not have any of that mistruth. They have long memories. Those who are responsible for that deeply incompetent and irresponsible move from a Territory government should stand up and take responsibility for that, including Chief Minister Lia Finocchiaro.

Despite the CLP's fire sale of Territory assets, the last Labor government inherited a $900m deficit and growing debt. The former government worked hard to try to reverse this situation but was dealt the double whammy of a $2bn cut in GST by the federal government—at that time it was a federal Liberal government under the leadership of former Prime Minister Scott Morrison—followed by the significant social and economic challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. It can never be calculated just how much of an impact the Territory, the rest of the country and the world experienced because of that global pandemic.

We saw the new Chief Minister—the Opposition Leader at the time of COVID-19—arguing and publicly stating on the radio and in the news that the Territory's share of COVID vaccinations should be sent down south. It was our job to protect Territorians and their livelihoods and to ensure that we kept those important COVID vaccines for Territorians first and foremost. I am sure the Treasurer is aware of this. It was just before he entered parliament in 2020, and the impact of that is still felt today. I am not sure whether the Treasurer is aware that the impact of COVID resulted in a global recession from which no jurisdiction has been immune, including the Northern Territory. It sounds like he is still reading the 101 on accounting, how to be a Treasurer and how to do a first budget.

We have since seen global unrest, supply chain disruptions, the rise in cost of goods—particularly building materials—and inflation. The Territory has not escaped the economic ripples from these external global factors. In an age when misinformation and disinformation are massively impacting people's faith in public institutions, it is disappointing to hear the Treasurer's extremely distorted take on the Territory budget.

He has clearly received briefings from Treasury about the broader context but chooses only to follow his party line, so it must be assumed that he is deliberately not telling the whole truth to Territorians when he plays the blame game about the Territory budget history.

The CLP loves talking about the eight-year history of the former Labor government, yet it does not talk about any of the history of the budget and impact of those factors I just mentioned that have created complexities and economic challenges that are now being faced.

There is no doubt that the Territory is facing fiscal challenges. This is hardly a secret to anyone, especially anyone who knows how to read a budget paper. The former Labor government worked hard to instil budget discipline, hence why the budget ceiling was put in. It was difficult to control the budget spending in the fiscal environment, but this was balanced with the need that met for Territorians …

Mr HOWE: A point of order, Madam Speaker! Standing Order 35; relevance. As much as I am enjoying this work of fiction, I ask the Opposition Leader to bring it back.

Madam SPEAKER: Member for Drysdale, this is a long speech of potentially 45 minutes. The Leader of the Opposition has been given the usual slack and latitude that all members get, particularly for longer speeches. She is speaking relevantly to the topic.

Ms UIBO: I am confused about how the Member for Drysdale thinks any of this would not be relevant to the Bill when I am talking about budget discipline, controlling budget, fiscal risk environment, balancing community expectations, public spending, infrastructure, health, roads, education and community safety.

Maybe as a backbencher he has not been privy to the Bill or has not done his homework on it. Maybe the Treasurer and the CLP government do not share information or give briefings to their members. They are just supposed to blindly follow the vote on the floor without being supported to understand the legislation as a new member.

I hope the Treasurer offers briefings, particularly before the budget, to the backbenchers because they will get their little packs and the books when the budget gets delivered in May. Hopefully, it is not the first time

they will get to see the budget from their team and there are no surprises, like we saw with cuts to the undergrounding power program, which the CLP did not tell people prior to the election.

The 10-year program for underground power in the northern suburbs and older suburbs of Darwin was completely cut, and it blindsided Territorians. I did not hear a single Darwin suburbs member of the CLP government—predominantly backbenchers—say that they had gone out to tell Territorians in their electorates that was what they planned to do when the CLP government got in. It was completely brand-new news. I was not planning on mentioning it until the Member for Drysdale thought I was off topic, but that is another example regarding budget accountability measures. You cannot tell Territorians one thing and do another, and you cannot not tell Territorians that you will do something and then take it off the table.

I hope the CLP government can look those constituents in the eye and tell them that they were shortchanged behind their backs because of a decision that was made in secret and not shared by the CLP.

The former Labor government focused on investing in additional police. The Chief Minister takes great pleasure in going to the police graduations and visiting the police academy to take credit for their great work. We want to support police. That is why the former Labor government invested in the police force.

You would think in seven months that the CLP government has just suddenly created a new platform and program for the police. That is rubbish. You just have to look at the work done formerly. The CLP loves its history lessons. Let us hope it learns from its readings of that one.

Another area focused on was striking an agreement with the federal government to fully fund every public school in the Northern Territory. This was a huge win, with $1bn of funding in education. We asked important questions at the end of last year of the Education minister to ensure that bilateral agreement would be safeguarded from CLP members rubbing their hands together and saying, ‘Look at all this money over here; we will spend it somewhere else it is not intended for’, which is to fully resource Territory public schools. That was the work of the former Labor government. If the CLP would like to continue that legacy, we are happy to support it to do the right thing and spend the money the right way.

Another focus area was directing an extra $300m over the last two years to meet and improve the demand of our Territory health system. I learned when I was the Health minister that the Northern Territory has some of the most complex issues in the country, yet it is the least-funded jurisdiction in Australia for hospitals. We are down at just over 30%. I am sure the Health minister can tell us the exact figure. The second-lowest funded hospital jurisdiction in the country is South Australia at 37%. New South Wales and the bigger states are up at about 40% to 42%, from memory.

How can the Northern Territory ever get ahead if we do not have equity in hospital funding when we have several large regional and main hospitals, small clinics and communities that are serviced by Aboriginal medical services? How can we ever get ahead with the health complexities of Territorians, particularly with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Territorians dying 20 years younger than non-Aboriginal and non-Torres Strait Islander Territorians?

It makes a huge difference when the funding is used and the Territory is resourced properly. Health is a life-or-death area of funding. I sincerely hope that the Member for Barkly, as the new Health minister, takes up that fight with the federal government to ensure that the Territory—even if we are the jurisdiction with the lowest funding for hospitals—is equitably funded for hospital funding in our budget so that we can ensure Territorians get a better cut of the national health funding. We need to improve the quality of our health infrastructure so that hardworking health professionals can deliver quality health services for Territorians.

The other important area of focus when our former Labor government was in power was ensuring record investment in infrastructure, particularly for roads to make them safer, more accessible and more efficient. We did that not just in the heavily populated parts of the Territory but for all our roads and access areas. We have pastoralists, tourists, remote communities and homelands. The benefit of improving road infrastructure over creeks, river crossings and bridges makes a big difference to Territorians and all who visit the Territory for tourism or business, including Defence.

I hope, with all fingers and toes crossed, that the Treasurer and Infrastructure minister continues to invest and does not cut funding for lifesaving roads and economic growth infrastructure.

The former Territory Labor government also invested in attracting and stimulating private sector investment. The focus was creating jobs and ensuring there were pathways that would lead to a strong, sustainable and diversified Territory economy. It is highly concerning that the CLP government implies that these investments

were wasteful. It is concerning because it would suggest a fundamental lack of understanding about growing the economy.

We have not yet heard of the CLP's economic vision for the future. Yes, it has a plan and writes everything up, but it is nothing new. What is the new vision? What is its out-of-the-box thinking, or does it just expect to do the same its members did years ago when it was in government and not get anywhere?

Madam Speaker, you and the Treasurer hail from Alice Springs; it is difficult to understand why the Treasurer, representing people in Central Australia, would even think that the people of Central Australia would want the budget for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Gallery of Australia cut.

Many business owners I have had the privilege to talk to, particularly in the Alice Springs township but also around the Central Australian region, have all been geared over the last few years for this record infrastructure investment, opportunity and jobs that it would bring to the heart of Australia, Alice Springs (Mparntwe). Yet, the Alice Springs-based—when he is there—Treasurer is cutting one of the most important job-creating and tourism-investing projects for Alice Springs.

I do not know how he holds his head up when he walks around Alice Springs. It is up to the people of his electorate to judge. I have heard businesses in Alice Springs say they have made investment decisions based on this infrastructure planning and commitment. Within a couple of weeks of the CLP winning the Territory election, they came in with a swoop saying, 'We will downsize the gallery. It will not be a project of national significance and, by the way, the project will now be smaller than one of the regional museums in Shepparton, Victoria.'

A project of national significance is now downgraded for the people and businesses of Alice Springs because the CLP thinks it knows better than all the years of planning, consultation and ups and downs of those processes. How does the government now explain to businesspeople that all the choices they made in the last few years were really for nothing? Say goodbye to the extra dollars for Central Australia, which I know would have benefited from it.

It sounds like the Treasurer has not spoken to the tourism sector in his own town of Alice Springs, the businesses locally and those who were gearing up for this economic and social game changer. Instead, they replaced it with a smaller project. How will the CLP government boost what will be delivered by this project of national significance? What will the CLP government do when it comes to job creation in Central Australia? Perhaps the Treasurer will speak about that; maybe he will enlighten us.

Chief Minister Lia Finocchiaro criticised and scrapped this project, probably not even talking to the Treasurer and only talking to the Member for Braitling—maybe to give him a bit of boosted ego because he nearly lost his seat to The Greens, which were closing in. This left entire businesses and communities in Central Australia, particularly in Alice Springs, scratching their heads over the complete lack of economic foresight or vision from the new CLP government.

We want the government to talk about responsible budget management, but scrapping this nationally significant project—which was calculated, costed, future-thinking and planning for jobs—was a baffling move. This is not just what the Labor opposition thinks; businesses and community members have told us this over the last seven months. People have reached out and asked us to raise these points.

The Treasurer ripped money out of road infrastructure projects. There was the failed attempt, for example, with the Wadeye road until the government was called out and had to face the petition signed by 600-plus people of the West Daly region. There were 100 or so people who travelled from Wadeye to present a petition to my colleague, the Deputy Opposition Leader. Pressure was placed on the CLP, particularly the Treasurer, to commit to sealing the Wadeye road. The government is trying to do sneaky things, and the Bill does not go to the heart of what it promised Territorians it would do—be open, accountable and transparent.

Those critical infrastructure projects—I would expect the Treasurer to know this—create jobs, stimulate the economy and provide opportunities for Territory businesses to grow and thrive. We will see the budget in May and whether there is an economic vison for Territorians, but I do not think we will see anything before that.

I will be eagerly waiting for my budget pack on budget day. As I have done every year, whether as a backbencher, minister or now in opposition, I will go through with my ruler, highlighter and pen—my old schoolteacher tactics—to follow every line. I will particularly look at the infrastructure budget paper because once we see that information we can tell Territorians, businesses, companies and those who have been

tendering for projects whether they are wasting their time because the CLP does not believe in investing in infrastructure and roads, which is critical investment that will make a difference to the Territory. I eagerly await budget day.

We want opportunities for projects to grow for local businesses, which will benefit Territorians in general. The lack of foresight, vision and ability of the CLP government to see the long game is disappointing and concerning to the Territory Labor opposition as well as all Territorians and businesses. Over the last two weeks I have spoken to huge businesses and industry players who are yet to be impressed with anything the CLP government has said, done or presented regarding the economic plan, vision and forward thinking.

I look forward to supporting that vision—if the Labor opposition thinks it will be beneficial for Territorians, businesses and industries—but I have to see it to make an informed opinion to talk to people, voice concerns or celebrate good ideas, and there has been nothing. The only response we have had from the CLP on the economic vision is, 'Out of a team of 17, we have no ideas. We will rest all hopes, dreams and aspirations for the Territory's future on a single position—the Territory Coordinator.'

Not one member of the 17-strong CLP government has provided an economic vision. They have all said, 'Wait until the Territory Coordinator Bill has passed and is installed in legislation, because they will have all the answers for the Territory'. I do not know why people ran for their seats if they do not have something positive to contribute to the future of the Territory's economy. That was one of the three main things the CLP members and candidates promised, and many of the sitting members became ministers as well.

I am concerned about the language the Treasurer used in signalling that the CLP is ready to take an axe and limit funding agreements. Some of the most concerning conversations I have around the Northern Territory are with small organisations, particularly community service organisations that deliver critical programs to support vulnerable and disadvantaged Territorians. These organisations say that they are concerned about the CLP's lack of engagement with them as service providers and that if they speak up, they feel they will be targeted and their programs and organisations will have funding cut.

What a terrible place the Territory will become over the next couple of years if there is no robust scrutiny or questions asked of the government. Organisations are too frightened to ask questions or display concerns about their funding, feeling that they will be punished if they express how they are struggling to continue to deliver services or expand at-capacity services. Some organisations I have met in with in Alice Springs fear that they will be punished for raising this with the government. Never in nine years of being a parliamentarian had I heard a single organisation say that they are worried their funding will be axed if they speak up. We are in a different era.

I will not name those organisations or associations. I hope that if they go to the government and air those concerns—many of them are talking about airing them in private, not publicly or to the media—that they will be given the time and respect of the CLP government and will not be punished for sharing their concerns or ideas on how continued funding agreements could support programs that are desperately needed in the community services sector.

Shiny new slogans, particularly for 2025, will not actually help the CLP get the job done. The CLP is starting to show a track record of inaction, uncertainty and insecurity for the Territory. That is not a great way to start in seven months of government. The CLP has spent a lot of time crafting carefully worded media releases and talking up the number of its government-backed private sector projects underway across the Territory, and this has left many people confused, worried and concerned.

Just last week the Deputy Chief Minister noted in a press release that the trialling of mineral exploration in the Territory had reached $545m in 2024, the second-highest combined annual exploration investment ever recorded in the Territory. Of course, he did not say that the majority of this work happened under Labor. The CLP members like picking and choosing the projects they claim. They will not if it is something where mud has hit the fan, but if it is a great story they will claim it and will not acknowledge any of the hard work of the public service and the prior government.

A point of order, Madam Speaker! I move an extension of time to continue my remarks.

Members: No.

Motion agreed to.

Ms UIBO: Cheeky. I was just talking about you, Member for Nelson. You should enjoy listening to this; it is about you.

This is a great achievement to celebrate. I commend the Member for Nelson for sharing that great story about investment in the Territory, but I ask that he show a little humility when needed and acknowledge the work that happened before August 2024.

In another release—Member for Nelson, I told you that you would enjoy this because it is about you again—he spruiked the Barossa project, which is getting close to completion and is set to deliver its first gas in 2025 later this year.

The Deputy Chief Minister was also excited—in his media release and carefully worded announcements—to speak about the lease agreement with Duxton Farms Ltd as part of developing the Wildman agricultural hub. This project will significantly expand and diversify our agriculture sector. We commend the CLP's concentration to follow on from this great work left by the former Labor government, but the Labor opposition wants to be constructive. We want to ensure that if there are hiccups along the way, project delays or blowouts in costs, the CLP will do its best as a responsible government—maybe I am using that term too loosely—to ensure it does everything in its capacity to support that development hub. That will mean a great deal to improving the Territory's economy because it will give investors and future business proprietors in the Territory comfort and excitement about why the Territory can be the best place to do business.

Member for Nelson, I have another story about you. You do not have to watch the clock; it is all about you.

The Member for Nelson was equally excited in his announcements and media releases about Pan African Resources' acquisition of Tennant Consolidated Mining Group. This will …

Mr Maley: Just remember I am married.

Ms UIBO: Pardon?

Ms Boothby: He is married.

Madam SPEAKER: Order! Please focus.

Ms UIBO: Oh, come on. It is too late. People have had long nights; they need to relax.

Tennant Consolidated Mining Group will underpin the development of the gold processing plant at Nobles Nob, which will help revitalise the Barkly as a mining hub. The Member for Nelson noted in his media release that Tennant Mining had benefited from a $10m Northern Territory Government Local Jobs Fund loan to make this a reality.

I had the pleasure of visiting onsite Tennant Mining a couple of weeks ago in the great Barkly region. The Member for Barkly loves it—'What about the Barkly?' It is an economic goldmine, literally. I visited the Tennant Mining development …

Members: Hear, hear!

Ms UIBO: The Member for Barkly loves these stories. I visited Tennant Mining in Nobles Nob and saw an amazing amount of progress …

Mr Edgington: The land of opportunities.

Ms UIBO: It is. The Barkly is full of opportunities. As I said, it is literally a goldmine. Regarding the work that had happened in 12 months—formerly started under the Labor government—the company was extremely complimentary of the fast-tracking of that project by the former Labor government and the impressive infrastructure that has now progressed.

The local jobs that have been committed to by Pan African Resources for the new development is a great story. It has a plan for local Warumungu people having the first choice of jobs, then local Tennant Creek community residents and local Barkly residents, then Australians and other people who want to come and work at the mine.

It was a great comfort to me to see the great work and legacy started under our former government, something that will be a game changer for the Barkly region and the Northern Territory. It was a great story, and I acknowledge that the Member for Barkly is a big supporter of this project as the local member.

Seeing how quickly that project has come online was a great comfort and opportunity to understand the processes and regulations—I have never held the Mining portfolio, but I have a large mine in my electorate—for the business of starting a new mine in the Northern Territory. That was interesting, and I learned a lot. It was good to see that process well underway—I am sure the Member for Barkly will be there to cut the ribbon when it officially opens—and to understand and celebrate how much that project will make a difference for people in the Barkly region with the jobs that will follow.

Member for Nelson, that is enough of talking about all your press releases. I point out that they all have one thing in common: every announcement the Member for Nelson has backed was launched or started under the former Labor government. Thank you, Member for Nelson, for indiscreetly celebrating the work of the former Labor government. He is often too proud to acknowledge that work, but it is there in black and white if anyone wants to see those press releases.

In the seven months that the CLP has been in power it has not announced a single new project—I look forward to seeing that—other than one, which is the new jail. I hope Treasury closes its ears on this one: it will be close to $1bn for that infrastructure. We will see what the CLP government's legacy is.

In relation to population growth and attraction to the Northern Territory, the Chief Minister rubbished the arts community. The Member for Brennan has done it too, as her faithful follower. She says that people do not want art galleries; they want prisons. How does the CLP government intend to attract much-needed health workers and essential services workers to the Territory? What will those people do when they have days off, weekends or have family come to the Northern Territory? They will say, 'Come right this way, let us tour the new prison. That is all we have because that is the legacy of our new government. Come here and see this new jail because that is what we have invested our billion dollars in. For the rest of your time, you can either be at work, go to the shops—in and out. That is it.'

We have nothing from the Northern Territory CLP government regarding liveability and lifestyle in any of its forward planning. It is astounding. Those opposite are all eagerly listening; we are too. The Territory Labor opposition is listening eagerly for what project announcements, other than a new jail, the CLP will make to restore our Territory lifestyle and stimulate the economy. We will not hold our breath because we will probably suffocate. We are eagerly waiting.

Mr Edgington: They could not even grow a vine on Cavenagh Street.

Ms UIBO: The CLP is obsessed with the shade structure. It was a pilot project. Let us hear those opposite all laugh at this one. The wood from the shade structure came from Gumatj timber made by Gumatj people. They all laugh at that. I will make sure I let the Gumatj mob know that the CLP government continues to laugh at their entity and Gumatj timber that was shipped from Nhulunbuy to Darwin for that pilot project. I will make sure I tell the Gumatj mob how much they are respected by the CLP government members who laugh at their business.

I could go on and on. I wish I had another opportunity to extend my time. I have them all riled up. The Labor opposition does not support this Bill from the CLP, which is scared of transparency, openness and accountability.

Mr MALEY (Agriculture and Fisheries): Madam Speaker, I support this Bill. My contribution will not be anywhere near as wonderful as the Leader of the Opposition's because that was a beautiful speech, but I can answer a few things.

You can go to jail if you commit a crime; when you are here working and have a job, you could do something like go goose hunting on the new pathway we built at Harrison Dam or catch a million-dollar barramundi, which the CLP introduced many years ago. There are wonderful things to do in the Northern Territory.

Mr Edgington: You would still have to wear a hat under that shadeless structure.

Mr MALEY: The Treasurer's noodle would get sunburnt under that. This Bill enacts legislation to repeal the limit on borrowing, commonly referred to as a debt ceiling. The $15bn debt ceiling was introduced by the former Labor Chief Minister Michael Gunner in May 2021. That was because the failed Chief Minister could

not trust himself or his Labor government to rein in spending. During the 2021 Estimates, Michael Gunner said:

> *This will strengthen accountability for our long-term debt reduction goal and send a clear message to rating agencies that the government is continuing its budget repair program …*

What a joke. He should be a stand-up comedian.

In 2018, just weeks before Christmas, the Gunner Labor government dropped a fiscal bombshell. It said that the Territory was on track to rack up more than $35bn in debt by 2030. I remind the Assembly that when the former government came to office eight-and-a-bit years ago debt was about $1.8bn, and it was continuing its budget repair program. The former Labor government admitted it was borrowing cash just to cover basic operating expenses. Labor was also borrowing to pay the interest on its ballooning loans.

In March 2019 economist John Langoulant released a blueprint for budget repair. One of the 76 recommendations was the creation of a debt ceiling. Rather than being a cap on net debt or liabilities, the ceiling was a cap on total borrowing minus finance leases. Put simply, the legislation Labor introduced gave itself a green light to keep spending beyond its means, and spend Labor did.

The Leader of the Opposition said that I should acknowledge some of the things that the Labor government did and how good they are. I acknowledge that the former Labor government put us in about $11bn worth of debt. It was good at spending. Leader of the Opposition, I acknowledge what Labor did in putting us in a world of hurt.

By the time Michael Gunner resigned in May 2022, debt had more than tripled since he came to office. When Territorians voted this CLP government into office, debt sat at $11bn. In just 18 months the previous government increased debt by $2bn. Where has that money gone? What do you have to show for it? We have a structure in Cavenagh Street—I do not call it a shade structure; it is structure—and a highway that—no matter where you travel, down through the centre, east or west—gets cut every year.

Our government, in stark contrast to what the former Labor government did, is being up-front with Territorians. Treasurer Bill Yan laid bare the Territory's two economic challenges during his statewide economy roadshow. He highlighted Labor's failures in its approach, noting record spending in police—the highest per capita in the nation—without corresponding investment in Corrections or courts. That is not a strategy; that is an imbalance.

There was no long-term funding for Corrections, which requires an estimated $50m annually. That resulted in crime going through the roof. The Treasurer emphasised that for every dollar spent on police, at least $1.50 should be invested in the broader justice system, including legal services, courts and prisons.

We cannot keep doing the same thing over again and expect different results; it is madness. The decision to repeal the debt ceiling is a difficult but necessary one, and if we do not do it we will be forced to make cuts, which we will not do. We will not punish Territorians for Labor's costly mistakes.

The Leader of the Opposition said she would get her ruler and pen to read the budget word for word; I have also done that. I did that for Budget 2024 and the 2024 Pre-Election Fiscal Outlook Report—which is in black and white, and I ask the Opposition Leader to have a read. It talks about planning significant cuts to critical services. Their own Pre-Election Fiscal Outlook Report, which is a public document, says on page 40 about three quarters of the way down:

> *… Territory-funded items that are currently budgeted to reduce or cease over the forward estimates include supplemental funding to support hospitals and corrections cost pressures, and time-limited funding for domestic, family and sexual violence reduction programs.*

Taking the Leader of the Opposition's advice and reading the budget books will tell you they would have cut funding to hospitals, Corrections and domestic violence prevention—things the Territory needs. Domestic and family violence is a scourge, and the numbers under the Labor government kept going up, with an 82% increase. Let that sink in.

The Labor opposition wants me to acknowledge what its government did: it overspent; put up debt; and would have cut funding to hospitals, Corrections and domestic violence prevention. Labor was fiscally inept; this is why those opposite are in opposition. They would have cut these crucial programs that keep the Territory

safe and healthy. If you get sick you should be able to go see a doctor or go to the hospital, and if you are a victim of domestic violence, you should get help to ensure you are safe.

The Opposition Leader knew the funding for hospitals, Corrections and domestic violence programs was coming to an end; she was in Budget Cabinet. She knew about it in detail and did nothing about it; what a shame.

Repealing the debt ceiling will give the government more flexibility to manage spending, address immediate budget pressure and plan for long-term financial stability, which the Labor government neglected to do. It will also allow for a strong focus on boosting revenue and improving spending efficiency. The previous government set a debt ceiling knowing it would break, and rather than acting responsibly it did everything it could to cover the truth. Labor deliberately excluded ongoing project funding from the forward estimates to mislead Territorians. The time-limited funding—Labor would put out program, lock it in and fund it for one year and not again; Labor knew if it did, it would reach its debt ceiling.

This was a deliberate attempt to hide the fact the Labor was driving the Territory into deeper debt. The previous government's actions were a betrayal of Territorians; it deliberately hid the truth, pushing its inevitable debt ceiling breach just beyond the forward estimates to avoid accountability before the election.

Had Labor been re-elected, it would now be scrambling to explain why it has smashed its own debt limit and plunged the Territory into further financial chaos. Instead of investing in crucial infrastructure for healthcare, aged care or mental health—priorities that matter to Territorians—it wasted taxpayers' money on pet projects like shade structures; art galleries; playgrounds; and, my favourite, the $5,000 Christmas tree.

Labor abandoned the needs of Territorians, leaving us with a deep financial mess and nothing to show for it. The Treasurer has a difficult job. I have been working with him lately, and he has a special calculator, which he needs because the debt is that bad.

The CLP is putting Territorians first. That is what they voted for, and it is what they deserve.

I commend this Bill to the Assembly.

J DAVIS (Johnston): Madam Speaker, this Bill is yet another example of the CLP removing transparency from its decision-making and, with it, opportunities for the public to hold the government to account for its decisions. The purpose of parliament is to be accountable to the people.

As the Treasurer said, the NT was always going over our borrowing limit, meaning the only effect this amendment has will be to remove the requirement for the Treasurer to produce a report addressing why more money was borrowed. It is not too much to ask that the Treasurer explain when money is borrowed. This is particularly true when we are speaking about a jurisdiction with complex and unique funding needs and already suffer from a lack of accountability about how funds intended for one purpose are used for another.

Despite the championing of large private industries that goes on in this Chamber, the mining and gas industries are not the backbone of the NT economy; the public and community sector is. The public and community sector is the largest contributor to the NT economy, jobs, growth and the gross state product. The NT economy has always been public, and that will not change regardless of what members in this Chamber might believe.

Managing the NT's economy, the services it funds and the social needs it meets means managing public money. Our economy is not separate from our society. We cannot manage the economy's needs without managing our society's needs. We often talk about the economy as though it is a separate entity devoid of any relationship with the health of our society, but the opposite is true.

A helpful way to think about the economy is as a measure of the health of our society. All government decisions affect the economy, which services get money, which corporations can mine our land, which groups of people get support and who is left behind. All these decisions bear a cost and contribute to whether a government is or is not responsibly managing the economy. To manage the economy responsibly, we must first govern responsibly.

I was motivated to run for politics in the Northern Territory and speak up for my electorate of Johnston because I can see that wealth in the Northern Territory is not being shared. I see some people getting very rich, benefiting greatly from the opportunities available. When I drive to work through Fannie Bay and

Bayview, past many beautiful houses, large swimming pools and boats, I see that some Territorians are doing well and that economic growth is making some Territorians very wealthy and comfortable.

That is only happening for some Territorians. From the work that I have been doing in communities over the past 30 years, I have seen and experienced firsthand that many Territorians are not getting wealthier or benefiting from the Northern Territory's economic development. To the contrary, many Territorians are becoming poorer. There may be wealth created in some places in the Northern Territory, but the story on the ground and especially in remote communities is that many people are not receiving any share of that new wealth.

This is not just my observation; it is a story I hear from many people in my electorate. We have all been watching as the gap between rich and poor in the Territory grows wider. The recent 2021 national census showed us that Indigenous policy in the Northern Territory is getting worse fast. Between 2016 and 2021 there was a 10 to 13% increase in Indigenous poverty rates in most places in the Northern Territory. In other words, an average First Nations person living in Katherine, Borroloola, Tennant Creek, Yuendumu or Wadeye had 10% less money to spend in real terms in 2021 compared with what they had in 2016.

Territorians in regional and remote areas are growing poorer, not richer. We all intuitively know this. If you have lived in Darwin for a long time like I have, then you know and feel that many people are growing poorer and that disadvantaged Territorians are going through hard times and are receiving less support than they used to.

I draw the Assembly's attention to the source of the Northern Territory Government's revenue, why the government gets that money and what we should be doing about it. In short, all of us and all of those working in government offices in Darwin have generous GST distributions from Canberra to thank for our generous salaries and comfortable Territory lifestyles.

These generous GST distributions are given to the Northern Territory in recognition of the high need in the Northern Territory—that is, that we experience unique remoteness and disadvantage in the Territory compared to other parts of Australia.

The key takeaway is that because of the disadvantage and remoteness of the Northern Territory's population, the Northern Territory Government receives high federal funding levels from Canberra. The reality on the ground is that much of money the Northern Territory receives from Canberra never reaches Territorians most in need and those it was intended to reach.

This is the major reason I raise concerns regarding the NT debt ceiling and reporting requirements being lifted. Successive governments have been mismanaging money in the Northern Territory, and we are paying for it in social costs. If social needs like safe and secure housing and access to healthcare go unaddressed, they get worse for the people going without and get more costly for the whole society.

To manage the economy responsibly we must govern responsibly. We need more transparency and accountability regarding how this money is spent before we should allow the government to borrow more.

I want to be clear that some debt is fine; some debt is good. Borrowing now to make our future better is a good idea—just like a person borrowing money now to own a house later is a good idea—but there are two parts to this question. If you borrow now and mismanage that money, you do not get the benefits later of your borrowing and still get saddled with the debt.

It is important to know that there is a reason we have the debt cap and associated reporting requirements in the first place. The NT's debt to gross state product ratio is the highest in the country by a long way. Despite what the members in this Chamber will tell you, we will not get out of this hole by boosting our gross state product with fanciful private development; we will get out of this hole by managing our money better. That means funding the services we need now so we do not pay the cost of unaddressed needs later.

Many of us may not realise that the generous GST distribution the NT receives is the result of Canberra's approach to addressing disadvantages in the NT. The very high GST distributions were intended to ensure we had the same opportunity as other states and territories around Australia to provide our residents with comparable services.

For example, the GST distributions are designed to balance out geographic and demographic disadvantages that individual states have and ensure that all states and territories can afford to provide a decent standard

of service and care. This process is called the horizontal fiscal equalisation. It is a method to balance inequalities between states and territories through differentiated GST distributions.

Recognising the unique challenges of the NT, our government receives five times as much funding through the GST per person compared to all the other states and territories. The Northern Territory Government receives well over half its funding from the Commonwealth Government through GST distributions and grants. This is money the federal government in Canberra is providing to the Northern Territory Government to provide services and infrastructure.

According to the 2024–25 budget papers, the Northern Territory Government has an annual revenue of $8.7bn. This is the annual budget of the Northern Territory Government to spend on all services. Of that $8.7bn, almost half or $4.2bn comes from GST distributions. This means that half of all services provided by the government is funded thanks to those GST distributions.

I note for my fellow members that all of this information is publicly available in the NT budget papers, the Commonwealth Grants Commission's submission to the 2023 Senate inquiry into the extent and nature of poverty in Australia, the 2023 Closing the Gap review and Commonwealth Government resources regarding GST distribution. Learning about this has been a deep dive because it is a new area for me, but I wanted to try to get my head around it.

The Northern Territory receives a lot of money from Canberra because of the high need of remote Territorians, yet much of that money never reaches those Territorians. Instead, much of it stays here in Darwin in our pockets and on our streets. Remote Territorians continue to become poorer, meanwhile economic development in the NT seems to be benefiting those in the city.

A friend who had never been to Darwin before visited this week, and the inequality was stark to her and confronting from the first glance. It does not take much to understand that the inequality in the NT needs addressing urgently and cannot be addressed without needs based GST funding for the people it is intended to help.

We should not be borrowing more money before we can confidently say we are spending the money where it was intended and addressing the inequality it was intended to address. We cannot confidently say we are justified in borrowing more money if we do not know what we are borrowing or why, and that is what this amendment is about. It is about letting the government borrow more money before it is held accountable for the money intended for the remote Territorians being spent in other places.

How the budget is spent and why must be transparent. When our economy is dependent on public funding and services, we cannot fix it without transparency in government. The public and community sector is the largest contributor to the NT economy with jobs, growth and grow state product. We will not fix inequality by approving more mines; we will make it worse. We will not fix inequality by fracking the Beetaloo Sub-basin, green lighting Middle Arm or with the Territory Coordinator.

Major private development plays a minuscule role in the NT economy. As we heard yesterday from the Treasurer, fracking in the Beetaloo is only projected to raise $8m in revenue a year. This may sound like a lot, but when it comes to the scale of the Territory budget it is not even enough to run Royal Darwin Hospital for a single day.

The annual budget for the Northern Territory is over $8bn, not $8m. The NT economy is dependant on public funds and public sector jobs. Major private investment never played a major role in the NT economy and the standard of living for most Territorians, and it never will.

By continuing to insist on big business development in oil and gas, the government is gambling with taxpayer money. Instead of making responsible choices and ensuring money intended to help vulnerable people in our society gets to them, they are repeatedly taking unfounded risks. It is not the job of the private sector to regulate the economy or the budget; it is the job of the government. Our economy does not need wishful thinking; it needs integrity and accountability.

Governing responsibly means making decisions that are responsible to look after our long-term future and avoid further endemic social costs. We need fiscal integrity measures like the debt cap because the government is managing taxpayer money without integrity. You do not need to take my word for it; you can listen to the ministers when they say they stand proudly with the minister's council; that we are sending a signal that the Territory is open for business; and 'drill, baby, drill'. I note that it is the fifth time I have heard Trump quoted and cheered in this Chamber, and it makes me ashamed.

Managing the NT budget and economy is not an easy task; it requires intelligence, integrity, planning and transparency. Removing reporting requirements for borrowing beyond a $15m debt cap without any plan in place to address how we got there in the first place is not responsible government. Removing reporting requirements for borrowing while we have the starkest inequality in the country with no plans to address this misappropriation of public funds designed to mitigate inequality is not responsible government.

It is also important to provide an alternative way forward. I hope we can find a pathway to better include and empower regional and remote leaders to have a say in how money is spent in the Northern Territory. Not all decisions about how money is spent in Darwin should be made by our large homogenous government bureaucrats; instead, we need to find better ways to share power. To address worsening poverty in our regions and remote areas we need to get better at listening to the voices outside Darwin.

I have had the privilege of working with many people and communities in my career in the Northern Territory. I learned that people often know what they need and what will work in their area and neighbourhood to make things better. I have often been surprised how creative and successful they are and how bold they can be in coming up with solutions.

It is true that we face many challenges in the Northern Territory, but I have learned in my journey to becoming the Member for Johnston that local communities are powerful when they come together, and their messages can be heard and understood loud and clear.

My vision for the Northern Territory is to find a way to bring communities together and give effect to the messages they give us. As a member of the Northern Territory parliament, I take the responsibility to listen to Territory communities and do everything I can to ensure money is spent in the way our communities have been asking us to. This is how we can ensure the Territory's economic opportunities can be shared by all Territorians.

There is a lot of work to do to make the Territory a more equitable place to live, and that work starts with more transparency, not less. We must move forward, not backwards.

Mr KERLE (Blain): Madam Speaker, I apologise to members; I will try to be brief. I will quickly put some comments on the record about debt in response to the Member for Johnston's comments.

Taking out a loan to pay for an asset that returns a dividend is good debt. There is a question of what an asset and a liability is. An asset puts money in your pocket; a liability takes money out of your pocket. If you take out a loan to purchase an asset that returns a dividend to the Territory, that is a good investment, like the railway. The railway was something the former Member for Blain, Barry Coulter, fought long and hard for. He managed to lay the foundation for the railway in a public-private partnership so that the Territory only chipped in about 30% to get a fantastic asset that is still delivering for the Territory today.

Labor took out loans for ongoing regular expenses. They were paying for the day-to-day outgoings of government with borrowed money; that is the definition of borrowing to purchase a liability. The golden rule in fiscal accountability is that the private sector has to grow faster than the public sector. That is how we can be sure the public sector will always be fiscally sound and able to provide the services we so desperately need to pay for our hospitals, schools, roads, police, Corrections and courts.

Unfortunately, over the last eight years of Labor government our private sector has been choked, strangled and driven into recession, our public sector has grown without restraint. A lot of good things have happened in government—I have worked for the public sector my whole life—but there needs to be fiscal restraint, and there was none.

We need more mines, gas, tourism, agriculture and a manufacturing sector in the Territory, hopefully powered by gas. We need more economic development on Indigenous lands that provide opportunities for real jobs for traditional owners and Indigenous people on country, not fake jobs that are paid for by Commonwealth money paying people to dig a hole and fill it back in. We need real jobs with real private industry for Indigenous people on country.

The only way we can get to a place where the Northern Territory is not dominated by the public sector, as the Member for Johnston rightly pointed out, is for us to get the private sector to grow faster than the public sector over a long period of time. That means things like the Territory Coordinator, which I know we disagree on, and making hard fiscal decisions. There are things we would love to spend money on, but we need to prioritise our spending so we are investing in assets—things that will return a dividend to the Territory—not liabilities that will continue to cost us money, like the shade structure on Cavenagh Street.

I commend this Bill to the Assembly.

Dr RAHMAN (Fong Lim): Mr Deputy Speaker, I had not planned on saying anything in relation to this Bill in the interest of efficiency as much as anything else, but I am compelled to say a few things.

I thank my colleague, the Member for Blain. What he just contributed to the debate evidences that there are people on this side of the House thinking about economic vision, alternatives and possibilities. There is not an absence of a plan, but a contest of ideas regarding our economic future and how to go forward.

I particularly thank the Member for Johnston for her contribution. I appreciate that she has done a lot of homework in communicating what she has tonight. In large measure, I agree with many of the things she has to say. That is why I find it so difficult to vote for this Bill tonight because I worry that we will not restrain spending going forward.

I am equally mindful that this is not a position that my learned colleague the Treasurer asked to be put in. This is a position that we inherited from decades of particularly egregious fiscal mismanagement over the last eight years of Labor governance. I talked about mismanagement and overspending from day one in this House and articulated what has gone wrong where and how I think it could be addressed.

Whilst I enjoyed the Leader of the Opposition's remarks for their comedic value in the most part, they are historically revisionist. The fact is that the books have been ground into the ground on the basis of fiscal mismanagement and gross malice, ineptitude or negligence when it comes to our economic affairs over a long time.

As I have said from my maiden speech onwards, I am economically rational, fiscally conservative and socially liberal. Perhaps I am more fiscally conservative than some of my peers within the government. I recognise at this point that the choices have been made by the government not to pull the handbrake fast and depress consumer demand and spook the horses, as it were.

If the government were to make egregious cuts and not repeal the debt ceiling, it is inevitable that the government would have to hit it, report on it, and spending and borrowing might be curtailed and affected. I support my learned colleague the Treasurer in his effort not to spend our way out of the problem, but to continue to spend in the short run to soften the landing of bringing integrity back to our economic position.

It is wholly unreasonable for us to be in the situation we are in, where it is not half of our money that comes in revenue from the Commonwealth; it is more than three-quarters. Half of it is GST money; the other quarter is essentially grants money in different forms. We have to find ways, as I have said from day one, not to just spend money but also institutionally establish how to save it, stop the wastage of it and make it.

The threads of that narrative and the plan for how to coordinate that agenda are starting to come together. There is obviously clarity on this side of the House that improving our regulatory environment by deregulating our environment aggressively—that is what we have done in the small space now—will hopefully facilitate private investment growth. That may transpire. I hope it does, because at the moment that is our singular strategy for making money in the short run, to the best of anybody's knowledge.

That is not the only way to run an economy. There are active conversations held on this side in respect of all that. We need to give the Treasurer a little more credit than we are giving him. We have not spent six or seven months getting across this only to say, 'Maybe we will keep spending, and we will spend our way out of the problem'. There is more going on than that. It is important for us to call a spade a spade, along with some of the other discussions we are having where we need to be a little less floral and a little more dry about the details of the discussion.

It is important to understand that the fiscal position we are in is predominantly the consequence of the rapid deterioration of our debt position over the last decade.

I noted the Member for Karama saying 'dear, dear' in relation to the contention by the Member for Johnston that we would never be able to realise private investment in this place and that it would never dig us out of our financial hole.

That is not true, in my opinion. It will be very difficult, but it will not be impossible. In fact, it has been a common aspiration of multiple governments in the Northern Territory over decades to try to wean us off the public purse by growing private sector investment and enterprise. The reasons why that has not happened are

enumerate, but we must start somewhere with trying to entice and induce private investment back into this space.

We talk about the fact that the public and community sector is the largest contributor to the economy, but that is indicative of us having 27,000 public servants in a place with 250,000 people, which is also diminishing. That is an unsustainable mix in any case.

It is necessary for us to create a regulatory environment that will allow for private investment and to try to reintroduce confidence in the marketplace. That is essentially what the government is trying to do. I am not thrilled with the nomenclature, but when the Deputy Chief Minister says, 'Drill, baby, drill', I think what he is really saying, in his own way, is that we are pro sustainable resource development. If we could just realise this and go forward meaningfully …

J Davis: That is a bit of a stretch.

Dr RAHMAN: I do not think so, because I am the one who has conversations with him at the end of the day. Both sides of this House have had a common aspiration over a long time to try to realise resource extraction, whether in natural gas or mining, so it is completely useless to sling mud on either side now about not wanting to own that agenda.

We have an abundance of sun and gas, and it would be prudent for us to make the best possible use of both whilst trying not to destroy our natural and built environment and maintaining our Territory lifestyle, which we all want to do. The place will not be worth a lick if we cannot live in it anymore, and we all know that.

I am veering off topic, and I do not want to give a speech like the Leader of the Opposition did.

I thank the Member for Johnston for bringing some numbers to this debate. It would have been a tragedy to have this debate without them.

I thank the Member for Blain for bringing an alternative economic vision to the debate, because it is important to understand vanity infrastructure spend is essentially on things that are shadeless shade structures. I seldom point to that one, but it is obviously the one that we can all understand as a stranded asset and a waste of time. Enabling and essential infrastructure are what we need to concentrate our efforts on with our limited resources when it comes to trying to create multiplier effects in economy at this stage. Conversations are being had on a regular basis about where we can best realise growth and where we should put our precious dollars.

I had not intended to speak on this, so I am not armed with facts and figures for once, but there is an economic vision. The strategy we employed broadly, which the Chief Minister announced this week, provides evidence of that. We have to be patient with a government that is less than eight months into its tenure—versus a government that was eight years into a run of fiscal mismanagement—to at least see where the cards fall and to give the government and the Treasurer the benefit of the doubt in that regard.

I believe we can realise private investment growth in this place, and I believe fiscal discipline will be required to do it. I believe our debt position is almost entirely the fault of the last Labor government, as I have said repeatedly in this place. While I am philosophically ill at ease with the idea of repealing a debt cap, I appreciate that at the moment it is about creating a short-run, smooth correction with the hope of providing better fiscal management, integrity and transparency into the future.

Mr YAN (Treasurer)(in reply): Mr Deputy Speaker, I thank all members for their contributions to this debate.

When the Opposition Leader first got up and spoke about cop-outs, cover-ups and hiding, I thought she was talking about the Labor Party, certainly not about us. She said that the CLP has a lack of credibility in fiscal frameworks. I thought it was pretty rich to be questioning our credibility in the fiscal area. The Opposition Leader said that dollars matter; they do matter. I do not think they mattered to the previous Labor government because the reason we are here talking about the debt cap is the way that the previous Labor government spent money. Regarding fiscal integrity and accountability, I found it rich for the Opposition Leader to speak over and again about that. It just did not make any sense.

I will set the record straight on a couple of things. I noted the comments from the Member for Johnston. A lot of her contribution was about the previous Labor government and what it did with finances, which we now find ourselves in the position of having to deal.

The one thing I need to correct is when the Member for Johnston said that private sector investment in the Territory is minuscule; you are incorrect on that. The total economy of the Northern Territory is $35bn. Our budget is only $9bn. Business and investment from the private sector drives our economy with that $35bn. I wanted to make that point.

The Opposition Leader also said that the CLP shuts down scrutiny like a whack-a-mole. We have been nothing but up-front regarding our budget position. I was with the Under Treasurer, who is here with us, when we drove from Darwin to Katherine to Tennant Creek to Alice Springs to talk about the financial mess that we found ourselves in. We have been nothing but open and transparent regarding the budget position the Territory is in.

I want to be clear on that for the future because there is a lot of talk that we are not being transparent about the budget and that we are trying to hide things away. Nothing could be further from the truth. I will always be up-front with Territorians about our financial position. I will always be open to share those financial positions with every Territorian. The commitment from this government is to get out there and share that position ongoing.

We have to repeal this debt cap because of the financial position we are in due to the previous Labor government. We will be open and transparent with all Territorians regarding our fiscal position into the future.

We will deliver a budget in May. After that budget we will be talking to Territorians. We will do another roadshow. I hope the Under Treasurer likes driving because we will be out on the road again visiting all the communities and regional places where we can talk about what the financial position of the Northern Territory is and what we are doing to try to deal with the issues we have been left with by Labor. They are legacy issues. It will take us, sadly, a long time to fix those.

I note from the Member for Nelson's contribution that the 2024 Pre-Election Fiscal Outlook Report published before Labor lost government last year has a section on risks and contingent liabilities. The Opposition Leader claimed that I have never scrutinised a budget paper. She is wrong there because I scrutinised her government over the years.

Page 40 of this report says that funding for critical services like hospitals were budgeted to reduce or cease over the forward estimates. It is in black and white that Labor knew about this and knew that this funding was dropping off a cliff. The Leader of the Opposition was a member of Budget Cabinet and knew this. If she did not know, then she was not doing her job in Budget Cabinet.

The Opposition Leader is correct that the former Labor government met all the reporting requirements and ticked all their boxes; however, they were actively failing to budget for the Territory's future so the fiscal aggregates looked better. That is the problem we find ourselves in; the funding was dropping off a cliff for all these projects. They had all the projects running out into the future, but they were only funding them year by year to try to hide the fact that they would hit the debt ceiling hard. Labor failed to act with integrity and 100% transparency about the Territory's true financial position, which is worse than we all thought.

We are here to talk about the Fiscal Integrity and Transparency Amendment Bill. The former government introduced the borrowing limit, which came into effect in July 2021 when there was a projection of being $30bn in debt under the former Treasurer. That triggered the Langoulant report among other things, and that is when the debt ceiling was introduced. As many have spoken about tonight, it seemed to greenlight the Labor government—'We can spend up to $15bn'—and away they went. In the last 18 months there was a $2bn increase in debt.

A government must have flexibility to spend. I do not like borrowing. I do not like spending money and throwing it after bad. I am tight with Territory taxpayers' money. At the end of the day, sometimes you have to spend a little money to make a little money. We are at the point in time when we have no outs when it comes to the debt cap. Labor left us in a position where the breach of the debt cap is inevitable. The only way to stop breaching it is—and I have said it publicly during the roadshow and media—to get rid of 4,000 public servants tomorrow. That would be the only way we could not breach that debt cap, but it would be irresponsible. We would kill the Territory if we did that, and that is something that I am not willing to do.

We will need to borrow money to deliver services for Territorians as we work through fixing the budget. I have been working through the infrastructure program—the Opposition Leader spoke at length about that today—and I looked at what Labor did to it commencing in 2021–22. It went through the roof. There were announcements of record spends in infrastructure, with over $4bn for infrastructure investment. Sadly, they did not have the cash to do it, and it is still not there. When you look at what they had budgeted for this year,

it was falling off a cliff. They did this in such a way so that it did not show a breach of the debt ceiling in the outer years. They would have published it and then borrowed more money for their infrastructure program, again pushing us further towards that debt ceiling.

Yes, we are facing fiscal challenges; these challenges were created by the previous Labor government, and the Opposition Leader was a part of Budget Cabinet in the government. To say the things she said in this debate is laughable.

The Opposition Leader mentioned the undergrounding of power. It was not the CLP's idea to remove that. The Power and Water Corporation told me that it did not have the money to do it. Labor gave Power and Water a budget of $65m. Labor gaslit the people in the northern suburbs about this.

I spoke to the media after we had to cease that funding. I took an educated guess on how much it would cost to put in underground power in the northern suburbs. I thought it would be more than $600m, and I was not far off the mark. I asked Power and Water to do the sums, and it came back with a conservative figure of a minimum of $500m. The Labor Party gaslit the people of the northern suburbs when it told them it would underground their power for $65m. What a joke. Labor was out by approximately $450m on its estimates, which seems to happen with all its projects, such as the Tiger Brennan overpass. That is a huge piece of infrastructure, but the budget was way off the mark.

It appears to be a hallmark of the previous Labor government to make an announcement and throw a few bucks at it, but not do the sums. Labor did not do its homework because the funds were not there; it did not have any idea how much something would actually cost. That is why we find ourselves in this fiscal position.

We will have to remove the debt cap, as we need that flexibility to deliver for Territorians. The Finocchiaro CLP government is fiscally responsible. Members on this side of the House will be open and transparent at all times with Territorians about Territory finances.

Motion agreed to; Bill read a second time.

Consideration in detail

Clause 1, by leave, agreed to.

Clause 2:

Ms UIBO: When is the legislation expected to commence?

Mr YAN: It should come into effect by the time it goes through the standard processes and assent by the Administrator.

Ms UIBO: Will you seek a specific date with the Administrator and the Executive Council?

Mr YAN: At this stage, no. This Bill will go through the normal processes, and it will go through to the Administrator and Executive Council. Once the Administrator has assented to it, it will commence.

Ms UIBO: Do you anticipate that will be the month of March, April or May?

Mr YAN: As a previous minister, you are probably aware of this in the same way I am. I expect that this should go to the Administrator and be dealt with probably either late March or sometime in April.

Clause 2 agreed to.

Clause 3, by leave, agreed to.

Clause 4:

Ms UIBO: This deals with the repeal of section 3, 'Special exception for 2020'. Through this process will there be no attempt to prevent the Under Treasurer from releasing a Pre-Election Fiscal Outlook Report before the 2028 election?

Mr YAN: I am not sure whether you understand the special exception for 2020. It was put in only for that one year because the federal government had not delivered its budget. There was an exception allowed for

the Treasurer in the Northern Territory not to deliver a PFO for that year only. This is a tidying-up matter to remove that from the Act. It was only to give the Treasurer the power not to deliver a PFO in 2020.

Ms UIBO: Can I confirm that the Under Treasurer will be able to release a Pre-Election Fiscal Outlook in 2028 for the Northern Territory election?

Mr YAN: Absolutely.

Clause 4 agreed to.

Clause 5:

Ms UIBO: Will you ensure that Territorians will continue to have transparency over government debt levels, including the reasons for those levels? Where can they secure this information?

Mr YAN: Territorians can get transparency and all those figures through the various functions of Treasury, whether they be through the normal budgetary process, the midyear financial reports or in the Pre-Election Fiscal Outlook reports. All those numbers will be freely available to Territorians.

Ms UIBO: Can you confirm where they can find this information?

Mr YAN: They will be available in Budget Paper No 2 and, of course, in the midyear report.

Ms UIBO: Will you release the Treasury advice in relation to this decision?

Mr YAN: What decision would that be?

Ms UIBO: To repeal the debt ceiling section.

Mr YAN: I am trying to understand what your question is about.

Ms UIBO: The advice Treasury has given you to remove the debt ceiling is in the best interests of Territorians. Will you release that advice, if that is what you received from the Treasury department?

Mr YAN: Now I understand your question—the decision to remove. We received a number of pieces of advice from Treasury on different options available to the government. The decision to remove the debt ceiling was made by Cabinet.

Ms UIBO: Was there no advice from Treasury to remove this section of the legislation?

Mr YAN: Treasury provided the government with a number of options regarding the debt ceiling, and the government made the choice, based on the advice given to us, to remove the debt ceiling.

Mr YOUNG: Can you outline the options given to you?

Mr YAN: No.

Ms UIBO: Has the Treasurer sought expert economic advice outside of government for this decision?

Mr YAN: The advice sought on removal of the debt ceiling and about the finances of the Northern Territory were provided to us by Treasury. I am happy with the advice we received from Treasury, so I found no need to go externally for advice.

Ms UIBO: What is the current forecasted debt level?

Mr YAN: That will not be known until the finalisation of Budget Cabinet. That will be available in the May budget.

Ms UIBO: I assume this question will receive the same answer: if Territorians want the updated level of debt, will they have to wait for the May budget papers?

Mr YAN: Yes. You should know how the process works for developing the budget. Once Budget Cabinet is completed the final numbers will be available in Budget Paper No 2.

Ms UIBO: How will you keep Territorians informed about your government's measure to reduce debt, including any budget cuts or austerity measures that you see fit to implement?

Mr YAN: As I said in my reply speech, I will be open and transparent. We will be telling Territorians what is going on through various means, whether they be roadshows or other public events. There will be the opportunity to review the budget papers and the midyear financial report.

Mr YOUNG: Will the roadshows expand off the Stuart Highway because I know the last roadshow was through …

Mr MACKAY: A point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker! Standing Order 155: Discussion Confined to Question. This should be about the clause being discussed, so I do not know how we are on roadshows.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER: I will let the question stand and let the Treasurer decide whether he answers it.

Mr YOUNG: It is up to the Treasurer to answer. He mentioned roadshows in his last answer. We want to make sure all Territorians have access to the information when it is put out. Will the roadshows be outside of Alice Springs, Darwin, Tennant Creek and Katherine in remote areas?

Mr BURGOYNE: Did you guys ever do one?

Mr YAN: Thank you, Member for Braitling; that was quite good. I note that Labor did not do a roadshow and never got out to the public. I will do my best to get out and advise all Territorians. To do the roadshows, it will be budget driven …

Ms Uibo: You know that is not true. Why are you telling mistruths? The Under Treasurer is sitting right next to you listening to you lie.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER: Cease the interjections, please.

Ms UIBO: What alternative transparency measures will you implement with your CLP government to replace the removal of this legislation?

Mr YAN: There are measures already in place, as I mentioned, through the budget papers and the midyear financial report. We will endeavour to discuss it with all Territorians. I have been out twice now. We will be doing regular public appearances where we can to discuss the state of the budget and what we are doing to repair the mess left by the previous government.

Ms UIBO: Because the debt ceiling will be removed, will there be no other measure to track whether spending becomes more exorbitant than anticipated if it was set at the $15bn debt ceiling.

Mr YAN: I have been advised by the Under Treasurer that all the normal parameters of the *Financial Management Act* will remain in force for reporting of the debt through the normal measures, so nothing is changing for the rest of that Act as far as the government finance reporting requirements go. It is only the removal of the debt ceiling.

Ms UIBO: Can you confirm that if a certain amount of debt is hit in the Northern Territory, there will be a reporting mechanism to parliament?

Mr YAN: That would be the midyear report and budget every year. The ability to see those numbers will be available to you and all Territorians through the normal reporting process.

Ms UIBO: So, there will be no set limit on spending in the Northern Territory for the CLP's budget, therefore no accountability for a particular figure if it is hit? The debt ceiling legislation was to provide a report-back mechanism to parliament, which is now being removed.

Mr YAN: I have answered that question. The normal reporting processes through the *Financial Management Act* will stay in place. As we work through our budgets, they will be made available, and all assessable debt will be made available in those budgets and the midyear report. I cannot add to my answer.

Ms UIBO: What measures will be put in place to ensure stability and predictability in the government's spending and economic policies?

Mr YAN: If you were at our breakfast launch on Tuesday you may have an idea about what we are putting in place. We are working through our normal Budget Cabinet process, and from that the budget in May will outline this government's financial priorities and what it will look like this year and the outer years up to 2027–28.

Ms UIBO: Maybe next year we will get that invite; you are open and transparent, just not to the opposition. Has the government assessed the long-term financial risk in removing this borrowing limit that was intended through the debt ceiling?

Mr YAN: Yes, we have.

Ms UIBO: Is there any way to access the outcome of that assessment?

Mr YAN: That assessment will be undertaken by Moody's. Once we deliver our budget, they will look at the current state of the Northern Territory and make their assessment on our borrowing capability post that.

Ms UIBO: Could you let us know when the next Moody's assessment will be?

Mr YAN: I do not know when that will be; it will be sometime after the budget is released in May.

Ms UIBO: What justification is there for allowing unlimited borrowing, and how does it align with the CLP's mantra to have a responsible fiscal management process?

Ms YAN: That is easily summed up. We will not be doing what the previous government did, continuing to spend and spend. We will ensure that our spending and borrowing is in line with what we can do. We will maintain tight fiscal measures on our budget, assessing our borrowings against our earnings. We have a number of measures in place to determine how we are performing within our economy. Those measures will be made public.

Ms UIBO: Will there be an unlimited amount of borrowing the Northern Territory Government can do in the next four years?

Mr YAN: We will not have a debt ceiling or go crazy borrowing money, like the previous government. We will do everything within our power to ensure our borrowings are kept to the lowest possible limit whilst repairing the legacy debt issues, which were there when we came to government.

Ms UIBO: Do you have a plan to put in place any similar process of a debt cap for the Territory?

Mr YAN: No.

Ms UIBO: Was there any public consultation or expert economic advice regarding Cabinet's decision on this legislation?

Mr YAN: I answered most of this earlier. Throughout the roadshows we did down the track, plus the public concourse we had in Darwin, we were open about the fact that we were removing the debt ceiling. It was not hidden; it was spoken about ad nauseam in the media. Being just a repeal of the debt ceiling, there was no requirement to go out to public consultation in my opinion. Our decision and approach to this was made public, and people had the opportunity to give feedback during the roadshow events in Darwin, Katherine, Tennant Creek and Alice Springs.

Ms UIBO: I think I lost my invitation in the mail for the Katherine one.

Will you release the advice that Treasury has provided regarding this part of the Bill?

Mr YAN: No.

Ms UIBO: How does the government plan to ensure debt remains at a sustainable level without a statutory cap which requires a report back to parliament?

Mr YAN: It requires a government that will be fiscally responsible in our borrowings and spendings, and I will ensure that takes place as Treasurer.

Ms UIBO: Will you ensure a process that requires a statutory report back?

Mr YAN: We have that statutory report back through our normal processes under the *Financial Management Act*, which is through the normal budget processes in May and the midyear report.

Ms UIBO: With the removal of the cap, is the government willing to take on significantly more debt in the future?

Mr YAN: Unfortunately, the previous government put us in a position where we will need to borrow more and exceed the debt ceiling put in place by the Labor government. There is virtually nothing that this government can do in order not to breach the debt cap that you put in place. The only way not to reach that debt cap would be to remove $400m from the budget immediately and ongoing. This government cannot and will not do that because it would ruin the Northern Territory economy.

Ms UIBO: Besides your goodwill, what alternative safeguards will be introduced to prevent reckless spending?

Mr BURGOYNE: Change of government.

Ms UIBO: Back to Labor? Thanks; we are happy about that one, Member for Braitling.

Mr YAN: That is why there has been a change in government.

Here are a few of the points regarding our responsible fiscal management to reduce our debt levels. We have spoken about growing own-source revenue through economic development and population growth, containing employee cost growth and restraining growth in non-frontline public sector staffing. We continue to engage with the Commonwealth to unlock economic opportunities, enable sustainable debt management to support regional and remote Territorians. We are strengthening policies and processes across government to improve the effectiveness of government spending. We are developing a new, contemporary and simplified fiscal strategy focused on prudent debt management.

Ms UIBO: It all sounds good. Let us hope it is put into practice.

What is the government's long-term strategy for debt repayment? What borrowing is allowed if it is to increase beyond the $15bn original debt ceiling?

Mr YAN: It is fairly straightforward. This is to make sure what we are spending is fiscally responsible. We are working with the Commonwealth to increase our GST revenue and to grow own-source revenue through various means. That will help us work towards paying down the debt legacy we have been left.

Ms UIBO: Other than the normal budget process and the MYEFO tabled in parliament, will you be implementing any mandatory reporting for debt levels to maintain accountability to Territorians?

Mr YAN: No. We will be utilising the current reporting requirements in the *Financial Management Act*, which have not changed.

Ms UIBO: I think this question has been answered, but are there any alternative mechanisms the government is exploring when it comes to the accountability measure with the removal of the debt cap?

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER: I think this is becoming a bit repetitive.

Mr YAN: I have answered that question.

Clause 5 agreed to.

Remainder of the Bill, by leave, taken as a whole and agreed to.

Bill agreed to.

Mr YAN (Treasurer): Madam Speaker, I move that the Bill be now read a third time.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 17	Noes 6
Ms Boothby	Mr Brown

Mr Burgoyne	J Davis
Ms Cahill	K McNamara
Mrs Carlson	Mr Paech
Mr Charls	Ms Uibo
Mr Edgington	Mr Young
Mrs Finocchiaro	
Mrs Hersey	
Mr Howe	
Mr Kerle	
Mr Mackay	
Mr Maley	
Mr O'Gallagher	
Mr Patel	
Dr Rahman	
Mr Yan	
Mrs Zio	

Motion agreed to; Bill read a third time.

ADJOURNMENT

Mr EDGINGTON (Leader of Government Business): Madam Speaker, I move that the Assembly do now adjourn.

Mr PAECH (Gwoja): Madam Speaker, today is National Close the Gap Day, and we reflect on our shared responsibility to address the inequalities that continue to affect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples across our nation. It is a day to recommit to the vision of a fair and just Australia where no-one is left behind.

The Closing the Gap strategy is built on the recognition that the gap in life expectancy, education, employment and housing between Indigenous Australians and non-Indigenous Australians is unacceptable in modern society. These disparities are not just statistics; they are lived experiences of inequality that we, as a nation, have the power and responsibility to change.

Investment in closing the gap is an investment in justice, fairness and opportunity. It is an investment in addressing systemic disadvantages and ensuring all Australians have the chance to thrive. This means funding and resources for critical areas like:

- health to close the gap on life expectancy and address preventable diseases
- education to ensure that every child has access to a culturally safe and high-quality learning
- housing to ensure the sustainability that underpins wellbeing and opportunity
- employment and economic participation to create pathways out of poverty and into prosperity
- children to ensure that the children of today have a bright future for tomorrow.

Investing in these areas cannot be done on its own. Real change requires Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders to be at the centre of decision-making to be empowered. For too long policies and programs have been developed without meaningful input from the people most affected. We have seen the result of this top-down approach in policies that fail, trust that erodes and gaps that persist. Self-determination is not just a principle; it is a necessity. Decisions about health, education, housing and our children cannot be made for Aboriginal people; they must be made with and by Aboriginal people.

When communities are empowered to lead the outcomes are stronger, more sustainable and culturally relevant. Programs like Indigenous ranger programs and community-controlled health services are living proof of what happens when local voices are heard and endorsed.

On this day I urge all us leaders, policymakers and everyday Australians to reflect on the role we all have to play in achieving quality and justice. We must listen deeply, act boldly and commit ourselves to the partnerships that are needed to close the gap.

Closing the gap is not just about fixing the past; it is about building a future that we can all be proud of. It is about ensuring that every child, no matter their background, can grow up strong, healthy and full of opportunity.

Let today be a reminder that the work continues and that every step we take together brings us closer to an Australia where everyone has the chance to survive. When our children, elders, Torres Strait Islanders and Aboriginal people are empowered we thrive, we survive.

We often hear in parliaments across this country the statistics used against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Although there is a significant journey to be undertaken, we must also celebrate many achievements. We should be celebrating increases in the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people completing their education and Year 12 studies.

There is work to be done. I acknowledge the outstanding work from the Coalition of Peaks and all the Aboriginal community-controlled organisations who work tirelessly every day to improve the life outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders in our country. Today serves as a reminder of that important work.

It is disappointing that today the Northern Territory Government has not mentioned National Close the Gap Day nor taken the opportunity to talk about the importance of Closing the Gap. The Aboriginal Affairs, Health, Housing and Education ministers in the Northern Territory are silent today on Closing the Gap.

Today we heard the government talk about fining Aboriginal families who have difficulty getting their children to school and evicting Aboriginal families who have difficulty in sustaining healthy tenancies—not supporting them, but evicting them. This is what we are hearing on the National Close the Gap Day in the Northern Territory parliament when we should be coming together and recognising the strength, resilience and courage of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, celebrating the uniqueness of the cultural expressions, identity and strength that Aboriginal people bring to this wonderful place we call home. We should be celebrating the participation in our culture, creative arts and economy. They are all things we should be proud of.

Yes, as I said, there are many things that we all need to do better, but on National Close the Gap Day we have not heard that; in fact, we heard the opposite.

The Northern Territory Attorney-General and the Corrections minister talk about increasing the rates of Indigenous incarceration. The Environment minister talks about eroding Aboriginal people's ability to have a say in the environment. The Deputy Chief Minister says that if you care about the environment or are standing up for the environment, you should go back to where you came from. Newsflash: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people come from this land, as they have for thousands of years. The Member for Karama says that he has long-term residents in his electorate who are Larrakia who have been there 40 years. No, they have been here for 40,000-plus years, mate.

On this day we should be celebrating the diversity, strength, resilience and courage of First Nations people and celebrating and acknowledging the contributions of our forefathers and mothers and the uniqueness they have brought.

Today is National Close the Gap Day, and as an Aboriginal person and a policymaker I recommit to working with the federal government and in this place to make sure that policies discussed always consider how they will impact on closing the gap so that our young children have a bright future and our elders have a secure future—one that we can all flourish in and celebrate together.

I am disappointed that the Northern Territory Government could not even be bothered to bring on a motion to talk about it. It could not acknowledge the significance of today. The Aboriginal Affairs minister could not acknowledge what today means and the road the government must go on. They could not even talk about the investment that their government is making in this space. It is a sad day.

Mrs Hersey interjecting.

Mr PAECH: I pick up on the interjections from the Education minister, continuing to snipe from the sidelines when we talk about Aboriginal people. Clearly, that is what she thinks of them.

Today is a day we should be celebrating, and I urge every Territorian to take note and support the Closing the Gap initiatives and measures which can make the Territory a better place.

Dr RAHMAN (Fong Lim): Madam Speaker, 10 March was Commonwealth Day and an opportunity to appreciate that we belong to a Commonwealth of Nations with shared history and aspirations. Although the event traces its origins to Empire Day, a day which was initially conceived to celebrate the British Empire, since the latter half of the 20th century the focus has shifted to emphasising the modern Commonwealth of Nations. The event was renamed Commonwealth Day in 1958, and its date moved to the second Monday in March in 1977.

Commonwealth Day is typically marked by a message made by the Head of State in the Commonwealth, as well as additional statements from the Commonwealth Secretary-General. There are interdenominational observances which are held in cities across the Commonwealth, including one held by the Head of the Commonwealth at Westminster Abbey, London.

I note the passing of the occasion today for three reasons of salience to this House. The first is that, at a time of shifting geopolitics and global uncertainty, it is worth reflecting on whom we actually share common values and commonality with and some of the positive forces that bind us together.

The second thing I note is that, notwithstanding the complexities of colonisation, it is worth appreciating, especially on a day when we have been espousing all the virtues of education, what a significant role the Commonwealth has and continues to play in education globally. I am personally extremely grateful for the educational opportunities I have been afforded by the Commonwealth over a range of years.

Thirdly, whilst the Commonwealth and the UK headquarters might feel extremely distant from us in Darwin, we all, more than most, belong to the Commonwealth in a direct way as members of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association.

The CPA has been relatively dormant in our polity for a number of years, but it is one of the oldest established organisations in the Commonwealth. It brings together members who are united by their respect for the rule of law, individual rights and freedoms and the pursuit of positive ideals for parliamentary democracy. It is something we should work together, as a parliament, to reinvigorate under the auspices of the Speaker.

The CPA is made up of almost 180 other legislative chambers and branches divided across nine geographic regions. We are a long way from the rest of Australia, but we are part of a broader fabric of democracy across the globe, and it behoves us to be part of it while we have the opportunity. There is a vast opportunity for parliamentarians and parliamentary staff to collaborate on issues of mutual interest and to share good practice.

I personally am learning an enormous amount from the CPA materials that we all have available to us. There are all sorts of information modules that are really instructive for the old and new parliamentarians amongst us. I note that today, whilst rushing past the lift, I found this flyer, ‘Top 10 Tips for New Parliamentarians’, amongst many other bits of material that I believe the CPA Headquarters Secretariat has been putting around to try to nudge us in the direction.

New and old parliamentarians would probably benefit from some of these ideas: don’t panic; remember who you work for; seek advice; get prepared; specialise; set boundaries; keep it clean; build relationships; and read your standing orders—I imagine that would have been a useful one today for a number of us.

The theme of Commonwealth Day for 2025 was ‘Together We Thrive’; that is the point. Commonwealth Day is an international harmony day, and just like the event we celebrated so enthusiastically yesterday and will officially celebrate again tomorrow, it is worth appreciating.

While we are in the neighbourhood of London and the CPA, I also wanted to shine a light on Darwin’s recent production of *Mary Poppins*, which brought together a huge number of people who devoted six months to putting on an artistic production that was genuinely first rate and worthy of recognition. The amateur production made up of cast, crew and helpers of more than 100 sold out five shows at the Darwin Entertainment Centre. It was a long and intense production. Things like these are not just small Mickey Mouse things; they are high-quality productions that support the Darwin Entertainment Centre and bring people into the CBD who then spend in the city.

I was lucky to catch the final matinee show at which there was a packed room of kids who I could not believe kept it together for what was an excellent but pretty long show. It is a testament to the quality of the production that all those kids stayed engaged. Young and old appreciated the event.

I shout out the people who were involved in the production because they did not even get a mention in the *NT News* until after the five shows had sold out. That is the state of affairs and neglect when it comes to our arts sector, in my opinion. I have spoken several times about the fact that we punch above our weight class in putting on artistic productions and having a disproportionate number of people involved in visual art, music, dance and theatre. This is the stuff that makes us money, whereas a lot of other stuff does not make us much at all. It is worth getting behind our arts sector because it is a growth sector that, alongside other industries we are looking to champion, can help us move forward and prosper economically and socially.

To the creative team of Cat Hart, director; Michael Loughlin, musical director; Abigail Hatton, choreographer; Sally Bevis in wardrobe; Tomm Lydiard in lighting design; and Chris Kluge in sound design, well done on your hard work.

The stage and technical crew, who are often neglected, built amazing sets. They are Annette Gore; Mary Verus; Michael Bradtke; Madeline Jarvis; Chris Kluge; Tully Gelfling; Daniel Gore; Mahli Seden; Angel Aquino; Debbie Barnett; Allie Kendall; Swahnnya De Almeida; Michael Gore; and Oliver Jarvis.

The set maintenance and construction and costume teams do the hard work behind the scenes that no-one notices but makes the whole thing hang together. They are Chris Kluge; Daniel Gore; Ben Hall; Michael Gore; Mitchell Strzelecki; Resy van Beek; Annette Gore; Martin Gore; Cat Hart; Glen Jarvis; Sally Bevis; Yvonne Corby; and Jacqui Saunders. Thank you for all your hard work.

Those were the people behind the scenes, which gives you a scale for the number of people who are involved in putting on something that large. It is not just about a few posters at the last minute; it is six months of tireless effort from people.

The orchestra is Benjamin Bradtke; James Teh; JC John Collins; David Smith; Amy Zhao; Sam Harrison; Bruce Cartwright; Joel Hoare; David Pye; Craig McGiffen; Matt Holt; Oliver Locos; David Chin; Jenny Hodgkinson; Tania Watts; and Michael Bardon. Thank you so much for giving up your time to perform in a high-quality musical from a difficult book.

Thank you to the ensemble who did the hard work shoe-shuffling on the stage: Ben Hall; Patrik Ralph; Harry Walker; Glen Jarvis; Justin Dela; Vega-Dela Pena; Fuakava Hatch; Liz Keith; Andrew Edwards; Chris Obst; Ludo Harrison; Lyndelle Barry; Helen Nenke; Sarah Cullinan; and Cameron Wieck.

To the main cast, it is an enormous amount of work being involved in a production like this, learning all the lines, giving up your time whilst holding down a full-time job and doing it for free to share and make the Territory a better, liveable place that has lifestyle options where you can watch *Mary Poppins* and go shooting, fishing, hunting and drag racing. These things are important in their own right. To Kamaron Arthur; Martin Gore; Rachel Wharam; Lina Zhao; Jonathan Bradtke; Lily Daniel; Jett Hutton; Fiona Wake; Yolande Davidge; and Resy van Beek, thank you so much for your efforts. Yolande Davidge recently underwent a medical procedure, and I wish her all the very best in her recovery.

Finally, I would be remiss not to single out Mary Poppins herself. Hannah Clark, who played Mary Poppins with such grace and poise, really deserves a shout-out as a class performer. When Hannah Clark is not busy entertaining children as Mary Poppins, she is Captain Starlight at the hospital—that is who she is. She is the one cheering up all those sick kids in the hospital and then in her down time, doing it on stage with her voice.

It is not a small enterprise putting on something like this. Thousands of Territorians benefited from being a part of it. I commend the production to the Assembly.

K McNAMARA (Nightcliff): Madam Speaker, apologies in advance for a bit of a shift in tone. Just a forewarning that my adjournment will be heavy in nature and may be upsetting for some people to hear.

I feel that with my platform comes enormous responsibility to speak out for the voices who are often muted. After our epic night on Tuesday, I got home at 2 am. Unable to sleep, I jumped online to Instagram to be confronted with the images of dead and dying children—I am sorry; I know this is unprofessional, but I am just a normal person, not a career politician—from the latest indiscriminate Israeli bombing of civilians in Gaza. It was such a wrenching feeling to have been so swallowed up in an incredibly intense night here with all the pettiness, hostility and outright lies that happen in this Chamber, which can feel like the whole world, for that to then be shattered by being instantly transported to the refugee tents of families in Gaza.

As I lay in bed, my 15-month-old baby lay sleeping peacefully next to me, I saw images of little Palestinian babies mutilated, their feet poking out of the rubble. On Tuesday night this week, Israel broke the ceasefire

and spent the night bombing refugee tent encampments in civilian areas. The body of the first dead baby had a little pink jumpsuit on with flowers. It is important that I say this. I imagined the mother picking that outfit out for her baby when she was pregnant, with hope for her child's future.

I saw men weeping over the wrapped-up bodies of children. It is something that the brain cannot understand when you first see it—the small cloth-wrapped bundles that are children's bodies. I saw a video of a little boy, about six years old, so traumatised by witnessing the death of his entire family that he sat directly facing a bloody hospital wall staring blankly and quietly rocking.

It is not just the bombing of civilian areas that are killing these children; I have seen and heard testimony of doctors. For those who may want to dismiss the testimony of Palestine healthcare workers, I have heard this from foreign aid doctors there about treating children with multiple bullet wounds from Israeli snipers. No sniper accidently shoots a child twice.

I saw a video of a grandmother running through a town square in Gaza holding up a white flag in one hand whilst holding the hand of a ten-year-old grandson in the other to be shot dead by an Israeli sniper—the boy confused looking down at his dead grandmother, unsure where to run.

On Tuesday night I watched an Australian doctor from Perth who had just arrived in Gaza speak to the camera as he lay exhausted on the floor of the barely working hospital. His name is Dr Mohammed Mustafa. This is some of what he said:

'We worked all through the night. We have not stopped. The bombing has not stopped. We have run out of all painkillers. We cannot sedate anyone. When we intubate people, they wake up choking because we have no sedation. There are seven girls getting their legs amputated with no anaesthesia. The bombing is still going on. The room is still shaking. It is mostly just women and children burnt head to toe, limbs missing, heads missing.

'The man in the other video that I put up—I did a chest drain, and he died. The video from the other day of three little girls lying on the bed were his children. They are now orphaned. Their mother did not even make it into the hospital. She was killed along with their other sister. I do not know what else to tell you. The bombing is still going on. The rooms are shaking; the screams are everywhere. I cannot bear to see another mother wailing in grief holding the dead bodies of her children.'

This is why so many people are frustrated, confused and furious at the representatives from both major parties at the Territory and federal level. Are they not seeing these same images? Are they seeing them and do not care? How could this be?

We are being livestreamed a genocide directly to our phones. For anyone who cares about human life, it is right here. How much more evidence do our representatives need to speak out? We have Palestinian Territorians here whose families have been killed. It is not only Palestinians, as Israel is bombing Lebanon and Yemen. I have spoken to constituents who have lost family, who wake every day wondering whether their parents, grandparents and siblings are still alive. We cannot pretend this is not important or relevant to us as lawmakers. As I said in my opening speech in this Assembly, genocide is always morally relevant.

I have a statement to read out from the Palestine Action Group Garramilla, which will be holding a protest at the front of Parliament House tomorrow at 7.30 am:

'Today is day 529 of the Australian-backed US–Israel genocide against the Palestinian people in occupied Palestine. It is the second month of March we have allowed this genocide to continue. On Tuesday 18 March this week at 2 am local time in the occupied Gaza Strip, on the 17th day of the Muslim month of holy Ramadan, Israel reaccelerated the genocide with a bombardment campaign which killed at least 436 Palestinian people and injured hundreds more. With this move, Israel officially and unilaterally ended the so-called ceasefire agreement that it continually violated since it began on 19 January 2025.

'Four-hundred-and-thirty-six Palestinian people in one night, each one a whole universe in themselves, were slaughtered in their sleep while they waited for Sahur—many in tents because Israel has systematically destroyed nearly 70% of buildings in the occupied Gaza Strip as of January this year.

'These Palestinian homes and bodies were destroyed by US-made bombs dropped by F35 jets with parts made exclusively here in Australia on stolen Aboriginal lands, guided by signals and intelligence coming from the US military base at Pine Gap, on occupied Arrernte country. To reiterate, this is an Australian-backed US–Israel genocide against the Palestinian people.

‘Sadly, the Finocchiaro government is eager to have a piece of this profitable genocidal pie by further entrenching militarism in the NT economy, in line with the policy of successive NT governments under both major parties.

‘Last September the NT Government sent a delegation of 15 NT-based businesses to Land Forces 2024 in Melbourne to seek military industrial contracts from arms companies complicit in the genocide in occupied Palestine. These companies included Lockheed Martin and BAE, which advertise their weapons and technologies as battle tested—that is, battle tested on the fragmented bodies of Palestinian people.

‘At that point, Israel had already killed at least 41,020 Palestinian people and injured an additional 94,925 with weapons manufactured by the same complicit companies with which the NT Government was seeking contracts at Land Forces.

‘Next month on 29 April the Finocchiaro government will host the Northern Australia Defence Summit with a focus, among others, on Defence as a driver for local economic growth. Further, we will see the annual return of US Marines on occupied Larrakia country as part of the Marine Rotational Force Darwin this Dry Season. Do we have reassurances that none of these military personnel are participating in the US–Israel genocide against Palestinian people?

‘By further entrenching the military industrial complex into the NT economy, the Finocchiaro government, like the Labor government before it, is committed to forcing Territorian workers to participate in a death-making industry that is complicit in the ongoing genocide against the Palestinian people.

‘The Finocchiaro government must condemn both the US and Israel for their genocide against the Palestinian people in occupied Palestine.

‘It must also introduce procurement investment and partnership policies and guidelines that exclude companies complicit in genocide, international crimes and other gross violations of international human rights and humanitarian law, in line with its obligations under the Genocide Convention, the Geneva Conventions and other international treaties.’

Thus ends the statement from the Palestine Action Group Garramilla.

I urge everyone in this Chamber to speak to their Muslim constituents, because they are hurting. These are our Territorian brothers and sisters—the people we are here to represent. Speak to them. Listen to their voices. Go online and listen to Palestinian voices. This is a genocide in real time, and it is not okay for us with this platform not to speak about it.

I urge everyone to think about what it means for Australia trying to be a second base for the US military. What does that mean for us, and how we are complicit in the way that they are entirely funding and arming this genocide? What does that mean for us?

To the people of Gaza and the Palestinians, I am listening and hearing, and every day my heart breaks for you. There are no words, and every day my heart is with the parents in Palestine.

Mr BURGOYNE (Braitling): Madam Speaker, my adjournment is on the wonderful work that the Clontarf Academy recently did during a Clean Up Australia Day event hosted by the Alice Springs Mayor, Matt Paterson. I thank Rory Hood, the Regional Manager of the Central Australia academies, for the invitation and acknowledge the work of the young men from Yirara College, Centralian Middle School, Centralian Senior College along with our friends from Tennant Creek who all worked together to clean the Todd River and were treated to a bacon and egg wrap afterwards.

A huge shout-out goes to Jose Petrick, a former constituent who has since moved to Old Timers Village in Alice Springs, who recently celebrated her 101st birthday. Jose has been a much-loved member of our community whose insights into the history of Alice Springs are invaluable. Jose took me to visit the Robert Czako Mural at St Mary’s many moons ago, and her insights whilst describing the story and work that had gone into the mural showed the love Jose has for our town’s history. Happy Birthday, Jose. I hope you had a wonderful day spent with your family and friends.

Lastly, I adjourn on the incredible leaders I recently had the honour of awarding their pins to at Braitling Primary school. They are as follows.

School captains, Jin Lu and Thomas; school leaders, Casey, Christian, Madeline and Spencer; Lander house captains, which was the house I was in, Madeline and Spencer; Hale house captains, Ethan and Jethro; Huge house captains, Daniel and Lylah; and Sandover house captains, TJ and Meilah.

Congratulations to all those students. The future for our amazing town looks bright with leaders such as you already putting yourselves forward. Thank you to Braitling Primary school for the invitation and to Principal Donna Wright for all the work you continue to do.

J DAVIS (Johnston): Madam Speaker, I begin by recognising the speech from the Member for Nightcliff. People in this Chamber know I am Jewish. I have a strong connection with the part of the world that is now known as Israel and as Palestine. My heart also breaks for all the people who are being and have been killed in the genocide happening there.

I acknowledge that today is National Close the Gap Day, a day meant to give us an opportunity to reflect on our commitment to improving outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. It is a day when this parliament has passed two laws that will disproportionately impact Aboriginal people in our community. We have heard that in the Northern Territory we are moving backwards. Last night in this Chamber the government recommitted to the Aboriginal Justice Agreement, which we welcomed. You would have seen the Member for Mulka was happy to see that, but on a day like today I ask questions about how we are honouring that commitment.

One of the ways my community responded to a heartbreaking event in the last fortnight, an alleged domestic violence murder in the suburb of Alawa—I talked about this briefly in the Chamber before, but this tragedy occurred in a house surrounded by other houses, full of people who had been raising concerns about the safety of its residents for years. Concerns were voiced to police, Housing, housing services and support agencies. Many of these people contacted me, and they have pages of records detailing their attempts to get help. They told me over and again that there were countless missed opportunities to intervene and prevent this tragedy, and no-one acted.

People were clear with me that they are not blaming frontline workers, police and Housing workers. They know how hard it is and how much pressure they are under. They said to me, ‘What are you doing about this? What is the government doing about it?’

People also shared with me that they do not feel safe or connected in their community, so I asked them what they needed. Imogen, a young woman who grew up in Darwin; Mark who moved here six months ago; Deb who has been for 10 years; and Marcus, a Larrakia man whose family has lived here for generations, all said the same thing: they want to be connected with other people in their community.

Together we organised a community picnic, which was a beautiful event filled with kids, dogs, cake and connection. People met neighbours they had lived near for years but had never met before. One resident shared his project, which is an Alawa tool library where the community can share tools. Did you know the average chainsaw is used for only two hours altogether by the person who bought it? Another resident brought a smash cake. If you know what that is, you know what it is. The kids took it literally, though.

A big thanks goes to Zoe from Territory Community Safety who came along and talked a lot about what that group can do from within the police to support safety and connect the safety service gaps that people are experiencing.

It was heartening that this was driven by community people who were unhappy, and we talked about what we could do to address that and help build a sense of community connection and safety. We supported it from our office, and people came together and did that. There are many examples of building connection in Johnston. I have talked about some of them in this House, and I look forward to sharing more of them in the future.

I love my community. I feel so lucky to be representing them and working for them. I must be honest, though, that sometimes when I am in this Chamber and ministers speak of abandoning compassion while others cheer them on, when I sit through hour after hour of CLP and Labor members attacking one another and when I witness the lack of respect that people are treated with, I sometimes find it hard to love this job. When I go back to my community and every day there are amazing, inspiring stories, connection and strength, I remember why I am doing it.

I know everyone in this Chamber loves our communities and feels honoured to serve them. My hope is that we can carry the spirit of compassion, resilience and unity that I see every day in my community into this Chamber and into every decision we make here.

Mr MACKAY (Goyder): Madam Speaker, I promise to be quick. I recently had the privilege of visiting Sattler Christian College and speaking to the Year 5s about the wonderful work that we do in this Chamber and across the Territory.

I know everyone in this Chamber values education. Education is the first step in having a successful life, and that is why it is important that these kids go to school. We had a mock debate, and I got to pretend to be you for the day, Madam Speaker.

The most important motion for the Sattler Christian College Year 5 students was that every school should have a canteen. Sattler Christian College students currently use the canteen across the road at Bees Creek, and it is apparently a major issue for those kids. They were much better behaved—maybe because their teacher was in the room—than we are in the Chamber.

The best arguments for why every school in the Territory should have a canteen included: 'The food would help compost'; 'We can raise money for the school'; and 'It will create jobs for people'. These Year 5 students are interested in creating jobs for Territorians, and I love that. Another argument was, 'Workers will be able to earn money, and we know money is wonderful'. I thought, 'We can get food at recess too, not just at lunch', was a good argument. Tom wrote, 'Kids forget breakfast, and there is good composting'. Good on you, Tom. Matilda wrote, 'What if children were hungry but forgot their lunch and needed food? And the staff members would get more money.'

These kids believe in some kind of communal service where money from the canteen goes straight to the teachers, and I commend them on their thoughtfulness. They also said that it would teach kids to learn to pay for food instead of getting it for free.

There were some good arguments from the opposition—much better than we may have heard in some arguments here—as follows: 'Most parents should be able to make their lunch, as it is their responsibility to feed their kids'; 'There will be more rubbish, and the lines will be long and crowded at recess and lunch'; 'It could start conflict, and someone could get hurt'; 'Junk food and raw food could lead to food poisoning, and we would not want that'; and 'We will need helpers for it'. The opposition in that Year 5 classroom decided it needed to go down the volunteer route rather than the financial route. They said, 'If some people have an allergy to food and eat it, they could die' and 'It will cost so much money to make canteens in each school because there are so many schools'. That young gentleman will write to me. He has lots of questions apparently, and I look forward to answering them. They said, 'It can get money stolen from home or bags, and you could get in trouble'.

I will let the Assembly know that this Bill passed with a vote of 10–9; the Year 5 students agreed to pass it. Madam Speaker, I did not vote as the Speaker, following in your footsteps. It was great to participate and see these kids flourish. It was fantastic to see the Year 6 students here this morning engaged and loving their school and community.

I love the Territory.

Ms UIBO (Arnhem): Madam Speaker, I will not use my full 10 minutes like I normally do in adjournment. I will acknowledge some of the great things in the Arnhem electorate.

My trip last week in the electorate to the communities of Jilkminggan, Urapunga and Ngukurr were fruitful. Upon arriving in Ngukurr in the afternoon it was fantastic to see the Ngukurr pool open and seeing …

Mrs Hersey: Swimming lessons.

Ms UIBO: Yes, the YMCA was doing swimming lessons. It always does them there without the CLP's free swimming lessons; people take their own initiative at Ngukurr. The YMCA is contracted to run the Ngukurr swimming pool. It was closed for a period a few years ago, and last year that deal was signed. The pool is open after school every afternoon, with the fully qualified lifeguards who are local lifeguards as well as people who came from outside the community and are now living in Ngukurr community, working with the families of Ngukurr for the YMCA. It was fantastic to see a lot of young people.

We have not had a lot of rain in certain parts of the Arnhem electorate, and Ngukurr particularly can get very hot. It was almost the sort of temperatures you would expect to see in the Build-Up around November, so it was quite hot in the high 30s. A pool to splash down in—there are a couple—was fantastic.

It was great to talk to Keith Rogers, who is one of the lifeguards from the community. We think he is one of the oldest players still playing competitive AFL football in the country. I will publicly say his age because he is proud of it—he is 67 years old. Keith will again be playing for the Ngukurr Bulldogs this year in the Big Rivers Football League competition. He is a great mentor for all the other community members, particularly the young men.

I am pleased to say that the Ngukurr Bulldogs female team will be re-entered into the Big Rivers competition this year. Unfortunately, they were unable to get enough sponsorship and players last year, but they are returning now.

Ammeretta Wesan is the AFLNT community officer in Ngukurr. She is a community person from there and has taken carriage of it. She was there doing training. They had 20-plus players and mentors for the women's team. She was showing me all the attendance lists at the Ngukurr oval last week. There were close to 30 men as well doing training—young ones, old ones and everyone in between. It was great.

Keith at the pool explained some of the youth engagement programs they have. The shed opened and Build Up NT—which is a Darwin company—was doing skateboarding workshops. They were at Ngukurr all last week. Every day after school any kid in Ngukurr who is interested in skating went to the sports shed to learn some skills, with helmets and all the safety gear. It was great to see that work of Yugul Mangi, which is running the youth and sport programs. With the support of Roper Gulf Regional Council, community organisations are coming together with the local government tier to run varied programs.

After we visited the football training we went past the pool again, across from the oval, and women's water aerobics was happening. They have great programs, thanks to the great work of the YMCA building and supporting local capacity with local lifeguards. It was great to see support for water exercise, particularly on a hot day. I cannot say that the water was cool, so they would have had a double whammy with the warm water.

A big shout-out goes to the Roper Gulf Regional Council Municipal Services team in Ngukurr. The community is looking fantastic. There was a time when the community looked neglected, and I expressed my concern to the regional council. It is testament to the work of Peter, the council service manager; Pete, the municipal supervisor; and all the team for the amazing work they are doing to ensure that Ngukurr looks good and that the municipal team is empowered with great work. It felt like the community was humming during my last visit. The have sometimes had rough patches, being the largest community in my electorate, with 1,100-plus people.

It was great coming all the way through on the sealed road from the Wilton and Roper bridges. The new highway is magic; it was sealed in the middle of last year and has made a huge difference to road safety and access, particularly when there have been high flash flooding levels and the road has predominantly remained open this Wet Season—even though there has been a bit of a lack of one. A lot of that is due to the safety of the new bitumen stretch. It is 30 extra kilometres of bitumen.

There is about another 35 kilometres, and I hope the CLP government continues with the important investment into roads infrastructure. That is all that is needed for the Roper Highway—35 kilometres, or 38 if you want to be picky, of bitumen to seal the road. I do not think my dad in his 82 years would have thought that the Roper Highway would ever be sealed, but let us hope that the work that has been invested in will continue under the CLP government over the next three or four years. It is needed for more tourism opportunities, for community safety and support, for more opportunities to enjoy the beautiful Roper Highway and to have it safely sealed for more accessibility, particularly in the Wet Season when food security can become an issues and road access becomes tricky, mostly due to the unsealed section.

A big shout-out goes to Ngukurr community, Yugul Mangi, Ngukurr School and to Heather, who is doing a fantastic job as the acting principal. She has been there for many years. I sat in on a lesson, which was good fun; thank you, Heather. All the team at Ngukurr School, which is flourishing—if anyone in this Chamber gets a chance to visit Ngukurr, please visit Bagai cafe, a program by the WANTA program in partnership with Ngukurr School. It is busy because it is a coffee cafe in beautiful Ngukurr, and it probably one of the hottest places you will ever go. They have all the local service providers, police and teachers who support the business, and the students get employment and training opportunities through the WANTA program cafe. A big shout-out goes to Indi and all the students who take a lot of pride in their work. This year they will be

selling Ngukurr Bulldogs merchandise through the cafe, which will be popular come April at the start of the Big Rivers Football League season.

Mr HOWE (Drysdale): Madam Speaker, I endorse the minister for Housing's public housing reforms, which will be welcomed by the people in my electorate of Drysdale. I acknowledge the Minister for Education and Training and her Bill. We are a government for all.

For too long, many of my constituents have been unable to sleep at night because of fears of crime being perpetrated on them, their loved ones and their property. I am proud to be part of the Finocchiaro CLP government that is standing up and saying enough is enough. We will fight tirelessly for the vast majority of Territorians who want action and certainty when it comes to security. We will get on with dealing with the minority who challenge that security.

My electorate is full of amazing hardworking Territorians, and it is incumbent on all of us, when we come to this place, to think about how we look after the good people of the Northern Territory. In my electorate, unfortunately, there are too many people who sleep with one eye open not knowing whether they are about to be the next victim of crime. That is the sole reason I am in this place, which is why it is even more devastating to hear of the corruption, complicity and lack of moral compass from those opposite.

I again address the stain on the Northern Territory that is the Labor Party. Today in this House the Attorney-General tabled the ICAC's Operation Sirocco report, which was finalised under the reign of the former Labor government. Labor is now led by former Attorney-General Selena Uibo.

This report was kept secret from Territorians for the last four months of the Labor government's term. This report was finalised 343 days ago; that is 343 days the Labor government decided to keep Territorians in the dark. It has taken our government's Attorney-General to table it in parliament—in less than one day. This case attracted nationwide public interest over several years.

This is shameful by the Labor Party. The blatant hypocrisy from those opposite who stand with the Labor brand is staggering. Only this week we heard from the Leader of the Opposition and Member for Gwoja wrongly claiming that the Chief Minister did not have the trust of Territorians over ICAC's Operation Apollo, the report into former Police Commissioner Michael Murphy. Let us not forget that the hiring practices and subsequent ICAC report that led to the demise of Mr Murphy all happened under Labor's watch. These events occurred under their party.

Two former Cabinet ministers—the Leader of the Opposition and the Member for Gwoja—were part of a disgraceful Labor government which covered up an ICAC report that looked into the complaint by former Children's Commissioner Colleen Gwynne. In the report it states that the former government entered into a secret settlement with Ms Gwynne in late August 2023, when Natasha Fyles was the Chief Minister. At that time, the Member for Gwoja was the Attorney-General and Minister for Justice. This was a fact confirmed by the Leader of the Opposition in her statement this afternoon, clearly throwing the Member for Gwoja, who wants her job, under the bus. How is that for leadership? To throw one of your party members under the bus to save your skin—that is real leadership right there.

Was it a coincidence that the Member for Gwoja left the Chamber as soon as the Attorney-General first raised Operation Sirocco at the start of Question Time? Before Colleen Gwynne's name was even mentioned, he ran for the hills. He knew about this secret ICAC report, as well as the secret settlement to Ms Gwynne. We also now know through this report that the government's secret settlement to Ms Gwynne was done before the Director of Public Prosecutions was planning to refer the matter to the Court of Appeal.

The report states:

> *… the Director was not informed of the existence of that Deed prior to or at the very latest, the date it was signed.*

The existence of this settlement, signed by the government, meant the DPP was bound from pursuing this matter any further in the courts.

The Labor Party, the entire former Fyles and Lawler Cabinet, the Leader of the Opposition and the Member for Gwoja have serious questions to answer over their dodgy deed and hidden ICAC report into Ms Gwynne. The lawyer for Ms Gwynne, Sean Bowden, is the brother of Joel Bowden, who was a Cabinet minister and part of the government which signed the secret settlement with Colleen Gwynne.

I leave it to Territorians to make their own judgement on that settlement process. The former Police minister, Kate Worden, had previously declared in a media article a conflict of interest over the Gwynne matter. What was that conflict? Territorians have a right to know. What influence did Mrs Worden and the entire former Labor government have over this ICAC investigation, the hidden report and the dodgy deed?

The Labor brand is smeared, and the foul stench is of corruption—not to forget the infamous cocaine-sex scandal or its president, Kent Rowe, now a convicted rapist and paedophile who Labor party members defended with character references in the court. That was disgraceful. This is an Opposition Leader and party with no backbone and zero integrity. Territorians will not forget.

As parliament concludes for the week, we implore all four members of the Labor Party to think about the constituents they represent and whether they truly believe representing the tarnished Labor brand is appropriate.

I ask that over the weekend the four sitting Labor members do the right thing by their constituents. They can do good in this House. Walk away from the Labor brand, come back next week and form a new party. Do what you must, but leave that brand behind and do better for the Northern Territory.

Motion agreed to; the Assembly adjourned.