

Ms Mia Davies; Mr Shane Love; Dr David Honey; Mr Vincent Catania; Acting Speaker; Ms Libby Mettam; Mr Peter Rundle; Mr Dave Kelly; Mr Bill Johnston; Ms Caitlin Collins; Ms Meredith Hammat

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## STATE BUDGET — COST-OF-LIVING INCREASES

### *Motion*

**MS M.J. DAVIES (Central Wheatbelt — Leader of the Opposition)** [4.00 pm]: I move —

That this house calls on the McGowan government to ensure that the upcoming state budget is focused on alleviating the cost-of-living pressures burdening WA families.

I want to start by painting a picture of what it is like in Western Australia at the moment. We are a state of significant wealth; that is undeniable. There has again been talk of a significant budget surplus being delivered in the upcoming state budget—eye-watering, in fact. As the Premier said in question time, other states look at us with some envy and wish they had our natural resources and the ability to deliver some of the projects and initiatives that we have delivered as a result of those natural resources. While other governments around the nation are talking about deficits and debt, our government is sitting on something between \$6 billion and \$8 billion in surplus.

That is quite extraordinary because in question time today the Premier painted a picture of strength, jobs and wealth, but if we peel back some of that rhetoric, we see that many families, businesses and small businesses are in real pain. When we have a surplus of that enormity, there is a responsibility; there has to be a dividend for Western Australians, many of whom are feeling the pinch. Billion-dollar surpluses are not there to be hoarded by the government as some sort of war chest for election spending or for when things go wrong and the Premier of a very poll driven government needs to curry favour. There are families and businesses that are in pain right now.

This is the last sitting week ahead of the state budget, before we return after a four-week recess, so today the opposition wants to take this opportunity to put the government on notice in relation to the issues that we think the Western Australian public expects to see addressed in the upcoming state budget. It is based around trying to understand what relief will be available, given that we know from the government's answers to questions over the last two weeks that there are many families suffering and that the Premier appears to be turning a deaf ear to improving that situation.

We cannot ignore the fact that we have experienced two years of pandemic and that there have been some unusual circumstances on a global scale, yet Western Australia has, I think, experienced relative normality in terms of income. In fact, there has been extraordinary income for the state government. The pandemic has really served to paper over or hide some of the government's true failures, which is why this state budget has to be a budget about resetting. If we believe what the Minister for Tourism said today, and what the Premier has said previously, about the government's intention to welcome people with open arms back into Western Australia and to make sure that our entire tourism industry—not just some sectors—thrives once again, we have to assume there is also a plan for trying to address some of the pinch points we are already seeing.

We do not have to look too far for the government's failures. Our health system is in crisis, not because of COVID, but because the government stripped back its operational budget and starved it of funds ahead of the pandemic arriving here in Western Australia. Nurses and health workers are stretched to breaking point. They are working long, long hours, under extraordinary pressure. The warning signs were here before the pandemic, so this is a chance for the government to put in lasting, structural reform to actually address some of those pressures. If the government does not have a health system that is working, it is failing at the most basic level.

We have a housing crisis that means more and more Western Australians are finding themselves on the brink of homelessness, or having to choose between paying their rent, paying their electricity bill or being able to put food on their table. Some of the data we have seen shows that more and more people are going without. There are more and more people in the rental market who are finding themselves on the public housing waitlist, which has also significantly blown out under this government.

There is a crisis in the Department of Communities, which is impacting upon some of the most vulnerable children and families in our community. Our police force has had up to 500 officers being committed to Operation Tide at any one time. Many of them have been called upon to go above and beyond over the last two years. They are policing a hard border that no longer exists, while there are serious crime issues in the north of our state and in the Perth metropolitan area, including in Northbridge, Scarborough and other entertainment districts. These officers have been asked to do a significant amount as a result of the pandemic and our COVID response.

Our small business sector has had to deal with constantly changing rules, firstly, because of the pandemic, and then because of the government's response to the pandemic in terms of providing support. It has dribbled out various different packages of support and it probably takes businesses a long time to figure out what they are eligible for. Certainly, some businesses that are eligible for support have not seen any of that funding, and that all contributes to additional stress and worry.

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As I mentioned, all is not well in our tourism sector. There are sections of the tourism sector that have done extraordinarily well, but I and many other members have met with representatives of the tourism industry who say that every time the Premier boasts about how wonderfully our tourism sector is doing, it feels like a knife in their heart. That is not an exaggeration; that has been repeated to me on a number of different occasions, whether I am in the Kimberley or the south west, talking to people from two of the premium tourism destinations in Western Australia.

The government has failed to address the basics of health and housing. Yes, there are shiny new projects that we see being rolled out, many of them paid for on the commonwealth dime—yes, our mining sector has remained strong; but, no, the government has not used its windfall surplus to ease the burden on ordinary, everyday Western Australians.

The Premier today spent some time outlining all the things the government has done in terms of economic management, so I asked him why we have seen significant increases—not just when the pandemic was in full flight but now, two years later—in the number of people accessing emergency service providers like Foodbank, Anglicare and others that provide emergency support. Despite all the Premier's claims, those numbers have increased, so something is clearly not right. This is not a government that listens to those on the front line, dealing with ever-increasing numbers of people in financial stress.

Just like the Minister for Housing's very well rehearsed response to questions about the housing crisis yesterday, the Premier's answer in question time today shows that he is starting to believe his own PR, and that is very dangerous. He has been in government for five years and has become so used to everyone telling him what a wonderful job he is doing that he is blind to the issues that he does not want to acknowledge. There are serious issues with many families who are living on or near the poverty line and who have been unable to succeed on this government's watch. How can we have a budget surplus of between \$6 billion and \$8 billion, and have more and more people living in poverty without a house, unable to pay their bills, unable to put food on the table and without assistance to do that?

When this government first came to office it increased electricity prices after it specifically told people that it would not. The shadow Minister for Energy, the Leader of the Liberal Party, will touch on this and other issues within that portfolio. The government also found time to address electoral reform and take regional representation out of the state Parliament permanently. It also found time to sell more than 1 300 public houses and not replace them. It found time to close down an entire industry, leaving the lives and the livelihoods of those dependent upon the native timber industry in great peril. It found time to criticise our St John Ambulance service and ambulance service providers, many of whom are ramped at state hospitals because there is bed-block in the state health system, which is under pressure because it has not been resourced appropriately.

The government has also kept public servant wages static for a significant portion of its tenure, which has essentially eroded wages in the public service in real terms. We heard the announcement at the end of last year, which goes to the question I asked the Premier in question time today about the impact the consumer price index and inflation will have between that announcement and when the budget comes down and whether the government will reassess its wages policy to ensure that the public service is not impacted by that and that it will at least match CPI. I heard a very clear no from the Premier. It will not change its wages policy. I think every union currently negotiating on that would be very interested to hear that.

A significant amount of money is coming into state coffers. For every dollar increase in the oil price above the budget forecast, the Western Australian government will receive an extra \$9 million in petroleum royalties and North West Shelf grants. We can assume that on the average oil price the government will collect at least \$27 million more than it expected when it did its projections in the last budget, but I think it will be far more.

Iron ore royalties will add at least \$2.5 billion to the budget's bottom line and, of course, the GST deal has been secured and delivered by our federal coalition government—the work on which was done well in advance of the McGowan government coming to power. Had we had access to that GST deal—which we deserve every dollar of—during our time in government, it would have made an enormous difference to the finances of the state. I think we can say that low wage growth for public servants over the first few years of this government has absolutely contributed to the eye-watering surplus that is sitting in this state's coffers.

Also over the last 12 months, Perth has posted its highest inflation rate in 20 three years—5.7 per cent in 2021—which is above the national average of 3.5 per cent. Perth was one of the cities hardest hit by inflation, second only to Darwin. It is Perth's biggest reading since 5.9 per cent was recorded for the June quarter back in 2021. We suspect we will not see that as we head towards the budget. There were some fairly extraordinary circumstances during that period of time. My question during question time today was attempting to get an understanding of whether there was any wriggle room or whether the government, if there was a significant increase, would reconsider and whether the wages negotiation could accommodate that. I acknowledge that the government abandoned that wages policy in December and is now working towards a new outcome, so I did not think it would be a difficult question

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for the Premier to answer. Given the significant increases in the cost of living, I would have thought that a government of this persuasion would consider it, especially with the dollars in the bank. But I heard no from the Premier. I heard no, there will be none.

For five years the wages policy has delivered only a \$1 000 pay increase for public servants. To put a human face on what that means—there would be any number of them across Western Australia—I will use the example of Julie-Marie Hay, an enrolled nurse and a single mum, whose comments on the cost of living were reported in an ABC interview of 22 March. She said —

“I haven’t been able to continue to keep up with the cost of living regardless of working full-time,” ...

...

“I work weekends as well and it still doesn’t cover everything I need,” ...

The article goes on to say —

Ms Hay has not seen her pay rise in real terms (that is, after inflation) for four years due to a historic public sector wage freeze in WA, and she’s not alone.

“My expenses here in this house have actually gone up about \$300 a fortnight over the last 12 to 18 months,” she said.

“I haven’t actually bought my children’s school clothes this year at all. Somehow I have to afford to buy them an entire new winter wardrobe.

“My biggest worry really is just not being able to afford to continue paying rent, and not being able to afford to continue paying my bills.

“I’m terrified of what’s going to happen.”

She is an enrolled nurse, who works in the public health system and who has been asked, I hazard a guess, to do far more than she is paid for, just as we know many of our nurses and frontline nurses have done over the last 24 months. The United Workers Union response to the Premier’s December announcement that the government will be bringing forward a change to the wages policy was that the change would equate to less than \$40 a week before tax over two years for a vast majority of the members that it represents. Many of United Voice’s members are essential workers. They receive a wage increase that has not kept pace with the duties and responsibilities that they are being asked to acquit and are getting a wage increase that, it would appear, unless there is a significant change in what is being predicted, will not keep pace with the rate of inflation. We are talking about police, nurses, teachers—all of them. I do not think anyone in this chamber would say that over the last two years they have not gone above and beyond over the last two years in responding to the pandemic. They also include child protection workers, prison workers and those who take on some of the most difficult roles in our public service.

Outside essential workers, I found a really interesting example in a submission from the Community and Public Sector Union–Civil Service Association of WA. It used the example of an employee from the Department of Water and Environmental Regulation who talked about the fact that jobs in the public sector are becoming less attractive because of the attraction of the private sector here in Western Australia. He said that they are always competing with the mining sector. There is expertise in our regulatory agencies and departments, but people are leaving because they do not feel valued and they do not feel that they have been looked after by their own government. His take on that was if the government has a mission to reduce red tape, as it has stated a number of times, when we do not pay and value public service workers and retain the required expertise, we put ambition at risk. I think that is a very succinct way of saying that we must be able to pay those people who have the expertise because we need them in government departments so that when industry comes with a project that needs to be delivered, it will not have lost vast amounts of expertise out of those government departments—I am sure the mining portfolio is no different—because they do not feel valued and have found employment elsewhere. There is no shortage of employment in Western Australia. I am very interested in understanding just how the government will approach this, given that there has been a very miserly wages policy in this state for some time. I suspect that many in those unions have been holding their tongues waiting for the Labor Party and the Labor government to make sure that their workers and their members are looked after. With a budget with a \$6 billion to \$8 billion surplus, I suspect it will be difficult to resist.

The last thing I want to talk about before I sit down is what I mentioned in question time—that is, the significant increase in the number of people who are accessing services like Foodbank and emergency relief providers. We cannot ignore this metric when talking about the cost of living. The Premier can talk about all the things that he pointed to in question time, but the fact is that more people are turning up on the doorstep of organisations like Foodbank, Anglicare and St Vincent de Paul seeking help, whether it is for food, rent assistance or paying utility bills. Food charities in particular have witnessed a significant increase in the demand for food relief.

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In its pre-budget submission, the Western Australian Council of Social Service notes that a relatively large number of clients are returning to emergency relief services who have not requested assistance for more than five years. These are people returning after five years, not having had to access that support. The food charities we have had contact with attribute it to being a result of households lowering their food budget because they have other non-negotiable expenses, and so they have to go to Foodbank and others to supplement what they need, and others are no doubt skipping meals. In Albany, the presentations to Foodbank have increased 42 per cent from last year. In February alone, the amount of food being distributed jumped by over 48 per cent compared with the same period last year. We cannot ignore that. We cannot ignore that more people are accessing these services. Data on the Emergency Relief and Food Access Service dashboard provided by the Financial Counselling Network shows the breakdown of clients seeking referrals to the organisations that provide emergency relief. During January this year, the service received 2 042 calls and assisted 745 clients, which was up from 732 in December. The dashboard breaks down the residential status of those accessing support. The biggest cohort is actually those in private rentals, not those living in public housing, of which we know there are many, and many more are on the waitlist. It goes right into those who are in the most unstable forms of accommodation—boarding houses, caravan parks and those who are homeless. Private renters accessing these services are feeling the pinch. When we consider the type of assistance that people are seeking, by far and away it is just to keep food on the table, closely followed by transport. If we then overlay a regional lens on top of that, we can certainly assume that it is more difficult outside the metropolitan area where there are limited public transport opportunities and people are more reliant on filling their car and being able to access affordable food and services.

My colleagues will go through each of the portfolios today and identify the challenges and what they expect to see in the upcoming budget. I was disappointed that when they asked in the last sitting of Parliament for relief with the Country Age Pension Fuel Card and the patient assisted travel scheme, there was a resounding, “We think you all get enough.” I think that was the response we got from one of the ministers. The response by the Minister for Health was that there would be no more relief for PATS patients. She was very clear in her reply. I went back and had a look at it and was quite shocked by the way she responded when I was standing in the chamber. She essentially said that regional Western Australians get more than enough and that there was no need to revisit that scheme even though —

**Mr D.J. Kelly:** Don’t misquote her.

**Ms M.J. DAVIES:** Go and read *Hansard*, minister.

**Mr D.J. Kelly:** Well quote *Hansard*—don’t make it up.

**Ms M.J. DAVIES:** Go and read it; do your homework. She said that regional Western Australians get more than enough. We need only watch the body language and review that particular question time. I can tell members that a number of my constituents called and were appalled at the way the minister responded to the question.

PATS is one avenue; there are a range of others. I know the member for Moore will touch on the Country Age Pension Fuel Card. This government has a number of levers that it can call on. There is a growing public housing list. There are more people accessing food and emergency services, more people unable to pay their power bills and more people struggling to put fuel in their car, yet this government is sitting on an enormous pile of cash. We expect to see from this McGowan Labor government a response to that—to not only deal with the immediate challenge, but provide some structural relief so that it sets up this state to transition out of the state of emergency and the pandemic for future generations. That is the task when a government has a budget surplus of such an eye-watering size.

**MR R.S. LOVE (Moore — Deputy Leader of the Opposition)** [4.24 pm]: I, too, would like to talk to the excellent motion moved by the Leader of the Opposition, which states —

That this house calls on the McGowan government to ensure that the upcoming state budget is focused on alleviating the cost-of-living pressures burdening WA families.

I think we have to understand that we have something of a perfect storm. We have had two years of the pandemic. We have had constraint in our supply chains. We have seen the cost of shipping go through the roof. We have seen the cost of transport rise in the last period by 20 per cent in one year. A 20 per cent increase in transport costs is throwing pressure upon every household. Of course, the situation has emerged recently with the price of fuel, which the federal government has taken some steps to alleviate through a 22¢ cut in the fuel excise. We are yet to see anything from this government to offer some relief for households in their day-to-day transport costs. Day-to-day transport costs are something that every household knows very well. The RAC has campaigned for some time to highlight the problem that exists with the steep and steady increases in vehicle registrations. It has put forward the view that if costs for vehicle registrations had kept pace simply with inflation over the past decade, every household would have saved \$900 in that time. That is the cost every household has had through vehicle registration fees rising in excess of the cost of inflation. It was four per cent in the most recent budget, which is twice the rate of inflation that was forecast in that budget for the rise of registration fees.

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Registration fees apply to not only cars, but also heavy vehicles. I will give members an idea of what heavy vehicle drivers pay for their registration. A list published on the Department of Transport's website indicates that a heavy vehicle licence for a prime mover towing two or more trailers, basically a four-axle truck, is \$10 666. On top of that are other fees for trailers. It is \$4 680 for a large rigid truck with trailer. These costs are flowing through to the state coffers, but they are also flowing through to every household in the state, contributing to that 20 per cent increase in the cost of transport. That is certainly not the only contributor. We know that the cost of fuel has gone up. Even though the excise has been cut by 22¢, it has not had such a positive effect for commercial users, because they have had a cut to the rebate. There has been a slight positive effect, but not a great downward driver in cost for heavy transport. That then flows through to the price of goods in supermarkets.

As I said before, we have had a perfect storm. We have had the constraints caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Supply chains have been disrupted because of COVID outside the state. Within the state, we have seen constraint on the number of truck operators. It is virtually impossible to buy a new truck; waiting periods are very long. We have seen a problem with the supply of AdBlue and a range of other issues that have conspired to make it very difficult to keep down the cost in that industry. That then flows through to the prices everybody pays at the supermarket.

The government could seriously consider the proposal the RAC put forward to freeze registration fees this year to ensure there are no further imposts on household incomes from the price of their motoring. I go further and suggest that just as the federal government has done with its response to a pinch point being brought about by the Ukraine crisis and the cut to federal excise of 22¢ a litre to on-road fuel, we could perhaps seek some relief to transport through registration fees that heavy vehicles operate under as a way of ensuring that they can keep down their costs. That could then flow through to every household that relies on transport. We all know how much we rely on transport. We saw what happened when the east-west rail line was out for a few weeks and supermarket shelves became very bare, except for the essentials that we produce locally. If people were waiting for any processed food that came mainly from other places, it was very difficult and supplies of some medicines and other lines got very tight.

We know how essential transport is and we know that every dollar that is spent in transport flows through to the basket of goods that householders have to pay for at the end of the week when they do their weekly grocery shop, or they go and buy fuel that still comes in a truck. If we could give some relief to transport, that would be a good outcome.

I will refer to a report that again was prepared for the RAC by ACIL Allen Consulting called, *Benefits to Western Australian motorists from taxes, fees and charges*. The report is a couple of years old, so things might have changed in that time, but the historical figures certainly have not changed. They will still be in the budget. It outlines the total vehicle-related revenue in Western Australia generated from Western Australian motorists that goes to local government, the state government and the commonwealth government. I will look at the state government revenue in the year this government first came to power, its first year of budget in 2017–18. The state government revenue from Western Australian motorists was a little over \$1.4 billion. The state spend on roads, including its contribution to local government roads, was \$1.274 billion. I have extrapolated from those figures that the commonwealth government had contributed to that \$1.274 billion with \$736 million, which meant that \$880 million flowed into the state coffers in that year from Western Australian motorists. It was not returned to roads. It was not returned to road transport. Certainly, some of it could have been spent on the vast subsidy that is given to public transport in this state, but \$880 million from Western Australian motorists flowed into the state coffers.

The forecasts in this report were that from 2018–19 to the end of next year—again, some of these figures have probably changed, but based on the trend of spending that was evident then—a total of \$5.4 billion from Western Australian motorists was expected to flow into the state coffers. I suggest that there is plenty of scope for the Western Australian government to make some adjustments to the charges it puts on transport, both in the fees that it charges motorists for their registration and in the costs of transport for industry, which provides us with our food, takes our produce to market, brings in the imports through Fremantle port and other places and distributes them around the state to all the supermarkets and shops. Transport brings all the building products and everything else into Western Australia that we need to make our economy work. If we could do something about curing the costs of that industry, costs that have blown out 20 per cent in a year, we would be able to help address some of the pressures on Western Australian household incomes. With a forecast of \$5 billion from Western Australian motorists in that period, there is pretty ample scope for some of those costs to be defrayed.

The member for Central Wheatbelt alluded to the Country Age Pension Fuel Card and there is another one—the Emergency Services Volunteer Fuel Card. I asked the Premier a question in this place about whether the Country Age Pension Fuel Card could be considered for an increase in the upcoming budget. His initial reaction was not very committal, but in a supplementary question I pointed out to him that as costs rise for motorists because oil and gas prices rise, so, too, do the revenues for the state because it recoups money from royalties and other taxes, which are rising well in excess of what the cost would be to provide a CPI increase for the fuel card. The money

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is there. It would cost nothing off the budget surplus. Extra money is coming in as a result of the Ukraine crisis and other price pressures, which are driving up state revenues from oil and gas. It would be only fair to share some of that with some of the people who are doing it very tough at the moment, caught as they are in the price squeeze. I know that the Leader of the Liberal Party will talk about some household costs, including energy costs and water costs, but transport is one cost that most households have to bear. Even if people in the country do not own a car, they are still able to use that card for taxis and other means, or they could have someone else drive them—even pensioners who have lost the ability to drive benefit from the Country Age Pension Fuel Card because their carers and others can use it. As long as it is being used for their transport, we are quite ambivalent about how they achieve that.

That is an ability, I believe, for country people, especially, to have some relief from the high price of fuel, which is happening in many country towns. That would be an excellent way of returning some of the state's increased revenues to some of the most deserving Western Australians—the aged people who have built this state and who have contributed taxes throughout their lives and now need a bit of a helping hand because they are caught in the perfect storm of events. They have had a horrendous couple of years. Many of them have been sheltering away, concerned about travelling, but they still need to travel to get to things like doctors and go shopping. For many of the people in towns I represent, they do not have a Coles. Actually, there is not a Coles or a Woolies in the entirety of my electorate. They go to the IGA. It is good that we have those as well, but some people want to go to larger shops and sometimes they have to go out of their smaller communities to buy some of the goods that they need. That is leading to a lot of pressure upon them.

The member for Central Wheatbelt also spoke about the reaction when an increase to the patient assisted travel scheme was raised. The contribution from the state to people who travel under PATS has never really addressed the actual cost. It has always been a help, but it does not cover anywhere near the cost of driving a car to an appointment. As we know, with costs rapidly escalating, now would be an excellent time for that to be addressed in the next budget as a helping hand, giving some extra help to those people who have to travel to get necessary medical services. This is not a nice-to-have; it is a must-have for these people. They have to get to the appropriate places to source medical services. Hospitals in many country towns now have much lower capacity than they once did. Operations that used to be done routinely in country hospitals are no longer done there. There are many circumstances in which people have to travel. Once we go north of Perth, there are very few major hospital services. Even in towns the size of Geraldton, Karratha and others, the standard of care really is not sufficient so that people do not have to travel in some circumstances to get the services they need. It is essential that people are able to do just that. We would like to see this measure taken up for those families who have to travel to gain their necessary medical services.

One of the other issues we were talking about was the cost of living in country areas. I raised this the other day in an MPI, but I had very limited time to talk about the rental situation in many country areas. I pointed out in that debate that of the 20 suburbs with the lowest vacancy rates for tenancies, 17 of them are in regional places. The member for Vasse has just come in; she has a couple of areas in her electorate where there are virtually no rentals available. York, in the central wheatbelt, has zero rentals. The member for Central Wheatbelt was talking about some of those pressures as well. In Geraldton even, a very large community in my area, there are suburbs where there are very low levels of vacancy. Jurien Bay has zero rentals available. Anybody who wants to provide an essential service in a town will find it very difficult to base themselves in a community that has zero rental properties available. The member for Warren–Blackwood probably would not know this, but many communities in her electorate are in that position, including Denmark, Bridgetown and Manjimup, which have severe shortages of rental accommodation available for people to come and take up employment.

Also, if a Government Regional Officers' Housing property is sold or is no longer available, for whatever reason, or a person is transitioning out of social housing because they have a job and they need to find a rental property in the private market, they will find they have a problem because there is none. They will have nowhere to go. We know that hundreds and hundreds of GROH properties are sitting empty around the state. We know that the Minister for Housing is big on promises and plans, but the only thing the government has managed to deliver in five years is to remove 1 300 houses from the social housing portfolio and it has built very few social houses. We know that given the price pressures and all the constraints we have, it will be very difficult for the government to catch up now it has dropped the ball and allowed this situation to manifest. Once we get so far behind, even in the most perfect circumstances, it will take months, if not years, to catch up again, and these are far from perfect circumstances. We have a boom in construction not just in our state, but also right across the country, and in not just housing, but also services to mines and other developments.

The federal government has spent an enormous amount of money on infrastructure to keep the economies of all sorts of places in Australia going so that the effects of the pandemic do not lead to a negative economic downturn

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for the country. The federal government is spending money on matters that can lead to increased productivity in the future—better roads, better communications, better water storage and through all sorts of other avenues.

I congratulate the government on some of its recent investments to ensure that critical minerals that play a very vital part in this state's economy will go forward. Although that might not necessarily address directly what we are talking about here, it will lead to a situation in which we can ensure that while we are addressing the short-term problems we face, in the long term we will have a strong and healthy economy so that we can make good on the promise for economic development of the state. The government has plenty of opportunity, with a \$5.8 billion surplus last year, and goodness only knows what we can expect around the corner, with some of the increases in commodity prices that we have seen and some of the assumptions about a fall in commodity prices that have proven wrong.

We have consistently seen huge amounts of money flowing into state coffers. At the same time, households are desperate and are doing it tough. There is a need for the state government to play its part, just as the federal government has done, in trying to address those pressures in the budget next month. We expect to see some reconsideration of the decision on the patient assisted travel scheme after the dreadful reaction we got; a reduction, or at least a freeze, in car registration costs; and some effort to cut the costs for the transport industry, which would flow through to every sector in the state, whether it is construction, retail, farming or mining, because they are all dependent on transport. That is fundamental to the future of our state. The government now has an opportunity to ensure that we do not have constraints that will not only hold up the development of the state, but also lead to unnecessarily high prices for households in the coming year.

**DR D.J. HONEY (Cottesloe — Leader of the Liberal Party)** [4.44 pm]: I rise to strongly support this motion. We are all aware of the sudden inflation in costs around the world. For the last two years, we have witnessed the growing problems created by the impact of the COVID pandemic on supply chains around the globe. We have had labour shortages across all sectors in most nations, which has added to supply problems for consumer goods and input supplies used in manufacturing around the world. The inevitable outcome of supply shortages is rising prices as businesses and nations push up prices in competing for that shrinking supply. We are not immune from these global economic impacts. Throughout last year, we experienced prices of consumer goods rising significantly, while also seeing empty shelves and shops as the supply chain problems continued. As last year rolled along, we had further price effects from rapidly rising oil prices. That has had a particular impact on our economy that has flowed into a general energy crisis and also global price rises for gas, coal and even uranium. This has obviously helped on the income side for this nation and this government.

The high cost of primary energy and the COVID effects also pushed up other industrial commodity prices, which created conditions across the board for costs that push up inflation and hurt consumers everywhere. But something that is within the control of this state government are the consumers in the state of Western Australia. The effect of oil price increases has been dramatically exacerbated by the conflict from the evil invasion of Ukraine and all the consequences of sanctions against Russia. That has flowed into substantial higher costs for petrol prices and, as the member for Moore just pointed out, that has a direct inflationary effect on other consumer goods because, as the saying goes, Australia travels on the back of a truck. Those transport costs significantly come into it. No household has been immune from these inflationary effects, but as I have said a number of times in this place, it particularly affects those people on low fixed incomes and low incomes, especially people who are doing part-time work. Obviously, the government has some scope in relation to transport, as has been outlined, but we see a squeeze on the family budget in relation to the cost of energy and families making invidious choices around what else they can cut, because many cannot avoid paying for transport.

There has been an upside for our state; that is, the high prices for energy, iron ore and other commodities has led to a boom in income for the state government. We will find out in a few short weeks the surplus for this government, but there is a very high probability that the surplus will exceed the \$5.4 billion in the last budget. We know that will be completely due to that surge in commodity prices, but it means that the government has capacity to provide support and help when required. Many households have not benefited from the commodity price rise, either through direct employment or wages, which has put a strain on home budgets. In addition to those cost-of-living pressures, people who rent their home are also facing an enormous impact from significant rent increases, which my colleagues will go into in more detail. Again, we see families making a choice: do they keep a roof over their heads or buy food or critical materials for children within their family? Households need relief from those cost pressures now. They are experiencing that now.

I get the most dreadful stories from people coming through my office, particularly people who are on low incomes. As I said earlier in debate, they are particularly women who are single-income parents living in untenable situations facing the prospect of losing accommodation. The federal budget has provided some relief in the form of significant cuts to the excise tax on petrol, but, again, as was pointed out, there is an opportunity for this government to provide some relief in those areas.

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The reality is that throughout its term, this government has contributed significantly to cost-of-living pressures through decisions made in past budgets. That has raised the cost of living for Western Australians quite significantly. I remind the government of its first budget in 2017–18 when it set significant price rises for our utilities, water and electricity. Back then, it announced a 10.9 per cent electricity price rise and a six per cent water price rise, which were well above inflation at that time. Those price rises hurt family budgets, and now they do even more so, given that families are facing such cost pressures.

I want to take a slight detour here. I refer to the Minister for Energy today. I will not go into all the statements he has made in his non-answer to my questions; however, I will go into his claim that the Barnett government was responsible for all of the power price increases. It is important to get a little history on the record in *Hansard*. Back in 2005, what did we see from the Labor government—the Gallop and then the Carpenter Labor government? Western Power was split into four agencies. That was the government’s plan. Its guarantee for that plan was that we would not see price increases. In fact, we would see price reductions. That was the promise of that initiative by the Labor government. That goes back to a Labor government. Alan Carpenter was the energy minister when that plan was hatched. In April 2008, there was a press release from Alan Carpenter saying that the state government had rejected an Office of Energy recommendation that would have increased electricity prices 47 per cent in 2009 and 15 per cent the following year. That was a 69 per cent increase in charges that the Office of Energy was saying had to be applied. Why did that have to be applied? The government had been playing to popularity and had not taken responsible management. The Gallop government had not increased utility charges since 2001, so we saw a massive and growing deficit for the state government with the subsidy of electricity charges. That is what the Barnett government was presented with when it came into power—a massive increase in utility charges. The Carpenter government said it would increase those prices in a tranche. They remained unchanged for a further 15 months out to the election, and then there was to be a 10 per cent increase in 2009–10, with further annual increases to be phased in over a six to eight-year period. We were looking at 60 to 80 per cent increases over that time.

That government was thrown out on its ear—as it should have been—and the Barnett government came in and it had a choice of constant bleeding or to do those increases in shorter tranches and stop bleeding that money out of those agencies. That government was not flush with funds in those early stages. That was the reality of it. It was due to a policy of the Labor Party to split up that agency. It led to massive inefficiencies and price increases. There had been fixed charges since 2001 and then the Barnett government had to deal with it. I think it is important to get that to get that on the record.

If we look the representative household model, the typical household prior to the 2017 election, the then Leader of the Opposition, Hon Mark McGowan, made the following election promise —

“If we’re elected, there will be no new taxes or increases on taxes on West Australians. Full stop.”

That was the promise he made. The first budget saw that commitment broken with the household basket of public sector goods increasing by \$438. That was the single largest dollar increase ever applied by government to the representative household basket of public sector goods and services. Across the board, this saw household goods increase by 7.74 per cent in 2017–18, at a time when inflation was under one per cent. That was the status then. The total expenditure in the representative household budget on this basket of public goods in 2021 was \$6 382. Taking into account changes in the model, this represents an increase of \$895 a year under the Labor government, or almost 16 per cent compared with the 2016–17 levels—a period when inflation was mostly in the one to two per cent level. It has obviously spiked up very recently. Motor vehicle charges increased by 13 per cent from \$802 to \$913 over that time, and licence charges increased 19.4 per cent from \$334 to \$399 for the typical family. That is an 11.8 per cent increase.

I turn to utility charges, which hurt households most because most households have very limited scope to reduce their charges. Over the first term of the McGowan government total household utility charges increased by 11.7 per cent, with families in the representative household now paying once almost \$1 800—it is \$1 779—a year for electricity and \$1 760 for water. Despite some minimal increases because of the COVID impact and the government saying that it would reduce costs, families are still paying 14.5 per cent, or \$324, more for electricity and 8.9 per cent, or \$238, more for water.

We have also commenced calling on the government to offer immediate cost-of-living relief to struggling families by removing the existing overcharging occurring on water fees. The minister would well remember that in the Economic Regulation Authority’s analysis of water charges, it said that the wastewater fees were almost \$400 per household above the cost of recovery, which should be the figure that the government is using in relation to the provision of that critical service. In fact, in 2018 the Premier conceded that, and it is in a press article titled “Premier McGowan says high water bills in Perth are necessary for the state’s economic good”. So the Premier was saying, “Yes, I know I’m hurting households, but it’s necessary for the state’s good.”

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The massive surpluses we have had over the last two budgets, which will be well over \$10 billion, offer the perfect opportunity for the government to stop overtaxing households, and that is the substantive point of our debate. Even if we look at public transport, we hear a lot about the capping of fares to two zones, but public transport has not escaped the cost-of-living increases from the McGowan government. Over the past five years, the standard two-zone fare has had increased 26 per cent or a total of \$124 since 2016–17. That is for a household that is predicated on six two-zone fares a week over the 48 working weeks of the year. So the recent statement about the cap on all transport fares at two zones brings no significant savings to the average household, which takes much shorter journeys. It might be a benefit to the people who live in Mandurah, and I am sure that that pleases the Premier, but it makes no difference to someone living in the two-zone area, which is the majority of people, who have had no saving. In fact, as I have said, under this government they have seen a 26 per cent increase in their cost of public transport.

One key metric of distress in electricity is disconnections. We now see a significant and disturbing trend. When after being warned that disconnection is imminent, households still do not have the capacity to pay their electricity bills and keep their power on, and they are increasing dramatically, we know it is time for the government to stop, listen and act. We know from the *Annual performance report—Energy retailers 2017/18* released by the Economic Regulation Authority that the rate of residential electricity disconnections in Western Australia more than doubled, reaching a six-year high in that year. There were 19 743 electricity customers disconnected for not paying a bill in the McGowan government's first year, and that was up from 16 000 disconnections in 2016–17. Over the same period, Synergy's disconnection rate increased by a massive 118 per cent, compared with an increase of 12.6 per cent in Horizon Power's disconnection rate. In the second year, we see no significant improvement. A total of 21 705 residential electricity customers were disconnected for not paying the bill in 2018–19—a 36 per cent increase on 2016–17 and a 15 per cent increase on the previous year.

In the government's second year, Synergy's disconnection rate increased by five per cent, while Horizon's has increased by 87 per cent since 2017–18. The Economic Regulation Authority has also stated that WA has a higher rate of disconnections than New South Wales, South Australia or Victoria. By the end of 2020–21, the average residential bill debt for Synergy's non-hardship customers reached its highest level in five years, while Synergy and Horizon customers on the hardship program had their highest average bill debt since reporting began in 2016–17.

COVID obviously provided a little circuit-breaker because of the freeze on electricity prices and the rebates to all householders, but as highlighted by an ABC article —

A report by the state's economic watchdog ... shows average debt levels owed by customers in financial hardship hit record highs in the year to June 30.

The increase came despite a \$600 handout by the government ...

Figures ... show average bill debt for hardship customers of state-owned utilities Synergy and Horizon Power leapt from \$772 in 2019–20 to \$1,195 last financial year.

The rise was even steeper among hardship customers of regional power provider Horizon, jumping from \$859 to \$1,547 over the same period.

One of the significant drivers of that has been the increase in electricity charges under this government. The first thing the government did in 2017–18 was to increase the daily supply charge for Western Australian households from 48.6¢ a day to 94.9¢—almost 95¢—a day. The hard thing about that is it is an unavoidable charge; no matter how much a household saves on electricity, they cannot save the connection charge. As members would know—I see members around this room whom I know care about people who are struggling—it is the poorest people who are facing most hardship who have the greatest difficulty in dealing with those fixed charges, but we saw a whopping increase in the charge under this government. As I have stated, that means that families are making tough choices: Do I pay the electricity bill or do I buy food? Do I get new shoes for my kids for the new school year or do I just make them squeeze into the old shoes or not wear shoes when they attend school? They are the choices people are making because of the massive utility charges that they face.

I could go on, but I have to get onto the exciting topic of water, and I thank the minister for welcoming me back into this portfolio that I care passionately about because water will deliver a massive economic opportunity to the state in the future. We have seen significant water charges under this government. In 2018–19, we saw a large increase in water bills for Western Australian families. Minister for Water Hon Dave Kelly put out a press release that said that the average household would see only a 5.5 per cent increase. Meanwhile, families that use more than 500 kilolitres would see a skyrocketing increase of 16 per cent on their water bills. As I pointed out, or at least alluded to, in question time today, that fee increase was all billed as water guzzlers in the western suburbs and the wealthy few living in the leafy suburbs using excessive amounts of water. I went into this in some detail sometime after that charge was introduced; overwhelmingly, the data showed it affected low-income households with big families. The average water consumption—I can be corrected on the latest figure—is about 130 kilolitres a person.

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A four-person household is automatically over the 500-kilolitre threshold if they use only the average amount of water.

**Mr D.J. Kelly** interjected.

**Dr D.J. HONEY:** I have only a limited time.

**Mr D.J. Kelly** interjected.

**The ACTING SPEAKER:** Minister!

**Dr D.J. HONEY:** Struggling families need relief from these cost-of-living charges. As I have said on a number of occasions, I am extremely supportive of targeted relief to help those most in need. Do not introduce regressive models that tax large families. Make sure to provide relief particularly to those people on low fixed incomes and low incomes who have no choice but to face these challenges.

**MR V.A. CATANIA (North West Central) [5.05 pm]:** I rise to support the motion moved by the Leader of the Opposition. We need to remember that on the one hand is a view that we have been lucky and everyone has been able to sail on as normally as possible. However, the reality is that since the first quarter of 2020, many businesses, particularly those in the events, tourism and hospitality industries, have been buried in debt and are dealing with increased costs and challenges, including the COVID restrictions and mandates that have been imposed on them and that continue to stifle their trade. A growing number of small businesses are struggling to cope with the rising cost of doing business, particularly in places such as the Perth CBD, where we see businesses closing left, right and centre and vacant hotels. Workers are working from home instead of their offices and that is having an effect on the heart and soul of Western Australia, the Perth CBD.

Regional areas have been trying to compete with businesses in the metropolitan areas, which are not exposed to the same level of costs. Businesses in regional areas are exposed to increased freight, fuel and travel costs. For example, people in Carnarvon were paying up to \$2.30 a litre for petrol and in some places further north they were paying up to \$2.80—and more. The cost of doing business in regional areas can be far greater than it is in the city, with the increased costs of goods and rents. There is a lack of rentals. I think the member for Moore raised the housing situation; people are lucky to find a rental in many regional towns. There are plenty of job opportunities in regional Western Australia, but there is no workers' accommodation. Businesses are under pressure simply because if they can find an employee, there is nowhere to house them. I think the government's announcements on workers' accommodation in Exmouth and Kalbarri are a little premature. The government has announced its election commitment of designating workers' accommodation in Exmouth and Kalbarri, but, in reality, acquiring expressions of interest to get a builder to build the workers' accommodation is proving to be an expensive exercise simply because to make it work, it needs government investment. It needs government investment to put services on a property to build workers' accommodation.

That is what is lacking in Exmouth. I have heard reports that it will take \$3 million to \$5 million alone to make the site suitable to build workers' accommodation. It is not within reach of a developer to take on that financial burden when it has such high costs. I am sure the Minister for Lands, the Minister for Housing and the government are well aware of the trials and tribulations of building workers' accommodation in places such as Exmouth when we need to make sites fit for purpose. I hope the government is listening and can come to the party to provide much needed earthworks to make workers' accommodation in Exmouth a reality.

The government is now embarking on that in Kalbarri. It has been talking about workers' accommodation. This is something that is needed so that people can fulfil those roles, of which there are plenty in places like Kalbarri. The other one I want to mention is Coral Bay. The government was quick to issue a media statement about workers' accommodation in Coral Bay. Most people might hear that the government is building workers' accommodation there, but it is actually the RAC that is building that accommodation for employees. Yet again, we see businesses suffer and people having to move to other towns to service places like Coral Bay. That has an impact on emergency services—those who volunteer as ambos or with sea rescue and so forth—simply because people who own businesses are stretched to the limit. They are finding it hard to make ends meet given the overheads they must pay, but they are also under pressures simply because they do not have staff. They are working themselves to the bone, as one would say, because they do not have the staff to fulfil those roles.

Water costs have increased. We hear the government say that it has not increased this or that. The member for Cottesloe summed it up when he spoke about the predicament that the Barnett government was in when there was a freeze on utility costs. That has an impact, because at some point governments have to try to close that gap. That was the legacy of the Gallop and Carpenter governments that the Barnett government had to take on. The Gallop government was negligent. It was trying to win votes. To get through the break-up of power and so forth, it needed to put a sweetener over the people of Western Australia, and that was to freeze utility costs. That was going to have to be paid for later on. The Barnett government took on the burden of the decision that the Gallop government had

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made and which the Carpenter government continued. That is the reason the government has needed to increase utility costs. We hear a lot about water. I am glad that the Minister for Water is in the chamber, although he is asleep.

**Mr D.J. Kelly:** What are you talking about!

**Mr V.A. CATANIA:** I am glad he has just woken up; it must be the after-effects of COVID! The minister knows that a uniform tariff exists for water. Is that correct, Minister for Water?

**Mr D.J. Kelly** interjected.

**Mr V.A. CATANIA:** He spruiks about how royalties for regions will make people in regional WA pay the same amount for water as people pay in Perth. When regional small businesses go over the amount that is allocated to them, many are sluggish with unsustainable water costs, which in many cases are up to three and a half times those in the metro area. It is around \$2.50 versus \$9 a kilolitre.

**Mr D.J. Kelly** interjected.

**Mr V.A. CATANIA:** When we talk about water, most regional communities are on band 15—the highest cost when it comes to water.

**Mr D.J. Kelly** interjected.

**Mr V.A. CATANIA:** The member for Kalgoorlie knows that. The member for Central Wheatbelt knows that. The member for Roe knows that. The member for Vasse knows that.

**The ACTING SPEAKER:** Member for North West Central, I am in the chair, but there is just one thing I want to ask, as you mentioned the member for Kalgoorlie. Are you taking interjections? I ask that, because you are goading —

**Mr V.A. CATANIA:** Only quality ones, which I am not getting from the Minister for Water. I will continue.

**The ACTING SPEAKER:** Are you taking interjections?

**Mr V.A. CATANIA:** No, I am not taking interjections, although you cannot stop the peanut gallery across the road!

*Withdrawal of Remark*

**The ACTING SPEAKER (Ms A.E. Kent):** Do you want to just withdraw that statement?

**Mr V.A. CATANIA:** What for?

**The ACTING SPEAKER:** Because I am in the Speaker's chair.

**Mr V.A. CATANIA:** It is not unparliamentary.

**Mr D.J. Kelly:** Are you challenging the Acting Speaker's ruling?

**Mr V.A. CATANIA:** I will withdraw because I am running out of time.

**The ACTING SPEAKER:** Thank you.

*Debate Resumed*

**Mr V.A. CATANIA:** The peanut over there is the Minister for Water.

We all know that regional WA is being put on band 15. They pay nearly four times the amount for water that people pay in Perth. It is not a level playing field for those businesses. There is the infamous toilet tax that the Minister for Water will not get rid of. If hotels, motels or pubs have more than one toilet, they pay for the privilege of having that extra toilet. Furthermore, they pay for the privilege of having water to go to that toilet. Furthermore, they pay for the privilege to flush that water out of that toilet! These businesses are paying exorbitant overheads.

**Dr D.J. Honey:** With 50 per cent occupancy.

**Mr V.A. CATANIA:** That is at a time when, over the last two years, occupancy rates have been about 10 to 15 per cent in the CBD. The Premier talks about how wonderful tourism is in regional Western Australia, but most places are at a 50 to 80 per cent occupancy rate. Why? It is because they do not have the workforce to be able to have their hotel at 100 per cent occupancy. The overheads that regional businesses have to pay are far greater than the overheads that businesses pay in metropolitan Perth.

Then there are the COVID rules. The school holidays start next week and Exmouth will be full. I urge everyone to perhaps bring some food with them because of the effect that COVID is having on businesses there. The chef might have COVID or be a close contact, the person behind the bar or the barista might be a close contact and cannot go to work, or the cleaner or administration assistant might not be able to go to work. It is having an effect. We will find that most small businesses will not be able to cope with the tourists who will go to their regional towns, simply because the stresses and strains of the rules around COVID are impacting them. That will impact the ability

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of tourists to enjoy places like Exmouth, Kalbarri, Shark Bay, Carnarvon, Broome, Kununurra and down south. It is a challenging time for businesses to cope with any visitors or tourists, simply because of the stresses and strains of COVID and the close contact, mask-wearing and two-square-metre rules. All these rules are placing a huge impost on businesses in regional Western Australia. Whether people agree with them or not, they are having an effect, and our businesses need help.

We can look at further costs. Insurance keeps going up—that is, if a business can get insurance. Adventure tourism is suffering because they are either unable to get insurance or are paying huge amounts. This makes their businesses unsustainable. It is making adventure tourism businesses think twice about whether they should stay in business. I have one horseriding business in my electorate and the owner is at the point where he cannot afford to continue because of exorbitant, rising insurance costs—and that is if businesses can get insurance. It will be interesting to see what happens over the next short period. Many caravan park owners cannot get insurance. When businesses find that the cost of insurance is prohibitive, or they are not able to get insurance at all, and face the prospect of closing after they have been trading successfully—it has nothing to do with their trade—we have a problem. As I said, caravan park owners are now starting to find out that their ability to get insurance is coming to an end.

The government is not tackling the massive problems that exist. We hear about how the economy has never been as good as it is under this Labor government. We all know that the iron ore industry and the resource sector are keeping this state afloat. We all know about the billions of dollars being put into the state's coffers. We all know about the GST revenue. This Labor government has failed to invest in our businesses and our tourism industry over the years it has been in power. What are the government's strategies to get workers to come to Western Australia? What is the government doing to build workers' accommodation? Is it reasonable for many people in businesses to have to work between 60 and 100 hours a week just to remain open? That is what they have to do because of the lack of workforce. We have not heard anything about what the government is doing to tackle the issue of worker shortages.

It will be interesting to see how tourism businesses in this state will cope when they have had a low season, particularly in the north of this state, and are now going into the high season and do not have workers available. The government's rules around COVID close contacts are also having a huge effect. That is in addition to the mental health issues and stress that our business owners are facing in these very difficult times. It is not all beer and skittles, as the Premier likes everyone to think, when it comes to tourism and businesses right across this state.

The liquor restrictions that have been placed on communities are also having an effect on small businesses. That is because of the lack of police in our regional areas. That is why we are seeing higher levels of crime than we have ever seen before in regional communities. The highest crime rates have occurred under this government. We hear a lot about the number of police, but we are not seeing them. That is because they are all being dedicated to the COVID response and Operation Tide. When crime rates go up, insurance costs also go up. Businesses and community members now have to pay more for insurance than ever before because of the amount of crime that is occurring in our regional towns.

The small businesses and tourism industries in Western Australia need vision and hope. They need some big ideas to be able to bring people and workers to Western Australia, and to promote Western Australia. We need to think big when it comes to trying to get events to Western Australia. We have heard a lot about the Wallabies match. That is great. But that is nothing new. We need to think of new ideas and ways in which we can hold events that span a week or two weeks. The Lord Mayor of Perth was pushing for the Commonwealth Games to be held in Perth. We need to think of big ticket events. Perhaps the government should try to chase the Formula One Grand Prix. We have a homegrown Formula One champion. Why not push to have a Formula One race in Perth? Let us get it off the Victorians. That is the type of thinking the government needs to act on to be able to grow tourism and put Western Australia back on the map.

When it comes to the state of emergency, all these issues that have been raised by other members are being masked by the state of emergency. Let us take the mask off on the state of emergency and deal with these issues that are having real impacts on real people, real businesses and tourism.

**Mr D.J. Kelly** interjected.

**Mr V.A. CATANIA:** Let us get some parity when it comes to water. I hope that instead of hearing this drip, drip, drip from the Minister for Water, he will stand up and pour some cold water on some of these charges that are affecting people in regional Western Australia. Let us also get rid of that toilet tax. We all know that the minister likes to tax the toilet. Let us flush him away, because we know that he will not be a minister in 2025.

**MS L. METTAM (Vasse — Deputy Leader of the Liberal Party)** [5.25 pm]: I rise to also contribute to this motion moved by the Leader of the Opposition —

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That this house calls on the McGowan government to ensure that the upcoming state budget is focused on alleviating the cost-of-living pressures burdening WA families.

I want to place particular focus on one of my shadow portfolio responsibilities, that being the prevention of family and domestic violence, and also on how that portfolio relates to some of the issues that have been raised in my electorate.

We know that, nationally, one in four women have been subject to domestic violence, and that, tragically, every 11 days an Australian woman loses her life at the hands of a current or former partner. Family and domestic violence is a leading cause of homelessness for women, and one in five women, and men, believe that domestic violence is a normal reaction to stress prompted by women, which is an ongoing concern. I appreciate and understand that we all share the importance of continuing to raise these concerns in our community and across the state. Clearly the Minister for Prevention of Family and Domestic Violence shares the important need to do that. We know also that according to the WA Police Force annual report 2020–21, the number of FDV reports in this state was 19.3 per cent above the five-year average. We have also heard that people in regional areas are three times more likely to be exposed to family and domestic violence. The incidence of sexual assaults also increased in the period 2019–20.

I note that the government has a Path to Safety family and domestic violence strategy. The first two years of the plan are around the fact that, and I quote —

The COVID-19 Family and Domestic Violence Taskforce will plan and develop actions as part of the National Partnerships Agreement on COVID-19 Domestic and Family Violence Responses. The Taskforce will consider:

- The needs of women and children experiencing, or at risk of domestic violence.
- Ensuring the visibility and accountability of perpetrators.

We know, as has been outlined, that COVID has exacerbated some of these real concerns. One of the biggest issues facing victims of family and domestic violence has been access to housing, which has been at a crisis level in this state under the McGowan government. The overwhelming feedback is that our not-for-profit and state government agencies are also feeling choked by the level of pressure in this area. I spoke to a couple of police officers today who said that their main demand is largely in the family and domestic violence space at a local level. There is little to no long-term housing available. Private market availability is so limited and expensive that people are finding it increasingly difficult to get into crisis care.

The rapid rehousing pilot project was spruiked in the last budget. I asked the Minister for Housing at that time about the timing of the project, appreciating that it would not start until 2022–23. I look forward to seeing how that works on the ground, but it is clear that funding for agencies that support victims of family and domestic violence is not keeping up with demand, especially the funding models that were set up pre-COVID. Some refugees have been forced to trim services and this issue was exacerbated by the rental moratorium ending in March 2021. That meant that many people were forced to re-sign rental leases at significantly higher rates, knowing that they could not afford to do so, but they had little choice. That led to a situation in which many people felt under significant pressure. We are now seeing that translate into an increase in demand for food services, as many people are spending most of their income on rent. They are having to seek assistance for food, transport and utilities.

This is no longer what was once considered a pressure only amongst those who do not have full-time employment; these levels of pressure are being felt right across the board. There is an obvious and clear connection between housing unaffordability and unavailability, and victims of family and domestic violence fleeing their perpetrators. We are hearing that women feel they cannot leave their home because they do not have anywhere else to go. The rapid rehousing pilot program would be welcome, but how can it be implemented if there is not any available housing? That raises questions about all the other measures and investments that need to be put in place to ensure that such a project's objectives can be achieved as successfully as possible, supporting some of our most vulnerable children and families.

We understand that 3 300 new social houses are to be provided. That is a good start, but it is only a start. There has been talk that the expected budget surplus could include up to \$8 billion in iron ore revenue. There is therefore an obvious obligation on the government to ensure that there is capacity to provide the support needed by some of the most vulnerable in our community, victims of family and domestic violence. We are hearing that because of the lack of available housing, there are many people who are desperate, with nowhere to go, living in very challenging circumstances.

I will touch on South West Refuge Inc, which provides support in my region. COVID has created unprecedented demand, which has been impacted upon by housing affordability in my electorate. Other members have mentioned that the availability rate is at about zero, and that has been intensified by the challenges facing victims of family and domestic violence. For a range of different reasons, many caravan parks and tourist parks are no longer extending availability to women seeking refuge. This is also in response to tourism demand and some questionable

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perceptions of these individuals as tenants, which is of quite serious concern. This has reduced the availability of local accommodation for women and children escaping domestic violence. During the moratorium on rental accommodation in the COVID period of 2020–21, South West Refuge Inc moved from crisis accommodation for individuals of about three months to six to nine months, just because of people's inability to find suitable alternative accommodation. As a result of that, South West Refuge has had to turn away about 200 families in need. The current shortage in affordable and available housing has increased local homelessness for women and children escaping family and domestic violence.

Looking forward, we see some real challenges for South West Refuge. It is effectively running on the same contract it has had for the last seven years, and the Safe at Home program for nine years. It is understood that the state government wants to recontract its services for the next five years at the same level of funding, despite the increase in demand and the significant increases we are seeing in the cost of utilities. It is increasingly having to fundraise and seek donations to keep itself viable, and it is possibly looking at actually having to cut back on services. It is understood that it costs the refuge about \$80 000 a year, through its own fundraising efforts, to provide its current level of services.

It is also understood that the state government will take five years to decide on the best model for moving forward, with no guarantees at the end of that process about the path of investment. The refuge has now had seven contract extensions, and after all this, it will have to continue for another five years with no additional funding. The Safe at Home program requires uplift in brokerage funding to meet the growing demand and clients' security needs. That is very welcome funding. The Safe at Home program employs more workers, but brokerage funding remains at 2010 funding levels.

Funding for the domestic violence mobile outreach program, a two-year pilot, commenced in December 2020 and will end in November 2022. This program has been an incredible success in the south west, providing women and children escaping family and domestic violence with valuable information, support and advocacy. But again the refuge has been advised, and it is concerned, that its funding will not continue beyond November 2022. As I stated, these are successful programs. Investment is needed in these important areas, but they are concerned about what the future holds and whether there will be a level of investment that can keep up with the incredible demand.

The South West Refuge is effectively in despair and is seriously considering its future options after July 2022. Unless there is some change, it will have to reduce the level of services it currently provides to remain sustainable. It cannot keep providing its services with the funding that it has been getting. It is very concerned about the impact that the closure of the service will have on the families that it supports, and I referred earlier to 200 families who were turned away during that 12-month period. I have had feedback from other refuges that are in a similar boat. They need to ensure that there is funding to support the demand for their services and that it takes into account the significant increase in costs as well.

South West Counselling in Busselton is a bit closer to home. The COVID-19 pandemic is having a serious impact on people seeking support from South West Counselling. The waitlist is ballooning. Clients already on low incomes are finding that they are unable to work due to COVID restrictions or whilst in isolation. If they are not paid during that time, they face challenges because they do not have the income to pay for increases in the cost of living, particularly in the housing market. An appeal was made to the Minister for Mental Health to increase funding to meet that demand. We were advised that the Mental Health Commission is the purchasing agency. The minister advised that his office and the Mental Health Commission would continue to engage with the mental health sector as it continued to grow and transform mental health service delivery across the state. The clients of South West Counselling need support now. It provides counselling and mental health support and preventive assistance to ensure that individuals and families do not face other challenges further down the track. These services are being significantly stretched right across the state, but this was just an insight into my local area.

We know that the government has a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity with a significant budget surplus to provide temporary relief. The government has a unique opportunity to provide investment in new areas of support. However, it is also vitally important that the government invest in assisting the vulnerable across the state. I have focused on victims of family and domestic violence, but the onus on the government is to ensure that those individuals, services and not-for-profits have the capacity to provide others with the support that they need so they do not feel that the only option they have is to be housed with a perpetrator. There is certainly an onus on the government to provide support to these agencies, which have continued to do an incredible job under extraordinary pressure, while there is a significant budget surplus thanks to the receipts of the mining industry.

**MR P.J. RUNDLE (Roe) [5.45 pm]:** I rise to support the Leader of the Opposition's excellent motion condemning the McGowan government for its inaction on alleviating cost-of-living pressures on Western Australian families while sitting on a record surplus that has been built on commonwealth funds rather than on sound economic management.

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I have looked back at some of the fantastic Labor Party documents from a few years ago. In the *WA Labor: Plan for jobs* there is no mention of people doing it hard. Here we go; there was “a fair go” for WA with Bill Shorten and Labor. There is certainly no mention of the vulnerable in that. Here we have *Getting things done*; there is no mention of the vulnerable in that. I must say that I agree with the Leader of the Opposition when she says —

**The ACTING SPEAKER:** Member for Roe, sorry; can I just interrupt you? Can you just tell me again which motion you are actually talking to?

**Mr P.J. RUNDLE:** Sorry, Madam Acting Speaker?

**Mr J.N. Carey:** He doesn’t know. Hello! Is anyone there?

**Mr P.J. RUNDLE:** I am here.

**Mr J.N. Carey** interjected.

**The ACTING SPEAKER:** Minister! Member for Roe, it is motion 13.

**Mr P.J. RUNDLE:** Thank you, Madam Speaker.

I would like to emphasise the way that the Premier answered the Leader of the Opposition’s question today. Basically, he spoke about getting people back to work. When the Leader of the Opposition asked about Foodbank, he spoke about diversifying the economy. I think that demonstrates that the Premier has lost touch with the vulnerable of our community. When the Leader of the Opposition asked her question, the Premier could not focus on the fact that the question was about Foodbank. Some figures that are coming in are quite disturbing.

I would like to go through some of the reports of the Western Australian Council of Social Service over the last couple of years, certainly between 2019 and 2021. The overall cost of living for people in the metropolitan area rose by eight per cent and the income for a family of four rose on average by just five per cent. When we look at the breakdown for that same family of four, with the cost of food and beverages, it increased in the metro area by 5.36 per cent and in the regions by 5.1 per cent.

What our members have pointed out today is the struggle that many of our citizens in Western Australia have undertaken over the last couple of years. As the Leader of the Liberal Party pointed out, unfortunately, more recently there have been real increases in costs and now people are having to make choices about whether it is transport, food, rent or electricity. That is what I am worried about. The size of this vulnerable section of our community is increasing quite rapidly. Some of the figures today are that rents in the metro area have risen by 14 per cent and up to 16 per cent in the regions, on average. I will quote Garth Davis, an adviser on property investment in Australia. He said that our rents are becoming ridiculously high with “ridiculously high levels of unaffordability”. I quote —

“We have a housing crisis already,” he said. “Which will become a housing catastrophe as the borders reopen.”

I hope the Minister for Housing is taking this on board. Anecdotally, people are sending out pleas for assistance with housing in regional locations. We see it on social media. We have short-term clinical placements for nursing students, medical students and contract roles and the market is forcing people out of accommodation on many levels. In Esperance today, 10 rental properties are listed ranging from \$260 to \$480 a week. In Narrogin, we have five rental properties, only two with more than two bedrooms. In Katanning, there are 12 houses, with two three-by-one houses listed for \$650 a week. There are two in Gnowangerup; two in Williams; none in Tambellup, Broomehill, Kojonup or Pingrup; and one in Cranbrook. That tells us the shortages that we are facing in our regional towns.

The latest Shelter WA report on housing affordability says that four out of five Australians think that owning a house in their lifetime is unachievable. As we know, 9 000 people in Western Australia experience homelessness every night. People waiting for social housing are looking at a wait of 100 weeks. There are 18 600 households waiting for social housing, 3 178 people are on the priority waiting list and the unmet need for social and affordable housing is 39 200 homes.

The Minister for Housing knows these figures. He has been in government for five years and we know that the minister has his hands full, but 700 houses are vacant at the moment. I heard the minister’s comments yesterday in question time about the fact that at any one time, there are absentees and people are moving out or moving in, but, as I have said before, we need the element of local tradesmen. I have said it before that we need tradesmen. When a tap or an electrical appliance needs to be fixed, it has to be done by someone who is within half an hour or an hour away. Too many contracts are given out to tradesmen from towns —

**Mr J.N. Carey** interjected.

**Mr P.J. RUNDLE:** Too many contracts are given to tradesmen from towns —

**Mr J.N. Carey** interjected.

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**Mr P.J. RUNDLE:** The minister has been in government for five years now. Too many contracts are given to people who are three or four hours away and that is why it takes them six months to turn up.

**Mr J.N. Carey** interjected.

**The ACTING SPEAKER:** Minister!

**Mr P.J. RUNDLE:** That is what happens.

**Mr J.N. Carey** interjected.

*Point of Order*

**Dr D.J. HONEY:** The minister's comments are constant, insistent and are not welcome.

**The ACTING SPEAKER (Ms A.E. Kent):** There is no point of order. Member for Roe, are you accepting interjections?

**Mr P.J. RUNDLE:** No, I am not actually; thanks, Madam Acting Speaker.

*Debate Resumed*

**Mr P.J. RUNDLE:** I just wanted to reiterate that. I have brought this up before and the minister needs to take it on board. It is an easy way to get that turnover of tenants and have fewer than 700 houses with no-one in them. That is a solution that the minister might want to look at.

If I can move on, there are plenty of other elements I want to speak about. I also want to talk about the COVID scenario. As we know, there was support through 2020 and 2021, but many businesses and families have not recovered financially and they are in a worse position than they were in 2020. I have spoken to some hospitality and tourism providers and some of the government grants are for when turnover has reduced by over 50 per cent. The problem is that once that happens, generally the business goes under. Some of those grants need to be tailored. Unfortunately, some of our regional and metro businesses have already gone. We have heard the comments about the Hay Street Mall and the CBD and it is something this government needs to address.

I want to go on to the Foodbank of Western Australia. We heard the figures put by the Leader of the Opposition. In the *Foodbank hunger report 2021*, it was found that one in six Australian adults have not had enough to eat in the last year and 1.2 million children have gone hungry in that same period. For one in six Australians food insecurity means that they are forced to reduce their food intake. They are often forced to eat smaller meals to make the food last longer or skip meals altogether. At least once a week, more than half, or 57 per cent, go a whole day without eating. I think food security is very important. Some of the reasons for food insecurity include the unexpected expense of a large bill, rent, mortgages, hours of pay being reduced at work, losing a job, family breakdowns, domestic violence or becoming homeless. The food security issue came to light in the early stages of COVID when busloads of people came into the regions and went to the local IGA, maybe 150 kilometres out of Perth, and raided the shelves of those regional stores. To be honest, I thought that was one of the most disappointing things I have seen over the last five years. It gave us an appreciation, for people in the metro area especially, of where our food comes from and how important it is. The situation in Russia and Ukraine at the moment has only increased our awareness of that.

I want to round up some of the comments from our other speakers today because they brought up some good points right through the line. As I said, the figures from the Leader of the Opposition about demand for Foodbank increasing by 42 per cent in Albany and the quadrupling of the number of people in Bunbury who are accessing Foodbank are quite concerning. That is one of my biggest concerns. I urge any members when they get the opportunity to go to the Foodbank at the airport or anywhere else to see the good work that is being done. We are really noting a major increase there.

As the member for Moore pointed out, we have seen a real increase in transport costs and a massive increase in the income the government receives from vehicle registrations and licences. The state government has the opportunity to reduce some of those fees and to stand up and be counted. The member for Cottesloe pointed out the 11.7 per cent increase in the cost of a basket of goods. He made a good point about removing the overcharging on water and wastewater. He also spoke about WA having the highest rate of energy disconnections in Australia; and, of course, the promise that the Labor Party made at the 2017 election of no increases in rates and taxes if it were elected. Unfortunately, that one did not come through the ranks.

The member for North West Central is an excellent member who is in touch with his community around the Carnarvon, Kalbarri and Exmouth region. He pointed out the average cost of fuel in that area was \$2.30 a litre, if not higher. He raised the real concerns he has about the situation in Kalbarri, Exmouth and Coral Bay, where they cannot get a tradesman—and even if they could, there is no workers' accommodation. He also referred to his favourite subject—the toilet tax. I run across this in places like Esperance where accommodation providers, which cannot always have that high occupancy rate, still pay the high level of the toilet tax. The band 15 water rate and the toilet

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tax could be addressed in the forthcoming state budget. This government has been in office for five years and has received a massive increase in revenue from iron ore royalties and GST revenue.

The member for Vasse spoke well on the issues of domestic violence and crisis care for the vulnerable part of the population—our women and children. I point to the good work that DVassist does in our community; it is a very important organisation.

Finally, I will wrap up with the fact that on the radio this morning I heard Western Australian Council of Social Service representative Rachel Siewert reiterate once again that people on low incomes are juggling power and rent; people on JobSeeker or a pension are really struggling; and that the hardship utilities grant, good though it is, is not enough. She suggested the government could assist by helping low-income people with utility bills, as the Victorian government has done; also concessions for public transport and car licences. She also pointed out the massive impact on Anglicare, with people contacting them or coming in their door. The forthcoming budget is an opportunity for the government to help out our vulnerable citizens. I hope all our ministers and our Premier; Treasurer take a breath and look at what is happening in their own electorates and the households in their electorates.

**MR D.J. KELLY (Bassendean — Minister for Water)** [6.04 pm]: I will make a few comments on the motion before the house. Labor governments always have an eye on those in our community who are vulnerable and who may be doing it tough—that is why we are here. To hear speeches from the other side about the Liberal and National Parties' concern for the underprivileged or people who are struggling does not sit well with their history. The Liberal–National government's history is that it did not look after people who may be struggling. At every turn, we saw that was not who they were interested in looking after. We have seen a demonstration of that during the pandemic. On this side of the house, with the leadership of the Premier, we have been fixated on making sure WA has good health and good economic outcome from this pandemic. That is what the government has been focused on. Members on the opposition side have basically been critical and on every issue and have looked at how they could drag down the government and its response to this pandemic, whether it be opening the border or supporting Clive Palmer. The member for North West Central showed his inner Donald Trump today, trying to get rid of masks without actually saying it. At every point, members opposite have tried not to be a constructive opposition. Quite frankly, the opposition's contribution today demonstrates that.

I will point out some of the issues raised in this debate. It is evident from the contribution of the Leader of the Liberal Party that he does not understand how water prices work. He raised this issue in question time today and again this afternoon. The increase in the top tier for water charges that the government implemented was really a price signal to people who use over 500 kilolitres a year to encourage them to save money by using less water. He said that impacted on big families. To justify that, he said that the average per person use is 130 kilolitres a year. If there are four people in a household, that immediately takes them over 500 kilolitres, and he said the government was slugging big families. He does not understand that 40 to 50 per cent of the average kilolitres used per person per year is used in the garden. If the number of people in a household doubles from one to two, the size of the garden does not double. If the number increases to three people, that does not triple the size of the garden.

The Water Corporation's research shows that one person inside the house, using the kitchen, laundry, bathroom and the like, uses about 55 kilolitres a year. If the number in the household increases, the water consumption figure per person goes down. If the household increases to six people, it uses about 180 kilolitres a year or 30 kilolitres per person. So, 180 kilolitres for washing, showering, cooking and the like is a long way from 500 kilolitres per person. The determinant of the size of the rest of the household bill basically depends on the size of the block and the size of the garden. It is absolute nonsense for the member for Cottesloe to say that because the average per person per year usage is 130 kilolitres, multiplying that by the number of people in the house will get the bill. The member should understand that. He was the shadow spokesperson for water in the previous term of this government, but basically he still does not get the numbers.

He again raised the Economic Regulation Authority report of a few years back, which recommended some changes in the way we charge for waste water. What is interesting about that report is that the ERA made a similar recommendation in a report in December 2012 when the Barnett government was still in office.

The previous Barnett government rejected the recommendations from that report out of hand. I remember quizzing Terry Redman about it in this place when he was the Minister for Water, and for good reason. What that report reiterated in 2012, in the last term of that government, was that it wanted to get rid of the gross rental value as a measure for how sewerage charges are worked out. Currently, the greater the value of a person's house, the more they pay in sewerage charges. The Economic Regulation Authority has constantly argued it should be a flat rate for everybody. That would mean that the sewerage charges for people living in lower value houses would increase, and the sewerage charges for people living in the more expensive houses—for example, in the member for Cottesloe's electorate—would be reduced. As a Labor government, we are not going to accept that recommendation. If the

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member for Cottesloe is honest, he would accept that when the previous government was faced with the same recommendation, it rejected it as well.

The ERA was also critical of how we subsidise water charges in the country. Are the members for Cottesloe and Roe seriously suggesting that we stop subsidising water charges in the country and charge people the real cost of water? We subsidise country customers to the tune of in excess of \$200 million each year. The ERA would like us to do away with that because it distorts the market. We are not going to accept that. We are never going to accept that, but members opposite come into this house and bang on about it. I wanted to make those points.

The member for North West Central came in and criticised the water charges for business customers in regional WA and said that some of them are on the highest level of water charges. That scale of water charges for businesses in regional WA was put in during the Barnett government, ironically when the member for North West Central was the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Water. He comes in here and criticises the pricing structure put in place by the last Liberal–National government when he was the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Water. He has come in here and criticised us for what we are doing for forestry when he knows that under the previous government when he was the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Forestry, his plan to alleviate the shortage of softwood timber was to try to source the timber from New South Wales. Our plan is to plant it here in Western Australia. The member for North West Central is like a broken-down car. He drives down the street making a lot of noise, belching out a lot of black smoke, thinking that he is doing something impressive and before you know it, he has gone again. He came in here today, made a speech—a lot of assertions, a lot of hot air, a lot of wind—and now he has gone again. He comes in here and criticises the very things that he did when he was in government. The member for Roe has a bit of a smile on his face. He knows what the member for North West Central is like. We are so glad that he is on the opposite side of the house, because we know what a divisive, incompetent contributor he is.

The Leader of the Opposition gave a very long contribution. She talked about the surplus, the pandemic, the failures of the health system, housing and the chaos in the Department of Communities. She talked about policing, small business, tourism, electricity, electoral reform, the GST, public sector wages, petrol pricing—everything one could possibly imagine except water charges. She did not mention water charges once in her contribution because she knows that she was the Minister for Water in a previous government and she is fundamentally embarrassed by what she did as a minister to struggling households. In question time today, I said that by the time she left office, 2 500 households each year had their water supply reduced to a trickle because they were struggling to pay their bills. Members should think about that. That figure of 2 500 households equates to 10 households a day for each working day of every year. Under the previous government, we would come in here in the morning and by the time Parliament rose for the day, another 10 households that could not pay their water bill had their water cut off. I used to raise that in the house every opportunity I got when I was the shadow minister. What response did I get from the then Minister for Water, now the Leader of the Opposition? Absolute stony silence! It was not as though it was a problem that could not be fixed. I asked the Water Corporation—in fact, I did not ask; I told it that it had to find a better way to deal with customers who were struggling to pay their bills. The Water Corporation was proactive. Its staff went out and talked to customers in hardship and found better ways to deal with it. They are now more proactive and when they see that someone is experiencing a very high bill, rather than wait for them to not be able to pay it, they contact them to find out what the circumstances are. They are very proactive about how they deal with it. As I said in question time today, the Financial Counsellors' Association, which is often very critical of governments, sent me a letter that states —

On behalf of the Financial Counsellors' Association of WA we write today to convey our thanks and appreciation for the recent changes to the Water Corporations financial hardship policies and processes. We understand that as the Minister for Water, staff at the Corporation were given a directive to look at the area of financial hardship and improve their current responses. Thank you for taking the lead on these matters.

I was pretty happy with that letter, I have to say. In the following year, 2019, the Financial Counselling Network said in a letter to me —

Dear Minister Kelly

...

We are writing on behalf of the Financial Counselling Network ... to acknowledge the measures the Water Corporation has taken to support customer experiencing financial hardship and payment difficulties.

...

We are pleased to note the positive feedback received from both FCs and HSC staff in relation to the Water Corporation's customer focused hardship policy and schemes to assist vulnerable customers.

Obviously, I am always pleased to get some positive feedback, but what I am really pleased about is the stories of the customers we dealt with who would otherwise have had their water cut off, but for whom we got a positive

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outcome. I talked to the staff at the Water Corporation who did this work of talking to customers and finding out what their issues were. I will always remember going to the Water Corporation one day and talking to the team leader who said to me that doing this work was the most rewarding thing he had ever done while working at the Water Corporation because they were actually helping people, not cutting off their water. I talked in question time about a free water allowance for customers on home dialysis. We have now extended that to customers who have a member in their household who suffers from incontinence. When someone in a family suffers from incontinence, that family can be doing five or six loads of washing a day and the water bill goes completely through the roof. The Medical Assist allowance, which provides free water for people on home dialysis, is now provided to several thousand customers who have a family member who suffers from incontinence. That is an example of the practical measures that we on this side of the house take because we are a Labor government that genuinely cares about people. The Liberal and National Party members only talk about these things when they are in opposition. When they were in government and we raised these issues, all we heard from the government side of the house were crickets. The Leader of the Opposition spoke about everything under the sun except water charges, because she knows about and should be ashamed of what she did when she was the minister—absolutely ashamed. Every year under the Barnett government, water charges were increased at a rate higher than the rate of inflation.

The only other thing that I will mention, because I know that other people want to contribute today, is something she mentioned that I cannot not mention: she quoted the struggles that an enrolled nurse, a member of the United Workers Union, is currently having. She talked about the concerns raised by the Community and Public Sector Union—Civil Service Association of WA. When members opposite were in government, they took every opportunity they could to attack unions and everything that they do.

**Dr D.J. Honey** interjected.

**Mr D.J. KELLY:** All members opposite did when they were in government was attack unions and everything they do.

**Dr D.J. Honey** interjected.

**Mr D.J. KELLY:** The member for Cottesloe has woken up. He loves to go on about “All you’re doing is supporting your mates in the trade union movement.” If he really cared about the enrolled nurse who the Leader of the Opposition quoted and Civil Service Association members, he would be supporting the unions. We all know that in countries where workers, especially the low paid, are represented by a union, they get paid better. We can look around the world and see that the biggest determinant of what a cleaner gets paid, what a security guard gets paid, what an aged-care worker gets paid, what a childcare worker gets paid is whether they have a union to represent them.

We saw crocodile tears when the opposition leader today spoke about ordinary workers and quoted comments made by the unions. The level of hypocrisy from members opposite is just extraordinary. The only time they are interested in people doing it tough or low-paid workers or what the unions have to say is when they are in opposition and they think they can score a political point. We on this side of the house know that despite the really good outcomes that we have had through this pandemic—a low hospitalisation rate, a high employment rate and the way jobs have bounced back—we know that people are still struggling. Members will see what our response to that will be when the budget is handed down in a few weeks. As a Labor government, we can rely on our track record of not a week or a month but of 100 years and we are very much focused on making sure that everyone in the community is looked after.

**MR W.J. JOHNSTON (Cannington — Minister for Energy)** [6.22 pm]: I am very pleased to follow the Minister for Water. He has laid out a very clear rebuttal of the commentary from the other side, and I want to join that. I am going straightaway to one issue as a first step in this rebuttal, and that is this nonsense that the Barnett Liberal government had to increase the cost of living because of the freeze on electricity prices. Let us understand what happened there. After the 2005 election, the Labor Party reintroduced the disaggregation policy for Western Power. The Liberal Party supported that on one condition: that the Labor government at the time freeze electricity prices for 10 years. That was the condition of the Liberal Party supporting the legislation’s passage. This argument that the need to increase tariffs by 25 per cent was caused by the disaggregation is just not true. It is just not correct.

**Dr D.J. Honey** interjected.

**Mr W.J. JOHNSTON:** It is another example of the member for Cottesloe simply not knowing what he is talking about. I want to make a suggestion to the Leader of the Opposition. The Leader of the Opposition shuffled some shadow ministries the other day. Do Western Australia a favour and take the energy portfolio off the member for Cottesloe and give it to Hon Dr Steve Thomas, because he has more sense. He may not have a PhD, but he knows about energy policy because he attacked the member for Cottesloe’s energy policy. He said that it was terrible, and he was right. He said that it was the worst policy that the Liberal Party had ever put forward, and he is correct. I want to return to this issue. I will table a letter in a moment, but I will read it first. It states —

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Dear Dr Honey

I refer to your comments of 11 March 2021, at a Liberal Party press conference.

You stated that you had met with the CEO's of all three GTE's and that they (myself included) supported the Liberal Party's Energy Policy in the State Election of 2021.

As required by the Caretaker Conventions, we take great care to ensure we as a corporation are impartial at all times. We remind our staff of this on numerous occasions.

I wish to put on record that at no stage of that meeting did I or Western Power staff express support for your—or any party's—policies.

While we did discuss individual components of the network that are relevant to your policy, based on publicly available (but dated) information, this in no way constitutes support of your policy.

**Dr D.J. Honey** interjected.

**Mr W.J. JOHNSTON:** I have not invited —

**Dr D.J. Honey** interjected.

**Mr W.J. JOHNSTON:** Can I have that paper tabled, please.

[See paper [1078](#).]

**Mr W.J. JOHNSTON:** This is typical of the member for Cottesloe. He comes in here and says things that are simply not true. On this day last week, the last sitting week, he said that there had been an outage affecting the Department of Housing customers in his electorate that was caused by a Western Power failure, and it was not true.

**Dr D.J. Honey** interjected.

**Mr W.J. JOHNSTON:** He came in here and specifically said that in respect of a resolution about Western Power. He came in here and said that I had responded to a grievance about Roleystone in 2020, when that simply was not true. This is the way that this member operates.

**Dr D.J. Honey** interjected.

**Mr W.J. JOHNSTON:** As I said in a debate with that member, he might have a PhD in chemistry but he knows nothing about physics. He also does not know much about honesty, and that is greatly disappointing. Let us get on with this.

**Dr D.J. Honey** interjected.

**The ACTING SPEAKER (Mr D.A.E. Scaife):** For members' benefit, I think we have all seen from *Hansard* lately that the Hansard officers are under extra pressure from not being in the chamber and having to listen remotely to transcribe the remarks. It makes their life even more difficult when we have interjections like we have been, so if we can get on with the debate in an orderly manner.

**Mr W.J. JOHNSTON:** Let us understand that the Liberal Party put up the cost of living for Western Australians by almost \$2 000, according to its own budget papers between the time it came to office and the time it was defeated. That \$2 000 is across the so-called household model that is reported in the budget. It is in appendix 9 of each year's budget. The Gallop Labor government never increased the household basket above inflation, and we have been proud not to do that. I just point out, during the first term of our government, during the COVID crisis, we gave every household a \$600 rebate on their electricity cost—a policy opposed by the member for Cottesloe; he said that should not have occurred. The rebate on a low-income earner's electricity bill was \$1 210. That was the rebate given by the Labor Party to low-income customers.

This is the problem with the member for Cottesloe. The member for Cottesloe does not understand the words that come out of his own mouth. He does not understand the electricity system. He does not understand the engineering involved. He does not listen to the people in the sector. He has no respect for anybody in the sector. He does not get it. Leader of the Opposition, please swap the member for Cottesloe with Hon Dr Steve Thomas. It is absolutely essential for the future of Western Australia that we have somebody who does not come up with these silly and stupid policies that risk the future of our state. As I said, the great thing that Hon Dr Steve Thomas said was that that policy was dumb, and he was right and he still continues to be right.

It is time for the member for Cottesloe to do some real work and pay attention to what is happening. I will go through some of the benefits of the way that we have been working with Synergy. The member for Cottesloe talked about the hardship utility grant scheme. When we came to power, HUGS was a subsidy for Synergy. What happened is that Synergy would simply take the money from HUGS and the bill would be paid for the customer. One would think that that might be a good thing, but, as we all know, financial counselling needs to be in place. If someone is not

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paying their electricity bill, it is not their only problem; they will probably have credit card debt and other bills that are unpaid. If we simply wipe off the electricity debt but do nothing about the person's life, they will continue to be in hardship and will continue to suffer. We reintroduced the referral to a financial counsellor for people who access HUGS. That is a very important benefit. We increased the amount available for HUGS and we made it easier for people to get it, but we made sure that they get it in the context of being given assistance. I congratulate the Minister for Community Services, under whose portfolio area HUGS falls, for the work she did to reform HUGS.

We reintroduced the household efficiency scheme that was abolished by the Barnett government. I note that when the old scheme was running, the member for Bassendean's wife was the chief executive of the organisation. I have always believed that it was probably for that fact and that fact alone that the previous government abolished the program. We reintroduced it. If someone can reduce their energy consumption, their bill will go down.

We have introduced the domestic violence fresh start policy, so that women who are escaping domestic violence, or men in rare circumstances, can walk away from the charges they have built up. We have a bespoke portal for financial counsellors. Like the Minister for Water has done, financial counsellors have written to me to congratulate Synergy on that work. They can now work with their clients and have total visibility over the whole of the Synergy system. We have introduced the Smart Energy for Social Housing pilot to help people in social housing have the opportunity to share in the benefits of renewable energy. We have introduced a consumer advocate position at Energy Policy WA. For the first time ever, there is somebody at Energy Policy WA who is solely responsible for looking at things from a consumer perspective. We have created a working group with community services organisations so that we can continue to examine ways to reform energy policy in Western Australia from an energy consumer's point of view. I have attended a couple of those meetings and they are really good. They bring together a range of peak organisations. We also have a grants program that supports research in that space. One of the problems is that Western Australia has not had the depth of capability in the not-for-profit sector that exists on the east coast, so we want to make sure that that is replicated so that there is a better understanding of energy policy needs.

We also had a disconnection moratorium during COVID. Of course, at the moment we are working with Synergy to make sure that disconnection is now only the last resort rather than the first resort. It is incredible to see the work being done as Synergy moves to a case-management process for hardship customers. Synergy has employed additional staff to work one-on-one and keep in touch with hardship customers. We have now had about 360 hardship customers graduate off that program. They are now able to manage their finances, so they do not need to get assistance. That is the sort of thing we need. If we help people solve problems in their life, they do not fall into hardship. It is a holistic approach. Rather than treating the symptoms, let us treat the causes and deal with them.

I am always amused by the idea that people on welfare are not being supported enough. I urge the commonwealth government to increase the unemployment benefit. One of the problems for people on welfare is that the unemployment benefit in Australia is exceptionally low. During COVID, it was doubled, and many people were able to afford things that they could not otherwise afford. If they got the proper level of income support from the commonwealth government, that would be a great thing; it would get them out of hardship and give them the resources they need. The Labor government in Western Australia is doing everything it can to create as many jobs as possible, but of course not everybody has a job. People have various challenges in their lives that mean that they rely on welfare. We would love the commonwealth government to increase the support for people on welfare, because that would be of much bigger assistance than anything the state government could do.

Another issue is that of homeless people. I would love to know how many homeless people get any government support at all. In fact, the overwhelming majority of homeless people whom I have dealt with over the last 12 or 13 years as a member of Parliament have got no government support at all. They do not get any government help. It is so difficult now to get any government support. Of course, these people are not counted as being unemployed because they are not applying for jobs, which is what they would need to do to be included in the unemployment list. They do not get welfare from the commonwealth government, so they end up relying on charities and other not-for-profits. That is terrible. The commonwealth government should step up and help those people, because that is absolutely essential for a properly functioning society.

It is interesting that water bills went up by \$288 during the four years from 2013–14 to 2016–17, compared with \$116.88 over five years under the Labor government. That was a 21.7 per cent increase while the Leader of the Opposition was water minister, compared with a 7.1 per cent increase under Labor. The average annual increase during those four years was 5.4 per cent, compared with 1.4 per cent over the five years of the Labor government. We know that many people do it tough in our community. As I say, we would love to have a better partnership from the federal government so that we could get more support, but we are not going to be lectured to by the Liberal Party, which increased fees and charges by \$2 100 per annum. Not once did it freeze prices. It increased power prices by 90 per cent, including by 25.6 per cent in 2009—in that one year alone—and 16.1 per cent in 2010. It increased water, sewerage and drainage charges by 66 per cent. Electricity disconnections increased by 82.6 per cent from 2011–12 to 2016–17. It increased car registration by \$183 each year. It imposed \$1.5 billion worth of land

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tax increases. We all remember that. In fact, as I have pointed out previously, there were three Ministers for Finance in the second term of the Barnett government, and the first bill for each of them as Minister for Finance increased taxes. Two of them had given inaugural speeches saying that tax increases were naughty, so it was quite ironic!

The forward estimates in the Barnett government's last budget included a price path for future electricity prices. It would have increased electricity prices by seven per cent per annum if it had been re-elected. Six per cent was the glide path for increasing water prices had that government been re-elected. We understand the cost of living challenges in Western Australia, as the Labor Party does elsewhere. We respond to them. We responded carefully and in a detailed way during COVID because we knew about that tragic situation. We introduced the electricity rebate, which the Liberal Party opposed. It said that we should not have done it. We have a strong record here. There is always more to be done, but we have a strong record. We are happy to run on our record. I will finish with this comment: members will notice that the Liberal and National Parties do not run on their record. They do not say, "Look at what the Barnett government did; we're going to continue that." We are happy to look at what the Gallop and Carpenter governments did, and, more importantly, what the McGowan government is doing, and to say, "That's our record, and we're happy to continue that."

**MS C.M. COLLINS (Hillarys)** [6.39 pm]: I, too, rise this evening to contribute to the motion around cost-of-living pressures. This state has avoided the worst health impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic because of the good and effective management of this government. The actions of this government over the past two years to contain the spread of COVID-19 have also effectively limited the fallout from the shutting down of key industries and sections of our economy. In turn, we have low unemployment rates, and our economy is booming at a time when others are flailing. There is no doubt that these past two years have presented a number of challenges and pressures for many families in Western Australia. We hear on a daily basis about the rising costs of rent, food and fuel. Combined with the long-term impacts of COVID-19, that no doubt is a financial worry for many Australian households.

Going into the federal election, more and more polls are being done on what the key issues are. The cost of living is front and centre in the minds of many families. The opposition has suggested that somehow the McGowan government has done very little to alleviate cost-of-living pressures over this last term of government. I take this opportunity to remind opposition members of the swift action that this government took to provide families with a buffer from the impacts of the health crisis that we continue to be in. We have just heard from the Minister for Energy about some of the ways in which we have reduced the cost of energy over the past few years. Near the start of the pandemic back in March 2020, the government was able to step in quickly to protect those facing financial hardship from having their utilities disconnected. No interest was charged on deferred bill payments, and the energy assistance payment scheme was boosted to double the amount available to eligible households. I recall when I was running as a candidate in 2020 that the McGowan government decision to deliver a \$600 electricity bill credit to every household as part of the WA recovery plan was very popular. This was a huge relief and injected \$634 million back into the pockets of Western Australians. This was on top of the \$2 500 energy credit that was provided to small businesses and charities that did not have a high annual power use. I would like to recognise the energy minister, Bill Johnston, for the work he has undertaken in monitoring the cost of power so closely, and in delivering savings for families across Western Australia, particularly during a period of expansion of household renewable energy. We can compare this, as the minister did in his speech, with the previous Liberal–National government, under which electricity prices increased at an average of eight per cent per annum for eight years. The fact is that if you need help with your power bill here in Western Australia, under this government, we will help you. We are working directly with people to provide support. The same simply cannot be said for Liberal governments. The Barnett government had more caps on disconnection numbers, rather than helping customers to pay.

Another key area in which the McGowan government has clearly provided some relief to families is through our transport initiatives. We made an election commitment that promised to cap all suburban transport fares to a two-zone fare. Families in Hillarys are particularly excited about this, but families all across the Perth metropolitan area are excited too, because as of 1 January this year, people can travel by train, bus or ferry anywhere in Perth and have their fare capped at \$4.90. For Hillarys residents who use the Whitfords or Edgewater train stations, this will mean a saving of up to \$360 a year, but my colleague sitting next to me, the member for Dawesville, would probably be much more excited about this than I am because people in her electorate could save up to \$3 000 a year under this new system. Not only is this encouraging people to use public transport, but also it is putting money back in the pockets of hardworking commuters.

Another key issue is housing. We have heard tonight from the opposition that there is a crisis in housing. There is no doubt that many Western Australians are feeling pressure in the housing and rental markets. Western Australians should feel confident that there is an affordable housing safety net. The 2021–22 state budget sought to do more for our most vulnerable Western Australians by including a record \$875 million social housing investment. That will see 3 300 new houses built. This is part of a \$2.1 billion social housing initiative over the next four years, the largest social housing investment in this state's history. That is coming at a critical time. It will deliver real support

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for those families that have been hit hardest by the many economic impacts of the COVID-19 global pandemic. Importantly, it will also enable a reliable and steady pipeline of work for our construction industry. I thank Minister Carey for his tireless work to boost social and affordable housing in Western Australia.

One issue that I can talk about firsthand from comments from my constituents in recent days and right up until now is the McGowan government's initiative to provide free rapid antigen tests across Western Australia. This is providing immediate relief for families that are experiencing the effects of COVID right now in our community. We are the only government in Australia that has put forward this initiative. Although there has been a delay with Australia Post and some families are still waiting on their 15 free test kits, every state member of Parliament has been issued with 1 000 RATs that they can distribute to their community. I know that this has been incredibly popular among people who have not received their test kits because they have been able to go to their schools and speak to their P&Cs about accessing those RATs in different ways if needed.

Meanwhile, the federal budget that has just been announced will see the end of the pandemic leave disaster payment in June. Although all workers regardless of income will be given a tax deduction for their RATs, the free RATs for concession card holders will end. That is despite those people being obviously the ones in greatest need of support. Thankfully, Western Australians have a McGowan Labor government that has put this initiative in place, given that the federal government simply has not stepped up in this area.

On the topic of the federal budget, I want to touch on how this federal Liberal government has ultimately failed to adequately address the real cost-of-living pressures. I will quote from a Western Australian Council of Social Service report that was issued on Thursday, 31 March this year. It is a reflection on the federal budget. It states —

**The clear consensus is that this is not a budget that is planning for the future, but a short-term cash splash, that does nothing to address the underlying structural pressures of rising living costs and flat wages.**

... It fails to systematically and structurally address the big challenges or help out those who need it most. The biggest issue for Australian households is the **rising price** of essential daily spending, at a time when **wages** continue to fall in real terms.

Every year, this federal Liberal government stands up at budget time and gleefully announces predicted wage rises over the next five years that never, ever eventuate. In 2017, it predicted that we would be enjoying a 3.5 per cent wage rise right now, yet here we are and wage rises have instead plummeted to 1.7 per cent this financial year. These wage rises never eventuate because the federal Liberal Party legislates and enforces a system that keeps wages stagnant. Mathias Cormann actually went public in 2019 and said on Sky News that the policy of low wages was a deliberate design feature of the Liberals' economic architecture. In June 2021, the McKell Institute released findings showing that the average Australian worker would be earning \$250 more a week if wages growth had continued at the rate achieved under the last federal Labor government.

Let me tell members how this federal Liberal government has created a situation across Australia that has become a cost-of-living disaster for many. Number one, it has attacked Australian workers' penalty rates. Number two, it has allowed many employers to rely on a temporary visa system, and of course this strategy has become even more disastrous in the age of COVID-19. Number three, it has ignored wage theft, despite enormous amounts of evidence that it was going on. Instead, in Western Australia we have a McGowan Labor government that did not ignore wage theft. The WA state government started an inquiry, did its research, and built a picture of how and where it was occurring.

Number four, every single year, the federal Liberal government has opposed minimum wage rises in the Fair Work Commission. Every single year, it has argued that the most vulnerable Australian workers should be making less, and now it has the gall to claim that this cost-of-living crisis has only just materialised out of nowhere. Number five, it has enacted public sector wage freezes. Members in this chamber will be very aware of Premier Barnett's numerous cuts and efficiency dividends on the Western Australian public sector: staffing freezes, pay freezes, cutting valuable institutional experience, and dismantling the sector via short-term contracts.

I will leave my contribution there, but I will say that Australia Institute chief economist Richard Denniss recently said that the "Morrison government has an obsession with wage suppression." The federal Liberal government has accelerated cost-of-living challenges, and I have outlined just some of the ways that the McGowan Labor government has alleviated these pressures for Western Australian families. Thank you.

**MS M.J. HAMMAT (Mirrabooka)** [6.52 pm]: I, too, rise to speak against this motion. I am pleased to have the opportunity to put on the record some reflections on the cost of living and the performance of this state government compared with the track record of the Liberal and National Parties in government, in addressing this most serious of issues. It is a very serious issue. The cost of living is a very central issue for everyday working people in this state. The member for Hillarys outlined how that is coming through very strongly. It is something that is fundamental

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to the considerations of the Labor Party. At the heart of our decision-making, all the time, is how we can advance and protect the interests of everyday people in this state and around Australia.

It is really a bit rich for the opposition to bring this motion to this house as though it has any kind of track record of doing anything to alleviate cost-of-living pressures on Western Australian families. As I listened to opposition members' contributions this evening, I could not help thinking that their hearts were not really in it. Although they brought this resolution because they felt it was their duty to do so before budget week, so they will have something to say, I cannot help but think that, really, it is not something they spent any time thinking about before they came along this evening to make their contributions.

The member for Roe was not quite certain which motion he was speaking to, and went on to make a contribution about a range of other things. I thought the member for North West Central, though, really took the cake for his contribution tonight. We heard his standard speaking points on a whole range of issues, many of which do not relate to the cost of living at all. We heard a bit about crime; we also heard him give a plug to the Commonwealth Games, as though bringing the Commonwealth Games to Perth will, in anyone's wildest dreams, do anything to alleviate cost-of-living pressures for working families. If that was a serious contribution from the member for North West Central, he is either —

Several members interjected.

**Ms M.J. HAMMAT:** That is right; it is clear he has not thought for one minute about his contribution tonight if he comes in here and says that that is something that this government should be doing under a resolution that is dealing with the very serious and substantial topic of cost-of-living pressures for Western Australian families. I think it is a bit rich for members opposite to come in here this evening and attempt to lecture the McGowan Labor government on issues that go to the heart of cost-of-living pressures affecting families.

We have heard contributions tonight from the Ministers for Water and Energy, who have given very detailed rebuttals on the issues of water and energy pricing. I congratulate and recognise both of those ministers for the work they are doing in their portfolios. They have done substantial work to not only keep increases and fees and charges at moderate levels, but also put in place deliberate strategies to ensure that the most vulnerable families in Western Australia who are struggling to pay those bills have the means and mechanisms to be able to overcome the problems that they are experiencing. That is what Labor governments do, because we care about the impact of cost-of-living pressures on families. We understand that families require essential services. We do not want to cut them off or jack up their prices because we have managed to achieve some kind of budget crisis, which is what we saw from the former Liberal–National government; we want to make sure that people can continue to access the services that they need. I congratulate the ministers for their excellent work in that area.

We also heard from the opposition tonight on the question of housing. Again, I acknowledge that is a serious matter. I think it deserves to be treated seriously, and that is exactly what this government is doing. The McGowan Labor government is investing \$2.1 billion into social housing over the next four years. This government will deliver 3 300 new homes for families. We know that everybody wants a place to call home, and the McGowan Labor government is working to deliver that for families in Western Australia. Just yesterday, I had the opportunity with the Minister for Housing to attend three new social housing homes that will soon be made available for families in my area, and I know that the minister was going on to another location shortly after that to inspect some more new housing. This minister is getting on with the job of delivering affordable housing for Western Australians and I commend him for the work he is doing.

We have already had some discussion in this house this week on the question of housing more broadly, to ensure that we not only provide social housing, but also ensure that housing is affordable for Western Australians. This minister has a plan to make that happen by ensuring that people are able to access affordable housing and to move out of the rental system and into their own homes using initiatives like Keystart, and by ensuring that we have land available for people to build on. The minister is working hard to deliver these strategies so that we can make a difference to the housing situation for people in this state. I also commend the minister for adopting new approaches towards delivering social housing, unlocking opportunities and speeding up delivery by looking at things like the modular build program and using timber frame buildings as a way of progressing social housing builds. As I said, this minister is energetic and enthusiastic and is clearly doing everything he can to deliver additional housing stock.

I do not have much time left available to me, and there is so much subject matter, but I could not let time run out and conclude my comments without talking about the enrolled nurse that the Leader of the Opposition spent so much time reflecting on in her contribution. One thing that is really important to me and that I think is a great protection against cost-of-living pressures is making sure that the people of Western Australia have access to secure and well-paid jobs. That is what this government is doing. One of the strategies that we are using is to ensure that TAFE is affordable and accessible for people to get the training that will then lead to them getting that permanent well-paid job.

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We heard about the enrolled nurse. I want to talk a bit about TAFE fees, because it is easy to forget that when the Liberal–National government was in power, it increased TAFE fees. How much did it increase TAFE fees by? I am glad you asked! In 2013 it cost \$1 878 to get a diploma in nursing. I refer to the cost of that degree in the former Liberal–National government’s last year of power in 2016.

Debate adjourned, pursuant to standing orders.

*House adjourned at 7.00 pm*

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