

STATE BUDGET 2022–23 — COST OF LIVING

Motion

MS M.J. DAVIES (Central Wheatbelt — Leader of the Opposition) [3.59 pm]: I move —

That this house condemns the Premier for delivering a budget that fails to provide real cost-of-living relief and is too little, too late for Western Australian families and key sectors in crisis.

Obviously, in the week after the budget has been handed down, there is scrutiny of what the Premier; Treasurer has announced. We look at the key themes of the budget and we provide our analysis as an opposition. One thing has resonated strongly since the budget was handed down. This is, undoubtedly, the wealthiest state in the nation, and the Premier goes to great pains to point that out, but we have many, many families who are struggling to make ends meet. Many households are struggling to pay their bills and many families are trying to keep a roof over their head. How can that be reconciled if you are one of those families or one of those individuals who is struggling and you see the Premier on the front page of the newspaper, gloating and smug about the budget surplus that has been delivered—not once, but twice?

Really, the centrepiece of that budget is the \$400 electricity credit. Nobody is going to say no to a \$400 electricity credit, although I note that the member for Cottesloe has generously donated his \$400 to a charity already. Certainly, that was a call from the Western Australian Council of Social Service at the time. It said that we needed to have a more targeted approach for providing relief to these families and that the budget was a missed opportunity to make sure that the money that is provided actually goes to the families who need it the most.

This Premier and government are sitting on an absolute bonanza of cash; there is no question about that. It was very unedifying to see the Premier coming out of the budget lock-up with a journalist, saying he thought other Treasurers would be looking like they had swallowed a bumblebee. I think there is a modicum of humility required when you are in the Premier's position. We know that there are crises in a number of key portfolios. We have spoken about family and domestic violence, we talk about health on a regular basis, we have talked about ambulance ramping figures and we talk about the pressure that our health system is under and the workers within that health system. We talk about the housing crisis and the fact that this government has taken its eye off the ball in delivering a sustained pipeline of affordable housing right across the state. There are waitlists for public housing, and we all know, as members of Parliament, the pressures on our constituents. They are coming through our doors daily and saying to us that they can no longer afford to pay the rent on their homes, so they are jumping on the public housing waitlist. That is going up and up. Limited work has been done by the government to ensure that we are keeping up with that growing cohort.

The Premier and his cabinet are now trying to spend their way out of a crisis, but for some reason we still hear this echo, now more than five years ago, to the previous government. This government has been in charge for five years, yet we have some serious issues facing the state. We did not see prolonged COVID lockdowns, like other states did. We did not see any of that. The businesses in our community are stretched in terms of labour, but they were largely able to continue operating. This government has had five years. We have a very healthy bank balance, but a big part of that is not due to good economic management, but good fortune. It has come from GST payments from the federal coalition government, record royalties that have flowed into the coffers of the state and increased taxation. There has been a bigger tax revenue coming into the state government coffers.

It could therefore be argued that it is incumbent upon the Premier; Treasurer to share that wealth. Unfortunately, this budget fell very short of the mark. People in our community, including individuals whom we have interacted with and key stakeholder groups, have expressed their concern that the wealth has not been shared, and that the real issues that so many people are facing have not been dealt with as part of the budget. This is a Premier; Treasurer who is sitting on a pile of cash, but is essentially unwilling to share it. With such a massive surplus, the government could have afforded to be far more generous with its centrepiece than it was. That is the point.

The Premier explicitly said that his budget would help families through the challenges of today. He claimed that his budget would help address cost-of-living pressures on households. As I said yesterday, that is simply not true. The member for Roe yesterday inspired me to have a look at some of the commentary from everyday punters on this issue, and there has been plenty. Certainly, commentary has come from all the key stakeholder groups, and we will get to that as members make their contributions, but I noted that the member read in some of the letters to the editor in *The West Australian*. I think a lot of that feedback correlates with the feedback from my own electorate and the discussions we have been having since this budget was announced. There is consensus that it was a very flat budget, it was uninspiring and that it missed the mark on supporting those who need it the most.

Inspired by the member for Roe, I went to *The West Australian* online yesterday to have a look. I can hear the Minister for Police groaning on the opposite bench, but members opposite use those comments when it suits them,

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and I certainly did not have to go very far to find the arguments that actually correlate with the proposition that we are putting forward.

Mr P. Papalia interjected.

The ACTING SPEAKER: Minister for Police!

Ms M.J. DAVIES: Only about five people read *The West*? Is that what the Minister for Police said?

Mr P. Papalia interjected.

Ms M.J. DAVIES: I am not talking about that; I am talking about going online.

Mr P. Papalia interjected.

Ms M.J. DAVIES: I said the member for Roe did yesterday, Minister for Police. Unlike you, I actually listen when your side speaks. I picked up what the Minister for Housing was saying and took note. If you are going to participate in the debate, you can pop up after we have finished and have your say.

Let us just read through some of these. These are ordinary, everyday Western Australians making their views known. One said —

An ALP government to gives \$400 handouts to ... millionaires? How does that work? While people are living in tents!

Mr P. Papalia interjected.

Ms M.J. DAVIES: No, they are comments, Minister for Police—as you would have heard me say, if you were not talking over the top of me—to an article —

Mr P. Papalia interjected.

Ms M.J. DAVIES: It says, “Ian B”, and I can point the minister to the website and give him a specific —

Mr P. Papalia interjected.

The ACTING SPEAKER: Minister for Police!

Ms M.J. DAVIES: Oh my goodness! I do not think it is a hard concept. We live in an online world, Acting Speaker.

The ACTING SPEAKER (Mr D.A.E. Scaife): Leader of the Opposition, if you could just pause for a second. I appreciate that the Minister for Police has been interjecting. I think, in some ways, you perhaps do not need to continue indulging him, though, either, Leader of the Opposition. I will keep making sure that there is order, if we can just get on with things.

Ms M.J. DAVIES: Thank you, Acting Speaker. It would appear that the Minister for Police is unable to understand the concept of online articles and the fact that there is regularly opportunity for members of the public to provide feedback. I am simply furnishing the house with some of those comments on the state budget and the feedback from the community. For the benefit of *Hansard*, I can point to the actual article and promise that I am not making up names or individuals. They do, in fact, have their names listed below the article. Phillip L says —

The state government has a majority they no longer deserve. Time is passing and very little achieved. There certainly seems to be a dearth of talent in their ranks. It does seem to be a lazy budget.

Wendy F says —

This has been a pretty disappointing budget. There was no need to raise power, water and rego costs when some are really having a hard time. The \$400 credit —

Mr P. Papalia interjected.

Ms M.J. DAVIES: The Minister for Police does the Western Australian public no good when he assumes that everybody comes to these things with a partisan background. It shows just how low an opinion he has of people who engage in this debate. The quote continues —

The \$400 credit will only offset the rise in charges for a short while.

Mr P. Papalia interjected.

The ACTING SPEAKER: Minister for Police!

Ms M.J. DAVIES: The quote continues —

I think he is a little out of touch.

Another says —

Of course the Budget is very slack work by MM. —

That is, Mark McGowan —

For such an important portfolio you cannot be Premier, lead a health crisis, micro manage & be front man of all areas of government and then devote the time to —

Being Treasurer.

It goes on and on. I read these comments just as a reflection of some of the things that have been said, not only online on *The West Australian*, but also in the conversations that we have been having with our constituents. They are certainly reflected in some of those key stakeholder groups. I acknowledge that there are some keyboard cowboys and girls out there, but I do think that this reflects a feeling in the community. Not everyone, but certainly a vast majority of people have passed judgement on this Premier; Treasurer for handing down such an enormous surplus when so many are feeling the pinch. The budget really fails to address the cost-of-living pressures being experienced by so many Western Australian households.

Let me be specific about where it fails. There is an increase in the basket of goods for households. The driver's licence fee people pay is going up by 6.4 per cent. Their car registration will go up by 3.8 per cent. The motor injury insurance is up by 2.4 per cent. Water charges will go up by 2.5 per cent and the emergency services levy will go up by five per cent. As I said yesterday, if people are seeking to be progressive in their choice of car by transferring to an electric vehicle, there will also be a 2.5¢ tax on those cars for every kilometre driven. That is an industry seeking to encourage people to take up electric vehicles—we certainly support that—but that is probably a disincentive at this stage while we are trying to increase the number of people purchasing those cars. In contrast, the opposition called for a freeze on fees and charges for the 2022–23 financial year—not across the forward estimates, and we did not say it should be forever—to acknowledge that there are some extraordinary circumstances in our state at present and to ease the pain in Western Australians' hip pockets. The sustained freezing of fees and charges would probably cause more challenges than it solved in the longer term because there would be bill shock when things returned to normal, but we have to acknowledge that there are some serious challenges in Western Australia at the moment, and I think that would certainly have relieved some of those pressures.

Likewise, we tried to advocate a raft of other issues prior to the budget being handed down, such as the patient assisted travel scheme. This is for patients who have to travel to access specialist services. With the price of fuel at the moment, even the very generous support that the federal coalition government is providing to try to ease the pressure for motorists still does not cover or fill the gap at all. It is simply unaffordable for people who have to travel by land to access specialist services in major regional centres or the Perth metropolitan area. It should never be out of reach for anyone to access the services that they require.

The other thing that would have been a relatively easy gesture to make was to acknowledge those age and disability pensioners who live in regional Western Australia who have access to the Country Age Pension Fuel Card. I am sure that the member for Moore, as the shadow Minister for Transport, will speak to that. When the Labor government came to power in 2017, it removed the indexing of the card, so the increase in funding for the card to keep up with the cost of living and inflation every year was removed. Unfortunately, that means that there is not the same amount of dollar stretching. By far the majority of those people do not have access to public transport. I note that there has been an investment in making public transport fares cheaper in the metropolitan area. The genesis of the Country Age Pension Fuel Card was to acknowledge that there were age and disability pensioners in the regions who did not have access to public transport, and it went towards supporting them to get to medical appointments. It was supporting them to stay connected in their communities and allow them to have some of the support that is available quite readily in the metropolitan area. This government could have increased the amount of funding for the Country Age Pension Fuel Card. The government could have changed the categories of people who are eligible for the Country Age Pension Fuel Card to make more people eligible for it in order to relieve their pressures. It is just a truism that people living in regional Western Australia spend more time in their cars—it is not an us-versus-them thing. They spend more on fuel; that is just a fact. There were most definitely missed opportunities for us to address, and we were very disappointed not to see those changes in the budget.

I would like to talk about two of the questions that were asked today about oncology services for Geraldton and Albany, because the Minister for Health pushed back immediately and said that there would be no funding from the state government, or that only one was under consideration. There was most definitely a reluctance by the state government, even with the budget situation it finds itself in, to partner with the federal government on, or match, funding that has been made available for Geraldton radiotherapy services and Albany oncology services. I could not quite understand the minister's proposal because, essentially, most funding that comes from the federal government is matched by state government funding or there is a partnership arrangement. Sometimes the state puts in more and sometimes the federal government puts in more. In this case, the federal government announced this program for, I think, 13 oncology radiation units around Australia. There was one promised for Albany and there is certainly

a need for a similar service in Geraldton. We are talking about the cost of living and basic services and where we see failures. Geraldton hospital has been delayed now for five years, and although there is additional funding in the budget, which we welcome, we now do not have a finish date. That has not been shared with the public and the people who are waiting for it so desperately. We thought that there would be an opportunity for this government to consider that as part of the redevelopment. Given that there have been delays, it could have been wound in to the redevelopment.

There was a tragic article published on ABC Midwest and Wheatbelt online on Monday, 16 May showing the real face of this tit for tat between federal and state governments on funding, such as patients like Geraldton general practitioner—I hope I say her name correctly, apologies in advance—Mahee Jayakody, who became a patient herself when she was diagnosed with breast cancer last year. The doctor said it was a very bad diagnosis. Having to travel down to Perth on a regular basis has had serious financial implications for her and her family. She has young children. When people cannot get treatment close to home, they cannot provide reassurance to their children. They are not able to go about their normal lives, if they have the health to do so. Unfortunately, too many people fall into that category.

The Albany radiation oncology service has been campaigned for for a very long time. The community, and Mary Williams in particular, has done a marvellous job of trying to keep this on the agenda. I know that Rick Wilson, as the federal member for O'Connor, has done a significant amount of work. We are still waiting to see when that facility will become operational. Unfortunately, I actually have friends who have required the services of a facility like this in Albany. When a person is very ill, the last thing they feel like doing is to get in a car or on a plane and driving or flying to Perth on a regular basis. That can be expensive, and although there are opportunities to use Crawford Lodge and others places in Perth, the problem is that these people are then away from their home and the comfort of their friends and family. Too many regional Western Australians have to do that. This is an opportunity to set politics aside. The federal government has put funding on the table for these two services. This state government has the financial capability to deliver on services like this that people really respond to and see the value of. It would be a marvellous outcome if the government were to put some funding into and deliver on these projects, and we would wholeheartedly support it.

I will finish up by saying again that when a Premier has been in charge for five years, as this Premier has been, and delivered two whopping budget surpluses, one would absolutely expect to have a health system that is in good nick. One would expect to have a housing sector that had received investment right throughout the entire supply chain in terms of unlocking land, investing in community and public housing and making sure that we have affordable rentals. It seems like we are delivering it all in a rush at the most difficult time, instead of this government having had the foresight to invest in the sector earlier. We have a housing crisis and a health crisis. Fees and charges are increasing that will put additional pressures on families that are already under stress. As I said yesterday, government members only need to talk to the staff at Foodbank Australia—as I do when I visit Albany, Geraldton or any of those regional centres—to hear that not only do they see coming through their doors the people who have been regular clients for the last five or 10 years, but also they are starting to see families who have never had cause to walk through those doors. That is an indictment on a government that is sitting on a massive budget surplus—a pile of cash—that could have been shared with more Western Australians to help ease their household budgets.

DR D.J. HONEY (Cottesloe — Leader of the Liberal Party) [4.22 pm]: I rise to support this excellent motion moved by the Leader of the Opposition. Earlier today, I delivered my budget reply speech and I reiterate from that that any measures to assist Western Australians families in this budget are too little and, for many, too late. I want to emphasise the point made by the member for Vasse today by way of interjection during a government answer in question time. When we talk about the relief that is being provided to Western Australians, the government touts its big relief package of \$400 to households. I will talk about what that actually means later. Of course, for the homeless in our community, it is no help at all. For those people who do not have a place to live and who are sleeping in their cars or sleeping rough, it provides no help or assistance whatsoever. We all know that they are the people most in need. Although it is not the major topic of my contribution, I am not sure that that will get significantly better; if anything, we have seen it get worse under this government. The really massive increase in rent is going to force more people out onto the street. I know that the Minister for Housing is a person of good intent and genuinely feels compassion for those people. My concern is that the actions his government has taken on homelessness are too little, too late. The housing industry cannot build houses at anywhere near the rate of normal demand. Getting additional housing will be enormously hard. I welcome the build-to-rent initiative and the stamp duty relief; it is a good initiative and something that members of the opposition have discussed with the building industry. We told it openly that we supported that as a good initiative. However, a third of all apartment projects at the moment are on hold because they cannot attract a builder. There are actually no builders to build them. When we talk about new projects coming into the market, I struggle to see how this will improve. As I say, I appreciate the minister's good intent, but because of actions this government took in its first term, that may now be an impossible dream.

Our state has received a massive budget surplus. As pointed out by the Leader of the Opposition, it is nothing to do with smart economic management. It is pure windfall. The income that this government will receive this year is \$16.5 billion more than that in the last year of the Barnett government. Take that in, members—\$16.5 billion. That is a 66 per cent increase in income. We should compare the surplus that has been announced to the \$16.5 billion increase in funding. The Premier says that somehow he, as Treasurer, is so much smarter and brighter than the Liberal government. He comes into this place and mocks us on this side for the performance of the past government. The surplus reported this year is only \$5.7 billion against a \$16.5 billion income increase. We have seen a massive 30 per cent increase in expenditure by this government. Even if we take out inflation, it is a 20 per cent expenditure increase by this government, but we do not see any commensurate improvement in services. What we see is households being hit up for more fees and charges.

I know that Western Australians have not accepted the spin from the government that their fees and charges will not increase because of that \$400 sugar hit, which, as I say, seems to be very conveniently timed before the federal election. The McGowan government in its first six budgets increased household fees and charges by \$1 050 a year. That is the underlying increase in fees and charges. This government can talk about a one-off hit, but those underlying increases are annual hits, and then there are the stated increases that the government has announced. It uses a model household to look at those particular fees and charges, but we know that there would be only a handful of households in Perth that are represented by that model household. Nearly every household would have significantly more fees and charges than that model household. Even if we accept that and the hypothetical consumption of water, the use of public transport and the like, there are still substantial increases. In 2022–23, the average basket of goods, as it is put, will cost \$6 536 per year. That is a 2.5 per cent increase. The underlying cost in fees and charges this year is going up by \$156. Very few households are going to see that \$400. They will not see anything like it in the reduction in charges. If they are the so-called model household, the net is only \$244.

Mr P. Papalia interjected.

Dr D.J. HONEY: The government is giving \$400 with one hand, but taking away money with the other, minister. It is supposedly giving \$400, but taking back \$156 —

Mr P. Papalia interjected.

The ACTING SPEAKER: Minister for Police!

Dr D.J. HONEY: — in increased underlying fees and charges. We will talk about that a little later. Even if we include the \$400 just for this year, the average household is \$650 worse off than it was in 2017. These are very substantial increases. I know that there are members here who care about those who are doing it tough. They are very close to the issues of people who are struggling and so on. They know that for many families their income has not gone up, so that \$650 simply comes out of other things. As I have said in this place before, we end up with this horrendous situation in which parents have to choose between getting themselves food or buying shoes for the kids. Do they just make the kids go to school in shoes that clearly do not fit because they cannot afford to buy them? That is what the \$650 increase means.

Electricity consumers in Western Australia have suffered massive cost increases. That was due primarily to the Gallop Labor government's reform in mid-2000 to split up government agencies. All of a sudden, we had four agencies and four executives and senior managements for what was once one agency. That reform promised massive reductions in fees and charges.

Ms J.J. Shaw interjected.

Dr D.J. HONEY: I have read the original debate in Parliament, member. That reform was touted —

Ms J.J. Shaw interjected.

Dr D.J. HONEY: For goodness sake!

The ACTING SPEAKER: Member for Swan Hills!

Dr D.J. HONEY: That reform was touted as one that would substantially reduce fees and charges. We never saw that. All we saw after that was massive increases. The Barnett government had to pick that up. That government had forecast 10 per cent increases year on year. The Barnett government inherited that. I know that on this side, an error was made about the charges under the Barnett government. Those fee increases were inherited from the previous Labor government. That is not spin. That is a fact. That reform did not result in businesses and households paying substantially lower fees and charges. In fact, there were significant increases because of the splitting up of those agencies.

The reality is that throughout this government's term, the decisions it made in past budgets have contributed significantly to cost-of-living pressures for Western Australians. This government's first budget in 2017–18 had significant

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price increases for our utilities, with a 10.9 per cent increase for electricity and a six per cent increase for water. As we pointed out at that time, that was well above the rate of inflation. The government was clearly front-loading those increases so that it could tell a better story at the end of its term in government. The reality is that those increases were not once-off. They are cumulative increases that are continuing to this day. Those increases in utility prices really hurt family budgets. In the early part of 2020, this government was on the rocks, but COVID hit, and that changed the whole political situation. I remember going out to the electorate of Darling Range with some members here and talking to householders. The pain they were feeling was visceral. It was quite remarkable, actually. It was shocking. Families were extremely distressed.

Mr V.A. Catania: Can I interject?

Dr D.J. HONEY: Yes, you can.

Mr V.A. Catania: It will be interesting to see the position of the Premier when it comes to Albanese supporting a 5.1 per cent pay rise to marry up with inflation. The inflation rate in Western Australia is two per cent higher than the national rate, so it will be interesting to see whether the Premier supports wage increases to meet the inflation costs here in WA.

Dr D.J. HONEY: As always, I appreciate the value of the member's contribution, unlike some others in this place. I deeply pray that we never get to find that out, member.

Several members interjected.

Mr V.A. Catania: Do you support it?

The ACTING SPEAKER: Member for North West Central, you are interjecting on a member of your own alliance at the moment. You do not have the call, member for North West Central.

Mr V.A. Catania interjected.

The ACTING SPEAKER: Member for North West Central, do not argue with the chair. I call you to order for the first time. Sorry. What was that? Did you have something to say, member for North West Central? No.

Dr D.J. HONEY: Thank you very much, Acting Speaker. I need protection everywhere.

As I say, member, I deeply hope we will never get to test that thesis. That is of great concern to me. Those price rises hurt family budgets. Despite the government's power bill credit, which will come in on 1 July, electricity bills will still go up by 2.5 per cent. That will effectively be a cumulative increase—the increase that will occur this year, and, on top of that, the two per cent increase next year.

In 2020, the government provided Western Australian households with a \$600 electricity credit. We could only describe that as an election inducement. That was at a time when our state had a significantly smaller surplus than the surplus that has been delivered this time. The state also had a substantially lower rate of inflation, and lower global price pressures. As I have said before in this house, I understand that this time, there is uncertainty. The government has said the reason it has done this is to calm people down and make them feel that they will not be under financial stress. The actual realised financial stress that households are under now is much greater than it was at that time. It is a government decision. The government holds the reins. If the government thought that \$600 was appropriate at that time, why does the government now think it is appropriate to come up with an electricity credit of only \$400, when households are under vastly greater financial pressure than they were at that time? It does not seem to make sense. This is what the government has chosen to do. However, there seems to be a complete inconsistency between an imagined risk at that time versus a real risk or a real pressure at this time.

Mr V.A. Catania: Can I interject?

Dr D.J. HONEY: Yes, quickly.

Mr V.A. Catania: That \$600 came from the Bell Group settlement. It was based on the WA Inc days. It was one way for the government to try to sell to the community that it was doing a good thing, rather than putting that money in its coffers.

Dr D.J. HONEY: I thank the member, but I had best move on. As always, that was a valuable point. The reality is that the government stated that that was a windfall, so it is not something that would make a big difference. No. It was income that the government had received. It had the choice to spend it on many things, and it chose to spend it on that.

The opposition has consistently called in this budget for a freeze on government fees and charges. That is what happened last time, when as well as the \$600 credit, there was a temporary freeze on increases in fees and charges. That would be appropriate now. The reason that a freeze would be of value to households is that it would reduce the cumulative effect of increases over the following year. By giving households \$400, yes, they will get a sugar

hit now, but the underlying fee will go up by 2.5 per cent, and next year it will go up by another 2.5 per cent. If that fee was frozen, the net increase that people would see next year would be 2.5 per cent and not the cumulative increase of five per cent. In fact, it would be more than five per cent because of compound interest. That is why we have called for that. That would provide sustained relief to families, whereas what the government is doing now will add \$160 to their costs forevermore. Mr Albanese came to WA and made great moment, as the member for North West Central alluded to earlier, of the very high inflation rate in Western Australia. Again, given that very high inflation rate, that one-off payment will not make any major difference.

Foodbank said earlier this month that it was seeing a trend of clients who are under-employed, or considered to be the working poor. The opposition has raised with this government time and again that for the first time in this state in my lifetime, we are seeing an emerging trend of middle-class homelessness. It is quite remarkable for a state that accounts for 60 per cent of Australia's export income, and has massive windfall surpluses, that we have literally moved to having middle-class homelessness. I have been contacted by people who have nowhere to stay. They have a full-time job, yet they cannot find a house to live in. That is just terrible. I have made the point about targeted relief. The problem with the way the government has delivered this \$400 relief is that the billionaires who reside in or immediately adjacent to my electorate—I counted six of them at one stage—will get the same \$400 credit as a single mum on social security who lives in a flat and is struggling to pay the rent. That makes no sense whatsoever. That is why last year, I donated mine to St Patrick's. I could not in all conscience take that money. One homeless person in my electorate often has to sleep in the basement of my office block. That is a completely inadequate payment.

The government has said that we want to spend all of the surplus.

[Member's time extended.]

Dr D.J. HONEY: If the government were doing something to make structural changes that would help the community in the future, maybe we would have a different attitude, but it is not. As I said, above CPI, we have seen an increase in government expenditure by 20 per cent since 2017. That is a net increase above CPI. The government is spending like there is no tomorrow but we are not seeing the commensurate improvement of services. Go anywhere, to housing, hospitals, homelessness or any of the big, core issues, we are not seeing a net improvement at this stage. The Premier promised that above certain thresholds he would apply 50 per cent of the iron ore royalty to pay off debt. As the Leader of the Opposition again pointed out in her contribution to the budget speech, if the government had done that, it would have reduced debt by \$14 billion. Why is that important? It is important because, for every year henceforth, the government—every government of whatever colour—would have more money to spend on critical services. That would provide lasting relief—a genuine relief. It would also, in a small way but I think significantly given the amount of money, put less pressure on interest rates, for example. One of the things that is driving interest rates in the nation is the debt that so many states carry. The government is not making the decision to do that. As I said, there are some initiatives. I think that encouraging the rent-to-buy scheme is a great initiative. The building industry came forward with it, the government supported it and we support it. We all think that is wonderful, but, in the greater part, it is very hard to see where that enormous wealth—\$16.5 billion—is going because we can see very few outcomes and very little of it in useful things in the budget.

The latest energy report released by the Economic Regulation Authority clearly shows that, after the original \$600 credits were applied, the number of customers repaying a bill debt and the average amount of debt owed continued to trend upwards. By the end of 2021, the average residential bill debt for Synergy's non-hardship customers reached its highest level in five years while Synergy and Horizon Power customers in the hardship program had the highest average bill debts since reporting began in 2016–17. Gas retailers reported the average bill debt owed by non-hardship residential customers and customers on a hardship program both increased by 46 per cent in 2021. There was also a substantial increase in the number of non-hardship customers with a bill debt. Currently, during March 2022 alone, 1 466 homes had their power disconnected for non-payment of power bills. That is one every 30 minutes. Every 30 minutes, a household is disconnected. Yesterday, the Premier made the point that relief had to be given with the original \$600 payment because of all the uncertainty, but what we know for certain is that interest rates are heading back to historic levels of seven per cent. That is the long-term average interest rate and that is what our interest rates will go back to, if they are not higher given the state of the global economy.

Based on the budget papers, households will continue to see further increases, as I said, by 2.5 per cent. That means families would see an increase from \$3 216 in 2023 to \$3 706 in 2023–24. That is going to be an increase of \$490 in just utilities, not the whole basket of goods. There clearly is no real solution to all of that. Another member of the community said that they received an additional \$500 bill from Synergy after their previous bill was calculated off estimations. This is a major issue. I will not dwell on it for too long but the issue is that the power utilities have so few people to read the meters that they are estimating them, but when somebody does read the meter and the estimates are significantly incorrect, households are getting hit with enormous bills. On the other side, households that have solar panels on their roofs are not receiving solar credits, so households that have based their budget on

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the fact that their solar panels are going to significantly reduce their bills are being hit with the full bills and they are not being corrected until some significant time later because there are not enough people to read meters. That is putting even more pressure on a lot of households, some of which have appropriately invested to try to reduce their expenditure. These are enormously high costs. The CEO of the Western Australian Council of Social Service, Louise Giolitto—someone whom I meet with reasonably regularly—said that stressed community services continue to call for more support for frontline services and help for those families that have fallen below the poverty line. She said —

With petrol prices back above \$2 a litre, interest rates rising and wages going backward in real terms, WA families have never had it so tough.

She is saying that the credit will make very little difference. I cannot go through all of the things I would like to talk to in the time that I have because of the amount of material that the government has given us to respond to, but I will say that water is a parallel to the power increase. This year, the Water Corporation will return just on \$1 billion to Treasury. That is \$1 billion above the cost of service to the customers. This is a basic service. When the government increased the charges, it had a massive impact on families. In particular, it impacted upon larger families and people who live on larger blocks. Many members here would know that a lot of the families who live in the outer metropolitan areas on larger blocks are not wealthy people. A lot of them are seeking low-cost rental accommodation. They are poorer people, but they use more water because of their larger blocks. That is in an inevitable consequence of being on a larger block. Someone who has a large number of children uses significantly more water. They are the people who were belted with that massive increase in charges for consumption over 500 kilolitres. A larger family that needs 700 kilolitres of water—that is not unusual—is now paying \$867 for the first 500 kilolitres and a massive \$927 for the additional 200 kilolitres. That is a massive hit. The people who have been largely negatively affected by the massive increase in water charges are larger families and people living in the outer suburbs. I do not have time to go on. I need to give my colleagues time to make their contributions, but if we look at the other underlying increase in charges, it is the gross rental value. Water charges applied based on gross rental value have increased by 29.7 per cent for small businesses.

The government should have frozen underlying fees and charges because that would not provide just one year's relief, like with the \$400. It would provide year-on-year relief because all the other increases in the following years would be based on a lower base. That would have been the appropriate measure to take to relieve cost pressures on families in Western Australia.

MR R.S. LOVE (Moore — Deputy Leader of the Opposition) [4.48 pm]: I would also like to contribute to this motion brought by the Leader of the Opposition —

That this house condemns the Premier for delivering a budget that fails to provide real cost-of-living relief and is too little, too late for Western Australian families and key sectors in crisis.

It is about families and sectors within our society that are under real stress. What we saw in this current budget is an increase on certain costs—not a freeze, but actually a steep increase in some areas. For instance, drivers' licences are going up by 6.4 per cent. Car registration fees are going up by 3.8 per cent. Motor injury insurance is going up by 2.4 per cent. We heard of the steep increases in water prices. We are also seeing increases in the emergency services levy at a time when families are under real stress. An understanding of just how stressed people are will come from reading reports like this one of 6 May concerning charities Foodbank of Western Australia and Anglicare that are coming under a lot of pressure from families who are not normally seen as the clientele of these groups. I think it was highlighted by the Leader of the Liberal Party and also by the Leader of the Nationals WA, the Leader of the Opposition, that Foodbank, for instance, has seen not only a tremendous increase in its run on demand, but also a change in the demographics of people who are coming to charities such as Foodbank for service. This particular report states —

Anglicare chief executive Mark Glasson said the rising cost of living was driving more people to his service despite having a source of income.

“What we're seeing is a new group of people emerging, seeking support for bills and food assistance, and they're people that we wouldn't normally have seen in the past,” ...

“One in six people that comes to us for assistance at the moment has a mortgage. Now, that would have been unheard of only three or four years ago.”

...

Foodbank WA chief executive Kate O'Hara said their organisation was seeing a similar trend of more clients who were “underemployed” or considered to be “working poor.”

“[We are] absolutely seeing that phenomenon emerging and becoming more of an issue pretty much week by week ...

“It’s just growing incrementally.”

We are seeing people who are not normally in a position of such stress turning to these organisations for assistance, food and emergency help at a very stressful time. Mr Glasson went on to say —

“The fact that we have seen so many people that can’t keep a roof over their head and food on the table is something that we should all be ashamed of.”

They are the quotes from those charities. We are not just seeing this in the metropolitan area; I have firsthand knowledge of the situation experienced by Geraldton Foodbank in the midwest area. It is seeing a tremendous increase in demand. It has to reach out to some of the smaller communities in the region in a big way. A recent example of that was the need to send emergency packages to householders in Mullewa. These people were probably already on reduced incomes, but they may have been isolating because they were close contacts of people affected by COVID-19 in the community and their households and could not access food. They could not afford to get a Woolies van or something like that to deliver groceries to them. Without the assistance of Foodbank, some of those households would have experienced real hunger.

This is a combination of a very stressful time when we are seeing people change their lifestyles around the pandemic. We are still adjusting to that. We are in the midst of that at the moment. It is having an effect on households as well as the general rise in the cost of living, as has been demonstrated. In response, instead of freezing charges and some of these fees, which it could have done, the government has made some quite steep increases in some of them.

Before the budget, I raised this matter with the Premier in a question without notice. I asked whether the government intended to set fees and charges against the rate of inflation, which at that stage was an alarming 5.7 per cent—I think it has gone up again—or whether it would take on board the severe stress that people are under and consider freezing charges. The Premier acknowledged that there were cost-of-living pressures and, at that stage, the Russian invasion of Ukraine saw an enormous spike in the cost of fuel. Many households were struggling with those imposts. In acknowledging that, the Premier said that his government was coming up with some initiatives, such as “an amazing two-zone fare policy”, which would be rolled out to 75 per cent of the state’s population. Some families will save up to \$3 000 as a result of that policy. That is fine for those who have access to public transport. But as we know, the other 25 per cent of people do not have access to public transport, and what was in the budget for them?

In that regard, I also asked the Premier a question about assistance for pensioners through the Country Age Pension Fuel Card and what considerations might be given. Some of the 25 per cent of people who do not live in the metropolitan area could have had access to some relief. I pointed out to the Premier when I asked the question that when the government came to office in 2017, the card could be used to purchase 445 litres of petrol. At the time of asking that question, that amount was down to 273 litres. I asked for an increase, not to completely keep up with the price of fuel but simply to match inflation, given the fact that the increase in fuel prices actually led to an increase in government revenue, something that the Premier acknowledged in his response to me. He went on to say —

In respect of the member’s question, he actually raised a reasonable point ...

That was about the fact that government revenue was also rising at a time when stress was on people around the fuel price in these areas where the Country Age Pension Fuel Card takes effect, and he said he would consider it. We know from the budget that just came out that the result was no.

In its pre-budget submission, the RAC put out a number of requests for the government to consider. At the front and centre of that was the freezing of motor vehicle registration fees and public transport fees. We acknowledge that we saw some effort in public transport in the metropolitan area, with the announcement of the two-zone policy, which I will talk about shortly. We saw no consideration given to freezing vehicle registration fees and other licensing fees that were called for by the RAC.

Mr P. Papalia interjected.

The ACTING SPEAKER (Mr D.A.E. Scaife): Minister for Police!

Mr R.S. LOVE: Not only did the RAC call for that freezing of fees for one year, but it also considered that if those fees were frozen for three years, it would be a reasonable response. The RAC would be as disappointed as we were to see that those pleas had not been listened to.

I return to the two-zone fare subsidy that was announced, which would have an effect on the budget. Budget paper No 3 shows that the total subsidy to Transperth in the current year will have risen to \$915 980 million. That is up from \$856 055 million in the previous year. That is an increase of just under \$60 million, which I presume will cover, in part, that two-zone fare policy and associated changes. Maybe it is also a reflection of falling patronage on Transperth services, which is interesting. When the government is in the middle of building Metronet and expanding

services greatly, people are staying off the services in droves. That is reflected in the fact that the government has had to lift the subsidy by \$60 million this year.

If the government considered the effects on country people who do not have access to that level of subsidy, it would only be fair that the value of the Country Age Pension Fuel Card be increased. It is interesting to look at the level of subsidy for regional services run by the Public Transport Authority such as Transwa and the school bus system. I know that the member for Roe was successful in getting an inquiry into school bus issues. Getting their children to school is a real issue for country families. Oftentimes, children get on the school bus or families get some assistance for travel. We have noticed that that assistance has been kept at a stagnant level. I understand that a committee of inquiry is looking at that issue now, but its terms of reference do not include any increase in budget. Even though the government might acknowledge the concerns of country families in getting their children to school and the costs around that, it has given it no consideration. The government is ignoring regional families while at the same time trumping its successes in Perth and building a horrendously expensive ongoing subsidy into the Transperth system. That needs to be taken into account when we are looking at the totality of the Metronet programs going forward. They will all require more and more subsidies—more track, more trains—and no great increase in passengers will lead to a tremendous drain on the state’s resources. That seems to be okay, but an increase for country people seems to be off the cards completely.

I can see that the Minister for Climate Action is in the chamber. He does not seem to be taking responsibility for measures that are now being introduced in the name of climate action. I wonder whether he will take responsibility for the introduction of the 2.5¢ per kilometre tax on road users who have made an investment in electric vehicles or the 2¢ per kilometre tax on those people who drive plug-in hybrid electric vehicles—vehicles that might do only 40, 50, 60 or 70 kilometres before needing the assistance of a motor. Those people will be paying twice. They will be paying 2¢ per kilometre when they drive their car wherever they go. There will be no allowance for them when the car kicks in and they have to use petrol. That is not being taken into account. I can see this being a real disincentive for families who want to invest in a clean green future for their children from taking the step towards electric vehicles.

One reason put forward by governments for introducing this tax is that there will be a decrease in fuel excise as electric vehicles take to the roads. I refer to a media statement of 10 May, which outlines that motorists will pay their “fair share” towards the maintenance and construction of WA roads. That is a complete furphy. Excise is collected by the commonwealth government. It is a commonwealth government source of revenue. It is not all expended on road infrastructure, although a good portion of it is. As we see a shift to electric vehicles, the impost will not be on state revenues; it will be on commonwealth government revenues. The commonwealth government, and not state governments, will have to come up with ways of funding infrastructure through this. It is an absolute furphy for the state government to say that it needs this charge.

I want to read from an article in *The Age* that refers to the Victorian tax, which mirrors exactly what will be happening in Western Australia.

Mr R.R. Whitby interjected.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER: Minister!

Mr R.S. LOVE: This article by Josh Gordon, who I assume knows what he is talking about because he writes for *The Age*, a very prestigious newspaper, states —

Victoria is trying to muscle in on what has for decades been an important federal revenue source:
Charging motorists to help pay for roads.

It goes on —

... Treasurer Tim Pallas —

He obviously has swallowed bumblebees —

said he was “unashamedly” attempting to siphon the federal government’s fuel excise revenue stream
using Victoria’s controversial electric vehicle tax.

That is the charge that this government is mirroring almost identically.

Mr R.R. Whitby: As New South Wales has.

Mr R.S. LOVE: Absolutely—the minister is dead right. The minister called it in one. He said “unashamedly”. He is pushing the commonwealth out of the tax. The WA government is pushing the commonwealth out of the tax, but the commonwealth will still pay the state government massive amounts of money towards infrastructure, and that is quite evident in the budget. The amount of support that the Morrison government has given to the Western Australian government is amazing. It is certainly not the case that the state government is under stress because of a falling

share of commonwealth revenues, and that it has to resort to unfairly taxing people who have made an investment in green technology, something that the Minister for Climate Action surely should be encouraging, rather than taking up a tax that will lead to the impression that we do not really need people taking up electric vehicles. Far from supporting those motorists, the Victorian state government, which admittedly is under financial pressure, is looking at ways of making extra money and is putting in place this system. But this state government does not need to do that. It has massive surpluses. It has a wonderful system. The GST has now been cured by the Morrison government to the extent that the government has a guaranteed floor in the GST. I think the Leader of the Liberal Party mentioned that there was \$14 billion in extra revenue this year.

Dr D.J. Honey: It is 16.5 over the 17.

Mr R.S. LOVE: It is \$16.5 million over the 2017 budget. This government should not need to rummage around for extra pennies.

[Member's time extended.]

Mr R.S. LOVE: I might not need the extension. This government does not need to rummage around in the cupboard looking for pennies from householders who are already under stress or cause them to make decisions on climate change that are not in the long-term interests of the state.

As I said, this charge mirrors the one that the Victorian government put in place, which I think is currently subject to a High Court challenge. I do not know where that matter is at, but it will be interesting to see where it goes in the end.

How the tax will be levied is quite clumsy. It is a little like estimating electricity accounts. Motorists will be required to make odometer declarations on an annual basis and then the tax will be levied at the rate of 2.5¢ per kilometre for an electric vehicle or 2¢ per kilometre for a plug-in hybrid. I understand, too, that the rate will be indexed to inflation, so by the time it hits the road and is up and running, the rate could be up to 3¢ per kilometre rather than 2.5¢. After reading how it will be carried out, the system looks terribly expensive to administer. It is a very clumsy way of harvesting \$300 or \$400 a year from the average motorist. It is a very poor tax. It is a little like the stamp duties we did away with in the duties bill that was in the house a little while ago—they cost more than they were worth. This tax is probably going to be very clumsy to administer and will cost people a lot of time and effort to participate in. It will be an impost on not only their finances but also their time, potentially, if the system that is used is like the rather clumsy system that the Victorians use of photographing odometers or some other method, or whether someone uses a GPS, for instance, to track where people go. That perhaps would be efficient, but I am not sure that we want to see that come in. Hopefully, the government does not intend to further impinge on people's privacy like we have seen in some of the COVID legislation with the unauthorised release of information.

As I said, this tax appears to be unnecessary for this state. It will be levied by the government in the same way that other state governments levy taxes and charges. But other state governments are scrambling around looking for pennies. They have difficulties in their state budgets. This state government does not. But the people who are having difficulties with their budgets are average Western Australian families. They are the ones who have trouble balancing their budgets. This government's budget is in surplus—\$5 700 million in surplus. The average householder is struggling to pay their bills. We know that because we have heard that from Anglicare and Foodbank. We know that the government has heartlessly increased charges on families through motor vehicle licence, insurance and driver's licence fees. What we need at this time is a McGowan government that is looking to support families and making sure that it does what it can, rather than slugging taxpayers and families with steep rises. The very least the government could have done would have been a modest increase in the Country Age Pension Fuel Card and a freeze on vehicle registration and driver's licence fees. Instead, the government has unnecessarily increased those fees and is introducing a completely unnecessary tax on electric vehicles.

MR P.J. RUNDLE (Roe) [5.09 pm]: I rise to make a short contribution tonight about some of the elements of the budget that have really disappointed me, and, of course, I support the motion moved by the Leader of the Opposition. As I pointed out in my contribution to the budget debate last night, when I woke up last Saturday and read those letters to the editor in the paper, I understood that the average person in Western Australia who was writing those letters appreciated the \$400 electricity credit, but their response was very lukewarm; they were disappointed by the rise in rates and charges and quite a few other elements of the budget. It brought home to me, once again, the rising cost-of-living scenarios that are playing out at the moment in both metropolitan and regional areas.

I will quickly refer to a couple of portfolio areas in the budget that I found really disappointing. The first relates to my shadow portfolio of sport and recreation. The regional athlete support program, a statewide network supporting regional-based talented athletes, coaches and officials, allows athletes to continue their development and progress along the athlete pathway from their home environment. The regional athlete support program is set to receive \$1.29 million in the budget, but this government has seen fit to drop it from the forward estimates. It is funded for 2022–23, but it has been dropped in the forward estimates. What message does that send to our regional athletes and their families? If members had looked at the Department of Local Government, Sport and Cultural Industries

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website today, they would have seen the question: how is the state government supporting the regional athlete support program? It stated that the state government would continue to support the regional athlete support program with \$3 million of funding delivered over three years through royalties for regions. It failed to mention that the funding will cease in 2023. I am amazed that this valuable program has been defunded. I go back to estimates last year when I asked the former Minister for Sport and Recreation, Hon Tony Buti, questions about this program. He said —

... it is an incredibly important program. One of the best things that I have done in the six months that I have been in this position is allocate these grants ... I would be very surprised if the program did not continue in one form or another.

That was the response from the former Minister for Sport and Recreation. The response of this government, with a \$5.7 billion surplus, is to cut this program in the forward estimates. That was probably the most disappointing element in the sport and recreation portfolio.

The next is the KidSport program, which was established to overcome the cost barrier of participating in sport, leading to better education, social and health outcomes for our children and adolescents. I called for an increase in funding. In 2018, I think it was, the current government decided that scouts, girl guides and the like were not eligible for this funding, even though they promote activity in our children and, as I have always said, have those health outcomes down the line. I called for an increase in funding for this program to increase the value of the voucher from \$150 to \$200. To the credit of this government, last year it provided two vouchers per family. I called on the government to increase the value of the voucher to \$200 and to continue with two vouchers per family. Once again, this budget has not taken into account the opportunity this program provides for those families and those kids. As I have said, I scratch my head when I look at a \$5.7 billion surplus and consider the importance of this program to those low-income families especially. With the increases in the cost of living, this was an opportunity for the government to come forth on this.

The patient assisted travel scheme is an important program for our regional constituents who are looking for assistance on those trips they have to make to Perth for medical assistance. As I said in my budget contribution last night, the government predicts that the average cost per trip will rise to \$528 and the reimbursement rate is 16¢ per kilometre. In this day and age, conveyancing allowances are an issue. I know that the two members on my left-hand side are looking at conveyancing allowances as part of the school bus inquiry. We need to look at the cost of fuel in the context of the patient assisted travel scheme for those people who need to go to Perth for medical assistance. They have no choice; their specialist is there. They need that compensation.

The final element that I find very upsetting is the boarding away from home allowance in my shadow portfolio of education. I go back to an article from the *Countryman* when this government, as part of its suite of education cuts, including Schools of the Air, Moora Residential College and the like, reduced the boarding away from home allowance from \$2 105 to \$1 320. The previous government had funded the allowance with \$785 coming from royalties for regions. I will read out a couple of quotes from this article in the *Countryman*. Firstly, Isolated Children's Parents' Association president Liz Sudlow at the time stated —

“Members throughout the State are disappointed with this decision, saying that once again the Government has forgotten about rural and remote families.

“One Kimberley member said ‘the State Government talk about developing the north, yet give families no incentive to live in remote areas’.”

Secondly, the former ICPA federal president Roxanne Morrissey said —

... any savings the Government might make would be minimal compared to the anguish the announcement would cause members who “relied heavily on this much-needed allowance”.

I make a point of this because I am not sure whether members opposite understand the importance of this allowance to our isolated communities. I certainly find it quite distressing that, with a \$5.7 billion surplus, this government has not seen fit to reinstate that allowance for isolated families. I will be interested in August this year, when the Isolated Children's Parents' Association federal conference is held in Perth, how the minister will be able to stand up at that conference with a straight face, having reduced those fees over the last few years, and talk about how important our isolated children and their families are and how this government is helping them.

We have seen not only a \$5.7 billion surplus in this budget, but also a \$5.8 billion surplus in the last budget. We have seen consecutive budgets with those two surplus figures. I express my disappointment, with the examples I gave of expenditure cuts in the shadow portfolios I represent, that the government did not take the opportunity to have a good hard look at these issues and the cost-of-living increases and do something to support our regional families.

MS J.J. SHAW (Swan Hills — Parliamentary Secretary) [5.19 pm]: I just had a really interesting exchange with the acting Leader of the House. He is a very erudite man who has been around this place for a very long time.

He made a couple of comments to me that I have been sitting here thinking about, and I cannot let what I am about to say go unsaid. I have been a member of Parliament for five years. I had the privilege to go straight onto the government benches. It is truly a great privilege to be in Parliament. I plan on having a long career, but at some point during that career no doubt the tide will go out and I may well find myself on the opposition benches or turfed out of Parliament altogether. I have only ever experienced my parliamentary life as a member of the government, and looking at what is going on across the chamber, I shudder to think what life would be like as member of the opposition. Today, the opposition tried to bring on for debate a motion, but instead we heard a most bizarre cacophony of randomly strung together thoughts, with the opposition adopting a carpet-bomb approach.

I wish people in the outside world—the real world!—would take the time to watch Parliament so they can understand its mechanisms a little more. If people did, they would understand that this week we are doing budget reply speeches, whereby members are given the opportunity to debate the budget. It is a general debate. Members pick whatever topic they want to discuss and away they go. There is also the ordinary ebb and flow of the week, with the part called private members' business. It is the opportunity for opposition members to forensically debate a very particular issue. Let us face it, the majority of the time in Parliament is government business and then every now and then an opportunity arises for the opposition to have a deep dive into an issue. Opposition members can prepare sustained, interrogatory lines of argument should they so choose. In the very limited parliamentary time available to all of us, one would think opposition members might try to make the very best of the time they have available to them, but this opposition does not.

I sit here on the government benches and think about how the last Parliament had very capable opposition members, who did the work, who did the research and took the time to get across their brief and take a forensic look at the portfolios that they were charged with. They came into this place and forensically—quite often somewhat successfully—prosecuted arguments. Opposition members were prepared for debates on legislation and that often led to reform. Sometimes the amendments made to bills improved the quality of the legislation. I tell you what! Absolutely none of that behaviour is evident in this place, and it is bad for democracy. Members opposite do a great disservice to the people of Western Australia with their laziness, lack of preparation and completely bizarre approach of carpet-bombing private members' business.

Dr D.J. Honey interjected.

Ms J.J. SHAW: I did not hear the debate from last week. If others have made the same observation, perhaps the Leader of the Liberal Party should reflect on himself. Perhaps the Leader of the Liberal Party should reflect why there are only two Liberal members sitting in the chamber.

If the opposition refuses to debate the motion before this Parliament, I certainly will not shy away from it. I am very proud to speak this evening to this government's record and to what Labor governments do to address cost-of-living pressures for families. I am very proud to debate that and I think it is well known that it is always Labor governments that support households and ease cost-of-living pressures. This government has done more to support Western Australian families and ease cost-of-living pressures than any government in the last 15 years.

Let me take a moment to remind the house of our government's record prior to the current budget. We froze fees and charges in 2020–21. We delivered a \$600 household electricity credit. We capped public transport fares at two zones and regional airfares. I was glad that that measure came up in the debate on this motion. As Minister Papalia pointed out when one of the members of the opposition was using a scattergun, carpet-bomb approach to have a bit of a crack at the government for trying to reduce public transport fees by asking what had been done for the regions, regional airfares have been capped. I was on the parliamentary committee that looked at that issue. As we travelled right around the state, regional communities consistently told us that they were fed up with the former government not listening to them. It was one thing the former Liberal–National government could have tangibly done to ease cost-of-living pressures for its own constituents, and those constituents told us that they were sick of the former government's failures in that space. We have acted to ease that cost-of-living pressure.

We have also delivered free rapid antigen tests and a \$318 energy assistance payment. We have restored funding for financial counsellors and expanded the hardship utility grant scheme. But these are definitely challenging moments, with a lot of current cost-of-living pressures. We do not deny that. On account of our strong financial and economic management, we are in a strong position to continue to support Western Australian households and, indeed, we will continue to do that. We are using the surplus to provide relief for households.

Let me assure members that easing cost-of-living pressures for Western Australian households is this Labor government's highest priority. In this budget, we have used our economic position to deliver a \$400 household electricity credit to every Western Australian household, putting \$445 million back into Western Australians' pockets. We will reduce household fees and charges by 3.8 per cent from 1 July. The average household will still pay four per cent less in household fees and charges than prior to the pandemic, in 2019–20. We have gone over and above our commitment at the last election to limit increases in electricity, water and public transport fees to

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inflation. This will be the third consecutive year that household fees and charges have been kept below the consumer price index, with two years when charges decreased. That is better than anything a Liberal–National government ever did. Electricity, water and public transport fees will rise by less than projected inflation. The government has now spent more than \$2.1 billion over the last four years to keep household fees and charges low.

Western Australians will continue to benefit from the two-zone fare cap on Transperth fares, saving some households and families as much as \$3 000 a year on travel. In a place like Ellenbrook, in the outer metropolitan area—my community—that will make a significant difference. We have also distributed free RATs, saving households at least \$150, and a lot more is being done around rapid antigen tests. We have limited the increase in small business and charity electricity tariffs to 2.5 per cent, which is less than projected CPI.

Let us take a moment to reflect on where the former Liberal–National government was at. Household fees and charges rose by almost \$2 100 in nominal terms during the eight years of the former government, and that would be much higher in real terms. That Liberal and National Parties did not manage in any year to contain household fees and charges to inflation over their two terms in government. My colleague the member for Mirrabooka is going to have a chat about utilities so I might just park that for now, but, as she will discuss, looking at their forward estimates, before they left government the Liberals and Nationals were planning on screwing households even more. If they say they were not, they were planning on digging an even bigger debt hole.

Dr D.J. Honey interjected.

Ms J.J. SHAW: There is absolutely no denying it.

I want to stick to the topic and talk about families. In particular, I want to talk about what we are doing for the vulnerable families that the Liberals forget about. I want to talk about the fact that we have made a record investment of over \$150 million in preventing family and domestic violence. During the debate on the matter of public interest motion earlier today we talked about our record on family and domestic violence prevention, as a government what we have done previously and what we will go on to do. We have invested in more community-based services, including two new women’s refuges. We have established Western Australia’s first family and domestic violence one-stop hubs, making it easier for women experiencing violence to come forward and seek help. These are tangible measures to support families. We have invested in a \$28.1 million support package through our WA recovery plan to address the impact of COVID-19, including \$8 million for extra domestic violence outreach and \$6 million for more community response workers. We have added over \$1 million to expand counselling, advocacy and support services, and provide a new job retraining scheme for women in refuge.

In response to COVID-19, we have ensured that commonwealth funding is distributed for flexible support packages to make sure that there are individualised responses for victims of family and domestic violence and ensure that they get the help they need determined by the situation they find themselves in. We are investing in a number of innovative and practical initiatives to support women experiencing violence, including Pets in Crisis, which the minister spoke about earlier, and funds for freedom providing grants to help people purchase household items, including white goods and security items, so that people can feel safe in their homes. We have provided another \$1.6 million to expand the Safer Pathways program to provide women with specialised outreach support to manage their tenancies, and \$1.5 million in practical initiatives, helping women with driving lessons, dental treatment when exiting refuge and a new youth counselling service for children impacted by FDV. We have committed \$4 million for a rapid rehousing trial to provide funds for rent and bond payments for women to help them access safe housing, and \$4.2 million to expand the Safe at Home program, supporting another 150 women with or without children to provide home security upgrades. We are implementing important reforms to ensure we protect those families who are most vulnerable, including amending the Residential Tenancies Act to make it easier for victims to leave abusive environments. In this budget, we continue to provide support with a \$60 million package of election commitments made up of a \$29.5 million Safe Home Safe Family package for women fleeing violence. I talked about that during the matter of public interest.

Our \$14.2 million law reform package includes expanding shuttle conferencing to support victims in regional and remote areas. We are also trialling a specialised FDV forensic unit, to assist with securing perpetrator convictions, holding those to account. We are introducing an FDV focused pilot program for women in prison to support a safe transition back into the community. We are also establishing an Aboriginal-led family violence court in Broome. As part of the \$60 million package, we have \$7.3 million to boost the prevention of family and domestic violence, which includes expanding the Respectful Relationships program, training frontline responders and also developing a primary prevention framework to build capacities of both communities and government to implement effective prevention activities that identify and challenge norms that drive violence against women. There is \$4 million to be invested in supporting survivors’ initiatives, practical support around dental care, driving lessons, and also family violence counselling programs for teenagers. We will keep going with our 10-year *Path to safety: Western Australia’s strategy to reduce family and domestic violence 2020–2030* implementation plan. I am sure that in estimates, if opposition members can be bothered to do their homework, they may like to ask the minister on how the various initiatives under that program are progressing.

In terms of other things that we are doing for our most vulnerable family members, let us talk about child protection for a moment, because that has been very topical. Children are the most vulnerable and fragile members of our family. We are investing an additional \$114 million into the child protection system, supporting services to protect vulnerable children and their families, and steer at-risk children away from the justice system. In the 2022–23 budget, we have more than \$75 million for frontline staff and services to support children in care and those who can remain safely at home. That includes \$36.7 million to help deliver and enhance child protection services, with 36 new child protection workers to boost capacity on the frontline. There will be a new chief practitioner position created to oversee a specialist child protection unit at the Department of Communities. This extra resourcing is in addition to the previous \$6.1 million commitment to create a new Midland care team.

We have increased spending in child protection by almost 25 per cent, and increased the child protection workforce by more than 20 per cent since 2017. That includes 218 full-time caseworkers. That is delivering results. In the last reporting year and for the first time since 1997, the total number of children in care in Western Australia dropped by 2.8 per cent. We are also allocating an additional \$23.9 million in the state budget to expand successful programs that provide support services to families with children who are at risk of coming into care. The state government has also committed \$37.2 million for the Home Stretch program, which supports kids at 18 to 21 years who are moving out of care and going out into the big wide world, making that very difficult transition.

Thinking more broadly about families, it is not just about the nuclear family; we acknowledge the very important role that grandcarers have in providing support for children. For that form of family, we have increased the grandcarer support payments available for those who are caring for their grandchildren. Those payments will be increased to \$1 000 a child. If grandparents are looking after more than two children, that will triple the amount of money available to them, and if they are looking after one child, it will more than double the support payments. We are looking after those grandcarers, and obviously, as well, through the senior security rebates program. We are thinking more broadly about how to support families with a whole range of measures.

The very difficult area is around families that have experienced lengthy periods of difficulty and their children who have recurrent incidents.

[Member's time extended.]

Ms J.J. SHAW: The Target 120 program is intended to assist with children who have repeat interactions with the juvenile justice system and are at risk of having pretty difficult life outcomes, to be frank. The Target 120 program was very successful in the pilot, with 50 per cent of the children who have been through that program not having reoffended. That is being expanded to areas such as Broome, Halls Creek, Fitzroy Crossing, Derby, Newman and Carnarvon. It focuses on very high risk children and their families who really need support. It takes the child concerned and has a very holistic look, and says, "Okay, it's not just about the child. What can we do to help the families concerned?" That is the direct intervention that this state government is making through the budget to support Western Australian families. I was very pleased to see that rolled out in my electorate in Ellenbrook.

In terms of more broad support to the community services sector, which also helps Western Australian families, there is \$160 million in new funding that flows through to families. I will not go into too much detail about that. Financial counselling is another way that we are assisting Western Australian families. It is challenging, there is no two ways about it, and sometimes families need a bit of assistance getting their affairs in order. Whereas the previous coalition government cut funding to financial counsellors, the McGowan government has reinstated it and increased it again during the pandemic. We are really helping. It is not just families who are benefiting from this, but also small businesses, and that helps those small business owners' families.

There is one area in particular that I want to briefly dwell on, and that is early years in child care. This is an area that can really move the dial for families. When it comes to supporting families, we have to start with our youngest members. Obviously, we want to give those children the very best start in life. One thing that can really help families is if mum, dad or the primary caregiver can go back to work, earn more money and not be penalised for it.

Ensuring families have access to cheaper child care is critical to easing cost-of-living issues. The Morrison government absolutely does not get that. It did a little tweaking around the edges and it implemented extra allowable absences and access gap fee waivers for the childcare subsidy during COVID-19 in WA, but that ended on 30 April 2022—right when we were hitting the peak and when our families were being challenged in a way they never had before. It is not its job. It has turned off the tap. Morrison is not holding the hose, and the federal government has turned off the tap for child care. In fact, since the federal Liberal government came into existence, childcare fees in Australia have increased by 41 per cent. In the past 12 months alone, at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, childcare costs soared by 6.5 per cent—almost double the rate of inflation.

Federal Labor knows that making child care more affordable and providing the parents of Australian families with the ability to choose to work longer and bring more money through the door will fundamentally make a difference. That is one thing that will significantly move the dial for families. Federal Labor, if elected, will lift the maximum

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childcare subsidy rate to 90 per cent for families for the first child in care and increase subsidy rates for every family that earns less than \$530 000 and has one child in care. It will keep the higher childcare subsidy rates for second and additional children and extend the increased subsidy to out-of-school-hours care. Under federal Labor, 96 per cent of Australian families, or 1.26 million families, will be better off. An investment of some \$5.4 billion will be made to make child care cheaper and to help parents go back to work to bring in extra money through the door.

It is shameful that the Morrison Liberal government cannot acknowledge that as a fundamental need. The Morrison government is tone-deaf to the needs of the community. We can see that because every time there is a bit of an issue, Mr Morrison cannot just work it through as a normal human would and have an empathetic authentic response. He has to ring his wife for clarity. We know that about this man. He does not understand these things. In fact, during the matter of public interest before, I was talking about patterns of behaviour —

Point of Order

Dr D.J. HONEY: Just on a point of relevance, we had a lecture from the member before about being on topic for the debate and now we are suddenly talking about the federal government and the Prime Minister.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER: Thank you, leader. I do not uphold the point of order. During this debate you have a fair bit of latitude to talk about whatever you would like to talk about and you respond to what has been said previously within this debate, so the member can carry on.

Debate Resumed

Ms J.J. SHAW: Thank you, Deputy Speaker. Carpet bombing applies all the way around. I am talking about things that are relevant to Western Australian families. In fact —

Dr D.J. Honey interjected.

Ms J.J. SHAW: The member for Cottesloe is demonstrating just the sort of tone-deafness that happens to be a consistent theme in the Liberal Party. It demonstrates that they do not understand Western Australian families.

Dr D.J. Honey interjected.

Ms J.J. SHAW: The Liberal Party's federal leader is a joke. When one former federal leader was talking about his party's family and domestic violence policy, he called it "the things that batter". That is how tone-deaf the Liberal Party is to the issues that genuinely affect Australian families—"the things that batter"! A former state Liberal leader has pleaded guilty to domestic violence charges, which the minister raised earlier on. Members opposite are tone-deaf to the needs of Western Australian families. The current family and domestic violence opposition spokesperson, as much as I like and respect her, has only issued two press releases since taking on that role. Members opposite are a joke, and it is shameful that they have brought this motion into the house and insulted Western Australian families. Rather than sticking to the topic and, as I say, doing their job of forensic policy assessment and carrying a decent debate, they have come in here with their scattergun, broad-based motherhood statements of no substance whatsoever. It is a shame that the Western Australian people are not watching, but perhaps they switched off from you lot a long time ago.

Dr D.J. Honey interjected.

Ms J.J. SHAW: We do take these matters seriously. We have Australia's first Minister for Prevention of Family and Domestic Violence. We have already spent \$150 million, we will spend another \$60 million in this budget and there are a range of other things that will seriously move the dial. You guys need to get with the program.

MS M.J. HAMMAT (Mirrabooka) [5.44 pm]: I also rise to speak against the motion brought forward by the opposition parties today. It is quite interesting to reflect on the actual motion. I was listening to the interjection of the member for Cottesloe when he accused the member for Swan Hills of being off topic, but it is quite clear that the motion talks about the impact of the budget for families, which is exactly the point that the member —

Dr D.J. Honey interjected.

Ms M.J. HAMMAT: I am not going to take any interjections because I listened to the member without interrupting. There is only a short amount of time left and I have a lot of things on this topic that I am very keen to talk about. I am delighted to have the opportunity to talk about cost-of-living issues, which are central to the motion. However, I am once again very disappointed at the lack of vigour with which members opposite have addressed the debate this evening. We know that cost-of-living issues are incredibly important. Labor members understand that. We are a government and a party that deeply understands the pressures and stresses that everyday people experience. A motion about cost of living in this place deserves to be debated and treated seriously, but I am very disappointed that this evening we have heard a kind of re-baking of many of the same talking points that opposition members made about four weeks ago when they brought a similar matter into this house. I also agree that we should be seriously debating the issues that are affecting the cost of living and our responses to that.

I am very happy to have the opportunity this evening to talk about some of the things that the McGowan Labor government is doing to ease cost-of-living pressures for families and to provide them with relief. I totally reject the premise of the opposition motion that it is too little, too late, because, clearly, a substantial amount of work is being undertaken in this regard. It is interesting that the opposition chooses to bring forward this resolution. When its members were in government, they were particularly woeful at managing the cost of living for ordinary Western Australians. When they had the opportunity to actually do something substantial to ease cost-of-living pressures, they did not do that. They have come in here this evening with the crocodile tears and this motion, but they lack credibility and any kind of substance to address what is such an important issue for everyday people in this state. I am incredibly proud to be part of a government that understands the cost of living and the pressures that that brings for everyday families. I am very proud to be part of a government that is taking practical steps to provide relief to households and families. It has always been Labor governments that have understood this and have sought to address this matter for families.

As the member for Swan Hills covered off, we have done a number of things. Prior to this budget, we froze fees and charges in 2020–21 and in that year we also delivered a \$600 household electricity credit. That was very well received in my electorate of Mirrabooka. We have capped public transport fares at two zones, providing real financial relief, particularly for people in the outer suburbs of Perth. The member for Dawesville's constituents saved up to \$3 000 under that initiative. We have also delivered the free rapid antigen test program. We are the only state in Australia to make rapid antigen tests available free of charge for people. Every household has received 15 free RATs as a result of this government's program. I bought some RATs before this program was announced and perhaps others in this place did the same. Five of them cost me nearly \$60. This is a substantial benefit for families in this state. As well as providing them to households, we have made them freely available through electorate offices, through vaccination centres for close contacts and in other ways as well. We have restored funding for financial counsellors and expanded the hardship utility grant scheme. I am really pleased to say that this government is delivering another \$400 electricity credit to every Western Australian household. I can tell members that this has again been extremely well received by my constituents in Mirrabooka. They understand that this will provide real financial relief to them and their households. It represents a reduction in household fees and charges of 3.8 per cent. This government is committed to providing that relief. We can compare that with the opposition when it last held office. The reality is that when the Liberal–National government was in office, electricity prices rose by 90 per cent, or 8.4 per cent every year. We heard a bit from the member for Cottesloe about how cumulative price increases work, as though we did not have an understanding of that. That was 8.4 per cent, member for Cottesloe, year after year after year. Water prices went up by 66 per cent. It is interesting that we do not have in the chamber this evening the Leader of the Opposition, who at that time was the Minister for Water and clearly played a hand in those dramatic increases in household charges.

Point of Order

Mr R.S. LOVE: Mr Deputy Speaker, I recognise that the member for Mirrabooka is quite inexperienced in the chamber, but perhaps you could remind her that it is unparliamentary to reflect on a member's absence from the chamber.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER: Yes. Thank you, Deputy Leader of the Opposition. There is no point of order, but it has been more of a tradition within this place that we do not refer to people's presence in or out of the chamber. Please carry on.

Debate Resumed

Ms M.J. HAMMAT: Thank you, Deputy Speaker.

Nonetheless, water prices went up by 66 per cent during that government's term in office. That was an enormous increase. To top it off, when the Liberals and Nationals left office, they left us with a budget that had rises built into it of seven per cent for electricity and six per cent for water, and with net debt on a path to \$44 billion. Members of the opposition have more front than Myer to come in here and want to talk about the cost of living. This is a clear demonstration that they have no credibility on this matter.

What is really significant to also reflect on—we have spent some time talking about this at other times—is that the government is not only doing work to keep fees and charges low. In this budget, as well as the \$400 energy credit, fees and charges have been increased by less than the rate of inflation. This government is also working with the most vulnerable in our community to help them with their utility bills and ensure that they can continue to access these essential services. We are working with people who are in financial stress to help them manage their circumstances, and are providing them with financial counselling so that they can continue to get the services that they need while paying off debt. Again, we reflect on the performance of the Liberal and Nationals when they were last in government. Between the financial years 2011–12 and 2016–17, the number of Synergy residential customers who had their power disconnected increased by 82 per cent. That is an 82 per cent increase in the number of people who were left without power. We have heard a lot tonight and seen a lot of crocodile tears about how families are doing it tough.

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This comes from two parties that oversaw an increase of 82 per cent in the number of power disconnections. At the same time, power prices increased by 90 per cent. That was the approach of that government. It limited engagement with people who were struggling to meet its exorbitant increases in fees and charges and just brought in the debt collectors. The approach of this government has been to work with Synergy customers who are experiencing hardship and help them repay their bills and put their finances on a better footing. We have developed the Synergy case management program to provide one-on-one support, and we have also reintroduced the household energy efficiency scheme that was cut by the Barnett government.

We have also introduced a domestic violence fresh start policy for people who are leaving a circumstance in which they are experiencing violence from a partner. We have introduced the smart energy for social housing pilot. We have increased funding for the hardship utility grant scheme and made it easier to access. We have also put in place grant programs for consumer advocates. We have put in place COVID relief measures. We have put in place a disconnection moratorium for people who are experiencing hardship due to COVID. Rather than send debt collectors after people, we are working directly with people to provide support. The Synergy case management pilot was so successful that it has become part of Synergy's core business and has been scaled up, because it just makes good financial sense. Since the pilot was launched in July 2020, hundreds of customers have graduated, clearing millions of dollars of debt, and are now in a better place to manage their energy bills going forward. Members, this is what good Labor governments do. We do not just jack up prices and send in the debt collectors, which is what we saw from the Liberals and Nationals when they held government. We work with people to find solutions to the financial problems that they are in.

It is a similar situation with water. We have heard the Minister for Water speak about the work that he has done. The record of the Liberals and Nationals when they were in office was to put up water charges, and rather than cut off water if people could not pay their bills, their water pressure was turned down so low that it was not viable for them to do their many households chores. In the first six years of the Barnett government, water charges increased by 52.8 per cent. That was a disgraceful increase in water charges. Rather than restrict the water supply of people who are in financial difficulty and cannot pay their bills, we have launched new programs to help people who are in need. We are helping them to work through their financial difficulties. We have worked with the Water Corporation to ensure that it takes a proactive approach. When the Water Corporation observes that a person's bill is increasing, rather than just let that bill get bigger and bigger until it becomes an enormous financial burden, it takes a proactive approach of working with clients who have difficulty in meeting their financial commitments to the Water Corporation. It works with those clients to help them get on track with not only their water bill but also their overall financial situation. As a result of that proactive approach, it has become clear that in certain households, water usage increases because people may be on dialysis or experiencing incontinence and are managing those health situations in their home. This government has responded to that not by turning a blind eye and charging them for their water use, but by putting in place programs that allow those people to access the water that they need to manage those situations in their own home. When the Liberal–National government was thrown out of office in March 2017, 227 customers had had their water restricted because of that government's approach. In March 2020, only 33 Water Corporation customers had had their water restricted. Again, it is a bit rich to have to listen to a lecture about cost of living from two parties that when they were in government and had an opportunity to do something about these things did nothing.

It is clear that if we want to be serious about discussing the cost of living, we need to look at the very good budget management of this government in delivering for all households with the \$400 energy credit. We also need to look at the approach and the commitment of this government to work with vulnerable families, such as in many of the programs that were outlined by my colleague in her contribution. We are working with vulnerable families that are accumulating debt on their utility bills to ensure that those debts can be managed, and instead of restricting people's supply or cutting off their electricity, we are giving people other options to manage their financial circumstances and get back on track.

These are really important programs. I am delighted to be part of a government that understands what life is like for everyday people. There was a bit of discussion during the contribution of opposition members about housing. I also want to make a few comments about that, but time is going to defeat me yet again. I have so many things to say on this subject. I had wanted to go to the member for Cottesloe's discussion about middle-class homelessness, but again that might have to wait for another time. In the housing space, it is important to acknowledge the incredible work that is being done by this government. Only eight months ago, we announced a record \$875 million injection for social housing. In the coming four years, we will be investing \$2.4 billion on social housing and addressing homelessness in this state.

A member: Hear, hear!

Ms M.J. HAMMAT: Hear, hear! That is a record investment. Delivering social housing is challenging, but because of the energy of our Minister for Housing and the commitment of this government, we are getting on with that job. In this financial year, to the end of March, we have delivered 356 new social homes. That includes 250 in

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the last four months alone. We are doing a range of things to accelerate the delivery of new social housing. That includes spot purchasing, and modular and timber-framed construction. All these programs are helping us to deliver housing.

Debate adjourned, pursuant to standing orders.

Sitting suspended from 6.00 to 7.00 pm