

PARLIAMENT OF VICTORIA

YMCA YOUTH PARLIAMENT 2025

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL CHAMBER

Thursday 10 July 2025

2025 Youth Governor: Lily Trethowan

Program Director: Kaitlin Woolford

Active Citizens

Sricharan Karthikeyan
Aneka Subramaniam
Charvi Joshi
Gautham Sriram
Rehaan Salil

Frankston Community Youth Leaders

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James Dyer
Adriel Appathurai
Greta Lawrence-Smith
Kirsten Harkness

Alyssa Nicholas

Ivanhoe Girls' Grammar School

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Liya Lo (Lee) Taylor
Shayna Lee
Sonya Radchenko
Alicia Stojanovski

Overnewton Anglican Community College

Renee Estelle Brotchie
Scarlett Moore
Katia D'Angelo
Lency Park
Kaosi Ugwu
Etienne Agnew

The Grange P-12 College

Jamie Stanton
Gurshaan Brar
Jack Nguzo
Kaiser Al Rashid
Shaniah Toleafoa

Boroondara City Council

Rohan Hobbs
Ishan Venkat
Ella Zhang
Mikael Bonne

Hoppers Crossing Secondary College

Charlotte Fleming
Zeinab Abdo
Nimeesha Visen
Kinda Alrayyan
Mahrosh Khayyam
Tavish Medepalli

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Emily Rodgers
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Westbourne Grammar School

Evie Theodore
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Nicholas Francis
Sara Aghighi
Abhilasha (Abi) Bhaduri
Tanvi Mondal

The ACTING PRESIDENT (John Berger) took the chair at 9:30 am.

The ACTING PRESIDENT (John Berger): Good morning, members of the Youth Parliament. My name is John Berger. I am a member for Southern Metro. For those of you who do not know where Southern Metro is, it covers 11 districts. So if we go from here and follow the Yarra along to Port Melbourne, then across the bay to Sandringham and cut back into Ashburton, and then there are suburbs such as Prahran, Kew, Hawthorn and Malvern and all the ones in between, that is Southern Metro.

My path to politics comes via the union movement. Some of you may have heard of the Transport Workers' Union. They are a union that cover all of road transport: aviation, cash-in-transit, bus transport and things of that nature and long-distance stuff. I have been a member of the union for nearly 40 years, and I have also worked for them. I worked there for 27 years, and in my last six years I was the branch secretary. I have covered a lot of roles in terms of the branch itself, being the national president, national vice-president. I sat as a trustee on the Transport Workers' Union superannuation board in the finance area. So I have a vast experience to bring in here, and I use these opportunities to come and give some guidance to youth in our area.

I think it is very important that you come into areas like this to understand what we do on a daily basis. This is the house of review, so all of the legislation that comes before the Parliament via the lower house comes up to us. I actually sit in that chair up there where that pillar is on the right-hand side and I fill in in this chair as the Acting President from time to time when we are sitting. It is a very dynamic workplace and it is a lot of fun, so if anyone is looking to get into the political arena, I encourage you to have a go at it, whichever mechanism you come through. There are a range of ways that you can get into politics. Certainly mine was through the trade union movement, but there are other ways to find your way into the Parliament.

With all of that, welcome to today's session. We are doing the introduction and first reading. In the real sense, when we do them it is quite a dynamic environment where the first speaker might speak for up to half an hour, subsequent speakers will speak for 15 minutes on the bill, and generally they take about 90 minutes, depending on the type of bill it is. That is typically how it might go. But sometimes they go a bit longer. We have sat in here until 3 or 4 o'clock in the morning, so you can imagine what it is like when you get to that hour of the morning. There is no rest for us; we are back straightaway the next morning. It is a pretty busy schedule.

Bills**VCAA Scaling System Reform Bill 2025**

Sponsor: Hoppers Crossing Secondary School

Refuter: Maribyrnong Youth Advisory Committee

Introduction and first reading

Nimeesha VISEN: I move:

That I have leave to introduce a bill titled VCAA Scaling System Reform Bill 2025.

Motion agreed to.

Read first time.

Second reading

Nimeesha VISEN: I move:

That the bill be now read a second time.

I rise today to sponsor the VCAA Scaling System Reform Bill 2025, a bill built not on speculation but on the lived experiences of thousands of Victorian students, many of whom may be gathered in this room. This bill is a call for fairness, clarity and accountability in our only education system that too often feels inaccessible and inequitable. It seeks to restore trust in a system where scaling and assessments have long lacked transparency and consistency.

We introduce the Victorian Board of Moderation, known as VBoM, as an internal addition to the Victorian Curriculum Assessment Authority, also known as VCAA. VBoM is a board which creates uniformity, brings consistency and breaks down the variations of internal school marking, currently dragging down and disadvantaging numerous students across the state. With annual audits this clause ensures that a student's marking is no longer dependent on what school they attend but on what they know. Clause 5 introduces rigorous and randomised auditing for every VCE subject in both public and private schools and VCAA itself. Why? Because fairness starts with accountability, and right now that is missing. Clause 6 demands something long overdue: honestly from VCAA. For years students have studied hard, sat their exams and received their marks without ever truly understanding how those marks were decided. Why should students feel powerless in a system that controls their future?

Clauses 7 and 8 strive to address the core problems in subjects all across Victoria. English, being a mandatory subject, should not end up disadvantaging those who struggle to achieve the bare minimum study score for university entry for both English and English as an additional subject. While also considering the number of students that do a language as a unit 3/4 subject, VCAA itself has stated that the rate of students doing a language has increased from 17.3 per cent to 19.4 per cent in the last two years. On one hand we are seeing a rise, whereas on the other we are seeing no effort to benefit these students. Isn't it time we stopped favouring only select languages and supported all our students? Let me be clear, the internal assessments contribute 50 per cent of majority of subjects overall scores, while the other 50 per cent relies on the external exams everyone sits. With the known importance of SACs and SATs, I urge this house to recognise that the core problem lies when internal assessments are mistreated and jeopardised.

Clause 9 is about empowering students through consistency and integrity. This clause mandates clear rubrics, model answers and access to marking criteria for all. Now, the government may argue on integrity and these measures being too strict on teachers and schools – but this is not about blame, it is about protection. It is about protecting students from biased marking, inconsistent standards or, worse, academic misconduct. Schools found to be breaking guidelines may face penalties, including the requirements of students to redo assessments or face stricter audits – no more vague rubrics, no more guessing what assessors want, no more advantages just because you go to a certain school. We stand together to establish a cohesive system rather than a broken one.

We have a choice today between keeping a system that is comfortable for institutions or building one that is fair for students. This bill does not ask for special treatment. It demands equal treatment. This is not too much to ask for. We are not tearing the system down, we are lifting it up. We are saying integrity should be a norm, not an exception. I urge this house to support the VCAA Scaling System Reform Bill 2025 to help it form revolutionary change for every student to have a fair shot.

Vivianne PHUNG: I appreciate the opposition raising an issue that we have probably all thought about, because let us be honest, the VCE system is flawed. I am not denying that. We have a scaling algorithm that discourages students from choosing the subjects they love just because the subjects scale down. We have teachers, the very people guiding students, who do not even fully understand the VCAA system themselves. We see plain as day the gap in funding between schools, government and non-government schools. So, yes, I say clearly: change is needed, but this bill I do not think delivers that change. It does not fix the root problem, and for all its good intention it is fundamentally misguided.

Let us look at the opposition's big goal here: to create equality between VCE scores. It sounds nice, but it is actually quite out of touch with reality. Government schools rely entirely on state and Commonwealth funding. Independent schools receive that same support plus tens of thousands of dollars in tuition fees and very generous private donations. So we are not talking about a level playing field here, we are talking about two different games. Let me paint you a picture. Imagine a father, a teenager and a toddler trying to watch a footy game behind a very tall fence. The father is just tall enough to see over the fence, the teenager needs a little bit of a lift and the toddler cannot see a thing. So do we give them all the same-sized box for the sake of equality? Well, the dad may see better, the teenager struggles and the toddler still sees nothing. That is exactly what this bill does: it treats every single school the same, regardless of what resources they have, the needs of the student and where they are starting from. But we do not need equality, we actually need equity. We need to acknowledge that not every student comes from the same background and give them the tools to succeed based on what their needs are, not what looks equal on paper. Because when you ignore the differences, you do not create fairness, you just hide the problem under a fresh coat of paint and hope no-one looks too closely.

Let us talk about clause 4.2, the idea of offering three prewritten SACs for all schools to choose from. Let us be clear: that is not flexibility, that is standardisation at its worst. It sounds equal, but what it really does is it locks schools into a box that ignores student needs and robs teachers of professional judgement. Is that what we are calling reform now? The second problem is this bill focuses only on English and language subjects. That is only 47 out of 115 VCE and VET subjects. So the opposition wants to fix the system – but only a third of it. That is not reform, that is just a patch-up job. Even worse, by isolating these subjects, the bill threatens the integrity of the scaling system, which already makes a fair comparison across all subjects.

Perhaps most embarrassingly, the opposition does not even seem to understand how the system works. VCAA sets the curriculum and assessments. VTAC handles ATARs and the scaling. They are two separate bodies, but this bill proposes a brand new Victorian Board of Moderation to do jobs that are already being done. We do not need more bureaucracy and we do not need more redundancy; we just need a proper understanding of how the system works. Scaling guides, exam solutions and rubrics are all already publicly available. Frankly, I suggest the opposition just do a basic Google search after this debate.

I am not standing here pretending the current system is perfect – and it is far from it – but the frustrations that all these students feel about VCE just reflect the deeper systemic issue. We will not fix them by adding new committees or boards or targeting a handful of subjects. What we need is real long-term reform, and that means funding schools properly, supporting schools and teachers properly and actually designing a system that values all pathways, not just academic ones. What about sports, arts, humanities and music? Until then, if we keep treating students like the opposition do, who keep proposing proposals like this, it is just putting a bandaid over a gushing stream.

Zeinab ABDU: I rise today to display to all the need for the establishment of the Victorian Board of Moderation, a long-overdue measure that will finally put fairness, consistency and integrity at the heart of the VCE process. For too long students across Victoria have been at the mercy of the inconsistent SAC guidelines, vague SAC expectations and opaque moderation methods that vary wildly between schools. This is not just an institutional misstep, it is a direct threat to student equality. Clause 4 aims to change this. It establishes VBoM, a board under VCAA tasked with ensuring uniformity in assessment standards across every school. No longer will a student's chance at a strong ATAR depend on whether their SACs were too easily or too harshly marked. Under VBoM, SACs will be centrally designed and distributed via a secure teacher portal, with schools given three pre-approved templates per outcome. School-assessed tasks will follow clearly defined expectations – expectations that will remain the same whether you are from Hoppers Crossing Secondary College or Melbourne High. For the first time, marking a turning point, manual audits will finally hold schools and even VCAA itself to account. This is not just about restricting teachers, it is about empowering students by ensuring rules are the same for everyone. Look around and think of friends, family, co-workers and schoolmates that are undertaking VCE. Imagine how devastated individuals who worked relentlessly are when they see their unjust ranking. VBoM will build a system that ensures their effort is judged fairly, not shaped by geography, luck or inconsistent assessments. By supporting this bill, you will be supporting a VCE system that is credible, transparent and just. Let us not delay fairness any longer.

Teirnan ALI: We thank the opposition for having identified the need to reform scaling across the VCE, as it is obviously a pertinent issue for a lot of us across both sides of the house. It is equally unfortunate, however, that the opposition's bill is substantiated on a misunderstanding of the way scaling even works in the first place, and therefore it should not attract the support of the wider house. In Victoria the current scaling framework works by taking into account only two things. The first is the performance of students enrolled in a cohort, irrespective of the cohort size, in comparison to the performance of those same students across their other academic classes. With this in mind, I draw your attention to clause 8, specifically subclause 8.2, in which the opposition have proposed a special pathway based on what seems to be a tiered structure that would purportedly reprioritise scaling support for students enrolled in what they call underscaled but academically challenging languages. The problem with this is that this is too vague and open to interpretation.

We as the government are curious to know what exactly the term ‘academically challenging’ actually means. Is Indonesian perhaps harder to learn than German, or is Greek just as easy to learn as Arabic or Hebrew? Because in what way is the opposition planning to judge the complexity of a language for one student to the next? In fact it should be noted for the house that as their bill currently stands, the opposition have not specified any process or pathway under which this evaluation might take place. We should therefore not lose sight of the fact that the only way for us to produce fairer scaling outcomes each year is by ensuring that scaling is not influenced by perceptions of how hard or easy a language is to learn but is instead based solely on the genuine performance of students enrolled across those classes. That is the only thing that makes sense. Thus changing the current scaling approach in a way that gives some but not all students a scaling advantage would seek to contradict the opposition’s sole intended outcome of improving equality across the VCE.

Charlotte FLEMING: This bill aims to not only promote individuality but also protect students from misconduct and bias. Clause 5, refining auditing processes in Victorian public and private schools, addresses the need for improved regulation practices and procedures. Following the recent VCAA debacle, it has become blaringly clear that we, as a state that prides itself on education, need to make some hard choices and tough decisions to better support our students, their futures and their blood pressure. The auditing process which VBoM performs is categorised into two classifications: internal, which is for any person who has or does handle examinations, and they will be regularly audited; or externally, where we aim to establish a more reliable, constant and thorough audit for schools. Schools and departments will be informed of the time period their audit will occur; however, audits will be conducted as drop-in visits to reduce skewed data and bias that may be collected. By updating our current processes we can hold more people accountable, promote fairness and do what education tells us to do: learn. Our state values its students just as much as this Parliament values its morning tea-break. Let us not jeopardise the future of Victoria by continuing to disadvantage our students and their achievements.

Rafael HUTAGALUNG: While I understand the motivation behind the VCAA Scaling System Reform Bill 2025, I rise today in strong opposition, especially towards clauses 8 and 7, which claim to promote fairness and transparency but ultimately do more harm than good. Clause 6, though, talks about the VCAA information being more accessible. Let us be honest, examiner reports, past papers and scaling guides are already very accessible online, just a single Google search away. I actually searched this up around two days ago, and it was the first link that popped up. This is not fixing a problem, as anyone can find these guides and reports; it is just making a solution to a problem that does not already exist. Worse, as the opposition has just stated, the bill proposes audits and disciplinary action, including removing VCE accreditation, if teachers do not follow new guidelines. In the middle of a statewide teacher shortage, how is making teachers feel micromanaged and afraid supposed to help? We need to support them, not treat them like they are doing something wrong, and we can do this by showing a little empathy and flexibility even when we look down on their marking.

Clause 7 is where it really falls apart. Removing English subjects like English language from being scaled is meant to make things more equal, but it completely ignores subject complexity. English language students memorise over 131 metalanguage terms, and that is not the same as writing a narrative essay and memorising it beforehand in mainstream English. It is a tough subject, and it deserves fair scaling. Scaling is there to balance subject difficulty, and taking it away is not fairness, it is flattening things out. It is exactly what honourable member Phung said earlier. It is not equality. We need equity. And finally, the bill removes English subjects from being required in the top four. As an English language student myself, I believe this is a great point, but it does overlook the point about why English is required in the top four. It creates standardisation between all students, so there is a subject in common for us to be measured against, as well as English being a primary language that we speak here today. This bill does not deliver equality or equity. It delivers confusion. I urge the house to vote it down.

Tavish MEDEPALLI: I rise today to voice my concern of how VCAA has been operating behind closed doors, leaving students, parents and teachers disorganised, unprepared and confused. Of the many interviews I have had with teachers and students alike, it was a common concern that there is limited transparency between VCAA and students. Clause 6 changes that. It demands openness and accountability, and most importantly, it puts students back in the centre of the education system. Clause 6 calls for VCAA to have a stronger, more visible presence in students' lives, to have a more built-up presence on social media and to actually communicate with schools and teachers. Clause 6 also allows students to have free digital access to their exam papers, which they worked hard to study for and write, along with the marking rubrics of those exams. VCAA has been forcing students to pay up to \$30 to view each exam paper for only an hour. VCAA has also been changing the study design. These changes can significantly alter the expectations for exams and assessments. That means students are blindsided. It means past exams and resources are suddenly outdated and unreliable. This could be avoided if VCAA was more open about changes in the system, communicating directly to schools and teachers. This is not about making VCAA trendy, it is about making it better, because when students understand the system, they can trust it. And when they do, they engage more confidently in their learning. It is crucial that we build a positive relationship between the system and students, for without such community, we will have failed the future of our beloved Education State – nay, our entire country.

Patrick PHUNG: Let us not confuse improvement with duplication. In clause 4 the opposition wants to set up a new Victorian Board of Moderation, and at first glance it sounds like a step forward – more consistency, more oversight and more structure. But when you take a closer look at what this board will do, you realise something very simple: it is already being done – SAT guidelines, VCAA; moderation processes, VCAA; and auditing, VCAA. All of it already exists. We are not talking about reform here, we are talking about a second version of the same system. It is like taking the same tasks, giving them a new name and calling that change. That does not make things better, because when you create two bodies with the same responsibilities, you do not get clarity, you get confusion – two sets of rules, two sets of expectations. And when something goes wrong, like that recent VCAA exam leak the opposition likes to refer to, there would be two sets of people to point fingers at each other – no accountability, just more deflection. And let us not talk about who will actually face the consequences. It is not the department and it is not the board; it is the teachers, it is the students and it is the people in schools unsure of which rules, which guidelines and whose advice to actually follow. That is not fairness, that is fragmentation. We do not need to build a new system, we need to strengthen the one we have, and that means investing in more training, more consistency and more trust, not creating more layers for the sake of it. That is just bureaucracy at its finest. Young Victorians deserve systems that work, not systems that double up. We need to fix problems and not reinvent the wheel.

Mahrosh KHAYYAM: I stand here today not as a member of the Youth Parliament but as a VCE student. I stand here to address the unjust scaling of English. As everyone here may already be aware, English is a compulsory subject and is a prerequisite for all university courses. It is evident that mainstream English gets scaled down, as a raw score of 25, which is a minimum score that every university requires, gets scaled down to 22. A student who puts time and effort into a subject they were forced to pick gets scaled down, closing off any pathways to success they may have. That is not to mention the even more cruel scaling of English as an Additional Language, where a 25 score gets scaled down to a 21. Is this fair? Students whose second language is English get a score lower than the mainstream English student. This is not serving them justice. This is taking away the student's opportunity to succeed. A 25 raw study score should mean just that: a 25. Furthermore, that raw study score should contribute to a student's final ATAR score, as stated in subclause 7.2. Moreover, the amount of weight being placed on an English student is dreadful. It is one of the primary four subjects, where the primary four subjects are the top four scoring subjects a student has. While I agree English is very important, the pressure of English and the pressure that is being put upon students is more than what they may be able to cope with, especially for students that take EAL. This bill does not aim to remove English for scaling; rather, it aims for it to be fair.

Ava LUTTON: I want to begin this speech by echoing what the honourable member Phung said: there is absolutely no denying that the current education system is innately flawed. Anyone who has been through high school in Victoria will attest to that. However, I believe the opposition are misguided in pointing their fingers at VCAA, SACs and exams, rather than the disparities between the quality of education within schools. The idea is that the teacher should not work against VCAA but give students the tools and understanding to work with it in order to maximise their overall study scores. In this, I believe teachers have spectacularly failed their students. The idea of absolute fairness is an asymptote, to put it in a term for anyone familiar with Methods – it is simply something that cannot be achieved. Our testing system does its very best to meet this ideal, even if not every single person is treated with impeccable equality, but this is plainly unrealistic in a world rife with inequity in the first place. I want to highlight some flaws in this bill's logic and perhaps give more perspective. SACs vary from school to school because they are meant to reflect the quality of the teaching within the school. The end-of-the-year exam is the great equaliser, comparing our results with the rest of the state and ranking us from best to worst. SAC scores are thus adjusted accordingly. I personally go to a school with some of the hardest SACs in the state, where students average 50 per cent, 60 per cent, yet we have consistently high scores, because by the time that the exam comes we have adopted the adequate skills needed to appease VCE assessors. Uniform SACs do not guarantee equality. They instead force the teacher to teach in a style alien to them, and it only exacerbates the discrepancies in resourcing, teaching and the learning environment.

Kinda ALRAYYAN: I took Arabic as a VCE access subject last year. My school did not offer it, so I had to sign up externally with an external school and do all the extra work. I sacrificed my breaks, took days off for city excursions and basically ran between two schools just to stay on top of things, and when results came out in 2024 a raw 20 study score became an 18 and a 45 barely moved to 46. It hurts, because I worked hard. I was not alone as well; many students faced the same struggles across Victoria. It is not a rare subject, but it still gets scaled down – why? Then I see students doing Hebrew or classical Greek, and their scores scale up like crazy. A 20 in Hebrew jumps to a 31. I even heard of someone doing classical Greek who got an 18, and somehow it shot up to 40 just because only one person did it. That is not a scaling system, that is a lottery. I am not against the way those subjects are scaled, but I believe all languages should and must scale, no matter what, and most importantly should scale fairly. Whether it is popular or not, difficult or not, it does not matter, because learning a language is never easy. Clause 8 is about fixing that mess. It is about making scaling fair. Because of how VCE scaling works, efforts do not count, not even the difficulty of a subject. It is about numbers. Clause 8 calls for a fairer, more transparent scaling system that supports students who are taking on these challenges. It brings in real standards for schools hosting external students, and most importantly it reminds VCAA and everyone else that languages deserve better. This is not a clause, this is a wake-up call, because we language students are tired of working and thriving and working as much and as hard as we can only to be told our efforts do not count. It is time we actually – *(Time expired)*

Taihan RAHMAN: We understand and agree with the opposition's desire to fix the VCE system, but when it comes to reform, how we go about doing so matters just as much as why we do it in the first place. There are genuine concerns about fairness and transparency, but this bill does not do what it needs to in order to actually fix those issues. This bill is built on a fundamental misunderstanding of the VCE system and how it works. It speaks about subject scaling as if it is controlled by VCAA, when in fact it is the Victoria Tertiary Admissions Centre. It tries to fix inequality by imposing uniformity, but fairness is not created by removing differences. It overlooks how school-assessed coursework is already reflecting the diverse context and cohorts across the state by stripping teachers of their ability to respond to their students' needs. This bill tries to make the system fairer by ignoring the real differences between schools and then calls that equality. It attempts to support students taking underscaled languages but still establishes a bonus system based on complexity. It refers to academic rigour as the only measure of a subject's value. Who decides this and how does this address inequality? The proposed inconsistent outcomes risk turning cultural and linguistic diversity into a ranking system. To be clear, we want reform. We need reform, but real reform must be grounded in understanding, not assumption. It should be collaborative, not controlling, and it must focus on practical, long-term solutions, not reactionary responses. This bill is not a step in the wrong direction, but it is a misstep. And while the issues raised are real, the proposed solutions fall short of what students and schools really need. I urge the house to reconsider this bill on its merits and focus on building an education system that empowers every student, regardless of who they are, where they come from or what they have.

Rohan HOBBS: Recent scandals have identified that the VCAA is deeply flawed. In 2024 sources were released by the VCAA, including questions that were on the end of year exam. This had a real impact on study scores and ATARs of last year, meaning that young people were failed, with negatively impacted grades preventing them from achieving what they want in life. The VBM body is required to spread the workload of a tired VCAA so that these failures will never be repeated. This VBM board is a completely new initiative which aids VCAA by working alongside it as a board and as an internal subset of the organisation. This is not just a bill; it is a new way forward for the youth of this state, taking away the discrimination of VCE assessments, where differences in school-based assessments, teacher marking and resources of individual schools impact end-of-year results. Acting President, I thank you for your time and thank this chamber.

Nicholas FRANCIS: Before I start, I do want to say to the opposition: feel free to interject as much as possible. The opposition claims this bill is about fairness and reform of the VCE system, when it is really just regression in a shiny coat. This bill would lead to a system in Victoria where food tech is graded the same as specialist maths. Now, the opposition might say ‘assumption’ – I disagree. This is why: the VCE scaling system is considered first class around the world, and it shows how we understand the differences between different subjects, with high-achieving subjects like methods, physics and chemistry not being graded the same as easier subjects like food tech, as I said. This bill sets a new precedent that will lead to an equalisation of all subjects into a system that removes scaling altogether. Now, I would love for my history, business and politics classes to be scaled at the same rate as specialist maths, but I know that that is ridiculous. This bill sets a precedent for regression of our education system in the Education State.

Adriel APPATHURAI: This government painted a picture of people standing behind a fence – a father, a teenager and a toddler. In this current system the father has got a monster truck, the teenager has put a hole in the wall and the toddler is buried 12 feet underground. In this system, with our bill, we want to make this fairer. We want to make sure that at least everyone is over the fence. This might not be the perfect solution, but this is a step towards equality. Any step in the right direction is a step forward.

Etienne AGNEW: The opposition is suggesting the introduction of yet another board, which will only sit on top of pre-existing systems and boards that already exist in VCAA. However, the bill does not outline who will sit on the board. So I ask: how will these people maintain a consistent moderation process and create and distribute SACs? It is also unclear how this board will work within, under or even above VCAA. If the board will have so much responsibility, then why can’t the opposition make it clear? As the honourable member Phung stated before, VCAA already completes all the tasks that the bill outlines VBoM will become responsible for. If the opposition wants reform, they should aim to change the current systems and structures already in place, instead of just adding more.

Alyssa NICHOLAS: I ask the government to think of this: a race to the finish line can only be fair when we start at the same position. My own school was severely underfunded. Despite this, what made my school harder was the system above, not the teachers or the classrooms that I sat within. This bill gives the opportunity for students, regardless of the price that they pay, to have fair and equal assessments. This bill is no repeat. It is about the state’s systematic classism.

Renee Estelle BROTHIE: This bill calls itself a scaling system reform bill. However, the only reform I see is for language subjects. I feel this bill misses the mark because it focuses half of its establishment on said language subjects but fails to mention names or categories of other subjects this bill wishes to reform. Reform is not something that can be generalised; it has to be specific and especially thought out. I personally believe this bill would have benefited from, and been greatly appreciated by, many VCE students if it had specifically mentioned and tried to address scaling issues in other subject groups as well as languages. For example, I have many friends who are taking more creative subjects that involve the procurement of portfolios. These friends spend hours upon hours, days even, brainstorming, drafting and creating deeply thought-out and beautiful music pieces, artworks, short films and textile pieces, to name a few. They do this all on top of theory-heavy SACs for these subjects. They have all complained, and I mean complained, about current scaling and how bad it is just because these subjects are seen as easier and laid-back subjects, although sometimes they are putting in a lot more effort, time and soul into these subjects – a lot more than I have seen and given in English – and yet these subjects scale lower. Current scaling of a raw score of 30 for some of these subjects include drama and dance, down by two; art creative practice and media, down by three; VCD, down by four; and art making and exhibiting, down by five. Where is the explicit support for these individuals?

Octavia MacDONALD: I would like to address the differences between the bodies. VCAA is an organisation, a statutory authority, whereas VBoM is a board, the Victorian Board of Moderation. VBoM is not a new system; it improves an already existing one as a board under VCAA. Current scaling rewards subjects and skills that are irrelevant instead of what the majority of people need.

Ariel MEZZACAPPA: This bill claims to be about fairness. It claims to support students, but it does not. It supports some students – VCE students – and it blatantly ignores the thousands of young people who take VET/VCE pathways. Where are they in this bill? I do not see any mention of VCE VET-scored students? Where is the recognition for their hard work and their skills? Nowhere. Changing the VCAA scaling system so that it is easier for VCE students while ignoring VET students is not reform; it is rigged. This is not representation, it is inequality. Out of 25 of the lower scale VCE subjects in 2024, 17 of them were VET subjects, lower scaled subjects. These are not subjects that are easier; these are subjects that require critical skills to manage time while moving around to different areas and different schools, and they are skills that go straight into our workforce, like engineering, health or into the performance area like music and dance. As said by a previous honourable member, these are skills that require portfolios. They are not assessed in the same way as SACs. In clause 9 the opposition does not even differentiate between VCE SACs and coursework to VET coursework, which is worth 50 per cent, or usually more. This bill must be amended. Supporting VCE students is great, but we should be uplifting all students, recognising qualifications and building a system where no young person is invisible.

Kirsten HARKNESS: The government demonstrates concern about the array of subjects in the gambit of this bill. Support for this initiative and the establishment of VBoM will open the doors for further attention and accountability in other subjects, including VET subjects and the vocational major, and issues within the VCAA.

Katia D'ANGELO: I ask the opposition: how can they ensure that no answers or questions will be leaked through them using prewritten SACs? How can they limit students sharing questions or answers with students from other schools? Nowhere in the bill do they mention anything about this. There is a reason that schools write their own SACs, and this is one of the reasons. If we move to standardise SACs across the state, it will go against the purpose of the bill because it will increase the sharing of information which they are trying to decrease. It will also decrease fairness across the state.

James DYER: It was stated that resources and rubrics are publicly available. Are they accurate? Are they constant? No. There are very few resources actually available considering the breadth of the VCAA system. While I am very glad that the government has had positive experiences in acquiring their information, this is not the case for everybody. A standardised public forum holds VCAA accountable and ensures there is accessible and broad coverage.

Sricharan KARTHIKEYAN: The opposition states that the Victorian Board of Moderation is in charge of audits. However, there is little mention of what will happen if audits reveal proper standards are not being met.

Nitya RACHAMALLA: Right now the government's ATAR scaling system pressures students to choose their subjects like gamblers, not based on passion or ability but on how they scale. Nowhere is this clearer than in English and other language subjects. English is the only compulsory subject, yet it is consistently scaled down. How is that fair? And students who take a second language, often to connect with their own culture or challenge themselves, face scaling that is unpredictable and unfair. Personally, as someone who chose French for the ridiculously high scaling, I will admit it was not about passion or connection to the language, but I still got the better end of the deal. The same system punishes students who choose more popular spoken languages, like Italian, Spanish or Japanese, subjects that are just as demanding, just as valuable and yet are still scaled down. Let us stop asking students to sacrifice their interests for their rank and build an education system where students can choose what they love without fear it will cost them their future. This reform is long overdue, and it is time to act.

Emily RODGERS: The opposition said 'vocational major'. However, a vocational major is not scored or given in the ATAR, so they are not included.

Ella ZHANG: I believe that we live in a world where languages seem to have a hierarchy because of VCE scaling subjects. Students often feel compelled to choose subjects based on this scaling, as our speakers have also stated before. I personally have chosen Chinese second-language advanced, not because I want to reconnect with my culture but because I feel like I have an advantage because I know how to speak it. I do not think this kind of advantage should be continued. It is not fair. It also takes away from the original intent of studying. What is the point of doing something that you are already good at just because it scales up and it is an advantage. It takes a courage that I did not have before to choose a scaled-down subject, and the current education system seems to value science subjects and language subjects more than the arts. I do not know what this is for the implication of society as well. Why are we valuing some parts of the world more than others when they are supposed to be of equal standing?

Charvi JOSHI: The opposition have mentioned a race where everyone is not at the same starting position, but what they fail to mention is that if the teaching quality to begin with is not the same, how are they going to start at the same place?

Lee TAYLOR: School-assessed coursework guidelines are only templates. They are not the actual SACs.

Sricharan KARTHIKEYAN: The opposition has spoken about equality. They are using scaling as a scapegoat for inequality and facts, because inequality is already being addressed by individual schools creating their own school-assessed coursework. The VCE system is broken. Nobody is denying that. But to effectively account for the inequalities between schools, individual schools should be allowed to create their own SACs to prepare their own students in a way they feel is equitable to the school's academic ability and infrastructure.

Shaniah TOLEAFOA: I want to point out that our language students are putting in the hard yards, mastering complex grammar and cultural nuances, only to see their efforts undervalued by our wonky scaling system. As the government said, 'It's far from perfect.' This bill champions those who dare to learn a language, ensuring they get the recognition and support they deserve. I personally do not take a language subject, but I know that it is hard or even harder to learn a language other than English. Students should be able to pursue their passions through the empowerment of language. They should not be punished for not being Shakespeare. Where is the justice in that? Nowhere. Exactly. That is why we urge everyone to consider voting for this bill.

Rehaan SALIL: While the opposition highlight flaws and corruption within VCAA, they also claim that the board that they seek to introduce will work alongside VCAA. I ask: how is this addressing the corruption that VCAA already has? How is scaling going to address this and provide equality? Also, different schools teach differently. They operate under different frameworks and different structures. How is this being considered when addressing equality? Currently the system uses data and real scores to scale. Isn't this replacing clarity with confusion?

The ACTING PRESIDENT (John Berger): I call on the sponsor of the bill for their right of reply.

Nimeesha VISEN: The government has painted a picture of fear: fear of change, fear of accountability and fear of holding institutions to the same standards we expect from our students. What they fail to offer is a real solution. They have criticised our bill, but they have not shown us how the current system is fair or transparent or even functional. Though they aim to raise valid concerns, it seems to me they have not taken the time to understand the fundamental purpose of this bill. This bill is not radical, it is reasonable. It does not attack teachers, it supports consistency. It does not punish schools, it protects student outcomes. And it does not weaken VCAA, it makes it finally answer to the people it serves, the Victorian people. This is meant to be a fresh start and an awakening. If the government had read this bill, they would realise the aim is not to bring business and specialist maths to the same level but to allow subjects we believe require current action. I am well aware of the other subjects that require attention, including for VCE VET students, but change has to begin somewhere and go forward from there. I sincerely urge this house to approach this with an open mind, to bring justice to those who are silently struggling now.

The ACTING PRESIDENT: The question is:

That the VCAA Scaling System Reform Bill 2025 be now read a second and a third time.

House divided on motion:

Ayes 32

Noes 20

Majority in favour 12

Motion agreed to.

Read second time.

Read third time.

The ACTING PRESIDENT: That concludes that debate. It went very well. There were quite a number of speakers. I think we had 12 to start with and then another 18 to go on with, so that was a very well considered, lengthy debate. Congratulations on your contributions to the debate. The chamber will now adjourn.

Sitting suspended 10:25 am until 11:01 am.

The ACTING PRESIDENT (Georgie Purcell): Hi, everyone. My name is Georgie Purcell. I am an Animal Justice Party MP that sits in this house of Parliament – I actually sit in the seat over there – and I am here to chair your debate today. The first thing I want to say to you is I know you are probably a little bit nervous, and I just want to share with you that I still get really nervous speaking in here sometimes; in fact I am a little bit nervous right now speaking to all of you. So please make this your own. Do not feel heaps of pressure. I will make mistakes. This is my first time chairing Youth Parliament, and I am really looking forward to seeing what you all produce today. You probably all know a little bit about my background being Animal Justice Party; I also want to say to the refuting side: no hard feelings for whatever you are going to say today.

I am actually the youngest woman in the Victorian Parliament, which is a pretty cool thing. I am turning 33 this weekend, so I am actually not that young, and I cannot pull the ‘young’ card much longer. It is really cool to see so many young faces in here today and people that are hopeful about our future who want to engage in politics and in democracy and understand more about how this place works. I really hope to continue to see you in here and hopefully properly see you in here one day as a member of Parliament. This is a really great first step to learning more about this process.

I was elected at the November 2022 state election, and I am the only MP for my party. I was actually just saying to Richard that I am meant to be on leave at the moment – I am really bad at taking leave – but I wanted to come in here for this today. That comes with its own challenges, being a sole representative, because you are responding to a lot of things and making a bunch of decisions all of the time, but it is such a great honour and privilege to be able to do this job. It is something that I absolutely never planned on doing. I did not do anything like this when I was younger. I think as well, particularly as a young woman, I really grew up thinking I just could not possibly be a member of Parliament. I was always interested in politics – I engaged with it, I joined the Animal Justice Party 10 years ago – but I was very much a volunteer and background person. So despite being part of the animal protection movement for my entire adult life, I did not ever consider being a spokesperson for it or a face of it. The past few years for me have been an absolute whirlwind experience. It is very, very exciting but a huge amount of responsibility. I feel grateful to be able to do it every single day.

I actually represent regional Victoria, which is why this bill is very exciting to me. I counted the kangaroos on the Calder Freeway on the way in today, and I saw seven of them, all of which had been pouch-checked. Living in the Macedon Ranges we actually have the highest rate of wildlife road strike in the entire state. What comes with that is we also have a beautiful community of people that respond to it who are volunteers. A big part of my job at the moment is providing them more support and getting the government to acknowledge this work that they do at all hours. It is not their job. They work it in amongst their paid work, and they use the money that they earn from their paid work to fund this work. I just do not think that is good enough, particularly when they are not only protecting the native animals that are iconic to our country, and which we can never get back, but also because they are providing a public service to keep our community safe as well.

I have a parliamentary inquiry happening right now that I am chairing, of the Legislative Council Economy and Infrastructure Committee, so this is just absolutely brilliant timing. We are halfway through that inquiry process. We have taken submissions, we ran a survey and we are starting public hearings in the next month. So if you are engaged on this issue and you have become interested through this process, you might like to watch what is going on in the Parliament over the next few months. We will be handing down a final report that makes a whole heap of recommendations to alleviate this problem as well. Thank you so much for being part of this today. Like I said, please feel relaxed, feel comfortable. I will make mistakes over the next hour, so do not worry if you make one too.

Prevention of Wildlife Deaths on Roads Bill 2025

Sponsor: South Gippsland Shire Youth Council

Refuter: Boroondara City Council

Introduction and first reading

Erica BEGG: I move:

That I have leave to introduce a bill titled Prevention of Wildlife Deaths on Roads Bill 2025.

Motion agreed to.

Read first time.

Second reading

Erica BEGG: Before I begin I would like to note that this debate contains mentions of animal deaths, euthanasia, graphic accounts of wildlife fatalities and road accidents leading to fatalities of humans and wildlife as well. If you would like to leave the chambers, please do so now. I move:

That the bill be now read a second time.

Imagine driving the same road every day and every day a different animal is lying there, hit and left behind. This is not a rare occurrence; it is a daily reality across much of Australia. Over 10 million native animals are killed on our roads each year. These lives are not just a number; they are silence, loss, avoidable tragedy. This bill gives them a voice. Australia is known for our iconic and irreplaceable wildlife. They are a part of who we are, but our roads are becoming killing grounds. We believe roads should connect people, not tear through habitats without a thought. This bill is our response to a preventable crisis. We have got the technology, we have got the data and we have got the urgency, so what is stopping us?

We are creating Wildlife Road Protection Victoria, or WRPV, a dedicated board that will take real action. They will lead a strategy, make evidence-based decisions and actually get things done. The board will include experts and community voices, because real change comes from all of us. The WRPV will implement solutions across the state, including wildlife crossings, vegetated overpasses, better signage and a 24/7 hotline to report dangerous spots, and each strategy will be tailored to different regions.

Right now we treat animals like road hazards. We are taught to just swerve or to ignore. That has to change. This bill will bring wildlife safety into our learners permit tests, our schools and our communities. It is about building a culture where care and caution are just as normal as seatbelts and speed limits. Victoria sees around 2 million wildlife road deaths a year, yet this barely gets talked about. Wildlife Victoria takes up to 400 calls a day, yet so many cases go unreported. That invisibility is what lets this crisis keep going. Through a big statewide awareness campaign – think billboards, socials, events and much more – we will make this issue visible, because when people see it, they care, and when people care, they make a change.

We are also stepping up for our vets. Most vets do not get the training in treating native wildlife that they need, despite often being the first point of their care. This bill implements trauma training placements and standardised care protocols across Victoria, plus 24/7 wildlife hospitals in every shire, because the ability to live should not depend on the postcode you are hit in. At its heart this bill believes that something beautiful but powerful, wildlife protection, is not optional but is necessary. It is about respecting life, every life, and building a future where our roads reflect that. We have changed public behaviour before, with seatbelts, drink driving and phone use, and we can do it again for the animals, who do not get to speak. This is not just about today; it is about building a future that every young person in this state can be proud of. Let this bill pass not just for us but for them, for the creatures we share our home with.

Ishan VENKAT: I think we have to recognise that this bill is a really important bill. The purpose and the advocacy have merits all across the opposition. But I think the main purpose of tonight's debate is to critically examine whether or not this proposed solution is actually effective. Two things in this speech, firstly, on the effectiveness of resources, and secondly, on the reckless use of resources. This bill proposes 24/7 wildlife hospitals in every regional and rural local government area. This ambiguity can lead to the exploitation of this model. How, you may ask? It is because we have a very big state that we live in, and it is actually unclear how big or how small the different distributions through every different local government agency are.

We see that each of these, according to the government's bill, are required to have two vets at all times. Yet we say that these two vets may not actually want to be there. We see that currently the status quo in the veterinary industry is that 38.6 per cent of this industry are facing vacancies. There is a systematic issue as to why people do not want to become vets nowadays, and this is because 52 per cent of veterinarian graduates were not satisfied with the remuneration provided. Furthermore, we see that two-thirds of all vets across Victoria have faced mental health burnout and overall physical deterioration. So we ask you: is this the most effective use of our resources, like labour and time? We see an industry that is actually being under-represented and has labour shortages, so instead of introducing bureaucratic methods that lack effectiveness, we should continue to enhance existing mechanisms to ensure all wildlife are protected. We tell you that Victoria already has a well-established organisation, Wildlife Victoria. Wildlife Victoria is here with a proven track record. Wildlife Victoria is here with an extensive network all across Victoria, with proven experience protecting wildlife all across our beautiful state. We say to you that there is a feasible option and a feasible organisation that is protecting all wildlife. So now do we rather attempt to introduce new mechanisms and mitigate the impact of existing programs that are targeting the benefits wildlife animals are facing?

When we spend resources to improve existing infrastructure, this is actually going to lead to a few ramifications. The government's bill will (a) introduce land acquisition. Don't we think land acquisition of native land for animals will continue to impact the various different issues wildlife are facing? Furthermore, there is the impacts on vets. These 24/7 hospitals, with the obligation to have at least two vets, will further perpetuate the veterinarian shortage we are facing. Paired with the geographical imbalances throughout our state, there is no logical direction with today's bill. Secondly, we see that the reckless use of resources will actually further blur the lines throughout our state, and this is seen through the divide between public and private clinics. How is this the case? It is because all across our state we have 24/7 hospitals, we have experience and we have expertise. But this bill fails to articulate what highly specialised services these wildlife hospitals would exclusively offer that differentiate from the status quo. This actually leads to the blurred intentions of today's bill. Do we achieve ultra-specialised veterinarian clinics for complex operations, or do we have advanced diagnostic image capabilities dedicated solely to native fauna? This confusion in the bill's purpose blurs these intentions and does not allow our status quo to improve. In closing, we tell you that these 24/7 wildlife hospitals will have no positive impact. We have an efficient system that is effectively targeting Victoria as a whole, and prioritising and strengthening existing mechanisms is how we build a good future.

Emily RODGERS: Currently the environment is not safe or accommodating for wildlife. If we do not make some changes soon, we are going to continue to see devastating deaths of wildlife, which could easily be avoided. Humans need to be more considerate and prioritise the safety of wildlife as well as our own. The strategies that the WRPV will implement will not sacrifice the safety of humans. Instead, they will increase the safety and protection of wildlife. The WRPV would create regulations to redirect wildlife from roads, taking into consideration a number of options. Underground tunnels for wildlife will allow wildlife to safely navigate and change habitats easily. It is important that the tunnels are made to look natural so that they attract a wide variety of wildlife. Animal nets on electrical or communication poles can be utilised by marsupials such as brushtail possums, as the trees that possums frequently rely on to scamper to different habitats have been cleared in order to construct many roads. During the Youth Parliament launch event, our team was lucky enough to speak to Georgie Purcell, who suggested the trial of roadside reflector posts that emit repellent sounds and/or light to alert drivers of the presence of wildlife. Line markings and road signs can warn drivers of wildlife hotspot areas. Overpasses with grass and shrubbery can offer a large variety of wildlife an alternative way to cross the road and avoid traffic. According to a *National Geographic* article, you can get reductions of 85 to 90 per cent with crossings and fences that guide animals under or over highways. Reduced speed limits in wildlife hotspots can be put into practice to mitigate potential hazards in high-risk areas. According to an article by Moffitts Farm, over 10,000 animals were hit in 2022 to 2023, compared to 6000 in 2017 to 2018. The majority of wildlife vehicle collisions are happening in hotspots surrounding regional growth centres.

Rohan HOBBS: Trigger warning: this speech contains reference to the deaths of humans and animals. If you wish to leave, please do so now. Whilst those opposite have their hearts in the right place, the reality of this bill is that it prioritises the lives of animals over humans. Of course we all wish to see fewer animals harmed in this state. However, to enact this bill would run the risk of adding to the shameful, ever-growing toll of human lives lost on Victorian roads. I implore those opposite to rethink their decision on erecting roadside reflector posts emitting repellent sounds and light. The Australian Automobile Association has found that distraction is the key component in 16 per cent of accidents involving death, a higher risk than from drunk driving. The reflector posts proposed will inevitably run the risk of adding to this, heightening the toll of lives lost on Victoria's roads and adding to the road toll. Victoria is no tortoise; slow and steady does not win the race. This is clear if you have ever had to commute from regional Victoria into the city. To lower the speed limit in wildlife hotspots, as proposed in clause 9.1(f), would have a real impact on those commuting from the regions into the city. The state's hard workers will have their work-life balance and wellbeing negatively impacted, as they will spend more time in the car. Those in government clearly have not listened to the uproar of anger from those driving to and from work, in and out of the inner city, with lower speed limits, because this bill replicates those. To prioritise the wellbeing of animals over humans is a fatal flaw that must be dealt with. The failure to do so means that this legislation cannot be passed in good conscience. I thank the Acting President and the chamber for their time.

Kaydee JONES: Wildlife road deaths are not a normal part of life and should not be accepted as inevitable. These tragedies result from bad habits and a lack of driver awareness. Research shows over 40 per cent of Australian drivers ignore wildlife warning signs and 60 per cent react by braking suddenly or swerving – dangerous behaviours that put both human and animal lives at risk. This bill protects both by promoting calm, informed responses. It tackles the root cause: a lack of knowledge. Clause 6 facilitates the introduction of wildlife safety education into the learner permit test and year 10 curriculum. The learners test will teach and assess how to reduce the risk of wildlife collisions and how to respond safely if one does occur. This ensures young drivers are prepared to act responsibly and reasonably in any scenario. Adding this content to the year 10 curriculum means students will learn from experts about safe driving, collision prevention and how to assist injured wildlife, early in their development as drivers. They will also gain an understanding of wildlife's role in our environment, their value and the scale of this issue. This will not just be another forgettable slide show, it will be a dynamic, practical lesson with engaging, accessible resources that make a lasting impact. By addressing a critical gap in driver education, this content prepares learners for real-world scenarios that they might otherwise be unequipped for. It is practical, relevant and essential from the moment any Victorian gets their Ls. This bill is not just a policy change, it is the beginning of a cultural shift in how we drive, treat wildlife and respond to crisis. We do not just want better drivers, we want informed and prepared drivers. This bill delivers exactly that. Let us pass this bill to protect the safety of both humans and animals, because every life on our road matters.

Ella ZHANG: Australian wildlife have not had the respect they deserve, we agree with that. Road strikes deserve attention, we agree with that – just not in the way that the government proposes it to happen. What idealistic utopia does this bill imagine itself to be in? The massive mobilisation of veterinarians in order to put this bill into action is simply absurd. I would like to reiterate that it fails to remember Australia's national vet shortage. Does the government plan to conjure up thousands of vets with a single wave of a magical wand? The government's bill also turns a blind eye to the implications of adding animals as a part of our health care. The bill seeks to build and staff government-run wildlife hospitals in each regional LGA, or local government area. This means making wild animals – which, mind you, the government still lacks a clear definition of – be a part of the healthcare system tailored for humans. How do those opposite plan to do so? By throwing away all the norms of our health system – the system that we cherish, the one that endeavours to provide human, not animal, health? I would also like to add that it is not respect to the animals themselves. How could they be added to our system? Is it by amending Victoria's current acknowledgement of health care as not only a human right but an animal right too? What is next, kangaroos to vote in the 2028 election? Animals deserve care. Road strikes must be addressed, just not in the way that the government has proposed. There is no clause that outlines how veterinarians should integrate into the healthcare system. It is just idealism getting into the government's head. The failure to consider such a fundamental aspect of reform shows the inadequacy of the proposed bill. We urge the government to reconsider this iteration, where it seems accountability is crushed by their high horse and our civilians have to bear the consequences.

Lily SMITH: I rise today in strong support of clause 7, 'Education for Veterinarians around the Treatment of Injured Wildlife'. This clause recognises a devastating truth that we can no longer ignore. Our veterinarians are the frontline responders to road-related wildlife incidents, yet they are not receiving the support and training they so desperately need. In fact only 24 per cent of veterinarians in Victoria reported feeling very confident when treating wildlife. This calls for immediate attention and action. Subclause 7.1 ensures that veterinarians will receive annual training around the treatment of wildlife. This subclause also outlines that training will be unique for each region, ensuring that veterinarians will be equipped with the skills most relevant to their local ecosystems. Additionally, this subclause emphasises the importance of reducing unnecessary euthanasia and instead prioritises rehabilitation and recovery wherever possible. This encourages a more preservative approach to veterinarian care, where rehabilitation and return to the wild is not just an option but a core goal of treatment. Subclause 7.2 also promotes long-term change. By requiring that universities offering veterinary studies include a unit of study and placement in wildlife treatment we are ensuring a new generation of veterinarians are prepared and ready to treat wildlife properly. This bill empowers our veterinarians, supplies much-needed support to wildlife carers and above all else provides better outcomes for wildlife. This is our opportunity to be the voice for those who cannot speak – to protect, to heal and to give injured wildlife a fighting chance.

James DYER: I rise today to speak on the Prevention of Wildlife Deaths on Roads Bill 2025. While its intentions are good and the cause is valuable, I believe this bill will unfortunately lead to the exploitation of the proposed wildlife hospitals. The bill plans for 24/7 wildlife hospitals in every rural and regional area, fully staffed. This sounds great, but it opens the door to abuse. Imagine a pet owner facing high vet bills; what is to stop them from claiming their sick or injured pet was hit by a car and then bringing it to one of these free, publicly funded wildlife hospitals for treatment? With a board with absolute control of fund allocations with no financially relevant members, this is not fiscally responsible for a widespread program. The bill's broad definition of 'wildlife' and emphasis on urgent care makes this scenario unfortunately all too likely. How will these hospitals, meant for wild animals, be able to tell the difference when those situations do cross over? Our veterinarians, specially trained to treat wildlife, will be perfectly capable of treating domestic animals too, blurring the lines even further. This exploitation would be financially irresponsible. Our wildlife hospitals intended for native animals could be overwhelmed by domestic pets, diverting crucial resources, staff and funding. This means longer waits and poorer care for the very wildlife we want to protect. How do we allow pet owners and non-native animals sufficient support while keeping the system in check? We must protect our wildlife but not while creating a system that can be easily exploited. This bill as it stands is a well-intentioned path to turning our vital wildlife hospitals into free clinics for domestic animals. I urge you to consider these serious implications and perhaps reconsider this bill.

Evie THEODORE: We desperately need wildlife hospitals which cater for the specific needs formulated by different densities of wildlife in varying locations. Considerations must be made in order to accommodate the treatment of wildlife who need assistance. It is not acceptable to rely on euthanasia as the only way to treat injured wildlife. When an animal is suffering and has no hope of recovery, euthanasia can be the kindest and most compassionate choice, but it should never become the easy way out. Every life deserves a chance, and the decision must be made with care, not for convenience. Instead it should be ensured that there is a sufficient number of wildlife hospitals. It is vital that WRPV takes into account data and statistics in relation to wildlife densities and spread and the type of environment in the location. In this way they can formulate a system of wildlife hospitals that is beneficial for their exact locations, taking into account the differences and inequalities that may occur. All rural and regional local government areas shall have at least one wildlife hospital that must be operational 24 hours a day. This will assist in catering for animals injured at all times. It will be mandatory that two veterinarians are available onsite around the clock. These individuals will be prepared to respond to an emergency situation involving wildlife. The wildlife hospital must also facilitate urgent care so that all seriously injured wildlife can receive the highest level of care. These animals deserve more than silent suffering; they deserve a real chance to heal. By passing this bill we give them that chance.

Kirsten HARKNESS: Perhaps ironically, I quote *Animal Farm*: power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. The establishment of WRPV is of concern to the opposition. Although this body is comprehensive and representative, for which I commend the government, the powers awarded to it are inordinate. This body has full control of fund allocation, roadside infrastructure and manipulating the curriculum and learners permit tests. I also highlight the ability of the body to introduce infringements for vandals, which is referred to with convenient brevity to not draw attention to the unlimited power this gives the body. Despite enforcement from Parks Victoria and Victoria Police, no clarity on the limits of these penalties leaves us unclear as to their scope and how they will be overseen. From the works of Plato: I ask those opposite to imagine what they would do if they had a ring that granted them total invisibility, but nobody knew that they owned this ring. As the myth goes, Gyges used this ring to gain absolute power and maintained that any man with that opportunity would do the same. This is the slippery slope the government leads us down when proposing this body's outlandish jurisdiction. This body takes away from our existing frameworks instead of bolstering them to more fruitfully protect our wildlife. I acknowledge the proposed representation of VicRoads and vets, but why does the government seek to override these professionals' existing expertise? Our expert vets do not need the bureaucracy of the proposed body interfering with their learned practices, all whilst dictating their position on animal euthanasia and wildlife treatment. I implore the house to truly consider if our state can afford yet another boundless and corrupting body like those that our institutions currently rely on.

Ariel MEZZACAPPA: I would first like to mention that this speech contains graphic descriptions of wildlife fatalities. If any of the members would like to leave, please do so now. Have you ever driven past a dead animal on the side of the road, seen a sunbaked carcass, seen the torn flesh – a mangled, twisted body left to rot under the hot Australian sun? Have you ever hit an animal while driving? Did you know what to do or who to call? Do you know the number of Wildlife Victoria? Most Victorians do not. In Victoria we have no standard education and no routine awareness, and often people do not take action at all. Wildlife Victoria data reveals that 10,643 native animals were reported as hit by a Victorian vehicle on our roads in 2022–23. This was an increase of 15 per cent from the previous year, and the total number of these creatures murdered by Victorian vehicles is likely to be much, much more, as most of it goes unreported.

Australia is in great need of an update. This bill is the first step. This bill will prevent wildlife collision through improved education surrounding our country, our land, our wildlife, our roads and our people. I live in an outer-city suburb, and I still see roadkill often. This is not just a rural problem; this is an everywhere problem. Clause 10 was written to educate the public, and it equips us with vital information such as brochures, billboards, community events, social media – just read the bill. These are not just leaflets, they are lifelines. They are the difference between a kangaroo left dying on the side of the road and a life-saving phone call. This is not a burden, this is the bare minimum – because the truth is that a large number of these deaths are not accidents, they are preventable. They happen not because an animal crossed the road but because we did not see them. If you are driving past a home among the gum trees, maybe a sheep or two or a kangaroo, you would not want to see that kangaroo dead and neither would your own child. This bill fixes that. Let us pass the bill for all our emus, our kangaroos, our echidnas and the native animals we see on our coins.

Mikael BONNE: This bill's ambition reaches for the moon. While I commend its initiative to protect our flora and fauna from an onslaught of dangerous incidents, it falls short of the comprehensive legislation it aspires to be. One of its more significant shortcomings is its failure to discern between what animals and organisms should be considered eligible for protection. This lack of clarification stems from the bill's application of the broad umbrella term 'wildlife', which is neither properly defined nor supported by a consistent framework for determining protected species. By not distinguishing between 'invasive pests' and 'vulnerable native species', this bill therefore risks misallocating resources or offering protection where it is not warranted. It leaves Victorian drivers uncertain and unprepared. What procedures are in place for animals deemed vermin? How are everyday road users meant to make informed decisions when the legislation itself fails to provide clarity? It is for these reasons, as an individual who is equally impacted, as a Victorian driver myself, that I cannot in good conscience allow this bill to pass before these highlighted issues, brought up in my speech and previously in those speeches by our members, are fully addressed.

Katia D'ANGELO: A member of the opposition mentioned that the lives of animals are not as important as human lives. That was a shameful statement. All life is equal and should be treated as such. The same member also mentioned that reducing speeds in areas with animals will increase travel times. However, we believe that saving the lives of animals is more important than reducing your travel time. Also, Victoria has already passed laws to reduce the speed limit when passing emergency vehicles, so why can't we do the same to save the lives of our animals? I would like to end my speech with a quote from David Attenborough: 'If we damage the natural world,' like our animals, 'we damage ourselves.'

Kinda ALRAYYAN: While I understand where the government is coming from, I have one point that I would like them to explain. If we are increasing petrol use and the pollution going into the atmosphere by lowering speed limits, isn't that also harming animals? By increasing the pollution in the atmosphere and harming the climate, we are risking their habitats through other climate change that is happening around us through unhealthy actions. Now, if we are decreasing these speed limits, we are increasing the usage of petrol and producing more carbon dioxide. How is that not also impacting the animals?

Etienne AGNEW: Are the opposition seriously suggesting that the comfort and convenience of humans are more important than the lives of thousands of native animals who have, by the way, inhabited this land for hundreds and hundreds of years before us? All of Victoria has wildlife – every single council – whether it be kangaroos or lorikeets, and with that, any road can become a hotspot. As the government, we are done waiting for more and more deaths to happen before we do something about it. It is time to work towards preventing deaths in the first place and ensuring preparedness and rapid care for any injured animals. The government acknowledges that not all vets may want to work with wildlife for their entire profession, and they do not have to, but every vet should have basic wildlife care skills, especially in rural and regional areas. Surgeons still need basic GP skills before specialising in surgery, do they not? This bill applies the same principle to vets. This bill is about increasing competence, not forcing a career choice.

Charlotte FLEMING: I wish to ask the government why the education program starts at year 10. I grew up in rural Victoria, specifically in Shepparton, and quite often we would drive from Shepparton to Melbourne due to personal reasons. I wish to state that as a seven-year-old I was a witness to roadkill accidents. I would see the roadkill on the side of the road, and I wish to ask why the government sees that year 10 is where the education should start. This is an issue that impacts younger generations, younger people. Care is something that starts when you are young. Your ideas are built from your experiences, and for our younger generations to grow into people who care about our wildlife and our nature, they should grow up being told that they are to be protected.

Renee Estelle BROTCHE: I ask you, if Wildlife Victoria was truly effective, why would you have claimed that you have seen seven kangaroos dead on the drive to Parliament today? I would not see dead kangaroos, possums and wombats on the majority of my rides, if not all of those, that I have taken as a learner on rural roads, highways and freeways. If Wildlife Victoria was truly effective, none of us in this room here would be seeing dead wildlife anywhere.

Nimeesha VISEN: I commend the bill's purpose. This issue is relevant and crucial to address. However, it is important to address the practicality of this bill. It is flawed and needs to be reconsidered. What worries me is the core problem of why these wildlife animals are being killed in the first place – reckless drivers. Urgency and education of wildlife deaths is significant, but what needs to be spoken about first is strategies to fix the increasing numbers of drivers not driving safely. I insist this house take a step back and improve human errors first before going and trying to fix another issue.

Vivianne PHUNG: Humans in regional, rural and remote areas receive substandard health care. The system already fails humans and humans are being underfunded. It is not hard to imagine how wildlife is considered when friends and neighbours are not even being properly taken care of. Animals are no different to humans, and they need the same attention. Raising awareness brings funding, and funding brings vets. Funding is a reason that can address labour shortages. This bill is vague on purpose because no one region faces the same needs. The Macedon Ranges that the President comes from will not need the same model as South Gippsland, and legislation should not be prescriptive: it should not lock councils or areas into a fixed model. We need to listen to the people, listen to the communities and listen to the people who are caring for the animals. The opposition continues to degrade animals and see humans as superior to animals. The opposition pretends to believe that humans rule the world, when we are the very people who are ruining the animals' habitats and homes. Wildlife is important, and we need to treat them as equal, and the least we can do for them is extend a helping hand when we are the very people killing them.

Shaniah TOLEAFOA: Let us be real, our roads are built for us, the two-legged creatures who pay taxes and need to get to work or school. While I love a good koala cuddle as much as the next person, turning every highway into a wildlife obstacle course, with tunnels, nets and round repellents, sounds like a recipe for traffic chaos. My uncle Bob – yes, his name is Bob – once swerved to avoid a possum and ended up in a ditch. It is either humans or animals in this case. We need practical solutions, not a wildlife theme park.

Patrick PHUNG: The opposition wants to ask us, so let us ask ourselves: why do we have wildlife roadkill in the first place? Because we are displacing the very existing communities and habitats that the wildlife lives in. The more we grow and the more we continue to sprawl further out, the more we will continue to displace and the more roadkill we will continue to see. To assume pet owners will abuse the hospital system or such veterinarian hospitals are unnecessary is a laughable assumption. The opposition claims this bill will value animals more than humans, but I do not recall animals having readily accessible healthcare clinics like we do. Can we really afford to play a cat-and-mouse game? Must we remain complacent and kick it down the road and hope someone else takes the action for us? Talk about not staying ahead of the curve.

Mahrosh KHAYYAM: I would like to take your attention to clause 9.1, which states underground tunnels may be built for wildlife. I question what happens when these tunnels collapse under heavy vehicles travelling over them, endangering wildlife. I also would like to take your attention to 9.1(c), roadside reflector posts emitting repellent sounds and/or light. While this may be a positive impact, putting animals safely away from roads, what happens when these reflectors and repellents run these animals out of their surrounding homes?

Nicholas FRANCIS: I would like to start off by addressing the opposition's question about why education will start at year 10. That is simply because that is when you get your learners licence. Going on, the opposition has claimed this bill actively places animals lives over humans. The opposition in one breath talk about the increasing death toll in Victoria and in the next talk about how lowering speed limits – which would also lower the death toll, keep in mind – is also bad; they complain about it. This bill is not about conflating the value and placing animals lives over humans, it is only about prevention through awareness and direct action. On another note, the opposition has painted our bill to be government overreach, making it seem like the WRPV will be authoritarian and create a regime comparable to the likes of Gaddafi's. What is the relevance of this? This bill is not about overarching authoritarian government policy. To conclude, this bill is about saving animals lives, not the deterioration of humans or the value of humans and the separation of power.

Zeinab ABDU: The government does not provide which regional local government areas will have more than one wildlife hospital, just that all local government areas should have at least one. This bill, in order to be truly successful in aiding the wildlife, requires more clarification.

Aneka SUBRAMANIAM: Of the 132 veterinary clinics that were surveyed around Australia, almost three-quarters of veterinary clinics only saw wildlife when they had spare time. This is concerning, as delays to treatment raise serious animal welfare concerns. Additionally, many veterinary clinics indicated they felt the lack of time, knowledge and skills interfered with their ability to treat wildlife, which is mentioned in 4.4(d)(ii), which says the WRPV will be coordinating public education regarding safely assisting injured or unwell wildlife. As veterinary clinics are small businesses, wildlife presents as a conundrum because they are animals that are not owned, they expect treatment with no payment and they do not look like the usual pets seen by most vets. With clinics full of paying clients expecting prompt treatment, it can be hard to prioritise wildlife. Thus I request those in both government and in opposition to pass a bill that only has good intentions and perpetuates reform and equality.

Jamie STANTON: ‘Care over convenience’. My own brother works day in and day out at ridiculous hours as a wildlife rescue call volunteer. This phrase is something he has called the bane of his existence. Most times euthanasia is impossible in the most scientific and biological sense. A poor little bundle, as it is said in my family tongue, cannot heal most of the time due to their poor circulation of blood and simply the way they are built. Current standards work with this, and I suggest that the bill accommodate this rather than form an ignorant reform of the system.

Charvi JOSHI: The opposition thinks vets will be tricked into thinking pets are hit by a car and reap the benefits. It seems that they have forgotten that they are professionals. It also seems that they have repeatedly mentioned that domestic animals such as dogs are the ones to be tricked. Exactly how, may I ask, is your adorable cavoodle at home part of Australian native wildlife? Another point to mention is the assumption that there is an excessive mandating of wildlife hospitals. What they do not realise is the fact that full-scale hospitals are not required, just access points, and some do not even have the basic care available that is needed. 24/7 vets that specialise in wildlife care are needed in these regional areas. We need to take a step forward, so let us begin like this: yes, drivers need help, but not at the expense of our animals. We need to take a step forward, so let us begin this change.

Lee TAYLOR: I ask the government: how do people get the incentive to report? Most people do not report when they hit an animal because it is unsafe to do so. Relying on humans to report road strikes is displaying a sense of superiority as we as humans are to report on them. Hypocrisy much, I ask the government.

Ava LUTTON: I believe there is a semantic misunderstanding and perhaps a bit of confusion faced by the opposition. We need to assume that a term when included in this bill is not defined in the definitions followed by dictionary definitions. Regrettably I cannot fit a dictionary in my compendium, but if I had to take a guess, I would assume it would probably include points about living outside, being native to the region and being exclusive of house pets such as our cuddly cavoodle. The opposition is trying to use the alleged vagueness of the simple English word which my exchange student, Carolina from Germany, could probably understand to create problems that simply do not exist. There is a very simple difference between the two, and the fact that the opposition is trying to create unlikely what-if scenarios shows the bill’s strength, depth and reasonableness.

Kaiser al RASHID: I can assure you that these roads that we drive on every single day are not as comfortable as your bed. I can assure you that the rubble, stones and rocks are impaling these animals across the road. These things happen – I will move on. We use these roads for travel purposes. We use these roads to go to a place that does not align with these animals. If we were to stop these road strikes, shouldn’t we abolish roads fully? If the government thinks in this way, in this idea of this statement of the equal life of animals and humans, wouldn’t that be contradicted, since that would be risking human safety?

Lily SMITH: I will quickly speak. I do not really know what I am doing, but here we go. I ask the opposition: why do they not value the lives of our wildlife? Why is it acceptable to value humans over animals? Why should I slow down driving through a school zone but not through a wildlife hotspot? The only fundamental difference between humans and animals is that animals have no voice. I also want to draw to the attention of the house that I was not aware that dogs and cats were considered native wildlife in Australia.

The ACTING PRESIDENT (Georgie Purcell): I thank all members for their wonderful contributions. The question is:

That the Prevention of Wildlife Deaths on Roads Bill 2025 be now read a second and a third time.

Motion agreed to.

Read second time.

Read third time.

Sitting suspended 11:57 am until 1:02 pm.

The ACTING PRESIDENT (Jeff Bourman): Just before we start, I am going to introduce myself. I am Jeff Bourman. I am one of the members of the Parliament for the eastern region of Victoria. I am from a minor party; I will not go into the details. There are a wide range of people in this chamber these days. It is really good to see you guys in here, so let us get down to business.

Reduction of Public Transport Fares Bill 2025

Sponsor: The Grange P-12 College

Refuter: Active Citizens

Introduction and first reading

Jamie STANTON: I move:

That I have leave to introduce a bill titled Reduction of Public Transport Fares Bill 2025.

Motion agreed to.

Read first time.

Second reading

Jamie STANTON: I move:

That the bill be now read a second time.

Public transportation is not a for-profit industry, and yet the prices to travel are set as if tapping on is the thing keeping it running – interesting fact. School students of all ages across the entire state find themselves constantly unable to cough up enough money necessary to travel to school. To put it simply, it is because they cannot afford it. School students and university students are at the largest disadvantage when it comes to affordable use of public transport. It is not an issue of the financial priorities of these people, but rather it is an issue of the system that is supposedly made for the everyday person. The apparently easy solution to this of course would be for them to just drive a car to where they need to be. If this was so easy, however, they would be doing it already. According to the RCH national child health poll, approximately a quarter of all children in Victoria travel to school by public transport most days. In fact the human rights commission considers obtaining an education a human right. The existence of unaffordable public transport fares blatantly clashes with this idea. The bill my team and I present here today stands up against this and voices the untold thoughts in pockets that are all around us. The bill reduces the fares of public transportation to 50 cents for the general individual and makes it free for all types of students across the state. This promotes a higher accessibility to trains, buses and trams so that people can actually afford to pay for services that they use daily. Keep in mind that our bill establishes a board for the purpose of data collection, not unnecessary power dynamics.

People should not have to calculate the risk of how much they can legally get away with without touching on their Myki cards just to attend school to chase their dreams. An overt barrier stands between school institutions and individuals. It involves a flawed system that fails to account for the simple fact that most people cannot afford to fork out so much for something that should not be so expensive in the first place. Students should be able to afford to get from their home to their place of education, and the everyday person should be able to afford to get to work to contribute to the society that seems to be so uncaring towards their personal finances. Education is compulsory for individuals between 6 and 17, yet people between these ages make up the smallest fraction of employed people in Victoria. How can we really expect them to pay to get to school by public transport? How can we seriously call ourselves an Education State if students are expected to pay unnecessary amounts of money just to go to school in the first place? It is contradictory. The rates of attendance to school would without a doubt rise if people could actually afford to utilise public transport.

Aside from this point, there is also an obvious yet largely unspoken-about environmental benefit to this. If public transport is cheaper for individuals, they would opt to use it over cars to get to work on most occasions. Here lies the benefit that upholds Victoria's very own environmental goals of decreasing carbon emissions. If Victoria truly wants to stick to its promises of a greener tomorrow, then a move away from a car-centric society is imperative. It starts here, with helping out the common people to afford to take public transport. It underpins the very right to freedom of movement, promoting the movement of people throughout the state. With this, I ask the room to consider what would really be opposed here. Why provide a service to the people when most cannot afford to have it as part of their daily lives? Serious action must be taken in order to address these disparities. Lowering the fares of public transport for everybody is the easiest and most clear way to do so. Current legislation goes to show that the government fails to consider the finances of HECS debt-burdened university students, cast away like junk by the government. This bill should be taken into consideration if we are serious in showing we care for the students and the everyday people of Victoria. We do not have enough.

Rehaan SALIL: This bill represents part of a broader vision, a vision for an accessible Victorian transport system. Trust me, as a student that consistently spends over 7 hours a week on public transport, I would more than love to see the system become more accessible. As of 1 January 2025, fares were increased to \$11, and this is not for no reason. The opposition propose a steep decrease to just 50 cents, an almost 95 per cent decrease, while simultaneously providing free fares for all students. Although aimed at increasing accessibility, this seems more like financial irresponsibility. Although we are confident that this bill was worded with the correct intentions, we cannot confuse good intention with good policy.

Further, the argument rests on the assumption that cheaper Myki costs would lead to more people using the public transport system. To be frank, resting such an important decision on an assumption is nothing short of dangerous. In fact many examples from the real world show the opposite happening. In Germany an 85 per cent decrease of fares led to a shocking realisation, which I hope we will never have to come to. The revenue that came from fares was no longer enough to sustain the network. Most concerning of all, as a result of a reduction program in the US – in cities including Denver, Austin and Kansas City – service quality dropped significantly, with consistent disruptions of over 90 minutes per day. With the current vulnerability of the transport system which we already face, this additional burden would undoubtedly worsen the issues in Australia. But let us assume that lower prices indeed do result in higher usage. How much higher would the usage become? Would it be enough to offset the costs? With the 95 per cent cut proposed by the opposition, we would need a 2100 per cent increase in usage to offset the cost. No city in history has ever seen more than a 300 per cent increase.

Further, I would like to emphasise that it is not solely the government that operates public transport services. There are multiple private operators involved in the bus network, Yarra Trams involved in the tram network and MTR Hong Kong, which is a major shareholder in Metro Trains Melbourne. These are businesses that are provided with guaranteed contracts, meaning guaranteed revenue. When the fares are cut by 95 per cent, who is left to compensate them for their fares? The taxpayer is left. In clause 5.2 the opposition suggests that changes that happen as a result of this cut will not be large and that large changes to any systems will be avoided. So a 95 per cent cut in fares is being done, but there is no large change to compensate for this. How does this make sense? Such a radical change must be met with proportionate changes to compensate. This vagueness is further reflected in clause 9. Does it make sense to maintain the same penalty amount regardless of the fares? Of course not. A lower fee should mean lower penalties. But how these changes will be reflected has not been outlined clearly in this bill.

Now, looking at regional services to remote places in Victoria: this bill would devastate regional Victoria, where public transport services are already hardly viable. Currently residents pay prices, but for premium services. Under this bill they would pay extremely low prices, but at what cost? They would be paying for services that are already unviable to sustain, which would become even more unviable to sustain. We believe that with the current experimentation and consideration of other factors, a solution could be crafted which allows for an affordable and accessible Victorian public transport network without the need for the superficial cuts that are outlined in this tangle of points.

Gurshaan BRAR: Cars cannot carry Melbourne. Traffic jams are a fact of life which cannot be denied, based on the morning commute of this entire house. But the solution to this is not just one more lane or a new highway, unless we want traffic like in Houston, Texas, where we see a city of just 2.3 million people unable to solve traffic on a 26-lane freeway. How is Houston's traffic worse than Melbourne's, despite us having over 5 million people? We have an expansive rail, tram and bus system. By passing this bill, we reduce motor vehicle volume and support our public in accessing a car's more efficient alternative. More people on public transport is the precursor to lower air and noise pollution but also a safer Victoria. By making public transport a larger share of the state's transport, we force car-alternative infrastructure to be taken more seriously. For example, the crossing outside your local train station could include speed bumps to protect pedestrians from multi-tonne vehicles. These changes are not instant and ask us to think differently about how our physical environment is built, but they are necessary to incentivise investment into public transport and other car alternatives instead of them being your car's second choice. This bill is Melbourne's guardian against a car-dependent, traffic-infested future like the infamous Los Angeles and is Victoria's workhorse in turning our state into the country's livable crown jewel. It will be more breathable and safer than anywhere else.

Aneka SUBRAMANIAM: This bill operates on the fundamentally flawed assumption that cheaper fares automatically equal increased public transport usage. While clause 5 outlines the 50-cent fare reduction and free student travel, it does nothing to address the real barriers that prevent Victorians from using public transport. There is no consideration of service quality and thus no measurement of whether this policy will actually achieve its stated goals. In the opposition's delusional world, they believe that their solution will work even if it is implemented tomorrow. As stated in clause 5.2(a), they believe that the new 50-cent fare will not result in any major changes to the system. Our current infrastructure would not be able to handle the influx of PT users that the opposition so clearly expects, so how would they not make any large changes to the system? We need look no further than Estonia's capital, Tallinn, which introduced free public transport for registered residents in 2013. The results revealed a clear failure: no reduction in car dependency, significant revenue losses and zero measurable economic gains to justify the policy. International evidence shows us that cities with high public transport usage achieve this through reliability and frequency, not cheap fares. Zurich operates one of the world's most successful public transport systems, with over 80 per cent of trips made by public transport – not because it is cheap but because trains arrive every 2 to 3 minutes during peak hours, with 99 per cent punctuality rates. Similarly, cities like Singapore and Tokyo have achieved remarkable public transport success because it is the most dependable option. As stated previously, from our understanding and consideration, this bill has not been carefully constructed. The opposition cannot buy their way out of a broken system. They have to fix it first.

Jack NGUZO: This speech does contain anecdotes about personal road injuries that led to injury. Honourable members of the Youth Parliament, today I stand before you with a heart full of conviction and a story that weighs heavily on my soul. I am here to sponsor the Reduction of Public Transport Fares Bill 2025, but I am mostly here as someone who has felt the harsh consequences of a system that fails its most vulnerable. This bill is not just about transport, it is about justice and it is about ensuring that every Victorian, regardless of their circumstances, can move through the city with dignity. In a state as rich as ours, a bus or a train should never be a privilege, yet for students, for low-income families and for those struggling to make ends meet, the cost of public transport is a barrier that locks them out of opportunities. It forces impossible choices: pay for a fare or pay for a meal, attend a job interview or stay at home because the trip is too expensive. This is not the Victoria we should accept.

I speak from personal experience. Last year I was struck by a car while riding my bike to school. The impact sent me crashing onto the road. My body bruised and my bike shattered, but worse than the physical pain was the fear that followed: ‘How can I get to school now?’ My family could not afford a daily return, and every bus fare there was another strain. I then understood what it means to be trapped by circumstances. Not everyone should feel that helplessness. This bill is a chance to change that. It introduces a simple fare system – 50 cents for all passengers and completely free travel for all students – no more complex concessions and no more financial barriers, just access for all. Think of the students who could now focus on their studies instead of scrounging for bus money, the single parent who could take their child to the doctor without worrying about the cost or the jobseeker who could attend every interview without hesitation. This is the future we can create. Let us be clear: this is not just compassion, it is common sense. Affordable public transport means fewer cars on the road, cleaner air and a healthy environment; it means a stronger economy where everyone can participate. So today I ask you to stand with me and with every Victorian who has ever been left behind. Let us pass this bill and let us build a state where mobility is a right not a privilege and where no-one is ever stranded again.

Sricharan KARTHIKEYAN: This bill claims to help Victorians, but clause 8 does the opposite. It takes away free transport from people who need it the most. We oppose this clause, as it removes measures put in place by the government to maintain equity amongst public transport users. In the current system, vision-impaired Victorians travel for free. This ensures accessibility. The opposition’s proposed solution abolishes all existing concessions, meaning that an eligible disability candidate would be paying the new 50-cent fare, when they would pay nothing before. This may seem insignificant, a figure that we might just shrug off, but even this small amount makes a difference. For a regular user of public transport taking around five trips a week for 50 weeks a year, this would sum to \$125, versus zero dollars before. Essential accessibility services must remain free for these vulnerable groups, particularly when the cost-of-living crisis is worsening by the day. Rather than progress in the public transport sector, this clause discriminates against people with disabilities. This bill claims to simplify the system, but it destroys 50 years of carefully designed equity measures for these concession groups. Forget about the reduced fee resulting in lower revenue for the government, the unnecessary amount of money that would be spent to change the existing concession infrastructure is unimaginably disproportionate to the returns reaped. Current concessions are there for a reason – as targeted support for people who need them. How can we suddenly make them obsolete? Fifty cents might not sound like much to us, but to someone with a disability, a pensioner or a veteran, it is a barrier. Good policy should help people who need it. While everyone else saves money, we would be charging more to our most vulnerable groups, creating a two-tier system where vulnerability means paying more.

Shaniah TOLEAFOA: The Allan government has already taken fantastic strides, making fares for students under the age of 18 free, commencing 1 January 2026, making it easier for our fellow Victorians and proving that we believe in a system that serves everyone. But while these broad strokes are essential, they leave a critical gap, and that is what sets our bill apart from theirs. The current legislation helps a family take a weekend trip, but it does not address the daily financial burden on a Victorian student who is 18 to 25 years of age. This is the disparity our bill seeks to eliminate. We are talking about students juggling part-time jobs and demanding coursework, often surviving on a diet of 2-minute noodles and sheer willpower. A recent national survey showed one in five students at university regularly skipped meals just to make ends meet. A train ticket should not be another impossible choice for these students, who are often among the most financially disadvantaged yet hardest working individuals. This is not a leap in the dark, it is just common sense. I find it weird that the government were stating facts from different countries. Look at the country we live in – we live in Australia. Now, I do not want to start any interstate rivalry, but if Queensland, a state that considers a giant pineapple a major tourist attraction, can figure this out, then surely we can too. South East Queenslanders have saved more than \$181 million in the first six months of the 50-cent fares for public transport. This could be us, but we choose not to do it.

The ACTING PRESIDENT (Jeff Bourman): Order! There is a rule about props, and showing giant pineapples is a prop – but good stuff.

Charvi JOSHI: Let us now turn our attention to the matter at hand, the proposal by the opposition to establish a board tasked with so-called researching of public transport network fare reduction. Now, this begs the question: what exactly is this board researching? What is the tangible benefit to the public from this vague and duplicated effort? Is this truly a matter of careful consideration, or is it simply a waste of time and taxpayer resources? Let us be clear, thorough and ongoing data collection is already being conducted by the department of transport. This includes journey lengths, peak travel times, route efficiency, customer satisfaction and patterns of high-volume use. These metrics form the backbone of effective transport policy, and they are already in play. So I put the question directly to the opposition: what exactly is the point of this board? Let me summarise: the opposition wants to establish a board to conduct research – research that adds no new value. Even more concerning, the board is apparently researching fare-reduction policies while simultaneously implementing a flat fare rate. If the goal is evidence-based policy, shouldn't the research come first, followed by informed decision-making? This policy is in reverse. Now, let us consider the structure – or rather the lack of structure – of this proposed board. There is absolutely no specification on the number of members. Will there be a five-member panel or will it be bloated to 500? We do not know. We are being asked to approve a board without even knowing what the most basic operational detail is. I mean, talk about professionalism. Furthermore, the board is said to include members from the Department of Education, apparently to advise for students on fair integration using Victorian student numbers. Yet the proposal completely fails to account for the complex jurisdictional issues surrounding university. As honourable members will be aware, universities are all partly under federal authority.

Kaiser AL RASHID: I rise in support of the Reduction of Public Transport Fares Bill 2025, a vital step towards a fairer Victoria. Equity means more than treating everyone the same; it means recognising disadvantage and taking action to correct it. Students, particularly those aged 18 to 25, often face financial barriers that limit their ability to access education, work and social services. Public transport should not be a privilege; it should be a basic right. By making travel free for all students up to the age of 25 and by reducing the general fares to just 50 cents, this bill supports those who need it most. Equity accounts for people's needs to ensure that everyone has the same opportunities, and accessible transport is essential to that. We are not just reducing costs, we are increasing access, participation and opportunity – opportunity for access to services within society. This bill also establishes the Public Transport Fare Reduction Board, which includes stakeholders such as the Department of Education and the Youth Affairs Council of Victoria. This ensures that decisions made are evidence based and shaped by those who understand the challenges firsthand enabling improved feedback to the government. If we want a more equitable and efficient society, we must remove the barriers that hold people back. Transport should connect people, not divide them. This bill moves us towards a more inclusive, mobile and empowered Victoria.

Gautham SRIRAM: I stand in front of you today to highlight the serious flaws in the Reduction of Public Transport Fares Bill 2025. While at first I appreciated the idea of this bill, its implementation simply is not realistic. While some may argue it circumvents the cost-of-living issue in our state, actually transport issues are not at the heart of this crisis. Instead rent, electricity and mortgages are real contributors to the cost-of-living crisis. The bill specifies in clause 6 that a report shall be presented to Parliament regarding this bill within three months of the end of each financial year. Parliament's job is to focus on action, not to drown in paperwork. Also, collecting, analysing and reporting data is no joke. Who will be in charge of this? This bill is piling on the weight of tasks to do, creating no real benefit for the people of Victoria. Instead of addressing issues such as service delivery, overcrowding and capacity issues, the opposition is choosing to just focus on the economic impacts on our transport system today. This bill is neither beneficial nor realistic, so let us work as a house to ensure we pass bills that benefit the people of Victoria.

Octavia MacDONALD: Public transport should not be a luxury, yet in Victoria the price of touching on is a privilege, not a necessity. Too many individuals, particularly students and young people, are unable to afford the cost of public transport travel. This is not a matter of poor budgeting, it is a systemic issue where service design for the public no longer serves the public. What message are we sending when young people are forced to choose between walking long distances in the dark, often alone, and risking fines for not touching on. These are not minor inconveniences; they are direct threats to safety and a major contributor to harassment on our streets. When people are priced off public transport, they are left exposed. We cannot keep telling people to be safe while simultaneously denying them safe, affordable ways to travel. This bill ensures that students can go to school without financial fear, supporting attendance, learning and their right to an education. It also opens the door to jobseekers, shiftworkers and low-income earners who rely on public transport to find and keep employment. The current system punishes the very people it is meant to support: students carrying HECS debt, casual workers juggling shifts and families counting every dollar. It is time to shift away from a model that prioritises revenue over rights.

This bill is more than about money; it is about dignity. It is about giving people the freedom to move through their city without fear, without shame and without checking their bank accounts first. A 50-cent flat fare for the public and free travel for students is not just fair, it is transformative. It removes the silent barrier between people and the services, opportunities and futures they deserve. It will improve school attendance, reduce transport-related financial stress and, most importantly, allow people to travel safely without fearing for their wellbeing or emptying their wallets. It is a small investment with an enormous return: safety, education, employment and equity. Let us give Victoria a transport system that does not cost more than the destination itself, because honestly, if public transport is meant for the public it should not cost a private fortune.

Patrick PHUNG: I do not doubt this bill's intention. We saw Queensland roll out their 50-cent fare, and all of a sudden we want it too. Here is the kicker: their own data shows it just does not add up. For every dollar the governments spend, they only get back 18 cents – 18 cents of value and 18 cents of real investment. That is not a red flag, that is a train wreck in slow motion. Yet here we are doing the same thing without actually fixing the underlying system. The opposition cannot call it reform when the price drops to 50 cents but the fine for not touching on is \$305 – \$305 for a 50-cent ride. They want to lower the cost of entry, but they leave the cost of error completely untouched. A student rushing to school who forgets to touch on their Myki outside of the free tram zone or a shiftworker whose Myki did not scan properly are all hit with the same penalty, and it has only recently gone up from \$288 to \$305, with zero adjustment for intent or circumstance. 'We want cheaper fares, but we also want to hike up the fares at the same time, and we still call that fair.' This is not about creating an accessible system, it is about creating the illusion of one. If the opposition really cared about fairness, then the penalty would have been the first thing they would have changed, because right now it is a trap – it punishes forgetfulness, it punishes system problems and it punishes the young Victorians who depend on public transport every single day. If we are serious about making public transport more accessible, we cannot just change the fare, we need to change the direction. This bill keeps the same broken track, now just with a shiny new price tag. A 50-cent fare means nothing if a \$305 fine is waiting at the next stop. Real reform is not about cheaper rides, it is about making sure the system does not derail the people who rely on it the most.

Nimeesha VISEN: The government contends that this bill would overload Victoria's public transport system, but this claim is short-sighted and ignores the reality. For one, public transport is more space efficient than cars. Facts tell us the average passenger motor vehicle in Melbourne contains only 0.13 passengers per square metre, meanwhile buses carry 6 to 8 passengers per square metre, and they are still more space efficient than cars. Not only is it more difficult to overwhelm public transport, but the inherent space inefficiency of cars means we must take this short-term hit to public transport in order to relieve congestion and promote public transport, because an increase in public transport is necessary to let Victorians go everywhere they need, and more people using public transport encourages more investment in our future.

Vivianne PHUNG: What is the use in charging 50 cents for a train that does not come? Making fares cheaper does not make the service better if there is no infrastructure to use it on. We would be richer if we just put our 50 cents in a piggy bank. In outer suburbs like Melton, Tarneit or even Cranbourne, people wait 40 minutes to an hour for buses or for trains to come on weekdays, and do not talk about weekends – do not bother waiting, because they might not even come. That is what people live with every single day. This policy gives a discount, but only those who are lucky enough to have regular, reliable services can profit from it. The real winners are the people who are in well-connected, richer inner-city suburbs. The east benefits over the west. Metro benefits over rural and regional areas. If Victorians live in areas with a dysfunctional transport system where buses, trains or trams arrive once a year, what is the use in 50-cent fares? Just save it for lunch. The real issue is not the fares. The problem is people are spending the same amount of money to have wildly different experiences from area to area. The problem is the public transport system is so broken that no matter how cheap or free the system is, people are still forced to use cars to get to places. That is not fairness and that is not reform, that is just playing chicken and egg with a rotten egg. The fares coming down 95 per cent will not help us if there is nothing there. Young Victorians deserve better than that. We do not need cheaper fares on a broken system, we just need a system that works, and that is the only way our car dependency can be broken.

Adriel APPATHURAI: Like many in this chamber, I have been travelling long days every single weekday to get to school and to uni since year 6. These long hours have been pretty terrible – studying, sleeping or talking with friends. Every day does really get tiring. What really hits the most is the cost. This cost is unbearable. But what hurts even more is the cost that this places on my family. By having 50 cent fares we free up money for our families to spend on things like big dreams or everyday conveniences that we need. Let us make this dream into reality.

Etienne AGNEW: The opposition has assumed that a large reduction in public transport fares will result in an unprecedented influx in people using such services, which it may, but the opposition has not accounted for how Victoria's current infrastructure will account for this. Buses, trains and trams are already packed in peak hours, and the assumption made requires more public transport. But how will this be managed? These services are already constantly late and even cancelled. The truth is this: Victoria's current infrastructure will collapse under the weight of even more consumers. The opposition may say this problem has a simple solution, but that is not so. Victoria cannot just conjure up more infrastructure. The current sums collected from public transport fares are reinvested in the system, maintaining trams, buses and trains, as well as improving infrastructure. The opposition has not accounted for how a reduction in fares will ultimately lead to less money to improve current systems. More people using a broken system that cannot be fixed just does not sound right, does it?

Rohan HOBBS: This is not a short-term fix. We are not just reducing fares, we are futureproofing Victoria's transport. This bill promotes a sustainable, efficient public network essential for a modern, smart city serving generations. To transform our state into one fit for the 21st century requires the greatest access to public transport, achieved through this bill. To lower emissions and transform into a carbon-neutral society, this bill must be passed. By reducing fares on public transport, our roads will be less congested. This is beneficial to us all. It will mean that future generations and the youth can breathe easier knowing that our legislators care and will act on the climate catastrophe. If we truly care about a modern, smart city serving generations, this Council will pass the Reduction of Public Transport Fares Bill 2025.

Nicholas FRANCIS: The opposition has pointed out how the Queensland government has reduced public transport fares. However, they have failed to identify how Queensland is so much less reliant on public transport than us, meaning there is less commitment and not as many packed trains. This makes Queensland's proposition much more realistic and attainable. Furthermore, the opposition is trying to fix the problem by providing a short-ended solution. They are, as PM Keating once said, putting lipstick on a pig. If the Parliament are to properly address the issue, they need to deal with the housing crisis and rent rather than a 50-cent fare. We need to catch the pig and not paint it with make-up.

Kirsten HARKNESS: I respond to the government's claims that we are blatantly ignoring concession card holders and the benefits of the current public transport system for them. Clarity is accessibility. We acknowledge the necessity of concessions for many groups in our state, yet fairness and transparency equally construct ease of use for many groups. A simple and universal fare at only 50 cents builds understanding and trust in the public transport system that many are currently losing faith in.

Taihan RAHMAN: I wholeheartedly agree with the opposition's proposition to increase accessibility and improve affordability, but there is a key shortfall that brings this bill down. Increasing affordability does not improve accessibility. The opposition has failed to adequately consider the more pressing issues that act as barriers to using public transport. I ask those opposite: what impact will reducing fares have if Victorians cannot even access that transport in the first place? What good will a free fare do for a student whose station is too far to walk to or where public transport is impossible for them to use? Additionally, reducing fares means that we prevent further investment into making sure that that transport infrastructure actually works for those who need it most. Cheaper rides mean nothing when you cannot take the ride in the first place, so I ask: why is the opposition using the issue of price as a scapegoat for improving accessibility instead of actually fixing the system for the thousands of Victorians already using public transport each and every day? As honourable member Phung asserted, reducing fares does not fix a broken system, and that is why this bill is not enough to fix the issues that prevent access at this very moment. I urge the opposition to broaden their perspective and see barriers to transport infrastructure as more than just price.

Nitya RACHAMALLA: The government may claim that habits are hard to change, that people will continue to rely on car-centric transport no matter what, but that kind of thinking is exactly the problem. This bill is not just about saving a few dollars on fares, it is about sparking a cultural shift within Victoria. Lowering public transport fares is a practical step towards a cleaner, smarter and more connected Victoria. It is a signal to every commuter that we value their time, their money and the future of our cities. This bill challenges the status quo and puts everyday Victorians first. It makes public transport the easy choice, the obvious choice. If we want real change, we must make it easier for people to choose better. This bill does exactly that.

Sara AGHIGHI: Let us stop pretending that you can triple demand on a system that is already groaning under peak-hour pressure and not expect cracks. Although this bill is a very thoughtful and considerate one, it hands out cheap tickets to a show that has no extra seats. We are being sold the fantasy that affordability alone solves access, but cheaper fares on an overcrowded train do not get you to work. They just get you closer to and pressed against a stranger, with nowhere to move. It is a bare minimum, and without it this policy is a fire sale on a sinking ship. We need more than slogans. We need space, security and sanity.

Zeinab ABDO: I urge the government to imagine the impact of this bill: less time spent in traffic and not being late due to heavy congestion. This bill tackles congestion head-on by encouraging public transport use. Less traffic means quicker commutes and more precious moments in life. I ask the government: are we here to sustain a network or sustain the lives of Victorians?

Rafael HUTAGALUNG: Stripping the fee down by 95 per cent is not a positive thing for Victorians. It is doing us more harm than good. This is because the fee that we pay goes back into the system to improve it. If we reduce this investment, where does the money to improve the system go to? We already know that the public transport system is flawed to its edge, but if we have to improve it still to meet this new demand of more customers and Victorians using PT, then we would need to take the investment from education, health, housing and other important things to us. So I ask the opposition: is it worth it? Is it worth sacrificing all these other issues just so we can have cheaper Myki fares? In addition to this, though, we do actually get the funds from other areas. If we remove all concessions and set it to a 50-cent fee, this includes elders – do we want our elderly, our grandparents, to have to pay a little bit more over the years and even more so? No, I do not think so. So I do not think we should accept this bill.

James DYER: Regarding the cost of this program, is it unreasonable to want a government to take care of its citizens? The importance of infrastructure will come from this program proving public transport can be trusted and relied on by Victorians. This bill does not aim to reform the entire PTV system, but it must be known that this will impact the masses. Has the government ever been on a train around 5 pm or 6 pm? This will help us move forward in establishing how vital public transport is to the beating heart of Victoria. Change will come, and this is where it will start.

Ariel MEZZACAPPA: Fifty cents for everyone – 50 cents for you, 50 cents for you and, Acting President, even 50 cents for you. Now it is time to pay up. At least this is what the opposition is trying to enforce, even for concession fares which are currently free and for our free trams, which are right outside. Why are we cutting free Victorian services? And what of our tram system, the one where people cram onto the tram? Now what? They will have to pay to be packed in like sardines? I work on Lonsdale Street, just around the corner, and I have to take a couple of trams every day just to get to work. If this bill were to be implemented, I would have to spend extra money on top of my V/Line fare. I would have to spend an extra \$2. You can laugh all you like. I know it is not much, but \$2 adds up, and even that \$2 is \$2 more than free. Do not gut free Victorian services. Help Victorian people. Please amend this bill before it is too late.

Charlotte FLEMING: The government may argue existing concessions suffice; however, this bill is the blueprint for a more equitable Victoria. By removing financial barriers we can be assured everyone can access opportunities, building a society where we can all participate and thrive and creating a more inclusive Victoria.

Katia D'ANGELO: In the opposition's bill they state in clause 5 that anyone who travels using the Myki system will have their fare decreased to 50 cents. However, in their bill they disregard so many regional travellers who do not use Myki. Their bill is only for the Myki system. However, Myki is not used for all V/Line services. Sometimes on V/Line e-tickets and paper tickets are used instead. So how will these everyday Victorian citizens access these 50-cent fares? They will not. Only people who use the Myki system will. This also brings up the point that the government has said that in 2026 we can switch to using debit or credit cards to tap on, but this 50-cent fare only applies to Myki cards. When people tap on using their debit or credit card, they will not receive this 50-cent fare. While this idea is a good idea, we need to make it accessible to all citizens, not just citizens who use Myki cards.

Mahrosh KHAYYAM: The government argues that this bill and its aims are minor. However, what the government fails to realise is the impact it can have on our climate and how it can benefit our future. A 50-cent trip would encourage people to leave their cars at home and opt for public transport. But would you rather spend 50 cents for your trip to work or spend \$50 or more for petrol that contributes to our climate decline?

Renee Estelle BROTHIE: I would like to offer a content warning for a brief mention of sexual violence. If you feel uncomfortable, please exit the chamber now. This bill states that its main purposes are to improve accessibility, meet environmental and sustainability goals, decrease reliance on private transport and enable access to education. But what it fails to address is why some of us refuse to use public transport or are fearful of using it. We have all seen the video of that guy claiming, 'I own Frankston', but there are so many other bad actors in our society, which has turned many away from this service. Whether physically, verbally or sexually violent, these actions have caused people to shift towards a reliance on private transport, a lack of accessibility and a lack of access to education. As a woman I constantly find myself fearing public transport usage, especially at night, due to these bad actors, and I am sure many women here feel the same or have felt the same way. Claiming this service is a safe alternative is incredibly wrong and purposely ignorant of the real world. I suggest the opposition opens their eyes and perhaps reads the news.

Ella ZHANG: Firstly, this is not part of my planned speech, but honourable member Brothie, I feel solidarity with you. My heart goes out to you and all the people out there who have had such experiences on public transport. The government today have argued that technical changes would be disruptive to the current system; however, this change can be smooth. The bill prioritises seamless integration with existing Myki systems, avoiding costly and disruptive overhauls. It is a smart, efficient policy with minimal confusion. Now, come with me and imagine a world where students can travel wherever, whenever they want – from regional to metro and from metro to regional. It is an access where 50 cents can make a difference. It gives our students access to places formerly too expensive. We want to have freedom of movement, but that only comes when it is accessible. When evading tickets becomes the norm and the enforcers of the law are called pigs and are hated, something is wrong with the system and something has to change. It is an objective truth right now that access to public transport for some people is hard. The government seem to also agree with us that our current public transport system is insanely flawed, but it seems like the government are trying to reject any form of change. We have to take small steps before big changes can happen. Why are you stopping us?

Teirnan ALI: There is a saying that goes, 'It is great being rich, but it is expensive being poor.' This bill tries to promise a lot but only goes so far. Why not make the fees based on the means of those who intend to actually use the system in the first place?

Kinda ALRAYYAN: I just want to reflect on this bill and on the 50 cents that is bothering everyone. The only thing I can still get for 50 cents these days is maybe a sour gum at the milk bar, and even that is pushing it. So imagine giving students the chance to travel to school for just 50 cents. That is not just a bargain, that is a brain boost on budget. This is not about spending money recklessly, it is about giving every young person, including many of you here, a fair shot at learning no matter what their lives are like or how much there is in their wallet. Let us invest in minds, not just motorways.

Kyriaki THEODOROPOULOS: I raise the question as to why we would reduce these prices without adequate services being available for Victorians, and I mean all Victorians, not just the many groups. With the lack of stations and the lack of trains and buses and, unforgettably, the constant delays, I would like to say, as an individual from the west, these services are as good as pineapple on pizza – ultimately useless. Why don't we first address the bullet before we put the bandaid on the wound?

The ACTING PRESIDENT: The bill sponsor now gets a couple of minutes for a right of reply.

Jamie STANTON: I address the government on a respectful yet appalled level. There is a blatant ignorance in the government's arguments. There is a blind eye turned towards the logistics of this bill. They claim it is a travesty to equity and claim it is discrimination. Yet we would uplift a significantly higher amount of people under its implementation. I commend their point on the barriers to those who are disabled. However, to make this argument, they ignore the other voices being addressed here – the much larger proportion of students who cannot afford public transportation in the first place. I hate to say we choose the lesser evil, but I am appalled that these voices are ignored here. Now let me address the utmost largest hole in the government's argument – funding. They call us unprofessional – illogical, even – a low that has been shown by the government, yet not us. A key basis of this bill is the cardinal rule that we do not talk about funding the 'YMCA'. Ninety per cent of this argument is damaging. Let me stoop to this low then. How could the government call us illogical when this breach in logic is the basis of their entire argument? They downplay the realism of this bill, yet there exist sanctums of public transport such as Luxembourg. But sure, we are unprofessional and are blind to the effects of higher access to public transport. An extra point I would like to address is that if there are more people using the system, the government are put into a position where they actually have to improve it – like with shorter wait times. I urge the chamber to support the realistic argument here.

The ACTING PRESIDENT: The question is:

That the Reduction of Public Transport Fares Bill 2025 be now read a second and a third time.

House divided on motion:

Ayes	30
Noes	20
Majority in favour	10

Motion agreed to.

Read second time.

Read third time.

The ACTING PRESIDENT: Thank you for your participation. I am about to head out. I just want to make a short comment on everyone here and how awesome it was to see how well you guys can do at public speaking and things like that. When I started in this place some time ago, I was not nearly as good as you guys are. Well done to everyone.

Sitting suspended 1:58 pm until 2:18 pm.

The ACTING PRESIDENT (Richard Willis): Good afternoon. My name is Richard Willis. I am one of the clerks here at Parliament. You might recognise me from earlier today – I was sitting down there. That is my normal job. I will normally sit there as one of the senior clerks here in the Legislative Council, but I have been elevated this afternoon to this position of Chair. I have been in Parliament for – a couple of people asked me just before how long I have been here – quite a while, maybe more than 25 years. I did not think this was going to be my career. I started off working in local government after I did a bachelor of business. I had about 10 years working in local councils and then just saw an ad in the paper one day for a job here at Parliament and went for it and have been here more or less ever since. I did leave for a couple of years and worked in a state government department, but that was just a massive bureaucracy. I much more enjoy working in Parliament and this magnificent chamber, which is a great place to work. But sometimes when we are here at 3 or 4 am listening to the members go on and on and on, it does not seem like the greatest place.

Just quickly, if you are not aware, the Legislative Council comprises 40 MPs as the upper house. The government is on this side. The government at this stage has 15 MPs. The opposition sit along here; they have 14. And the other 11 are what we call crossbench members. You saw Jeff Bourman just before; he is considered a crossbench member. These are the minor parties – Georgie Purcell, Animal Justice et cetera. We have got four Greens who normally sit down there. The government, with 15 members, need a majority of 40. They need 21 votes to get all their legislation passed. So the government is constantly looking at these crossbench members to get support in their chamber. It is a very interesting place to work. With that, I will now call on the sponsor of this bill.

Mental Health Days for Students Bill 2025

Sponsor: Westbourne Grammar School

Refuter: Ivanhoe Girls Grammar School

Introduction and first reading

Evie THEODORE: I move:

That I have leave to introduce a bill titled Mental Health Days for Students Bill 2025

Motion agreed to.

Read first time.

Second reading

Evie THEODORE: I would like to note that this debate contains mentions of mental health and brief mentions of anxiety and depression. If you would like to leave the chamber, please do so now. I move:

That the bill be now read a second time.

This bill has been carefully crafted to support the mental health of senior students across Victoria. Our goal is to foster a school system that not only values academic performance but also actively prioritises student wellbeing. This bill addresses a growing and urgent issue, the mental health of young people. Students in years 10 to 12 are experiencing unprecedented pressures as they navigate the most academically demanding years of their education. Rates of stress, burnout and anxiety continue to rise, yet mental health remains significantly underaddressed within our schools. To tackle this issue, the bill introduces the concept of dedicated mental health days throughout the school year. These days are intended to give students the opportunity to take time off when needed. Clause 4 outlines how this initiative will be implemented in practice. Subclause 4.1 establishes that all eligible students in years 10 to 12, across both public and private schools, are entitled to four wellbeing days per academic year. These days are categorised separately from other absence types such as illness or truancy, recognising that mental health requires a distinct and respected space within our school attendance records. This clear classification helps to ensure that mental health related absences are acknowledged, validated and supported. Subclause 4.1(a) reinforces that all students, regardless of the education sector they belong to, are equally entitled to these days. This consistency across the system supports a broader cultural shift towards recognising mental health as a legitimate and necessary part of school life. It lays the groundwork for schools to adopt a proactive and inclusive approach to managing student wellbeing.

Subclause 4.2 builds on this foundation by safeguarding students from academic penalty when they take wellbeing days. It makes clear that these days will not count against the minimum attendance requirements set by the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority, the VCAA. By formally distinguishing wellbeing days from other absences, schools are provided with a clear framework for implementation that prevents misinterpretation and misuse. Subclause 4.2(b) removes the requirement for a medical certificate, acknowledging that mental health issues are often invisible and not always clinically documented. This change reduces unnecessary barriers for students and empowers them to be honest about their mental health without needing external validation. Subclause 4.2(c) ensures the protection of academic integrity by maintaining existing school-assessed coursework and examination absence policies. Students are still expected to follow the same academic procedures, which balances flexibility and responsibility. Together these subclauses provide a structure that supports students mental wellbeing without compromising academic standards or expectations. These provisions together create a framework that encourages proactive mental health care. Students are given a space to pause, reset and return to their studies with improved focus and capacity to succeed.

Culturally this bill marks a meaningful step forward. It affirms that mental health is just as valid a reason for absence as physical illness. It helps dismantle a stigma surrounding mental health and fosters an environment where students feel safe asking for help. This bill serves as a safeguard, not a shortcut, in a student's educational journey. In passing this bill we will build a school culture rooted in compassion, respect and trust – one where young people are equipped not just to achieve but to thrive.

Sonya RADCHENKO: Before I begin, I would like to issue a content warning. The following speeches may contain topics that are sensitive about mental health, including topics like anxiety and stress as well as mandatory reporting of high-risk students. I would also like to commend the sponsoring team for bringing up this issue of mental health in today's society. It is a very important issue to talk about, and it is very commendable.

I want to begin with a simple question: is four days off a year really enough to make a difference in students' mental health? That is what this bill proposes, and it is unnecessary, because the truth is, mental health struggles do not follow such a timetable. They do not categorise neatly into four times per year, where you can outline exactly when your struggles may align. For many students, stress, anxiety and burnout are things that they wake up with and go to bed with. It is a daily struggle, and this is part of their daily life, not just an occasional bad day. There are roughly 200 school days in a year. This bill gives students four days off. That means 2 per cent of the year is the time they will be getting for their day off. For someone who might be dealing with ongoing depression and ongoing mental health issues this amount of time is not enough to actually make an impact.

However, the flaws of this bill lie not just with the small amount of days. There are barriers that make even accessing these four days incredibly difficult for all students. Clause 6.2 requires students to give at least 12 hours notice before using such a day. However, in reality mental health issues are not going to allow you to just give advanced warning. Often students may wake up in the morning feeling not ready for the day. However, the government deems that an unreasonable excuse. Not only that, but then there is the need for parental permission to access this bill. Not every student will feel comfortable asking their parents for permission for these days off, as many parents may be really strict, not understanding, maybe reacting badly. For whatever reason, this parental mandatory guideline is really uncomfortable for many students and is, honestly, very exclusionary for a large portion of students who actually may want to access this day.

The bill also mentions in clause 5.1(a) that schools may allow students to take extra days apart from the original four if they have an exceptional circumstance. However, this part is incredibly vague, and the exceptional circumstances are not listed; therefore this opens up many potential loopholes and a system which could be abused by the students and the school. For example, highly academic schools may refuse students wanting to take extra days, as they may fear that it will impact the VCE grades of their school. Therefore these exceptional circumstances should really be listed in this clause.

With the main purpose of this bill being on the wellbeing days and adding all these conditions, this bill unintentionally sends the message that students have to cope on their own if they do not access this mental health day. It sends the message that they just have to push through the year unless they take this health day, and that is a message that we cannot send. However, even if we were to pretend that we were living in a fantasy land with an ideal world, with all these barriers and rules – like, let us just say they were applicable here and it would be helpful – would this even be the right course of action, though? Research from the UK's Mental Health Foundation shows that taking days off from school does not actually increase the overall mental health of students. Instead it does little to improve health long-term and actually adds more stress, as once coming back from this day off, they have the increased stress of homework that they have missed, the stress of missing the class, as well as the guilt and pressure that they may feel from the school.

Think about what actually harms student mental health: the enormous pressure to succeed in VCE. I am sure that many people feel this pressure, and that is something that we should actually be addressing here: a culture where, despite progress, mental ill health still carries stigma and is often uncomfortable to talk about, and where there is a lack of proper ongoing access to trained mental health professionals who offer real support, not just a day away from class. Giving students full wellbeing days may offer some kind of pause, but it does not change any of the root causes, because changing the environment is what we actually need to do. This bill offers a temporary pause, and we deserve a real solution.

Tanvi MONDAL: This bill acknowledges a need, a need for support, something Victoria's VCE and pre-VCE students are desperately crying out for. The establishment of wellbeing days recognises the mental health crisis in our schools and takes steps to prioritise our wellbeing. Under this bill, specifically clause 5, students from years 10 to 12 will be entitled to a minimum of four days off per academic year, finally giving burnt out students a rare but seriously needed opportunity to put themselves first, planting the seeds to start important conversations around mental wellbeing. Our bill will not penalise already struggling students during times of poor mental health. This bill will exist only to support students. Staying true to this, any mental health days taken will not be counted to either a school's or the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority's mandatory attendance. Students should not be punished for taking a day off, regardless of whether the student meets attendance requirements set by VCAA or their school. Wellbeing days should allow students to de-stress, not cause anxiety. Additionally, taking time off for mental health should be recorded as such. Some may call them sick days or unexcused absences, but it is time to name them for exactly what they are: a break from the constant pressures and expectations of school, a mental health day. And this bill will ensure they are recorded as such. By passing this bill we would answer a need, a need for support. This bill is not revolutionary; this is the bare minimum.

Alicia STOJANOVSKI: No-one in this chamber is denying that mental health is real and deserving of our attention, but good intentions do not make for good policy. This bill, despite its heart, opens a dangerous door to systematic misuse, unchecked absenteeism and a culture of avoidance. While we acknowledge the government's positive intent behind the bill, we as the opposition can simply not support a system that is easily exploited by students to skip school, excursions or even assessments without any real accountability or oversight. Yes, the bill does include a follow-up system, but these so-called check-ins are not even with a qualified mental health professional, and they only occur when the student has exhausted all available mental health days. There are so many students who will see these mental health days as not a lifeline but a loophole.

Additionally, the bill requires no medical certificate, no real accountability or oversight – just a 12-hour email, a parent's nod, and suddenly you are off the hook, no questions asked. Mental health matters, but so does structure, so does consistency and so does facing discomfort head on instead of fleeing it. And what of the students who are genuinely struggling? They deserve real support, not a bandaid day off with no therapeutic follow-up. A student can take four days off, tick every box and still never have a real conversation with a counsellor. We would also like to draw your attention to clause 5.4, which states these records should not be disclosed to any authority apart from the VCAA. This, although admirable in its attempts to not disclose student privacy, is not pragmatic. How can we track trends, offer support or protect against misuse if the data is hidden? Mental health is so crucial, and this bill touches on such an important topic, but we need better solutions – real investment in on-campus mental health services, curriculum reform and preventative changes – not a surface-level solution which leaves far too much room for exploitation. We owe our students better.

Kyriaki THEODOROPOULOS: For too long the education system has not lived up to our expectations. We – us all, young students and young adults – are asking for change. Mental health is not a luxury. It is not something we need to beg for. It is just a necessity. The bill recognises the reality we face as young people. I am sure we can all acknowledge the stress, the burden, the burnout. For so many people, it is much more than that. This is more than just an inconvenience. Clause 6.1 requires all eligible students seeking a mental health day must (a) be approved by a parent or guardian, and (b) it must be communicated to the school through communications. Part (a) allows for communications between students and their families regarding mental health, to break down the stigma and encourage open dialogues. Part (b) ensures schools are properly informed of student absences, enabling staff to provide pastoral support if necessary. A 2023 study by Headspace showed only 30 per cent of students who experienced mental health issues sought help from school staff. Together this clause ensures wellbeing days are not just a way out of responsibility, but a genuine tool for support.

Clause 6.2 refines this process by saying that, where possible, students should provide a minimum 12 hours notice prior to taking a wellbeing day – but no-one schedules this like a dentist appointment. We understand it is unpredictable, so it allows students to recognise early signs of distress rather than waiting until they are at breaking point. No students will be denied support, because life just does not fit a rigid schedule. The bill ensures wellbeing days are professional and accessible. It fosters an open environment where students feel truly supported, not just through their academics but through their greater health. We should not be worried about students faking a mental health day. We should be worried about students pretending they do not need one. Let us pass this bill, not because we want to give students a way out, but because we care about our students.

Nitya RACHAMALLA: This bill claims to support student wellbeing, yet it draws an arbitrary line at year 10, completely excluding students in lower year levels. The government may argue that senior students face stricter attendance rules under the VCAA, but that does not mean junior students do not have to show up. Every school monitors absences, every student is expected to provide a valid excuse and every year level is held to basic attendance standards. So why are we pretending that mental health only begins to matter once you turn 16? Ignoring the wellbeing of younger students does not simplify the system, it just leaves the most vulnerable behind. Years 7 to 9 are some of the most formative, impressionable years in a student's life. This is when they transition into high school, face new pressures, start to form their identities and deal with growing social and academic expectations. Mental health challenges do not magically begin in year 10.

By excluding younger students this bill risks sending the message that their struggles do not count, or worse, that they are just not serious enough to be recognised. So the question must be asked: why does the government believe that mental health matters less before VCE? This only deepens stigma. It creates division, and it tells students in junior years that unless they are in VCE their wellbeing is secondary. If we are serious about mental health, it cannot be something we apply selectively. Support needs to be universal, not limited to those who tick a particular box. The government has failed to see the full picture. Wellbeing should not begin at year 10, and any bill that claims to care for students should care for all of them, because the government cannot claim to support wellbeing while turning its back on half the student body. It cannot say mental health matters and then decide whose matters more. This bill is not inclusive, it is incomplete, and if we are serious about mental health, then half-measures like these are simply not enough.

Nicholas FRANCIS: May I remind the opposition: mental health is not a luxury. It is not optional. It is not something we should only worry about when it reaches its crisis point. It is the cornerstone of a functional, thriving society, and this bill recognises that. Clause 7 of this bill is one of the most important sections. It ensures students that are taking mental health days do not slip through the cracks. It creates structure, it creates responsibility, but most of all it creates care. Too often in our education system, students are asked to put up with stress and emotional strain silently, quietly and alone. The result? Burnout, anxiety, depression and isolation. Clause 7 changes that. It requires pastoral staff to check in with students after a set number of wellbeing days are taken, not to punish, not to pry, not to offer support but to ask, 'How are you really doing?', to remind these students someone notices and someone cares. It does this by protecting the student's privacy. Under clause 7.3 staff are informed about the numbers but not the names. Student identities remain anonymous; dignity remains intact. This clause also empowers students to run cohort assemblies to tackle common issues, issues that may be impacting whole year levels and not just individuals. This is not surveillance, it is about support. It is not about data, it is about duty of care. Clause 7 does not just talk about mental health, it takes action. It formalises compassion. It ensures mental health wellbeing is more than just a buzzword. It becomes embedded in how our schools operate. This clause and this bill are a step forward for every stressed out, burnt out, barely-holding-it-together student who ever needed a moment to breathe and someone to notice.

Adriel APPATHURAI: Mental health is something that I am deeply passionate about. It is something that I want to see deep reform in, but this bill will not make it better. One of the core issues with this bill is the assumption that students can anticipate when they will struggle with their mental health. Clause 6 requires students to give at least 12 hours notice before taking a wellbeing day, but that simply does not reflect how mental health works. Twelve hours ago I did not even know what I wanted for breakfast. Stress, anxiety, burnout – these do not always show up on schedule. A Headspace survey showed that one in three young people face high or very high levels of distress. When this happens, it can appear overnight, unexpectedly, and often escalate quickly. A student may feel fine one evening and then completely overwhelmed the next. In those situations, a 12-hour requirement becomes a barrier, not a support. The bill tries to address this by allowing for exceptional circumstances, but that basis is vague and undefined. What qualifies as ‘exceptional’? Who makes that decision? Without these circumstances being defined, students are left in an uncertain position. This is when young people are at their lowest and when they are at their most uncertain. Confusion will not make it better. When we look at how schools currently handle absences for physical illness, the inconsistency becomes very obvious. Students can call in sick on the day with no penalty or advance warning, so why are we holding mental health to such a high standard? If we are serious about treating mental and physical health equally, this process needs to be consistent. The requirement for notice risks discouraging students from taking the time they need simply because they did not notify the school early enough. Ultimately, this clause fails to recognise the realities of student wellbeing.

Sara AGHIGHI: We rise in support of clause 8, and specifically clause 8.1, which mandates that all schools hold mental health workshops delivered by external providers. This is not an add-on or an afterthought; it is a necessary structural response to a crisis that is already here. Two professionally delivered external workshops per year is not excessive, it is the bare minimum. Our teachers and students are under increasing psychological pressure, and schools are often the first place where signs of distress appear, but they are not equipped to handle it alone. Clause 8 recognises this and brings in trained professionals, people with expertise, to deliver meaningful, evidence-based support, and most importantly, it is flexible. Schools can choose to hold more than two workshops if needed, and they can even time them with national awareness campaigns like RU OK? Day or Mental Health Week. It is a smart policy which anchors mental health in school calendars without being rigid. Workshops held during school hours convey a powerful message that mental health is not something to be squeezed into lunchtimes or ignored entirely. It is part of education, it is part of wellbeing and, most importantly, it is part of preparing students and staff to thrive, not just survive. Clause 8.1 is about giving schools the support they cannot provide alone. It is realistic, necessary and overdue. I urge all in this house to vote for this bill, because without change, nothing changes.

Shayna LEE: For far too long students have been inadequately supported through their mental health struggles, even with the implementation of school initiatives. In response to this, this bill proposes the inclusion of mental wellbeing workshops across the school year. While we understand the good intention of this bill, it would be a grave oversight not to criticise the vague framework and disruptive nature of these programs. First, what exactly are these mental health workshops going to be about? Yes, they are described as sessions that teach students to care for their mental health, but how exactly do they run? The bill seems to offer little explanation as to how these programs will be conducted outside of internal and external providers, as mentioned in clause 8. We do not know which external providers will be conducting them and we do not know how they will operate, and thus we have no grasp of their efficacy within schools. Likewise, the description of internally held workshops in clause 8.2 lacks a clear structure as to how they will be delivered. How can we expect these workshops to have a lasting impact on students without knowing how they are going to achieve this? Further, though these programs are designed to alleviate the stress of students, they may just have the opposite effect. These mandatory workshops will be held during school hours, which means eating into precious time that students use to learn and study. In addition, schools are required to host at least four wellbeing programs throughout the year during the most critical years of secondary school. Isn't one of the main sources of VCE student stress keeping up at school? Are these workshops actually effective if they stop students from doing this? So I ask: if implementing these programs means disrupting the school day for something that is not well defined nor fully understood, is it really worth it?

Abi BHADURI: A key strength of this bill lies in how mental health workshops may be timed to coincide with significant awareness events. This increases student engagement and reinforces the importance of mental wellbeing. Specifically, clause 8.2 states that two internally provided mental health workshops shall be held each year, while also allowing schools to increase this number under their discretion. By scheduling workshops alongside important times like mental health weeks, schools can connect students to a wider movement supporting mental health. This timing helps normalise mental health conversations and encourages students to engage more deeply, knowing they are part of a collective effort to support one another. Importantly these workshops must take place during school. This makes them accessible to all students and helps reduce the stigma by showing that mental health is a priority during the school day. By requiring a mandatory minimum of two internal workshops per year, this bill sets a clear standard all schools must meet. It also allows flexibility for schools needing extra support, ensuring no student is left behind. Having professionally delivered mental health workshops is essential, especially in later school years when pressures increase. I have seen friends break down in bathrooms too afraid to ask for help. I have seen classmates push through exhaustion, hiding their anxiety behind test scores. This is not rare; this is our reality. The rise in mental health issues is concerning. By giving students space to rest and embedding mental health education in school life, we help them manage this pressure better. These workshops do more than help students cope today. They teach lifelong skills like resilience and emotional strength, preparing them for challenges beyond school. This bill is necessary. Students are tired, burnt out and overworked. Many put school above their wellbeing. This bill is how we show up for them, breaking cycles of stress and silence. Our students are drowning in this silence. This bill is more than a policy; it is a lifeline. So I ask this chamber: if not now, when? If not us, who? Let us show up, do better and pass this bill together.

Charlotte FLEMING: I would like to establish a content warning for the brief mention of crime, missing persons and mental health. This bill outlines how records of mental health days are exclusive between schools and the VCAA. While the opposition understands and respects the privacy this bill aims to uphold, the data from these records can be used for good. The data and records of mental health days can assist Victoria Police and mental health practitioners in understanding victims and offenders or giving insight into events or the headspace of a young person prior to committing a crime or going missing. Privacy can still be upheld. Nobody wants to strip a person in a vulnerable position of whatever coverage they still have left. This sensitive information of a student's personal details and mental health days should not be publicly available, and that is something we can all agree on. But neither the VCAA nor your education staff are trained, licensed professionals that have the authority or knowledge that can keep our students safe and protect them.

Etienne AGNEW: I think the opposition is somewhat confused. This bill does not give students another reason to miss school, as students already miss school due to mental health issues. The only difference is that those days are currently being categorised as regular sick days. Instead this bill acknowledges that mental health issues are a valid reason to miss school. The opposition has stated that students will see these days as a loophole and abuse them, but I beg to differ. Students are given a large number of days for holidays, sickness or even parent choice in some cases, so why would they use these days that are limited and overseen by a parent or guardian instead? This bill tackles a problem that is currently being ignored way too often. Why should mental health issues not be a valid reason to miss school? What right does this house have to restrict the ability of students just to take a day off – what right, I ask? Mental health is an issue, and we know that. The opposition know that, yet they are against this bill. This house must pass this bill, not for us but for all the students like us.

Lee TAYLOR: I have a lot of respect for the government for bringing light onto this topic, as it aims to address an important issue faced by many young people. However, in its current state, we as the opposition cannot support it in its entirety. Let us take a closer look at clause 7, which outlines how schools should respond when a student takes a wellbeing day. At first glance it seems like a step in the right direction:

Pastoral care staff shall conduct check-in meetings with students ...

That sounds promising, but then we read the fine print: check-ins are only required after the student has taken four wellbeing days in a year or two in a single term. I ask the government: why are we waiting? Why do we only show concern when a student hits a quota of days off? The truth is we do not know what is going on in a student's life. Even if they have only taken one day off, support should never be conditional. Whether it is for one day, two or four, a student's wellbeing should never be treated like a statistic. Even more concerning is the vagueness of the check-ins themselves. What actually counts as a check-in? Is it a casual 'how are you' in the hallway, an impersonal email or a formal meeting requiring the student to justify their absence? Without clearer guidelines these check-ins could be implemented in ways that are inconsistent, ineffective and possibly harmful if conducted intrusively. Then we get to clause 7.3(b):

Student identities shall be kept anonymous;

Year level and reasoning behind the wellbeing day shall be the only information given.

The thing is, confidentiality is very important and is a necessary inclusion as part of this bill. But so is the law. Mandatory reporting exists for a reason. Pastoral care staff would be considered mandatory reporters. If a student discloses something in a check-in that suggests they are at risk, that information must be reported. Not doing so would constitute neglect. We cannot ignore that.

Patrick PHUNG: 'Are you okay?' is a question we ask ourselves. We ask our friends; we ask our peers. We ask to show that we care. We ask in solidarity. But most importantly, we ask because we are concerned. At the start of each term, perhaps our teachers tell us to pace ourselves, to look after ourselves but also to look after each other. But what happens if the answer is no? What happens next? To ask someone if they are okay is one thing, but it is merely symbolic and tokenistic at best if there is nothing to move that conversation forward. What use is it to ask if a young person is okay if they cannot do anything to transition to that okay state? The opposition claim that four days are not enough but also claim in the same breath that students may abuse the system due to the vagueness of the exceptional circumstance. We cannot strictly define what circumstances are, can we? Bills are not meant to list every each and every condition. They are meant to be a flexible and adaptable framework. I also question why the opposition thinks that students are wanting to take days off as a loophole. I encourage the opposition to consider: if students are wanting to use these loopholes, wouldn't that beg a deeper inquiry of the root cause? Why are students disengaging? God forbid – mental health reasons? We can and we must do more to support young people so they do not fall through the cracks, so they can finish off their education, but most importantly, so they can be and become the very best of themselves.

Alyssa NICHOLAS: As someone who works in the social sector I have a deep understanding of the importance of raising mental health awareness. In this role I completed mental health first aid training. My simple question to the government is: why are the professionals and the personnel who are delivering these workshops and these check-ins with students not receiving the same life-saving and vital training?

Ariel MEZZACAPPA: Mental health is health. It is time we treated it that way. High school students are not machines. They are teenagers navigating exams, jobs, family stress, social pressure and the weight of a world in crisis. They are exhausted, they are overwhelmed and they are too often invisible in their suffering. We need to act for our students in Victoria. With the COVID-19 pandemic and rumours of World War III, who can help feeling anxious? The opposition stated that this system would be easily exploited by students. Yet look at the young people around you today. They are knowledgeable, they are kind and they are passionate. They are honest and driven. Any student can be this. It is time we recognised that young people are capable. We should recognise that students can be mature. We should have trust in our students and that they know what is best for them and can make decisions which impact their lives. Let us do what is right for our Victorian students.

Octavia MacDONALD: I rise today not in opposition to mental health days for students but against the lack of safeguarding. As a clinically trained and practising nurse I deeply value the mental health and wellbeing of individuals, but I also carry the legal and ethical responsibilities of mandatory training, just like teachers, to protect the wellbeing of individuals and others. A mental health day without any sort of clinical oversight, assessment or monitoring of overall health and wellbeing can mask serious issues. It is a matter of safety, intervention and duty of care. I must ask: who is following up? Who is ensuring that this is not a silent cry for help? This is not a punishment, but it is an essential safety mechanism. We need to check in and not check out.

Gautham SRIRAM: The opposition raised a point about if four days a year is enough. My answer is: it is plenty more than what there is right now. Some may agree that in higher levels of schooling taking days off may mean the student misses out on content, but I must say there is nothing worse than having a mentally burnt-out student consuming more content that goes in one ear and out the other. The opposition also argued that a 12-hour notice period is ridiculous. However, subclause 6.2(b) says:

Exceptional circumstances may impact the notice period.

I urge the opposition to read the bill. As a youth ambassador for the Mental Health Foundation, I believe this is a step in the right direction. I urge the house to consider this bill as a need for those young people in Victoria.

Kirsten HARKNESS: The government displayed some concern that we had a misunderstanding around this bill. I would just like to raise a few questions from the opposition to gain some clarity. We are concerned about the 12-hour notice period. I do just ask: if this 12-hour notice period has been included in this proposed legislation as a possibility, you know, on exceptional circumstances, why include it in the first place? What was the intention behind this 12-hour notice period? I also do ask the government, as they have previously been asked today: why are these days only beginning for year 10 students? We have failed to understand why this is only going to begin for those aged between 15 and 16. We cannot fathom why this cannot be implemented sooner, and we demand a response from the government.

Katia D'ANGELO: I would like to start off my speech by responding to one of the questions the member of the opposition had. The reason we have the 12-hour notice, just like any other profession, and in school, is they always have the mandatory hours to say if you are not coming to work or not coming to school. That is why we have the 12 hours there. But like in every other case with exceptions, obviously this cannot always be stuck to, and we acknowledge that and we understand that. That is why we say if you wake up that morning and you decide your mental health is not there to be able to go to school, we understand and we will still allow people to take mental health days. But just like any other job sectors, we prefer 12 hours notice, because these teachers can send the feedback, send the work that these students miss in time – so maybe later in the day instead, if their mental health is feeling better, they can catch up – instead of waiting until the end of the day or later that week to catch up on that work, because teachers would then have the chance to send them the work. I would also like to answer one of the claims that the opposition made, that this bill only allows four days out of 200 school days. These four days are just a start. In clause 5.1 the bill states that at the discretion of the school, they can allow more than four days. I also want to address their concern about needing parental consent. However, parental consent is needed for any sick days, and this is to ensure no abuse is taken of this system.

Shaniah TOLEAFOA: Although this bill is great, this bill puts more responsibility onto already stressed pastoral care staff and teachers. Check-in meetings, framework development and ensuring confidentiality for anonymous wellbeing absences – it sounds like they are asking teachers to become part-time therapists and full-time attendance detectives. Let us let teachers teach and mental health professionals handle the heavy lifting. That is what they get paid to do, not teachers.

Taihan RAHMAN: If the opposition believe that four days is not enough, do they instead suggest that the school provides zero days of respite? This bill does not suggest that mental health days are the only way to address this issue. Instead, it is a clear and conscious step towards addressing a broader issue. This bill does not ask for the world. It asks for help. It asks for compassion. It asks for us as a house to consider the daily struggle of thousands of Victorian students. We agree that broader change is needed for all students wellbeing, and this bill is simply a step in the right direction. I urge the house to consider the potential for even this simple step to have a widespread positive impact on the lives of all Victorian students, because if we do not do anything now, then nothing will ever change.

Mikael BONNE: I draw the government's attention to clause 7.3(b)(i). Despite the anonymity afforded by the bill, why must a reason be given? Mental health is something individual to every one of us and is personal. Students should have the right to take a wellbeing day without any justification or reason. I ask the chamber to therefore wholly refute this bill, not out of spite but out of reason and consideration for those it affects.

Vivianne PHUNG: I want you to cast your mind back to high school, an exciting and anxious transition period of your life. But it would have been full of stress and anxiety that I am sure everyone can attest to – test after test, exam after exam and managing the expectations of not knowing your future in five years time, managing your expectations of going to uni or not or choosing a vocation or not. It is an experience that we all had to go through. I was expected to push through the tough days. I was told to grit my teeth and to not give up because it was all for my future. But what if past me could not see the future, because surviving every day was a struggle? As a now working adult, I am given at least 12 days of personal leave, no questions asked, and I am sure many of the individuals, the professionals in this room, can attest to this. We are given a set number of days off to account for sick days, children who do not want to go to school, mental health days, and we give adults this privilege. It is good for productivity. We say it is for work–life balance. But we do not give this to our young people, who face immense stress and the challenge of navigating life. There is more than just school. People expect students to know where their future is but do not give them the time to consider and to dream a future. It is not just about a mental health day. It is a day for students to know that they are okay where they are, and it is a day to know that they have a future worth living for.

Zeinab ABDO: The government fails to realise how these mental health days or a good intention may and will be abused by students. In clause 4 it is stated that a medical certificate shall not be required, yet it fails to discuss whether they will provide medical certificates when needed, to prove to the school that students are not lying to get out of tasks other than school-assessed coursework and exams. I myself am undertaking VCE and require a medical certificate to supply to my teacher for something as simple as missing a class coursework checkpoint. If not provided, I would be placed ‘at-risk’ and given a ‘non-satisfactory’ on my coursework, so if we truly want to aid students, let us not put more pressure on them from their schools.

The ACTING PRESIDENT (Richard Willis): Thank you all for your wonderful contributions. I will now call on the sponsor of the bill for a right of reply.

Evie THEODORE: I would like the opposition to please read the bill again. They have misquoted the bill, claiming clause 5.1 relies on extraordinary circumstances. However, this is simply untrue. The clause truly states that the minimum days are made available to students across all schools and that these schools are the ones able to increase at their own discretion. This is implemented because schools who find they are subject to more mental health complaints and demand may need to give their students more options. Additionally, the opposition has also repeatedly talked on the notice time. The bill states that, where possible, students should give notice, and we have acknowledged how different circumstances can impact this and have not set any penalty for students who fail to do so. The opposition also believes that the check-ins provided to school students should be applied to every mental health day. However, many young people may be deterred from taking these days at the thought of such a daunting conversation. Mental health is not a race to be won. It is a journey we are all on. Our bill puts the mental health of students back at the heart of education, cultivating an environment within our schools built on not only academic excellence but true wellness.

The ACTING PRESIDENT: The question is:

That the Mental Health Days for Students Bill 2025 be now read a second and a third time.

Motion agreed to.

Read second time.

Read third time.

Sitting suspended 3:10 pm until 3:36 pm.

Closing Ceremony

Assembly members entered chamber.

Welcome

Joel HALLINAN: Good afternoon. I have met a few of you, I have not met all. My name is Joel Hallinan. I am the Assistant Clerk Procedure and Sergeant-at-Arms. I have been very fortunate to be a part of this week, in and out doing a few of the sessions. It has been really fantastic, and we will have a few people speaking about how fantastic it has been as part of this closing ceremony. I will not slow things down by talking too much myself, so I will start off by calling on Jaclyn Symes, the Treasurer of Victoria, to make her remarks.

Jaclyn SYMES: Thank you so much, Joel, and good afternoon, YMCA and Y Victoria participants of Youth Parliament. Thank you so much for allowing me to be a part of your closing ceremony. Of course I will begin my address by acknowledging the traditional owners and paying my deep personal respects to elders past, present and emerging, and I extend that respect to any Aboriginal Victorians who might be joining us today. I understand you have had a fantastic week. I can reflect on this because I am an alumnus of Youth Parliament. I was feeling really uncomfortable about saying how long ago that was, but a few people have asked – so I was 1995. None of you were born, were you?

Brad Battin interjected.

Jaclyn SYMES: Brad was born. I would also like to, on that note, acknowledge my parliamentary colleague Brad Battin, member for Berwick and Leader of the Opposition. I think we have got Alison Marchant, who is one of the MPs that have given their time to be an Acting Speaker or Acting President. I thank all of the MPs that have given up their time. That is a testament to how important we think this program is and how important it is for elected officials to engage with young people as much as possible to make sure that your voices are heard by the leaders in this state, so I do thank all of the MPs that have been part of that. I will share a little bit of insight into the many hats that I wear. First of all, I am a member for Northern Victoria. That is the largest electorate in the state of Victoria. It extends from Kilmore across to Bendigo up to Mildura – I know there are some Mildura people in the house; very good to see you – across to Corryong and down to about Healesville. Is anybody else in my electorate apart from the Mildura team? Where are you from?

A member: Kyabram.

Jaclyn SYMES: Ky is here as well, excellent. It is good to have representatives from regional Victoria. I do wear many, many hats, so covering that electorate is sometimes quite difficult. I have been a member of Parliament now for 11 years, I think – more than 10, around about 11. The first four years my sole responsibility was as a local member, and I spent a lot of time visiting my electorate and meeting with constituents, businesses and community groups, attending as many events as I possibly could. I believe that I represent one of the best parts of Victoria and of course as a leader I represent the whole state, but having a regional presence in the Parliament is really important. Similar to young peoples' voices, country voices in the Parliament of Victoria are particularly valuable.

I am also the Leader of the Government in the Legislative Council, so thank you for visiting my chamber today. This is where the real work happens. We work harder in the red place than the green place. As Leader of the Government I spend a lot of time in this seat right here, because we are the house of review. I know you have learned a lot about this in your time here, but I will just give you some stats to back up the statement of how hard we work in here. We work more hours because we do the detailed scrutiny of bills. When I say I spend a lot of time here, this is where I answer a lot of questions in relation to legislation. Because the upper house has six ministers, we represent all of the other ministers in dealing with their legislation. I will stand here and be questioned by predominantly members of the opposition and crossbench. Occasionally government will have some questions, but it is rarer. I have been known to sit in this chair for 30 hours straight, with a couple of breaks, when we have got controversial legislation, because we take the time to answer all of the questions that people put. A lot of members are putting questions on behalf of their community, so I never complain about the hours that I do. I point it out, particularly to those in the Assembly, but it is important work that we do in this chamber. I understand that you guys have done about 20 bills this week. That is substantial. Last year the Parliament of Victoria did 60, and that is over 19, 20 weeks. So the work you have done this week in particular is huge. In this place, in this year alone, the number of sitting weeks we have had would be –Richard?

Richard Willis interjected.

Jaclyn SYMES: So far, in six months, about seven or eight sitting weeks. There have been 192 substantive questions during question time. Who do you think answered the most of them? I will give you a hint. Yes, I answered 60 questions in the first six months of Parliament, predominantly in my portfolio as Treasurer. They are not always great questions. Brad does not write the ones in this chamber. He writes the ones in that chamber. But again, it is an important scrutiny of government to make sure that ministers are accountable and answering questions that are put to us by the opposition, often representing their communities. The next highest number of questions by portfolio went to minister Harriet Shing, who sits next to me, and she had 21 questions asked of her about the Suburban Rail Loop and 18 questions on housing in the six months as well.

I do want to take the opportunity to congratulate all the teams, particularly those that have travelled far to be here. As I said, I am an alumnus. I particularly enjoyed my time as a Youth Parliament participant at the age of 16 – I think I had my 17th birthday when I was here. The memories are starting to flood back, looking at you guys here. I was not always destined to be a politician. The way I describe being an MP is that it is not really a job or a career, it is an opportunity that you take up. Having had a little bit of experience in Youth Parliament put me in a really good position to consider working in government as something that I was interested in doing, because public policy and social justice issues were what drove me. This experience will set you up for life in relation to opportunities. Whether you become an elected member of Parliament or not is, as I said, an opportunity that hopefully some of you will get to explore, but the opportunity to work for people in government or in opposition is a most rewarding task. It is hard work, but I think a lot of you are here probably because you share the values that I do and that Brad does in relation to wanting to learn about how to make things better for people, particularly in Victoria. This is a great opportunity for you to do that.

As I said, I do wear many hats. I am currently the Treasurer, the Minister for Industrial Relations and the Minister for Regional Development. I have held previous portfolios of agriculture and resources, and I was the Attorney-General for four years. I loved all of those jobs, but as the Treasurer right now, that is certainly the role that consumes most of my time and the busiest role that I have ever had in my service to the public. The way I got into Parliament in particular is that I finished high school at Benalla College, which is reasonably close to Ky – you are probably the closest neighbours that I have got in relation to where I grew up and where I now represent. I went on to study law. I worked in the disability sector and wanted to be an advocate in the disability sector, but I ended up finding another pathway to be an advocate for workers, worked in the trade union movement and had some really good friends and mentors that were able to push me into situations of looking for jobs that were doing a bit more, time and time again. My first entry into government or politics was when I became the adviser to the then Attorney-General about 20 years ago now. Politics and government and public policy – once you are in it you generally love it, and you stick with that type of career opportunity for a long time, which is effectively what I have done.

As Treasurer, I am very pleased that the Victorian government is able to provide funding to the Youth Parliament. I am a politician – I do have to put some of these things out there. We have funded the Youth Parliament program, and I understand the Youth Press Gallery. Who is in the press gallery? This is a great initiative. This did not exist 30 years ago when I was in Youth Parliament. Every day that we walk into this place we walk past the press gallery, who we call the ‘state rounds’. They are doing a job; I respect their work, and it is a really important role that they play because they are able to get the messages out in relation to what we are doing, the legislation that we are passing and the like. It is a really valued role for democracy, so I think it is a great initiative for Youth Parliament to have introduced this. As I said, it is a great thing for young people to get informed, to get educated, to participate, and this is the program that allows those of you with passion – and I can see it all; this is a group of passionate people – to have a platform to do that.

I want to take the opportunity to thank the YMCA and Y Victoria for putting on this program. I know it is a lot of volunteer time, so thank you very much. I think we have got the taskforce over here – a lot of passionate people interested in youth issues giving up their time – so thank you very, very much. I would also like to thank all of the schools, councils, youth program staff and the parliamentary staff. This is the parliamentary winter break; they do not have to put up with pesky MPs, and they still give up their time to come and facilitate the program because they really enjoy it. So thank you to the parliamentary team – again, to the MPs who have visited you throughout the week. And a special thank you to Lily. It is amazing, Lily, that you have taken on the role of Youth Governor of Victoria and thank you for all of the work you do – a round of applause for Lily.

I will let Brad make a few remarks as well. We both understand that we will get your legislation delivered to us shortly. I am really interested in seeing the ideas and potentially solutions of how you think that we should go about doing our job better, particularly for the lives of young people. Thank you so much for letting me be involved in your closing ceremony. I hope you have had a wonderful week.

Brad BATTIN: It is great to be here with you today. I will quickly go through it – Jaclyn just gave her description of coming into Parliament and her career before that. It is very different from me. We come from a totally different pathway, and it is interesting to hear from someone who has been in here at the Youth Parliament. I walked into Parliament for the very first time after I was elected so I never actually walked into this place prior to being elected – so a little bit of a different pathway. I went to Berwick High. Anyone who is out in Casey, I was a Berwick High boy – but they did not really like me that much so they asked me to leave just before the end of year 10. So I was actually out of school in year 10 and I started working at McDonald's. I thought I was really cool, to be honest – flipping burgers, making enough money to go out on the weekend and my mates could not afford it. I thought I was miles ahead of them in life and I was going to go so far. Then they finished school, and they went on and did other things and most of them started to advance a bit further than me and a bit quicker.

But I wanted to get into the police force. My dream was never this place; mine was the police force. It was all I ever wanted to do. I should not admit it, but when I was around about 15 I had posters on my wall of coppers, because that was my dream of where I wanted to go – and I made sure I never forgot it. My uncle was a copper, my aunty was a copper, my dad went through the academy and did his knee, so he missed out on being a copper at the time. But I was not intelligent at the time because I was 18 and nine months. I had gone through the whole process to get into Victoria Police and the night before my final interview – here is one for the press, here is your headline – I came out and I lost my licence.

When you walk in and you go to the inspectors, 'How are you going?' 'Good, good.' 'What would you like to discuss to start with?' I said, 'I'd better tell you I lost my licence last night for speeding,' and that was the end of my interview. So I walked out from that interview. Twelve months later I went back, did my interview again. I got knocked back because 12 months ago I had lost my licence. And then they said, 'You only get three times to apply.' So I went out then and went into a different workforce. I went into sales. I eventually worked in the prison system. I started working with offenders and more about a rehabilitation role. At the time, I was a prison officer, but that was the pathway through. I eventually got into the police force when I was 25. So by then, reasonably uneducated, working in the Victoria Police, I had landed my dream job and I went out and started working with young people.

When you are in the system, working as a copper, and every day you are arresting a new young person and you start to know these kids by their dates of birth, that is a problem. So I started a program called Operation Newstart. My whole thing was: how do I engage the next generation so you do not lose them into the system? We would get them before, identifying youth at risk. That program totally changed the course of where I wanted to go and what I wanted to do, because I genuinely wanted to see change and did not want to see these kids go into the justice system and end up in the prison system. It is a sad cycle once they get there. This program was successful for about 10 years. Royal Children's Hospital analysed it and came back, and the return from the investment was well and truly above what we would put in. So for every dollar in, we were getting about \$3.50 return, and the program was exemplary. It just kept working very, very well. In that time, I went to university. I decided I had better go and get some education. So I did my diploma in public safety, a graduate diploma in adolescent health and welfare, focusing again on the criminology side of it. Then I ended up going to do my masters. The only thing I am going to say was good about lockdown was during lockdown I freed up a bit of time and could do my masters. I did my masters of business administration during the lockdowns of COVID, because I did not have to travel as much. I could do all my meetings online and then put it through to the end of the day so I could get everything done and do my masters. I am glad I did.

When I got elected here, I came in in government. I was a backbencher in government in 2010, and as a backbencher I came in and sat in the Parliament. You have had three days more experience than I had had. I sat at the back of the Parliament and did exactly what I was told: 'Just go to the back, sit, watch, learn.' Eventually you will have to do your maiden speech, and then you start the process of learning what is going on. Every day I got up, I spoke with notes, I read everything. Everything was perfect; it was written down for me. And then I had a budget speech. I had my first big budget speech, which would have to be probably more challenging than my first one, but for my first one I was sitting in the Parliament. I had never done a budget speech, and the person who was supposed to be speaking was Terry Mulder, the minister, and he did not show up. There were 4 seconds, and the minister at the table turned around and said to me, 'You're up.' I had to get up and speak for 15 minutes on a budget – can I say I had not even really looked at the budget – and talk about the things that impacted my electorate. I still say to this day it is probably one of my best speeches. It was also where it guided me on making sure that you can be ready in Parliament all the time, because you do have to be.

What you have done here, though, is to come in here and spread out to make sure people understand the importance of this place. I did not. Before I got here, civics was not something we really spoke about as much in school. One of the big passions I know I have and, I am going to say, nearly every member of Parliament has – whilst we are speaking to you here today – is going out to schools and speaking about the important role that Parliament does play but also the important role you play in Parliament, that you have got that approach. We are probably one of the best democracies in the world. I think that we are so open to working with our community. I love the fact that we can walk down the street and people can approach us and talk about any issue and we can raise that in here for them. That is the importance of making sure the next generation understands how important this place is.

I do it in primary schools a lot. We actually do a mock Parliament in there. We set it up. We have got everything all ready to roll, so the kids get prepared for it and they get to debate – banning homework in Victoria. Obviously everyone wants it to go through, but we also go through the party politics. We explain to them that whilst I think this, sometimes we have to vote en bloc with our party. That is the reality of the system. That is how it works. So we explain to them how it all works, and we go through and eventually we do ban homework in Victoria. They get all excited. I get phone calls from parents. The teachers usually say to me, 'This is fantastic. We don't have to worry about this anymore.' But it is such an important role.

To the YMCA and Y group, the taskforce and all of the ambassadors and those that are going out and speaking and raising the issues to get more people involved, thank you so much. You might not realise the difference you make, but it makes a massive difference when we are speaking to people out in the community who then understand what we do in here, because too often people do not. They think we sit in here and fight and yell at each other across the table, because that is what the media will show, when the reality is, I am going to say 95 per cent of the time, we can have a conversation in here. We can sit opposite at the table and talk about the policies that are coming forward. Of the legislation that goes through, probably 80 to 90 per cent of it we actually do not have any opposition to – there is a not-opposed position. There are only a few where we will vote differently, and they are the ones that you hear about in the media. I think it is really important that you do come in here and understand that this is the process of how this place works. Thank you for making sure you go out and pass it on.

I am not allowed to pass over to you, but you have got to make sure you follow me on Instagram, as you did say. But just a bit of history of Mildura – I want to talk about Mildura, the place I went for a holiday for nine years in a row. I am going to give you an interesting fact to see if you are aware of it. Do you know where the first place in Australia was to sell frozen yoghurt?

Jaclyn SYMES: Was it Mildura?

Brad BATTIN: The pharmacy in Mildura was the very first place to sell frozen yoghurt, so there is a new stat for you up there. It is one of the greatest places on earth. It is a borderline with some other states.

Jaclyn Symes interjected.

Brad BATTIN: No, they did not know. And there is Jackie's Corner as well, but we just decided not to speak about that one. Thank you so much, everyone, for coming in. It is fantastic to see you here.

Joel HALLINAN: Thank you, Treasurer. Thank you, Leader of the Opposition. I will now turn it over to Alexandra Ash, CEO of YMCA Australia.

Alexandra ASH: Thank you. Love a frozen yoghurt, I have to say. Where I live, Church Street in Brighton, the Yochi goes off every night after school. As I said, thank you for introducing me. My name is Alexandra Ash. I am the CEO at Y Australia. Would I ever have thought that I would be in this role when I was your ages? No, not at all. But the impact and the experiences that I get day to day in my role are why I turn up every day, and this is just an example of that. Along with before, I would like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the lands where we are today. It is the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nation, and I would like to pay respect to their elders past and present.

I am going to be doing quite a few acknowledgements in terms of the amazing program that we have in front of us. First of all, Her Excellency Lily Trethowan – I hope I have said that right – in terms of Youth Governor of Victoria. She got an applause before, but let us do another one for Lily. What an amazing experience and leadership opportunity for her. The Honourable Jaclyn Symes, as I said, Treasurer of Victoria, plus the many other hats that she wears, including being a parent and everything else that we have in our lives. Brad Battin as well, the Leader of the Opposition. I said I have seen Brad's face many times when in the Casey region. Y Victoria have a longstanding partnership with the City of Casey in terms of recreation sites, and we have seen so many young people being able to learn to swim, for instance, in those facilities, a life skill. We have Iwan Walters, the Parliamentary Secretary for Multicultural Affairs.

Youth parliamentarians, as we have said; youth press gallery members; volunteer taskforce members; youth Parliament alumni, including many in the room that we have just sensed; our friends from the Victorian Electoral Commission; and also the welcomed guests – thank you deeply for all your hard work and support and the involvement in the Y's incredible 39-year-old Youth Parliament program. That is absolutely amazing. A special thank you for Marcia Pallet, who is the former president of YMCA Victoria and the founder of the Victorian Youth Parliament program. Again, a big round of applause in terms of 39 years.

Members applauded.

Alexandra ASH: At Y Australia, the vice-president's name is Leigh Johns, and he often says this program changed his life. He would not be in the role that he is now without the opportunity to do Youth Parliament. It changed him from flipping burgers at Maccas in Bendigo to now being a federal family court judge.

This week, as I said, marks the culmination of months and months of hard work researching, collaborating, drafting and debating, and I am pretty sure it has paid off for many of you. You have stepped into this chamber with both courage and clarity. The red can probably be a bit overwhelming, right? So you have walked in with that. You have shared your vision for a better Victoria. Your bills will soon land in the hands of government, as said before, and they will be reviewed, considered and ultimately help inform the future of public policy. The power that lies with you therefore cannot be understated. The opportunity to change laws is not a small one, but it is clear that you have seized the moment with both hands and you have made the most for you. And really, for that the Y in general is very proud of everyone in this room. I would like to say I have my eight-year-old son with me today. It is the school holidays, so the juggle is real. There he is, 'Ted Bear'. But to have my eight-year-old son, who has never had any interaction really with government or this place, come and see what might be an opportunity for him in his next years is amazing, like nothing I saw when I was eight years old. So thank you for my being able to share this day with him as well.

The 20 bills debated this week tackled the issues that young people care deeply about. These issues, like women's health, transport equity, the environment, mental health and education, are matters that impact both regional Victoria and metropolitan communities and diverse cohorts of Victorians of all ages. Because of your aspirations, your lived experiences and the fresh perspective that you can provide, this really impacts Victorians of all ages. Because of your aspirations and lived experience around 70 Youth Parliament bills have already done this in the past as well. The latest of these is free public transport for under-18s, and that change comes into effect on 1 January. This was championed by the 2024 Boroondara team. A shift such as this will help hundreds and thousands of teens and families across Victoria access health and education and connect with family and friends. This year The Grange P-12 has built on that momentum. They proposed that broader fare changes can be made to make public transport even more affordable for all Victorians.

I am also so pleased and proud that this year youth parliaments across the country debated women's health care, equity and period care access. The national matter of public importance was developed off the largest youth consultation and has been led by and for young people. This is really close to my heart. I remember being a 16-year-old working at Coles and having my first experience of intense endometriosis, fainting at the counter as I was trying to work. That pain is invisible pain that has taken now over 20 years to really get highlighted in the public forum, and to now be able to have affirmation of the silent pain that I went through for so much time – it is now in your hands, so I thank you. The fact that you have chosen to focus on those needs of Australian women is beyond much of the leadership that we have today, so thank you. You are looking beyond your own cohort. You are looking at the needs of all communities. You are looking for the change that my son Teddy will be able to see into his future, and with that, it is not just yourselves. It is inspiring. It is real leadership, and it is for that the Y truly thanks all of you.

Before concluding, there are a large number of people that I said at the start, but also I need to thank on behalf of the Y, a huge movement that exists across the nation. Thank you to the President and Speaker for allowing us access to this beautiful space. Thank you also to the members of Parliament who have supported this program this year and previous years. To the Parliament of Victoria staff, especially the clerks, thank you for everything that you have done to help make this possible. As I said, it is pretty confronting if you have not been in this space before. The Department of Families, Fairness and Housing partnership and generous funding, as outlined by Jaclyn before, ensures this program is accessible for more young Victorians like those from regional Victoria but even those in metropolitan areas as well. To the Victorian Electoral Commission, thank you for ongoing support and commitment to building civic education among young Victorians. To the volunteer taskforce led by Kaitlin Woolford, your energy and dedication has been incredible to witness. I see that when I see you at work many times through the week and we say hi, but I want to publicly really thank you. Without Y Victoria and their support, this program simply would not be possible.

Every youth parliamentarian and press gallery member, congratulations on what you have achieved. Make sure you reflect and take note, and make sure when you are having job interviews in the future you really highlight this experience as one that will put you leagues ahead of many others. It is so important. Congratulations. I hope this experience is one that you take with you through your life and it continues to inspire and lead change for your communities. Thank you so very much, and enjoy your closing ceremony.

Joel HALLINAN: Thank you very much, Alexandra. I understand next we will be passing to the youth leaders of each house, who will make some remarks. I invite the Youth Premier Taihan Rahman to kick us off.

Taihan RAHMAN: Good afternoon, everyone. My name is Taihan, and over this week I have had the honour of serving as Victoria's Youth Premier as well as the Leader of the Government in the Legislative Assembly. This has been an incredible experience for me and for all of the young participants here today. We have all had the privilege of having our voices heard in the halls of the decision-makers of our state. I know that this will be an experience that we will cherish for the rest of our lives. I would now like to take the time to thank the Parliament of Victoria for making this program possible for all of us. Thank you to the Speaker and the President for the use of this incredible building, to the house department staff, especially Paul, Keir, Tom and Naomi, as well as the Hansard and broadcast, catering, security, IT and cleaning teams. Without your help, this program would not have been possible. And finally, to all the members of Parliament for generously giving up their holiday time to chair our debates and listen to our voices, your appreciation for the value of youth voices really means so much to us. Thanks again to all of those involved for making this program possible for us, and thanks for giving us the opportunity to have our voices heard.

Nimeesha VISEN: Good afternoon, everyone. I am Nimeesha, Leader of the Opposition in the Legislative Assembly. I would like to begin my thankyou to my amazing chamber and my fellow members of the Hoppers Crossing Secondary College team, Mahrosh, Tavish, Zeinab, Charlotte and Kinda. I extend my thankyou to the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing for your generous funding contribution to the program each year and to your staff for their ongoing support. Thank you also to the Victorian Electoral Commission for sponsoring multiple teams to participate in the program and to access this experience. The ongoing commitment that you provide to this program allows more Victorians to understand their roles in civics and how they can influence and shape their communities.

Atena KASHANI: Hello, my name is Atena. I just want to start off by saying thank you. Thank you to all of the wonderful young people that have been around the camp. Thank you for your wonderful support throughout the week and throughout the training camp. Thank you to the taskforce for your dedication, for always being there, no matter how small or how big the problem or the encouragement was. Thank you to Jamie for being so wonderful. Thank you for encouraging me to speak up. You are wonderful. Thank you to the executive chamber leader for your continuous support and having my back always. Thank you to my chamber members. Thank you for always being there and being so wonderful and always having my back. And thank you to Hume City Council for your continuous dedication and my wonderful team. It gives us the opportunity to be here, to be able to say that we did it. We as young people had the opportunity to speak up about what was important to us and had our voices heard, so thank you. Thank you to the team at YMCA Victoria for your commitment to this program. This program demonstrates your belief in the power that a group of young people being inspired has. Thank you to all of the teams that have made this program an experience possible, including the youth services team and the Lake Dewar Discovery Camp team.

Sandy GANESH: Good afternoon. I am Sandy, Leader of the Opposition in the Legislative Council. Thank you to my chamber for being such a fun, welcoming and supportive group of people, and a massive thank you to the incredible Youth Parliament taskforce. This group of amazing young people has stopped at nothing to provide a positive and empowering experience for all of us as participants. The taskforce started working in November of last year and have collectively donated more than 6500 hours to this one program. This program would not be possible without your selfless contributions. On behalf of every single participant involved in the program, we thank you for making the experience so meaningful, memorable and transformational.

Presentation of best speaker awards

Joel HALLINAN: Thank you, Youth Premier. Thank you, chamber leaders. Richard and I now have the very great pleasure of awarding the prizes for the best speakers in each house. One of the most impressive things that I have seen over the course of these few days is the number of scribbles on everyone's sheets as they followed all the speeches: 'Oh, that person – no, the next one is best.' I was most impressed by people after the initial 12, speaking off the cuff, writing notes and responding to other members in the chamber. It is not an easy thing to do, and you guys did a really good job. For the Assembly, I will first announce the runner-up. Could you please join me in congratulating Legislative Assembly best speaker runner-up award winner Ishan Venkat.

Members applauded.

Joel HALLINAN: Now please join me once more in congratulating best speaker in the Legislative Assembly, Vivianne Phung.

Members applauded.

Richard WILLIS: Thank you, Joel. I am Richard Willis from the Legislative Council. It has been a pleasure working with you all this week. You have all been so passionate and articulate, and particularly you have been so respectful towards each other, which has been a real pleasure to see and witness. It was a very close vote in the Council debates. But I want to first of all thank you all. I wish you could all get an award; you deserve an award. But the runner-up in the Council is Ammar Mahmoud from Hume City Council.

Members applauded.

Richard WILLIS: Well done, Ammar. Can you please continue your applause for the award for the best debater, Matilda Sowter.

Members applauded.

Joel HALLINAN: Congratulations, guys. I am now very pleased to pass over to Ms Lily Trethowan, Youth Governor of Victoria, who will address the house and present your successfully passed bills to the Treasurer.

Handing over of bills

Lily TRETHOWAN (Youth Governor): Good afternoon, everyone. Welcome to the closing ceremony for the 2025 Victorian Youth Parliament. Firstly, I would like to thank and welcome Ms Jaclyn Symes, Treasurer of Victoria, and I also thank you for your presence, Mr Brad Battin, Leader of the Opposition, and Alexandra Ash, CEO of YMCA Australia. Thank you for your very inspiring words. In attendance today we also have Mr Iwan Walters, Parliamentary Secretary for Multicultural Affairs, and Marcia Pallette, former YMCA Victoria president and founder of Youth Parliament in Victoria. Marcia strikes me as, and is in fact, a very dedicated and ambitious person. She has achieved much throughout her life, and by her presence today and continued attendance at our week of Youth Parliament we are reminded of the ability of this program to inspire and help others continuously and consistently, now for almost four decades. I would like to acknowledge representatives from the Victorian Electoral Commission and also from the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing. We deeply appreciate your support of our program and our team.

Thank you to the staff at Parliament House: everyone who helped organise and run debates or checked us in, clerks and more. You have contributed a depth of true reality for our participants in this house, which I think they very thoroughly enjoyed. To the Y staff, volunteers and guests, thank you for coming. We deeply appreciate it. Then there is the taskforce, the team that made it happen. This is a team that picks each other up when they fall, runs when needed by each other and puts an insane amount of work and effort in, all voluntarily. This program has been pervaded by their persistence, partially because of how skilled they are but mostly because they care. They care so much and therefore are able to support our participants to grow and enact change, not to mention the exceptional role-modelling they show in the process across the camp program. Now to our 2025 Youth Parliamentarians and Youth Press Gallery members: congratulations to you all. You have arrived at the end of this year's parliamentary journey. In the process I have seen you get better and better – sharper, more confident, taking more chances. Your future is unlimited, and I have had just a vision, almost like a prophecy, that you will keep this experience in your hearts and minds and use it for good.

My name is Lily Trethowan. I am the Youth Governor for 2025. Now is the time for the conclusion of my role and to pass it on to the next. I have loved it truly, and I have enjoyed using it to tell literally everybody who visits or attends or even hears about events such as this ceremony that they need to commit more of their time to watching and listening to young people and then acting on it if possible. Again I thank the support of last year's cohort of the program, who elected me to the position in the first place, and that of this current program, who have let me represent and address them within my responsibilities. You have shown respect, honesty and care. You have shown tenacity, fire and drive. You have exemplified strength. In effect you have used your voice in here and to yourself and with your fellow members. You have come to work together and supported each other. You hit it with the velvet ground running beneath you. Honestly, I just felt like I needed to catch up most of the time.

This admiring of you that I am doing is to tell you that what we see in you is not to placate, not to reassure. Rather, it is to empower further beyond these walls, because we do not just need you in here; we need you out there, whether that is living your life more open-mindedly, putting your understanding of parliamentary debate process to quality use or being more confident in yourself. That is what empowerment is. It can lead in so many directions – most relevantly of all here, legislative change – but it can lead to a more fulfilling and sustainable life. Trying things that you never have before is a good way to do so, showing yourself your resilience, and I thank you for trying this. Along the way you meet some incredible people, and I know I have this week. I hope that one day nobody says that young people are just leaders of the future. You are here, and it does not necessarily take older age to lead, nor to express what is affecting them and what can be done.

You broke this stereotype this week and you will again. Many have come before you and many will come after. Do not lose hope, as there are hundreds and thousands of young people able to lead, some of whom will come through this program. You lead today. With almost 70 Youth Parliament bills that have passed into current legislation here in Victoria in 39 years of the program, we know that it is broken every year. The key is in reading the bills, consuming their perspectives and taking them into legislative reality, and for this year, this is where it begins. Today I am honoured to hand over the 19 bills that passed our Youth Parliament this week to Treasurer Ms Jaclyn Symes to be taken into consideration by the Minister for Youth, for the future of Victoria.

Bills presented.

Members applauded.

Lily TRETHOWAN (Youth Governor): Settle – we have still got tonight and tomorrow, don't we?

Naming of 2026 Youth Governor

Lily TRETHOWAN (Youth Governor): Last night we elected the 2026 Victorian Youth Governor. This role is part of what I am doing now. It involves speaking with and to the young people of Victoria and the program itself to champion them. And now the time is to announce who they are. But first, I would just like to congratulate all the nominees for going up. I have done it before, so I can say that it takes an insane amount of bravery and courage to go not just in front of our participants like last night but also our taskforce, to really go for it and put yourselves up for it. It is really brave, and I really applaud you, and I love you all. Maybe just to keep the tension I would like to say a bit about who the successful person is. With this person – their passion for this program is so obvious, literally shines through every room that they are in. In the time I have worked with them it has been known widely by everyone that they try and they work so very hard in any way they can. They represent the impact that the program can have on young people. The development that this person has gone through is insane and beautiful to me, and I always saw potential in this person from the moment I met them. The Youth Governor for 2026 is Scarlet Lee.

Scarlet LEE: Did we enjoy that I had to get led to the lectern? Oh, my goodness. I have a lot of words to say, and now there are not really any in my head. Wow, this does not feel real. I cannot express how insane and unreal this feels. To all my participants, I am really sorry but I am going to reuse the story I used last night. I started Youth Parliament and initially only joined the Youth Parliament because I needed extra credit to graduate high school, and I begrudgingly joined the program, not thinking much of it. I then participated, and it changed my life. It changed my life for the better. It made such a significant impact on me. Never, ever did I think that I would be up at this lectern speaking to all of you – I cannot look at anyone; they are going to make me cry. I felt that everyone who surrounded me saw something in me that I could never see in myself. I feel so incredibly honoured to be standing up before you guys now. Participants, this is not me. This is all of taskforce. I see so much in you that you do not see in yourselves. You are so fantastic. You really are so amazing, and every single one of you could be standing up here like me, like Lily, like previous youth governors. You could do exactly what I have just done, and you could do it so much better than I could. I firmly believe that you all are capable of this and you are all capable of so much more, and I just want you to know that we see you and we hear you. You absolutely deserve to be seen. You absolutely deserve to be heard. You all have a right to be on this program, and you all have the right to be in this position that I am standing in now. Thank you so much.

Lily TRETHOWAN: That was a lot of fun to do. So with that, it sounds like we have finished our business here, guys. I now declare that the 39th annual Victorian Youth Parliament is officially closed.

Youth Council adjourned 4:24 pm.