

PARLIAMENT OF VICTORIA

YMCA YOUTH PARLIAMENT 2026

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL CHAMBER

Monday 29 June 2026

2026 Youth Governor: Scarlet Lee

Program Director: Kaitlin Woolford

Charles Latrobe P–12 College

Abubakar Maalim
Aleya Ismail
Hamza Hassan
Ibrahim Sharif
Imrana Ahmed
Jack Wright

Geelong Youth Parliament

Isabella Harvey (Bella)
Isobel Rose
Jessie Moore
Jye Usher
Pippa MacPherson
Thoorigai Murugan (Tori)

Ivanhoe Girls Grammar School

Ava D’Sylva
Mahek Badwal
Nishi Makati
Olivia Harrap
Ruby McDonald
Shania Nevindie Adihetty

Maribyrnong Youth Advisory Committee

Bridget White
Eliza Morris
Leah Nguyen
Nyandeng Mayan (Monica)
Patrick Phung
Shanay Gao-Kuhlman

Merri-bek Youth

Aiden Stevenson
Hamayle Asmat
Maria Abdani
Mohammad Freihat
Mohammed Rayhan Pasha
Zara Asmat

Mildura Rural City Council

Allegra Cirillo
Alyia Alassani
Arzoo Habibi
Iris Newton
Sophie Lloyd

South East Community Links

Ammar Mahmoud
Ember McBryde
Farima Sawari
Linh Do
Najiba Naseri
Shakthi Willis

South Gippsland Youth Leaders

Bodhi Collins
Emily Rogers
James Dyer
Kaydee Jones
Thalia Baker

The Grange P–12 College

Dua Hassain
Ella Saji
Eveline Michaels
Jack Nguzo
Lillith McAdam
Saba Malik

Y Community School

Atena Kashani
Fangcheng Zhou (Anna)
Hayley Martiniano Dias
Khushleen Kaur
Matilda Feehan
Shea Munnings

Opening of the session

The PRESIDENT (Shaun Leane) took the chair at 10:04 am.

At 10:05 am the Deputy Clerk read the following:

Proclamation for holding the 40th YMCA Victorian Youth Parliament

Whereas the Victorian Council of YMCAs wish to develop a project which will:

- provide young persons with a state forum to express their views on matters of concern to them;
- provide the state government with bills which would express the concerns and expectations of youth and which could be acted upon by the government; and
- provide the opportunity for young persons to gain public speaking and debating skills and develop an interest in their own parliamentary system by actually being involved in the parliamentary process;

and whereas the Honourable the President of the Legislative Council and the Honourable the Speaker of the Legislative Assembly have graciously consented to the use of the Legislative Council and the Legislative Assembly chambers for this purpose; and whereas the Honourable Luba Grigorovitch, Minister for Youth, has agreed to receive the bills passed by this assembly;

now therefore I, Scarlet Lee, Youth Governor, command the selected members of the YMCA Victorian Youth Parliament to attend Parliament House on 29 June at 10 am for the carrying out of such business as the YMCA Victorian Youth Parliament shall deem appropriate.

Given under my hand on 29 June 2026.

Scarlet Lee
Youth Governor

Opening speeches

Usher of the Black Rod announced approach of Youth Governor.

Youth Governor entered chamber.

Legislative Assembly Youth Parliament members, with Speaker, attended in response to Youth Governor's summons.

National anthem sung by Carla Tarquinio.

The PRESIDENT (Shaun Leane): It is now my pleasure to call on Auntie Irene Morris to perform the Welcome to Country.

Auntie Irene MORRIS: Good morning, everybody. As you gather here today on the traditional lands of my Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung ancestors, I would like to acknowledge my elders, any First Peoples here today and the Youth Parliament. What an awesome job you are doing, I must say.

Wurundjeri is one of five traditional owners that make up the Kulin nations. Our boundary runs from the Werribee River, up to the Macedon Ranges, across to Mount Baw Baw and down to Mordialloc Creek, so it is quite a large area to start looking after, and it takes a lot of effort from everybody in our corporation to handle doing that – and we still do not cover it all.

My grandmother was born on Coranderrk mission in Healesville. As part of that, she was not allowed to practise any of her protocols or her cultural practices. Over the last 40 years or so we have started to reawaken a lot of those practices and bring them back into being. So we in the corporation are not only looking after and caring for country, which is our most important thing, no matter what happens – caring for country is looking after the land, the waters and the skies – we are now also looking at language. We have got our youth and our young ones starting to do language. We have been doing more ceremonies. We have started to look at climate change, renewable energy and economic development.

So even though we still do our cultural practices, we have to change and we have to keep with the times and look to the future. What I am saying here today is that you are our future. You may look at where you have come from, where your parents have come from and what you are doing today, but you are tasked with looking after the future. I think that is such a big job, and I think you will do a marvellous job, at least starting from here. I believe you have been out looking at other areas. It is really good to see that you are all here and going forwards.

On behalf of my elders, I say wominjeka Wurundjeri balluk yearmann koondee biik. You are most welcome to the lands of the Wurundjeri people. Ngoon godjin. Thank you.

The PRESIDENT: Thanks, Auntie Irene, for that Welcome to Country. Also I should point out Carla's fantastic singing of the national anthem. I am very pleased to call on the Honourable Jaclyn Symes, Treasurer of Victoria, to make a contribution.

Jaclyn SYMES (Treasurer): Good morning, everyone. Of course I begin by acknowledging the traditional owners and paying my deep personal respects to elders past, present and emerging. And thank you, Auntie Irene, for your generous time, your Welcome to Country and your words to the young people who are participating today. Thank you to the Youth Parliament program leaders, the supporters and the young parliamentarians who are gathered here today. There are so many of you from right across the state, and you are very welcome in the Legislative Council, the best chamber in the Parliament. Thank you to the Assembly people for coming over. It is a privilege to have the opportunity to open the program.

For four decades Victoria's Youth Parliament has shown young people they are not simply leaders of tomorrow but that they can make meaningful impact today. The program has always been about giving young people the opportunity to shape ideas, challenge assumptions and experience democracy not as spectators but as participants. It has given them a voice, and it has given them opportunity to discover something powerful: that leadership is not about waiting for permission to make a difference; it begins the moment you decide that your ideas matter and that you are willing to work to turn them into action.

That tradition continues with each of you here today. Over the coming week you will debate, you will negotiate and you will question, persuade and collaborate. You will test your ideas, defend your convictions and at times have your views challenged. This is good. Have some arguments. Win the arguments. You will be better for it. It is exactly what democracy should look like. You will learn that the strongest arguments are built not just on conviction but on listening, compromising and respect. As Leader of the Government in the upper house, I know this firsthand. I normally sit in this seat here, but I spend a lot of time here. And the reason I spend a lot of time here is that the upper house is where the bills come to be considered in greater detail than in the Assembly – again proving my point. The longest I have sat in this seat at one time is 30 hours non-stop, testing and questioning legislation to ultimately vote something to become law. Thirty hours is not regular, but we can sit here right through the night, continuing to have our debates, have our questions challenged and ultimately decide what becomes law in the state of Victoria.

Some years ago I was fortunate enough to again be in this chamber as a participant in Youth Parliament. Not a single one of you was born when I was here the first time – it was 30 years ago. It was a great opportunity, and I know you are really going to enjoy the work. Look at the diversity of where you have all come from. Who is from country Victoria? Excellent. I came from country Victoria. I grew up in Benalla. I was the first person in my family to finish school and the first person to go to university. Did I ever imagine that I would be the Treasurer of the state, standing here opening Youth Parliament today? No, I did not, but starting off and having these types of experiences put me on the pathway to where I could take up the opportunities that I have been fortunate enough to have in my life. I have learned here that ideas have power and that democracy works best, again, when you choose to participate – so you have taken the first step. The laws passed in Parliament do not just happen – they do not appear by accident and they do not generate in this chamber. They begin with conversations, they begin with communities standing up for things and they begin with people asking, 'How can we do this better?'

Many of the reforms that are improving life for young people started exactly this way. Whether it is making renting fairer through stronger protection for tenants, investing in more affordable housing, strengthening social justice protections or continuing Victoria's leadership on climate action and renewable energy, lasting reform starts because there are people who are prepared to advocate for change. We are making sure that the future

being built in this state is one that every Victorian can see themselves in, because a strong economy and a strong pathway for Victorians is not just something we talk about, it is something we are building. Here in Victoria just since June 2020, 123,000 new businesses have started – net new businesses. We are streets ahead of any other state because people are willing to try ideas and put themselves forward. Since the peak of the pandemic 646,000 more Victorians are in jobs – again the absolute highest of any other state. Victoria is a state of ideas. Victoria is a state of people. We constantly punch above our weight.

I do not know if anyone can see me shaking. I have got massive jet lag. I got back from New York yesterday, because as the Treasurer of the state, I have got some obligations to go and speak to credit rating agencies, which was part of the trip. The other part was talking to people in New York about Victoria. The excitement about investing in Victoria, starting businesses in Victoria – overseas as well our reputation is very, very strong and our economic credentials are very, very strong. It is on us to go over to other countries and ask people to look at Victoria, look at our strength and invest in Victoria. We have got so much going for us.

This is what progress looks like, but it is also about who gets to be part of it. As you know, it means that young people can train at TAFE for free, and it is about getting jobs in some of the powerful industries of the future – working on offshore wind projects, building the next generation of trains and trams, delivering clean energy and contributing to cutting-edge biotech. We know that today's challenges are complex. The challenges facing your generation I know are significant: housing affordability, cost of living, mental health, climate change, AI and equality and inclusion. The decisions and solutions made over the coming decades will require thoughtful, capable and compassionate leaders. Many of you sitting here today are those leaders.

Please remember that leadership does not begin when you are elected to office; leadership begins when you decide to get involved. It begins when you volunteer, when you speak up for someone else, when you bring people together and when you have the courage to challenge an idea or, equally, the humility to change your own mind when you are presented with a better one. That is what this week is all about. I encourage you to consume it, absorb it, have fun, make friends, be curious, be courageous, ask difficult questions and listen carefully as you speak – because this state needs you. It needs your ideas. It needs your energy and your optimism. We need young people who are prepared to turn passion into action. The future of our state will not simply be inherited by your generation, it will be shaped by it. Build friendships across different schools, different parts of the state, different communities and different backgrounds. Some of the people sitting beside you will become lifelong friends. Some may become future leaders. All of you will leave here with a better understanding of how democracy works, not just in theory but in practice. I wish you every success for the week. As I said, be fierce, have fun and make a difference.

The PRESIDENT: It is now my pleasure to call on Nicole Werner MP, Shadow Minister for Youth.

Nicole WERNER: Thanks so much for having me here. To the President of the Legislative Council; Treasurer Jaclyn Symes; Aunty Irene; Greg Jennings, the acting CEO of the Y Victoria; Scarlet Lee, the Youth Governor of Victoria; distinguished guests; volunteers; and, most importantly, the young people participating in the 40th Youth Parliament: it is a pleasure to be with you today. Thank you for the opportunity to join with you as we officially open the 40th Victorian Youth Parliament, and a very happy 40 years indeed. Looking around the chamber today it is impossible not to feel optimistic about Victoria's future with you at the helm. What an incredible group of young people we have gathered here. Each of you has chosen to step forward, engage in public life and contribute your ideas to making our state a better place, and you should be very proud of that commitment.

Youth representation and representation in politics more broadly is something I am deeply passionate about. When I was elected to Parliament, as many of you will have heard if you were at the launch of Youth Parliament a few weeks ago, I became the first woman to represent the electorate of Warrandyte and the first Asian Australian woman elected to the Victorian Legislative Assembly. I think I am right in saying that our Treasurer is the first woman to serve in the role as Treasurer. It is something we believe in, and our experiences reinforce to us just how important representation is in a healthy democracy. That is why in fact our Parliament is strongest when it reflects the diversity of the community it serves. Different backgrounds, different experiences and different perspectives all strengthen the decisions that we make, and that is why your participation here matters, your voice is needed, your ideas are valued and your perspective is important. I commend each and every one of you for putting your hand up and committing your time to this program.

As we officially open this year's Youth Parliament it is also worth reflecting on the remarkable legacy of this program. Since its inception in 1987 the Y Victoria has been at the forefront of fostering youth leadership and civic engagement. For nearly four decades this program has inspired young Victorians to learn about democracy, develop leadership skills and engage with the issues facing their communities. What makes Youth Parliament particularly special is that it has always enjoyed strong bipartisan support, as reflected here today. Democracy is stronger when we encourage young people from all backgrounds and political perspectives to participate. The impact of this program extends far beyond the walls. Over the years, dozens of bills have been debated by youth parliamentarians like you, and these participants have gone on to influence Victorian legislation and government policy. Many alumni have become community leaders, advocates, professionals and elected representatives. In fact two of my parliamentary Liberal colleagues, Brad Rowsell MP and Chris Crewther MP, are Youth Parliament alumni, as well as the Treasurer Jaclyn Symes here today. In fact some of you that were there at the Youth Parliament opening will have heard the story that I shared, which I share every year, about the famous comedian Sammy J, who spoke about his experiences at Youth Parliament very fondly because it was the place where he met a young woman, here at Youth Parliament, who went on one day to become his wife, with whom he has two children. So you never know what this experience might hold for you. You never know where it might lead. It could be the start of a career in public service and community leadership or perhaps even a lifelong friendship or marriage – who knows?

Looking at the bills before this year's Parliament I am struck by the breadth of issues you have chosen to tackle. Healthcare access, mental health, housing, education, public safety, multicultural inclusion and support for vulnerable young people are all significant challenges facing Victoria today. These are not simple issues; they require thoughtful discussion, careful consideration and a willingness to listen to different viewpoints. The work you undertake this week will give you a valuable insight into how democracy functions and how change can be achieved.

I also want to acknowledge the volunteers who work tirelessly behind the scenes. Programs like this do not happen by accident; they succeed because dedicated people give their time, energy and expertise to support the next generation of leaders. On behalf of everyone here, thank you to all of the volunteers and the people who have made this possible. Thank you for your extraordinary contribution. To all of you participating this week, I encourage you to make the most of every opportunity. Speak with confidence, listen respectfully, challenge ideas thoughtfully, learn from one another, build friendships and never underestimate the impact that one person can have when they choose to get involved. Whether your future lies in politics, community advocacy, business, education, the arts or any other field, I hope this experience inspires you to continue contributing to your community and shaping the future of our state. Victoria needs young people who are prepared to lead, to serve and to make a difference. In public life I often go back to a quote that I shared in my very first speech to Parliament, from Martin Luther King, where he said that everybody can be great because everyone can serve. I look forward to seeing many of you continue that journey in the years ahead in service, putting service above self and perhaps even returning to Parliament one day as elected representatives. Congratulations on being part of the 40th Victorian Youth Parliament, and I wish you success for the week ahead.

The PRESIDENT: It is my pleasure to call on Greg Jennings, acting CEO of YMCA Victoria, for his contribution.

Greg JENNINGS: I would like to commence by acknowledging the traditional owners of the lands on which we meet, the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nation. I pay my respects to elders past and present and extend that respect to First Nations people here today.

I would also like to acknowledge the President; the Speaker; Their Excellency Scarlet Lee, Youth Governor of Victoria; Aunty Irene Morris – thank you for welcoming us to the lands of your people; the Honourable Jaclyn Symes, Treasurer of Victoria; Nicole Werner, Shadow Minister for Youth; youth parliamentarians; press gallery members; and special guests. Welcome, everyone. Today we mark the opening sitting week for the 2026 Victorian Youth Parliament. Months of work, research, lobbying and practice will be showcased over the week in a series of important bills.

As mentioned, it is the 40th anniversary of Youth Parliament, a milestone for the program, which has run every year since 1987. Back then the program looked very different. The room was not full like this. There were about 40 young people without the benefit and expertise of the alumni and people that knew what they were doing. I would like to acknowledge the role of two founders of our Youth Parliament. The vice-president of the

board at the time, the late Marcia Pallet, was a trailblazer in the time. In recent years, despite ill health, Marcia rejoined as a dedicated volunteer along with her husband Richard, whom I had the pleasure of meeting earlier today. Welcome, Richard. They were the greatest supporters, and we will hear more about her shortly. The former CEO Dave Davis, now in his late 90s, developed the idea and was instrumental in the formation of the program and making it continually evolve. He sends his best wishes from South Australia. Also present from the very first Youth Parliament in 1987 is Judge Leigh Johns OAM, who joins us here today. Leigh was the very first Victorian Youth Premier, and we are honoured that he could join us this morning. Welcome, Leigh.

What has not changed is the belief that this is a program by and for young people. The bills issued and what they choose are what they are passionate about, and it is this passion that drives the program and everyone in it. Congratulations to each and every one of you. You have taken the opportunity. Let this be one of the steps in your journey towards becoming change-makers for your local communities. Change does happen because of the matters debated here, as Nicole and Jaclyn mentioned. As we have seen around 70 times, ideas from youth bills have been adopted, and they change lives. Most recently in January this year, free public transport for young people under 18 was announced. This bill was debated successfully here in Youth Parliament a number of times, and the government agreed with it. As a parent of a 14-year-old who catches the train to school, I am very pleased by it. The YMCA movement has a long history of supporting great ideas by young people. It is the reason why we formed 170 years ago. One of our global pillars of impact is creating a just world for all. Again, our cohort this year share the belief in a more equitable Victoria. This year we have chosen a wide range of bills covering housing, cost of living, essential services, education, environment and mental health. You are putting some important solutions on the table, and we look forward to hearing more about them.

Thank you to Athalia Zwartz and the team from the Victorian Electoral Commission. Thank you for the ongoing support of the program and providing this unique opportunity to more young people from electorally under-represented communities. Thank you to the volunteers of the Youth Parliament taskforce. Every year a dedicated team of talented young volunteers contribute hundreds of hours and lend their passion and expertise. This year is no exception, and simply the program would not be possible without you. Thank you to the President and the Speaker for the use of these awe-inspiring chambers. The access and opportunity make the experience exceptional, memorable and transformational. Thank you to the Parliament of Victoria staff. Your team have been incredibly supportive to our program and our young people. Our ongoing partnership makes this unique and transformational opportunity possible for our young Victorians. Thank you to the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing for their commitment to the program and support for accessible opportunities to young people across Victoria. Finally, and most importantly, to the Youth Parliament and the youth press gallery participants: everyone here wishes you the very best in this sitting week of Youth Parliament. Enjoy every minute of it and make every moment count. You are not only the future leaders of our state, you are the current leaders. Go well.

Scarlet LEE (Youth Governor): Good morning. I am very honoured to welcome you all here today. I would like to begin by thanking Carla Tarquinio for performing the national anthem, as well as Aunty Irene Morris for graciously welcoming us to country today. I would also like to acknowledge and thank the Treasurer of Victoria and program alumna Jaclyn Symes; the Shadow Minister for Youth, the honourable Nicole Werner; and the acting CEO of YMCA Victoria Greg Jennings for their poignant speeches. I would also like to recognise esteemed guest Athalia Zwartz, the director of public engagement at the Victorian Electoral Commission. The Victorian Electoral Commission's ongoing support holds an integral role within the Youth Parliament program, and we thank them for their continued involvement with Youth Parliament. I would also like to thank all of our volunteer taskforce members, who put their absolute heart and soul into Youth Parliament, especially our fantastic program director Kaitlin Woolford, or 'Sheepy', and Y Victoria's youth services manager Michael Delaney, who work tirelessly to uphold and maintain the integrity of this program.

Lastly, I would like to formally recognise our wonderful 2026 youth parliamentarians and youth press gallery members. These young people have worked so hard in the lead-up to this moment, and the effort and thought that are already apparent from this year's cohort have not gone unnoticed. To our exceptional participants, as of right now you are the most important people in this room. Regardless of title or job description, you are Victoria's future, and there is absolutely nothing that takes precedence over that. You, as young people, have solutions that we cannot think of. You can recognise patterns and problems that we have not even considered yet, and you are the change that we are going to see. I can guarantee that there is a whole slew of emotions filling this room. I am very aware because I too have been a participant in that exact position. I have been extremely overwhelmed and honestly quite unsure of myself not just in Parliament but as a whole. However,

that is the beauty of Youth Parliament: nervous young people are given the space and the support to flourish and to become the self-assured and openly talented people that they are. Within this room there is an entire community of people who care so deeply about our young people's voices and hold such pride and admiration for the incredible people that our youth really are.

When I began my Youth Parliament journey, I honestly did not think that I would succeed, and yet here we are. Through Youth Parliament I found within myself a voice that I did not think I had, nor that I ever felt capable to find. There is something genuinely inexplicable about Youth Parliament, something that I may even call the magic of camp, that really does change a person for the better. Through this program our young people are able to discover their passions and what change they truly want to see in the world around them. They are able to speak out for what they believe and truly be heard. I myself was able to see confidence and proficiency within myself, and because of that I was able to consider myself a candidate for Youth Governor. I have all the love in the world for this program. Ever since the completion of my first year as a participant, Youth Parliament has altered the course of my entire life in an indescribable way, and all that I would ever have hoped for going forward was to be able to give others the ineffable and simply magical experience that I had been given. Following my experience on taskforce I saw the same change within our young people that I had seen within myself years prior. This led to a harsh but beautiful realisation. I was not an outlier. I was not the exception. I felt myself speaking to participants, listening to their awe-inspiring speeches, and I simply knew that each of them could do what I did and more.

I spoke last year when applying for Youth Governor, stating that each of the youth parliamentarians or youth press gallery could take on that very same role, and that was why I applied. I saw the innate skill and capability of each young person, and I knew that I wanted to take on this role not to highlight myself but to highlight the brilliance of our Victorian young people. I cannot possibly echo the sentiment enough. I speak to each and every participant within this room today and earnestly say that any of you could stand where I am now and fulfil the role of Youth Governor, and you will. Some, if not many, of you here today will someday take on my role. Some of you will do things even greater. All of you here today have taken the first and most important steps to greatness. You cared and then you did something about it. That is simply all you need. You excellent young people felt passionate about something and wanted to make a change, and look at you now. You are seated here in Victorian state Parliament about to debate bills that you have written asking for change that you have championed. If this is what you can do now, imagine what comes next. I feel an extreme sense of pride towards the steps already taken by our participants to advocate for themselves, and I can only look forward to how well they will present themselves and their voices this coming week.

I would now like to take some time to recognise the recent passing of the co-founder of the Victorian Youth Parliament program and former president of YMCA Victoria, Marcia Pallet. We simply would not be in this room now without Marcia, and the opportunities available for Victorian young people would be a whole lot slimmer if it was not for her. Marcia has been a constant within this program. For the past five years Marcia had consistently attended our days in Parliament and ensured she spoke to as many of our young people as she possibly could. Marcia repeatedly advocated for and uplifted the voices of our young people and did so with pride. I am forever grateful to Marcia, a feeling that all youth parliamentarians past and present would share. Please stand and join me now in a moment of silence to pay our deepest respect and admiration to Marcia.

Members stood in their places.

Scarlet LEE: Although we do not have the privilege of having Marcia with us here in her usual capacity, it is abundantly clear that her legacy will continue on through all of the inspired young people here today and in many years to come. We are very grateful to have Marcia's husband Richard present right now. Please feel free to speak with him over the breaks and share the joy that has been brought here today.

I would argue that this program is not to create or help build talented young people who are civically engaged, because our young people already are. They already have something to say. They already know what they want and how they will achieve it. Our program is to bring these fantastic people together and give them a platform to amplify themselves, to give us as the broader community the privilege to witness our truly amazing young people. Today marks the beginning of our 40th year of Youth Parliament – 40 years of talented and dedicated young people all striving to change the world around them. In this time over 70 bills have been adapted into Victorian legislation and nearly 50,000 young people have strived for progress – 50,000 young people. That is the power and the reach that Youth Parliament has: thousands of young people, all of whom have the potential

for excellence far beyond their perceived capabilities. That is the decision that all of our participants have made by joining Youth Parliament. To our esteemed participants, I would like to say: your choices, your actions – that is what makes you who you are. With that, I declare the 40th Youth Parliament officially open.

Members applauded.

The PRESIDENT: That ends the official opening of the Youth Parliament. As the President of the Legislative Council I never welcome anyone to the Parliament, because for everyone in this room this is our Parliament. But in saying that, it is so fantastic that you are all going to be here this week. Make sure you enjoy yourselves. Have fun but also take seriously the opportunity that you have got. I know that is a strange mix, but I manage to do it most weeks with the Clerk. She is sort of saying yes, no. As I said, it is so great you are going to be here. You are going to have a fantastic time. You are going to be fantastic in all of your contributions. The business will proceed in both chambers at the ringing of the bells.

Sitting suspended 10:49 am until 11:30 am.

The ACTING PRESIDENT (Richard Willis): Good morning. I will introduce myself. I am Richard Willis. I am one of the clerks here in the Legislative Council. This is a promotion for me sitting in this chair. I normally would sit down here on a sitting day. Normally when we bring the President in, we would come through here and stomp on the step and announce the President's arrival.

I have been at Parliament for a long time. I had dark-brown hair when I started, so it is quite a while that I have been here. I will not go on too much about myself other than: one of the most important parts of our role as clerks is, clearly, we vote at elections, but it is none of the members' business who we vote for. So one of the most important roles as a Clerk in the Parliament is to be completely impartial, neutral and give confidential advice all the time. You can imagine in this chamber we have got 40 members. The government sit on this side; they have 15 out of 40 members. You can see straightaway they do not have a majority. They need to work with other members to get the magic number, which is 21 out of 40, to pass legislation. The opposition sit on this side of the chamber; they have 14 members. And then down across the front seats here, we call them crossbench members, but it is largely the minor parties – well, we call them minor parties. There are the Greens, with four Greens members. And then we have got a whole bunch of single members representing different parties. For instance, we have got the Shooters, Fishers and Farmers Party, and next to that member we have got someone from the Animal Justice Party. So you can see there are complete opposite views. We have got I think 11 different political parties represented in this chamber, so it is important in our role as clerks to work with them all equally and in a very impartial and neutral way. That is enough from me as a Clerk. Also Tom Mills is my assistant; he is one of our chamber officers. I give you a shout-out, Tom.

Members statements

Imrana AHMED: On behalf of Charles Latrobe, I would like to thank our team leader in charge Salma Abdi for her guidance and support throughout this journey, our mentors Gabe and Yuwal and the YMCA taskforce and program leaders for this opportunity. Finally, thank you to our family and friends for their constant support and encouragement. We truly are grateful.

Saba MALIK: On behalf of The Grange Youth Parliament team, I would like to thank Jacinta Allan and Dylan Wight for taking the time to visit our school and share their great expertise. I would also like to thank the Victorian electoral commissioner Sven Bluemmel and the Victorian Electoral Commission for giving us the incredible opportunity to participate in Youth Parliament. Thank you to our school, the staff members at Youth Parliament and everyone part of the Y team.

Isabella HARVEY: Hi, everyone. My name is Bella from the Geelong Youth Parliament team. I would like to thank Greg Chadwick for organising this team and setting up our meetings as well as for providing lots of great snacks throughout the year. I would also like to thank the City of Greater Geelong for funding our team to come here. I would also like to thank MPs Christine Couzens, Alison Marchant and Ella George for taking the time to meet with our team and organising a tour of the Parliament building. And just a final thankyou to the taskforce, Sheepy, family and friends and my awesome team for all of your effort.

Mohammed Rayhan PASHA: On behalf of Merri-bek Youth, I would like to thank all the stakeholders that helped bring us to this stage, enable our voice to be heard and have the honour of debating in the Victorian

Parliament. I would like to thank Merri-bek City Council for funding the team and opening this opportunity up to us. I would like to mention the unwavering support from all the members of the taskforce, especially inviting the bill and bringing our ideas onto paper and up to mark. I would like to thank Hamayle, our resource and team lead and chamber leader, for her extensive support and for pushing forward for the Merri-bek team and its funding – that is, the catalyst for the team being here. Last but not least, I would like to appreciate the team for all the hard work and coordination all along the way.

Sophie LLOYD: On behalf of the Mildura team, I would like to thank the Victorian Electoral Commission for funding us; our teachers who in many cases highlighted this opportunity and supported our applications; Gabe Di Falco for being our mentor; the parents and friends of the team members for supporting us and helping us with our bill; the Y for being so accommodating to our team as a team that needs to travel by plane; Dawn Johnston for holding all of our meetings, making sure we were on time through our events and feeding us; and the Mildura Rural City Council for funding youth engagement activities. We are extremely grateful.

Ava D'SYLVA: On behalf of Ivanhoe Girls Grammar School, I would like to take this opportunity to thank Ingrid Hildebrand, Cara Harbottle, Chantelle Lloyd, Ivanhoe Girls Grammar School, the Youth Parliament taskforce, Mark Cameron and our families. Thank you for all of your time, support and expertise in helping our team navigate through this program.

Eliza MORRIS: On behalf of the Maribyrnong Youth Advisory Committee, I would like to thank the City of Maribyrnong for their support in sponsoring us to participate in Youth Parliament. Their investment in young voices like ours shows a genuine commitment to youth engagement. Thank you to the Maribyrnong Youth Services team for your ongoing support and commitment. I also want to thank our mayor Cr Semra for being a strong role model and advocate for young people in our community.

Najiba NASERI: On behalf of my team, I would like to thank first our dear taskforce for bringing us together, guiding us and making this work possible. To South East Community Links, thank you for your vital funding, trusting us, the program and lending support to our community. To Leanne, our head of house, thank you for guiding us every step of the way. To Chantelle, thank you for your endless patience. Even our emails sometimes get slower and then it is a snail's holiday. We could not have done this without you. Thank you.

Emily ROGERS: On behalf of our team, I would like to thank and appreciate Demi, our resource person, the South Gippsland Shire Council, the taskforce, our parents for driving us and Parliament House for allowing us to come together and deliver our speeches. Thank you.

Matilda FEEHAN: On behalf of the Y Community School team Epping, I would like to thank the Y Community School itself and staff member Mark Connors for supporting us through the planning and writing of our bill. Thanks go out to Shahana, our training leader, for guiding us through the whole process, and Leonard, our head of house, for all the extra assistance. Finally, I would like to thank the YMCA and all of the taskforce members for making this program possible. Thank you.

The ACTING PRESIDENT: They were very well spoken thank yous. I am looking at the list of participating members today. I need to give a shout-out to the honourable member Willis. We have the same surname and may be related somewhere down the track. Good to see you. Now we will go on to matters of public importance. The two lead speakers have 5 minutes each, and every other speaker will have 2 minutes.

Matters of public importance

Housing

The ACTING PRESIDENT (Richard Willis): I have accepted a statement from the YMCA Youth Parliament proposing the following matter of public importance:

This house believes that instability within Australia's contemporary housing context is a key factor that undermines social and community cohesion.

Bodhi COLLINS: Housing in Australia has never felt so dire for so many young people. In submissions for this year's matter of public importance, where we received more than 1300 submissions, it was made clear that young people think that housing is a major concern. We see that youth want further action by government to tackle this crisis. The current housing battle that we are going through right now is being fought on multiple

fronts. We have an affordability problem, a supply problem and a planning problem. The reality is that the great Australian dream has never been more dead, and the consequences that this is having on our young people are widespread. The causes of the housing crisis remain at the centre of the debate. Whether you believe high levels of immigration, renters being exploited by their landlords or government inaction is the cause of this crisis, it does not deny the fact that we have a problem that is in need of fixing. We have three levels of government that we need to go to to build a house. We have a cost-of-living crisis that has made it so expensive to build a house, and we do not even have enough tradies to increase supply for houses that we so desperately need. We are also seeing a major problem on the planning front. As someone who grew up in Werribee in Melbourne's bustling outer west, I live the consequences of urban sprawl every day: our hospitals are full, our schools are bursting beyond the seams and our arterial roads become parking lots during peak hour. To put it simply, there are more people, when we are not planning our houses outright, competing for the same amount of resources – and we think that this isn't contributing to poorer social cohesion?

A recent poll by Roy Morgan estimates that 29 per cent of mortgage holders are experiencing mortgage stress. Now, mortgage stress is when a mortgage holder contributes 30 per cent of their income to paying and servicing their mortgage loan, meaning that they are struggling to get by and pay for other essentials. Recent interest rate rises have also worsened the situation. We have people having growing anxiety that they are not going to be able to pay for their mortgages, that they are not going to be able to afford their rents, and we think that this is not contributing to our good social cohesion. Median house prices are also exorbitant. In Sydney the median house price, according to Domain, in December 2025 was \$1.75 million. In Melbourne it was \$1.1 million. Our median weekly rents in Melbourne are \$580 a week according to the same research, equating to more than \$30,000 a year. On what income can everyday Australians support their families and be able to buy the essentials while also maintaining an equitable standard of living? For so many, housing has never felt more out of reach. Australia's housing value-to-income ratio is a key measure that indicates housing affordability. It currently sits at 8.2. This is above the 20-year average of 6.8. What that means is that it takes 8.2 years for the average household to afford to buy a home without contributing a single dollar elsewhere.

When residents fear eviction or not being able to afford rent, it is no wonder our social cohesion is waning. When people are struggling, it is no wonder they look for someone to blame. We are seeing landlords being blamed, mum-and-dad investors for purchasing properties. We are seeing immigrants being blamed for a lack of housing when it is really a supply issue and we cannot actually build our homes. We should be seeking solutions, not people to blame or scapegoat. Yet we see our political parties and governments time and time again dishing out policies left, right and centre come election time that do nothing to help young people in 10, 20 or 30 years time. We are seeing short-term sugar hits that do nothing to actually tackle the problem of our housing crisis. As a result, we are seeing a weakened society where we are all feeling that we are competing rather than working together. Does this house believe that Australia's contemporary housing context is weakening social cohesion? I would argue it is, and I would argue that we as young people need to support this motion to signal to our elected representatives that we care and we want something done about this, because we want the great Australian dream to be back alive and running well again.

Hamayle ASMAT: I rise as the main refuter to oppose this matter. At the outset let me be clear: we do not deny that Australia is experiencing a housing crisis. Rising rents, increasing house prices and homelessness are real challenges that deserve attention. However, this matter is not asking whether housing instability exists, it is asking whether housing instability is the key factor undermining Australia's social and community cohesion. The government has failed to prove that. Instead they are focused on one consequence of a much larger problem, while overlooking the root cause affecting Australians every day.

First, this idea mistakes a symptom for a cause. The government assumes housing instability is driving declining social cohesion. However, housing instability does not exist in isolation. It is largely the result of broader economic instability. Australians are facing a nationwide cost-of-living crisis. Inflation has driven up the cost of groceries, electricity and fuel. Families are making difficult decisions about whether they can afford food, transport or health care before they even think about housing. These pressures affect home owners, renters and young Australians alike, regardless of whether they are experiencing housing instability. Housing instability is not the root cause, it is one of the outcomes of wider economic pressures. If Australians had greater financial security, many housing issues would become significantly more manageable. Therefore it is economic instability, not housing instability, that is the primary force weakening social cohesion. Moreover, the government has focused on one section of Australia's housing market, which it is attempting to apply to the entire nation. The greatest housing pressures are concentrated within the private rental market and among lower

income households, yet millions of Australians continue to live in a stable house. Despite this, many still experience financial stress, reduced community participation and increasing social isolation because of these rising living costs. If people with secure housing are still experiencing weakened social cohesion, then housing instability cannot be the key factor. The common denominator is not housing, it is financial pressure. When families are forced to work multiple jobs, give up community activities or withdraw from social life because everyday living has become too expensive, the issue extends far beyond housing.

Furthermore, this idea ignores the significant action already being taken to address housing instability. Federal, state and local governments, alongside charities and community organisations, are already implementing substantial measures to improve housing stability. The Australian government's National Housing Accord is increasing housing supply and improving affordability. State governments have strengthened tenant protections while investment continues in social and affordable housing, rental assistance, homelessness services, first home buyer schemes and build-to-rent developments. These initiatives show that housing instability is already being actively addressed. Yet Australians continue to experience financial hardships every day because economic challenges remain unsolved.

Finally, the government has failed to establish causation. The government argues that housing instability contributes to social disconnection. We agree, but contributing to the problem is not the same as being the key factor behind it. Correlation does not equal causation. The government has demonstrated that housing instability always follows broader economic conditions. Employment insecurity and the cost-of-living crisis are undermining Australia's social cohesion. Without proving that housing instability is the primary driver of all the factors, this matter cannot stand. I urge the house to bring attention to the fact that this matter does not focus on the actual issue but rather focuses on sub-issues of how our housing system is failing. This government is failing our social cohesion and community cohesion.

Bridget WHITE: When we discuss housing, we commonly only focus on how we need more houses and need cheaper houses. Yes, that is evidently true, but we also want to consider where we place housing. That is what this matter considers. This matter needs not only to consider where houses are built and what kinds of houses are built but also to place emphasis on houses being built in communities that have the infrastructure to support them. This sounds simple to achieve, but new housing developments are commonly delayed or limited due to long processes, zoning rules and construction shortages, to only name a few. But well-located housing is important, as where someone lives impacts every aspect of their lives. That means building houses that are close to work, school, public transport, health care and community services. Increasing housing supply is a must and also planning these houses to be located in communities that can make a house become a home. Everybody wants a home and everybody needs a home that is safe, affordable and not only a place to live but also a place to thrive. That is what this motion calls for. To achieve this we must consider planning and infrastructure. It is the major factor, and it has been considered carefully in this motion. I can assure you that this motion will push for more housing that is well thought out so that anyone – from young people to families, our citizens – can have a place to call home.

Shea MUNNINGS: Housing instability does not cause mental health issues; rather, not being able to afford the rent and cost does. Therefore this MPI focuses on the sub-issue rather than the actual issue. There should be more support helping the people who are struggling rather than helping the people who do not need it. If you are getting an average income, you still have to pay the bills, which takes most of the pay that you earn. Then the last of it has to last you until your next pay, and you can use that for groceries. Young people who suffer from depression can find it hard to find a suitable job, because that can then affect their ability in a workplace.

Jessie MOORE: This speech contains mentions of youth homelessness, mental health and family breakdown. If you would like to leave the chamber, please do so now.

In Victoria on any given night there are 7600 young people sleeping rough. You may ask: why? Because we simply do not have enough housing. There is a current shortage of short-term and long-term housing for young people. The accommodation that is available lacks accessibility. There are multiple places that have criteria for young people to be able to access it. This is absolutely disgusting. Imagine a young person having to leave their house due to family breakdown and then being told that it is fine because they live in their car or another person being denied housing because they suffer from mental illness. These are real people with real stories that are having a real impact on their lives. In Victoria we currently have a priority waiting list of people who are in need of social housing. That waitlist is currently 10 to 12 years long – 10 to 12 years to have a roof over your

head, to have a safe place to call home. In Australia we need more housing within every state, yet we still use more restrictive measures to let these people not have housing. We need more safe and suitable housing with less restrictive measures.

Maria ABDANI: There is no denying that Australia's housing crisis is a serious issue that affects Victorians every day. However, to claim that it is the key factor behind the negative impact of social cohesion oversimplifies what truly brings communities together. Social cohesion is built on trust, participation and shared experience. Australians build these connections through schools, gyms, sporting clubs, volunteer groups and local events. These third-party spaces bring people together, which creates social cohesion regardless of whether someone owns a home. Even if a family moves because of housing pressure, they can still become part of a community by joining local activities and meeting others through local groups. These shared spaces have a greater impact on social cohesion than housing alone. If housing was a key factor to social cohesion, everyone with a stable home would feel connected while renters would feel disconnected, when in reality it often shows the opposite. Social cohesion depends on people engaging, not just where they live. Housing is a challenge Australia faces, but it is not the defining factor behind strong communities.

Isobel ROSE: Clearly purchasing a house is not easy. In fact for most Australians it feels like a far-off dream. The average Australian, statistically, will not purchase their own home until their mid-30s. How sad is that? Our country is in a place where house prices are rising higher than ever before. In regional Melbourne alone the average house price sits at a massive \$650,000. Forty years ago the average Australian home was four times the average person's annual income. Today it is nearly eight. But people are not doing anything wrong. They are not working any less hard, but they are continually reaping these negative consequences. Of course this will affect relationships. Of course this will affect mental health. Of course this is going to divide people. Australians can barely afford a home. The young people that are here today, me included, have at least thought about the trying times ahead of us – all the years it will take to earn a place that we can call home. How can that possibly make us feel happy? The rising housing prices are a crisis that at this moment is causing an astronomical effect on social cohesion, and it is going to get worse from here. No-one here can tell me that housing prices are not having a massive impact on your families, your friends and even yourselves. The cheap houses older generations once bought are now selling for millions. How can a young person just entering the workforce possibly keep up with that? Who is going to tell them, not even including current spending on rent or food, that it will take them years to even consider putting a deposit on that old house down the street? What effect do you think that is going to have?

Zara ASMAT: The government wants us to believe housing instability is the key factor of declining social cohesion. I am not here to pretend Australia's housing crisis does not exist. It does. Rent is high, mortgages are terrifying and if you are trying to buy a house before 30, good luck. But housing instability is not the cause; it is the receipt. The real culprits are inflation, skyrocketing construction costs, population growth that has outpaced housing supply and planning systems that move slower than my brain during exam week. Let us be serious, if housing instability was the key reason Australians are becoming less connected, how do we explain declining trust in institutions, political division, cost-of-living pressure and society turning every slight disagreement into World War III? Apparently all of that gets benched because someone could not pay their lease. That is not analysis; that is selective vision. Housing instability exists because broader economic problems exist. Fix inflation, build more homes, improve planning approvals and invest in infrastructure so people can live outside inner-city suburbs without travelling for half their lifespan – those are solutions. Simply declaring housing instability the villain is like putting a bandaid on a broken leg. Sponsors want a simple answer because simple sounds good. Unfortunately for them, Australia's problem did not come with a one-item checklist.

James DYER: Australia's current housing context makes young people fight a losing battle. A continuous cycle of exclusionary practices harms our communities. Prosper Australia's 2025 housing data update reveals that there are 101,000 underused houses, 30,000 of those being completely empty. This is in Melbourne alone. Investment properties are making our rental prices skyrocket, demand is rising with equal fervour, Victorians are feeling immense pressure in this competitive rental market and houses are not any better. Treating properties as capital disproportionately raises home prices, leaving first buyers in the dust. How are we supposed to preserve our communities when empty houses are not being used to live in and our rental environment is so hostile that no-one is able to stay in one place for long? The barriers to entry are unscalable for no good reason. Housing is a human right, and our young people are unable to gain access to stable housing – that fair go that they deserve. Our housing market should work in tandem with our goals for social cohesion and community participation.

Najiba NASERI: If we truly want stable, connected communities, then why do we accept a system that pays people too little and forces them to work longer and harder just to get by? You know what, it leaves them with neither time nor energy to live, connect or plan for their future. In this way low wages mean working more hours, leaving less time to socialise, to rest or to build a relationship that holds our society together. Worse, it pushes the dreams of owning our own home further and further out of reach. Home ownership rates keep falling not because people do not want homes but because income simply cannot keep up with skyrocketing costs, rents and living expenses. Furthermore, ordinary people work themselves to the bone just to keep roofs over their heads. We still spend \$20 billion every year on tax breaks that help investors, not working families.

Emily ROGERS: The current unprecedented housing crisis is inhibiting individuals from accessing essential resources and equipment. If individuals cannot afford houses that contain adequate cooking facilities, which are vital to creature comforts, it is inevitable that they will end up overconsuming discretionary foods. This barrier to healthy eating can result in many individuals suffering from a variety of lifestyle-related diseases and illnesses such as obesity, which can lead to a variety of other health impacts.

Aiden STEVENSON: I would like to give a content warning to the house. There will be mentions of discrimination based on race, sexuality, gender identity and immigration status. If anyone would like to leave, please do so now.

The government fails to see that focusing solely on housing will not solve Australia's social cohesion problem. The matter of public importance does not ask what truly divides us. Discrimination runs rampant in our nation: 60 per cent of people believe that racism is a significant problem in Australia, 50 per cent of trans Australians have experienced some form of hate and 22 per cent of immigrants reported experiences of discrimination since arriving in Australia. It is naive to believe that, solely by addressing housing instability, social cohesion will occur. Those who predominantly face discrimination are often the ones that are most likely to face housing insecurity. How will the MPI ensure that our most vulnerable populations feel they belong, if only housing is being considered? What about their other issues? The government needs to bridge the gap between social groups so that those who predominantly face prejudice feel safe, included and valued in our country. Only then will Australia have achieved social cohesion.

Shanay GAO-KUHLMAN: If I am to read the matter of public importance, it states:

This house believes that instability within Australia's contemporary housing context is a key factor that undermines social and community cohesion.

The motion states that housing instability is a key factor, not the only key factor. This undermines the opposition's point that housing instability is not the key factor impacting social cohesion, because the motion never said it was. Housing instability is not the key factor, as the opposition states; it is a key factor, and that important difference signifies how it is one of many factors that we as a government need to consider when battling declining social cohesion. The opposition's points regarding other factors that impact social cohesion are most definitely true, and they are some of many that we need to target to better our community. How can someone engage in their community, volunteer or act in civic participation when they are too busy working long and draining shifts just to pay rent? There is a direct and undeniable link between housing stability and social cohesion. For well-off Victorians it may not seem like there is a correlation, but for our struggling citizens there is little time, little mental capacity and little opportunity to engage socially in the community. We cannot ignore Victorians who are struggling just because our richest citizens do not reflect the issue. That would be simply discriminatory and demeaning to the crux of Victorian citizens.

Mohammed Rayhan PASHA: Considering everything that has been said up to this point, what does this have to do with community connectedness? If we are going to talk about this, what do you define 'social cohesion' as? It seems like the MPI is simply considering community as something that is individualistic. Social cohesion is a community built by working together, so considering personal issues as ones that impact social functioning is just wrong.

Jack WRIGHT: The opposition have stated that they believe social cohesion is not significantly impacted by the housing crisis. However, I implore the opposition to take a look at our media landscape and tell me otherwise. For the last decade the spectre of the immigrant investor has been a malaise on our media environment and actively driven a wedge between people within our community. Under the guise of the problem of immigration, our property investors and investment lobby have taken to reducing affordable

housing to that of their problem. With immigrants being pitted against people born and raised in Australia, we have seen greater social decohesion come from an increase in property prices and the hostile rental market. It is necessary that we address this hostile and inhospitable nature of our property environment in Victoria in order to address key drivers of social disunity.

Ember McBRYDE: While the lack of housing is undoubtedly an issue, it is by no means the primary nor only means of causing social discord. To address a point made by a member opposite, to say that it is sad that the average age of house purchase is mid-30s is to place an unreasonable idea that there is a set age to buy a house when that is not necessarily accessible to all Australians. While this motion does address house buying, the purpose of this motion is to address social cohesion, and the underlying issue is the financial crisis and rampant polarisation, which are contributed to by unreasonable assumptions such as this one and which are causing division in Australians. To quote the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, social cohesion is a multidimensional concept. It includes solidarity, trust and interconnectedness between communities, organisations and individuals. In a globalised society that is being more and more polarised by social media, rising discrimination and a government that does not understand what to do about the issues truly affecting Australians, is it any wonder that social cohesion has become social chaos? To address a point made by another member opposite – who stated that the motion was a key factor, not the key factor – the housing crisis is a symptom, not a cause. A key factor of social discord is the worsening financial crisis, of which the housing issues are merely a part. If we want to acknowledge what is causing social discord among our citizens and our people, we need to address and acknowledge the underlying issues, not merely a symptom.

Allegra CIRILLO: I would like to preface this by saying that the following speech contains themes of financial hardship and suicide. If any member wishes to leave the chamber, then they should exercise their discretion now.

1961 – a brief economic collapse; 1974 to 1975 – a global economic crisis; 1982 to 1983 – a severe downturn driven by international conditions; 1990 to 1991; 2008; and 2020 to 2021 – they are all just dates and all just times. Yet they all have two things in common: (1) they all had instability in the housing market and (2) they all led to recession. ‘A significant, widespread and prolonged downturn in the economy’ – that is the definition of recession, and that is what happening to our housing market. Uncertainty and instability in our housing market are a historical indicator of economic collapse, yet nothing is in place. A 10 per cent increase in suicide and a decrease in employment by 5.7 per cent after two decades in recovery time, yet nothing is being done. It is the responsibility of a government to prevent and to protect the economy from a downward spiral. Something must be done, because without an economy and without the housing market this social cohesion and this community that we speak of will not exist.

Shania Nevindie ADIHETTY: As previously said, the government consider the housing crisis a key factor. However, simply emphasising it does not prove this statement to be correct. I could simply do the same, stating that it is a key factor. However, this is simply false. The housing crisis may be a factor, which we can agree with. However, what it has led to must be considered the key factor, not merely the effect of a financial crisis.

Thoorigai MURUGAN: Housing affordability is often framed as an economic issue, but it is equally a public health issue. A safe and affordable home is far more than four walls and a roof; it is where people sleep, recover from illness and find security. When families face housing insecurity, they also face chronic stress, anxiety and poor sleep. These health impacts do not stay at home; they follow people into classrooms, workplaces and communities. We often talk about investing in health care after people become unwell, but one of the most effective forms of preventative health care is ensuring that people have access to stable and affordable housing in the first place, because good health does not begin in the hospital, it begins at a home.

Atena KASHANI: Instability within Australia’s housing context is a significant growing factor, and I fear that we are not addressing the real elephant in the room. We have identified that there is an issue, but what now? What is the long-term investment goal that we are going to invest in? Housing prices, population growth, huge rental increases, skyrocketing inflation and growing homelessness within Australia are just some of the issues that Australia has been facing for years, and with the rise of COVID those issues have only exploded. I ask again: what is the long-term investment plan? I know measures are being put in place to attempt to address these housing instabilities, and while increased investment in social and affordable housing is wonderful, what is the end goal? What happens next financial year when the funding is cut short? We cannot invest our time, effort and money into short-term housing solutions when in reality they are only bandaid solutions.

Patrick PHUNG: When people talk about the housing crisis, they often focus on interest rates, rental vacancies and house prices. But numbers only tell half the story. The real issue is not just how much housing costs but where the cost forces us to live and what that does to our community. Housing is not just a roof over our heads; it is access to jobs, schools, transport and the everyday spaces we form community. But today that access is not evenly distributed but shaped by geography and by postcode, and that is where our instability begins and the breakdown of our social cohesion begins as well.

As homes become more expensive, young people and families are pushed further away from opportunity and to places where everything important becomes harder to reach, where it becomes longer commutes on our V/Line train to the city if the train even shows up or is not being replaced by buses. Education becomes harder to access. Seeing friends becomes something planned rather than something spontaneous. Regardless of how many houses we build, we already see this now. Young people are being priced out and forced into growth suburbs like Tarneit and Clyde where public transport is limited if not non-existent, places where infrastructure simply struggles to keep up with daily demand. Housing stress now becomes transport stress, time stress and social stress but all in one, and this creates a form of inequality that is easy to miss but hard to escape, because postcode has determined opportunities. Two young people can work just as hard, study the same subjects and have the same ambition. But if one lives near opportunities and the other does not, their futures diverge, and that is the core geographical inequality: differences in infrastructure depending on where we live and the postcodes we live in. Building more homes is not the only answer. We need to consider what surrounds them, to answer the opposition's question. We need to build the infrastructure that connects housing to opportunity, reliable transport, accessible schools and shared public spaces that bring different people into contact, because without that, housing does not create a community, it creates distance.

Mahek BADWAL: To quote the government, they said, 'Put houses in communities that make a house a home.' This evidently demonstrates that the government says that we should build houses in communities that are already strong. This fails to look at the overall problem, which is that communities which are not strong, which lack social cohesion, are the main point of this matter of public importance. But are we simply just going to wash over these communities and ask for negligence? The government speaks about going to communities where there is access to public transport as well as communities where education is strong. However, where are we going to build houses in these communities? They are close to the city and there are already houses built there. If we are to expand and build more houses, they will be out in suburbs, as they said, such as Tarneit and different areas. Should we not focus on improvement in these communities themselves to ensure that people living in those areas also experience the same level of social cohesion? As well as this there is this delusion that the housing crisis directly correlates to recessions. Simply put, recessions occur because of cyclical factors such as inflation and high levels of unemployment as well as low levels of GDP growth. They do not simply come because certain people cannot buy houses. It is a societal issue. Simply put, if we want to ensure that we have a progression of social cohesion, ensuring that not only non-material living standards but also material living standards improve, we should focus on creating more streamlined versions of these cyclical factors.

Sophie LLOYD: I would like to issue a content warning for the following speech, which contains mentions of homelessness, suicide, self-harm and hospitalisation. If members would like to leave the chamber, please do so now.

Half of young Victorians aged 15 to 24 experiencing homelessness battle mental health conditions that lead to hospitalisation. The cycle repeats itself when they are released back into homelessness, so tell me exactly how mental health is not contributing to homelessness, how homelessness is not related to mental health and how the housing crisis is not related to mental health? It is clear that self-harm, suicide and hospitalisation are directly impacted by this insanely ridiculous inflation leading to a housing crisis. We did not say that the housing crisis is a factor of a recession. We said it is an indication of the recession. We also said that we understand that the housing crisis is separate from the economic situation. We understand this. What we are saying is that mental health is being impacted by this situation.

Matilda FEEHAN: The government wonders why social cohesion is low, but who is supporting the people who physically and mentally cannot participate in society, hold a job et cetera, let alone manage rent, especially in this economic state because of their mental health? Yes, this leads to other issues such as homelessness, and there is zero doubt that homeless people need support. Of course they do, but a homeless person needs a foundation – support from elsewhere. A house does not fix the problem of social cohesion; support does. This is the real problem. Housing instability is the result of other, more urgent issues. Strong social cohesion is not

going to magically coincide with housing stability, because social cohesion is not about where you are; it is about whom you are with.

Isabella HARVEY: I would like to bring attention to the fact that the current lack of accessible housing causes a detrimental loss of hope in our futures as young people and that this also causes a serious lack of community participation for youth. Young people without access to safe, stable housing are less likely to have the opportunity to participate in society. This by definition causes a divide in social cohesion. The opposition has brought up the fact that unstable housing does not affect everyone and that the real issue is only economic strength. I would like to ask you: why do you think it is okay for young people to suffer in silence without a home while nothing is being done to help them? These young people have done nothing to deserve their insecure housing. That is a failure of the government. If we are debating social cohesion, we need to understand that, for a cohesive society, everyone must be included. Young people do not deserve to be forgotten by their government. It is not good enough that the youth of Australia are robbed of their happiness, security and ability to participate in society because of the failures of our housing system. We must work together to prevent insecure housing from further ruining our social cohesion.

Nishi MAKATI: Social cohesion is a community function. A well-made house in an unsafe neighbourhood barely passes as a safe home. The government has consistently stated that a lack of houses is what prevents cohesion. But what about safety? Housing cannot be considered the issue if it is the location and the community that decide such things.

Eliza MORRIS: I would like to support and further add on Member Moore's point. Over 30,000 Victorians are currently experiencing some form of homelessness. Of those 30,000, only 7 per cent actually sleep rough on the street. Homelessness presents itself in various different ways. This includes sleeping in a car, couch surfing and even temporarily crashing at a friend's house. The reality is this accommodation is temporary. When somebody is actively thinking about where their next meal is coming from and where they are going to stay the night, their ability to connect with their community and participate towards social cohesion becomes hindered. If you were stuck in a constant state of survival, would your first priority be social cohesion and connection? I think not, so housing stability is directly tied to social cohesion.

Najiba NASERI: The measures in this MPI of social housing assistance and reforms are small steps, but they do not fix the root causes: economic instability, low pay and a system that makes security a privilege rather than a stated right. When people are overworked, underpaid and locked out of home ownership, we all lose. This MPI does not go far enough to fix this unfair reality, and it will not give working people the dignity, time and security they deserve.

Arzoo HABIBI: Saying 'home' itself brings peace, but now when people think of home it creates stress and financial pressure, which was once bringing peace. Stable housing is strongly connected to physical health and mental wellbeing. As housing instability increases, so do homelessness, financial crises and mental health crises – all due to the challenges faced by the community because of housing instability, which might even lead to increased crime rates and substance abuse if they cannot be coped with well.

Imrana AHMED: Housing instability is not just about lack of homes; it is often a result of economic instability. When people lose their jobs, face rising living costs or struggle with paying rent or mortgages, it becomes incredibly difficult. Financial pressure can lead to missed payments, eviction or even homelessness.

Ember McBRYDE: I would just like to point out that a lot of the points from the government side have been about how the housing crisis is directly correlating to mental ill health. While we do not dispute that the housing crisis is an issue and that it is contributing to a mental health crisis, what this motion actually intends to address is social cohesion. Social cohesion has not been functioning as it should be in Australia for many reasons, including the increasing divide over other political issues, which are made worse by social media and discrimination, as members of my side have already stated. I would just like to remind the government of this when they continue to speak about only one aspect of their motion, which is attempting to address an issue that is only part of the larger problem.

Kaydee JONES: As previously analysed, the gap between average wages and the average cost of housing has become ridiculous – completely out of control. Home ownership among 30–34-year-olds has fallen from 64 per cent to 50 per cent from 1971 to 2021. But this crisis extends beyond buying a home. Today's young

people are navigating a market that continues to fail them whilst fighting voices that tell them they are the ones failing. This is where the intergenerational divide deepens. Frankly, the fact that different generations hold harsh, often unfair opinions about each other should not be a surprise to this house. We see these attitudes everywhere. Other generations see young people as uncaring, irresponsible, lazy or unwilling to work hard, reasoning that this is why they cannot afford homes. Conversely, younger generations blame other generations for creating our housing climate after supposedly having it easy back in the day. These misconceptions and opinions are vicious and are driving a wedge between our communities. Young people do care and they are willing to work hard, as evidenced by this program. Other generations are not solely to blame, and they did not just get everything they wished for. This constant battle of opinions drowns out the real issues – issues creating constant change in all parts of our housing context that no-one can manage. Simply put, housing instability creates problems for people. This frustration about the problems turns into the blaming of others for the problems everyone is facing. This creates division between people. Housing instability does not just push people out of homes; it pushes generations away from each other and prides communities apart. If we fail to act now, community cohesion will continue to crumble, and the consequences will reach every corner of society.

Fangcheng ZHOU: I would like to say to begin by saying that everyone's speech here has been so impressive. It has been so amazing to listen to everyone, and I pretty much agree with all the points made. I just want to add that, even with stable housing and accommodation, there can still be a lack of social cohesion due to factors such as loneliness or even bullying, because bullying, unfortunately, when it happens, can still lead to a lack of social cohesion and division within the community, even with stable housing. Thus it is important to consider multiple aspects when we want to ensure social cohesion and not just housing.

Sophie LLOYD: 7628: that was the number of young Victorians experiencing homelessness on the census night of 2021, making up 24 per cent of homeless people in Victoria – 24 per cent, that is a quarter of the homeless population in this state. I refuse to believe that these statistics do not show the mental health struggles within this community and do not show that this housing crisis is a real issue that is a direct indication of recession in our state.

Olivia HARRAP: The government state that fixing the housing crisis is an idealistic solution for the perfect community, but do they really believe this will suddenly lead to perfect social cohesion? It is simply unfathomable.

Shanay GAO-KUHLMAN: I would just like to reiterate that housing instability is one factor affecting social cohesion. We do not deny the other factors such as bullying or the other factors previously mentioned. They are all part of a big puzzle piece that affects us as a community. But if we keep denying every factor to try to fix one sector, then the whole piece will never be solved.

Hayley MARTINIANO DIAS: In a matter of social cohesion, Victoria gives equal opportunity to all. We should empower Victorians to take back control of their living situation instead of being forever in a state of victimhood. Let us provide resources and employment, engagement support and counselling for those facing housing insecurity rather than giving them more taxpayer dollars.

Linh DO: Why does the government keep talking about homelessness when the topic is social cohesion?

Isabella HARVEY: I would like to reiterate that homelessness and mental health directly impact social cohesion. Those who are struggling with mental health or homelessness do not have the opportunity to participate in our society.

Mahek BADWAL: Let us talk about social cohesion. Social cohesion is not just mental health. Social cohesion is about how we connect as a society, not just the individual. They say that simply by putting a house on top of someone's head we will solve discrimination itself. Pray, tell me, do we really think that just by allowing someone to move into a house their whole life will just be renewed and bettered – simply by an objective piece of wood, if you think about it? Now tell me, even if I indulge in the notion that putting someone into a house helps them stay safe, takes them off the streets and ensures that they are not homeless, is that all we are capable of – just security, nothing more, like equity, inclusion in society itself, collaboration with neighbours? We should be focusing not only on a way to ensure that people have housing but that the reasons why they have to leave their houses in the first place do not arise. Why do people become homeless? Some of

the reasons are because of problems at home. Social incohesion is the reason that homelessness rises. We are stuck in a spiral. We need to focus on the real problem rather than going in an endless loop.

Isobel ROSE: While politicians talk about different issues, the people are fighting for homes. It is difficult to address different aspects, like bullying, when that person and their family might not have a home. What do you think is more urgent? That is not a connected community. That is what you talk about when you say 'social cohesion'.

Jye USHER: I think it is fascinating to learn that as the government of idealists we are fighting against an opposition that believes this MPI should solve every problem in the entire state, housing inclusive.

House divided on motion:

Ayes 51

Noes 3

Majority in favour: 48

Motion agreed to.

The ACTING PRESIDENT: Well done; I think this is so topical. I have got a 26-year-old and a 32-year-old. The 26-year-old still lives with us; the 32-year-old is spending \$650 a week on rent somewhere with his wife. They came out for dinner last night. The whole conversation at our dinner table was about housing and renting. We did not come up with any solutions, other than my son suggesting that I live in a tent in the backyard and he come back. It is tricky for you all when you get into that market, tricky for your parents. Anyway, thank you again for your contributions.

Sitting suspended 12:42 pm until 1:17 pm.

The ACTING PRESIDENT (Michael Galea): Good afternoon, members. Welcome to Youth Parliament. My name is Michael Galea. I am a state member in this chamber. I sit right where you are sitting over there normally. That is the best seat in the house, I have to say. I hope you are very much already enjoying the day. Today I will be taking you through a piece of legislation, which is very exciting. This is my first term of Parliament, so I have been here for just over 3½ years. I am from the outer south-east of Melbourne, I represent the South-Eastern Metropolitan Region and I got into politics when I was about your age by running a campaign to get a bus route from my local town to the nearest train station. Our local MP in the Assembly at the time was terrific, and she really inspired me. She delivered the bus route, and she showed me you can achieve a lot through politics. I hope you are all getting something really valuable out of this week. I hope you feel free to ask questions and interact and engage. I will be very happy to stick around afterwards, have a chat and answer any questions you have about this strange place we are in today, this weird and wonderful building, but also anything else you would like to ask about.

Bills

Free Ambulance Services Bill 2026

Sponsor: Charles Latrobe P-12 College

Refuter: Y Community School – Epping

Introduction and first reading

Jack WRIGHT: I move:

That I have leave to introduce a bill titled Free Ambulance Services Bill 2026.

Motion agreed to.

Read first time.

Second reading

Jack WRIGHT: I move:

That the bill be now read a second time.

Over the last decade government inaction on healthcare policy has left this state a frog in boiling water. In this bill's case the government is to take a stride towards rectifying a critical bottleneck in our ageing healthcare policy framework, introducing the Free Ambulance Services Bill 2026. For most within the community our valued ambulance services provide a first port of call in times of medical crisis and an essential role in patient stabilisation and transport, yet the service's financial framework has become a hallmark of outdated policy. Within the state of Victoria governments past have placed the financial burden of a public good on the private individual, commodifying a life-saving service.

As our state's population continues to expand, we cannot risk leaving the most vulnerable members of our community behind in regard to crisis care. The individual should not look to choose between their access to quality health care and the health of their wallet when it comes time to call an ambulance. This is why within the bill tabled today the government proposes the full funding and subsidy of ambulance services, repairing an essential pillar of our healthcare system. Directly within this bill the government makes clear that the ambulance service of our state is an essential public good. No longer will over 17,000 Victorians a year pay for on-the-spot paramedic care. No longer will patients receive unexpected invoices for ambulance rides well after transport. They will simply receive world-class care through the taxes that they already shoulder.

The government understands it is not only the cost of an ambulance ride that hinders the accessibility and efficacy of our first responders but also a crisis of understaffing and endless backlogs that have festered under years of poor policy management, with the Australian Medical Association noting that only 65 per cent of ambulance call-outs are resolved within the 40-minute target timeframe. For many within the community to wait on an ambulance is to gamble with one's own life. To this end this bill will act to rectify external sources of pressure on our ambulance system, including staff burnout and unnecessary callouts. In establishing a non-emergency hotline in clause 6 and better conditions for on-the-job paramedics within clause 9, in line with union demands, this bill enables our healthcare workers to focus on acting as first responders to the most critical situations across the state.

Further, addressing the intersectional nature of healthcare coverage, this bill's provision of ambulance translation units field tested by the National Health Service in London will bridge accessibility issues faced by our ever increasing linguistically diverse community. This will be paired with cultural sensitivity training for all paramedics. This government is committed to demarcating our ambulances as a good for all residents of Victoria, without the burden placed by finances. The free ambulance bill tabled today is an opportunity for long-overdue reform to remedy the considerable strain on patients and paramedics alike. In addressing both community accessibility issues and structural limitations on our ambulance services this bill reinforces a cornerstone of our healthcare system and therefore the lives of the residents of the state it is built upon.

Fangcheng ZHOU: Before I begin, I would like to give a content warning that this speech contains very brief allusions to alcohol and substance use. If any members would like to leave the chamber, I advise them to please do so now.

Health care is a fundamental human right, and the intent behind this bill resonates with me as one which I wholeheartedly support. I am sure there are many in this group who feel the same – that people should feel empowered to call ambulance services without any financial barrier. Despite this, even with the best intentions, that may not always translate into perfect legislation, at least not straightaway. Thus today we shall propose some suggestions to further refine this bill to enhance its effectiveness.

To begin, free ambulance services already exist in Victoria under the concessional classification, so those eligible for concession receive free ambulance coverage in Australia with free ambulance transport to the nearest and most appropriate hospital. This applies for both emergency and medically authorised non-emergency situations. The concessional classification includes current holders of the Victorian pensioner concession card, healthcare card and child disability healthcare card and includes asylum seekers, so in our current system those who need them most already have free ambulance services available to them. As for

others, the Ambulance Victoria membership gives Australia-wide protection against the cost of emergency ambulance services and is only \$55 for an entire year.

I would like to draw attention to clause 6, which talks about the establishment of a non-emergency health advice line. In fact such services already exist under our current healthcare system. Nurse-on-Call is a free helpline connecting people with a registered nurse 24 hours a day, seven days a week, to discuss any health-related issue anywhere in Victoria. When someone calls the helpline, a nurse may provide medical advice on whether they should contact a GP, or if their condition is very serious, the nurse may transfer their call to Triple Zero Victoria. Additionally, for Victorians requiring urgent care, the Victorian Virtual Emergency Department is also free and may be accessed anytime 24 hours a day, seven days a week, connecting people to an emergency doctor or nurse from their computer or mobile phone. Both these services have translation and interpretation services available at all times from TIS National for those who speak languages other than English. Rather than spending immense amounts of money and resources on implementing a whole new system, shouldn't we instead put our energy into improving our current systems? Having two or more separate systems would only reduce our efficiency and ability to help people, whereas one cohesive and unified entity would reduce costs and reduce confusion around which service is which, thus optimising our organisation, coordination and the number of people we can save.

Additionally, who here used PTV when it was free? Did you notice that trains, buses and trams were noticeably more crowded and crammed? Making anything free will make people more incentivised to use it. That is natural. Whilst for public transport and ambulance services we hope that this will be used for good, it can also lead certain people to abuse the system. Even with the establishment of a non-emergency health advice line and the emergency services education campaign, in the heat of the moment for some people their first instinct is to call an ambulance, and in their panic they may fail to discern whether that actually is the appropriate move that the situation calls for. According to Triple Zero Victoria on average Victoria receives 3172 ambulance emergency calls per day. If that service was made free, we would only expect an increased number of calls, which would only increase the pressure and burnout rate of an already stretched healthcare system. I would like to draw everyone's attention to clause 9, which states that paramedics will have access to rest between shifts as well as access to health counselling and burnout prevention programs, with additional leave if required.

Although the government has thought about faster ambulance response times and faster services within hospitals, they have not yet thought about where the additional paramedics and hospital staff are going to come from. Naturally to ensure reasonable working hours for staff we require more staff. According to leaked Ambulance Victoria communications, intensive care ambulance shifts are still struggling to be filled, with the number of full-time equivalent intensive paramedics at a 10-year low. Thus before making ambulance services free for everyone, it is crucial that we first consider whether our current system would actually be able to handle this surge in ambulance calls. We must first prepare – *(Time expired)*

Imrana AHMED: I would like you to know that this speech contains a personal experience involving illness and hospital care. If anyone would like to leave the chamber, please do so now.

When a Victorian goes to a hospital they should get care quickly, but at the moment crowded emergency departments and tired healthcare workers are putting our system under huge pressure. This problem is not something I have read about; it has affected my own family. Not long ago my dad became very sick and needed urgent care, but after seeing how crowded hospitals are and hearing about ambulance delays, he chose not to go. He was scared he would have to wait hours in a hospital chair whilst staff were already overwhelmed. When people are too scared to go to the hospital because they think the system will not help them, something is seriously wrong. The system is blocked and overloaded. Data from the Australian Medical Association shows that one in 10 mental health patients in Victoria's emergency departments wait over 22 hours for a bed. Across Australia 90 per cent of patients who need hospital beds wait up to 19 hours. These delays are dangerous and could be life threatening for some patients. This plan offers a real solution. It introduces 8-hour shifts, protecting workers from too much overtime. Currently 72 per cent of nurses say they are burnt out. When most of our healthcare workers are exhausted, how do we expect them to perform safe and high-quality care? We need to be able to ensure all staff get the support they need in order to appropriately care for patients. This proposal also improves the system by building better hospital spaces, adding discharge areas to free up beds faster and speeding up medical tests. This is about basic care and responsibility.

Matilda FEEHAN: The notion of reducing costs of ambulance services is 100 per cent a necessity, but the idea that it could become completely free is far too ambitious. As part of the government's bill aiming to create free ambulance services, clause 7 proposes faster ambulance response times. Clause 7.1 states emergency lanes shall be created on all Victorian roads – note 'all' Victorian roads. Developments like this would take years, not to mention all of the resources VicRoads would be expected to cash out. It is impractical and unfathomable to believe it is even necessary for there to be an emergency ambulance lane on all Victorian roads. While there would most definitely be benefits for these lanes in high-density areas, doing roadworks on rural roads would only cause disruptions for local drivers and most likely the ambulances themselves. Even if it was for the extra lane, ambulances are deemed at a high-risk speed and flagged once they go more than 25 kilometres an hour over the speed limit, meaning the extra lane also has its restrictions. By stating that resources and systems used to communicate between emergency vehicles and hospitals should be improved, clause 7.2 is focusing on all the wrong things. It is nearly impossible to imagine that an already functioning and effective system can be improved whilst also updating every single road in Victoria. The only reason you would need an updated GPS system in an ambulance is for all of the roadworks that would be occurring. Yes, Clause 7 explains that roadworks will be planned to minimise disruptions, and clause 7.4(a) establishes that all local hospitals and ambulance services will be notified of the disruptions. However, anyone who has driven in Victoria while roadworks are occurring will know that they are never done swiftly or conveniently. Ambulances are equipped with all of the necessary resources to stabilise a patient until they reach hospitals, and in a worst-case scenario a helicopter would already be on the way. Introducing roadworks and trying to update an effectively operating communications system to increase ambulance response times would only create more chaos and minimise overall ability for people to access urgent care.

Hamza HASSAN: I rise to speak on clause 10, addressing the urgent need to reduce language barriers in our healthcare and emergency systems. Victoria is becoming more diverse every year – more cultures, more languages and more people who rely on services that were never designed for this level of multiculturalism. In emergencies this becomes dangerous. When someone cannot explain their symptoms and when a parent cannot describe what is happening with their child, treatment is delayed and lives are put at risk. This is equally true for deaf and hard-of-hearing Victorians, who rely on Auslan and face even greater communication barriers under pressure. Clause 10 provides practical, immediate solutions – a dedicated interpreter line with 30-second access and multilingual in emergency operations, real-time ambulance translation technology and stronger communication between paramedics and patients. We know this works. In London the NHS already uses interpreter and translation systems to support its diverse communities. Providing these measures saves time and saves lives. Victoria cannot wait. Our population is only becoming more diverse, and without action the gap in emergency communication will widen. When lives are on the line, language and communication barriers must never determine whether someone receives care. I commend clause 10 to the house.

The ACTING PRESIDENT: At this point I will acknowledge the presence of a visiting MP from the Parliament of Victoria, Mr Shaun Leane, the President of the Legislative Council, in the gallery today.

Shea MUNNINGS: The paramedics have to be able to keep the patients safe, and on top of that, they have to call an interpreter. This is for the translation device. If they are in the middle of trying to save a patient, how will they know how to use the device, if they are trying frantically to figure out what is wrong with the patient and as well to figure out how to keep them alive until they reach the hospital? Paramedics have already gone through training – tough training – and now they have got to learn how to use this device. There are other ways that they can figure out what language a person is speaking, and that would be Google Translate. It is a free service, and it is easy to access. It pretty much says what the patient or the young person might have said over the phone. Using Google Translate would be a great way to figure out what the responders need for that patient when they arrive, instead of not knowing what they will need to do once they get there. How often will the device be checked? Will the devices be checked every day, every six months or every year? It is not up to the paramedics, it would be up to someone else, which means there would be more money going towards something that the government has to pay for, just for these devices to be checked quite often. Also, how will the translation device work during a search and rescue, when you might not be able to get the device down to the patient, or if the patient is in a tough spot, they might not know what they have got to do to make sure that they do not make the situation worse. How will that work? How will you get the translation device down there? *(Time expired)*

Aleya ISMAIL: I rise today to speak in support of clause 7 of this bill, which focuses on one of the most important aspects of emergency health care – ensuring ambulances can reach patients as quickly as possible.

When someone calls an ambulance, every second matters. Delays caused by traffic, poor communication or roadworks can be the difference between life and death. Clause 7 introduces practical and effective measures to improve ambulance response times across Victoria. Firstly, creating emergency lanes on Victorian government roads will allow ambulances to travel more effectively through traffic, reducing unnecessary delays and helping paramedics to reach patients sooner. Secondly, improving communication systems between emergency vehicles and hospitals will mean hospitals can prepare for incoming patients before they arrive. This will allow medical staff to respond faster and provide immediate treatment, ultimately improving patient outcomes. Clause 7 also recognises the challenges faced by rural communities by allowing emergency vehicles to use local clinics or fire stations to treat patients when necessary. This bill ensures that people living outside metropolitan areas are not disadvantaged simply because they are further away from a major hospital. Finally, the bill requires roadworks to be planned with emergency services in mind. By notifying local hospitals and ambulance services when roadworks are taking place, disruptions can be managed more effectively, ensuring emergency vehicles can continue responding without unnecessary delays. These are practical, sensible reforms that will save time, improve emergency care and ultimately save lives.

Atena KASHANI: I rise today not because I disagree with the intention of this bill. The principle that no-one should hesitate to call an ambulance because of the cost is something that I can wholeheartedly support. However, good intentions do not equal good legislation. This bill promises equality, but it fails to deliver on equity. Victoria is one of the most multicultural states in Australia. We are home to international students, temporary workers, refugees, asylum seekers, visitors and tourists from all across the world, yet clause 4.1 limits free ambulance services exclusively to Victorian residents. Members, illness and emergencies do not stop to ask someone what residency status they hold. That directly contradicts the bill's own preamble, which states that 'price should never be a consideration over life'. If you truly want to believe that statement, then it should apply to every person in need of emergency care, not just those who fit a particular definition of 'residency'. The bill also speaks exclusively about reducing language barriers by introducing interpreters, translation devices and cultural competency training. These are wonderful initiatives that I am so proud of and in full support of, especially as someone from a migrant background who has to translate for their family. But accessibility is more than just language. Equality means treating everyone the same, but equity means understanding that different people face different barriers and challenges. This bill has a potential to be outstanding, and I have no doubt about that. However, in its current form it falls short of its own vision. Until emergency health care is genuinely accessible for everyone who needs it, I cannot support this bill, and I urge the government to make changes.

Abubakar MAALIM: I stand before you today to urge your full support for this vital section of the bill, improved conditions for paramedics. When we are at our lowest, when an emergency strikes and every second counts, who do we call? We call our paramedics. They are the backbone of our frontline healthcare system. But right now those very individuals are facing a disaster of their own. How can we expect them to save our lives if we do not provide them with the basic conditions to sustain their own? How can we expect someone who has been working a gruelling, exhausting shift without adequate rest to make split-second life or death decisions? The reality is our paramedics are burning out. When 70 per cent of our frontline workers openly admit they are given more work that they can safely do well, we have a crisis. This is deeply concerning as we want the absolute best care for all citizens across Victoria. But how can we possibly guarantee their safety when the very people we trust to protect us are pushed past their limits? We cannot. It is our responsibility in this chamber to protect them. This proposal directly addresses this urgent need. First, it mandates that paramedics receive a reasonable amount of rest between their shifts. Rest is not a luxury; it is a fundamental safety requirement. Second, it caps standard shifts at 8 hours, ensuring that if they do work past this point to take care of a patient overtime pay automatically kicks in. Finally, it guarantees access to health counselling and burnout prevention programs. It ensures that employers must conduct regular wellbeing reviews and provide additional leave when it is desperately needed. This is not just about changing workers' regulations on a piece of paper, it is about human dignity. It is about showing the people who look after us that we see them, we value them and we care for them. If we want a healthcare system that is strong, safe and reliable for every Victorian, we must protect the people who run it. I urge you all to vote in favour of these changes. Let us give our paramedics the support, the rest and the respect they rightly deserve.

Hayley MARTINIANO DIAS: I rise today with a deep sense of responsibility because what is at stake is not just policy but the very stability of our emergency healthcare system and the wellbeing of the people who rely on it most – the people of Victoria. Let us be absolutely clear: Victoria already protects its most vulnerable.

Right now, to name a few, refugees, low-income earners, pensioners, concession card holders, children in out-of-home care, people in police custody and more all receive automatic free emergency ambulance services – no fees, no barriers, no discrimination. Current legislation has ensured that no vulnerable Victorian is left wondering whether they can afford a call for help. In contrast, this bill – this sweeping, universal no-limits bill – threatens to undo that calculated balance. Imagine the consequences. Imagine an already stretched ambulance system suddenly flooded with people who can afford private cover but choose not to because this government has told them they no longer need to contribute. Imagine paramedics pulled away from life and death emergencies because the system is overwhelmed with call-outs that were once handled privately. Imagine seniors, the single parent, the asylum seeker, those we are meant to protect, waiting significantly longer because the system has been swamped. This bill removes the injury threshold entirely. Any injury, any concern, any moment of uncertainty becomes a free ambulance ride. We know human nature. Some will take advantage of this, and when they do, it is the vulnerable and poor who pay the price in delayed care and reduced access. And let us not pretend this bill is truly universal. It still excludes non-emergency transport, leaving people with chronic illness, mental health issues and disability exactly where they were before. We are not fixing the gaps. This bill fundamentally widens them. The truth is profoundly clear: we already remove financial and access barriers for those who need it. We already have a system that works when it has the right support to thrive. The bill risks collapsing the very service it claims to improve. It spreads resources thin, encourages misuse and diverts care away from those who need it most. For the sake of fairness, sustainability and the Victorians who depend on medical care in an emergency, I cannot support this bill.

Ibrahim SHARIF: A lot of Victorians deal with health problems that are worrying but not serious enough to be life threatening. In those moments people are often left asking, ‘Should I call an ambulance, should I go to the emergency department or should I see a GP instead?’ Without clear advice, many people make the wrong call, which puts extra pressure on ambulance services and closes our emergency departments. This proposal would create a free, statewide, non-emergency health and advice line to help fix that. Anyone could call the service and speak with a trained health professional who understands both health care and the Victorian system thoroughly. After hearing the caller’s symptoms, they could point them to the most appropriate option, whether that is booking a GP appointment, going to an urgent care clinic or, if they really need to, calling an ambulance. Because the service would be completely free and available to every Victorian, no-one would have to put off getting advice because of cost or uncertainty. Instead of guessing what to do, people could get trusted medical guidance quickly and safely. This would also help our healthcare system by steering people with non-emergency conditions away from ambulances and emergency departments. They could free up those important services for people who really need them. This means that people experiencing genuine medical emergencies would have shorter waiting times, faster ambulance responses and more efficient use of healthcare resources. This proposal would give Victorians confidence that they are making the right healthcare decisions while also helping to create a more efficient, accessible and responsive healthcare system free to everyone.

Khusheen KAUR: The essence of this bill is to provide free ambulance services for all Victorians in emergency situations. The government holds the aim to give Victorians reliable care. In an attempt to address issues of efficiency, the bill disregards the crucial component of including all Victorians, while holding reliability. For a bill centred around improving public health for all, why are the 1.6 million Victorians residing in rural areas being disregarded? Now, I have read the bill. I have read it dozens of times, and in its entirety it provides just one sentence regarding rural communities. Let us draw attention to clause 7.3:

In rural areas, emergency vehicles shall use local clinics or fire stations to treat patients if necessary.

I ask: has the government really done research into the nature of rural communities? This bill promises equal ambulance access, but it ignores the reality of rural Victoria. We cannot improve response times simply by making services free, when rural communities already suffer from ambulance shortages, a lack of paramedics, extensive travel and limited emergency infrastructure. Utilising and facilitating medical equipment in fire stations – sure, let us do it. But where is this extra space coming from? Fire stations are built and used for fires. Is that not common sense? Hospitals and clinics, though, are for medical emergencies. I urge the government to rethink why they are increasing workload and adding more equipment without even having proper facilities.

This bill promises everything to everyone, but it does not deliver a realistic plan to make it happen. Rather than creating all of these new concepts, let us strengthen our focus on those that truly need the extra facilities and services. If this bill is enacted, the rural communities in our state will not benefit from this service. Their voices,

their pain and their need for medical help will not be heard, but being here, are we not meant to be listening to the voices that need to be heard?

Sophie LLOYD: I would like to mention a content warning. This will have a personal anecdote of a medical emergency. If you would like to leave the chamber, please do so now.

In 2021 my dad had a heart attack. He was not unhealthy and he was not unfit; he just had a heart attack. He survived, but at what cost? The ambulance fee was \$650. My parents are nurses. If you know anything about nurses, you know that the pay is not adequate. As someone from a rural area, I support this bill. You see, the hospital in my town cannot meet the demands of a rapidly growing and ageing community. We cannot recruit new workers due to it being an unappealing place to work, and there are ongoing pressures due to the expenses of ambulances. There are so many pressures on our ED workers. We have such a high rate of turnover and burnout that it is astronomical that people still choose to work there. We have such a lack of beds in our ED that we have people getting treated in the chairs in the waiting room. I support this bill not only because I have witnessed firsthand the burnout and pain that ambulance workers go through, but because I have had personal experience with not being able to afford these services.

Ruby McDONALD: In clause 9 the government has explained that they want to reduce the pressure on healthcare workers by providing counselling. However, how is this a foolproof development if nurses, for example, are already experiencing symptoms of burnout? By eliminating the cost of ambulances, it is undeniable that only more people will want urgent care, providing more work to the paramedics. Although we the opposition recognise that all citizens should have equal and easy access to urgent care, it is an assumption that burnout prevention programs and counselling are the only solution to reducing the sheer increase in pressure put on paramedics, especially as the amount of patients will only increase sharply from here. Access to urgent care may increase, but the number of paramedics does not. How now can we expect them to perform at their best?

Kaydee JONES: I would just like to address that health care should not be balanced between who needs care and who maybe could possibly go without. I know that sometimes we talk about this bill as if non-emergency situations are of a very, very high prevalence, but the fact is emergency situations in this bill are defined as ‘any situation in which urgent medical assessment, treatment or transport is reasonably required to protect a person’s life or health’, which can include mental health crises and many other things. It is a matter of the level of severity. Additionally, when we are talking about the free services for ambulances that are already available in the state of Victoria, we talk about those who need them most. I just want to point out that medical emergencies can happen to anyone at any time. We cannot reasonably know who may need it most. We are also talking about people possibly abusing the system. I think, personally, people would already have found ways to use the current system, and I do not think anyone wants to be in an ambulance. I think that is common sense. So I do not believe that this bill would necessarily correlate with an increase in abuse of the system. And also finally, no-one should have to stop and consider if a situation requires urgent medical attention because they know that services may cost money. It should just be an instinct. Have you ever heard of the saying ‘Better safe than sorry’?

Najiba NASERI: Thank you, honourable members. We truly respect your point of view. This bill comes from a good place, but it carries serious flaws that risk doing more harm than good. Let me clear the points: first, free services for everyone will cause overuse and strain. With no cost threshold, many will call ambulances for non-urgent issues, clogging lines, delaying help for life-threatening cases and stretching paramedics and resources to breaking point. Free access without clear limits can turn a solution into a bottleneck. Second, it ignores the massive cost and where the money will come from. Ambulances and hospital services are already underfunded. Making everything free means billions must be funded – money that may be taken from other vital health, education and community services. Of course good care needs funding, but this bill gives no clear, sustainable plan to pay for it all. Life should never depend on money, but fairness and safety also depend on a system that works for everyone. This bill is well meaning, but it is unbalanced and unfunded and risks slowing down the help we need the very most. It needs more realism to succeed.

Allegra CIRILLO: Ambulance, police and firefighters are all essential workers with jobs to protect and help the community in an emergency. The opposition has made a point to mention that we should not make this free because it would put more stress onto paramedics. However, let me ask every single chamber member in this room this: what about that patient or that victim? The removal of the cost of ambulance services does not

increase the amount of victims, it instead turns more victims into survivors. So to compare the cost of tram services – a convenience – to a human life is inhumane and against the national interest.

Aiden STEVENSON: Victoria already has a shortage of nurses, doctors and paramedics. The increase in ambulance services would cause an increase in stressors for our emergency staff, who are often already overworked, burnt out and facing their own health implications. Stress can cause more mistakes with patients. Is that really better care for our patients? Stress on already overworked staff could cause our emergency staff to start having health complications of their own or worsen their already existing health complications. Emergency staff often already work overnight shifts, have a lack of breaks and work long hours, which increases their likelihood of having health complications. This bill would mean that these workers would have to undergo more stress and face more health implications. Why must our already short-staffed, overworked and, as the sponsor has already said, underpaid workers have to face the brunt force of this bill.

Shanay GAO-KUHLMAN: Please note that this speech mentions a personal emergency, so please leave now if you need to.

Last year I considered taking a tram to the hospital when experiencing an emergency; however, because that was not obviously feasible at the time, I simply received no help. This is the truth for many who do not understand or have ambulance cover. They suffer in silence because the cost is simply too high. The cost for someone suffering should never be that high – if there is any at all. Nobody should be stuck in severe pain or a potentially life-threatening situation because the out-of-pocket fee might make them worse off. These financial concerns should never be a barrier to someone receiving adequate support. Additionally, the opposition is discriminatory in saying that those who can technically pay the coverage should have to just because their wage is high. There are many other factors that can influence someone's ability to pay the fee. For example, I could be considerably well off, wage wise, but that money could be occupied paying for skyrocketing rent prices, education or children or other dependents, with whom the priority would sit. A choice between your child's dinner and their health should never be a question.

Maria ABDANI: Clause 10.4 talks about translation devices that the paramedics would have to use. How often would these be monitored, and by whom? If there is monitoring, constant or not, monitoring can take away resources and keep them for monitoring rather than for the actual paramedics who have a job to do. Additionally, clause 6 talks about the establishment of a non-emergency health advice line. What is the point of this when resources like this already exist? Having yet another resource could stretch out the lack of healthcare workers, which then could lead to individuals not getting enough resources to receive help.

Bodhi COLLINS: I would like to address a concerning point made by the opposition: that there is an underlying assumption that an increase in people using ambulance services is a bad thing. People do not call ambulance services for bogus reasons generally. The majority of people have proper judgement when calling 000, and they call 000 because they actually need help. I would also like to echo the words of the honourable member Wright when he said that to wait on an ambulance is to gamble with one's own life. This bill defeats that gamble. This bill makes sure that people can access ambulance cover no matter their financial state. I would also like to rebut the opposition, who claim that there are sufficient measures already available. Whilst society's most disadvantaged do receive more equitable access, people who cannot afford ambulance cover, who find themselves in between the most disadvantaged and those able to afford ambulance cover, find themselves unable to afford ambulance services. The opposition assumes that this bill is a bad thing, but this bill breaks down barriers. This bill puts Victorians first, no matter their financial state. If the government can afford free public transport for under-18s, why can't we afford an initiative and a program such as this one that will save lives? In matters of life and death what is more important to society? Social cohesion. As the honourable member Maalim stated, ambulance services are the backbone of our healthcare system. We should support this backbone. We will be a stronger society through making sure that people have access to equitable health care. This bill is extremely important to support. I call on all members in the spirit of bipartisanship to vote for this bill because it sends a clear message to government that youth want something done about it.

Mahek BADWAL: Before I begin, I would like to acknowledge that certain aspects of the bill do have some merit, especially the parts about equality and diversity, as well as the connection to the burnout in our healthcare workers. Evidently our healthcare system in its current position is kind of in a shambles. However, instead of taking the longwinded route in finding a solution, I wonder if there are other ways in which we can fix the problem. Instead of taking taxpayers money, which if we are to improve the healthcare system we must

take, to create these ambulance lanes on every single road in Victoria – which is going to be a lot of money, let us face it – why don't we utilise that money making more ambulances or even making more sections where we can place ambulances? Fundamentally, if you think about it, even if you get there quicker having more ambulances is just going to be a better way of fixing the problem, no? Finally, there is another issue. There is some help for paramedics in getting rid of the burnout in a sense, but we have to understand that even if an ambulance gets to the hospital quickly, you still have to wait in the hospital. Waiting lines in hospitals are currently extremely long. People stay for 9 hours waiting in queues because they have to take a priority list, so it does not solve that problem, which they assume it does. As well as this, before we even think about the cost of paying for ambulance lanes, we need ambulances to get there first. That is why I propose that focusing on actually increasing the production of ambulances and improving the healthcare system is probably better.

James DYER: I will be transparent: I agree with a lot of the opposition's points, but I strongly affirm the concept of free health care and support for our healthcare staff. For example, I would love further incentives to be placed to support our paramedics. Let it be known that calling 000 falsely still incurs a fine. People could call an ambulance for something they would not do now under this bill. But aren't government services meant to be used? Why are we scared of this service actually being used and actually benefiting people? Australia prizes itself on equitable health care. I would rather somebody who benefits from a free service gain access to something previously inaccessible than them choose between their finances and their health.

Ember McBRYDE: I would like to take a moment to thank the members opposite who have shared their stories about their own personal experiences with emergency services. I would like to say that although making ambulance services free is a noble pursuit, I fear doing so at the current rate may make problems like the ones that the members opposite have presented worse. The Victorian hospital system, much like in many other states, already has problems with bed availability, wait times, ramping and lack of available professionals. This bill, while written with the best of intentions, is not actually fixing the problems it sets out to solve. Implementing ambulance lanes that require many roadworks, utilising places such as regional fire stations that are unequipped to take patients and removing the injury threshold will only increase wait times and put patients in situations where they are being treated in hospital waiting chairs or worse. This bill will place far too much strain on an already stretched system without reinforcing the places where it needs help. We need more beds, more hospitals, more nurses and more ambulances before we can even think about passing this bill.

The ACTING PRESIDENT: Apologies to all members who did not get to contribute to the open debate. Member Wright to sum up.

Jack WRIGHT: Before we vote on this bill, I ask the chamber here today to reflect on something. Would you expect to pay for the call-out of fire services in an emergency? Would you expect to pay for the call-out of police in the event of a crime? No, we do not. Our public services are that: public and accessible to everyone. Two of our three public services are free at any time to any member of the community. Why should ambulances be different? When you go to vote today, think about that. We are not implementing something new but rectifying a past mistake.

The ACTING PRESIDENT: The question is:

That the Free Ambulance Services Bill 2026 be now read a second and a third time.

Motion agreed to.

Read second time.

Read third time.

The ACTING PRESIDENT: Pursuant to standing order 14.28, I will convey the bill to the Legislative Assembly for its consent.

Thank you, members. Well done to everyone who spoke today. That was genuinely and extremely impressive from pretty much each and every one of you. Thank you very much to everyone who has participated so eagerly, earnestly and robustly in this debate. That does wrap up our session. Congratulations; you have passed

your first bill in Parliament. I am happy to stay back if anyone has any questions or comments or anything else you would like to talk or speak about. Come and have a chat.

Sitting suspended 2:08 pm until 2:31 pm.

The ACTING PRESIDENT (Sonja Terpstra): Good afternoon, everybody. My name is Sonja Terpstra, and I will be acting as your presiding officer for this session this afternoon. I am a state Labor member for the North-Eastern Metropolitan Region, and I know some of you who are in the room today are from my region, so I would like to welcome you who are from my region but also extend a warm welcome to everybody else who is here today as well. A little bit about me, just by way of background: I obviously sit in this chamber. I am sitting right over there, normally, in the middle up there on the back row.

Recently, just in the last parliamentary sitting, we had what is called an all-nighter. Do you know what an all-nighter is? Our all-nighter I think finished at 4 am, which was very uncool – very uncool indeed. And then my Assembly colleagues had to wait for us in the lower house, because we amended a bill here and we sent it back down to them, so I think they finished at 6 am. None of us like the all-nighters. It is not something we like, but in the upper house, or the Legislative Council, we tend to do a few more of those.

I am now in my second term as a member of Parliament. Before I came to Parliament I worked in a number of different jobs. I have worked as a stablehand. I have worked in hospitality in a bar. I worked then as a trade union official. I then became a lawyer. I have worked as a conciliator as well. So I have done quite a few different things.

I attended public schools. I am going to show my age – I actually left in year 10. I did not do year 11 and 12, but I was lucky enough then to go to university as a mature-age student and get a law degree. I worked as a lawyer for a little bit. I worked in community legal centres representing women from working-class backgrounds and those who were from non-English-speaking backgrounds as well. So that is a little bit about me.

I know you guys are pretty keen to get underway, but before we do, does anyone have any questions about me or anything about my region you might like to ask me?

Abubakar MAALIM: What is the most amount of hours you guys have spent here?

The ACTING PRESIDENT: In one day? It was before my time, but we generally start our sessions at about 9:30 in the morning and then we just keep rolling, because there is a very weird thing with our standing orders – even if it goes past midnight and we are still debating, under our standing orders it is still the previous day, so a little bit into the twilight zone. Richard tells me the longest time they have had was 11:30 the next morning. That is crazy insane. That was during the voluntary assisted dying debate. Anyone else?

Saba MALIK: What was the longest-worded debate you have ever heard or seen or done before?

The ACTING PRESIDENT: Again, our standing orders set down that in a debate we have our second-reading speeches and everybody gets an allotted period of time, but there is no set number of speakers, is there, Richard? You can keep going. Everyone in the chamber can speak, and you exhaust every member. Once that happens, though, then if we go into committee on a bill, there are no time limits in committee.

Committee is what they call committee of the whole, and it is when a minister will sit at the table there and the Deputy President will sit here where Richard is and preside. Any member can ask questions of the bill, and I think when we did the Electoral Further Amendment Bill 2026, I counted at least 80 questions. The electoral matters bill I think had a finish time of – was it 1:00 am or 11:00 pm?

Richard WILLIS: I was on holiday; I missed it all.

The ACTING PRESIDENT: Well, you were lucky. But that was another very late one. We have the second readings that can go on for quite a long period of time and then committee consideration of a bill. In the lower house they do not normally do the committee stage on a bill. That is why in our chamber debates can go for a very long time.

Another bill we did recently was the Outdoor Recreation Victoria Bill 2026, which changed the name of Outdoor Recreation Victoria during the debate. That was another long one as well. So long debates are what happen in here frequently.

Ava D'SYLVA: Can you choose to leave if the debate happens to be really long, and what happens when people start going back and forth and start repeating the same things because it has just been going on for so long?

The ACTING PRESIDENT: That is what we would call, in the business, filibustering, and it happens a lot.

To go to your first question, 'Can you leave?', we have what is called a chamber roster in here. Members are often rostered on, and we have got to make sure we keep quorum in the place as well. We would have our whip sitting in the chair there, and we would have a minister and maybe two or three MPs – backbenchers. As long as the quorum is kept, you can come and go as you like. You might be allocated a speaking slot, but it may be in addition to, say, the chamber roster. So you can come and go. Generally speaking, if you are allotted on your chamber duty slot, it is an hour and you should stay, unless something bad is happening or whatever. You should generally stay, but when there are divisions happening, generally speaking you cannot leave the precinct. I can leave the room, but I cannot leave the precinct. If there are divisions happening and I do not make it back to this chamber within the 4 minutes of the bells and I get locked out, I am in big trouble. That is when we could actually lose a vote on a bill if it is very tight. There are some very strict rules for MPs around that. But yes, you generally cannot leave the precinct, so you are trapped here. It is not a very glamorous life sometimes. We might have one more question before we get underway.

Jack WRIGHT: Which community legal centre did you happen to work for?

The ACTING PRESIDENT: In New South Wales I worked for a community legal organisation called the New South Wales Working Women's Centre. It was funded by the New South Wales department of industrial relations, and it was specifically to provide advice to women from working class and non-English speaking backgrounds, who otherwise could not afford legal representation. I loved that job; it was amazing, but it got defunded.

Social Media and Artificial Intelligence Education Bill 2026

Sponsor: Ivanhoe Girls Grammar School

Refuter: Maribyrnong Youth Advisory Committee

Introduction and first reading

Mahek BADWAL: I move:

That I have leave to introduce a bill titled Social Media and Artificial Intelligence Education Bill 2026.

Motion agreed to.

Read first time.

Second reading

Mahek BADWAL: I move:

That the bill be now read a second time.

The lens through which we interact with the digital environment has changed dramatically over the past decade. The discovery and development of models such as artificial intelligence and social media have changed the trajectory of how we can allow our wildest dreams to come to fruition, ushering a new age of creativity. However, just like with predecessors, progress acts as a double-edged sword. For every step we take into the horizon, there are ulterior possibilities which endanger the whole framework of society itself. As members of this Parliament, we owe it to Victorian youth to equip them with the necessary skills to thrive in the new age but also educate them on the dark realities which can arise when engaging with social media and AI.

A study by the research group METR has found that the turnover for AI progression has been exponential in nature. In seven months AI can work rapidly, two times the speed that it did before. This means that what once may have been an impossible and inaccessible idea or concept for many everyday citizens can now be achieved in a matter of 3 hours. Many students, including me, are utilising AI to create practice questions, learning models and, more impressively, applications, algorithms and even video games. However, realistically speaking, for every one of these students engaging with AI in a creative manner and enriching their mind, there are countless others who are utilising the tool as a replacement of critical reasoning itself. There is a difference between utilising AI to learn English and letting it write the whole essay for you itself. One is progression education, the other is a negligence of it.

A study by KPMG in partnership with the University of Melbourne found that in 47 countries one in two students responded that they did not fully understand AI, while 86 per cent of it use AI in their studies daily. Even 75 per cent of teachers feel that they are inadequately trained to teach AI, as found by the World Economic Forum. There is a large gap between the number of students using AI and those using it effectively and safely. Our bill simply creates the environment in which education in artificial intelligence is not only taught but is evaluated. By showing students both the positions and the benefits of the tool, we can help a system in utilising it in a meaningful manner rather than just lazily.

Another platform which demonstrates the importance of education rather than negligence is social media. It has become a critical part of our lives used in all areas and our youth is taking it by storm. Our youth is utilising social media not only to chat with their friends but to promote their personal image online, connect with friends and collaborators, as well as to create revenue through marketing. However, there is a reason that social media has been banned under the Australian government. There is a dark side to it, which is considerably alarming. The 2021 eSafety report found that 44 per cent of Australia's young people have faced negative online experiences, being exposed to things that they are simply not ready to see, including radicalist views, body dysmorphia and expectations which are too strong for impressionable people. While the social media ban shields under-16s from exposure, it does not provide a solution to the problem, it rather delays it. While I can see minors are able to mature by that age, simply suggesting that as soon as they turn 16, they are immune to the effects is just unrealistic. Our bill aims to equip Victoria's youth with the necessary knowledge about social media to ensure that, when they reach that age, they are not only older but also more aware.

Our bill is not about promoting a fantasy which portrays social media and AI as a perfect model of creation but rather educates students that they are tools and models all have two sides. By implementing V CASE, we are creating a progressive model which tailors learning to different year levels from 4 to 6, 7 to 8 and 9 to 10. Each cycle contains three areas of study. The first includes downsides of AI and social media and the harsh realities, the second being the creative ways we can utilise it and the last one being an application section. This ensures that learning is not only theoretical but applied, equipping them for the skills necessary for the future.

Shanay GAO-KUHLMAN: Now, I will not bore you with the statistics of how bad AI is for the environment or how much the people are already protesting its usage, because frankly, we already all know it – it is abundantly clear that AI is not going anywhere. But must we really listen to this bill and make a deal with the devil because of it? I think not. We think not. The opposition clearly lacks this sentiment as they show no real care for the freedom or safety of the people this bill targets. Our young people deserve their own rights, which are trampled upon by the notions spread in this bill.

The opposition intends to shove AI down the throats of our school-aged children and those who teach and engage with them with no real concern for their moral or ethical stance on the matter. Through a statement from Pope Leo, where he declares AI must be disarmed, all believers have now been granted the right to deny AI usage as it goes against their religious beliefs. For believers, the word of Pope Leo is the will of God in tangible form, and in that the bill goes against the rights of our religious citizens by forcing them to engage with content they find immoral. This bill is inherently discriminatory and forces dangerous ideology onto those for whom it wholly goes against their faith. What happened to freedom of religion and the human right that comes with that? The bill spares no breath for exemptions from study or compulsory participation in AI usage, meaning religious schools are not safe from this heinous misdemeanour. Neither will it be for the cautious souls for whom AI goes against their moral and ethical beliefs, for they will be forced to use it anyway in the hope of a passing grade. This is coercion at its finest and pushes a very dangerous rhetoric. Even something as vital as sex education is optional to some extent, because we as a state respect people and their choices of what to expose their children to and at what age. This bill completely demolishes this construct and the right of the common

people, who are now coerced into using AI regardless of the impact it has on the individual's religious state or mental wellbeing. Now, I do not disagree that teaching our young people how to safely engage with digital platforms, such as social media or AI, is inherently bad. However, it is not up to the state to force these ideologies into our schools with no exemptions and no real thought-out plan of what it would actually look like.

The bill never defines what responsible and irresponsible social media and AI usage mean, leaving it in the hands of the reader to distinguish, and through that there is no practical way of arguing what is considered safe and unsafe usage. For example, you can explain to a teacher that it is responsible to use AI for mundane tasks, maybe making a birthday wall for the students because it is simple yet long. However, it can also be debated that usage is irresponsible because it is inputting students' data into a platform, which would send it overseas and could potentially be used for nefarious purposes. With no clear definition or method of defining these features and with no concern for Victorians' data being siphoned overseas, the bill completely lacks the scaffolding to support the infrastructure they propose and would topple Victorian society straight into the ground, much like how it would ruin the career prospects of Victorian teachers.

If teachers are taught to engage with AI rather than be told not to, it pushes the ideology that AI is okay to use and anything can be used productively. However, this rhetoric does not consider the broader issues that come with using AI in professional settings. If you as a teacher are overburdened and use AI to say, 'Write my lesson plan' or 'Individualise education plans for students with additional needs', it tells the higher-ups that they do not need a human to do that job because technology can do it for them. There is no hiding it. We live in a capitalist society that will profit off the usage of technology instead of hiring humans. In showing them that AI can do that part of the job for you, it pushes that dangerous sentiment and consequentially the human essence of the work will all but disappear. Because why pay a teacher when an AI model can do it for free? We know it, because when one is using AI that is free, they are the product. That is inherently true in this bill, as are the profits from the innocent, overburdened teachers that it supposedly seeks to support. If we show the people in power that teachers are not necessary, those jobs will disappear and the infrastructure of the education system will crumble.

There are so many consequences to promoting AI usage in schools. Even if it is considered responsible or productive, the opposition neglects to consider the associated economic, social and ethical risks. In doing so, the opposition has fallen into the capitalist trap that we as a nation need to adopt AI because it is the only way to progress, when in actuality people want anything but. In falling into that trap the opposition is taking away the freedom of people and their right to choose. The bill has an idea but not a tangible plan. It has heart, but the practical elements are discriminatory and blind to the needs of people at a broader level. In its current form the bill cannot be passed or it will spread a dangerous and controlling rhetoric with no culturally informed or economic understandings.

Shania Nevindie ADIHETTY: Today I will be discussing exactly what V CASE is. V CASE stands for the Victorian Centre of AI and Social Media Education. It is a program between the grades of 4 to 10 that runs as an addition to the curriculum. It includes two sections of social media and AI, which will work together to create three cycles, which are a step-by-step guide for schools to follow. These will promote development and improvement within students in the rapidly developing world of these tools. V CASE further runs a system called VAST, which stands for Victorian AI and social media testing. Though it is called testing, in reality these are modules, and these modules are used to identify a skill set and how one can develop it personally. Alongside education of students, teacher and wellbeing team education is just as vital. V CASE introduces a V CASE licence that must be renewed every two years for teachers, and one for the wellbeing team too. The required course for teachers will cover the content that they are required to teach each year level and how they can also use AI effectively in classrooms, rather than unproductively. For a counselling team, they will be taught the impacts of AI and social media on children and how they can assist those struggling from addiction and mental health issues that are influenced by social media and AI. Carers of students are also a major stakeholder that must be taken into account, which is why V CASE will also consist of support services such as helplines for these carers and also additional resources so these parents know what their children are learning in this curriculum.

Nyandeng MAYAN: The current school timetable is already full and hectic, so where would the time be coming from for this AI and social media education? From other classes? Because as it currently stands, the students of Victoria very much need their class time, as core subject scores have been dropping. Gen Z is the first generation in modern history to not outperform their parents' generation cognitively. In our current state,

how can we take away from class time when it is clear students need it? This is the time they should be focusing on building their knowledge and getting support from their teachers. Time does not come out of nowhere, meaning we would have to cut out class time and also extend school to finish at a later time, which itself is known to be a difficult situation as students need time to rest and recharge.

If we look at the maths objectively, 26 hours of AI education and 26 hours of social media education equals 52 hours of time stolen from other classes. One elective, for an example, is art. Art approximately takes 30 hours a semester, with 90 minutes a week, meaning AI and social media education would almost eradicate two elective blocks. As a high school student myself, I can confidently say taking away class time from other subjects would impact us negatively, as it does not give us proper time to get assistance from the teacher when needed, not to mention there are multiple students in a class who are going to need the teacher's help. Having teachers learn the subject itself will also take time and will also have classes cancelled, and even school, because teachers need to learn how to teach the subject itself. By taking away class time, we are putting unnecessary stress on students for them to focus in class, meaning they will have more homework to catch up on outside of school. Why am I as a student losing precious class time?

Nishi MAKATI: The whole essence of our bill is to provide something over nothing, a concept which we firmly stand with. As the role of AI technology and social media grows, we aim to provide a foundation for students to draw upon for their own benefit, rather than a complete integration of this new resource into every nook and cranny of classrooms. The core concept of the bill is education, a means to see the multifaceted nature of this growing industry, equipping students with the resources to empower them through this uncharted future. While engagement may appear as a primary concern for the opposition, we would like to emphasise that the purpose of this bill is to provide more than what we do now. Student exposure is our primary concern. Engagement is up to the individual student, similar to any other subject in school like maths or English. Simply providing the resource is a step in the right direction. It is a move towards a well-rounded curriculum, rather than an attempt to smooth out the intricacies of big tech companies.

Regarding the recent social media ban, our bill works to allow a more seamless transition into the worlds of online giants in the learning environment of school, emphasising the nature of social media as a tool that we can be taught to use safely. All tools can be abused to some extent, and our bill simply helps to alleviate this issue, supporting them through media education through the use of our testing and module system. With the world of AI rapidly expanding, we aim to provide controlled exposure to such a useful resource, allowing for, at the very least, some form of knowledge in relation to the workings of this tech and how to go about using it. AI or the world of the social internet are not resources to be feared, nor are we suggesting that they should be the core of teaching. We are simply suggesting that our classrooms are kept in league with the rest of the world.

Bridget WHITE: I want to draw attention to clause 1(b), which states that this bill aims to assist educators, and now I draw your attention to clause 4.2(c). How does a minimum of 15 to 26 hours annually for training students to have a better understanding of AI and social media – which does not account for the hours spent by educators planning and preparing for the lessons – assist educators? If that isn't hypocritical, I do not know what is. We know educators are already overburdened. According to the 2024 *Victorian Teacher Workforce Snapshot*, by 2030 Victoria will have a deficit of more than 2000 teachers, predominantly in secondary schools – the main reasons being teachers are leaving the profession due to workload pressures. One may argue that AI will assist this workload, but in reality it does not reduce it, it only shifts it. So-called time saved will be spent on correcting AI inaccuracies and errors, working on academic integrity and monitoring unauthorised and plagiarised AI use by students and also teachers. All AI may do is, yes, get a task done but create a new one in the process. There is no evading this. For example, according to Frontline Recruitment, at the beginning of this month a teacher used AI to generate student report comments and then did not review these generated comments. One of these comments was 'This assessment is the worst of the batch.' This comment was not only seen by the student but also sent home to the family. AI assisting the teacher by writing comments created a task of editing and reviewing, which is just as time consuming – a task that cannot be evaded, as demonstrated through this example. So how is this bill actually going to assist educators?

Ava D'SYLVA: According to the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare one in four young Australians aged 16 to 24 experience a mental health disorder, and researchers consistently identify social media as a key contributing factor. Meanwhile the World Economic Forum projects that 97 million new AI-related roles will emerge this next coming year. These numbers tell a story we can no longer ignore. The world our students are growing up in looks nothing like what this curriculum is designed for. Artificial intelligence is reshaping every

industry. Social media is woven into the daily lives of every young Victorian, especially with the most recent decision to ban social media for children under 16. Yet we send our students into this digital world with almost no understanding. Unfortunately the frequency with which youth are using AI algorithms as an outlet for advice and support is concerning – letting numbers define their decisions, stripping them of emotional intelligence and plummeting them into a false reality. Social media, on the other hand, creates unrealistic and idealistic standards, pressuring students into streamlined comparisons as well as a forum of cyberbullying and misinformation. Additionally, its endless loop of content is just a gateway to addiction, which is just as physically and mentally detrimental. This is why students need critical education. Prevention is better than a cure. This bill further equips school wellbeing teams with adequate tools and training on AI and social media's impacts. This is crucial in an area where these platforms are so powerful and hold a great influence on student mental health. With proper education from counsellors, students will not have to rely on algorithms for support, which create a blind, harmful trust. Awareness through education is not just the right thing to do, it is the smart thing to do.

Patrick PHUNG: V CASE bears a great resemblance to Donald Trump's healthcare plan – a concept of a plan, but no answers justify it. I must ask: is V CASE really necessary? We already have established institutions like VCAA, who are responsible for developing our school curriculum and assessments. If the concern is we need this in schools, why not get VCAA to put it into the curriculum then? Because when we get two bodies with the same responsibilities, none of us have clarity. All we get is two sets of rules and two sets of expectations, and when things go wrong, two sets of people to point the finger at and to play the classic blame game. The opposition wants to create confusion, and with all this confusion, they plan to give V CASE the power to develop new curriculum material, mandate compulsory assessments, and worst of all, collect student data in a way that is opt out instead of opt in. Talk about student privacy.

My main concerns are who is part of V CASE, who will make sure it delivers the best outcomes for our students, and who will hold it accountable if it is simply not up to scratch, for all of which there are zero answers in this bill. My concerns only grow when I look at the role of teachers. Clause 4.1(f) promises schools will be given flexibility on how this curriculum will be taught. If this so-called curriculum is that important, why won't teachers be given a voice or a seat to design the very material they are expected to teach? Is that what the opposition thinks flexibility looks like, or is it just some fancy word for 'we decide and you will deliver it'? Flexibility is meaningless if it exists only in a classroom and nowhere else, because the last time I checked, the people who understand how students learn and what actually works in the classroom are teachers and not some bureaucrats in head office. It is clear there is a need for better education, but the opposition have not made clear a case for V CASE. Before we teach V CASE how to teach students how to critically think, perhaps we should apply some critical thinking to V CASE itself first.

Ruby McDONALD: Victorian youth should always possess the freedom of choice. We are shifting into an era where exposure to AI and social media are inescapable. Our bill provides insightful education for students to make their own thoughtful and informed decisions. This cannot be done without fully fledged familiarity, exposure of both the benefits and the harms. We understand concern at exposing children to these platforms, but it is crucial – and this concept is already present in the curriculum through drug and alcohol education. Some cultures refuse to use these, but it still equips students with the ability to make individualistic, informed decisions. Social media provides endless access to millions of units of content. As a user, we are open to an entirely public platform. We are forced to navigate a labyrinth of fake statistics and scams while consequentially avoiding widespread global data breaches. AI has advanced exponentially. Like social media, we recognise it has vast environmental impacts. There are also major concerns of security risks and whether AI models can essentially learn from human inputted responses. Similarly, there is a distinct lack of transparency from AI companies. At what point do these models cease to evolve? However, our bill does not frame AI and social media as perfect. It acknowledges that it is a complex decision as to whether it should be used. This cannot be decided by a government body alone, it is up to the students. As these platforms currently advance, there is no clear end point for where they stop evolving. This is why our bill aims to highlight the benefits but also have a conscious awareness of its flaws. Ultimately students must have autonomy.

Eliza MORRIS: The implementation of this bill will destroy young people's ability to think both critically and creatively. The opposition plans to take away from vital schooling hours through their mandatory AI and social media education. These hours could be used to learn essential skills, develop critical thinking skills and overall general learning time. Not only is this AI education taking away from class time, but it is actively killing students' abilities to think creatively and critically. A study at Duke University found that university students

who used large language models such as ChatGPT and Gemini demonstrated poorer reasoning and argumentation skills compared to their peers who did not. The widespread adoption and normalisation of AI will kill the arts. As generative AI tools become more and more popular, people working in creative jobs such as music and art are finding it increasingly challenging to earn a living from their work. Due to its seemingly low cost, large companies would much rather use free AI slop than pay for human creativity. In clause 4.1(e) the opposition states three different topics that would be delivered through its mandatory program: dangers of AI, benefits from AI and application and creation utilising AI. The last one – application and creation utilising AI – shows that the opposition are actively supporting the death of the arts along with the degradation of young students' basic cognitive skills and creativity.

Olivia HARRAP: The technology of tomorrow demands the skills we teach today. Our Social Media and Artificial Intelligence Education Bill 2026 is about preparing students for the next VCE exam. It is about preparing them for a future we cannot yet imagine. Technology has never stood still, and neither can our education system. Just five years ago artificial intelligence was unfamiliar to many people, but today it influences how we learn, work and communicate every single day, and in another five years the digital landscape will undoubtedly look different again. While we cannot predict every innovation that lies ahead, we can ensure that young people have the knowledge, adaptability and critical thinking skills to navigate whatever the future brings. Today 96 per cent of Australian children aged 10 to 15 use social media and more than 70 per cent have already encountered harmful content online. Those figures demonstrate why digital literacy is no longer optional; it is essential for the youth of today.

Importantly, this approach recognises that this technology is not inherently good or evil. Despite strengths, this technology carries serious risks and requires users to be informed and to utilise thoughtful decision-making. Rather than just expecting young people to easily assimilate among a sea of rapid technological expansion, this bill encourages them to engage with emerging technologies in a responsible and safe way. As new platforms and tools develop, this bill will enable students to use the skills fostered through this legislation, skills that will remain highly relevant, because let us face it, we cannot turn back the clock; tech is here to stay. Education has always been our greatest investment in the future. By giving young Victorians the confidence to embrace innovation while recognising its risks, we are preparing a generation that can lead technological change rather than be overwhelmed by it. Supporting this bill means recognising that adaptability is now an essential outcome of education, not an optional one.

Leah NGUYEN: There is no denying that artificial intelligence and social media have transformed the lives of young people and realistically will continue to do so for many years. The bill seeks to educate students on emerging technology and promote responsible digital usage. However, these intentions alone are not the overarching message of the bill. Instead clauses 5, 6 and 7 propose mandatory AI and social media education across multiple year levels, with ongoing hours of assessment, reporting requirements and training for teachers. It would be beneficial in theory; however, this would place a significant burden on schools that are already struggling with students, increasing demand on teachers. Adding a whole other curriculum on top of this existing arduous program would create a drawback on all learning.

Instead we would like to propose a more practical solution. Rather than embedding continuous mandatory lessons throughout the school year, we should deliver an annual educational day, which students can opt out of, that is focused solely and entirely on artificial intelligence and social media literacy. This preserves the bill's core purpose while making its goals achievable. A single well-planned day would allow experts, educators and wellbeing staff to collaborate in delivering truly engaging workshops with tools that would have a higher value and effect on the students receiving the education. This operation would target the issue without creating strains on schools across the state. I would like to emphasise that this proposal does not reject AI education, rather it promotes it with a more pragmatic approach. If schools cannot practically implement a program, even the best ideas risk becoming ineffective. Education is a vital tool that influences youth but that must be executed well in order to truly make a difference. Without these changes, unfortunately I do not believe this bill should be passed.

The ACTING PRESIDENT: We have now come to the point where all 12 sponsors and refuters have spoken on the bill. I will now open up the floor to further debate.

Matilda FEEHAN: The government states that other programs in schools are optional, such as sexual education, which infers that this program is not optional. Clause 10.1 clearly states:

For all students, consent shall be considered in regards to participation in V CASE testing;

(a) Students may withdraw any or all personal data at any period ...

AI can be dangerous, and the bill does agree with this. May I ask, did the government read the bill? The bill aims to teach about AI so it is used safely and the dangers are minimised. The bill is not trying to assist AI's great takeover, it is trying to educate everyone on how to correctly use AI. To state that the bill is shoving it down the throats of students and teachers is ignorantly undermining that people need to know the facts about the use of AI. The government claims that AI will take over. How are we meant to combat a problem way out of our control if we do not have the facts about it? This bill provides a baseline and a vital information program for the group of people most vulnerable to AI – students. I urge the government to read the bill and learn the facts.

Sophie LLOYD: AI, it seems, is all we are hearing about nowadays. I would just like to say that in this bill the opposition actually do not clarify what kind of AI they are talking about in their definitions. They do not mention whether it is generative AI or not. I am going to assume it is generative AI as later in the bill they do mention generative AI; however, it is not in their definitions, and I would like to point that out. I would like to say that if the issue is people not being able to identify AI, why don't we look at the groups who have a harder time identifying AI, such as those who are older? Teenagers obviously are at risk; however, they are more likely to be able to identify AI. Now, to draw from the point made by member Mayen, from our side, AI education will take away from our more essential subjects. If a year 10 student is doing a VCE subject, it is actually required that they do 50 hours of that subject. Now there would be time being taken out of subjects to do AI education, which I do understand would be optional, but if time is taken out for that, then will they be able to get their full time in that VCE subject? Then we need to take into account that if information is being given to these AI bots, there is a chance that we will be at higher risk of AI pornography, which has been a large issue within Australia and Victoria recently.

Mohammed Rayhan PASHA: Those opposite say that we are taking class time away from important subjects, but isn't learning about how to use skills such as prompt writing, which is required by many employers, teaching? Those opposite pile on the rhetoric that we are sending data overseas, taking away jobs and causing or supporting all of the problems. Clause 4.1 says, yes, we are aware. This whole clause about cycles is dedicated to exploring and teaching this. Ultimately, we are not sending info to companies. With people using AI in general and how we have implemented it in the country, that is inevitable. Data is required for AI to be able to operate. Those opposite say we do not have care for ideologies and views, but we have a specific clause relating to opt-out strategies. I suggest you read the bill. We are teaching them the difference between good and bad, whether it is generative AI or not, and allowing them to make up their own minds. 'Where are we getting time to learn about AI?' they ask. Time for technology studies in schools is already mandated, but instead of gaining skills in Excel, which are quite redundant, we just learn about AI, which is probably much more useful in the workplace. Last point – the opposition consistently tries to show our bill as having malicious intent, pushing ideas of sending data to companies and creating problems. That is the whole point of why we are pushing for this bill, so we can educate people who use AI and who are going to use AI about the ethics of it.

Jessie MOORE: AI actually uses more water than humans do. So if we put this bill into effect, we are hurting our climate and possibly our wildlife. Our climate change is currently a mess. Using AI is just going to make us run out of water and we will eventually have no water left to spare.

Najiba NASERI: In a world where technology shapes almost every part of life knowledge is our strongest protection. This bill turns the truth into action. It makes digital literacy as essential as reading, writing and mathematics. Students learn to spot misinformation, protect their privacy and use AI as a tool for growth, not just a distraction. It turns confusion into confidence and risk into opportunity all at the same time. It supports those who guide them.

Isabella HARVEY: I would like to bring attention to the fact that this bill does not outline or specify who the creator is of the artificial intelligence which will be in use by these schools. This lack of specificity allows for potential foreign AI users to take hold of data in our schools without the consent or knowledge of students who are required by this bill to use it. Furthermore, these foreign creators of AI, for example, Elon Musk, could

have specific political agendas that our government is inadvertently supporting by utilising AI within our schools. This bill could not only threaten the security of our students' personal information, but it could also threaten our national security as we know it. I would like to note that I am referring to the creative and innovative uses of AI, that section of the bill. Education on the dangers of AI is a very good idea. AI as we know it contains so many biases that we cannot allow the students of our state, who are the future of Victoria, to be exposed to it.

Ember McBRYDE: I would like to address points made by the members opposite. One member claimed that this bill is shoving AI down students' throats and forcing those who ethically disapprove of AI to use it. I would like to point out that there is more than one kind of AI. There is a specific clause that refers to generative AI, but many types of artificial intelligence which are not generative AI and do not have intellectual property ethical concerns, are used in industries that our students are preparing to go into. There are positive applications of different kinds of artificial intelligence. Expecting students who turn 16 and graduate and enter tertiary study or industries with no education on how to use social media and AI ethically means that students currently under the age of 16 will be woefully underprepared on graduation. Instead of wasting valuable class time trying to prevent students from using social media or generative AI, teachers do not have to wrangle assignments through AI checkers or doubt their students, making more learning possible. Another point made by the government is that positive and negative uses of AI and social media are not defined within this bill. These tools and platforms are prevalent across the adult digital world and are rapidly changing, and this legislation is a necessary addition to what has already been passed as an act to prepare students. Students similarly need to adapt to the rapidly changing digital world. This means that Victorian students are actually learning and are ready to use or not use these tools as they choose when they graduate.

Abubakar MAALIM: In this bill clause 6 states that after each learning outcome students shall complete a module on the learned topic by using VAST testing modules. This is not only an error but an inadequate assessment format. Clause 6 limits testing students to only multiple choice and short answer questions. These formats do not actually assess a student's ability to critically evaluate AI output, create content or demonstrate ethical reasoning. Tell me, how can you call that testing?

Hamayle ASMAT: I would like to address a point the government made that AI has our data, but so do Microsoft, Apple, Google et cetera. So why aren't these companies stopped? This is exactly why we need this bill to educate these young people about their digital footprint, where and what information should be given and how to effectively use social media to its best abilities to benefit themselves and others around them in the long run.

Jye USHER: I would just like to clarify: I have a piece of information in front of me. The bill itself defines AI to mean specifically generative AI, not multiple variations of AI in the bill. I am just clarifying if the opposition has read the bill. I am surprised that the opposition is letting these AI and social media companies off scot-free. It appears that the onus has been put on the teachers and children to adapt to being, in the words of the opposition, 'scammed', and that these scams exist within AI. I do not think personally we should be allowing a bill that permits the onus for stopping scams against Victorian people being on Victorians. Instead, maybe we should stop the scams. Does the opposition value Victorians or the American capital of these AI companies?

Shea MUNNINGS: I would like to say that we are allegedly taking class time away from students. I believe that kids with disabilities should be getting handwritten assignments so that it then makes it easier for them to understand the work and be able to proceed through the year levels in schooling and to get a degree or graduate. I also believe that AI is not helping kids with disabilities because it is making forms complicated. It is causing these forms to be more of a technical equation than a simplified equation.

Bodhi COLLINS: While I appreciate the intent of this bill in educating our youth to use social media and AI, I am concerned about some of the points. Encouraging AI use is something our education system cannot do. Every step we take in support of AI is a step that is lost to human independence and human individuality. I invite the opposition to come back into the world of reality where our teachers are actually calling for less work and to do less paperwork, rather than calling for more office hours and for more programs to have to be delivered. As the honourable member Mayan put it, our generation is the first generation to have gone backwards compared to previous generations. While I recognise this bill has its merits, I disagree with its implementation. I urge the opposition to consider new models using experts, not teachers, like many schools do

with sex education. I suggest we consider the model suggested by the honourable member Nguyen where we have a day dedicated to AI and social media use once a year rather than burdening our already burdened teachers and students. But my main point is that the idea is sound and necessary to an extent. However, my main grievance is with the model in which this has been proposed and I call on the opposition to reconsider the way in which they want this bill to be implemented.

The ACTING PRESIDENT: I thank all honourable members for their contribution. I call on the sponsor of the bill for the right of reply.

Mahek BADWAL: Thinking critically, taking away from class time, morality, impacts on the environment, data leaks – these are all points made by the government about the bad sides of artificial intelligence. Practically what they are doing is simply saying the very things that we are teaching in our section about the downsides of artificial intelligence, so I come to wonder: has the government read the bill? I particularly say this with true disappointment, because our bill was on not just artificial intelligence but social media as well – all areas which are impacting the future development and landscape for our youth. We have this rising idea that has been continuously brought up by the government suggesting that artificial intelligence is just blanketly wrong and bad. That is what we have seen with their negative things on data leaks, morality and environment. While we agree that these aspects also exist, perhaps the issue that there is stuff like this is because there is a stigma surrounding artificial intelligence itself. We acknowledge that there are downsides to artificial intelligence, but there are also bright sides – the same for social media as well. The new world does not wait for anyone. When we moved from normal textbooks to internet textbooks to the internet itself, we learned new skills like Excel, Word et cetera at school. The reason why? To equip our students for the future.

The ACTING PRESIDENT: The question is:

That the Social Media and Artificial Intelligence Education Bill 2026 be now read a second and a third time.

House divided on motion:

Ayes	27
Noes	27
Majority in favour	0

Motion negated.

The ACTING PRESIDENT: Ordinarily a presiding officer such as me would also have a vote, but I do not have a vote, because I am not part of your group today. Because the vote is tied, I understand that the bill does not pass, but I would like to thank all of you for your contributions. You have been very good, and to have a tied vote is unusual. Congratulations, everyone.

Sitting suspended 3:31 pm until 3:48 pm.

Support Systems for Youth Offenders Reform Bill 2026

Sponsor: Mildura Rural City Council

Refuter: Merri-bek Youth

Introduction and first reading

Allegra CIRILLO: I move:

That I have leave to introduce a bill titled Support Systems for Youth Offenders Reform Bill 2026.

Motion agreed to.

Read first time.

Second reading

Allegra CIRILLO: Before I begin I wish to advise the chamber that this speech will contain references to youth crime, the death of young people and the disproportionate impact of the justice system on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Members who may find these topics distressing should exercise their discretion now.

I move:

That the bill be now read a second time.

Australia prides itself on being a nation that values its children and invests in their future. As members of this Parliament, we have a responsibility not only to respond to crime but to address the circumstances that lead young people into the justice system in the first place. Across Australia approximately 44,583 young Australians aged between 10 and 17 have had contact with the youth justice system. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people remain significantly over-represented in this statistic. These are not simply numbers on a page; they are people – people's lives which have been shaped by trauma, disadvantage, instability or circumstances beyond their control. They also represent an opportunity. If we intervene effectively, we can help break this cycle of offending and create a safer community for everyone. This is precisely what this bill seeks to achieve.

The Support Systems for Youth Offenders Reform Bill 2026 focuses on rehabilitation alongside accountability. It recognises that punishment alone does not reduce reoffending if the underlying cause of offending behaviour is left unaddressed. Under this bill every young person entering the youth justice system will receive a psychological assessment to identify the support they need. They will have access to ongoing counselling throughout their time in custody and after their release, ensuring rehabilitation continues beyond detention. The bill also strengthens education and personal development by providing individual learning plans tailored to each young person's needs. These plans aim to improve literacy, reasoning, decision-making and life skills, giving young people a greater chance of successfully reintegrating into their communities. In addition, every participant will be assigned a dedicated case manager, responsible for coordinating services across education, housing, mental health and community support. This integrated approach ensures that young people are not left to navigate a complex system alone and that support remains consistent throughout their rehabilitation.

Importantly, this bill also strengthens accountability within the youth justice system itself. It establishes clear expectations for service providers to deliver safe, culturally appropriate and ethical care. Young people must have access to environments free from intimidation and neglect, and staff who report misconduct must be protected. These measures promote transparency while ensuring that support services remain effective and responsive.

This bill also introduces a clear court structure for youth offending. The most serious indictable offences, including murder, rape and child sexual abuse, will continue to be heard in the Supreme Court. Less serious indictable offences, such as armed robbery and aggravated home invasion, will be dealt with in the County Court, while summary offences will remain within the Children's Court. For most young offenders detention will continue to be treated as the last measure.

Some members from the opposition may argue that Victoria already has support systems available for young offenders. However, the existence of services alone does not guarantee successful outcomes. If current approaches were working as effectively as they should, we would expect to see lower rates of reoffending and fewer young people being trapped in the justice system. This bill builds upon existing services by improving coordination, increasing accountability and ensuring that rehabilitation remains the essential focus.

Supporting this bill is not about excusing criminal behaviour. It is about recognising that accountability and rehabilitation are not mutually exclusive. Communities are safest when fewer people reoffend, fewer victims are created and more young Australians are given the opportunity to build productive lives. Every member of this house has the opportunity today to support practical reform that strengthens our justice system while investing in the future of our young people. For those reasons I commend the Support Systems for Youth Offenders Reform Bill 2026 to the house and encourage all honourable members to support its passage.

The ACTING PRESIDENT (Katherine Copsey): I call on the refuter of the bill.

Maria ABDANI: I would like to note that this speech contains mentions of youth justice systems, offending behaviour, rehabilitation and punishment frameworks. If anyone would like to leave the chamber, please do so now.

Today I am here to oppose the Support Systems for Youth Offenders Reform Bill 2026. This bill comes with good intentions, but good intentions do not automatically create good legislation. At its core, the bill mistakes administration for change. Throughout the bill claims it will reduce youth offending and improve outcomes for youth. However, when examined, we find page after page of new boards, oversight mechanisms, reviews and systems. This is shown in clause 4 where the Board of Service and Case Oversight, or BSCO, is established. Is this really made to support people or to create yet another unnecessary board? The bill assumes that youth offending continues due to services not being properly monitored, and it creates new monitoring structures to investigate. But how does creating yet another board reduce youth crime? Why is another board created instead of us just improving the old ones?

A young person does not avoid crime just because another committee has reviewed their case. A young person does not stop just because another board is made. Creating additional layers of administration may create more reports, but it does not guarantee they will generate better outcomes for young people. That is the main goal, is it not? In fact there is a risk that these resources and attention will be more focused on ensuring these services, like BSCO, are maintained rather than on giving direct support to young people who need it the most. The bill creates a system where organisations are constantly monitored, reviewed and investigated, which is shown again and again, yet it never explains how this will reduce crime or improve rehabilitation outcomes.

Youth offending is often linked with family instability, substance abuse and negative peer influences. However, rather than addressing these root causes and helping individuals beforehand, the bill focuses heavily on oversight structures and review processes. Bold monitoring does not automatically mean less crime, and more reviews do not automatically produce better outcomes. Instead this bill creates more systems to manage youth offending rather than trying to prevent it. Constant monitoring can lead to youth offenders being pushed aside, while monitoring services take all of the resources. Why is this bill necessary when the main problem is youth offenders, rather than oversight mechanisms?

Additionally, this bill cannot decide what it needs to be. Throughout the bill rehabilitation is presented as the main goal, as shown in clause 5, through counselling, rehabilitation and education services during custody and release. That seems like the main goal. However, clause 8 shows us a completely different story. For serious crimes, courts are instructed to prioritise punishment, deterrence and denunciations, while rehabilitation is pushed to the side. What happened to supporting youth offenders? Surely the people committing the most serious offences are the very people who need the most rehabilitation and the most support. Punishing these serious youth offenders is unlikely to stop more offences and could lead to more issues within individuals, since the main reasons as to why offences are committed are never truly discovered as rehabilitation is stripped away. If rehabilitation is the true goal, why does this bill reduce its importance when it comes to dealing with serious offenders? What is the point of creating a support bill if rehabilitation is thrown to the side when things get hard? The bill attempts to satisfy both sides of the youth justice debate. It wants to appear compassionate by promoting rehabilitation while also seeming tough on crime through stricter sentencing and reduced emphasis on rehabilitation. In trying to be both, it becomes neither, which completely voids the true goal of the bill.

The bill is unnecessary, hypocritical and contradicts itself. It promises reform but delivers bureaucracy. It fails to address the root causes of youth offending, sends mixed signals about rehabilitation and punishment and focuses more on managing crime than preventing it. For those reasons, I urge the house to reject the Support Systems for Youth Offenders Reform Bill 2026.

Isabella HARVEY: I would like to emphasise the pressing importance of this bill and the real opportunity it offers the government to reform systemic failures. This bill will bring down crime rates and change the lives of many young people who have been abandoned by the justice system. In clause 6 of this bill the government lays out a plan to create personal, holistic support for all youth offenders who are willing to make a change. Each young person will be assigned a case manager – someone who can support them at all times, a support many of these young people have never experienced. Further outlined in clause 6 is a plan for extensive rehabilitation, with regular meetings required and plans regarding the young person's health, education, social

life and housing created. Furthermore, the plan offers culturally unique support accommodating diverse needs. Overall, I would like to emphasise that all of these youth offenders are human. They are young people just like us. They have faced hardship and they have faced harsh consequences. These young people need someone who believes in them. These young people need a system that actually supports them, not punishes them. These young people need this bill. Support rehabilitation, not punishment.

Aiden STEVENSON: This bill mentions support for at-risk youths but fails to go into the detail of these supports. Furthermore, this bill fails to address the systemic factors that leave young people to become involved in the justice system in the first place. Poverty, homelessness and out-of-home care are key drivers of youth involvement in crime. By removing factors that cause youth crime and by providing early intervention, we will see far better outcomes for young people than if support is only provided once they are in the justice system. I believe the Australian Human Rights Commission put it best:

It is now understood that children's involvement in the justice system is a failure of the systems which should have helped them earlier.

Young people in the justice system are the most disadvantaged in Victoria. Of young people in Victorian justice centres, 63 per cent have been victims of trauma, abuse and neglect; 62 per cent have been suspended or expelled from school; 11 per cent are registered with disability services; 40 per cent had a parent or sibling with a history of imprisonment; and 12 per cent are parents. By reducing known crime-related risk factors and increasing protective factors, we can prevent young people from engaging with the justice system. This bill also does not address the systemic issues that cause our First Nations young people to offend. First Nations young people aged 10 to 17 are 29 times more likely than their non-Indigenous peers to be in detention. For First Nations young people, inequality, discrimination, social and economic disadvantage and involvement with the child protection system lead to over-representation in the justice system. Yet this bill fails to go into these preventive measures. Unless we address systemic factors, transforming Victoria's youth justice system will not be possible.

Eliza MORRIS: Every young person deserves the opportunity to learn from their mistakes, rebuild their future and make a positive contribution to society. Throughout this bill debate we have heard about the importance of addressing the causes of youth offending rather than simply responding to its consequences. This bill takes a practical and constructive approach by providing young people with the support they need to make positive changes to their lives, enabling them to make a positive impact on society. By involving family members of the young people throughout the rehabilitation process, young offenders and their families are further removed from the systemic cycle of crime. By implementing individual plans shaped by programs specific to their case, youth offenders are further supported to better integrate back into society and become well-functioning citizens.

The bill ensures access to counselling, psychological assessment and ongoing therapeutic support. These measures help to identify underlying challenges and provide young people with the tools needed to move forward successfully. Importantly, the bill also recognises the value of education. By supporting access to schooling and alternative education pathways, youth offenders are much less likely to reoffend. Research proves that investment in adequate education programs keeps offenders out of the system, enabling them to become overall more contributive, well-rounded citizens. It also helps young people to develop skills, improve their future opportunities and build a more positive future. This bill is not only about supporting individual young people – and it does more than change individual lives – it strengthens families, communities and society as a whole.

Mohammed Rayhan PASHA: I rise to oppose this bill on the basis that while it provides extensive support for youth offenders, it fails to ensure that rehabilitation is balanced with accountability and the protection of those affected by the crime. Clause 5.3 – this clause guarantees youth offenders access to legal education, advocacy services, drug and alcohol counselling, rehabilitation programs and harm reduction initiatives. These services are valuable, but the clause contains no requirement for offenders to take responsibility for the harm that they have caused. There is no mention of restorative justice, victim acknowledgement or any process that encourages offenders to understand the impact of their actions. Rehabilitation without accountability risks becoming support without responsibility. Clause 6.4 – this clause requires support services to continue seamlessly after offenders are released into the community. However, it makes no reference to victim safety during that reintegration process. There is no requirement for agencies to assess whether victims may be placed at risk, particularly if an offender returns to the same neighbourhood, school or community. A reintegration

strategy should not only support offenders; it should also ensure the safety and confidence of those affected by the offence. Clause 7.4 establishes partnerships with schools, training institutions and employers to assist youth offenders in returning to education and employment. Again, the objective is positive, but the clause overlooks a practical reality that victims may share the same environment. The bill specifies no safeguards, consultation processes or the slightest consideration of how reintegration may impact victims or the broader community.

I support rehabilitation because reducing reoffending benefits everyone, but not at the expense of accountability, of victim safety. This bill is heavily focused on expanding support for offenders yet overlooks essential safeguards that would make the system more practicable. Hence I urge the house to reject this bill in its current form.

Sophie LLOYD: ‘Victoria – the Education State’: we have all seen this once in our lives. It is on the back of everyone’s car. With billions invested into education in Victoria, you would wonder why our current youth justice system is not a fair go for 10- to 18-year-olds that are being educated. The majority of the time it does not account for those of them who are struggling more than others, where they have a learning disability or where they do not have a learning disability. Maybe they are smarter than those around them and they do not get the same opportunities because of what they might have done. Clause 7 of the bill is about access to quality education during detention and post release, meaning that this education does not need to stop at VET, VCE or VM, as it currently does. Individual learning plans, or ILP, as mentioned in clause 7, will be developed and tailored to offenders’ needs academically and they will follow their personal needs and goals. Tell me: how is giving at-risk youth quality education that goes exactly alongside their specific needs and their specific goals not a good thing? Tell me: how is getting specialists and qualified teachers a bad thing for these people? Tell me: how is measuring the way we live up to our name as an Education State in all areas – not just education for those not in the youth justice system – making sure we continue our reputation for education a bad thing?

Mohammad FREIHAT: While the intent of this bill is admirable, it contains several significant flaws that outweigh its benefits. Firstly, the complaint process lacks credibility. Clause 4.4 states that a formal investigation begins after 10 or more credible complaints against a service provider, but the bill never defines what makes a complaint credible. If all 10 complaints came from the same individual, the system could be abused through repeated allegations, wasting time and resources on unnecessary investigations. A stronger threshold or independent verification process is needed before triggering mandatory reviews. Secondly, this bill limits the freedom of choice of young offenders. It requires them to participate in individual learning plans, education, employment pathways, counselling and supervised programs regardless of their readiness or circumstances. While these supports are valuable, forcing participants removes personal authority and may reduce genuine engagement. Rehabilitation works best when young people choose to participate, not when they are controlled. Finally, the bill assumes that every young offender can follow the same structural pathway. In reality every case is different. Some young people face mental health issues, unstable housing or family violence that make education or employment unrealistic in the short term. A one-size-fit-all approach risks setting them up to fail instead of supporting their individual needs. For these reasons, I urge the house to reject this bill.

Arzoo HABIBI: Victorians have a right to feel safe in their own community. Young people have a right to a future that is not defined by a cycle of crime. This bill achieves both. It puts community safety first while still keeping rehabilitation and support in the centre. The bill amends the Crimes Act 1958, the Sentencing Act 1991 and the current Bail Act 1977 to deliver a more appropriate trauma-informed response to youth crime. The focus is clear: rehabilitation, accountability, community safety and long-term outcomes.

The bill strengthens accountability for young offenders, but support without responsibility does not work at all. Clause 8.4 recognises genuine remorse as a mitigating factor but mandates a strict six-month supervision order with behavioural programs, counselling and tight monitoring. Clause 8.5 ensures that any breach or reoffending within 12 months is treated as a severe aggravating factor, with immediate legal consequences. Clause 8.8 emphasises that in all bail decisions involving youth offenders, community safety shall be the paramount consideration. Clause 8.9 reflects zero tolerance for reoffending, stating bail must be refused where a youth reoffends within 12 months, breaches bail, reoffends on a supervision order, is charged with a serious youth offence or presents an unacceptable risk of further reoffending in community. Clause 8.10 requires strict conditions where bail is granted for serious youth offences. For clause 8.1 offences, rehabilitation is given reduced weight because deterrence, denunciation and community protection must be considered when there are risks to community safety. Despite the firm stance, detention remains the last resort, while it still would provide

structured support during and after detention to help reintegrate young people safely. It is not a choice between safety and support; it is both. It tells victims their safety matters, and it tells young offenders that actions have consequences and that real help is available to change for those who want to. For a safer Victoria and for the future of our youth, I urge the house to support the bill.

Zara ASMAT: I rise to refute clause 7 of the youth offenders reform bill proposed by the government. Now, before anyone accuses me of refuting their education, I am not. In fact we believe education is one of the essential fundamentals that helps foster healthy future generations. I am refuting the structure and implementation of strategies proposed by the government. The government proposes clause 7, which demands specialist teachers, individual learning plans, vocational pathways, digital platforms and trauma-informed staff as well as annual reviews carried out by an independent body. While this in itself sounds amazing, it is simply not practical to implement considering the shortage of teachers the Victorian education system is experiencing. Moreover, 90 per cent of the youths in juvenile centres encounter gaps in education as well as suffering from learning and mental health disabilities and difficulties for many, many years leading up to offending. This gap cannot be filled by expanding educational programs alone. Afterwards, in clause 7.1, the government proposes the idea of education being equivalent to mainstream education yet continues to set an unrealistic threshold of expectations from government as well – all of this whilst disregarding youth choice and limiting the possibility of not being on an individual learning plan which is proposed by a linear course of action for all. Hence, I suggest that the current bill, considering its technicalities, is a rather unrealistic promise that cannot be practically delivered – and a promise that cannot be delivered is no kindness at all. If we are to make promises to these young, vulnerable children, let them be far more valuable. Our honour, our honesty, our realism and reforms that can actually help to genuinely change their lives.

Alyia ALASSANI: I rise to draw the house's attention to clause 9 of our bill, 'Service Accountability and Enforcement'. This clause is essential because support systems cannot be effective without accountability. Across early intervention, incarceration and post-release stages, young people rely on services to provide safety, rehabilitation and meaningful support. However, when those services fail through neglect, misconduct, inadequate support or intimidation, the consequences can be severe and long lasting. Clause 9 addresses this directly.

Clause 9.1 establishes that service delivery must not result in harm and ensures young people are supported in environments free from mistreatment, retaliation and intimidation. Importantly, it also ensures young people are provided with clear and accessible pathways to report concerns safely and that those reports are taken seriously. That is vital because if young people cannot safely speak up, harm continues unchecked. Clause 9.2 further strengthens this by requiring service delivery to be culturally safe, genuine and responsive, particularly for Aboriginal and marginalised young people, while actively supporting rehabilitation, reintegration and the development of purpose. This recognises that support must be meaningful, not performative. Clause 9.3 extends accountability to staff, ensuring workers can raise concerns without fear of intimidation, retaliation or loss of employment. Accountability cannot exist where silence is safer than truth, and we cannot expect young people to take accountability for their actions if the systems around them are not willing to do the same. Finally, clause 9.5 recognises the importance of coordinated service delivery between youth justice, housing, mental health, education and child protection. This is critical because one system failure often becomes another system's burden. Clause 9 is not simply about compliance, it is about protecting young people, supporting workers and strengthening the systems responsible for breaking cycles of harm, and for that reason I commend this clause to the house.

Hamayle ASMAT: This bill, despite its good intentions, simply duplicates services that already exist instead of fixing the real problems. Let us ask ourselves one question: Do we really need another board? If we do, what happens if the new board fails? Another board? Victoria already has organisations such as Forensicare, which provides mental health advice and response services, conducts psychiatric and psychological assessments for young people and delivers specialist support. We also have Headspace, youth justice community support centres, youth advocacy organisations, the Department of Justice and Community Safety, the Victorian Ombudsman and existing complaint processes. The services are already there. Creating another board does not fill the gap, it creates another layer of bureaucracy. The real issue is not that these services do not exist, the real issue is that they are underfunded and poorly implemented. Instead of investing in frontline workers, this bill invests more in administration. We do not need more people sitting around another boardroom table discussing problems. We need more people on the ground actually solving them, and that is where this bill falls apart. Victoria is already experiencing staff shortages across youth justice, mental health

and community services, so where exactly are these qualified professionals going to come from? If we pull experienced psychologists, social workers and youth justice staff into oversight roles, we are taking them away from the young people who need them the most. This bill mistakes more bureaucracy for better outcomes. More boards do not automatically mean more accountability, and more administration does not automatically mean better support. If we truly want to improve outcomes for young people, we should strengthen the services we already have, not duplicate them.

The ACTING PRESIDENT: Thank you, members. We have exhausted our speaking list, but I will take additional speakers from the floor, starting with the sponsor.

Shanay GAO-KUHLMAN: Please note this speech briefly mentions murder and rape, so please take a moment to leave if needed.

I ask the opposition: is the main speaker of the opposition implying punishment is not necessary for murderers or rapists? It would be ridiculously idealistic to assume that rehabilitation is plausible in every scenario. For some cases punishment and deterrence are absolutely necessary. I ask the opposition: do you think rehabilitation would stop a Ted Bundy or a Jeffrey Dahmer? I think not. The bill is receptive to this fact and that not everything is solvable, and that should be appreciated and not nitpicked. Additionally, the opposition's second speaker highlighted the need for preventative measures, which I wholeheartedly agree with. However, in shutting this bill down with that reasoning, it is discriminatory and not culturally receptive to those who are already in the system. Young people in or on their way to be in the youth justice system should not be ignored. Instead they should be rehabilitated, as stated in the bill, to aid their assimilation back into our society. Think about falsely incarcerated young people – specifically, over-represented First Nations young people and those of colour. They are harshly punished and pushed further into crime, when they have the potential to be rehabilitated and educated. The opposition appears to consider the youth justice system as equal, when it is anything but, and that is why the previously existing acts require amendment, as stated in this bill.

Hamza HASSAN: While I do agree with the overall idea of the bill, I think one of the greatest weaknesses of this bill is the absence of measurable outcomes. The bill promises better rehabilitation and improved reintegration, yet it never explains how Parliament will determine whether those objectives have actually been achieved. How much should reoffending decrease? Over what period should success be measured? Without clear benchmarks, Parliament would not be able to properly evaluate whether this legislation has delivered meaningful change.

Bodhi COLLINS: This bill seeks to strike a balance between community values and rehabilitation as the core form of dealing with youth offenders. Supporting this bill is a clear sign that this Youth Legislative Council wants to see government action in dealing with the youth crime crisis and dealing with our youth offenders. The opposition alleges that this bill, in seeking to strike a balance between those in favour of rehabilitation and those in favour of punishment, actually achieves nothing. Well, I disagree with this, and I say that seeking compromise is such a core aspect of our democracy. When we seek compromise, we get the best results. When we seek compromise, we are able to establish a mutual understanding in such divisive debates as this, that we want the best for our youth offenders and that we want the best for Victoria. Is it a bad thing that we strike a balance? I say no. This bill considers how to deal with youth offenders through providing youth offender support and rehabilitation services, integrated case management and service coordination. There is no denying that we have a youth crime crisis. This bill takes relevant and meaningful steps to address this. If this bill means that there is one less crime committed, I would be down for voting for it; if this bill means that one youth offender stays away from committing crimes, I would vote for it; and if this bill means that we have less victims of crime, I would vote for it. I urge all members of the Legislative Council to vote with their conscience and support this bill.

Najiba NASERI: If this bill truly wants to change lives, why does it leave out the very important things that keep young people safe and well? Firstly, it has no proper focus on public health. While you cannot fix behaviour or build a future while ignoring mental health, trauma and physical wellbeing, without real health support all the programs in the world will only treat the surface, not the deep pain and the struggles that so many of these young people face. Secondly, it fails Indigenous youth and lacks long-term investment. It mentions cultural safety, but does not deliver the dedicated, lasting resources Indigenous communities need. Without respect, proper funding and plans that go beyond the short term, this bill will never close the gap for disadvantaged young people.

Emily ROGERS: This bill gives everyone a fair go. How many chamber members think they could participate in opportunities such as VCE if they had been arrested? How many chamber members think they would want the mistakes that they made before they could even make informed decisions to determine their future? The opposition wants to act like this bill does not practically work and does not fix anything. But I can assure you it does. It changes everything, just making young people seen.

Ember McBRYDE: While I agree with the government that this bill does aim to assist youth offenders back into the community, I do question whether a lot of the systems they are providing to do that are actually going to be as effective as they think. For example, clause 6.3 states:

A single, comprehensive support plan shall be developed for each youth offender;

(a) The plan shall address the individual's needs, including;

- (i) Health;
- (ii) Education;
- (iii) Housing; and
- (iv) Social support.

I come from a program called the youth foyer. The youth foyer is a housing and education program for young people at risk. In our program we address all of these things as part of it. However, the youth foyer is only acceptable for lower risk young people. High-risk young people are not admitted into the foyer because they are not ready for the program. Some of their higher risks need to be addressed before they can start engaging with education, housing, legal and advocacy services, where appropriate, as well as some of the other things that the government have included in this bill.

A member interjected.

Ember McBRYDE: To address the interjection, I am reading the bill. The bill has been made with great intentions, but I do question whether all of the support services are actually going to do what they are intended to do.

Kaydee JONES: This bill shows nuance. That is what it does. It is a complex bill that acknowledges and amplifies the importance of early intervention and rehabilitation in reducing crime, both now and in the future. This bill knows that rehabilitation is always the ideal most commonly, but through clause 8.7 it shows that this is not always possible. The crimes that this clause allows for – with detention to be imposed without the last resort limitation – are the worst of the worst, and they are considered as such because the offender has caused serious or irreparable harm to another person. I would also like to clarify that this clause is not just saying that detention will be enforced and the importance placed on rehabilitation will be forgotten. It is just acknowledging that this is not the best fit. In the justice system the sanction needs to fit the crime. It also means that a consideration of factors will address one of the aims of the bill, which is to reduce the number of youth offenders. For example, punishment aims to deter offenders from repeat offending, community protection reduces the spread of negative influence, denunciation shows the justice system's disapproval of crime and deterrence stops other people from committing. This bill may not address everything. It may not address the systemic issues we face in our state justice system, a system derived from England's much older and much more tested and entrenched justice system, but honestly, what bill could? But it is a positive step in the right direction, and sometimes that is all it takes to initiate long-overdue systemic change.

Mahek BADWAL: When we think about youth crime, we must first question why it occurs in the first place. While some reasons for this have been addressed by the government, including childhood trauma as well as societal and communal reasons, we have seen a rising number of youths opting to do crime simply for the aesthetic. If we look to the rise of the machete aesthetic and the joy-riding across Melbourne and Victoria, it is becoming increasingly evident that these current repeat offenders are not doing it simply because they have to do it – for example, if they do not have the right equipment or they need something so they have to go and do it – but rather just for the thrill of it. Simply put, we need to ensure that we have engagement with these youths to ensure that they comply. Placing too many extra ideas and further contracts on these youths simply creates resentment rather than engagement. To ensure that we have a system in which youth crime is not only prevented in the future but also evaluated, we must work cohesively with the youth currently in the system, rather than simply applying punishment or even forced education systems.

Thalia BAKER: The opposition argue that youth offenders being forced to participate will cause them to disengage. However, a parent who does not set rules for their child is a parent viewed as neglecting said child. It is the same for youth offenders. A support system without rules is a support system neglecting the youth offenders it is supposed to be protecting. Whilst mandatory participation in rehabilitation might seem harsh, it is necessary for youth offenders to be supported in reintegrating into society.

Matilda FEEHAN: This bill is proposing support that a lot of young people and youth offenders, undoubtedly, desperately need – the feeling that people care and that they do have a chance. So why wait until it is seemingly too late? The government aims to provide housing support for youth offenders. Clause 6.4 states:

Support services shall be maintained during custody ...

This includes housing. So why not improve the foster care system instead? Why is the government focusing on housing people in custody? It is pointless. The housing issue lies with the foster care system, and it in turn influences mental health. Again, this is a preventative issue; provide preventative measures. What good is counselling if they have already murdered somebody? We need to support the youth, especially those vulnerable to committing crimes, before the damage is done.

Nyandeng MAYAN: Understandably, not all offenders will actually want to change and will act accordingly, but what about those who actually want to change? Once getting out of prison, you are likely going to get rejected – rejected by your community, rejected by your family and rejected by jobs. You are just lonely. With the education that they will be provided by this bill, they will be able to get new jobs and rehabilitate in a new world. Why don't we show them support rather than rejecting them and showing hate towards them? There is a reason why offenders keep on offending. It is because they have no-one there for them, so why can't we be the ones there for them? Why can't we be the ones to support them and instead stand up for them and treat them like actual human beings? This bill will lower the chances of offenders going back to jail and going back to the streets willingly to sell drugs and all that, because they can actually get proper jobs due to the education that this bill has provided them.

Olivia HARRAP: The government states that this bill reduces discrimination and promotes equality in the justice system. However, this is a blatant assumption. All it merely does is alter the severity of crime for all. This does not avoid the unfortunate internal bias of one that may influence consequences for youth. Discrimination is discrimination regardless of the level of court, making this bill redundant.

Patrick PHUNG: The opposition may be correct. Many youth offenders face challenges that have caused their offending behaviour or 'adopt a machete aesthetic'. They may be experiencing unstable housing, poor mental health, family violence or a lack of community connection. However, tackling youth offending means tackling the causes that have led young people into the justice system in the first place because public health prevention is better than late intervention, as the opposition would claim otherwise. These issues are deeply connected to each other. They cannot be addressed in isolation but are something we must address as a whole. That is what clause 6 of this bill aims to do. It recognises the importance of integrated case management and the coordinated service around it because it creates a system of wraparound care, care that gives support for housing, health and education among the other services.

This care does not just stop at the courtroom or the prison; this is something that continues throughout their journey through the justice system and as they navigate back and reintegrate into the community. This care is important because it helps build a framework for putting people back on the right track instead of making a youth offender navigate a fragmented and complex system. Having a dedicated case manager and a support plan means a young person will be less likely to fall through the cracks and be more likely to get the support they need at the right time. We cannot expect young offenders to change if we continue to respond only after a crime has been committed. What we get is a society where young people fall back into the same circumstances that contributed to offending in the first place and what we get is a system of offenders revolving through the doors of the justice system. Justice should not be holding youth offenders accountable for their actions, but it should also be equipping them with the right tools to make better choices in the future.

Hayley MARTINIANO DIAS: I would like to pose a question to the sponsor of the bill: the opposition defined 'continuity of care' in clause 3 as meaning uninterrupted and consistent provision of services and support. I would like to ask across the aisle, is this actually feasible?

The ACTING PRESIDENT: We are in debate on the bill, so I can only welcome contributions at this time. Having come to the end of our time for open floor debate, I will now call on the sponsor of the bill for their right of reply. You may wish to take up the member's question in your reply.

Allegra CIRILLO: I would like to directly respond to the opposition. The opposition has raised points, points that are simply legislation taken out of context. I will give you an example. Clause 7.4 was taken out of context. They have claimed that offenders are potentially being put into back into a system that is potentially harmful. However, in responding to these claims, there is only one thing I can say: read the bill. This bill's clauses cover all sectors that concern youth offenders. This bill keeps the services accountable. It reintegrates a youth back into a society that is suitable for their lives. It keeps them out of harm by enforcing this through this bill. This bill is to support every single youth offender. So the hypothetical what-ifs – what is going to happen? what if this happens? – are simply make-believe and facetious statements. I once again advise every single chamber member to support this bill's passage.

The ACTING PRESIDENT: The question is:

That the Support Systems for Youth Offenders Reform Bill 2026 be now read a second and a third time.

Motion agreed to.

Read second time.

Read third time.

The ACTING PRESIDENT: Very well done, everybody. That was great. You will be heading off shortly, but thank you so much for joining us today. I am Katherine Copsey, by the way. I am a Legislative Council member for Southern Metropolitan Region. I am the Victoria Greens justice spokesperson, so thank you very much for picking a bill that was so on topic for me today. We do have 5 minutes before we finish up if anyone has any questions that they want to ask about the process today.

Ava D'SYLVA: This is not exactly related to Youth Parliament, but what got you into politics? How are you here today?

The ACTING PRESIDENT: As a Greens MP I have always been very motivated by climate and environment, but I did not set out to become an MP really; it is something that happened along the way, as I think happens. We have got people with lots of different backgrounds in this place, which is a really good thing. I began doing advocacy and volunteering through organisations like Environment Victoria, and through that I did a lot of doorknocking and going out in the community and talking to people about issues, but not in an electoral sense, just trying to raise awareness and that sort of thing. I graduated law and started a career in commercial law, but I was pretty sure I did not want to stay on a partner track. By the time I was practising I was actually doing quite a lot of volunteering on the weekends because I grew up in the area and was living at the time where Adam Bandt was the MP for Melbourne. I did a lot of doorknocking and stuff for the Greens and was enjoying my weekends more than I was enjoying my time in the office. Through the Greens I started doing volunteer organising and that sort of thing, and in my legal career I got frustrated as well with coming up against laws that I thought were quite difficult for my clients to practice within and were not very scientifically based or rigorous. That is what got me more interested in decision-making. That was the pathway, and then I eventually ran for council and served on the Port Phillip council for six years prior to running for election here.

Youth Council adjourned 4:44 pm.