

Legislative Council

Hansard

Thursday 19 September 2024

Motion: Budget Papers and Appropriation Bills

[excerpt...]

[11.07 a.m.]

Ms WEBB (Nelson) - Mr President, I rise to provide my formal response to the state budget 2024-25.

Since its delivery last Thursday, we have heard many claims and adjectives used to describe this budget. From the government's claim it delivers a strong plan for the state's future through to requiring an R rating, that it is a blues budget, an unending debt spiral and a budget which prioritises investing in projects over investing in people, to quote from the TasCOSS response.

I would also add it is a budget with its head firmly planted in the sand. Once again, when it comes to making the hard decisions or even just putting mechanisms in place by which to commence hard conversations to instigate an agreed plan of necessary reform, structural reform that has been thoroughly deferred to another day - in all likelihood to another parliament. For financial year after financial year, economists, political commentators, the Treasury Department itself, have all emphasised the critical need for Tasmania to undertake rigorous and modernising fiscal structural reform. Yet, at most, these calls are given lip service by recent successive governments and, at worst, they are completely ignored.

By structural reform, we mean more than merely balancing the books from one financial year to the next. However, this budget does not even present a realistic and believable way to achieve that. Put simply, structural reform means reconfiguring in a responsible and equitable manner the means by which income is generated and expenditure is determined across the immediate, medium and long term. The longer that this is put off, the harder it will become. We have been putting it off for quite some time already.

The Pre-Election Financial Outlook Report which was released in February this year by the Department of Treasury and Finance, following the announcement of the early state election, said this:

The most recent Fiscal Sustainability Report (FSR) prepared by the Department of Treasury and Finance in June 2021 concluded that, under all the scenarios analysed by the Department, the results showed predicted fiscal outcomes that were manageable in the short to medium term. However, the size of the corrective action required to maintain fiscal sustainability increased over the projection period.

This pre-election report goes on to reiterate:

Early action to correct fiscal deterioration will mitigate the severity of the measures required to effectively maintain fiscal sustainability.

As well as warning:

The composition of the state's revenue base means it is not possible to rely solely on economic growth to maintain fiscal sustainability.

That prudent warning and advice of February is not reflected in the budget we are considering before us. Nor was this the first warning that was received. The earlier Tasmanian government Fiscal Sustainability Report 2021 reiterates the importance of maintaining fiscal sustainability for a number of key reasons, those being:

- the importance of intergenerational equity;
- building of a robust budget position to cushion the State against unexpected negative events;
- efficiently allocating public resources; and
- the establishment of spending and taxation policies that are equitable, stable and predictable;

Further, this 2021 fiscal sustainability report warns that addressing future fiscal pressures will require a range of policy measures to be implemented. There is no one quick fix. It also stated quite bluntly that:

Delaying action until the task is much greater is likely to place an undue burden on the community and businesses.

Why is structural reform to achieve fiscal sustainability such a growing imperative here? We can answer that question by looking at the Independent Review of Tasmania State Finances. It was undertaken by Mr Saul Eslake just this year and was released publicly in August. As stated in the report's executive summary:

Sustainability, in this sense, builds confidence among businesses, community groups and individuals that they won't be suddenly hit with big tax increases, or reductions in funding or services on which they depend, in turn enabling them to plan and arrange their affairs with greater surety. Fiscal sustainability also helps to promote intergenerational equity, by reducing the likelihood that one generation has to pay for the fiscal mistakes of another. Conversely, a protracted failure to ensure fiscal sustainability almost inevitably leads to a fiscal crisis - which in turn increases the risk of political and social instability, and long-term adverse economic consequences.

The link between fiscal sustainability, intergenerational equity and social cohesion is a crucial one, and it is a point that I will return to throughout my contribution. The independent Eslake report makes some very clear and salient points that the government, and all members of this place, should take heed of, including:

- Tasmania's general government finances have deteriorated sharply since 2018, and that is including before, during and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

- The deterioration in Tasmania's public sector finances is entirely the result of conscious decisions to increase spending and cut taxes. In budget paper terms, which presents the policy and parameters statement in budget paper 1, the current dire situation of Tasmania's finances is all the result of policy, and not the result of external parameter factors.
- Tasmania's general government sector cash balance and net debt positions are not the worst in Australia, but they are no longer the best, and when Tasmania's outsized, unfunded superannuation liability is included, our general government net financial liabilities are exceeded only by the Northern Territory.

Further, when government-owned businesses are also included, Tasmania's position looks worse than even Victoria's and the Northern Territory's. We are now seeing reporting that Tasmania's credit rating is likely to be downgraded, and that it could drop even more significantly because the government, through this budget, is not communicating any demonstrated interest in making structural improvements for our financial sustainability.

A key finding of the independent review by Saul Eslake is that Tasmania's state finances have been on an unsustainable trajectory for some time. I quote this:

In the absence of corrective policy actions, the conditions of Tasmania's state finances will inevitably and inexorably deteriorate further.

Those were the Treasury warnings that were available to the government prior to the development of the September budget, along with those more recent warnings contained in the specifically commissioned independent review of the state's finances.

Ms Forrest - It should not be news to anybody.

Ms WEBB - It is old news. Yet, as Mr Eslake's post-Budget analysis found - and I quote from his public assessment from last week:

The government has put off to another day commencing the task of restoring Tasmania's public finances to a sustainable position.

Yet again, the government has 'kicked the can' well and truly down the road. When governments keep on kicking the can down the road, the dented and battered can is soon going to become lodged in a fiscal pothole. It will not be one that can go on a social media post for the Premier. It will be a deep fiscal pothole.

We have been warned of the potential ramifications that the fiscal pothole presents to us. The failure to prioritise robust structural reforms to get the state back on track - back on the road to fiscal sustainability - undermines Tasmania's intergenerational equity and puts our social cohesion at very real risk. I know both these things are important to all members in this place. We all are mindful of the generations to come - not only in our own families but in our communities. We are all very mindful of social cohesion and its importance. We know that a growing divide in Tasmania is only going to be at the expense of all of us in the long run, and of our state.

I note that Budget Paper No. 2 acknowledges the Eslake independent review and its thought-provoking commentary on the state's financial position, while undertaking that the government will provide a further response to the review's 26 recommendations in due course. I recognise that the August release of that independent review may have been cutting it fine when bringing down a mid-September budget. However, the review contains a range of legislative and other initiatives that could have been incorporated into this budget cycle, especially, as we have noted, this is not new - this news in the report. It is not like it came as a bolt out of the blue.

The lack of correlation between the State Budget and the independent review also demonstrates a key criticism the latter makes of the recent government's failures to heed the advice available in the 2021 fiscal sustainability report and the pre-election report, which I have mentioned. If the government was serious about repairing and putting us back on track to long-term fiscal sustainability, they would not have needed the independent review to have pointed it out to them. There is no excuse for that not already being firmly placed on their budgetary planning radar.

The government may have chosen to ignore the advice contained in the independent review of the state's finances for now, but I found it prescient and timely. As such, it provides a useful reference point against which to evaluate the budget and the government's current fiscal approach. The independent review particularly provides food for thought when considering the government's expenditure priorities, its income sources, and limitations against Tasmania's demographics, our national economic position, and the potential future challenges we may face. It also raises some serious questions over whether the government has a vision for a cohesive and equitable Tasmania, and if so, what does that look like? Just as importantly, how do we get from here to there in an equitable, inclusive, and sustainable manner?

A significant point to consider when appraising both the Eslake independent review and the 2024-25 budget is that neither advocates for the lazy slash-and-burn approach to apparent return to surplus, which, hopefully, has been relegated to the policy bin and labelled 'irresponsible false economy'. Although, I am sure the latent temptation to resort to such ineffectual measures is still there. In light of that, I noted carefully the Treasurer's commitment, made during his budget speech on Thursday, that:

Nor will the government be implementing a slash-and-burn or austerity approach to rebuilding Tasmania's public finances.

That was a very welcome commitment. We have seen the destructive impact of austerity measures as applied elsewhere, and then the subsequent struggle to repair both the social and economic damage of such austerity policies. So, yes, it was a very welcome undertaking from the Treasurer last week. However, his statement also acknowledged and confirmed the need to be rebuilding Tasmania's public finances. There is the rub: acknowledgement that the rebuild needs to occur but minus any real and viable praxis by which to deliver that, particularly in light of the other blanket undertaking issued by this government, that it will not review or revisit the current state-based income mix, including the state's taxation and levy base. Further, although not going down the slash and burn route, the government is still relying upon the equally blunt instrument of so-called efficiency dividends, despite the Eslake independent review specifically recommending against this approach. As Mr Eslake reiterated, post the release of this budget:

Efficiency dividends are a poor substitute for conscious decisions as to which programs or services should be funded and which shouldn't, and often results in greater inefficiency rather than increased productivity. They also often result in a disproportionate burden of spending cuts and job losses being borne by policy advisory and analytical functions in the name of preserving frontline jobs and services.

I will come back to the issue of frontline services later. Demanding efficiency dividends also abrogates the political responsibility of spending cut decisions. Responsibility is instead pushed into departments and most likely well down the food chain within the public service bureaucracy. Such an approach will rarely be successful in actually delivering genuine and sustainable efficiencies. It is not strategic; it is political cowardice.

It is also important to acknowledge that reducing spending is not the sole solution either. In fact, Treasury reports and the independent review all emphasise that corrective action will require more than one approach. According to the Grants Commission, Tasmania is spending approximately 7.5 per cent less than what is actually required to provide Tasmanians with a level of services equivalent to the average of all states and territories at the average level of efficiency.

So, this is a rather sobering thought, that even though there is a growing disconnect between our revenue base and our expenditure, Tasmania is currently, in real service delivery terms, potentially underfunding those services when compared with the average of our national counterparts. We know the demand on Tasmania's public sector spending is only going to grow in light of the state's unique demographic trends, including an ageing population, low health and education outcomes, lack of pay parity with interstate jurisdictions, just to mention a few examples.

The Eslake Independent Review also makes it quite clear that reducing expenditure by cutting public services will have a detrimental effect. One such statement can be found on page 88 of the independent review report, which states this:

It is highly unlikely that the task of putting Tasmania's public finances on a sustainable footing can be achieved primarily through savings in operating expenses, at least not without imposing significant costs on Tasmania's most vulnerable citizens and having a greater adverse impact on Tasmania's economy than would result from raising an equivalent amount of additional revenue.

As well, on page 87 it says this:

All of these considerations point to the conclusion that the most important elements of any plan to return Tasmania's public finances to a sustainable condition are more likely to be found on the revenue side of the budget and from within the government's infrastructure investment program than among the government's operating expenses.

This makes it pretty clear that any attempts to check spiralling debt or pull back on necessary services expenditure by relying solely on tightening of the proverbial belt or slashing funding is not the way to fiscal sustainability. It is not the suitable corrective measure. We must also address the state's revenue sources and mix. This is the entrenched blind spot for this and former governments.

Before anyone decides to misconstrue or misrepresent my position on this, I am not calling for a knee-jerk increase in or introduction of new taxes or levies. Instead, I am saying it is long overdue for a comprehensive and holistic review of our taxation base and that be undertaken with the purpose of testing whether it is delivering as progressive a tax and transfer system as intended, to provide the robust underpinning for the delivery of sustainable and inclusive services to facilitate a healthy community. Some members will be aware that for successive state budgets now I have raised the need for comprehensive, rigorous and effective structural reform of our taxation and revenue system in this state. I continue now to reiterate that call. In light of these stark economic challenges facing our state, the growing inequality that is holding our communities back and the lack of any viable alternative plan being proposed by this government, a transformative review of our revenue base becomes more imperative with every passing year. As I previously raised, such a review, potentially undertaken by an independent panel or the like, charged to produce a range of implementation options, could examine the state's recognised narrow taxation and revenue base with the intent of seeking options for modern, equitable and efficient means to broaden that base. It could test whether the current taxation and revenue mix supports or risks undermining modern public policy direction and demand.

For example, the potential impact of reducing or removing taxes on positives, such as employment, while redirecting tax focus onto damaging practices, such as pollution, and exploring other incentivising taxes to encourage social and sustainable reforms. It could investigate any current revenue foregone options present within our current state tax and revenue mix. Finally, it could identify any required transitional time frames and supports that may be required, including possible funding to assist those most affected by proposed reforms.

It is not just about what we might do. It is how we might go about it - all of which could be informed by an appropriately independent, rigorous process.

A courageous government and parliament would identify this as a priority and a potential way to depoliticise potential corrective options by which to put Tasmania back on the path to fiscal sustainability.

Fiscal resilience is not going to come from blind reliance upon the federal coffers to keep cushioning us from external, national or global shocks. We urgently need a circuit breaker to break through the political stalemate of who will blink first. That is the attitude amongst our major political parties, which are currently caught in a downward spiral of their own with attempts to outcompete each other with their taxation rhetoric about who is not going to raise taxes the most.

As was noted by the Treasurer in his speech delivered on Thursday 12 September last week, and I quote:

the 51st Parliament is diverse and calls for a new way of working, that of working together in unity with a common purpose to deliver stable government and to make good decisions for Tasmanians.

This is a very important and significant acknowledgement; it is exactly this 51st Parliament which may provide the opportunity to break through and break away from old political silos and approaches.

A brave and determined government could seize the opportunities presented by this parliament to seek to progress with establishing, for example, a panel of experts who are unconstrained by one political ideology or another and who are tasked to provide rigorous and credible structural reform options back to the parliament for open debate.

For all the rhetoric by some who say the current government is not achieving anything, this parliament is kicking goals through the twin goal posts of public interest and good governance. We are seeing all kinds of interesting activity come through this parliament; the possibilities are there.

History demonstrates to us that the hard yards and the heavy lifting tends to occur when the burden is shared, albeit grudgingly. Not only are the budget papers screaming at us with their black and white font that substantive action is required, historically we could be in the midst of a parliamentary context that could mitigate entrenched political ideologies and scaremongering and do the hard yards to deliver. Sadly, despite the potential springboard offered by the independent review, that vision is not evident here in this budget. Depressingly, this current opportunity to provide the respectful space for such a meaningful discussion on transformative evaluation of our revenue sources may be slipping through our fingers yet again.

I do not know what it will take for the two major parties to rise above the political self-interest in their cowardly refusal to address taxation reform. Potentially, if they remain having to work with a diverse parliament in both Houses of this place, they will at some point be relieved of the sole fixation on winning majority government and realise there is an opportunity to genuinely work together in unity with common purpose, to deliver stable government and to make good decisions for Tasmanians, just as the Treasurer suggested.

Before I move on to discuss fiscal good governance within the context of these budget papers, it is worthwhile to pause briefly to emphasise that just as appropriate and worthwhile spending to deliver on good public policy in the public interest is not a bad thing, nor is debt in itself necessarily a bad thing. Not surprisingly, there has been considerable political commentary since last Thursday regarding the projected debt levels across the forward Estimates. As we know, borrowings and debt generated as investments that assist further tangible goals and outcomes, in contrast with the less fiscally responsible borrowing to pay for recurrent expenditure on an ongoing basis, can be considered a sound fiscal policy.

However, as already discussed, it does require a deliverable plan by which to meet the repayments both on the interest and the principal borrowing ultimately. I would caution, though, that just as the knee-jerk reaction to spending exceeding revenue is to demand cuts or efficiency dividends, the other knee-jerk reaction of calling for public asset sales can also be an equally blunt instrument. In the long-term, blunt instruments can often cause more problems than the short-term relief they provide. Short-term fixes and band-aids should not be confused with serious and rigorous structural reforms. I hope we do not see suggestions of public asset sales in this state.

In the context of discussing the strategic purpose of expenditure and investment, I cannot go past the infrastructure spend in this Budget. Although spending is not necessarily a bad or irresponsible thing, the degree of this government's infrastructure spending for ideological reasons is clearly producing serious stress fractures on our fiscal wellbeing. This Budget continues what is becoming a bit of a compulsive trend of this government, and that is to spend big on infrastructure. Apparently, according to economic commentators, it is the

largest public sector infrastructure spending program of our interstate counterparts relative to the respective economy size.

This record infrastructure burden totals \$5.1 billion over the four years to 2027-28. This spending is apparently to be funded from borrowings, and again, the key issue here is that without a clear and robust payment source identified, nor a deliverable time frame, it is this spend, rather than the spend on providing services to Tasmanians, which is predicted to result in cash deficits totalling \$3.8 billion over the next four years to 2027-28. Again, as economists and analysts tell us, it is the spiralling interest on those borrowings without a clear and reliable repayment strategy that compounds and puts at risk the state's credit ratings.

Without getting caught up in the pros and cons of individual infrastructure projects, I do find this largesse exceedingly problematic for two broad reasons. The first is that the state expects to pay for its infrastructure largesse with a reliance on the blunt instrument of efficiency dividends - basically, this is our education system, our health system, the vulnerable in our community - at the risk of forgoing services to underwrite the promised growth in the civil engineering sector. Secondly, we have already had budgets predicated on the presumption of building our way to restoring the budget and prosperity. That was the catchcry coming out of the COVID years. The fact that a reliance on infrastructure spending and the high-vis army clearly has not shielded us from the impacts of the financial headwinds that the Treasurer warns about would indicate that this fiscal strategy may not be viewed as effective as we had initially been led to believe.

The promised benefits of the huge infrastructure spending coming out of the Premier's Economic and Social Recovery Advisory Council (PESRAC) process, for example, and the 2021-22 Budget should have placed us on a more robust footing if there was merit in the 'build our way out of budgetary doldrums' theory. The fact that we apparently have to resort to this approach again in such a short time frame surely should give reason to pause. Is this really the most responsible use of public finances and in this manner? I would say not, and certainly not at the expense of a viable and functional public service that can provide all services required by Tasmanians, not just those deemed essential and in the manner in which public sector staff can meet mandated and statutory obligations. Clearly, determining the merit or otherwise for large infrastructure spends, particularly in the absence of meaningful structural reform of our revenue base, requires the public interest test to be paramount rather than perceived party or favoured stakeholder interests. We need to know that when we are investing in infrastructure, thorough cost-benefit analysis has provided us with the priority projects to put at the top of the list, which also brings me to the topic of pork-barrelling and election commitments when we talk about priorities.

Much has been said on this matter over recent days, which I acknowledge. However, once again, there have been loud warnings about this practice that have been deliberately ignored. The Auditor-General's Office raised serious concerns in its 2011 Special Report No. 98, Premier Sundry Grants program and Urban Renewal and Heritage Fund.

Subsequently, the Tasmanian Integrity Commission has identified the practice, colloquially known as pork-barrelling, to be at the least, potentially, indirect electoral bribery, and at the worst, corruption. On 6 April 2022, the Integrity Commission released its Grant Commitments in Election Campaigns, one of the research papers in the commission's ethical conduct and potential misconduct risks in Tasmanian parliamentary elections. That title in itself

should have provided a large enough red flag to have our major political parties contesting elections to reconsider the practice.

This Integrity Commission report provided three main recommendations.

(1) We recommend that the government consider before the next House of Assembly election reviewing the Public Governance, Performance and Accountability Act 2013 (Cth) with a view to introducing legislation into Tasmania incorporating the sentiment of section 71 of that Act.

(2) We recommend the government consider before the next House of Assembly election introducing mandatory grant rules modelled on the Commonwealth Grant Rules and Guidelines ensuring that they include compliance mechanisms and apply to ministers and ministerial staff, grant commitments made during an election period, ad hoc and discretionary grant commitments, and grant commitments in election campaigns.

(3) We recommend the government consider adopting the remainder of those recommendations made in 2011 by the Tasmanian Auditor General about the Premier's Sundry Grants program, now known as the Premier's Discretionary Fund.

As we know, these recommendations were utterly ignored. I acknowledge that many of us may feel conflicted on reforms proposed, such as blanket bans. There are a range of community groups in my electorate of Nelson that are deeply woven into the fabric of our community and that richly deserve recognition and support - and no-one would want to deprive them of the benefits of grants. However, it is the lack of transparency and accountability as to the decision-making process, that determines one lucky recipient over a less fortunate one during the heat of electioneering, which is at the heart of this problematic process.

As the Integrity Commission points out in its 2022 examination of electioneering grant commitments, I quote:

A fundamental tenet of our democracy is that public money should be administered responsibly by elected officials.

And further, in its 2022 report, it states:

There is the potential for electoral advantage to arise or be sought from the making of grants. If political or ministerial discretion is available in the grants process and it is used improperly, this can give rise to political favouritism and corruption. Irresponsible use of public money, or the perception of irresponsible use of public money, has arguably contributed to the declining trust in government in Australia and growing dissatisfaction with democracy itself.

Support from the public purse should not come down to whose ear a particular individual or organisation may have access to. That is akin to a feudal favours system and surely Tasmanians deserve better than that no matter whose electorate they may be in.

It is also important to note, that electioneering commitments are not only risking good governance but also good fiscal management. As noted in the Treasury pre-election financial outlook report released in February this year, I quote:

In addition to major infrastructure projects, there are also significant new government policy commitments that are of a scale that is uncommon for the state.

Another warning gone unheeded. There certainly must be reform in this area before the next state election. Whether that is the recently proposed blanket ban, which appears to be intended to only apply during election campaigns, or a more consistent and comprehensive reform model based upon good management principles that are outlined in the 2022 Integrity Commission report, is certainly a matter for priority consideration. In fact, to be so dismissive of such a fundamental tenet of a healthy democracy that we would hear our premier use absolutely inappropriate terms like bull crap in public commentary when it comes to pork barreling, I find highly inappropriate and disrespectful to the Tasmanian community. It might be fun to throw that sort of commentary around for social media audiences. But this is a serious issue. It has been thoroughly looked at by our Integrity Commission. There is a clear blueprint for how this can appropriately be dealt with during election periods and it is absolutely unacceptable to have a government and the leader of that government in the Premier disparaging concepts of fundamentally healthy democracy, like addressing the risks of pork barreling.

I find that it would be something that as member of the government I would be feeling quite embarrassed about and would be wanting to have really intense conversations behind closed doors within my party about what that says about me if I was a member of the government going forward and plan for a different approach when the next election comes up.

Moving on, there are further good governance and fiscal management reforms highlighted by the Eslake Independent Review and in fact the Premier and the Treasurer's silence on the legislative and administrative reforms recommended by that independent review is deafening, disappointingly, so in fact. The Eslake Independent Review Report provides a series of recommendations that warrant serious consideration. I note the Treasurer has indicated a more thorough response to the report in due course and I state now the government is on notice that this considered response in due course needs to include an implementation time frame by which these substantive recommendations will be considered and delivered.

I particularly anticipate constructive actions that delivers on the intent and spirit of the recommendations to boost the Tasmanian Audit Office's independence in line with the best practice of other national jurisdictions and the proposal to establish a Tasmanian parliamentary budget office. A parliamentary budget office will be a strong investment in capacity building across all non-government members particularly in the development and formation of sound and good public policy.

The Independent Review Report presents a compelling case for this reform and I am not going to repeat it in detail here, except to endorse its finding, which was this:

A Tasmanian Parliamentary Budget Office would significantly enhance the effectiveness of parliament's role in scrutinising fiscal policy decisions and in promoting more informed debate, both in parliament and within the broader Tasmanian community of budgetary and fiscal policy issues.

Amongst other contributions, this proposal could help both us as elected representatives as well as the broader community, including the media and commentators, when it comes to having constructive and robust discussions regarding the urgent need to have comprehensive structural reforms of our revenue base and our expenditure priorities. It is a government that is scared to have those conversations that would fail to act on this and look at implementing this measure.

It would also go some way to providing the capacity for properly costed election policy commitments across all parties, rather than merely those with access to Treasury resources. Also, if governments of any persuasion are serious about their respective oppositions producing annual alternative budgets, which we hear a lot about, rather than just goading them opportunistically for public theatre, they would welcome and facilitate the swift implementation of this proposed reform of establishing a parliamentary budget office.

It is also worthwhile to note within the context of state elections and funding of election commitments that a factor exacerbating this particular pressure on the annual budget and forward projections is when the government goes to an early election when they perceive that timing to be to their electoral advantage. We are currently here in September debating the 2024-25 financial year Budget because the Premier chose to go to an early election on 23 March this year. Arguably, there was no need for an early election. However, the 50th Parliament was declared unworkable by the Premier and Tasmanians were sent to the polls a year early, yet again, before anyone could say 'be careful what you wish for'. The early election returned the largest crossbench in recent Tasmanian history, making the previous 50th Parliament potentially the closest thing to a majority government we will see at least potentially for the next couple of elections. Additionally, the early election resulted in the disruption of the workings of government agencies, legislative reforms and the community sector, which are reliant upon funding from one financial year to the next.

It is a worrying pattern that we have seen far too often recently; as members will recall, the previous election held on 1 May 2021 was also a year early. Following that election, the 2021-22 State Budget provided funding for almost \$1.6 billion to meet election commitments made. We barely get through two subsequent state budgets and here we are again, an early election resulting in the current Budget before us having to provide an additional \$1.3 billion in election commitments across 2024-25 and into the forward Estimates.

It is considerably ironic, with all the hysterical criticism thrown at minority governments as apparently being inherently unstable, the last time a Tasmanian majority government went full term was 10 years ago with the election of the then Hodgman government in 2014, which went full term to 2018. This brings me to the point: in addition to introducing more rigorous constraints on major parties treating the public purse as their own electoral magic pudding during election campaigns - through measures such as the recently proposed ban on electioneering pork barreling, I believe we should also be legislating, for fixed four-year terms for the House of Assembly. Such a legislative reform, which has been called for by many, seeking to strengthen the equity and transparency of our democratic system of governance and elections, would also provide benefits for our fiscal management, even if it is to merely reduce the frequency of paying out billions in electioneering commitments every three years or so instead of every four.

I want to reiterate in my contribution today my longstanding call for the portfolio of Aboriginal affairs to be returned to the premier of the day, where anyone who takes seriously

the responsibility of leadership for our state would consider it to be the only place for it to belong. This neglect is reflected in the budget papers. We know Tasmania is not meeting all of its Closing the Gap obligations and time frames - far from it. We are still falling desperately short in some key areas and against significant metrics.

Looking at the allocations contained within the commission of inquiry funding, the majority of resourcing dedicated to the Tasmanian Aboriginal community is actually allocated across the forward Estimates rather than in this immediate financial year. For example, the Aboriginal Youth Justice allocation for 2024-25 is \$116,000 compared with the \$586,000 for 2025-26 and forward Estimates. We know that it can be heavily revised between now and then too, but at least there is funding there in the forward Estimates. While it is heartening to see funding provided for the Aboriginal Land Council of Tasmania, that only appears in this financial year, with nothing allocated in the forward Estimates, it appears - which makes me wonder what exactly the government's intent and vision is for this statutory entity.

This matter will be unpacked further during Estimates, but it also aligns with the general impression we have from this Budget and from the fact that the Premier does not assume leadership in this space by having this portfolio responsibility himself.

It is with growing concern that I note the promised truth-telling and pathway to treaty is beginning to resemble a neglected and overgrown track wandering to a dead end. The lack of dedicated focus and drive on acting on delivering the treaty is unconscionable and diminishes us all. Yes, the budget papers tell us the department is continuing to work to progress a treaty, but after all this time, there should be something tangible to show for that apparent work and effort. There should be time frames and implementation schedules; instead, it is like pulling teeth to obtain any meaningful update. Instead, Table 9.1 of budget paper 2, volume 1 reveals that the Aboriginal Advisory Group for Truth Telling and Treaty is allocated \$100,000 for the 2024-25 year, with nothing further across the forward Estimates. Does this mean we can expect to have fulfilled the truth-telling process and have a treaty in place by the end of this financial year? Sadly, I do not think that is the message we are supposed to take from this. I do not think that is what the lack of funding across forward Estimates means. I think it means that we are yet not committed to how we will take this forward and how we will fund investment in that space.

We are further seeing a projected decrease this financial year and across the forward Estimates for funding allocated to the minister for Aboriginal Affairs output group. As we know, government budgets reveal policy priorities; it tells us who matters and what warrants the attention and resources of the decision-makers and the leaders of the day. This is why the lack of focus of the Premier, this government, and as demonstrated by this Budget, is of grave concern. We have so far to go to achieve real tangible reconciliation with the Palawa and Pakana of Lutruwita and I do not see that journey progressing seriously or coherently under the policy settings and priorities of this government as evidenced in this Budget.

The Eslake Independent Review considers that the state's current unsustainable fiscal position indicates we need stronger institutions and more robust rules around the management of its public sector finances. The same principle could apply to other of our governance institutions, such as the Tasmanian Integrity Commission and the Office of the Tasmanian Ombudsman. I have stated previously, in this place, that the Tasmanian Integrity Commission annual funding is such a pittance compared with its interstate counterparts, that it would be laughable if the consequences were not so serious. Repeatedly we have independent reviews,

such as a recent Weiss review of the Paul Reynolds situation, which make formal recommendations that involve increased responsibility being placed on the Integrity Commission, and repeatedly, the Integrity Commission advises that it does not have the resources by which to comply and implement such recommendations.

As Chief Commissioner Greg Melick said in a media statement dated 8 July this year:

We strive within our current resourcing to do the best we can do. However, on our current budget, we cannot provide the level of investigation or oversight that the report recommends.

And further, he said:

Importantly, we barely have the resources to exercise our existing powers as envisaged and expected by the Tasmanian Parliament and the public.

A slight increase for the 2024-25 financial year and then a decrease across the forward Estimates that we see in this Budget is not going to do anything to improve that dire situation.

It is dire for transparency, dire for accountability and dire for community confidence and trust in our system of governance. The only people benefiting by this chronic underfunding are those who are uncomfortable with scrutiny and having to answer to good governance and transparency expectations. If the hat fits, the government should wear it. Shame on them.

The Office of the Ombudsman also finds itself in a similar underfunding limbo. Again, there is a real decrease in appropriation across the forward Estimates for one of our most crucial oversight entities. This entity also has increased responsibilities as outcomes of the commission of inquiry, yet you would not know that when looking at its measly operational budget. At the same time, Tasmania's right to information system has become the laughing stock of the nation due to the trend of some government agencies taking an Orwellian approach to disclosure applications. Despite hand on heart protestations by government of the importance of a robust, effective and transparent right to information system, rather conveniently, the oversight and compliance entities such as the Ombudsman is left carrying the weight without adequate mean to effect necessary cultural change across agencies and defending the public interest in accessing information regarding government decision-making.

The pittance of extra funding provided towards RTI functions will barely allow the backlog of external reviews to be dealt with, let alone actually deliver on the training and education functions that are supposed to be delivered by the Ombudsman's office. Again, it is shameful that this government avoids transparency and accountability by stealth through underfunding entities that are there, which on paper, have the responsibilities to deliver that transparency and accountability but are thwarted in doing so by being starved of funds.

There is so much more that warrants closer examination in terms of integrity, oversight and good governance.

One further matter that I will take the time to highlight here is the recent media statement issued by the Tasmanian National Preventive Mechanism, known as the TNPM. This is another of our crucial oversight entities, and it is also a requirement under the OPCAT protocol - the Optional Protocol to the Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman

or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, of which Australia is a signatory, as we all are familiar with. For those unfamiliar with the role of the TNPM, it is an independent oversight body that proactively visits and examines places where people may be deprived of their liberty, with the purpose of preventing their torture or inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment. It also provides education on human rights, cooperates with service providers to improve quality of treatment and advises government on legislation and policy.

I cannot express the seriousness of underfunding this pivotal role better than the current TNPM, who happens to be the Ombudsman and Custodial Inspector Richard Connock, who, for those who did not see his media statement of Friday last week, let me quote this from it:

I wish to communicate my disappointment that the Tasmanian Government has decided not to carry through with its commitment to appropriately resource the Office of the Tasmanian National Preventive Mechanism, NPM. The announced funding of \$300,000 will make it impossible to establish this new office and exercise any of its statutory functions. Not resourcing the office jeopardises Tasmania's newly acquired status as a leader in preventing the abuse of some of the most vulnerable people in our community, by ensuring that they are treated humanely, appropriately, and in accordance with international law.

They cannot do what they are statutorily required to do because they are not being funded to do it. We were the first jurisdiction in the country to establish our NPM. We took pride in doing so. We have crowed about it, in fact. This government has crowed about it as an achievement and now its funding is so paltry it literally cannot do any of the roles it is statutorily required to do. It has not been able to visit a single facility to undertake this oversight role, for example. It is shocking, and shameful.

The TNPM goes on to say in that media statement of last week that the Tasmanian Government was provided with a comprehensive budget submission which detailed that for the 2024-25 year, the TNPM would require \$2.8 million to commence building the new office role and to exercise its functions. An annual allocation of \$300,000 is a long way short of \$2.8 million. Hence, we understand the assertion from the TNPM that they will literally be unable to do any of that work.

We can reasonably assume that providing that paltry 11 per cent, or thereabouts, of the specifically requested funding envelope can only mean it will be impossible. They will not do their role. Vulnerable Tasmanians will not have that additional protection. There will not be the education functions undertaken that are required also under the act, and we will be well and truly knocked off our perch as nation leaders in this space. What a disgrace, after this government had so loudly congratulated itself. These decisions have real and immediate impacts and long-term ramifications.

It is disturbing, particularly in the context of recent times, because it shows that we have failed to learn lessons of the past. This underfunding of entities such as this, that are there as oversight entities to protect vulnerable Tasmanians, is a serious false economy. These entities could identify and forestall wrongdoing and human rights abuses which, if left to fester, can result in serious and extensive abuse.

In turn, not only does that abuse wreak havoc and trauma upon the affected community, it proves to be a heavy financial cost when eventually, down the track, we find ourselves having to make compensation payments and apologies in response to this. Have we not learned from

the compensation payments necessary that are stemming from the outrageous and egregious human rights abuses of the stolen generation, of those affected by forced adoptions, and of the recent and still very fresh shocks of our commission of inquiry. In part, properly resourced independent oversight entities are a responsible investment in this preventative care of the community. Failure to do this is dangerous and false economy. Shame on this government.

This brings me to reflect on the significant impact in this Budget that is being felt from delivering on responses to recommendations from the Commission of Inquiry into the Tasmanian Government's Response to Child Sexual Abuse in Institutional Settings. The extent of that is clearly stated in budget paper 2, volume 1, which identifies this as one of four key areas of focus for the Budget. The government's commitment to deliver all recommendations from the commission of inquiry has been widely welcomed, particularly those measures that address drivers of engagement in the child safety and criminal justice systems.

Having said that, key stakeholders such as TasCOSS have pointed out that most of the expenditure in this area focuses on tertiary interventions and responses to violence against children, rather than providing adequate investment in long-term preventative and early-intervention measures that support family and wellbeing. This, coupled with the significant workforce challenges faced, particularly in the child safety system, risks undermining the achievement of the outcomes sought from the commission's recommendations that Tasmania's children are safe. A completed checklist of implemented recommendations, in and of itself, will not guarantee the actual outcomes to which we have all expressed commitment - the safety of Tasmania's children.

The broader policy context within which these delivered recommendations sit, including the adequacy of investment in prevention and early intervention, coupled with the central, more tangible pillar of genuine culture change, will be determinative in achieving those outcomes. The additional funding of \$423 million over four years to deliver on the recommendations from the commission of inquiry is detailed in the budget papers, and there is an extensive list that gives us an indication of the size of the job, which is in budget paper 2, volume 1, pages 30-39.

I am not going to go into detail on each of the funded implementation programs that relate to the commission of inquiry. I cannot, though, go through my contribution and not mention the closure of Ashley Youth Detention Centre. I express, again - because it should be given voice to at every opportunity - the intense concern, frustration and alarm that is held by so many -by both the commissioners themselves, when they pointed to this as a matter of urgency; by those who are victim/survivors of that place; and by people who have been whistleblowers who pushed for change and know that the only way to resolve the risk of harm is to close that centre.

To many of us in this place, in this parliament, it is highly concerning that we have an ever-retreating date for the closure of Ashley Youth Detention Centre.

Ms O'Connor - I do not think they are going to close it.

Ms WEBB - It does prompt us to ask: is there a real possibility that this centre will not be closed? I ask that because we know it was announced in 2021 by then-premier Gutwein that it would happen within three years - which would be about now. That has not happened.

I understand circumstances have changed since then. The original intention in closing it was to replace it with two similar facilities in the north and the south of the state. Plans have changed, informed appropriately by the commission of inquiry. We are now redesigning our whole youth justice system to introduce a more comprehensive model. There is nothing wrong with that except that, while it may be a reason that we need to take more time, I fear that it will also be a reason that we never arrive at that destination.

The reason I think that, and fear that, is because I have observed this sector over many, many years - at least the last 15 years - in my work before this place and during my time in this place. I have seen time and time again announcements made and reforms committed to which have never come to fruition in this space and across the time that those announcements are being made and those commitments were being put out there, we continued to have, behind closed doors in that institution, children being raped on a daily basis. We continue to have human rights abuses occurring on a daily basis. We continue to see children being assaulted, we continue to see workers in that place being bullied and at times driven out when they did not comply with the culture of that place, which a DPAC commissioned expert report has now said as a closed institution was a culture of a paedophile ring within a closed culture. That is what has happened the whole time that this government, over a number of terms of government, have committed to making it better and they have never done that.

I was in the sector when there were announcements of the introduction of therapeutic models into Ashley and millions of dollars were poured into it; this goes back to 2014, 2015, 2016. Even though they were told at the time through the Noetic Report to close it, they instead announced a wonderful new therapeutic approach. It has resonance to the announcements now that we are going to be redesigning our youth justice system entirely and have this wonderful new approach, which on paper sounds great. It sounded great then, too. Millions of dollars poured into Ashley. It stayed open and children continued to be raped daily. That is what we now know from the commission of inquiry - while they poured in millions of dollars, while they delayed actually closing it as they have been advised to do by the experts.

That is why I find myself here. When I hear these time lines continue to be pushed out, when I hear the commitment expressed to wonderful new therapeutic trauma-informed approaches that are going to be introduced at some point. When I hear that I have a higher level of scepticism because there are still kids in there and the minister cannot stand up in public and say they are absolutely safe at this moment. He cannot say that there are not abuses happening right now and that should be unacceptable to every single one of us in this place. The government is too complacent on this. They are too complacent to say we are doing it as soon as possible - we are getting there in the end. We have all these taskforces and working groups developing this lovely new model. That is not enough. It is not enough for our public confidence that we are actually protecting children in that place - children we are responsible for.

We will continue to speak on this matter in this place and I am incredibly pleased that the parliament has established the joint committee to scrutinise the government's response to the commission of inquiry and that work is actively underway now. It is a committee that I am very pleased to be a member of. It will be similarly challenged to ensure that scrutiny is not limited to a checklist approach but that it genuinely delves into assessing the progress of real tangible change and delivering that overarching outcome that we all want to see achieved: that children are safer in our state.

I note that as well as delivering on recommendations from the commission of inquiry, this Budget contains substantial provision for payment of redress and civil claims. That is an area of responsibility that we must meet and I hope that there will be appropriate support provided to claim recipients who may need assistance in managing their financial circumstances after receiving such payments.

The saga of the commission of inquiry will continue and there will be many of us who will maintain a fierce scrutiny of that progress. I acknowledge the things I have spoken about today can be very triggering. I acknowledge victim/survivors in the Tasmanian community and whistleblowers who have contributed to exposing these horrific abuses as being champions for our state and champions for children in our state. We cannot thank them enough and we cannot acknowledge enough the bravery of victim/survivors who have come forward to make clear what has happened and how we need to ensure it does not happen again.

Another key focus of this budget, identified in budget paper 2, volume 1, is the provision of cost-of-living relief. This is an area in which we should expect priority attention to be given to measures that are equitable, inclusive and sustainable, and which make positive structural change for our future. At the post-budget briefing provided by TasCOSS, it was highlighted the degree to which Tasmanians are suffering under cost-of-living pressures.

In that briefing they pointed to the cost of essentials, which have in reality surged more than CPI. They pointed out that 71 per cent of Tasmanians receiving income support are cutting back on meat, fresh fruit and vegetables because they cannot afford them - 51 per cent of Tasmanians receiving income support are skipping meals regularly. Overall, 61 per cent of Tasmanians say they are financially worse off than last year and almost half have cut back on essentials to make ends meet. A telling statistic is that one in five Tasmanians could not raise \$500 in an emergency. Back in the day we used to have \$2000 as a measure by which we looked at resilience. We used to say could you raise \$2000 in an emergency? Now, we are putting the bar at \$500. Could you raise \$500 in an emergency? An emergency could be that you need to replace the tyres on your car, or your fridge is broken down - those sorts of things. One in five Tasmanians could not do that.

That tells us clearly that too many Tasmanians are in a highly precarious position, one that cannot withstand any further pressure or unexpected shocks. The key cost-of-living pressures being experienced by Tasmanians are affordable housing, food security, electricity costs, transport access and digital inclusion. On none of those fronts does this budget do enough in terms of structural improvements to address the current affordability issues and deliver real, enduring positive outcomes. Instead, we see a focus on short-term relief such as poorly targeted one-off energy bill payments, which has seen, I believe, \$12.7 million of financial support unnecessarily going to the wealthiest 20 per cent of Tasmanian households, which probably includes most of us in this place - unbelievable. While that might be quite a sugar hit for the government as an election announcement, it is very poor use of public money and does nothing to provide enduring relief to those who need it most. It is \$12.7 million that could be providing funding for structural energy efficiency improvements for the lowest-income Tasmanian households. That would have extended the beneficial impact far beyond a one-off handout to people who did not need it and would have made a tangible difference to cost of living for those households, not just in one bill cycle, but well into the future.

Of course, we know that there is a cascade effect when you provide structural support in this way. For example, when a household is not struggling so much to pay the energy bill in

an enduring sense, into the future, they are much less likely to have to ration food, skip meals or seek emergency food relief. They are much more likely to be able to meet their housing costs, pay their rent and be at less risk of homelessness.

It is a no-brainer. Structural improvements not only assist individual households, they decrease reliance on a range of other services and thereby save public expenditure overall, in an enduring sense into the future. It is particularly true when the investment is well targeted to those people and households who are most in need. To opt for that sugar hit and the electoral boost of simplistic non-targeted payments makes a mockery out of that trite rhetoric we so often hear from Liberals in this place of how much they value a 'hand up, not a 'handout'. What rubbish. Handouts is virtually all we have seen here when it comes to cost-of-living relief - poorly targeted or not-targeted-at-all handouts. Make a hand up next time please by all means; live up to your trite rhetoric?

Digital inclusion was another cost-of-living area named by TasCOSS with our state languishing with more than one in four Tasmanians reporting their phone and internet costs unaffordable; that is 140,000 Tasmanians digitally excluded and unable to access the benefits of the online world. In this modern age, internet access is not a luxury; it is an essential utility. This Budget is a virtual vacuum when it comes to addressing the fact that Tasmania is the most digitally disadvantaged state and scores the worst of any state or territory on digital ability.

This is another one of those areas in which investment in structural improvements would deliver enormously beneficial outcomes, not just for individuals who are being assisted, but for the ultimate saving of public money and a boost to our economy that would come from meaningful improvements in our digital inclusion.

People are much easier to employ if they are digitally capable and they can access the digital world. People are much easier to keep in education and training if they are digitally capable and able to access the digital world. It is our economy that is suffering when we fail to make long-term structural investment in these ways.

On affordable housing, while long-term building projects are all well and good, not enough is being done to address the immediate crisis in the private rental market, in particular, where there are a multitude of levers the government is refusing to consider at the expense of those who are most vulnerable, often teetering on the edge of homelessness.

Effective regulation of the short-stay accommodation market with greater control at the local government level to ensure the private rental market does not continue to be gutted by property shifting into short-stay: I will give you an example. Devonport has experienced a 40 per cent increase in whole homes added to the short-stay sector in the last year. There is no way that has not had a crippling impact on the local private rental market and a negative flow-on effect to employment, education and homelessness in that city.

More definite and enforceable regulation of rental increases to ensure that we do not continue to see ballooning rents, such as the 38 per cent increase in the median rents in only the last five years: These are all options which are available right now that would make a difference right now and help turn off the pipeline of people into homelessness in this state. Yet this government refuses to do any of them.

This government's plans on housing and homelessness are demonstrably inadequate. Tasmania has experienced a 42 per cent increase in the social housing wait list in five years, sitting now at 4745 families. The average wait time for social housing has blown out to an average of 1.7 years which is 35 per cent longer than five years ago.

We have had a 45 per cent increase in homelessness in five years. That is nine times the national average. Nothing in this Budget is sufficient to change any of those trajectories, which tells us this government has no effective plan to solve our housing and homelessness challenges.

Budget paper 2, volume 1 identifies enhancing essential services as a focus for this Budget. However, we know that, as acknowledged by the Department of Treasury and Finance in last year's budget paper 1's fiscal strategy section and I quote:

the greater the cost of debt, the less funding available to provide direct services to the Tasmanian community.

Something that is crystal clear in this Budget is that our state will be burdened by an ever-increasing cost of debt across the forward Estimates and well beyond. It is clear too when you look at the expectations for spending on services, which falls off a cliff down the track so that we can pretend on paper that there will be some magical surplus delivered in a few years. Utterly ridiculous. When you look at that, it is only possible because we have a crash in what we expect to spend on services.

The two behemoth expenditure areas of our state Budget are health and education, which comprise 56 per cent of all general government sector expenditure. These are essential areas of government responsibility and investment for our community and they are foundational. If we are not able to deliver adequate services in health and education, it is the future social and economic wellbeing of our state that is at risk. This Budget makes it clear there will be falling government spending over the forward Estimates.

The member for Murchison highlighted in her contribution that in fact, in 2028-29 we are forecasted to spend 13 per cent less than what we will spend in this current year. I do not believe there is ever a time we have actually decreased spending in key areas year to year. In fact, this government takes great pride in continually crowing about its record spending in health and education. One effect of this Budget might mean that in a couple of years we will not have to listen to that anymore. As the member for Murchison said, what this Budget is presenting in terms of falling expenditure, it sounds like an austerity approach. We have certainly seen from other international jurisdictions that an austerity approach will fail in the long-term, and not only that, it will do incredible damage along the way.

In the area of health, the AMA has stated this Budget meets election promises but fails to deliver much more for existing services. The Department of Health needs to find \$134.9 million in savings and efficiency dividend across its services. The Budget provides for only a 1.7 per cent increase in recurrent health funding from this financial year to the next, which is well below inflation and therefore represents even more of a cut on top of the required efficiency dividend. It is indisputable that the Tasmanian health system is already struggling to meet demand. It simply cannot afford these cuts without dire consequences for the Tasmanian people.

The area of education is similarly hit with cuts in this Budget. It appears that \$300 million in an efficiency dividend is to be found over the four years. However, we have no detail on how that will be achieved or what supports we can expect to lose from our schools or from our education department to achieve this efficiency dividend. While there is \$188 million for a school building blitz outlined in the Budget, there is no sign that we are planning to address critical shortages that may be arising when we need to staff these new developments in these schools. We cannot just build things and then not adequately provide for the operation of the services that they are there to deliver. Just as our health workforce do an amazing job under intensely challenging conditions, we know that our teaching and educational support staff go far above and beyond what should be expected to ensure that Tasmanian children receive an education and are supported in their development throughout their childhood.

It must be deeply disappointing for all public servants working in our essential services to see the trajectories of expenditure and cuts laid out in these budget papers. Quite frankly, my heart goes out to them. In better news -

Recognition of Visitors

Ms WEBB - Mr President, I was just moving into something that was better news when it comes to another of our central services - the community services industry. In this Budget, the government has delivered on a commitment to an indexation approach that goes some way to addressing cost increases. Indexation of 12.5 per cent over four years, that is comprised of 3.5 per cent in 2024-25 and then 3 per cent for the remaining three years of the forward Estimates, has been budgeted for. The indexation rate is always an area of uncertainty for the sector. It is positive to have it mapped out. However, TasCOSS's comment is that they will now need to engage with the community sector organisations to understand what this indexation increase will deliver and whether it addresses the years of underfunding combined with increased demand and increased costs of doing business. Spoiler alert: it is guaranteed that while welcomed and better than some years past, the indexation level in this Budget will still leave essential community services desperately short of meeting current need, let alone providing for the increasing demand that they are experiencing now and over recent years.

On a more positive note, I understand there is a move by government to introduce five-year funding agreements for the community services sector. This is definitely welcomed and will provide additional continuity and security, especially in relation to recruiting and retaining staff. Unfortunately, it does not appear that it is confirmed yet; perhaps we will find out in Estimates next week, but community services that are funded by the Department of Health will be similarly transitioned to that more sustainable five-year funding agreement model. I hope they are. It will be disappointing if we find that they are not. There should be consistency. These are often services that work quite hand-in-glove and alongside each other out there in the community, regardless of which department they are funded from, so indexation should be something that is consistent and comprehensively applied across various government departments.

I attended the TasCOSS post-budget briefing on Friday last week, which was an informative event and a valuable opportunity to speak with stakeholders in that sector and to hear the questions and concerns that they raised in relation to this Budget. I listened to the minister speak about the Budget and the commitments it contains, and I was interested to hear, when he was speaking about community sector funding, that he reports the departments are examining outcomes-based funding for the sector. Outcomes-based funding is a very positive

model to consider and should generate more innovative approaches. However, I recall it being looked at for this sector from at least a decade ago. Again, what we have here is a question of deliverability and whether this government can actually do what it says it would like to do. I believe every minister in the intervening years, from at least a decade ago, has happily announced an intention to introduce an outcomes-based approach to funding the community services sector and we have yet to see any actual progress delivering on that. You never know though - we could remain optimistic and perhaps it will be fifth or sixth-time lucky with the minister this time around.

Any plan that does not place the climate emergency front and centre is barely worth the paper it is written on.

Ms O'Connor - Hear, hear

Ms WEBB - Climate justice is critical. We are already beginning to start to see comprehension dawn regarding some of the serious social challenges that the climate emergency poses for us, along with the potential devastation for our natural environment and biodiversity. This dawning comprehension is evident when people realise that incentives to move to electric cars, for example, while benefiting us environmentally also risks benefiting those who can afford to transition to electric vehicles and again leaving those who cannot afford with the polluting, less-cheap to run, fossil fuel vehicles. Depending on potential incentive policy levers governments may wish to pull to further that transition, that could become a social equity issue. Another area is providing affordable housing - in the climate sense of affordable. Climate emergency sensitive initiatives can be considerable climate justice equalisers or contribute to greater entrenched inequities, let alone when it comes to access to sustainable clean, potable water, land and food to meet our ecological and biodiversity needs, as well as maintaining the health of our communities and our marine environments and so on.

I read an interesting report recently detailing how schools across the United States are ripping up playgrounds. This is driven by research showing that asphalt play areas, many of which were installed decades ago, magnify the health risks of extreme heat. Within cities, temperatures are typically hottest in dense, low-income neighbourhoods with little tree cover, where roads, buildings and parking lots soak up the sun's rays, known as the urban heat island effect. These US studies have identified that schools in these lower socio-economic areas tend to be even hotter because they have less shade and more asphalt. As climate change sends temperatures soaring, the movement to replace heat-absorbing pavement around the US schools has gained urgency, with more than 300 playgrounds across 23 states transforming asphalt playgrounds into islands of greenery.

This example tells us much about not only how some jurisdictions are tackling the climate emergency, but also how those impacts could be felt more in some demographics than others. Addressing the climate emergency in this regard can be an investment in social equity, whereas failure to do so will result in inequitable impacts, such as health impacts caused by heat in some of these poorer schools compared with those in wealthier suburbs, as identified by that US research.

Closer to home, another example is the dawning realisation in the insurance sector, where people are being confronted with rising premiums to insure their homes and property, through to insurance companies flat-out refusing to cover them due to their location and future

extreme weather event projections. Again, the Eslake Independent Review makes a salient point when it highlights on page 17 how:

Surprisingly unremarked in Treasury's analysis of the Tasmanian economy presented in the 2023-24 Budget Papers or the 2023-24 Revised Estimates Report have been the effects of persistent drought conditions on Tasmania's primary production sector, which accounts for almost 10% of Tasmania's economy compared with less than 3% of Australia's.

This is potentially one example of where we need to be paying closer attention to climate change and its very real ramifications for a range of sectors such as agriculture. To touch again on my call for a comprehensive and urgent review of our revenue base and mix as part of structural reform, the impact of climate change is, and will continue to be, one of those external pressures outside our control. We need to be clearly and consciously identifying and developing those policy parameters, settings and levers by which to ensure we are prioritising addressing climate change, while also ensuring we deliver ecological and social climate justice.

Being climate aware and investing in climate resilience and climate justice is so much more than renewable energy initiatives at the industrial scale or the establishment of renewable energy zones across maps, but there is little to indicate that when trawling through these budget papers.

I will also touch briefly on the gender budget statement that came with this Budget. Some members here will be aware that I, amongst others, have been calling for a comprehensive gender budget statement to be developed as part of the state budget process; in fact, we passed a motion in this place to that effect a few years ago and that was when the government committed to begin including such a statement. It was a very good response to a motion in this place.

I have been watching with interest how that initiative has developed across time. The current version in this Budget is the third iteration, and as such, I acknowledge there are marked improvements in it, which I really welcome. However, there is still a long way to go before it provides the comprehensive analysis required and can become a useful tool, as we would expect it to be. It is good to see the government has moved away from just listing its gender-based expenditure initiatives and instead has moved towards applying a gender-informed lens across potential policy positions and outcomes. A key area of improvement that we could look ahead to as we continue to develop this process is the inclusion of intersectionality analysis as part of a multifaceted gender lens.

To reiterate, while there is a definite improvement in approach and detail that is provided in this year's gender budget statement, it does need to continue to develop; if it can do that, it will become a useful public policy tool - not just a reporting tool after the fact, but a really good policy development tool for us to plan well for good public policy. In particular, it can become a mechanism by which we can deliver greater inclusion and social and economic equity.

I will take this opportunity to acknowledge some particular investments in this Budget that will be very welcome in the electorate of Nelson.

A significant one is the commitment to a Kingston Emergency Services Hub, which has \$7.5 million allocated in 2025-26, and the same in 2026-27. This is a model that has been rolled

out in some other areas already, and I am sure the Kingston community, and the communities south of Kingston, will be pleased to see this hub come to fruition.

On the transport front, I note the commitment to develop a ferry terminal in Sandy Bay, which is a positive inclusion to the expansion of the ferry service. I also hope in the not-too-distant future we will be welcoming a similar announcement of a ferry terminal in Kingston, which would also be a very positive addition.

Jireh House is an incredibly important women's shelter in the Kingston area, and I am pleased to see it receive additional support of \$150,000 in this Budget. Like every women's shelter in this state, Jireh House experiences demand that far outstrips the accommodation and support available, and has a huge turn-away rate. We know that many of those turned away are women and children trying to escape domestic violence, and the lack of crisis accommodation - and then subsequently the lack of affordable longer-term accommodation - is the biggest barrier to them successfully leaving and re-establishing a decent life.

Kingborough Community Missions provides extensive emergency food relief to the community, and under the leadership of Peter and Patricia Harvey, does an incredible amount of good on a very small budget. It is positive to see additional support provided in this Budget for this much appreciated grassroots organisation. While it is a stone's throw beyond the Nelson boundary, I also note the \$150,000 provided to the Blackmans Bay Hall, which is a facility valued by many Nelson constituents.

As can be expected, a range of sporting clubs in the Nelson electorate have received funding for projects to assist with their facilities; this includes the Kingborough Tigers Junior Football Club, the Kingston Crows Cricket Club, the Royal Yacht Club of Tasmania, Sandy Bay Sailing Club, Tarooma Bowls and Community Club, and Tarooma Football Club. They are all welcome investments. In broad terms, I would hope that some of the additional funding that is committed in other areas of the Budget - for example, to Neighbourhood Houses and to Men's Sheds - will also include a portion of additional assistance that flows through into the electorate of Nelson to the Kingston Neighbourhood House and the Kingston Men's Shed.

Before I conclude, I will also just mention - because it was covered so well by the member for Murchison, and I would like to back her calls and the concerns she raised around parliamentary resourcing in this budget - and reiterate that if we are to make this workplace a safe and respectful workplace, but also an efficient and effective workplace, we need to invest in that. At this point in time, it does not look like that investment, as laid out in the Budget, is either sufficient and or equitable across the two places here and that is unacceptable. It is particularly unacceptable for the staff associated with our Chamber, who are not necessarily having the support funded for them in the same way that they are in the other place.

I also would back the comments made by the member for Murchison around parliamentary resourcing for members, which also is now demonstrably inequitable across the two Chambers. It feels gauche to speak about resourcing for us. No-one wants to hear politicians arguing for more staffing and resources for themselves. However, that should not be a reason that we have it go unremarked that if I or others here were independent members of the other place, we would receive a staffing allocation under this Budget of 2.5 FTEs, whereas here in this place as independents, we receive one FTE. That is strikingly inequitable, when we are here trying to do an important job in this place as representatives through our community. In fact, if we think about it, it is our communities that are being disrespected in

expectation that we can undertake this important job with less and inequitable resourcing compared to representatives from the other place.

Before I close, I am just going to seek leave to table a document that I have referred to a lot in my contribution, which is the Independent Review of Tasmania's State Finances by Mr Saul Eslake, dated August 2024. Although the document has been in the public domain since August, for some reason I believe it has not yet been tabled in either parliamentary Chamber, despite it being an outcome of the Premier's previous formal agreement from April this year with the then three members of the JLN party. I will seek to table it now, so that it becomes part of the record of this place.

Leave granted.

Ms WEBB - To conclude, despite some sound key funding initiatives that are provided for in the State Budget 2024-25, in the main, it is hard to escape the fact that it is rooted in and perpetuates the short-term electoral cycle that we have now been stuck in for some time. It utterly fails to put our state on an equitable, inclusive or sustainable footing. On that note, I note the budget.