

## Legislative Council

### Hansard

Wednesday 4 June 2025

The President, **Mr Farrell**, took the Chair at 11.00 a.m., acknowledged the Traditional People and read Prayers.

*[excerpt]*

[11.19 a.m.]

**Ms WEBB** (Nelson) - Mr President, I say a heartfelt thankyou to all the members who, when they rose yesterday to make their contributions, offered their congratulations and good wishes on my re-election to this place as the independent member for Nelson. I very much appreciate those sentiments.

I would also like to add my congratulations to the returning member for Pembroke and congratulate and welcome the newly elected member for Montgomery. Elections are a huge effort, not just for the candidates, but especially for family and friends surrounding them, and also the supporters and volunteers who participate in our campaigns. I deeply appreciated the support I received in my re-election campaign. I thank each of the people who contributed in ways large and small to that effort. I especially want to thank my family, on the record here, for their love and support. I could not have done it without them. We all know the toll that it can take.

As I rise to provide my formal response to the 2025-26 state Budget, my recent campaign is very much in my thoughts. During any campaign, we have the opportunity, particularly through door-knocking, to connect and talk with a wide range of constituents more intensively than we might do in the usual course of things. The thousands of conversations that I have had on the doors of Nelson this year are very much the context in which I am looking at this Budget.

A consistent, overwhelming message that was raised unprompted by the people of Nelson on the doors was a loss of trust in this government to make good decisions and deliver good outcomes for the Tasmanian people. These sentiments were almost always expressed in conjunction with one particular illustrative issue, which I will talk about later in my contribution.

These views and concerns about a lack of government capacity and leadership were being raised time and again in many areas that would usually be considered heartland places for the Liberal Party. In fact, it was common for the comments that I heard to be prefaced by the statement: 'I have been a lifelong Liberal voter, but...' This Liberal government's lack of leadership, poor financial management, inability to deliver outcomes, bullying approaches and refusal to listen to the community were among the litany of concerns raised repeatedly across all suburbs of Nelson.

When the budget papers assert this is the fiscal framework by which we are, and I quote, 'building a better Tasmania now and for the future', and further, when we are told, 'This Budget delivers a sensible pathway to surplus', our sceptical response has to be: 'Really?' I believe that the people of Nelson cannot but question the premise of both those assertions. While it would be heartening to take both those statements at face value, particularly during such uncertain times, it would in fact be irresponsible to do so. Instead, on behalf of my community of Nelson, I must query: does this Budget really build a better Tasmania and, if so, for whom? Which Tasmanians will see and feel the benefits of this Budget?

Is it really a sensible pathway or is it in fact a bypass hurtling us off a cliff of no return, a detour perhaps, to avoid hard conversations that require long-term thinking, a detour past genuine collaboration and instead directing us into the cul-de-sac of short-term fixes?

These are not mere rhetorical questions; instead, I believe they go to the heart of what a state budget should seek to address. These same questions also go to the heart of the strange and concerning situation of good public policy inertia and malaise that appears to be shrouding the senior leadership levels of this government.

Some may ask, what does a public policy malaise have to do with balancing the budget books? It has everything to do with that challenge, as does the crushing crisis in political leadership, laid bare by these budget papers. It is, in fact, playing out in our state this very day.

When examining these 2025-26 budget papers, I went looking for any sign of the much-needed and long-overdue structural reform of our fiscal and financial framework in this state. Where are we building that fundamental foundation? Are we investing in that long-term modernising and intergenerational fiscal infrastructure?

The short answer is a resounding no. This government is not building such a necessary component of a better Tasmania. It is not investing in a more robust, fair and sustainable fiscal foundation.

It is worthwhile considering the fact that the independent review of state finances undertaken by Mr Saul Eslake was released last August just prior to the delivery of the 2024-25 state Budget. The then-treasurer, Michael Ferguson, stated at the time the independent review provided 'a thought-provoking commentary' and that the government will 'carefully consider and respond to Mr Eslake's findings and recommendations'. Yet, a second state budget later and we have yet to see any confirmation of that promised careful consideration.

Considered structural reform of our financial base is long overdue. As the estimated figures of the \$10.7 billion in net debt and projected borrowings in the multi-millions in this Budget confirm, it is urgently needed. In his post-budget analysis released just last week, Mr Eslake made clear that the financial position of Tasmania's public sector continues to deteriorate. Projections are now worse than previously presented, even those presented as recently as February. The outlook for all the key budget aggregates continues to get worse, while the projected slowdown in the rate of growth of operating expenses and decline in capital spending are overly optimistic and unrealistic based on recent decades. This sort of smoke and mirrors, this sort of obfuscation, begins to look like cooking the books. At best, perhaps we could say it is delusional. At worst, it looks misleading.

Mr Eslake also calls out the obfuscation attempts by the government to favourably compare Tasmania to other states and territories as misleading, highlighting that by some metrics Tasmania's finances are the worst of any state or territory, and favourable comparisons rely on ignoring key facts. When it comes to the overarching narrative about Tasmania's financial position presented by the government in these budget papers, at best, as I said, it looks delusional. At worst, to be frank, it looks dishonest.

The state's financial position is even worse when you include Tasmania's non-financial corporation sector. The net debt of Tasmania's non-financial public sector is now forecast to reach \$17.6 billion in three years, by 30 June 2028, and \$19.9 billion in four years, by 30 June 2029. This means that the non-financial public sector's net interest payments will increase to \$854 million in 2028-29. That is close to four times more than the interest payments were in 2023-24. It is an astonishingly steep rise in what we are having to pay in interest payments.

Based on previous experience, we can also perhaps assume that these projections will only get worse over time. Mr Eslake warns that:

Based on these sorts of numbers, there must be a significant risk that Tasmania's credit rating, currently AA+ from S&P and Aa2 from Moody's, but on negative watch from both agencies, could be downgraded which would likely result in Tasmania having to pay higher interest rates on new debt and when rolling over maturing debt.

This so-called sensible pathway appears to have entrenched a compounding trajectory where not only are we taking on more and more unstrategic debt, we are eroding our capacity to manage competitive interest rates. We are going to have to pay more for less with less. This may indeed be a sensible pathway for our creditors, but it is a downward spiral for Tasmanians, who will be at risk of shouldering this debt in real terms.

Mr Eslake reiterates the observation from his independent review of state finances of last August that 'the Government is in the financial pickle it is now in because it kept increasing spending without giving any thought as to how that spending (however justified) should be paid for'.

The facts have not changed. Increasing spending from the government has to be paid for either by cutting spending in other places or by raising additional revenue, but, to quote Mr Eslake, the government 'is simply unwilling to do that'.

To be fair, I get that.

Nobody is asserting the answer is to indiscriminately raise taxes or impose new ones, but I do repeat my call, as I have made in this place on numerous occasions, as have others, for an independent, expert, comprehensive review of Tasmania's financial framework, including our revenue and taxation mix. This is something we have to address.

For those who see concerning holes and looming social inequity chasms reflected in the current budgetary analysis, a comprehensive, integrated structural financial reform is not optional; it is imperative.

We urgently need an independent expert evaluation of our current revenue and taxation measures, our policy settings and available levers for change. Potential and progressive new revenue sources may be identified by such a review, while regressive and harmful practices could also be identified to be brought to a close.

Such a comprehensive and independent review would undertake an immediate and long-term health check of our financial framework. Its assessment would cast beyond the short-term view of an annual budget cycle or even further beyond the horizon of election cycles to analyse and test the following things:

First, what are the best progressive levers available to drive innovation in securing positive outcomes such as clean air and water, resilient and equitably supported communities, strong employment and affordable housing, for example? Second, what are the best progressive levers available to identify and reduce activities which harm us, such as land, water and air pollution, for example? Third, what are the regressive levers holding us back? And fourth, how well are we positioned to absorb and counter potential future financial shocks, whether cascading from a global meltdown, another pandemic, or natural causes closer to home?

To reiterate: careful, considered, structural financial reform is not about raising taxes in isolation. It is about developing a modern, fair and future-looking plan to manage our expenditure and revenue sources in a way that meets both the needs of the community, responsibility and care and the fiscal responsibility and diligence; a plan that gets us a more sustainable future, rather than the ever-expanding black hole and chasm of social disadvantage, which is the inevitable trajectory of this government's approach, as exemplified in this state Budget.

A structural review of our financial foundations requires political fortitude, imagination and purpose. It requires the hard and inclusive conversations to be held across our community. Even those who want to accept at face value the rosy descriptions provided in the Treasurer's Budget Speech of a strong and growing Tasmanian economy, then responsible and visionary leadership would seize this moment to capitalise on and invest in that apparent current strong economic position, to undertake a forward-looking financial structural reform assessment process.

Without some form of meaningful structural reform of the financial framework and foundations, I fear the inevitable trajectory of the narrow thinking that underpins these budget papers will lead to future financial chaos and a more inequitable, divided, transient and insecure community here in Tasmania.

Additional to the narrow thinking evident from this government is a crisis in political leadership, noted so prominently on the doors of Nelson and which I am watching with increasing alarm. This is a government in denial, determined to spin and spin and spin as it chases self-serving political expediency rather than being honest and accountable to the Tasmanian people. We see a reliance upon window dressing, rather than genuine problem solving.

We see a government yet again kicking the can down the road, rather than facing up to its responsibility to set our state on a dramatically improved trajectory. Instead of structural reform, we see promises of deck-chair-moving tweaks and short-sighted edges towards the sale of public assets and privatisation. One of the things that concerns me most is this government's ideological inclination in its short-term, electorally focused measures, and its refusal to contemplate genuine longer-term solutions; to be regressive every time instead of actively shepherding our state towards greater equity, which we know is the essential foundation for us all to thrive.

A simple example is the recent \$60 energy rebate for every Tasmanian household. This could have made a meaningful difference to those Tasmanians doing it most tough, who are desperately struggling with energy costs as we go into winter. Instead, it is a non-targeted cash splash that will disappear without any significant impact. For people like us in this place, it is not needed and will be barely noticed; while for some Tasmanians who are urgently struggling with energy debt or the risk of disconnection, or who are missing meals to keep the heaters on

today, it will be nowhere near enough to change their circumstances.

This rebate, targeted in a progressive scale to deliver the most support to the most disadvantaged Tasmanians, would have been something to celebrate. Instead, as it is, what we have is a great social media post designed to boost the electoral stocks of a flailing government. It is offensive, outright offensive. Quite frankly, this government's ideological refusal to take a progressive approach to government assistance, to have it targeted to deliver a more equitable outcome and make a tangible difference to the disadvantage experienced by our fellow Tasmanians, is verging on criminal.

A similar inclination is the cronyism we see, given expression through corporate welfare from this government: largesse doled out to mates, generally with no strings attached, no accountability to deliver public good outcomes, no metrics on the returned benefit to Tasmanians overall.

Instead of the urgently required political leadership, offering a clear and fair vision moving forward, it is apparent this government has a myopic fixation with its ideological skeletons of the past.

By that I mean privatisation or public sector cuts, which we are seeing play out here.

I am not going to spend too long discussing the privatisation process, identifying potential GBEs and state-owned companies for partial or whole divestment. Both the proposed sale of public assets and specific and targeted cost-saving measures remain in the planning and assessment stage in this Budget. Despite both measures being apparent pivotal planks, the government is relying upon the duck board of their fiscal quagmire. They are both opaque at this point.

However, both raise serious concerns. To begin, I have the following questions on the privatisation agenda: First, how will accessibility and effectiveness of service delivery to Tasmanians in key government services be assessed? Second, how will consideration of equity be incorporated into any proposed changes to key government services? Will the government guarantee that no changes resulting from cost-saving measures will be regressive in their impact on Tasmanians? And third, how will the most disadvantaged Tasmanians be protected from loss of accessibility or affordability in key government services?

Mr Eslake's first report of his two reports commissioned by the government, which was released in April this year, is the initial assessment of potential government business divestment. It provides interesting food for thought. While now is not the time to go into that report in too much detail, it is worthwhile considering the following statement from this initial assessment report of potential GBE sales:

... Debt repayment as a primary motivation for privatisation is likely to be met with heightened public scepticism...

That underscores the importance of putting stronger 'guardrails' around the formulation of budgets and the management of public finances ... in order to provide the public with greater assurance that the 'family silver' isn't being sold off, only for the same imprudent financial management which led to the debt problems (which privatisation is intended to solve) subsequently to emerge again.

Again, this state highlights the myriad of implications of this proposed budgetary corrective measure. It casts in sharp relief the need for strong fiscal guardrails for our community and that we consciously avoid financial decisions which erode our fiscal robustness and potential capacity to absorb future economic shocks.

We already know the state is constrained when it comes to creating new diverse revenue streams. Hence, we need to act with clear foresight and a plan should we start to go down a privatisation road that further limits and restricts potential revenue streams. Of equal importance is the need to recognise and own that there are state-owned companies which will not make a profit, but which provide critical services to our community.

An example of this would be Metro Tasmania. I would like to see greater recognition to the fact that reliable, affordable, effective and safe public transport is an essential service for Tasmanians. We saw the Premier proudly declare that Hydro Tasmania was excluded from divestment consideration as it is a sacred cow. All well and good, and while I am sure there are many other significant service providers we could add to a veritable herd of sacred cows, there are some, such as Metro, where the national evidence tells us the only way private providers earn a profit is by cutting services or pricing them out of the reach of those who need and rely upon those services.

Further, the lack of reliable and fair access to such services has very real social, health and environmental costs. Lack of reliable and fair public transport has been shown nationally and globally to entrench disparities in social inclusion and mobility and health equity. Public transportation barriers have serious implications for engagement in education, training, employment and other cultural and economic activities. And further, a modern and zero-carbon public transportation system should be actively contributing to our climate resilience and our climate justice goals.

Time constraints prevent me from going on in too much detail here, but to put it very simply, a strategic approach would regard such a zero-carbon public transport system as a state asset actively working to lower individual transportation costs while contributing to the state's social inclusion, health and climate ledger. That would require the government to climb out of the ideological comfort zone to view these assets not just as short-term profit or loss in the pecuniary sense, but to also apply a robust social, climate and environmental intergenerational lens across them to have some vision to offer both hope and leadership, something we are seeing sadly lacking.

Just as privatisation of assets can risk eroding and making more brittle our financial framework, so too does the spectre of further public sector cuts.

The second predictable ideological comfort zone is this: of the non-imaginative further public sector cuts. The concerning lack of imagination is not just about the lack of effort to identify and explore alternative fiscal corrective mechanisms, but the lack of imagination, curiosity or empathy for how these proposed cuts of an estimated 2500 state employees will affect our fellow Tasmanians.

We have the Treasurer announcing an efficiency and productivity unit, to help assess whether we have, and I quote, 'a public service that is the right size, the right shape, in the right place and equipped with the right tools and resources'. Quite frankly, that is utter trite and insulting nonsense. How do we know that our current public sector is not the right size? What if, in fact, it is currently too small to meet its statutory obligations and the service needs of our fellow Tasmanians?

Where is the analysis, the consultation and the substance behind that ham-fisted rhetoric? It is not there. Why would this government want to risk being able to trot out a favourite scapegoat, which the public sector is invariably regarded as by this government, to carry the can for the fiscal mismanagement of the government's own making?

I can tell you what else is not there: any reference to the independent review of the Tasmanian State Service commissioned by this Liberal government in 2019 and undertaken by Dr Ian Watt AC, who provided the final report in 2021. The purpose of the Watt Independent Review was:

...to consider whether the governing framework of the State Service is fit for purpose for Tasmania today and into the future. The Review set out to identify structural, legislative and administrative improvements that will transform current structures, services and practices to deliver a more efficient and effective public service.

Less jingoistic than the current government's chant, but pretty much stating a similar intent. For members who may not be aware, the government supports, apparently, or at least in principle, all 77 recommendations of the Watt Review. The most recently available update of October last year indicates that 15 recommendations were completed, with another 20 underway, leaving another 42 yet to be brought into effect.

The indicated stage 3 for delivery of all recommendations is the period of June 2025 to June 2026, coinciding with these state budget papers. The budget papers are silent on the Watt Review. Instead, as detailed in budget paper 1, we have a so-called, and Orwellian-sounding, Efficiency and Productivity Unit.

This appears as a bit of a rinse and repeat, as we already saw with the efficiency units and the red tape audit re-announcements made during the Premier's March State of the State speech this year. I am sure not everyone agreed with the recommendations of the Watt Review, but at least that was a transparent process into which input could be made and established criteria used to assess its findings. We are not provided thus far with such criteria, input or transparency for the public sector Efficiency and Productivity Unit. While there are always options for periodic renewal and new ways of delivering services more effectively and efficiently, this is not what these budget papers are about.

It is critical to acknowledge that Tasmanian State Service capacity and resourcing has been weakened and eroded consistently over the years. As we have heard many workers and union representatives state, 'There is no fat left.' We are now at risk of cutting into muscle and into bone. Supposedly, that was one of the remedial tasks of the Watt Review, to address those capacity and delivery deficits.

When considering this latest attack on our public sector system, many serious implications and questions are raised, including the following: first, with the budget papers indicating that the number of general government FTEs will be reduced by 7.2 per cent by 2032-33, how will positions to go be identified?

Second, what assessment is being undertaken of the potential impact of fewer people doing more upon statutory obligations that certain areas of the state sector are legally bound to meet?

For example: RTI officers are required to meet legislated time frames when considering assessed disclosure applications and internal reviews. We know there are more stringent child safety mandatory reporting requirements by law coming in. That is not just about a one-way reporting street. Those reports then require assessing and potentially further action. These are only a couple of examples. Suffice to say, it would be a highly irresponsible and reckless government that knowingly places state servants in a position where they are unable to comply with their legislative requirements. Any accidental slippage of compliance is concerning, but when the government deprives workers of the means by which to comply in a consistent and rigorous manner, it is in fact a dereliction of duty.

Then of course, the other area of enormous concern is the impact of reduced services upon Tasmanians across many walks of life. I have touched on the importance of reliable and affordable public transport services already, in the context of the flagged privatisation agenda. However, other critical and essential services such as affordable and secure housing, health, education and a range of necessary support services for vulnerable Tasmanians, whether to address cost of living or other pressures, are also feeling on shaky ground in light of these budget papers and the forward estimates forecast.

We know, courtesy of decades of research, comparative analysis and longitudinal data, that short-term fiscal corrective measures such as budget cuts to services result in long-term socio-economic costs, real human costs in fact, including reduced human and social capital, growing inequality and decreasing civil engagement, a more divided community with those experiencing disadvantage doing so at a disproportionately high degree.

It is high time for the government to recognise that state sector services provide the backbone of any community's social infrastructure while also promoting social equity and inclusion, economic stability, a healthy environment and overall wellbeing.

While it is heartening to hear public statements by both the Treasurer and the Premier along the lines that this government is not slashing and burning the public sector as they want to ensure services continue to be provided, the serious problem is they have failed to provide a coherent and trustworthy plan to avoid future budgets resorting to slash and burn in light of the escalating debt. By failing to provide such a coherent and considered plan, Tasmanians are deeply concerned that the axe may fall even more savagely across more critical services, if not this financial year, then possibly the next or the one after that.

Another critical area lacking the desperately needed government leadership is reconciliation with our Tasmanian Aboriginal community.

I have said numerous times previously in this place and I will continue to repeat that the portfolio of Aboriginal Affairs should be held by the premier of the day. That is where the whole-of-government and integrated approach stems, fundamentally crucial for meaningful and effective reconciliation efforts.

Yet again, we see a lack of vision, a lack of determination and a lack of a plan. In fact, the plan is going backwards, as we heard last week when the Warner and McCormack-recommended pathway to treaty is now inexplicably put on hold. While I recognise the significant truth-telling component is set to continue, which is welcome, it is disappointing that the government has not reiterated its intention to still pursue a treaty, maybe following that truth-telling process.

I do wish to acknowledge the emphasis placed on Tasmania needing to do more to 'close the gap' in these budget papers; that is welcome, but also it is long overdue, and it comes off a base in which we are failing miserably to close those gaps. I also think it is a constructive step forward to see the Aboriginal Land Council allocated \$200,000 for the 2025-26 financial year and annually across the forward Estimates. Many of us here are aware how lack of adequate resourcing of the Land Council meant that it was struggling to comply with administrative and other management requirements, and hopefully being able to plan around this additional funding will provide much-needed breathing space and room for capacity-building.

Unfortunately, however, the same cannot be said about the government's support for another vital organisation, Reconciliation Tasmania. While there is a small bump in funding for Reconciliation Tasmania presented in this Budget, it falls far short of the peak body funding that was requested to ensure RecTas can do its important work, and which is provided by all other state governments in their jurisdictions. It leaves Reconciliation Tasmania with future uncertainty which may well hamstring its ability to play a meaningful role in supporting our state to meet Closing the Gap targets.

I recognise, Mr President, as did you, the Premier attended the wonderful Reconciliation Week breakfast function that was hosted by Reconciliation Tasmania just yesterday. However, there is ongoing lack of secure, meaningful and practical support over the forward Estimates by the government to be investing in the capacity of organisations such as Reconciliation Tasmania, which are working to deliver tangibles on the ground.

Given our current poor progress on the Closing the Gap targets, where we are behind on 17 of the 19 targets according to the last report provided, we can do with all the help we can get on this front.

One last point I wish to make on this topic is to again highlight the disappointing, deafening silence on the provision of future land handbacks to the Tasmanian Aboriginal community.

We have not seen this paramount and significant mode of recognition of the oldest living culture on this planet, the returning of non-ceded lands, since 2005 with the return of Cape Barren and Clarke islands. Inaction of 20 years, though I do recognise there were more recent attempts made during the Labor-Greens government, just over a decade ago. More clear planning and effort is thoroughly lacking and is failing to occur under this government that has been in power these past 11 years.

I have spoken on a range of matters relating to the crisis of leadership from this government and cannot move on from that topic without mentioning the looming spectre over this Budget, of the AFL-demanded stadium at Mac Point.

Fundamentally, the debacle surrounding the Mac Point stadium is catastrophic failure of leadership. It is a failure that has cruelly cleaved our Tasmanian community, causing a level of distress and division I have not seen on any other issue. Today, I will not be veering into discussion of the merits or otherwise of the AFL-demanded stadium at that site. That is a debate for another day. What this issue illustrates in sharp relief cannot go without being remarked upon.

My campaign team knocked on around 12,000 doors in Nelson this year. I can say categorically the issue raised unprompted at the doors most frequently was the AFL-demanded stadium at Mac Point. Let me say clearly, by a massive order of magnitude, the views expressed at the doors of Nelson were against the proposed Mac Point stadium.

However, the views expressed were not simplistic nor jingoistic and were certainly not uncomplicated. By and large, they were thoughtful, and they were pained. Virtually in every instance, they saw the government's mismanagement of the AFL team and the AFL-demanded stadium issue as emblematic of a government that has lost its way, that lacks leadership to make good decisions and, most sadly, a government that is bullheadedly refusing to listen to the Tasmanian community.

They commented with dismay on the apparent determination of the Premier and his government to drive division in the Tasmanian people, with aggressive language and false equivalencies. The people of Nelson were astounded to observe such irresponsible and damaging behaviour and rhetoric from a premier who, on this topic of a Tasmanian AFL team, had the opportunity to provide our state with the most unifying and positive realisation of a shared dream. Instead, the Premier has turned that dream into a destructive nightmare and, in doing so, has sole responsibility for putting our longed-for Tasmanian team at risk.

No doubt much more will be said on this topic in later debate, for now to other topics relating to the Budget.

My passion for a strong, accountable democracy in this state is well known. Naturally, something I was keen to scrutinise in these budget papers was the funding provided to our important statutory oversight bodies and whether it may finally be provided at levels that even come close to sufficient for them to do their statutory roles. Tasmanians would be excused for thinking that starving our independent statutory oversight bodies of resources is an actual government savings program in these budget papers.

Let us start by having a look at the Integrity Commission. Despite the then-chief commissioner, Mr Greg Melick, stating in response to last year's Budget, in only September last year, and I quote:

The marginal increase to our funds in the 2024-25 Budget does not meet our needs. If we are to fulfil our statutory obligations and meet community expectations, our resourcing needs cannot be neglected. We call on the parliament to properly resource and empower us to be the Integrity Commission Tasmanians deserve.

Well, didn't that fall on deaf ears from this government?

Even that marginal increase provided in last year's budget is eroded in the papers before us. We see our Integrity Commission in this state doomed to remain the nation's lowest-funded independent integrity entity. That is despite the fact that on 1 July, the new lobbyist oversight regime is scheduled to commence: another task that will need to be undertaken by the Integrity Commission.

It will require further of the Integrity Commission's resources and staff to administer it, to provide education and training and so on. That is on top of the considerable load they are already carrying in terms of their statutory responsibilities.

This deliberate and continual starvation of an independent statutory oversight and integrity entity by this government is appalling. It is unconscionable and members of this government should hang their heads in shame over it.

It is telling, when a government persistently and deliberately underfunds the integrity entity that is supposed to deliver oversight in this state and yet, when questioned about it, we hear this government try to put up the paltry defence that since more than a decade ago there has been some increase in funding to that entity. What a crock. Quite frankly, what a crock.

We have known for years that our Integrity Commission does not have the funds it needs to do its statutory job under law. We also know that this Integrity Commission is hampered in doing its job because of the absolute delay and dereliction of this government in delivering the reforms identified under the Cox Review from 2016. Nine years ago, the Cox Review was, and yet we have the Premier in the other place saying just the other day that they will be delighted to give us an update in September on delivering the remaining recommendations from that Cox Review. Well, quite frankly, that is nine-and-a-half years too late.

There were 55 recommendations from the Cox Review: about six of them are implemented. The Integrity Commission has said time and again it is hampered in doing its role. It is literally being held up in current investigations because of the matters that should be dealt with by those recommended reforms, and yet the government has persistently delayed in doing them. That is a deliberate decision, and to point ahead still yet six months further down the track from now to an update on delivering those recommended reforms is offensive.

This is a government that does not want to be held to account on integrity. There is no other way we can interpret this behaviour from the government and the absolute offensive level of funding provided in this Budget to the Integrity Commission of Tasmania, no other way.

Moving on to the Ombudsman and its associated hats of the Custodial Inspector and the Tasmanian National Preventive Mechanism, the TNPM, Chapter 21 of budget paper 2 and volume 2 rolls all three together. To save time I will also refer to all three now. Again, these papers reveal a woeful, shabby story. The minor budgetary bump provided to the Office of the Ombudsman for the 2025-26 financial year then dissipates over the forward estimates, and despite the ongoing recognition that the office has been under-resourced for years, we see this continuing trend.

The TNPM received a measly additional \$250,000 in the 2025-26 and 2026-27 years, and then nothing for the remaining forward estimates, where presumably it will be reduced to last year's budget allocation of \$300,000.

You will recall, that when it was given \$300,000 in last year's Budget, it was identified that that was sufficient to put a position in place of the Tasmanian NPM, which would then not be able to undertake any of its statutory roles, which are the visits to places of detention, or places where people have had their liberty taken. To fund an entity, to have on paper someone in a role, sitting at a desk, but actually not funded to do the oversight job it statutorily is required to do is an absolute joke; but it is not at all funny. It is disgraceful.

Wearing his TNPM hat, Mr Richard Connock released a media statement dated 25 November last year calling on the state government to do this:

...commit to effective independent monitoring and oversight to protect hundreds of vulnerable people around the state that are being denied their

rights under Tasmanian law, and who are at risk of poor-quality treatment.

Mr Connock then provided a detailed budget breakdown of what was required for the TNPM to fully comply with its legislated responsibilities under the Tasmanian *OPCAT Implementation Act 2021*, as well as its accepted commission of inquiry and Disability Royal Commission recommendations, and he stated that \$4.2 million was necessary for the TNPM to fully perform its functions.

The \$500,000 for two years is a long way short of the identified \$4 million considered necessary to comply with state legislation and deliver the commission of inquiry sets of recommendations. Tasmanians have a right to expect these independent statutory offices to be able to fulfil all their functions all of the time, yet the government is deliberately hamstringing their capacity via resource starvation. Again, this is a deliberate choice. This is a government which is happy to crow about being the laudable first movers in our nation to put our OPCAT act into effect. That was a celebrated day, when we took the lead on doing that, and yet now, ever since, they have done nothing but undercut the actual implementation, actual activity that role is meant to undertake under the act.

On a slightly positive note, I do want to acknowledge that it is heartening to see the proposed parliamentary budget office received the recognition it merits. Presuming it comes to fruition, this initiative should add to the robust policy debate occurring in this parliament. However, yet again, it is actually just another process that has been announced here. We have yet to see the rubber hit the road and if we can pessimistically go on past practice, it will be a tragedy if we see a parliamentary budget office established, only to be so significantly underfunded that it cannot deliver on the functions it is designed to provide.

It would seem an odd omission if I failed to mention here the minimal increase provided for all upper House members detailed in budget paper 2, volume 2. This is a formalisation of the process - for want of a better word - instigated by the Premier just prior to last year's budget Estimates scrutiny hearings, when he wrote to all upper House members offering additional 0.5 of an FTE staffer, bringing individual total staffing resources to 1.5 FTEs.

I asked at the time why MLCs, particularly independent MLCs, were not resourced in a manner equitable to the independent crossbench members of the other place who receive 2.5 FTEs. Why are we not resourced equitably in this place?

Why should our staff not receive the same workplace safety considerations offered by colleagues on site, particularly in regional electorate offices, or professional development opportunities facilitated in a team environment, as apparently exist in other MPs' offices? Why should elected representatives of single-member electorates, such that we are, not receive the same degree of resourcing by which to serve our electorate, as MPs who share their electorates with six other MPs?

I have yet to receive satisfactory answers to these questions.

While I welcome the acknowledgement made by these budget papers that resourcing of legislative councillors is inequitable to the resourcing of the Assembly MPs, I reiterate on the public record this token provision does little to address that inexplicable inequity.

A key issue I look for in budget papers, because of my background before coming to this place, is the degree to which we are investing in a resilient community via supporting our community services sector. If I just mention briefly here, unfortunately I was not able to go to the TasCOSS budget briefing last Friday morning because it happened to coincide with the declaration of the polls for Nelson. I did receive the material provided by TasCOSS at that briefing and it is incredibly concerning to note at a time that we see many metrics of community wellbeing and social cohesion going southward, when we are talking about cuts to public services, fundamental supports to the Tasmanian community, we are also seeing a community services sector that is being insufficiently supported and funded, and continuing to be subject to the insecurity and the uncertainty of their funding environment.

We know that the community services sector in Tasmania presents budget submissions every year. There are very fundamental, straightforward things that they request in those budget submissions. Quite frankly, typically the amounts being requested through the Budget are very modest when we look at them in the big scheme of things. Some of the things that the industry had identified as being absolutely important to be delivered in this Budget included funding certainty and five-year contracts with appropriate indexation and outcomes-based frameworks applied to them. They identified that a sustainability program was needed, with standard contracts, reduced reporting, streamlined processes and shared services. They looked to a 10-year update for the state of Tasmania's community services sector report, and hope to see a mid-term review funded of the Community Services Industry Plan 2021-2031.

Unfortunately, the community services sector has been let down once again. The fact that occurs virtually every year in this state should never inure us to the real-life impact that it has out there in the community, because this is a sector that we look to, to support our most vulnerable and to tenaciously and committedly keep showing up when people need them most. Yet, every year, we undersell, we under-support this sector, and this year we have seen the same.

What we have seen, which is a positive piece of progress, is that we are commencing stage one of the transition to longer-term five-year funding arrangements. That is welcome, but we have not had confirmed that appropriate indexation is going to be applied in those circumstances. So, we do not have the full package of that yet, and we do not know exactly how that is going to be delivered. We have seen a commitment to \$150,000, I believe, for a community services sustainability initiative. That is a pittance and will deliver a very limited outcome. It certainly does not come anywhere close to delivering on those asks that I just ran through previously, that were made by the sector in their budget submission through TasCOSS. It is a shocking lack of support.

There is some window dressing. We know that all governments of any stripe love to support Neighbourhood Houses and will typically make some nice, appealing-looking announcements about funding in that space - which is always welcome, which will always go some way to providing something through those excellent institutions in our neighbourhoods, which are typically our most disadvantaged neighbourhoods. It is not that we are going to turn up our nose and say no to that funding, but that is window-dressing funding.

We still have far too many community sector organisations - many of which I have been in contact with in the most recent months - which are facing a completely uncertain funding future past 30 June this year.

At that time, of course what that meant was they were losing staff because when you cannot tell staff at the beginning of May whether they are going to have a job at the end of June, they have to start looking for other opportunities, and organisations have to start winding up programs if they do not know whether they can continue past 30 June.

This is a government that is leaving these organisations in these positions far too often. It is disgraceful. It trades on the dedication and the goodwill and the good faith of the people who work in this sector and the people who lead this sector. That is quite disgraceful.

A key component of the annual state budget papers, which I look forward to considering, is the Gender Budget Statement.

The 2025-26 Gender Budget Statement is the fourth such document and it has come a long way since the inaugural statement produced by the Liberal government in 2022, following this place voting in support of my two motions calling for this initiative, which went through this place in early 2020 and 2021. In contrast to that initial 2022 gender budget statement, which was basically just a shopping list of female-oriented funding line-items, successive statements since then have slowly developed a series of indicators and made attempts to provide data collation and analysis of policies which may impact upon women and girls, as well as provide comparative statistics across genders. This has been a welcome progress over time.

The current 2025-26 Gender Budget Statement does continue this trajectory from its basic beginning to now providing a broader range of policy targets and analysis. However, further work is still required for this to become as useful a policy analysis tool as it could and should be, particularly in the area of developing more meaningful indicators. For example, a gender budget assessment statement should continue to provide informative and current data that helps us monitor indicators which are intended to assess gender-based statistics such as women on boards and addressing the gender pay gap. Additionally, it should also be presenting a developed and nuanced lens by which apparent non-gendered policies are in fact impacting and behaving in a gendered or intersectional manner. For example, the current Gender Budget Statement provides an analysis of the 2025-26 Budget initiatives, including half-price fares. It states:

Census data indicate that a greater proportion of Tasmanian women use public transport compared with men. If this is still the case, it would suggest that half-price fares may disproportionately benefit women as the greater users of public transport. However, given the limited data, this cannot be conclusively stated.

It is a shame that there is limited data on the gender of Tasmanian public transport users, as this could be an example of how an effectively designed and produced gender budget assessment becomes a crucial component of a good public policy toolkit, not just how well it tracks delivery of specific gendered policy and resourcing, such as breast diagnostic facilities, for example, but also to test for a gendered landing of apparent gender-neutral policies such as providing the half-price fares on public transport. In light of my earlier discussion of Metro Tasmania as one of the state-owned companies under consideration for potential divestment, I would argue that a strong gender lens must be cast across any assets proposed for privatisation as well as any public sector jobs or service cuts.

In conclusion on the Gender Budget Statement, I would congratulate the government for the continuing progress being made on that as a tool and I look forward to that continuing in future budget years and it becoming even more valuable to us. I am really happy to see this has come to fruition from the advocacy that I brought to this place early on in my first term.

Before I conclude, I want to touch on climate change and climate justice as absolutely crucial matters that should be discussed in relation to any budget.

We know the current climate change action plan spans 2023 to 2025, but clearly we cannot be reducing our focus or our efforts. This is so fundamental to building a resilient community, to addressing the cost of living, food insecurity, affordable heating and cooling of homes, hospitals, businesses, et cetera. It goes to the heart of our transport planning, or at least should, let alone protecting our unique biodiversity, our freshwater sources and our marine waterways. Yet the climate change output in Volume 1 No. 2 appears to receive a small increase for the 2025-26 financial year, up to \$9.5 million, but then it plunges back down to around \$2.7 million across the forward estimates. I doubt we will have solved the climate challenge by July 2026, so this does appear somewhat shortsighted.

The OECD has called governments to develop instruments for integrating the impact of climate change and green objectives into budgetary discussions and decisions. The OECD described these instruments as:

Green budgeting uses budget policymaking tools to integrate climate and environmental perspectives into budget frameworks and practices, to better inform budget decisions. Green budgeting is relevant to all stages in the budget cycle, specifically budget planning, formulation, approval, implementation and oversight.

There are clearly some similarities in how gender and climate change should be incorporated into our public policy assessment toolkit. The Tasmanian government should begin to swiftly develop a climate budget lens and framework, as urged by the OECD, to begin to drive an integrated and coherent climate budgetary process. That is one for continued advocacy in this place I hope to contribute to.

There are many aspects of this state budget I am not going to analyse in detail today. I have kept it high level on some key areas I feel are crucial. As this is such a woefully bad budget for our state, with such a dismal outlook we cannot but focus on the issues of leadership and those overarching principles this government is failing to apply.

In conclusion, given the dereliction of our state's financial circumstances and the daunting magnitude of the challenges our Tasmanian community faces, we need here a state government that is better than average, that is exemplary.

Unfortunately, what we have is a state government that, in this Budget, has confirmed yet again that it falls far, far short of even basic competence, capacity and leadership. This Budget does not and cannot build a better Tasmania, certainly not for Tasmanians who are struggling the most. This B budget is not a sensible pathway to anything, let alone a surplus.

This government has put us in a deep hole, and they are still digging with this Budget. This government, in this Budget, has done nothing to remedy our increasingly dire financial situation. That situation is entirely due to policy decisions across the 11 long years this government has been in power in this state.

This is a compounding trajectory and one which risks eroding the capacity for both the state and Tasmanians to absorb future shocks. Yet it would seem this government hopes to distract Tasmanians from the looming black hole of the ever-increasing debt burden across the future budgets that are ahead of us, with misleading spin and the dopamine decoy of short-term sugar hits.

Of equal concern is the lack of a plan to address the growing debt reflected in this 2025-26 Budget and across the forward estimates. This inevitably foreshadows a more deeply divided and less equitable Tasmania in the future.

I reiterate my call for the government to genuinely tackle the structural reform of Tasmania's financial framework that is desperately needed and a decade overdue.

By doing so, I put this government on notice.

It will be unacceptable for this government to saddle Tasmanians with significant non-strategic debt, in the main, without a substantial plan to get back into the black, and then to turn around and say, 'Oh, given the concerns over debt, we have no choice but to cut services even further, to cut even more public sector jobs and to sell off at a bargain basement rate even more of our state-owned assets.'

This government has been warned, that will not be acceptable in this place or to the Tasmanian people. There are alternative and responsible approaches to the trajectory we are seeing at risk of compounding from this state budget, across the forward estimates.

There is an opportunity now to drive business, public sector and community momentum in a constructive manner towards real, equitable, fair and sustainable reform. The people of Nelson and all Tasmanians deserve a sound, fair and robust fiscal framework which invests in an inclusive Tasmania, now and for the future.

Sadly, this 2025-26 state Budget does not and cannot deliver that.

I sadly note this Budget.

*[excerpt ends]*