

**McGOWAN GOVERNMENT — INFRASTRUCTURE**

*Motion*

**HON DR STEVE THOMAS (South West — Leader of the Opposition)** [10.10 am] — without notice: I move —

That this house notes the McGowan government's mismanagement of its infrastructure and asset investment program, despite being gifted the largest budget surpluses in the history of any state government in our nation's history as a result of the recent iron ore boom, including —

- (a) the government's inability to deliver Metronet on time and on budget;
- (b) the government's inability to deliver other transport infrastructure;
- (c) the government's inability to deliver health infrastructure, including long-promised election commitments; and
- (d) the government's inability to deliver other projects, especially in regional Western Australia.

**Hon Alannah MacTiernan:** The old scattergun approach.

**Hon Dr STEVE THOMAS:** They get a bit sensitive, President.

**Hon Alannah MacTiernan** interjected.

**The PRESIDENT:** Order! I am just letting it roll a little bit this morning so that you can get it out of your system.

**Hon Dr STEVE THOMAS:** It is a Thursday morning and government members are sensitive on a Thursday morning. They were concerned when we were too specific about the Minister for Regional Development. When we went on a broader scale, they were concerned that we were not specific enough. We can never make them happy on a Thursday morning; it is a grumpy morning. They should have a second coffee first up on a Thursday morning!

This motion deals specifically with the infrastructure budget of the state government. Obviously, we have spent some time this year talking about the massive revenues that this state government has received and, despite that fact, its inability to deliver services. We have done that on repeated occasions because it is an outstanding failure of the government that in the biggest boom that this state has seen, it cannot deliver services. It has a health crisis, a housing crisis and a crisis of confidence in the Department of Communities. The government should be taking responsibility for all those things and that is what makes government members a bit sensitive on a Thursday morning when these debates come along.

Let us talk more specifically about the infrastructure budget. We cannot go down that path without a slight reflection on this government's budget. We have been talking for a year about the \$5.8 billion surplus that this government had in 2020–21. It was the biggest budget surplus of any state jurisdiction in the history of our nation.

**Hon Darren West** interjected.

**Hon Dr STEVE THOMAS:** No; it was up a bit from the \$5.7 billion estimated in the budget that was delivered prior to the end of that financial year. It was a \$5.7 billion estimate and a \$5.8 billion surplus. What was that based upon? It was based upon a \$6 billion increase in iron ore royalty income plus some other bits and pieces, including a higher GST share that was accounted for by some higher expenditure on things like COVID measures. We have not complained about this government spending more money on COVID measures because we think that is a reasonable outcome, but it was a \$5.8 billion surplus, based on an additional \$6 billion in iron ore royalty income. What happened in the 2021–22 financial year? The joy is that in the interim in late September, the *Annual report on state finances* came out. It is a great document. I was waiting for it to arrive. On 28 September, it was due to be placed onto the Department of Treasury's website, as it is every year because it has to be delivered 60 days after the close of the financial year. At two o'clock in the afternoon, I was sitting up here in Parliament House, waiting for the annual report. The government had plenty of opportunities. The report tends to be delivered a bit earlier than that, not at the last minute. I was waiting for it because I had made some predictions about it. I had predicted—I thought it was fairly brave to do so—that we would be looking at a \$6 billion surplus for 2021–22. In its budget, Treasury had suggested that the budget surplus would be \$5.7 billion again, and I had said, "I think you've underestimated that. I think we could be looking at a \$6 billion surplus. It will certainly be \$5.8 billion or \$5.9 billion at a minimum, but I think we could be looking at \$6 billion."

Blow me down! What came out on 28 September? Bear in mind it came out at about 10 to three in the afternoon. The Premier, embarrassed by his wealth, embarrassed by the riches raining down into his money bin, rolled it out at the last possible minute. I think he was hoping nobody would notice. Luckily, the opposition was sitting here, ready and waiting and prepared for it.

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The media response was quite interesting. The \$6 billion surplus that I had predicted turned out to be \$6.019 billion. For the first time, a state jurisdiction had a surplus over \$6 billion, beating the greatest budget surplus that had ever been delivered.

Several members interjected.

**Hon Dr STEVE THOMAS:** In talking about that, I note some derision from members opposite. Members of the government might have noticed that I have been mentioning money bins and making comparisons with Scrooge McDuck for the last couple of years.

**Hon Lorna Harper** interjected.

**Hon Dr STEVE THOMAS:** I know Hon Lorna Harper is very keen to hear this discussion!

The media response on 29 September and the evening of 28 September was quite interesting. I particularly note the Alston cartoon in *The West Australian* the day after the release of the annual report, which I now hold up. I think members are struggling to see it. Perhaps they would like me to table it so they can look more closely. It is very hard not to see a money bin in this cartoon, and the Premier diving off a diving board, looking to do a forward somersault.

People are starting to recognise that the surplus is the result of the great fiscal boom, not good financial management. People are starting to recognise the money bin.

**Hon Alannah MacTiernan** interjected.

**Hon Dr STEVE THOMAS:** Minister, just because your hand is not in the money bin does not mean it does not exist.

Several members interjected.

**The PRESIDENT:** Order! Deep breaths, everyone. To allow Hansard to understand what you are saying, it is probably advisable not to talk over each other.

**Hon Dr STEVE THOMAS:** I will resist the urge to table the Alston cartoon in *The West Australian* that day. The Channel Seven coverage went one step further on the night that the *Annual report on state finances* was released. It used a clip of Scrooge McDuck himself, swimming through his Money Bin. It was fantastic: Scrooge McDuck in all his glory. Hopefully, a modern generation is now learning what Scrooge McDuck looks like and stands for. They will be able to put up a poster of the Premier on one side and a poster of Scrooge McDuck on the other side and make a full comparison.

Let us not argue about this for an instant. This government is rolling in cash not as a result of any part of its financial management and not as a result of any planning but because of the sheer good luck of being present and producing iron ore at a time when the world is investing in stimulus packages. It is through sheer luck that this government is dealing with a \$6 billion surplus. What is it doing with it?

**Hon Alannah MacTiernan** interjected.

**Hon Dr STEVE THOMAS:** It is Thursday morning. They are still upset.

**The PRESIDENT:** Order! I do hope, honourable members, that you are setting a good example for the Perth Modern School students who are observing you from the public gallery and who are very welcome.

**Hon Dr STEVE THOMAS:** I thank you for your advice as usual, President. It is very good. I hope those members opposite are listening. When the teacher is speaking, the students should be quiet and listen. In this circumstance, that would be a very good lesson for members; set a good example.

**Hon Alannah MacTiernan:** We do not have anyone who is qualified to teach!

**Hon Dr STEVE THOMAS:** They should set a good example.

We have to deal with the government's difficulty with delivering infrastructure. The first box we have to tick is whether it has adequate financial resources. It has more money than any government that has preceded it. Thanks to international spending on iron ore, it has more money than any government —

**Hon Pierre Yang:** And good financial management.

**Hon Dr STEVE THOMAS:** No, it has not had good financial management. Hon Pierre Yang should have listened to the President. It has not had good financial management. It is a two-sided argument—it always is—of money in and money out. The money in is more than the government can carry. It is also, based on its expenditure, more than it can spend. As we have said before, no government could spend on build and infrastructure the amount of money that this government is receiving. It simply cannot deliver it. We will get to the point in a minute at which we will discuss why the government cannot deliver it effectively and efficiently, which is the problem and the basis of the motion before the house today.

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The government places into its budgets, particularly its forward estimates, a massive expenditure on infrastructure that it cannot possibly deliver. This demonstrates that the government is unable to manage its business cases and cashflow its projects, and that is a problem. It should be a problem for members opposite. This government will be judged not on how it managed COVID, because, let us face it, it took the health advice given to it by the Chief Health Officer and implemented it effectively, so well done for that. It is fine. It did a reasonable job of that. I give credit where it is due. But that was not a forward vision. The government responded to the advice it was given by the experts. If that is the standard by which we judge the success of a government, I think we have an issue. I think this government will be judged on how it spent and what it did during the biggest economic boom this state will possibly ever see. In 1 000 years, a shadow Treasurer might stand up and go, “Wow, we wish we had the revenue incomes that the McGowan government had between February 2019 and the end of 2023, the biggest boom in the history of the state, but do you know what? The wastage was massive and it did not deliver.” That is why members opposite need to have a good, hard look and listen to the debate before the house today.

I will seek to table this chart. I think I might have pushed my luck with the cartoon, but anyway. Today I want to demonstrate to members exactly what I am talking about. This chart is not one of mine. This comes from the government’s document called budget paper No 3. It deals with the state government’s asset investment plan. The graph is at the bottom of page 34, for those who are interested—the economic tragi-comedies. I can give members the whole page, if they like, but I have blown it up to make it more obvious. The asset investment plan in various budgets is represented by the blue columns. In 2014–15, the budget was a bit under \$7 billion. It dropped for a while in 2015–16 and 2016–17. It picked up a bit in 2017–18. In 2019–20 it was well down. That was under the Labor government. Bear in mind that 2018 was before the effects of the next boom. Bear in mind that the boom under this government started in February 2019, so—here is a tick to the government—it would be quite reasonable that the asset investment plan would drop while economic times were tough. I understand that.

From then, the boom hit and the budget increased. It had \$7.5 billion planned in 2021–22. The problem is 2022–23, 2023–24 in particular, and 2024–25. The government is recommending in this financial year and next financial year that it will deliver \$8.5 billion of asset investment each year.

This is the problem the government needs to face. The red line shows what the government has actually managed to deliver. Well done to the government. According to that lovely document *Annual report on state finances*, in 2021–22 the government got \$7 billion worth of asset investment done. That was pretty full on, so well done. The government is now saying that it will get \$8.5 billion worth of asset investment done. The target that the government has set for itself is completely undeliverable. Why is that important? It is important because every year, there is a gap of between \$1 billion and \$2 billion, or \$1.5 billion in the shortest measure. In 2020–21, the government estimated \$7.5 billion in asset investment and got less than \$6 billion done. In each of the years shown on this table, what the government put into its budget about what it intended to spend on asset investment was highly optimistic compared with what it was able to deliver. This is not a problem just for the current government. This obviously has some history.

President, I seek leave to table the asset investment plan.

**Hon Alannah MacTiernan:** Can we get a copy of that, please?

**Hon Dr STEVE THOMAS:** Yes, the minister can have a copy, but only if she gives me leave to table it.

Several members interjected.

**The PRESIDENT:** Order! Let us deal with the document first, and we will deal with the distribution after that. The member has sought leave to table that document. Is leave granted?

[Leave granted. See paper 1716.]

**The PRESIDENT:** That document will be copied and distributed to interested members.

**Hon Dr STEVE THOMAS:** I am pleased that the minister is interested, and I am more than happy to make sure that she gets a copy, given that it is basically the government’s work.

**Hon Alannah MacTiernan:** I just want to make sure that you haven’t doctored anything.

**Hon Dr STEVE THOMAS:** I would be interested in doctoring the government’s response on occasions to actually get answers, but, unfortunately, I do not have the power to do that.

There is very little time on a Thursday morning to get into the detail of debate, but what does this mean? It means that every year, the government puts into the estimates that it is going to spend \$1.5 billion on infrastructure, but that money is not spent. It is not the case that the money is not present. The government will never have a better opportunity to spend that money. It is because that infrastructure cannot be delivered.

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There are some valid reasons that the government cannot deliver more infrastructure than it is currently trying to get out the door. One reason is the shortage of labour. I note the motion that will be brought on in a bit about skills. If I get the opportunity, I might try to correct the record a bit on that, but I will not be leading that debate. The government is struggling to get workers. It is also struggling to get materials. Therefore, it is very difficult for the government to deliver infrastructure to the level that it is proposing. That means that a fair bit of money is available in the budget. It also means that this government is unable to properly manage the business cases and cash flows of its infrastructure program.

As usual, we the opposition are here to help. We will be making some suggestions today about how the government might improve the management of its infrastructure plan to increase the output and get better outcomes to serve the people of Western Australia. One of the issues is that this government is focused on the political outcome rather than the infrastructure outcome. This government's major focus is on its pet political plans. Let us call it what it is. This government is focused on its vanity project of Metronet. That started as a \$3 billion process and will finish as a \$10 billion process. If the government wants to talk about blowouts in time and in cost —

**Hon Dan Caddy:** What about the Bell Tower?

**Hon Dr STEVE THOMAS:** The Bell Tower? I cannot believe the member just raised the Bell Tower! How much did the Bell Tower cost? Do members remember what the Bell Tower cost?

Several members interjected.

**Hon Dr STEVE THOMAS:** That is a great interjection. What did the Bell Tower cost? The government has had a \$7 billion increase in the cost of Metronet. The Bell Tower cost a few million bucks. It would barely rate a mention. Let us not talk about that. Let us go back. What did the former Labor government's petrochemical plant cost?

Several members interjected.

**The PRESIDENT:** Order! The Leader of the Opposition.

**Hon Dr STEVE THOMAS:** I got distracted by that interjection, President. It was just too good to let pass! Let us talk about petrochemical plants. Let us talk about billions. The cost of the Bell Tower is like that little bit at the end of the budget surplus in the *Annual report on state finances*. That last \$19 million that I was out, which is 0.03 per cent when all of Treasury is taken into account, is the Bell Tower discussion—that tiny little bit at the end. This government is unable to properly manage. The minister will stand and pull out a pile of projects that the government says it is in the process of delivering, and I am sure that we will find a bunch of ones that have been promised—for example, members might mention Geraldton hospital. I asked yesterday whether the government can even finish the business cases for the tier 3 rail lines that it has been talking about for years. Where are the business cases? Every few months I ask where are the business cases. This is because the government cannot build a business case and it cannot manage its cash flow.

**Hon Darren West** interjected.

**Hon Dr STEVE THOMAS:** Where is the minister? Stand and table them. You will get the opportunity; you are the parliamentary secretary! Let us see the business cases for it.

This is the problem. The government cannot manage its infrastructure budget. It cannot cashflow these things. That is the problem the government needs to face. If it would like some assistance, we will do our best to provide it. Maybe the government should work on some of those projects that it promised and failed to deliver.

**Hon Shelley Payne** interjected.

**Hon Dr STEVE THOMAS:** Sorry; I missed that. Did the member say “Carnegie Clean Energy”?

**Hon Shelley Payne** interjected.

**Hon Dr STEVE THOMAS:** Carnegie Clean Energy in Albany? Sorry; I must have misheard.

There is a bunch of projects that were election commitments that the government might be able to proceed with, and we are happy to give it some advice and assistance, because opposition members are here to help, as we always are.

**HON TJORN SIBMA (North Metropolitan)** [10.32 am]: It gives me great pleasure to rise this morning to speak in support of this excellent, well-targeted motion. Because there has been some accusation that we have been broadly focused, I might narrow it specifically to paragraph (a) of the motion. I think the government's inability to deliver Metronet on time and on budget is incontrovertible. The motion is timely, too, because Sunday was a great day. The opening of the Forrestfield–Airport Link was something to rejoice in. People have been looking forward to it. It has been delayed. It had three or four scheduled opening times that were rescheduled. I and the majority of Western Australians were relieved to see it open. But the version that opened on Sunday was not the Labor plan. It was not even Hon Ken Travers' plan. It was the Liberal version. It would be fair to say that if the government had had its way, it would still be digging something, but it would be delivering an inferior option—one that was largely

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at grade, with train stations stuck in the middle of Tonkin Highway and with a journey time between the CBD and the airport double the length of the journey time that has been established today.

The interesting thing about the Forrestfield–Airport Link is that that version was derided and criticised by the current Minister for Transport. It originally did not form part of the government’s version of Metronet. However, upon Labor coming to government in 2017, it was shamelessly rebadged. I often wonder what happened to the children at school who used to pinch other people’s homework and submit it to the teacher as their own work with a Cheshire grin on their face. I know what happened to those children. They grew up and ended up becoming ministers in the McGowan government, incapable of any original thought —

**Hon Alannah MacTiernan:** We stole the idea!

**Hon TJORN SIBMA:** You stole it! That is all right—you did!

**Hon Alannah MacTiernan** interjected.

**Hon TJORN SIBMA:** I seek your protection, President.

**The PRESIDENT:** Order!

**Hon Alannah MacTiernan** interjected.

**The PRESIDENT:** Order!

**Hon TJORN SIBMA:** What is also unbelievable —

**The PRESIDENT:** Honourable member, I had not actually given you the call again. Hon Tjorn Sibma.

**Hon TJORN SIBMA:** Thank you, President.

**Hon Alannah MacTiernan** interjected.

**Hon TJORN SIBMA:** What is also unbelievable—I think members will like this—is that Hon Ken Travers seems to get absolutely no credit for the work that he did in conceiving Metronet as a concept. Quite frankly, I cannot work out what the reason for that might be. His original plan, which I think was largely resubmitted by the current Minister for Transport and the ex-Treasurer on the verge of the 2017 election, was quite ambitious and reasonably scoped. There were four to five major passenger-facing usable dimensions, all with reasonably modest individual component budgets. However, that project has now ballooned from five or six major components to something approximating 16 or 17. The original delivery milestone of over six years, taking us from 2017 to somewhere between 2022 and 2023, means that if the government had stuck to its original concept that it took to the electorate in 2017, it would have finished Metronet by now or would be very close to doing so. Instead, the only bit of the “new” Metronet that anybody can use is the Forrestfield–Airport Link—the version designed, funded and secured by the previous Liberal government.

We understand that infrastructure projects transition across governments, but it is important that the government of the day has a consistent, economically reasonable approach to infrastructure planning, funding and delivery. Hon Dr Steve Thomas has done the chamber a favour today by telling the government that its own ambitions are actually unsustainable. I suggest members opposite read their own guidance material and listen more intently to the bureaucrats who are going about their work professionally.

I will refer to a few documents that I think government members should apprise themselves of because it is clear to me that the Minister for Transport is either unaware or uninterested. It is a bad sign for any government to be overburdened by the weight of its own ego. Dare I suggest that is happening now, but the government seems to be very, very dangerously close to suffering from that malaise.

I will refer to a couple of documents. This might seem boring, but this is the meat and potatoes of infrastructure planning. If governments do not do it, they are going to get it wrong—and badly wrong. There is a document within the Public Transport Authority that I think the Minister for Regional Development would be familiar with. It is a long-term planning document called the rail growth plan. I have sought the tabling of that document through a variety of means. This document explains, or projects, patronage needs and where infrastructure should go, and understands the delivery schedule and the like. When I sought that document, I was told via a question without notice asked on 17 August and answered on 31 August —

The rail growth plan is an internal working document produced by the Public Transport Authority. It is not a document that is approved or reviewed by government, or used by government for future investment decisions.

I ask members to dwell on that sentence. I googled “rail growth plan” and got this result among other things on the PTA website —

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The Rail Growth Plan ... is the Public Transport Authority's ... response to the forecast population and patronage growth and forms the long-term strategy for the evolution of the existing Perth metropolitan passenger rail network through to 2051. The RGP sets the framework to make the best use of existing rail assets and guide staged improvements and future investment in order to continue to meet long-term passenger needs.

That is what the plan is there for, but the minister tells us that it is not a document used by government for future investment decisions. All I am asking the government to do is account for a very obvious inconsistency. I am trying to understand where the government has got Metronet wrong. Perhaps it got it wrong at the most fundamental level. The government is not listening to its own professionals; it will not deign, condescend, to even contemplate their work. I find that to be a very dangerous way to go about doing things.

Another document was cited by Hon Dr Steve Thomas, with his chart that came from budget paper No 3 of this year's state budget. I will not cite a chart, but I will cite a reference to page 62 of that document, which noted the government's overall approach to its asset investment program —

The Government is also taking a considered and proactive approach to managing changes in project costs to ensure that projects continue to represent value for money.

What is value for money in investment terms? Value for money in investment terms can be at least measured by its benefit–cost ratio. The ratio is for every dollar in, how much of that dollar comes back. The Forrestfield–Airport Link delivered a benefit–cost ratio of 1.4. On a \$1.8 billion investment, it would get up to \$2.5 billion to \$2.6 billion value.

If the government had stuck to Hon Ken Travers' original Metronet plan, and not the Minister for Transport's scaled-up version, perhaps it would be delivering reasonable economic value for the staged works on the Armadale line. Unfortunately, however, it decided to take another approach in an already heated construction market. Essentially, the government is misspending or misallocating \$1 billion on two projects: the Byford rail extension and the Victoria Park–Canning level crossing removal. Collectively, the negative cost on that is \$1 billion, a cost that has not been accounted for and has not been justified. That is where the government is getting these things wrong, and we will continue to focus on this issue.

**HON WILSON TUCKER (Mining and Pastoral)** [10.41 am]: I am speaking in support of this motion today. I will avoid the typical cut and thrust of Thursday and take a more measured approach. I will talk about some broader economic considerations of delivering infrastructure projects in Western Australia. I will pose a few recommendations that I hope the government will seriously consider, but I am quite doubtful of that.

We are now in an inflationary environment, and WA is at its epicentre. We have the highest inflation rate of any state and territory in Australia. The Reserve Bank of Australia is slowly ratcheting up the cash rate to try to curb inflation, while engaging in a delicate balancing act to try to avoid a recession. This is attributed to a number of different factors. We have a war in Ukraine that is increasing the prices for oil and gas and a few other commodities. We also have disrupted supply chains and an overstimulated property market. A number of first home buyer grants from the state and federal governments have certainly contributed to inflation.

WA's economy is actually doing quite well. We are fairly insulated here. The Carpenter domestic gas supply agreement is giving us a little bit of a buffer and avoiding some of the energy price rises that are being experienced in the eastern states. We have a lot of things in the ground that other countries and jurisdictions want. Oil, gas and iron ore are doing particularly well right now. China is certainly addicted to the red stuff that we are pulling out of the ground in the Pilbara. Oil and gas are in high demand and being delivered. We are keeping those supply chains open, and those companies are profiting quite well.

I will now look at the construction industry that is needed to deliver large infrastructure projects. The Property Council of Australia mentioned that one in 10 people migrating to WA is tied to the construction industry. Migration is a good thing for WA. At a federal level, we have seen for many years now an effort to curb migration. We have seen that being slowly ratcheted back under the Albanese government. Migration is certainly good for WA. We are in a bit of a chicken and egg scenario right now, whereby we need workers to build houses but we do not have enough houses to build the number of workers. Last year in regional WA—in Broome, Karratha and Port Hedland—housing availability in some places was about 0.1 per cent. We find ourselves in this boom and bust cycle fairly often. It is well documented and well known that when iron ore is doing well, we have a lot of jobs, and when the market for iron ore falls, we turf people out. The property market then responds to a supply and demand–driven market. We do not have enough houses for the workers up there and we do not have enough people in the construction industry to build those houses. We are looking at about a 16-month long tail to build houses in some of those towns in regional WA. The state government needs to look a little more intelligently at the existing housing stock and try to utilise it to the best of its ability.

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One way of doing that, which I have spoken about previously, is around resizing. We have an ageing population in Australia. We also have a rising millennial population. The millennial population now equals the boomer population, with the median age in WA now being 38. We have a lot of young people who also represent younger families trying to enter the property market. We also have wealth disparity issues across generations in Australia, though certainly not as bad as in some other countries, but it does exist. The Premier is very quick to beat his chest and say that we have a \$6 billion surplus and higher incomes on average than other states and territories, and that we are all doing really well here, but a lot of people are really struggling. It can be a very trying time for young families trying to enter the property market. We need to think about how to incentivise and provide opportunities for younger people to get into a market that has been overstimulated by state and federal grants pushing up property prices.

One way of doing this is resizing. On one side we have ageing parents whose children have left home. They might have a four or five-bedroom house with a double carport that is potentially becoming a bit unwieldy for them to manage. Giving them an option to resize their property to suit their lifestyle makes a lot of sense. I am not saying that we should give up on the Western Australian dream. We have some of the largest properties in Australia. In 2017–18, I think we had the largest properties out of any state and territory by square footage. I am not suggesting that we all live on top of each other, but we should look at the existing stock and try to incentivise people who want to downsize by cutting stamp duty on the sale of those properties. That would provide room for younger families to enter the market.

The other point I would like to make is around the boom and bust cycle we find ourselves in. We are very dependent on the price of iron ore. A fair amount of diversification is happening in the resources sector. Battery technology is coming through and the demand for rare earths and minerals is certainly rising—for example, with lithium. We are very good at digging things out of the earth and putting them on ships, but we also need to think about the higher end of that supply chain and to try to unlock the high value that comes with intellectual property and securing some sovereignty around supply chains. A fair amount of diversification is happening within the mining sector, but, thinking more broadly about the economy, if we want to try to avoid these peaks and troughs and sine waves we find ourselves in every 10 years, with strong demand for jobs and housing and then the bottlenecks that come when we try to deliver infrastructure projects, we need to take a serious look at diversifying the economy across other industries. I have spoken about this before. The tech industry is certainly one that the government could embrace. The Tech Council of Australia has forecast that by 2050, we will have more tech jobs than mining jobs in WA. A lot of mining companies are looking at automating and reducing the number of staff. As we move towards a digital economy, WA could certainly profit from attracting people to, and trying to boost, the information technology space, and there is a very real advantage to doing that.

In the time remaining, I want to quickly talk about Metronet. Metronet has obviously become very politically charged. It has become weaponised. I was impressed when Anthony Albanese, on coming into his term as Prime Minister, mentioned in the first instance that he would engage in a new style of politics and try to attain a level of bipartisanship when talking about different policies and projects. I do not think we necessarily all need to be singing from the same songbook as long as we can agree on the fundamental terms. I think that scrutiny of the details is certainly good, but broader support for projects and policy would be a better outcome for the people of Western Australia. Certainly, with Metronet, the daggers are out, and we do not have the transparency and insight into that project that Western Australians deserve because it has become so weaponised and politicised.

With that, I support the motion and thank Hon Dr Steve Thomas for raising it today.

**HON ALANNAH MacTIERNAN (South West — Minister for Regional Development) [10.51 am]:** I thank members for providing the Thursday entertainment! I have been struggling to find the connection between the two contributions that we have had from our friends in the opposition. In the first instance, Hon Dr Steve Thomas is very concerned that we have accumulated too much money. He is obviously fascinated by cartoons, which are guiding his economic analysis that we have too much money. However, at the heart of Hon Tjorn Sibma's complaint appears to be that rail was their idea, and, in any event, we are spending too much money on it. On the one hand, we have this critique that we have too much money; on the other hand, the critique is that we are spending too much money. I am going to try to bring those ideas together, but it is a little challenging.

Of course, it takes a special kind of genius to achieve what the previous government did with its economic management. For at least five of the eight years of its term, it had record iron ore receipts. Let us not forget that it had record iron ore receipts during five of its eight years, yet it managed to have cash deficits on every single one of its eight budgets. That takes genius.

I note that the charts of the members opposite start only in 2014. The story during those boom years is that the then Treasurer, Troy Buswell, who was rising ascendant, was rampaging around the state with the Premier and talking about how fabulous they were at economic management, but, extraordinarily, that was their performance. But that is the past. One of the key planks of the McGowan team's election in 2017, and the reason for its success, was

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a promise that we would reverse the financial mismanagement that had occurred under the previous government. The Leader of the Opposition himself has acknowledged that we were on track for a \$42 billion deficit. We made it very clear that we were going to turn that around and that we would, in principle, move to produce budget surpluses. I do not think anyone in the state would say that that was not our pledge and that we have not delivered on it. I know that the Leader of the Opposition is an intelligent person, but I think there is a problem in his party about grasping the realities of budgets. An operating surplus is not like a cartoon. It does not mean there are piles of cash and that nothing is being done with them. Those operating surpluses are set aside to do a number of very important things.

**Hon Dr Steve Thomas:** Billions of dollars have been shuffled into special purpose accounts.

**Hon ALANNAH MacTIERNAN:** That is right. They are there to fund the important things that we need to fund. That is good economic management. The member was not in the Parliament at the time, but I urge him to please look at what was going on in 2016. Look at the horror that was out there in all sectors of the community and at the budget processes. The economic management of the state was parlous, and that is why we have turned it around. The member's various claims include that we have not been paying down debt. Bear in mind that locked into the forward estimates was a \$43.7 billion deficit. We have been paying down that debt. The debt is now down to around \$29 billion, so we have been paying it down. In fact, we had record debt reduction in 2021–22 when we reduced net debt by \$4.3 billion. That is the lowest level it has been since 2014–15.

**Hon Dr Steve Thomas:** You inherited debt of \$32 billion, it went up to \$34 billion and you have knocked it back to just under \$30 billion. That is what you've done.

**Hon ALANNAH MacTIERNAN:** No. It was in the trajectory. The member has acknowledged that.

**Hon Dr Steve Thomas** interjected.

**Hon ALANNAH MacTIERNAN:** On 15 June, the Leader of the Opposition acknowledged —

**Hon Dr Steve Thomas** interjected.

**Hon ALANNAH MacTIERNAN:** I am sorry if I quote the member, but I think it is important that he acknowledges what he has said. On 15 June 2017, he acknowledged that general government debt was heading to \$42 billion. The debt we inherited was not just for that year, it was for the entire forward estimates, and the debt was heading up in that direction. We have clawed it back and it is now at the lowest level since 2014–15. There are not piles of cash.

**Hon Dr Steve Thomas** interjected.

**The PRESIDENT:** Order, let us cut down on the cross-chamber chatter and focus on the speaker, which is the Minister for Regional Development.

**Hon ALANNAH MacTIERNAN:** We have been addressing the issues. The member seems to have a problem with some of our cash flow. The problem with trying to understand where the member is headed is that he is always complaining about us having too much money and then he complains about cash splash handouts for power, but they were important. They were cost-of-living adjustments because, as Hon Wilson Tucker said, there is the crisis in Ukraine and there have been various spikes in energy costs. There were two payments of a one-off nature to electricity users. We do not want to do what the previous government did, which was lock in long-term, unsustainable economic structures. It failed to manage wages and expenditure policies, which deeply embedded into the budget real structural problems. We have been unpicking those structural problems that were part of the lack of management of the Barnett government. We recognise that we have a worldwide energy crisis, which we all hope that at some stage we will get through. Therefore, it absolutely makes sense to use part of our surplus to provide that cost-of-living adjustment during this period of considerable difficulty.

Importantly, we have got the debt monster in hand by reducing the size of our debt. I think it would be fair to say that we are the only state that has managed to do that. I make the point again: do not forget that there were record receipts from iron ore during the first five years of the Barnett government; nevertheless, every single one of its budgets had cash deficits.

It is true that we are investing in Metronet. We recognise that the Forrestfield–Airport Link was committed to under the previous government, and I note that Dean Nalder was invited to its opening but let us look at its performance. During the eight and a half years of the Barnett government, government members left it right until the last moment—2016—to start the rail project, and, of course, it was not completed on their watch.

In the eight years of the previous Court government, it did not deliver a single centimetre of rail; in fact, if anything, it achieved a negative rail contribution. I must say that it amazes me that the Leader of the Opposition has the cheek to get up and talk about tier 3 rail lines when the previous government was responsible for not only the failed privatisation of the rail lines in 2000, but when those members got back in government in 2009, they made it worse!



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They made it worse by removing the one thing they had put in to provide some protection, which was the use it or lose it principle to the privatised rail operator.

We are trying to do the work on tier 3 rail lines, but reopening them has not been our central focus. As the member would probably know, it is not supported by some of the big users of that rail; nevertheless, we are continuing to look at that work.

I move on to the comments of Hon Tjorn Sibma, who thinks that rail is really the legacy of his government. The whole concept of urban rail has been a great Labor tradition, and it is really important to understand the history here. Under the first Court government, the government of Sir Charles Court, the decision was made to close the Fremantle rail line. Apparently, no-one was using the trains; therefore, the government was going to put in a freeway down that line. But Labor had a policy. We understood cities and we understood how modern cities worked. We understood that we could not have old diesel trains chugging around and expect people to use them. The first thing that happened under the Burke administration was the modernisation of the rail system, and it brought in electrification of the heritage lines. Then, under the Lawrence government, we had the development of the Joondalup line. Under the Gallop and Carpenter governments, within seven and a half years, we doubled the size of the metropolitan train lines, with extensions to Mandurah, Clarkson and Thornlie. Then, going into the 2008 election, one of our projects was forward planning for the Forrestfield–Airport Link. I remember going out there. Of course, that was such a good idea that everyone eventually came on board to support it. I acknowledge the role that Hon Ken Travers played in that.

It is in the DNA of Labor to build rail and to understand the primacy of having quality public transport to make our city work. Unfortunately, those opposite have never completed a project within their terms of government.

**HON COLIN de GRUSSA (Agricultural — Deputy Leader of the Opposition)** [11.06 am]: I, too, rise to make a contribution to this excellent motion brought to the house by the Leader of the Opposition. It is a broad motion; members opposite seem to be making a big deal about that, but I guess it is just because there is so much to talk about that we have to cast the net fairly wide. There is no shortage of undelivered issues for us to focus on. Nevertheless, I intend to focus my remarks on part (b) of the motion, pertaining to transport infrastructure, and I particularly want to focus on Westport—a project that does not seem to have done anything up to this point in time. In fact, I am reminded to ask the question: what major infrastructure projects has this government delivered that were not started by the previous government? What projects has it actually delivered? It loves to take credit for the big projects. We all like to go to the football!

Several members interjected.

**Hon COLIN de GRUSSA:** Yes, that is right.

Several members interjected.

**The ACTING PRESIDENT (Hon Dr Sally Talbot):** Order, members. Perhaps the member on his feet can just take his seat for a moment. I have given the call to Hon Colin de Grussa. Hon Colin de Grussa, if you address your remarks to me as the chair, and perhaps avoid the rhetorical question I am asking, we should be able to retain some semblance of order.

**Hon COLIN de GRUSSA:** As I was saying, I want to focus my remarks on the Westport project. I have said before in this place that we note the very slow progress of that project and the millions spent on what, exactly? I cannot point to anything other than —

**Hon Dr Steve Thomas:** A lot of meetings!

**Hon COLIN de GRUSSA:** There is a fancy website and some downloadable PDFs, but what else has the government done on Westport? It has spent three years going through some kind of theatrical process, including future report recommendations from the stage 2 report. Of course, that delivered the outcome that was expected. I have been asking questions about modelling and planning to try to find out where the government is at with this project, and what, indeed, it is going to do in the interim to manage the expected increase in container traffic through the existing network, but we cannot get answers to those questions. The government either has not done the modelling, or the modelling is telling it something it does not want to know, and therefore it does not want to share it. I do not know; the government simply will not answer those questions and will not provide the modelling, so one can only presume that it has not actually done it, and therefore does not know what the impact is going to be on the restricted access vehicle freight network, particularly around Leach Highway, which inevitably will become a car park before Westport delivers anything. Of course, that will affect a number of people in the great city. The Minister for Regional Development just talked about the liveability of the city. I would suggest that trucks parked outside people's front door because the freight network cannot cope with the volume of traffic as a result of the government not doing the planning is probably not the way to increase the liveability of the city. Nevertheless, the reason for that question

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was simply to gain a better understanding of what the government is actually doing. I fully expected a genuine answer about what has happened and, perhaps, a copy of the planning and modelling to understand how it will work and what is expected to happen with the long-term container trade forecast, but we did not get that answer. In fact, as I said before, the government does not know, does not like the modelling or simply does not want to share it. We will continue to wait and ask questions to find out what is going on with this project.

It has been five and a half, nearly six, years since this project effectively began with the election of this government in 2017. March next year will mark six years of this government, yet we do not have a business case for this project on which the government continues to spend millions of dollars and about which it will not answer the simple questions asked by the opposition to get an understanding of the project. As I said at the start of my remarks, it is not an unreasonable request to ask for this information, particularly when one considers that this government has a 100 per cent success rate in delayed, stalled and over-budget infrastructure projects. As I said at the start of my contribution, I struggle to name a project that has been delivered by this government that was not started by the previous Liberal–National government. It is therefore problematic that this government talks about its wonderful infrastructure projects that it has not delivered.

Westport will not be delivered this decade. If we go to the Westport website, we can see quite clearly that “the Westport Program is developing a business case”. How long does it take to develop a business case and how long does it take to do the forecasting, modelling and an assessment of the impact on traffic on the RAV 4 freight network? We do not know because either the government will not tell us or it has not done it. It is simply not good enough that for a project of this scale and nature, we cannot get that basic information. Either the government is not doing that planning or it is too focused on Metronet and the Minister for Transport; Ports does not really have her eye on the ball with Westport and other projects. We need clarity from the government about this project and when it will be delivered.

The opposition is obviously concerned about other projects. I know that my colleague Hon Steve Martin wants to talk about some projects in regional areas that have not been delivered or have been held up by this government. I am sure that he will make a contribution to that effect shortly. It is very important that we consider that significant investment is being made in major infrastructure projects about which we know nothing. Metronet is an example of a massive over-budget project. There is no doubt that Westport will blow out to a huge cost. We do not even know where we are at with that because the plans are not in place.

**Hon Dr Steve Thomas:** We know there’s \$400 million in a Westport special purpose account.

**Hon COLIN de GRUSSA:** That is right.

**Hon Alannah MacTiernan** interjected.

**Hon COLIN de GRUSSA:** The government is quite happy to whack the money away. We do not know where it is going. We cannot get access to the planning.

**Hon Alannah MacTiernan:** That is ridiculous. We are planning well in advance.

**Hon COLIN de GRUSSA:** Minister, we should have planning and a clear understanding. Perhaps if Hon Alannah MacTiernan was still the Minister for Ports, we might get somewhere with this project, but that is obviously not my decision. The fact is it is a big, complex project, but we still have to move container freight via the existing port and road network and we need to know what impact the expected increase in the volume of container traffic will have on that network, the commuters and people who live in those areas. We cannot get an answer to that. Has it been done? Who knows? Do they know? Who knows? We do not know what will happen with that container freight network and the extra traffic that is predicted will occur through growth in container freight. I will leave my remarks there in order to let other members make a contribution. The key here is that this government has again failed to deliver infrastructure projects, despite being in office for a long time. We hear every day in this place that it is always someone else’s fault. The government does not accept that it is accountable or responsible for the decisions it has made that have not resulted in any particular outcome.

**HON STEVE MARTIN (Agricultural)** [11.15 am]: I rise to make a contribution to this excellent and important motion moved by Hon Dr Steve Thomas. Hon Dr Steve Thomas outlined some of the budget circumstances that the government finds itself in, which are extraordinary. It has another record surplus—\$6 billion! I will concentrate on some of the promises this government has made and not delivered. In her response to the motion, the Minister for Regional Development talked about the government’s pledges over time and said that the government delivers on its pledges—on some of them, it has not! I have raised one issue in particular in this place before, and it almost feels cruel to do it again because every time we raise the subject of the Geraldton Health Campus, the people of Geraldton and the midwest prick up their ears and think that perhaps it is just around the corner! Mercifully, we have not had a media release from the minister in the last couple of months. We have had 16 media releases over the last six years,

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promising action and a spend in Geraldton. On 21 September, Hon Martin Aldridge received a reply to a question he asked in this place. He asked, again, in part —

- (1) What is the expected completion date for the redevelopment?
- (2) Has the tender process for the main works contract recommenced; and, if so, on what date did it recommence and how many tenders have been received?

We got the normal answer to questions about the Geraldton hospital —

The McGowan government is committed to delivering the major upgrade of Geraldton Health Campus for the people of the midwest and Gascoyne.

Just not yet! The government has been at this for six years and it is still not happening. But, again, with some sense of irony, I imagine, the minister mentioned the car park. The answer to Hon Martin Aldridge continues —

The government has already delivered stage 1 of the redevelopment, which included a reconfigured main entry —

That was a door! It continues —

and more than 400 additional car parking bays. Stage 2 of this significant project includes an expanded ...

Blah, blah, blah! In effect, the government does not know when it will deliver stage 2. The answer continued —

An expression of interest date is currently under consideration.

It has been under consideration for six years. Nothing is happening on the Geraldton Health Campus.

**Hon Dr Steve Thomas:** In the fullness of time!

**Hon STEVE MARTIN:** In the fullness of time, indeed. That is one specific project that the government has absolutely failed to deliver, despite promising over and again that it would deliver it.

I will mention another project that I have been paying attention to—the Common Ground facilities in East Perth and Mandurah. These are not my words but those of the Minister for Homelessness, John Carey. He stated —

The Common Ground facilities are a key pillar of our long-term response to addressing homelessness in Western Australia.

The government has been talking about Common Ground for years. In July, the minister gave us the unfortunate news that “as disappointing as this is”, the government will not accept any tenders for Common Ground—none! The minister further stated —

The State Government will go back out to market shortly ...

It is now October and nothing has happened. We have not gone back out to tender. A quote from the minister in July reads —

The State Government will go back out to market shortly, with a new request for tender to deliver Common Ground Perth.

We are waiting and, more importantly, the homeless people of Perth and Mandurah and the service providers that are desperately short of crisis beds are still waiting. That \$70 million that is allegedly committed to Common Ground remains parked, like a number of infrastructure spends by this government.

I will spend the rest of the short time I have left discussing a transport project that includes a rail component in the wheatbelt. We have heard a lot of discussion, some of which is nonsense, around the government recommissioning the tier 3 railway lines. We saw a glimpse of a crack in the argument from the minister this morning. The quote from the minister was that it was not central to the plans of either the government or the people who cart that grain. Despite that, the Premier has said strongly that the government is recommissioning tier 3 rail. We have heard the Minister for Transport say, “We are recommissioning tier 3.” However, \$72 million is parked—most of it is federal money; some of it is state money—waiting on another plan to see whether that tier 3 line makes sense.

From the crack in the argument from the minister today, we now know that it is not central to anybody’s planning—the users of the infrastructure, the people who lease the infrastructure from the government or, indeed, the government. I will give members a little background about that proposed \$72 million spend. This goes back to the *Revitalising agricultural region freight strategy*, which has been around for some time. It tells us a bit about what the government planned to do and, indeed, about the tier 3 network. Under the frequently asked questions, with the transport minister’s smiling face on the front of the brochure, it states —

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Since the conclusion of the arbitration, neither Arc Infrastructure or CBH have pursued reopening Tier 3 railway lines. Arc Infrastructure and CBH are focusing future investment in the rail network on operational and high-volume Tier 1 and 2 rail lines.

...

The RARF Strategy prioritises investment in the Tier 1 and Tier 2 rail networks; railway lines which are still operational, economically viable and carry significant volumes of grain from regional Western Australia to port.

That is what the government was telling us was the basis of its strategy. Along came another bucket of money that the government had access to. According to the transport minister, it was a \$200 million boost for Western Australia's regional rail freight, and \$40 million of that was from the state and \$160 million was from the federal government. This is called the agricultural supply chain improvements program. An amount of \$72 million—a very limited amount of money when compared with the billions that have been spent on Metronet—is still stuck waiting while the government does another plan. It has been planning and talking to stakeholders for years, but after all that, the state's contribution to the grain freight network is \$25.6 million; that is what it has spent. CBH Group, the grain growers of Western Australia, has kicked in \$200 million. The federal government has committed \$160 million and the state's contribution is \$25.6 million.

**Hon Alannah MacTiernan** interjected.

**Hon STEVE MARTIN:** I am not taking interjections because I have only a few minutes left.

That money is stuck there while the government does yet another study, but it is not central to anybody's plans. I will outline in the brief time I have left why that is important. At the moment, we are on the back of the biggest harvest Western Australia has ever seen. It is estimated there will be a three to five million tonne carryover. Another big harvest is coming that will add to the carryover and the small amount of money the state has committed is not being spent to ease the flow of that grain to port. That is causing an enormous discount to Western Australian growers because we simply cannot get that grain to port fast enough. The ASCI money could be spent on the broader freight task, not just rail; it is for freight of all sorts. We have a road network but none of that money is being committed to the road network. There have been no upgrades in the productivity on our grain freight road network in years, yet somehow the government wants to play politics with this bit of tier 3 railway line. It is not central to its planning, it is not central to CBH's planning and it is not central to the owner of the railway line, yet that \$72 million will remain parked and Western Australian growers will continue to receive an enormous discount on the world price because our grain is stuck in the country and we cannot get it to a port. I urge the state government to spend that money on the network. We have talked about the agricultural supply chain investments mark 2. Given what the federal Treasurer is telling us about the budget crisis, which he did not know about six months ago, we need to spend that money because it will be much harder when we say we need ASCI mark 2.

I will quickly move on. I was not going to mention Oakajee but we had a bit of back and forth on the wonderful work that has been done on Westport. There is another proposed port in Western Australia—Oakajee has been proposed for a long time. Again, we allocated \$6 billion for that about a budget ago. The proposed Oakajee port is certainly a failed commitment for infrastructure in regional Western Australia. That project could do with some serious investment, as opposed to building a roundabout and nothing much else. Thank you.

**HON DAN CADDY (North Metropolitan) [11.25 am]:** I like getting up and talking about the fantastic infrastructure projects of the McGowan government and everything it is doing for the state. The opposition has done it again; it has come in here with another absolutely ill-informed and disjointed grab bag of attacks just to have a go, like it did last time. It did not work last time. It is interesting.

**Hon Tjorn Sibma** interjected.

**Hon DAN CADDY:** I do not have time for interjections.

Several members interjected.

**Hon DAN CADDY:** I will come back to parts (a) and (b) of the motion, because most members who have spoken today have spoken about the rail infrastructure and Metronet. There is a little thing called credibility.

**Hon Tjorn Sibma** interjected.

**Hon DAN CADDY:** I will get to you, Hon Tjorn Sibma. Let me take the member back to 25 January 2021. What was Hon Tjorn Sibma doing then? He was standing with his then leader and talking about sinking a rail line through the metropolitan area. One of them was saying that it would cost \$10 million and the other was saying \$5 million.

**Hon Tjorn Sibma** interjected.

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**Hon DAN CADDY:** Let me read a quote from that article. This is my favourite quote from Hon Tjorn Sibma —  
The commitment is too that there will be something that comes of that plan.

That was his quote. I do not understand.

**Hon Tjorn Sibma:** Were you there? I don't think that's an accurate reflection.

**Hon DAN CADDY:** That is in *The West Australian*. The member can look at it; it is a direct quote from him. It is little wonder that that announcement did not work for Hon Tjorn Sibma or his party. The headline was great: "WA Liberals announce sunken underground rail plan for West Perth at mystery cost". I love that bit—"mystery cost". The former opposition leader liked to talk.

**Hon Alannah MacTiernan:** Mystery rail!

**Hon DAN CADDY:** Mystery rail, mystery cost—it would be a magical mystery tour on that train, minister!

This is the legacy of the honourable member's party. That was a botched announcement on rail leading into the last election. I have spoken about the history. Hon Alannah MacTiernan raised the first Court government, under Sir Charles Court, which closed down the Fremantle line. He said —

... there would only be a public backlash for sentimental ... reasons but there was no justification for retaining the service.

I have spoken about that before. I want to go back to something else that Hon Tjorn Sibma said in this place on 17 March this year. He said —

All responsible government in the state's history, and in this nation's history, have made investments in infrastructure, particularly transport infrastructure.

If that is the metric that Hon Tjorn Sibma is using to judge governments in this state, as well as obviously putting Charles Court's government in the bin —

**Hon Tjorn Sibma:** What's wrong with it?

**Hon DAN CADDY:** There is nothing wrong with it because we are front and centre. The McGowan government is spending more on public infrastructure and building Metronet.

**Hon Tjorn Sibma:** But you're not. You can't get the money out the door. You didn't understand the chart and table. You can't do it!

**Hon DAN CADDY:** What happened to Metro Area Express? This government came forward with a plan, from opposition.

We have a plan to build significant train infrastructure. This is not just a railway line. It was a Labor government that connected Mandurah to the rail line and now we have a plan for connecting the entire city. This will set the city up with rail infrastructure for generations to come, but members opposite carp and have a go at this government for what it is doing.

Several members interjected.

**Hon DAN CADDY:** Let me point out something else to members opposite. This is not just about the kilometres of track that we have laid or the kilometres of track that previous governments have sought to rip up; it is also about the railcar manufacturing business. I do not know whether the member remembers the quotes made by Liza Harvey at the time she was Leader of the Opposition. She said it was a failed manufacturing industry, a waste of money, and an industry from a bygone era. What have we done? The Bellevue manufacturing plant has taken the biggest ever order of railcars that will be built locally. It will also serve as a permanent maintenance facility and provide all sorts of training opportunities. I am sure that my colleague Hon Stephen Pratt will talk more about jobs and training and where that is at. The Liberal Party does not understand that there is much more to Metronet than the laying of tracks. If its members want to bring on a motion about rail infrastructure, we will stand here all day and talk because we are the only ones with any credibility in this space.

Motion lapsed, pursuant to standing orders.