

The committee convened at 8.32 am.

**Madam CHAIR:** Good morning, everyone. I welcome everybody present to the public hearing of Estimates Committee.

I acknowledge that the land we gather on today is the land of the Larrakia people. I pay my respects to elders past, present and emerging.

This is the 23<sup>rd</sup> year of the Estimates Committee process. Many of us around the table have been involved in different roles, on and off, over the years.

The procedures of the committee have been well established over that time and are outlined in the Estimates Information Manual, which is available on the Assembly's website.

I will highlight a few procedural points. The Estimates hearing agenda gives the order that outputs will be considered. I remind members to please seek clarification from the minister at the beginning of the hearing if you are unsure of which output a matter you wish to raise falls under.

It is important that each question on notice is given a number and repeated so that the terms are clear. We will interrupt whenever a question is taken on notice to ensure this correct procedure occurs. I will also interrupt when answers are given to clarify the question number it refers to.

Questions on notice must be answered by 15 July this year. Under the Assembly's resolution, the committee is not able to accept answers after this date.

I will ask agency staff if they could please leave promptly when the hearing is complete so that we can admit the next agency. There will be a short break between each agency for that transition, as well as for morning tea and lunch. If people need a break at other times, please indicate to the Chair at that time.

## MINISTER LAWLER'S PORTFOLIOS

### CHIEF MINISTER

### AUDITOR-GENERAL'S OFFICE

**Madam DEPUTY CHAIR:** The committee will now proceed with consideration of estimates of proposed expenditure in the order set out in the Estimates hearing agenda, commencing with the Chief Minister and the Auditor-General's Office.

Chief Minister, I invite you to introduce the officials accompanying you.

**Ms LAWLER:** I introduce Julie Crisp, the Auditor-General. She will provide the opening statement.

**Madam DEPUTY CHAIR:** If you can proceed with a brief opening statement, I will then call for questions relating to the statement. The committee will then consider any whole-of-government and fiscal strategy-related questions before moving on to output-specific questions.

I will invite the shadow minister to ask questions first, followed by committee members. Finally, other participating members may ask questions. Other members may join in on a line of questioning pursued by the shadow minister, rather than waiting for the end of the shadow's questioning on an output.

**Ms CRISP:** This year the office commenced 110 audit tasks against a budget of 110 that was planned and tabled three reports to the Legislative Assembly in August 2023, November 2023 and May 2024. The office is dependent upon adequate appropriation funding to deliver audit services and to continue to provide an appropriate level of assurance over the public account.

As at 31 March 2024 total income received for the financial year was \$4.43m, being \$821,000 below the original budget of \$5.25m; that is just timing—the time that the accounts were taken. Output appropriation for the year to date was \$2.36m and the remaining revenue comprises recovered audit costs from statutory audits of \$1.94m goods and services received free of charge from other government agencies, which is primarily the Department of Corporate and Digital Development.

As at 31 March 2024 total expenses incurred for the financial year were \$4.48m, comprising \$3.5m in audit fees; \$789,000 in employee expenditure; \$57,000 in operational costs; and \$137,000 in goods and services free of charge.

Actual audit costs are affected by the number of audits; the nature and scope of the audit; the time an audit takes to complete; the composition and experience of the audit team assigned to the audit; annual contractual price escalations; and increasing market rates of audit services. The time taken to complete audits also increased due to new requirements of the Australian Accounting and Auditing Standards.

As at 31 March 2024 the office had recognised a deficit of \$51,000; that is due to the timing of the audit work and the timing of the appropriation. We have an approved staffing level of five FTE. Presently four of those positions are filled, and recruitment is planned to fill the second principal auditor position.

There are 108 audit tasks that we have anticipated to be scheduled for the 2024–25 financial year, and this reduction from the prior year reflects the reduced outsourced hours to counter rising audit rates and reduced internal capacity.

I place on the record my thanks to my very small team, each of whom works incredibly hard to ensure the office efficiently and effectively delivers the audit program and meets all the regulatory and financial management responsibilities that apply to public sector agencies. My thanks also to the authorised audit staff and the staff of the Department of the Legislative Assembly who have supported and assisted me to deliver the audit mandate.

At my final Estimates appearance in my 10-year term, I thank and acknowledge Sue Cooper from our office. Sue is the principal auditor, and she has worked with me throughout my term and is celebrating 20 years with the office this year. Over the 10 years we have delivered 1,300 audits and 28 reports to the Legislative Assembly. I place on record my thanks to Sue.

I am happy to take any questions.

**Madam DEPUTY CHAIR:** Are there any questions relating to the opening statement?

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** Thank you, Julie. It is your last appearance at Estimates, so thank you very much for you and your team's hard work and dedication over the last decade; also to Sue, 20 years is an incredible achievement. Congratulations.

In your latest report to parliament in May you were critical about the processes undertaken for the ship lift facility. Some documents were not provided to you by government that would have allowed you to undertake further analysis. What were the documents that you requested, and is it usual practice that they be provided?

**Ms CRISP:** There are often, based on some of the audits that we do and the complexity of the audits, documents which are Cabinet-in-confidence, and I accept that is appropriate and is a convention. There were a number of key decisions around the ship lift where decisions were made by Cabinet, and it is usual for those papers to be held in the Cabinet Office. I requested to see them, not to reproduce them or anything in a report to parliament, but just to assess the information that was provided to base those decisions on. I provided a list of what the decisions were, where the information was not provided. What it prevents me from doing is forming an opinion on whether the department has done what it needed to do to affect the decision-making.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** In the past have you been able to sight those Cabinet documents before when you have requested it?

**Ms CRISP:** Yes, I have.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** Have you made any additional requests for documents during this reporting period that have been provided?

**Ms CRISP:** No, I have not requested other documents.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** You commented in the report that you are unable to conclude that agencies had adequate systems and therefore could not comment on transparent procurement or sound financial management. Is that because you were not able to sight those decisions of Cabinet?

**Ms CRISP:** Correct. The opinion is essentially a disclaimer of opinion, which says that I cannot form an opinion on something I have not seen. It does not mean that something has been done incorrectly or otherwise. It just means that I cannot see the documentation to enable me to support an opinion.

**Madam DEPUTY CHAIR:** Apparently there are a few issues with hearing you, Auditor-General. Please move the microphone a bit closer.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** Who was the last Chief Minister who allowed you to witness those Cabinet documents?

**Ms CRISP:** It is not the actual deliberations and decisions of Cabinets. It is the documents that support the information going up to Cabinet. I do not look for the Cabinet decisions, deliberations or discussions, and I should not. What matters to me is that I can see the right information has been provided to the ultimate decision-makers. As to which was the last Chief Minister, I am not sure that it matters. In the past there have been business cases and cost-benefit analysis I have requested which have been provided because they have been maintained at the Cabinet office. They are not for keeping, either. To be clear, they do not go on an audit file. I review what is there and say that they were provided with the right information.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** Under Chief Minister Lawler you have not been able to have access to those documents?

**Ms CRISP:** I will not reflect on whether it is an individual. There is obviously a decision that needs to be made through the Cabinet office about what information might be provided or what I might look at. I do not have a view on whether it is a personal thing.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** Chief Minister, why did you not allow the Auditor-General to review this information?

**Ms LAWLER:** Because it was commercial-in-confidence. As I have said to you previously on the floor of parliament, if it will be your policy to open Cabinet documents that is your decision. The advice to me was that it was critical, commercial-in-confidence information.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** We heard from the Auditor-General that in the past she has been able to view these types of documents in order to provide a fulsome audit analysis and that previous Chief Ministers have allowed this. Are you not concerned that your decision to stop her from looking has hampered her ability to do her job?

**Ms LAWLER:** No, I am not concerned about that at all. We can have a greater discussion when we are in the output area of Infrastructure NT with the Infrastructure Commissioner.

I am not disagreeing with the Auditor-General, but there are various layers of information. Leader of the Opposition, I think you have only been a minister for six days, but there are layers of information that go to Cabinet. For example, a business case, or work that has been done by the agency on the way through, can be given to the Auditor-General. If there is commercial-in-confidence, when we are dealing with businesses about things that could impact the Northern Territory or share prices—you are on record saying that you would open the books on Tamboran and the gas deal—decisions have to be made by a Chief Minister or Treasurer that maintain confidentiality. There can be impacts on the stock exchange or the business.

The Auditor-General has spoken about documents she has seen in the past. The agency will weigh up and look closely to work out which documents should be accessible to the public. We have been transparent about the documents that have been made public. We have probably made more documents public than any previous government—that information can be seen on the DEPWS, DITT and DIPL websites. There are times when decisions are made that are commercial-in-confidence. They are important decisions. Leader of the Opposition, you can be on the record saying—if one day you get the privilege of being Chief Minister—that you will open those up. But I bet that you will not.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** With due respect, we are not talking about making documents public. We are talking about allowing the Auditor-General to view those documents, not copy, replicate or take notes from them, just view them. It has nothing to do with making documents public. You just said that where there are business cases then of course you would give that to the Auditor-General. But in her report she very clearly stated that she was not able to obtain a cost-benefit analysis. If you are happy to provide the business case, why was the Auditor-General not given that opportunity to view it?

**Ms LAWLER:** We can go into more details in the appropriate output area, which is infrastructure. Those decisions are made carefully. Of course we want the Auditor-General to see information and be able to show

that the government and the agencies have made decisions in the best interests of Territorians, but there are times when we have to withhold that information. That is a fact.

Leader of the Opposition, you have not been a minister—well, you were a minister for six days. If you ever get the opportunity to be Chief Minister, I think we will be hearing from you in a very different light. There are some things that have to be withheld by government because of the impact on that individual business, whether that is the Paspaley group of companies, for example, one of the construction companies involved with the ship lift or a land development corporation. There are times when information needs not to be made public. That is a decision of government and is one that we will stick to.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** It is pretty clear this morning that you are more interested in personal attacks on me, and that is fine. I am here to ask the questions that Territorians want answers to. Who made the decision not to allow the Auditor-General to view those documents?

**Ms LAWLER:** I did, under the position I hold which has the responsibility for Infrastructure NT, the agency responsible for delivering the ship lift.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** You just said in your earlier response that you would be happy to give the Auditor-General the business case and yet you refuse to allow her to have the cost-benefit analysis. Is that because there is not one?

**Ms LAWLER:** I did not say that I would be happy to regarding anything. We need to go back in history regarding the ship lift because it was the Giles government—you seem to forget; you often do this where you rewrite history—in 2015 which decided that a ship lift would be a good idea and gave an allocation of \$100m to Paspaley Group and allocated land for the ship lift.

If we go back to the Auditor-General's report in 2017–18, it quoted—I do not have it with me, but I could easily get it for you, Leader of the Opposition—that the \$100m for the ship lift was just a made-up figure that Chief Minister Adam Giles just decided on. It was, 'We will give them \$100m to build the ship lift'. That was in the Auditor-General's report, I reckon in 2017–18. My staff who are listening could get me that.

It is a bit rich coming in here and talking about cost-benefit analyses or business cases because the whole initial decision regarding the ship lift was a decision made by Adam Giles. The allocation was to Paspaley group of companies. The \$100m figure was one that Adam Giles obviously plucked out of the air.

This is the Leader of the Opposition talking about cost-benefit analyses and business cases. None were done by the CLP. The Member for Araluen, Robyn Lambley, often harks back to issues of history, but history is what underpins some of these decisions.

The commitment to the ship lift was a decision that was made in 2015. When we came into government—I remember. The Chair and Deputy Chair were in Cabinet meetings at that time—we were talking about the SLAMI, which is the ship lift. It was one of the early decisions we made as a government, when the CLP had committed \$100m to the ship lift and had committed the company that would deliver that project. It is important to remember the foundations of decisions.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** Thank you for that history lesson, but the reality is that your government has been in power for the last eight years. That project was announced in 2015, and your government has been unable to deliver it in almost an entire decade.

**Ms LAWLER:** No, that project is being delivered. I know you do not go to East Arm and talk to businesses there, Leader of the Opposition, but there are excavators on site where the work is being delivered. Black Cat Civil is already under way with that work. Just to correct the misinformation you are providing, that project is being delivered.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** After nine years. Thank you, Chief Minister. My question was about whether there is a cost-benefit analysis. Is the reason that you did not allow the Auditor-General to see it is it does not exist?

**Ms LAWLER:** That is a question for when we have the Territory Infrastructure Commissioner here.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** Because you do not know the answer?

**Ms LAWLER:** No, because we are talking about the Auditor-General. You should be directing questions to her, not to me. Let us move on to outputs for the Auditor-General and her reports.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** But her report to parliament was highly critical of the process because she was unable to review documents. You made the decision to stop her from doing that. She has told the Estimates Committee that it is standard practice for her to come in and review them. In your earlier comments, you talked about business cases and other things being provided, yet in this instance the cost-benefit analysis was not even able to be viewed by the Auditor-General. The logical thinking behind that is that perhaps you stopped her from looking at it because it does not exist. It either does or does not.

**Ms LAWLER:** Am I hearing that you would not go ahead with the ship lift? Because that is what I am hearing in your line of questioning. It was Adam Giles who instigated the ship lift with \$100m. You can go back and look at the Auditor-General's report. The ship lift will provide substantial benefit to the Northern Territory.

We understand the Northern Territory's position in relation to Asia, especially to China, and the position in relation to our shipping, such as getting work done or upgrades in Cairns and Perth, so the ship lift will be a substantial asset. Going way back to Paul Henderson's time—we need to develop a maritime industry in the Northern Territory. It will be of great benefit and diversify our economy.

**Mrs LAMBLEY:** Where is it then, Chief Minister? Eight years and nothing.

**Madam DEPUTY CHAIR:** Do not interrupt, please, Member for Araluen. You will get your chance to question.

**Mrs LAMBLEY:** You are talking about something that has been on the cards for nine years—nothing, not delivered anything.

**Madam DEPUTY CHAIR:** Member for Araluen, please, no interjections.

**Ms LAWLER:** That project will be of substantial benefit to the Northern Territory. It will provide a whole new industry to the Territory. I am more than happy to take questions when we come to that portfolio and output area in regard to Infrastructure Northern Territory.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** You could answer the question now if you wanted to, but you clearly do not want to. That indicates to me the answer is actually no, because if the answer was yes you would just say it.

**Ms LAWLER:** Not true.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** You can try to obfuscate and hide behind outputs. The reality is that you are in the chair all day. These questions are in the minds of Territorians; they go to the heart of scrutiny, integrity and your government's inability to deliver. If you want to hide behind output numbers that is a matter for you, and Territorians will judge you for that. It sounds to me, for three or four questions, like you have tried to dodge making an answer, so that is a matter for you.

**Madam DEPUTY CHAIR:** I remind everyone that we have outputs throughout the Estimates process. The Chief Minister has made it clear that we expect lots of questions in that output when the Infrastructure Commissioner is up.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** Auditor-General, how would you describe the level of resourcing in your office, and is it having a limiting impact on the number of audits and other functions you are able to undertake?

**Ms CRISP:** The resourcing has not changed over the years. It had a full-time equivalent staffing of five for many years—over 20 years. The decision to use outsourced audit service providers came in, I think, in 1982. That was a way to make sure we could use the resources and build the capacity of firms. It becomes challenging sometimes.

Today is an interesting example. We are currently recruiting for one of the chief principal auditor positions we have been unable to fill over the last couple of months. We have one staff member on leave, one sick, and I am here, so it can be pretty light on.

The challenge for us with that is the internal capacity. That primarily affects things like the performance management system audits, which we generally do in-house because they are sensitive; referrals of information under the *Public Information Act*, because that is something I need to look at directly rather than outsourcing; and the data analytics that we do in the office, which is in-house.

We tend to see that the financial statement audits are always outsourced and compliance audits are generally outsourced. However, the volume of a lot of the stuff we do in-house is constrained by the staffing capacity we have.

**Mrs LAMBLEY:** I enormously value the work that you do. Most of us who have been part of this parliament for any length of time understand the critical nature of the work you undertake. You have been great to work with Julie; thank you very much.

My concern is—and has been for some time—that the role of the Auditor-General is undervalued in this parliament. I remember last year—or it might have been the year before—you told us that you do not routinely brief Cabinet on the amazing reports that you publish three or four times a year, whatever it is.

I am wondering how your role and relationship with government compares with your counterparts in other jurisdictions. You come to the Public Accounts Committee and present your reports, which is fantastic. However, I have always found not presenting to Cabinet unbelievable. What do other Auditors-General in other jurisdictions do, and how could we allow you to perform your job better, given that you are leaving in September?

**Ms CRISP:** Member for Araluen, I am sure whoever follows will do a great job as well.

It varies between jurisdictions. The usual practice is that the Auditor-General would brief the Public Accounts Committee or equivalent. The Public Accounts Committee represents the same makeup as parliament does—obviously there are no ministers on the committee. That is not unusual.

Some Auditors-General provide a briefing that any member of parliament can attend. They host those themselves. Sometimes that is facilitated through the parliamentary offices. Others are like me and report purely to the Public Accounts Committee.

Perhaps what we see less of these days is debate of the reports. I suspect that comes with the Territory and the bandwidth that parliament has to get through these things. Sometimes in other jurisdictions there is some debate and response about the reports.

My reports are provided to each CEO for the content that relates to their agency in advance of me tabling it. They are given 10 working days to respond if there is anything they are concerned about in the report being made public, or if there is an error. We always take those comments on board. There are times when I will change the content of a report so that it is not releasing anything of concern that it should not. I can only assume that those CEOs would brief their ministers.

To that extent I think Cabinet would be informed. It is not usual practice, that I am aware of, to brief Cabinet as a body. I suspect that could possibly be interpreted as trying to influence the Auditor-General anyway. I think there has to be that distance.

**Mrs LAMBLEY:** One of the issues you raised over the last number of years which does not seem to disappear from your reports is the problems within the Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education. Even in your latest report you have been unable to make conclusions about what the student record data is, there is insufficient evidence to verify employee expenditure, and there are all sorts of inaccuracies and lack of evidence concerning what is going on inside Batchelor Institute.

You have been reporting basically the same story or a similar story for many years now, which leads me to wonder whether the Department of Education, the Minister for Education or the Chief Minister read these reports. I know you cannot answer that, but when you are constantly raising issues like those within Batchelor time and again, what more can you do? Do you have any other ability to influence what is going on within government, apart from producing these excellent reports and hoping to hell that someone looks at them and takes notice?

**Ms CRISP:** Can I start out by addressing Batchelor? The most recent audit opinion and report that I released was on the financial statements for the year ended 31 December 2022. I am currently completing the audit for December 2023, so there has been quite a time lag, it would be fair to say, on being able to get those audits finished.

If I go back two years to issuing a disclaimer of opinion—once you have disclaimed an opinion at the end of a financial year, anything that happens during the next year to true-up or proof those figures happens after the event, so there is a flow-on impact. Even if everything was fixed there would still be qualifications that

would ride through to the next year. It is usual that it takes three financial years for a disclaimer to flow through, even if people are working hard to address the issues.

There are some substantial issues around verification. The student numbers to which you speak—both the federal government and the Northern Territory Government fund based on student numbers, and often those numbers are provided directly out of Batchelor's systems to the various departments. From that there will be a determination of funding. The challenge we have was finding a connection between the student number records, how they could be extracted from the system, then verifying that to the funding.

I understand that the Batchelor management team has been working very hard to rectify some of the issues. I received the file for this year for review on Friday night, so that is what I will be doing this week. Hopefully I will be in a better position—certainly the briefings that I have from the authorised auditors suggest that a lot more of the issues have been addressed.

In terms of the Department of Education's role, I ask you to raise that with the Department of Education.

### **Agency-Related Whole-of-Government Questions on Budget and Fiscal Strategy**

**Madam DEPUTY CHAIR:** The committee will now consider the estimates and proposed expenditure in the Appropriation Bill 2024–25 as they relate to the Auditor-General's office. Are there any agency-related whole-of-government questions on budget and fiscal strategy?

That concludes consideration of agency-related whole-of-government questions on budget and fiscal strategy.

### **OUTPUT GROUP 1.0 – AUDITS AND REVIEWS Output 1.1 – Audits and Reviews**

No questions.

### **OUTPUT GROUP 2.0 – CORPORATE AND SHARED SERVICES Output 2.1 – Corporate and Governance Output 2.2 – Shared Services Received**

No questions.

**Madam DEPUTY CHAIR:** On behalf of the committee, I thank you, Auditor-General, for attending today and wish you all the very best for the future.

**Ms LAWLER:** Julie, congratulations on an amazing career. Ten years as Auditor-General is hard work, and you have done it in a very solid way. Thank you very much to Sue Cooper for 20 years. Sometimes we may not see careers in the public sector of that length of time. Congratulations to you both for serving the government very well over the periods of time. It is appreciated.

**Ms CRISP:** Thank you very much, Chief Minister.

### **NORTHERN TERRITORY ELECTORAL COMMISSION OUTPUT GROUP 3.0 - ELECTORAL SERVICES Output 3.1 – Electoral Services**

**Madam DEPUTY CHAIR:** The committee will now move onto Output Group 3.0, Electoral Services, Output Group 3.1, Electoral Services. Chief Minister, I invite you to introduce the officials accompanying you and make an opening statement regarding the Northern Territory Electoral Commission.

**Ms LAWLER:** I introduce Kirsten Kell, Electoral Commissioner for the Northern Territory Electoral Commission; and Wayne Harlock, Deputy Electoral Commissioner. I will ask Kirsten to make an opening statement.

**Ms KELLY:** Good morning, Chair and members of the committee. This is my first opening statement. In December 2023 the Redistribution Committee released the final report on the redistribution of the Northern Territory into electoral boundaries, having undertaken the redistribution process in accordance with Part 8 of the *Electoral Act*. The redistribution resulted in boundary changes to 18 of the 25 divisions.

The redistribution coincided with the Australian Electoral Commission's expanded enrolment program, an application of the federal direct enrolment update—FDEU—to include rural and remote areas of the Northern Territory following earlier trials. The revised boundaries have been applied to the electoral role and will come into effect at the 2024 Territory election. The current enrolment rate in the Northern Territory is 93.6% representing 155,286 eligible voters, with an unenrolled number of 10,559. This is based on an eligible population of 165,845. The enrolment rate at the 2020 Territory election was approximately 85%, or 140,780 eligible voters. This is an enrolment increase of 8.6%, or 14,500 voters in a four-year period.

Provisional voting will continue for voters who are not on the electoral role but have an entitlement to vote in the election. Where the entitlement is confirmed the ballot paper will be included in the count. Voter turnout at the 2020 Territory election was 74.9% and 61.3% at the 2021 local government elections. The Territory's turnout at the 2022 federal election was 73.1% and at the 2023 Voice referendum was 71.4%. It is not known at this time what the impact of increased enrolments through FDEU—federal direct enrolment—will have on the voter turnout at this year's Territory election.

Since 1 July 2023 the NT Electoral Commission has conducted 14 local government by-elections at a cost of \$250,000. Council elections and by-elections are conducted on the marginal cost-recovery basis with the addition of a corporate overhead of 15%.

The NT Electoral Commission has also conducted eight fee-for-service elections and ballot services generating \$36,875.

During the reporting year the NT Electoral Commission has delivered 90 education sessions for school and adult groups and has conducted 10 school elections. In addition, there have been five Democracy Dash events run in Darwin and Alice Springs, with the sixth event happening today. By 30 June we will have had over 5,000 participants in our education programs this year.

I acknowledge that considerable effort has gone into planning for the August 2024 Territory election. I acknowledge the NT Electoral Commission team members for their commitment to the delivery of the election, in addition to maintaining business as usual. Up to 500 casual staff will join the NT Electoral Commission team to support the election. We look forward to welcoming them.

The service plan for the 2024 Territory election has been released and provides electoral participants and stakeholders with early advice on how the election will be delivered. Candidate information sessions will be held in Alice Springs on 4 July and in Darwin on 10 July. The Darwin session will be streamed and recorded. An online media information session will be held on 15 July. On 15 August scrutiny information sessions will be run.

Candidates and registered parties, as always, are encouraged to meet with the NT Electoral Commission to ensure that they are aware of their rights, roles and responsibilities.

To support compliance, a number of registered parties and candidates—including current MLAs—have participated in meetings with the NT Electoral Commission to discuss their financial disclosure obligations. I acknowledge this positive participation.

The communications for the 2024 Territory election will focus on three calls to action. We are asking Territorians to check their enrolment. We want to educate and empower people on the importance of voting and democracy. We also want people to plan for where they will vote at the election.

Across the Territory the NT Electoral Commission will deliver a multichannel communication campaign through TV, radio, digital, social media, letterbox drops and print media. The NT Electoral Commission will also, and has, attend local events and stalls across the community. A dedicated service centre team will be stood up in July to support email and telephone inquiries.

In 2020 the COVID pandemic saw a reduced remote engagement program. For the 2024 Territory election three teams are currently delivering a 19-week program, visiting 74 communities across the Territory. Key objectives of these visits are to inform residents in remote communities about the elections and preparing to vote, as well as working and collaborating with local groups in community to keep the election message going through the election, after the election and as we move towards the 2025 local government elections.

These visits are also important to share information with remote Territorians about the redistribution changes, particularly in the divisions of Arnhem, Daly, Gwojda and Mulka.



The NT Electoral Commission is also presenting at the 67 local authority meetings to discuss the election and provide specific information in communities. This is important because it allows us to confirm the most suitable voting locations in communities and to confirm in the community the most appropriate channel to communicate within communities.

For the 2024 Territory election voters can vote at any voting centre or at any remote voting team, even if the voter is out of their division. That is important.

A total of 29% of Territory voters are enrolled in the seven remote divisions of Arafura, Arnhem, Barkly, Daly, Gwoja, Mulka and Namatjira. For the 2024 Territory election there will be 16 remote mobile voting teams providing voting services at 171 locations over the voting period.

In response to increased trials of voting hours in larger remote communities, such as Maningrida, Wadeye and Galiwinku, they will now have up to four days of voting services provided.

Mobile voting services will also be provided at correctional centres and work camps, as well as hospitals. Remote voting teams will offer voting services to aged-care facilities in communities through either scheduled visits or drop-in services if they cannot be scheduled in advance.

Early voting services will be available at 12 early voting centres, including 10 that will be open for the full early voting period and two opened for a reduced time.

For the first time, and for voter convenience, all early voting centres will become election day voting centres. There will be 31 election day voting centres across the Territory.

Interstate voting services will be available during the early voting period through Electoral Commission offices in all capital cities. Postal vote applications opened on 1 January this year. If a voter is unable to attend a voting centre in person, they can apply for a postal vote, and there is no eligibility requirement to apply. If a voter will be interstate or overseas and they will have a fixed address during the election period, they can apply for a postal vote. Urban aged-care facilities will receive assisted postal voting services. A new feature of the postal votes is a QR code on the postal envelope, which will allow the postal voting applicant to access a short video to assist in completing their postal vote.

A new initiative for the 2024 election being delivered by the NT Electoral Commission is the misinformation and disinformation register which has been launched with the objective of correcting factually incorrect information regarding the electoral process.

Further, to ensure the safety and wellbeing of election staff the NT Commission is a recent signatory to a joint referral protocol between all Australian Electoral Commissions and the eSafety Commissioner. The protocol establishes a process for Electoral Commissions to request assistance from the eSafety Commissioner in cases where election staff are targeted by online threats, including adult cyber abuse and the distribution of illegal or restricted content. Details of this service have also been made available in the candidate handbook to support candidates.

The NT Electoral Commission, as with all Electoral Commissions, is conscious of the need to reduce fatigue in its election workforce when delivering major elections within fixed statutory time frames. Fatigue management guidelines will be introduced to support the health and safety of election workers.

To support awareness and engagement shareable stakeholder engagement packs have been developed with a focus on content that supports community groups, including remote voters, culturally and linguistically diverse voters, voters with disabilities, seniors and youths. The packs have been shared with over 1,000 groups across the Territory and individuals. They include posters, educational videos, newsletters, social media posts and frequently asked questions.

A multilingual guide for voting has been developed and translated into 11 international languages, commonly spoken across the Territory. A 'Voting Business Guide to Enrolling' and voting flipbook is currently being used in remote community engagement and is in the process of being translated into audio and eight Aboriginal languages. This is in addition to the NT Electoral Commission's in-language videos about voting which are available in 13 Aboriginal languages and will be available at voting centres.

Moving on to challenges to democracy, they continue in the conduct of elections and these challenges are becoming more varied and complicated. Across the world democracies face challenges through misinformation campaigns and the continued rise of artificial intelligence systems that distribute

disinformation en masse. While we hope not to experience these challenges in the Northern Territory, the NT Electoral Commission must be ready and responsive. It is therefore critical that the electoral commission is resourced with necessary capabilities and supported by election management systems that are robust and contemporary and that we operate within a regulatory environment that is responsive to such threats.

I thank you for the opportunity to make my first opening statement. It has been a little longer, but in an election year there is a lot to talk about. I am happy to take questions.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** Thank you and welcome, Ms Kelly. Congratulations on your appointment to the role. It will obviously be a big year ahead, not just because it is your first, but because you have an election to deal with.

You mentioned communications and having an entire team on that. That is an important part of making sure people have access to voting. I note the Electoral Commission has changed a lot of booths that Territorians would traditionally be used to. In my electorate there is a booth where people would have been voting for the last 20-plus years and it is no longer a booth. Equally, I understand you are putting more resources into allowing early voting centres to remain open. I am not critical of the process, but the point of my question is: how will you make sure that people understand those changes when they are so used to, after decades, going to a particular place to vote? How will you ensure they understand that is no longer available to them?

**Ms KELLY:** For the first time, in this election, another initiative we are introducing is a 'find my closest voting centre' tool. On the NT Electoral Commission's site you can currently search for voting centres. There will be an opportunity in a couple of weeks to put in a remote community or a suburb in Darwin, and it will list the closest facilities that are available.

When we are designing our services for urban voting, we are looking to make sure that there are voting centres within each division. For this election there will be a number of voting centres—we call them multi-voting—that will issue ordinary votes for more than one division because more than one division has been declared for a region.

That will allow more people to access—although they can vote at any voting centre. On election night we will be able to count at each voting centre, those votes for the divisions. When we look at service design, we also look at accessibility for voters and the suitability of the site. Some of the sites we have used have not been deemed suitable because of accessibility, so we are constantly revisiting those to make sure.

We will be reaching out. We send an SMS or an email to electors who have their details registered with their enrolment. We will send reminders close to the election, which will include a link to the website to find their closest voting centres. We will also be doing a DL drop—a letter drop—particularly in areas that have been affected by the redistribution. In that we will also let people know where voting centres are.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** Will there be any specific messaging to let people know that it has changed? It is that ingrained behaviour. We would not want to see people who are used to rocking up and find that it is not there, and they think, 'I will not go to the next one'. We do not want people to give up.

**Ms KELLY:** Absolutely. We can also make that clear in our distribution newsletter that is sent out. That is good feedback. We will make sure that message is provided so that people are aware.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** I noted that in the booklet you put out it mentions that if a person has been marked off as having voted but states that they have not voted, they are allowed to vote again. How will you put safeguards in place for that? Effectively, people can vote twice.

**Ms KELLY:** It is a good question. We use electronic voter mark-off. If someone was to attend a voting centre and were looked up, and someone could see that they had been marked off, they would make some inquiries. If they said, 'I have not voted at this election' which is a question that is asked, they can be offered a declaration vote. Before the declaration vote is accepted there are lines of inquiry undertaken to ensure it is not a duplicate vote. That might be making contact with people in the different lines above or below because sometimes in the Northern Territory, we have families with a mother and daughter or father and son with the same names and address, and they may get marked off. We have those safeguards in place to make sure.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** Will you be keeping some sort of register of people who had that opportunity to vote twice, to monitor it? Is there any statutory declaration required for that person to complete to do the declaration vote?

**Ms KELLY:** They have to sign the declaration at the bottom. Someone will authorise that and the details of why they are completing a declaration vote. It will not be because they were not found on the roll; it will be because they have already been marked off the roll. Those inquiries will happen before that ballot has been admitted to the count.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** In your report post-election, would you detail how many occasions a declaration vote was done because someone was incorrectly marked off?

**Ms KELLY:** Yes. In the election report there is a section on multiple voters.

**Mrs LAMBLEY:** A few years ago the NTEC closed our office in Alice Springs, much to my disgust. I have made that fairly clear over the years. I was not very happy about it. What is the plan for Alice Springs going into the August NT election?

**Ms KELLY:** There is an office being stood up. It is already being fitted out in Alice Springs Plaza. That is where the electoral team will sit to support the election; it is where the counts will be undertaken. It is on the first mezzanine floor of Alice Plaza. We will also have a voting centre in that plaza.

**Mrs LAMBLEY:** When will that open?

**Ms KELLY:** It will open in July. I can provide you with the date for that as well.

We will be holding the candidate declaration of nominations in Alice Springs and candidate information sessions. We support Alice Springs through providing Democracy Dash processes. We visit Alice Springs and support community events, such as seniors.

I understand in 2020 our last staff member concluded their contract there and the office ceased. We have been able to demonstrate on many occasions since 2020 our ability to deploy, mobilise and establish officers to support elections in the southern region, not only in Tennant Creek but in Barkly and Katherine. It is important we do that to provide services to Territorians.

We are mindful of keeping reach and education and being part of community events as well. I think we are doing that well.

**Ms FYLES:** I appreciate your work. All of us in this room can agree on that, particularly in an election year.

I understand the thinking around going towards early voting and providing that flexibility. There has been some important information shared today. You said in your statement that every division—electorate—will have a polling booth. However, on the draft list there is an electorate that does not presently have it. What is the reasoning behind that?

As much as people like that flexibility of early voting, there are many people who want to vote on the day in their own electorate and have the chance to talk to the people who might possibly represent them. We often joke about the democracy sausage sizzle, but genuinely there is a percentage of each electorate who make up their minds early and welcome that opportunity. I seek some clarification on that, please.

**Ms KELLY:** As I mentioned earlier, there are multiple home divisions or voting centres. They essentially provide the same support. I use the example of Drysdale. Voting services will be provided at Sacred Heart, Palmerston Shopping Centre and Gateway. They will be issuing ordinary votes there and the votes will be counted at the voting centre on election day night. Those areas provide opportunity to campaign, and if they do not—because some shopping centres do not—there will be an opportunity to provide how-to-vote pamphlets in situ.

**Ms FYLES:** It is more you said that every division will have a booth and that there is an electorate that does not have a voting day booth on that Saturday. That is something I outlined—I will not go back over it. There are many people in the community who want to vote on the day in their electorate. Sometimes it comes down to a point of trust. It is a similar question to the Leader of the Opposition's. It is what they have been used to for many decades.

That is something I would like on the record that I urge you to look at. I understand the cost of doing early voting has increased over the years because you have extended that. It is terrific that you are offering multi-days in some of those bigger remote communities—you see a better turnout.

However, I know from my electorate it is a bit of a ritual. My orange team friends and my green team friends all get out. There are residents who very much want to vote on the day in their electorate if you provide that opportunity.

**Ms KELLY:** I appreciate the feedback. I will take that on notice, and we will certainly review that.

**Ms FYLES:** Thank you; that would be very much appreciated.

### **Agency-Related Whole-of-Government Questions on Budget and Fiscal Strategy**

**Madam DEPUTY CHAIR:** The committee will now proceed to consider the estimates of proposed expenditure contained in the Appropriation Bill 2024–25 that relate to the Northern Territory Electoral Commission. Are there any agency-related whole-of-government questions on budget and fiscal strategy?

That concludes consideration of agency-related whole-of-government questions on budget and fiscal strategy.

### **OUTPUT GROUP 3.0 – ELECTORAL SERVICES**

#### **Output 3.1 – Electoral Services**

**Madam DEPUTY CHAIR:** The committee will now proceed to Output Group 3.0, Electoral Services, Output 3.1, Electoral Services.

I note that while the Chief Minister is responsible for the Northern Territory Electoral Commission under the *Electoral Act 2004*, the Minister for Local Government is responsible for the NT Electoral Commission responsibilities under Chapter 8 of the *Local Government Act 2008*.

However, the committee has agreed that any questions for the commissioner regarding local government will be asked during the appearance with the Chief Minister—right now—and the Electoral Commissioner will not be reappearing before the committee with the Minister for Local Government.

**Mrs LAMBLEY:** I have a question, but I am not sure if this is the right ...

**Madam DEPUTY CHAIR:** Do you want to go for it, Member for Araluen, and we will figure it out?

**Mrs LAMBLEY:** Electoral services.

**Madam DEPUTY CHAIR:** We are in electoral services. That includes talking about the local government elections, if you have questions regarding that.

**Mrs LAMBLEY:** Ms Kelly, in the ICAC investigation report, Operation Jupiter at point 155, the ICAC Commissioner says that the trips which were investigated by the commissioner into the Labor government in 2020—undertaking specific taxpayer-funded trips to three remote communities on polling day. Point 155 says:

*The trip was planned to coincide with the opening of a remote polling booth.*

Can you advise the committee whether the Electoral Commission has received a financial disclosure return from the government, the Northern Territory Labor Party or any other entity in relation to the more than \$40,000 of public money spent on Labor's campaign for the 2020 general election?

**Ms KELLY:** During Legislative Assembly elections, party candidates are required to keep electoral expenditure within a cap. That cap does not include expenses related to travel and accommodation. My understanding is that is because of the size of the Territory and not to disadvantage candidates. For example, Gwojja is a huge division. The Northern Territory Electoral Commission has not received a return of that nature, but the commission does receive returns relating to electoral expenditure and financial returns under Part 10 of the *Electoral Act*, which is gifts and donations during elections, annual returns and gift returns and electoral expenditure returns.

**Mrs LAMBLEY:** Are you saying that because it was travel and accommodation it would not normally be reported, as such?

**Ms KELLY:** There is no requirement for it to be reported because it is not considered electoral expenditure and is excluded.

**Mrs LAMBLEY:** My next question is to the Chief Minister. Can you assure Territorians that no public money will be spent on Labor's campaign for this year's August election as was confirmed by the ICAC Commissioner's report for the 2020 general election?

**Ms LAWLER:** We can talk more about the ICAC report with the acting commissioner here. I have been on the public record saying that I accepted all the recommendations. I said that as Chief Minister I will not be travelling, and ministers will not be travelling, beyond their own electorates in the caretaker period. We can talk more about that in the ICAC section.

**Mrs LAMBLEY:** Will you pay back the \$40,000 worth of travel and accommodation that Labor spent on campaigning, which is referred to in the ICAC Commissioner's report?

**Ms LAWLER:** We can talk about that more in the ICAC session, but no because there were no findings against the Chief Minister at the time.

**Mrs LAMBLEY:** Point 1.55 says that the trip was planned to coincide with the opening of a remote polling booth. I think you need to read the report again, Chief Minister.

**Ms LAWLER:** I have read the report, but there were no findings against the Chief Minister at the time.

**Mrs LAMBLEY:** But not necessarily the Labor Party and the use of taxpayer funds for those trips. Can you assure us that no ministerial staff or fourth-floor consultants are involved in soliciting campaign donations to the Labor Party for the 2024 election?

**Ms LAWLER:** You said fourth floor; do you mean fifth floor?

**Mrs LAMBLEY:** Sorry, fifth floor.

**Ms LAWLER:** I think we need to be clear on this. Every party has volunteers who work after hours. If you read the report you would see that one of the recommendations is to make sure there is a timesheet being kept for staff. I accepted that recommendation, so that will be put in place.

We see opposition staff and probably even Independent staff who work in a voluntary capacity after hours. That is just a fact of every election campaign across the world. There are people who are committed to political parties, and they can work after hours. That is their right to be able to volunteer and work after hours. Any staff on the fifth floor—I am sure it is the same for the Leader of the Opposition on the fourth floor—can choose to work after hours in any capacity, volunteering for their party.

**Mrs LAMBLEY:** Could that include soliciting campaign donations to the Labor Party?

**Ms LAWLER:** After hours, of course it could. That is all part of the political machine. Elections are expensive things to run. We all support a fair democracy, and having a democracy in the Northern Territory means that we have to travel vast distances and make sure that people in remote electorates have the same opportunities to have someone handing out how-to-vote information as happens in a Palmerston or an urban electorate.

I do not know where you are going with all of this, Member for Araluen. Obviously, political parties need money to run their campaigns. We do not have publicly funded campaigns in the Northern Territory. That was part of the Mansfield review in 2016–17 or whenever that review was done. It might have been 2018.

I am trying to think of a person who is involved with that. If they were, they would do it after hours as a volunteer. Most of the things regarding political donations are done by Labor Party members who are part of a committee for Labor, and they would do that work. They would not be people who are on the fifth floor.

**Mrs LAMBLEY:** Even though the ICAC Commissioner's report is fairly clear in its findings that the Chief Minister and various staff ...

**Ms LAWLER:** At the time—the Chief Minister at the time.

**Mrs LAMBLEY:** ... at the time in 2020, took three trips that were specifically planned to coincide with the opening of a remote polling booth, you do not accept any financial responsibility for that, given that it was clearly about campaigning for the Labor Party.

**Ms LAWLER:** I am not sure that this is the right output area to talk about this rather than in the ICAC session. The findings in that report were that the guidelines are unclear. Let me just explain that. If you have a look at a federal campaign, you will see that there are federal ministers and opposition leaders who fly on government jets around the country during election campaigns. You would have seen Albo, Scott Morrison, all flying around Australia during the caretaker period. It is confusing when federal politicians can do that and Territory politicians who maybe cannot do that, let alone local government.

My office put in place those guidelines. When I became Chief Minister I put in place very clear guidelines about the work that you can and cannot do as a political staffer during your daily work and the things you can and cannot do during a caretaker period. I made those guidelines available to the opposition as well.

To me, it was about providing clarity. People want to do the right thing. The majority of people want to do the right thing, but they may not be 100% sure because there are lots of grey areas. That came through in the report.

I put out guidelines for my staff on the fifth floor in February this year. I worked with my chief of staff on that, trying to clear up any ambiguity. We then had the ICAC report. I have accepted all those recommendations. The Leader of the Opposition has also accepted all the recommendations.

We want to make sure that we are doing the right thing because that report took three years to be delivered. That is three years of concern from the people involved. No-one wants to have that hanging over their head while they are going through years of waiting for a result of an ICAC inquiry.

I have put in place clear guidelines on travel and what can and cannot be done. If there is a flood, fire or famine in Alice Springs or a major disaster in Wadeye or elsewhere during the caretaker period, I am still the Chief Minister until 6 pm on 24 August. If there is a major disaster in the Northern Territory I will travel. That would be the number one reason for me to travel. I will not be travelling to remote polling centres, remote communities or Alice Springs, Tennant Creek or Katherine—you need to check with the Leader of the Opposition as to whether she will be travelling. I will be staying in Palmerston—Darwin. I understand it has caused ambiguity and raised concerns. My staff are clear about the guidelines I provided. We are clear on that; I think everybody, including my staff, are clear on that.

**Mrs LAMBLEY:** To clarify, Chief Minister, you will not be using taxpayer funding resources to fly into polling booths on polling day?

**Ms LAWLER:** I have been on the public record saying that I will not do that. Previously, there was ambiguity where a minister or Chief Minister could travel to those communities. But because of this investigation I have made it clear that I do not want three years of an investigation into my travel.

That said, the Territory is a big place. Remote Territorians deserve the opportunity—I was pleased to hear the Electoral Commissioner talk about having the opportunity of four days of polling in Wadeye, Maningrida and Galiwinku. The community of Maningrida is as big as Tennant Creek because of its outstations and homelands. Instead of having a few hours or one day there, they need three or four days to vote. Eventually, they possibly need two weeks of polling as other places have because people lead busy lives and may be out in a community, a homeland or in Darwin.

To be clear—I have spoken about this one long enough—I will not be travelling during caretaker period. Federal politicians travel on government jets during caretaker period.

**Mrs LAMBLEY:** You have said that doing it is morally and ethically wrong, yet you are refusing to pay the cost of the three trips that Michael Gunner took in 2020 to those three remote polling booths. Can you explain to Territorians why you do not feel a responsibility to pay that enormous amount of money back?

**Ms LAWLER:** Since becoming Chief Minister I have put in guidelines for that. The report says that it was ambiguous for the then Chief Minister ...

**Mrs LAMBLEY:** Everyone knows that it was wrong. He was a Chief Minister for many years.

**Ms LAWLER:** There are examples of the previous CLP government doing the same thing. That is probably why the Leader of the Opposition is keeping out of this one because it has been ...

**Mrs LAMBLEY:** You do not know that.

**Ms LAWLER:** It says that in the report.

**Mrs LAMBLEY:** That was not the point of the investigation, and he did not make any conclusions about that.

**Ms LAWLER:** We brought in the ICAC Commissioner, and he did not look ...

**Mrs LAMBLEY:** You are throwing someone under the bus to make yourself look better.

**Ms LAWLER:** No, I am not. The ICAC Commissioner did not look back at things that happened in 2012–16, but it talks about it in the report.

**Mrs LAMBLEY:** This is your government in 2020, and you will not pay \$40,000 back. Shame on you.

**Madam DEPUTY SPEAKER:** Could I ask that we allow the person asking or answering the question to be able to do that without interjections?

**Ms FYLES:** I have a question that might be better for the Speaker and the Clerk of the Assembly. As MLAs in the Territory we cannot put any party branding, and some people think we should do that. Is that because of our *Electoral Act* or under the guidelines of the Legislative Assembly?

**Ms KELLY:** Could I have an example of branding you are referring to?

**Ms FYLES:** As elected members—MLAs—we have our electorate offices. The Leader of the Opposition has hers in Zuccoli, I have mine in Nightcliff and the Member for Araluen has hers—I am not sure if hers is branded 'Independent Member for Araluen'—but we cannot put party branding on the offices. Is that something which would fall under the domain of the *Electoral Act* or the Legislative Assembly?

**Ms KELLY:** My understanding is that it is the Legislative Assembly because it relates to electorate offices. I am happy to look into it, but I believe it is a question for the Speaker.

**Madam DEPUTY CHAIR:** We will reserve that question for the Speaker session at the end of Estimates.

That concludes consideration of Output Group 3.

**OUTPUT GROUP 4 CORPORATE AND SHARED SERVICES**  
**Output 4.1 Corporate and Governance**  
**Output 4.2 Shared Services Received**

No questions.

**Madam DEPUTY CHAIR:** On behalf of the committee, I like to thank the Electoral Commissioner for attending today.

The committee will now move on to consider the Office of the Independent Commissioner Against Corruption.

**Ms LAWLER:** I would like to thank the Electoral Commissioner, Kirsten Kelly and Wayne Harlock and wish them all the best for the election, as I know they will be very busy.

**OFFICE OF THE INDEPENDENT COMMISSIONER AGAINST CORRUPTION**

**Madam DEPUTY CHAIR:** Chief Minister, I invite you to introduce the officials accompanying you to make an opening statement regarding the Office of the Independent Commissioner Against Corruption.

**Ms LAWLER:** Madam Deputy Chair, I introduce Naomi Loudon, Acting Independent Commissioner Against Corruption, and Kathryn Clet, Director, Corporate Services. Naomi will read the opening statement.

**Ms LOUDON:** I am joined today by Ms Kathryn Clet, the ICAC Director of Corporate Services. By way of background, this morning I was sworn in as the Acting ICAC whilst Commissioner Riches is on personal

leave. I have returned today to the office after a number of weeks of leave, including long service leave and a period of Defence leave in my capacity as an officer in the Australian Army Reserves. I have been with the Office of the ICAC since October 2021, commencing as the General Counsel. I have held the positions of Executive Director and more recently Assistant Commissioner. Prior to commencing at the Office of the ICAC I was a Crown prosecutor with the Director of Public Prosecutions in the Northern Territory, specialising in fraud and corruption prosecutions. I worked at the DPP for a period of eight years before commencing at the Office of the ICAC.

In the last 12 months the office has received 238 reports, containing a total of 274 allegations. Some of these reports have contained more than one allegation. We have assessed 241 reports. That figure includes reports received prior to the reporting period. Two hundred and sixty reports have been closed after assessment and this figure, as I have said previously—these reports include reports received prior to the reporting period. We have commenced 11 investigations and closed 13 investigations—those investigations have been completed.

Forty-two recommendations were made, and these recommendations have resulted from investigations as well as reviews that have been conducted by the office. There were 28 referrals to referral entities, and we have 15 investigations ongoing.

Commissioner Riches published a number of reports, a discussion paper as well as a submission. This includes a longitudinal analysis of action taken on allegations made in reports; two general reports to parliament, which were in March and May of this year; the Discussion Paper: Independent Oversight of Police Critical Incidents; and a submission to the conflict of interest review, which was conducted by Ms Kathleen Robinson.

This July the office will host the Australian Public Sector Anti-Corruption Conference in Darwin from 29 to 31 July. This is the first time the conference will be held outside of the eastern seaboard, and it will be the first time the conference has been held following the commencement of the National Anti-Corruption Commission. There are currently 405 registrations, being 388 in person and 17 online. The registrants are from the Territory, interstate and international.

There are a number of impressive keynote speakers: Baroness Casey of Blackstock, who is a member of the House of Lords in the United Kingdom. In 2023 Baroness Casey delivered her landmark report into behavioural standards and culture in the Metropolitan Police in London. Other keynote speakers include the Honourable Paul Brereton SC, the Commissioner of the National Anti-Corruption Commission; Professor Paul Heywood of the University of Nottingham, a world-leading researcher into corruption integrity; First Assistant Secretary, Ky Blackman of the Counter Foreign Interference Coordination Centre at the Department of Home Affairs; and Dr Rachel Bacon, Deputy Commissioner at the Australian Public Service Commission. There is a great line-up of speakers, and we are looking forward to the sharing of experiences and knowledge throughout the course of the conference.

Commissioner Riches also released Whistleblower Guidelines and Directions. They are in relation to dealing with voluntary protected communications and the minimisation of retaliation. There are 22 guidelines and 14 directions informed by a consultant's review, consultation with a cross section of 10 public bodies, consideration of submissions from members of the public and consultation sessions in person with public officers in Darwin, Katherine, Tennant Creek and Alice Springs.

Recently, key aspects of the guidelines and directions were discussed in a workshop attended by public body nominated recipients. This provided the participants an opportunity to exchange experiences, challenges and potential solutions to some of the common issues that have been accounted in the implementation of the whistleblower protection frameworks.

A key priority of the office in 2024 is remote and regional engagement. In the last six months the office has conducted a number of these engagements, which have seen staff travel to Alice Springs, Mutitjulu, Yulara, Ali Curung, Tennant Creek, Katherine, Jabiru, Wurrumiyanga and Groote Eylandt.

The prevention and engagement team has been tireless in its work to ensure as many public bodies and offices have been met and engaged with in these regional and remote areas. These engagements have been particularly rewarding, but they also have been instructive. Lessons have been learned and we have adjusted in how we deliver information, taking into account the differing circumstances as well as the cultural environments.



In November 2023 there were a number of amendments to the ICAC Act, which included an additional statutory function of gathering intelligence about improper conduct. A team has been established and will focus on gathering intelligence, conducting reviews and monitoring the implementation of recommendations.

From 1 July this year we will see an increase in budget of \$550,000 ongoing. This will enable the office to continue to discharge its functions and retain skilled staff.

I am happy to take any questions.

**Madam DEPUTY CHAIR:** Are there any questions on the opening statement?

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** A little while ago the ICAC released its report into alleged travel rorts during the 2020 election. As part of that it was noted that there would be a second report that would only be provided to the Chief Minister and would not be made public. Will the absence of the ICAC Commissioner now delay the completion of that second report?

**Ms LOUDON:** In respect of that matter, Operation Jupiter, I have a conflict in it and, as such, I have had no involvement in the investigation or the report. The report was tabled whilst I was on leave. As I just returned to the office today, I have not read that report. What it means for the office ongoing at this point, I am unable to say.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** The report has not been completed? You will be unable to complete it?

**Ms LOUDON:** I do not know where the report is at. I cannot give you an answer as to whether it will be completed or what my position or involvement will be in relation to that matter. Once I return to the office today I will meet with staff and will have to do a proper assessment of the office and the matters that we currently have on foot, then decisions will be made.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** How many staff does the office have?

**Ms LOUDON:** At present we have 23 staff and six positions vacant. Within the office, four of the positions that are vacant are within our operations unit. Our operations unit is made up of an investigations section as well as an assessment section. Those four vacant positions within operations sit with the investigation section. The other two positions which are vacant sit within our legal team.

That has obvious consequences for us with the work we do. It has resulted, particularly in the legal space, in externally briefing a number of matters because of the difficulties we have found in recruiting both to the legal team and the operations team.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** Would you put this resource issue down to the fact that the report—I know it was tabled while you were away, so I appreciate that. There was a lot of public criticism about how long that report took. Is that because there is a resource and staffing issue which limits and constrains the operation of the ICAC and its ability to get through these reports in a more timely manner?

**Ms LOUDON:** A number of issues have contributed to that, Leader of the Opposition. Yes, we are currently having difficulty in recruiting to the positions that would contribute to investigating, as well as the production of the report.

There is also the process itself. Procedural fairness takes time. Having worked at the Office of the ICAC for two-and-a-half years, originally as general counsel—I performed the role of counsel assisting in examinations—there is a process whereby submissions are put out to potentially affected persons. They then obtain legal advice and provide a response. If their response involves new information or potential adverse information to other persons, that has to go back out to those potentially affected persons.

It is a long process. Whilst you think the submissions go out and you have an opportunity to respond, there is a further process where the response comes back in and it may have to go out another time to ensure procedural fairness in the process itself. We brief a number of our matters to external counsel, and they perform the role of counsel assisting. It is also dependent on their availability, as well as the person presenting for either interview or examination and the availability of their legal counsel. A number of factors contribute to the delay that we have seen in a number of matters.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** Were any external counsel briefed to undertake the work on Operation Jupiter?

**Ms LOUDON:** Yes, there were.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** How many did you mention? I think there were 238 reports—of the reports you have open and ongoing, how many require external counsel to be briefed?

**Ms LOUDON:** Just to clarify, the 238 reports have come through our assessment team; they are not necessarily investigations. Assessments are done entirely within the office; we have an assessment team that looks at that. Once the matter has gone across to the investigations space, we then may need to brief depending on our availability of legal staff in the office, taking into account potential and actual conflicts of interest. As we all appreciate in the Northern Territory, being quite small, that is a real consideration for us.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** How much was spent on external consultants in the reporting period?

**Ms CLET:** For the period 1 July 2023 to 31 March 2024, we have, in total, just \$9,000 of external legal advice that we sought for investigations for this year.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** I note in previous years that a portion of the ICAC office's budget had to go towards legal expenses and claims arising against the ICAC office. How much has been spent on that this reporting period?

**Madam DEPUTY CHAIR:** I remind everyone that if you need to put questions on notice, that is an option throughout the Estimates process.

**Ms CLET:** We do have that information. There is only one matter, or case, where we required legal advice. That was a total of \$9,500.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** We had the ICAC inspector provide a report to the Chief Minister on Friday, and she provided her response to that yesterday. My understanding from the media reporting, and this is perhaps for the Chief Minister, is that a copy of the summary of that report will be tabled in parliament next week. Why are you not providing a copy of the summary report to the public now? Why are you waiting until parliament next week?

**Ms LAWLER:** Yesterday I provided a statement in summary of the inspector's finding. In that summary I said that the ICAC inspector has identified that his report contains confidential information concerning Mr Riches and Mrs Riches' allegations, legal documents that are the subject of legal professional privilege, as well as highly confidential medical information. On this basis it should not be published, but I have also sought that a summary of the inspector's findings will be provided. He will provide a copy to me, and I will table that in the Legislative Assembly as appropriate.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** Have you not received a copy of that summary from the ICAC inspector yet?

**Ms LAWLER:** No. I have received the full report; I provided the full report on Friday. I provided the statement on Monday. He will provide a summary that will be available to the public. It will not have confidential or legal privilege information in it. That will be tabled in parliament on Thursday-week when we return to pass the budget.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** Could it not be provided earlier if the ICAC inspector provides it to you sooner? Could that not be made public?

**Ms LAWLER:** Why does it need to be provided earlier? I provided a summary that was made publicly available. The process is to table the report in parliament. That is the appropriate thing to do.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** Just for the purpose of transparency and giving confidence to Territorians, this is a time that makes people question those issues. If you had a copy of it, why would you wait until parliament?

**Ms LAWLER:** I do not have a copy of it. The ICAC Commissioner gave me a copy of the report. I have just read the reasons why that is not being made public. The ICAC Commissioner will provide a summary, and that document will be tabled in parliament. I have committed to making sure it is tabled in parliament so that it is on the public record forever. To have it recorded in parliament is the appropriate thing to do.

I would not presume that the summary will be anything different from the summary I provided to the media. I do not know how you think it will be different at all. The summary will be provided for parliament.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** It is about maintaining confidence and having transparency and accountability. If you have information that you are intending to make public, why would you not make that information public as soon as it was made available to you? I do not understand why you would wait until parliament.

**Ms LAWLER:** It may not be given to me until Thursday-week. I do not know when that will be given to me. The ICAC inspector is doing that work now. It will be tabled in parliament. That is the appropriate place for it to be tabled. I have provided a statement and been transparent regarding that. I am not sure why you think that it lacks transparency. I provided a media release and the summary yesterday. That was two days, which is pretty good. We got it on the Friday and worked over the weekend. We got legal advice. We provided that summary to the media and the public. It has been reported on.

On the Thursday when parliament resumes I will table the report in parliament. It is important. It is not up to any parliamentarian or politician to provide a running commentary on the ICAC Commissioner or the ICAC inspector. That position is at arm's length to all of us. It is appropriate that it be tabled in parliament for all my parliamentary colleagues to have the opportunity to talk on that statement.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** Correct me if I am wrong, but the ICAC inspector took only a couple of days to do the entire investigation and complete it. Why would it take him two weeks to do a summary of that?

**Ms LAWLER:** That is a question for the ICAC inspector.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** Have you not requested it as soon as possible?

**Ms LAWLER:** No. I said to the ICAC inspector that he needs to provide a report for Territorians that can be tabled. That is what I have asked. The time line will be up to him; he may be able to do it in a day or two, but I will table that report on Thursday week in parliament.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** Even if you received it today or tomorrow, would you not make it public until parliament next week?

**Ms LAWLER:** No. I will table it in parliament.

**Madam DEPUTY CHAIR:** To confirm that date, that will Thursday 20 June.

**Ms LAWLER:** Yes.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** Chief Minister or Acting Commissioner, are you aware of a return date for the commissioner?

**Ms LAWLER:** No, we are not. He is on extended sick leave.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** Given that his absence is likely to cause disruption to the office, what impact will this have on investigations?

**Ms LOUDON:** At this point in time, I am not able to say. I have not met with staff yet. I have been out of the office for a number of weeks. I am not across current matters, but I intend to be over the coming days. At this point in time I am simply unable to say.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** Do you think that is something you would provide a public statement on if there was to be significant delays or challenges for the office to continue going forward?

**Ms LOUDON:** I have not given consideration to any public statement at this point in time. My main focus is to meet with staff today. As you can appreciate, it has been a tumultuous two weeks for them. I have not been there. I think the office needs leadership right now, which I hope and intend to provide.

My mind is not on those matters right now. Of course, the business of the office will continue, and I will do my best in respect of investigations. Regarding Operation Jupiter, I have a conflict in the matter so there will need to be some consideration about that and decisions about moving forward.

**Mrs LAMBLEY:** Can you tell us about your conflict? Is that possible?

**Ms LOUDON:** I do not think it is appropriate to put my conflict on the record. It is related to operational matters.

**Mrs LAMBLEY:** It is interesting that you just described the last two weeks as tumultuous, because that is exactly how it appears to everyone who is following this. Chief Minister, what will you do about this? It appears that the Northern Territory ICAC is in a terrible state. It is understaffed, which we heard last year, and that is the least of its worries. It is now plagued with this scandal, this controversy, and we are yet to hear what the findings are. I have to question: what do you see is the future for ICAC? Will you reset and restructure it so that it can operate effectively and be something we are proud of?

**Ms LAWLER:** The ICAC and the use of 'tumultuous' is at arm's length to me. I do not line manage the ICAC Commissioner or the commission. I have no say over the recruitment or what occurs in the commission. I think our government has managed this very carefully and has done a good job of that.

The first I heard about the issue about the commissioner and his partner was two weeks ago when I was in Maningrida. I immediately wrote a letter, which I signed that evening, to the ICAC inspector to ask for an investigation. I have followed all the correct processes and procedures in regard to this. I received the report from the ICAC inspector late on Friday afternoon. I had been in Barunga during the day. I immediately put in place processes and procedures. The first opportunity on Monday, a public holiday, I did media.

I think I have worked diligently, carefully and followed the correct processes. I sought advice at every stage of that and followed the ICAC Act. As a government we followed everything correctly and by the book in relation to this issue with the Independent Commissioner Against Corruption. We appointed Naomi Loudon, the acting commissioner, this morning. As acting commissioner she will make sure there is strength in her leadership and work with the agency.

I know that Naomi will do the job with integrity, hard work and commitment. We wish her well. Leading the ICAC in the Northern Territory it is a big job, but she has my backing to do what is needed. No-one wants to see the issues we have seen over the last two weeks. I was shocked and surprised when I saw the inquiry that I received on Monday afternoon. Nobody wants to see that in any government agency.

**Mrs LAMBLEY:** Chief Minister, you were quoted in the media yesterday as saying that this controversy involving the ICAC Commissioner has raised questions about the integrity of the ICAC Commission. Can you explain what you meant by that?

**Ms LAWLER:** That was a question asked of me, and it was not about the ICAC Commission; it was about the integrity of government. Somebody has a transcript of that interview—I think you changed the words—but I was asked by a journalist about when we see things such as we have seen over the last two weeks, whether it impact the integrity of government. My answer was yes, I think it does.

I think there is a whole group of people across the world, not just in the Northern Territory, who are cynical about politicians. As the new Chief Minister I have worked very hard to try to grow Territorians' trust in the Chief Minister. I talk about commonsense decisions because I am often asked if it is a political decision—if it is a left or a right political decision. I always say, 'No, it is actually a commonsense decision'. I think by the time you get to 62 years of age you can make decisions that are commonsense decisions not based on political ideology. Every decision I make is for the good of Territorians.

The question was around integrity—and anything that reflects badly on government or government agencies, particularly the ICAC Commission, is not what I want to see. A good day for me is when I do not get—a great day for me is when I do not get a media inquiry into somebody allegedly not doing the right thing in the Northern Territory who holds either a government or a political position.

I think the acting independent commissioner, like me, wants to see the ICAC run smoothly, do its work and for Territorians to have trust in the ICAC. The question I was asked about integrity, yes, it is something that I did not want to see. It raises concerns by Territorians about the integrity of positions, whether they are political or government positions. I know the acting independent commissioner will work hard to make sure that the integrity and trust is rebuilt, as will I.

**Mrs LAMBLEY:** Given that you have acknowledged this is an integrity issue for your government, are you taking steps to terminate the employment of the ICAC Commissioner, Michael Riches?

**Ms LAWLER:** I cannot do that. You probably need to read the act.

**Mrs LAMBLEY:** I have read the act, and you can initiate or trigger that. You can definitely.

**Ms LAWLER:** It needs to be a two-thirds vote of parliament. That needs to be ...

**Mrs LAMBLEY:** That is about the third or fourth step, Chief Minister. You trigger it. I can read it to you if you like.

**Ms LAWLER:** Obviously I have been reading the act closely lately.

The ICAC Commissioner is on sick leave. The ICAC inspector—if you refer to the statement—found allegations that the commissioner improperly offered \$20,000 to his former wife to suppress an allegation of domestic violence made by Ms Jennifer Riches not to be true. The inspector was not able to make a conclusive determination in relation to the truth of allegations pertaining to the ICAC's former wife's allegations of domestic violence. Mr Riches and Ms Jennifer Riches, the ICAC's former partner, were contacted and made submissions to the inspector in making these conclusions. The inspector has concluded that none of the allegations made against the commissioner could constitute corrupt conduct under section 120 of the ICAC Act. That is where we are right now.

**Mrs LAMBLEY:** Looking at these two very senior and competent government executives, it occurred to me that you have a duty of care to make sure that these people, and the whole staff of ICAC, are looked after carefully because this incident has the potential to damage the professional reputations of Mr Riches and other people—collateral damage. What are you doing to protect the staff of ICAC from this?

**Ms LAWLER:** I am very much aware of the wellbeing of the staff of the Independent Commissioner Against Corruption. Ken Davies, the CEO of the Department of the Chief Minister and Cabinet, has been working with that agency. Naomi has been on leave, so the Acting Independent Commissioner Against Corruption just returned from leave yesterday. I have met Naomi one-on-one and given her assurance that I support her in her acting role, and for her to work hard and do what is needed to support her staff. The appropriate person is the CEO of the Department of the Chief Minister and Cabinet, who will continue to liaise and work with the ICAC commission to make sure the wellbeing of staff is looked after.

**Mrs LAMBLEY:** What exactly is Mr Davies doing?

**Ms LAWLER:** It is probably a question for Mr Davies. He has been liaising, with the appropriate staff as required.

**Mrs LAMBLEY:** Do you have any intention of restructuring ICAC and doing it differently?

**Ms LAWLER:** It is a difficult time. We are two months out from an election, so at this stage I do not have any intention of making any changes or doing anything with ICAC at all. As Chief Minister I need to be at arm's length to ICAC. I rely on the Department of the Chief Minister and Cabinet CEO Ken Davies to continue to provide support to the acting commissioner and any support that is needed for ICAC as well.

The ICAC is at arm's length to me, as the Chief Minister. That is the way it should be. The ICAC can investigate me—it probably has on a number of occasions. I have to be careful about my influence on the ICAC. I need to remain at arm's length and not have any influence over what the ICAC commissioner and the agency does. It is appropriate that we want wellbeing for staff and for it to continue to deliver the work that is needed. At this stage I need to continue to be at arm's length.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** This is your first day back, so I appreciate that it is a challenge to come back to work. You already identified one area with ongoing investigation where there is a conflict. How will it be managed once you have reviewed all of the ongoing investigations? Do you now have a deputy who can take over these things for you? How will it work in practice when you are inevitably conflicted out of one or a number of matters going forward?

**Ms LOUDON:** I do not have a deputy. How we will approach these matters is something that will need to be considered moving forward. At this point I am simply not able to say; I will need to have a meeting with the executive, who are the directors in our office, as well as the general counsel. I am unable to provide any response other than that.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** Do you have oversight on how many open investigations you have that relate to government ministers?

**Ms LOUDON:** I am unable to answer that question at this point. The way the office works is that I conduct some investigations and Commissioner Riches has the conduct of the majority of investigations. I have, as

the assistant commissioner, responsibility for assessments as well as in the prevention and engagement space. Those are the areas I work closely with.

Once we move into investigations, Commissioner Riches has conduct of his own for those. Whilst I may have some oversight I do not know the ins and outs of it. Moving forward I will need to become acquainted with those matters. For those matters where a conflict exists then decisions will need to be made.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** You will be able to pick up the investigations that are within his remit currently and move on, assuming there is no conflict? It is not that those investigations will now sit idle?

**Ms LOUDON:** The intention is that they will not sit idle and that I will be able to pick them up, keeping in mind that a number of these investigations have been off foot for some time. There will be a considerable volume of evidence that I will need to get across, whether that is examinations, interviews or documentary evidence, as well as correspondence.

The purpose of an assistant commissioner is that the work is split; now all of that work is with me. The difficulty is that whilst there are particular delegations or powers I can delegate under the act, it also is dependent on whether I have that skillset within the office. As I said, the areas in which we have been unable to recruit are in the operations space, in particular investigations, as well as legal services. That also will play a role in considering the particular matters that Commissioner Riches has had conduct of.

### **Agency-Related Whole-of-Government Questions on Budget and Fiscal Strategy**

**Madam DEPUTY CHAIR:** The committee will now proceed to consider the estimates of proposed expenditure contained in Appropriation Bill 2024–25 that relate to the Office of the Independent Commissioner Against Corruption. Are there any agency-related whole-of-government questions on budget and fiscal strategy?

That concludes consideration of agency-related whole-of-government questions on budget and fiscal strategy.

### **OUTPUT GROUP 5.0 – OFFICE OF THE INDEPENDENT COMMISSIONER AGAINST CORRUPTION Output 5.1 – Office of the Independent Commissioner Against Corruption Operations**

**Mrs LAMBLEY:** You might want to take these questions on notice. Do you have any information you can provide to the committee on the number of reports on hand that ICAC has accepted and their current status, covering:

- (a) the year of receipt
- (b) relevant agency
- (c) whether an investigation has commenced and, if so, when
- (d) whether any investigations have been delayed or impacted by under resourcing by the Labor government?

There is a lot there, but do you have those sorts of stats on hand? Would you like to take that on notice? My general question is: in what time frames are you processing referrals? How many referrals are you getting? What are the reasons for the delays in processing the referrals?

**Ms LOUDON:** I have not said that there is delay in the referrals. There was a comment from the Leader of the Opposition in relation to delays in the investigation space. That is very different. We received 238 reports this year, and that comes into our assessment space. They are assessed, and we have KPIs for that. The assessments team is working very well. Those matters come through to me with a recommendation. The reports received from assessments may then be referred out. In this reporting period there have been 28 referrals.

When a matter is referred to a referral entity to action and provide a response to our office, it will very much be dependent on the type of allegation, the nature, the seriousness, the numbers of allegations and how many people are involved.

We have a review and monitoring officer who engages with that referral entity in relation to their ability to provide us with a report back. At the outset they will be given a time period in which to provide that report. If they are unable to for whatever reason, they will write to us and seek an extension. I will then consider that and provide an extension in relation to that referral, which is a report that has come through for assessments. That is very separate to the matter, being the assessment report commencing as an investigation.

We have 15 investigations on foot. That is very different from the assessment space where a report comes in. It is assessed, and it may be that there is no further action perhaps because it is not within our jurisdiction. Perhaps it is a matter where there is not enough information—it has been an anonymous report, and we are unable to obtain further information in relation to it. It may be that a preliminary inquiry has commenced under section 24 of our act, and we will write to the relevant agency to obtain further information. That will inform what we will do with it, whether it is referred out or an investigation is commenced under section 31. Alternatively, there is the option to refer with no report back or the matter is referred to investigations, and an investigation is commenced.

**Ms LAWLER:** Budget 2024–25 provides an extra \$700,000 to the ICAC. There is also an extra \$550,000 ongoing. That difference between this year's and ongoing is for the conference. As the acting commissioner mentioned in her report, the Australian Public Sector Anti-Corruption Conference will be held in Darwin in July; it will be the first time it is held away from the east coast. There was some extra money to provide for that conference, and there is also \$550,000 ongoing to the ICAC.

In February or so, I met with the ICAC Commissioner in regard to staffing. I do not talk about jobs now; I talk about building our workforce, because it is hard to recruit to a lot of positions. The commissioner had found he was in the same position; finding the right people for the job has been hard. I had given approval for him to travel to the UK to do a recruitment drive and get some more investigators to the Northern Territory.

That travel was cancelled because through the preliminary work they were unable to get the interest level and could not get people to the Northern Territory to be investigators. It is a small pool of people who fit the bill. Often they are ex-police or ex-lawyers, and it is hard to get people to fulfil those roles, particularly in the Northern Territory.

There is more money; we put in the extra \$550,000 ongoing. The issue is with filling vacancies. That will be ongoing work. We see that in DIPL as well with engineers, and in Education in relation to teachers. It is not unique to the ICAC when it comes to recruiting people.

**Mrs LAMBLEY:** In the Operation Jupiter report, in which I know you have a conflict and were not involved, it talked about how the investigation proceeded at a 'glacial pace'. I am wondering what was the cause of that? If it was not staffing, why were there protracted delays in the investigation and producing this report? Are you able to answer that?

**Ms LOUDON:** Unfortunately, I am not, Member for Araluen.

**Mrs LAMBLEY:** Can I put it on notice?

**Ms LOUDON:** The only person who would be able to answer that is Commissioner Riches.

**Mrs LAMBLEY:** I would like to put a question on notice to that effect.

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#### Question on Notice No 1.1

**Madam DEPUTY CHAIR:** Member for Araluen, please restate the question for the record.

**Mrs LAMBLEY:** The ICAC report, Operation Jupiter, states that there were delays in completing the investigation which at times proceeded at a 'glacial pace'. What was the real cause of the protracted delays and was under-resourcing of ICAC from government a factor?

**Madam DEPUTY CHAIR:** Chief Minister, do you accept the question?

**Ms LAWLER:** Yes, I do.

**Madam DEPUTY CHAIR:** The question has been allocated the number 1.1.

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**Mrs LAMBLEY:** Why were public hearings not held into the matters outlined in the ICAC's report Operation Jupiter?

**Ms LOUDON:** Again, I cannot answer that. The only person who can is Commissioner Riches. He is on a period of personal leave and, as I understand it, is not having contact with our office. I am not sure the question is able to be answered.

**Mrs LAMBLEY:** If they are answered, they are answered; if they are not, they are not. The fact we cannot discuss it today is probably very disappointing to a lot of people. Can I put that on notice?

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### Question on Notice No 1.2

**Madam DEPUTY CHAIR:** Member for Araluen, please restate the question for the record.

**Mrs LAMBLEY:** Why were public hearings not held into the matters outlined in the ICAC's report Operation Jupiter?

**Madam DEPUTY CHAIR:** Chief Minister, do you accept the question?

**Ms LAWLER:** Yes, I do.

**Madam DEPUTY CHAIR:** The question has been allocated the number 1.2.

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**Madam DEPUTY CHAIR:** That concludes consideration of Output Group 5.0.

### OUTPUT GROUP 6.0 – CORPORATE AND SHARED SERVICES Output 6.1 – Corporate and Governance

**Madam DEPUTY CHAIR:** The committee will now consider Output Group 6.0, Corporate and Shared Services, Output 6.1, Corporate and Governance. Are there any questions?

**Mrs LAMBLEY:** You mentioned before, Chief Minister, that there was a recruitment trip to the UK ...

**Ms LAWLER:** No. To clarify, I said that there was one planned, but it did not occur.

**Madam DEPUTY CHAIR:** That concludes consideration of Output 6.1.

### Output 6.2 – Shared Services Received

No questions.

**Madam DEPUTY CHAIR:** On behalf of the committee, I thank the Acting Independent Commissioner Against Corruption for attending. The committee will proceed to consider outputs relating to the Ombudsman's office after we return from a break.

**Ms LAWLER:** I thank Acting ICAC Commissioner Naomi Loudon. She has just gotten off a plane, come in here and done an exceptional job. Thank you, Naomi, for your leadership. Also, Kathryn Clet, thank you very much.

### OMBUDSMAN'S OFFICE

**Madam DEPUTY CHAIR:** Chief Minister, I invite you to introduce the officials accompanying you and to make an opening statement regarding the Ombudsman's Office.

**Ms LAWLER:** I have Peter Shoyer, the Ombudsman and Information Commissioner. He will make his introductory statement.

**Mr SHOYER:** Good morning. To clarify the function undertaken by the Ombudsman's Office, at the moment there are four distinct functions: the Ombudsman function, which includes oversight of administrative actions across NT Government and local government, as well as police conduct; the Information Commissioner



function, which provides oversight of information access—FOI—and privacy protection within the NT Public Sector; the Judicial Commission Office, which provides administrative and investigative support to the Judicial Commission; and, at the moment, interim national preventative mechanism under the optional protocol to the Convention Against Torture and Other Forms of Ill Treatment.

Approaches to the Ombudsman will be lower this year compared with recent years, primarily due to a sustained drop in numbers of complaints involving the Department of Health, coming off COVID and in relation to police conduct.

We have also managed to reverse—partially because of the lower number of matters coming in—the number of matters that are open or are likely to be open at the end of the financial year. That will be reduced to below 100, which is more in accordance with historic averages.

As recorded in our annual report we had a fairly significant number of police conduct complaints that remained open, but we have worked with the Police Professional Standards Command to reduce those numbers significantly. They are also down to historical levels.

Since the last Estimates hearings we have completed reports on police use of spit hoods and restraint chairs on youths; a report for the Corrections Commissioner on Correctional Services themes; a tabled report on domestic violence information sharing, as Information Commissioner; produced a statutory report for the Minister for Police in relation to police use of firearm prohibition orders; and recently tabled a report in relation to separate confinement in Darwin Correctional Centre.

This will be my last appearance before an Estimates Committee. I acknowledge the assistance I have had from my staff over the years, particularly the people who have worked as my Deputy Ombudsman, including Brenda Monaghan, Roxene Cahill and Julie Carlsen.

**Madam DEPUTY CHAIR:** Thank you for that opening statement. Are there any questions on the statement?

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** Mr Shoyer, I congratulate you on your time as Ombudsman and your last Estimates appearance. Thank you to your staff for their hard work; they have supported you over many years of service.

How many FOIs have been received by your office in this period?

**Mr SHOYER:** I will make it clear that we have oversight of FOIs, but we do not actually deal with every application that is made to an agency.

Last year there were 1,670 applications to agencies across government. We collect information on applications received at the end of the year. We get details from every organisation and put that in our annual report. We only received 15 complaints regarding FOI and privacy last year. This year it is looking to be a little higher. Most recently, it looked to be in the low twenties.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** Were there approximately 20 complaints on FOI processes for this reporting period?

**Mr SHOYER:** Yes.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** Do you have oversight of how many FOIs are rejected?

**Mr SHOYER:** We will report on those details in the annual report, but essentially we do not become aware of an FOI application unless there is a complaint made. It is only those complaints. There will be limited access granted. There may be reasons why; for example, it is personal information about someone else. There will be a whole lot of decisions that people decide not to contest which we do not hear about, but we do report on them at the end of the year.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** There was an increase in complaints on last year. Can you note detail how many were fully redacted or partially redacted?

**Mr SHOYER:** We will be able to provide details on that at the end of the year once we get all the information from the agencies.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** In your role as Ombudsman how many complaints have you received for this reporting period?

**Mr SHOYER:** We estimate that by the end of the year we will have received about 2,000. In the past our numbers have ranged from 2,000 up to 2,500. We are looking at a bit of a reduction now, which has enabled us to tackle a backlog that had built up.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** What is the longest it has taken you in this period to complete an investigation?

**Mr SHOYER:** I do not have details of individual investigations, but there are certainly investigations that take over a year to complete if, for example, we are doing an own-motion investigation. A small number of investigations would take that long.

In terms of the general closure times we are talking about an estimation of 90% of general matters completed in under 28 days, and 80% to 90% of police matters would be conducted and finalised within 90 days.

They are the KPIs that we set in those cases. There are some that can take considerably longer. We do have some that last over a year.

### **Agency-Related Whole-of-Government Questions on Budget and Fiscal Strategy**

**Madam DEPUTY CHAIR:** The committee will now proceed to consider the estimates of proposed expenditure contained in the Appropriation Bill 2024–25 as they relate to the Ombudsman's office. Are there any agency-related whole-of-government questions on budget and fiscal strategy?

No questions.

**Madam DEPUTY CHAIR:** That concludes consideration of agency-related whole-of-government questions on budget and fiscal strategy.

### **OUTPUT GROUP 7 OMBUDSMAN'S OFFICE Output 7.1 Ombudsman's Operations**

**Madam DEPUTY CHAIR:** The committee will now consider Output Group 7, Ombudsman's Office, Output 7.1, Ombudsman's operations. Are there any questions?

**Mr GUYULA:** In this budget there are cuts to a number of independent statutory bodies. The Ombudsman's office has a loss of \$123,000; the Office of the Children's Commissioner has a loss of \$80,000; the Anti-Discrimination Commission's loss is \$226,000; and NT Consumer Affairs has a loss of \$900,000. These independent bodies are all very important for protecting Northern Territorians in various difficult situations and often provide transparency and oversight of government.

What will the reduction mean for the Ombudsman's office, and what does the combined effect of the reductions mean for the NT?

**Ms LAWLER:** The Northern Territory Government has not made cuts to those statutory organisations and agencies. Often it will be about timing of grants, or it might be an additional amount of money they received for infrastructure, for example, repairs and maintenance. The Northern Territory has not made any deliberate reductions in any of those. I just spoke about the Office of the Independent Commissioner Against Corruption where they have had an additional \$700,000 this financial year. I can assure Territorians that there have not been cuts to those agencies by government but that may reflect money moving in and out for various things.

**Mr SHOYER:** The reduction for this year is to do with the OPCAT I mentioned earlier, which is the international treaty on the prevention of torture and other forms of ill treatment. The NT Government provides us with short-term funding for two years. In previous years we managed to carry over some of that budget in this current year. One of the outcomes of that was the separate confinement report I mentioned. That is a reflection of that carry over being spent, and there is currently no further funding allocated in relation to that OPCAT function. Australian state and territory governments have not been able to come to an agreement as to how that international obligation should be funded, so there is no more funding available for that specific function.

In relation to the other Ombudsman functions, the usual toing and froing of the budget process for efficiency dividends and money for CPI increases—that sort of thing—has happened. That is where the reduction is for this year. That is something we continue to pursue and consider vital from the point of view of not just our office but the other likely NPM inspectors, the Children's Commissioner and the principal community visitor.

We need funding to be able to do that work, and we will continue to pursue that at a Territory level and within the national group.

**Madam DEPUTY CHAIR:** That concludes consideration of Output Group 7.

**OUTPUT GROUP 8 – INFORMATION COMMISSIONER**  
**Output 8.1 – Information Commissioner Operations**

No questions.

**OUTPUT GROUP 9.0 – JUDICIAL COMMISSION**  
**Output 9.1 – Judicial Commission Operations**

No questions.

**OUTPUT GROUP 10.0 – CORPORATE AND SHARED SERVICES**  
**Output 10.1 – Corporate and Governance**  
**Output 10.2 – Shared Services Received**

No questions.

On behalf of the committee, I thank the Ombudsman and Information Commissioner for attending today. We wish you well for the future and thank you for your service to the Northern Territory.

**Members:** Hear, hear!

**Ms LAWLER:** I also pass on my congratulations for a wonderful career, Peter Shoyer. Thank you for all your hard work and commitment to the Territorians.

**Madam DEPUTY CHAIR:** We will now move on to the outputs relating to the Department of the Chief Minister and Cabinet.

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The committee suspended

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**MAJOR PROJECTS**  
**DEFENCE INDUSTRIES**

**DEPARTMENT OF THE CHIEF MINISTER AND CABINET**

**Madam DEPUTY CHAIR:** Chief Minister, I invite you to introduce the officials accompanying you and to make an opening statement regarding the Department of the Chief Minister and Cabinet.

**Ms LAWLER:** Madam Deputy Chair, I have Ken Davies, the Chief Executive Officer of the Chief Minister and Cabinet; Deputy Chief Executive Strategic and Corporate Services, Jean Doherty; Deputy Chief Executive Officer Policy and Reform, Tom Leeming; and Dorrelle Anderson, the Deputy Chief Executive Officer Territory Regional Growth.

We will not make an introductory statement; we will get straight into it. I am happy to go straight to questions in the output areas.

**Agency-Related Whole-of-Government Question on Budget and Fiscal Strategy**

**Madam DEPUTY CHAIR:** The committee will now proceed to consider the estimates of the proposed expenditure contained in the Appropriation Bill 2024–25 that relates to the Department of the Chief Minister and Cabinet. Are there any agency-related whole-of-government question on budget and fiscal strategy?

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** It is probably not surprising, Chief Minister, that you did not make an opening statement. It is a way to avoid scrutiny and because your government really has nothing to sing from the rooftops about ...

**Ms LAWLER:** That is not true; it was the opposite. It would soak up time. We had a number of independent statutory agencies read their statements. I thought it was the opposite, so we can get straight into it. Leader of the Opposition, I will make sure I make an introductory statement for Treasury, just to keep you happy. I was thinking I was doing you a favour by getting stuck into it. I cannot win in politics.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** The reality is that there is probably not much for you to be proud of so you are skipping straight to the questions ...

**Ms LAWLER:** I am exceptionally proud of this agency and the outstanding public servants I have. You will not find a better group of people than those sitting in front of you today. We look forward to answering your questions.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** I do not dispute their capabilities, Chief Minister; I am disputing yours.

Robberies are up across the Northern Territory by 75%; car thefts in Alice Springs by 350%; robberies in Darwin have doubled; and we have had three Chief Ministers, all of whom have failed to strengthen the law. Businesses are voting with their feet. We are seeing more businesses close down, including Johnn Johnn's ice cream and the Beauty Bar in Katherine, just to name a couple. Last week we heard that the Darwin Cup will not be able to run centre field because of low sales of tickets.

Crime is the single biggest issue impacting the Territory. What is the total cost of your crime crisis to the Northern Territory?

**Ms LAWLER:** I chuckle to myself because we heard this line of questioning last year. You truly are a one-trick pony. This was the exact line of questioning. We have worked very hard to address the issue of crime in the Territory.

We heard the Member for Brennan misquote figures, and we just heard you misquote figures regarding the number of businesses closing. The *NT News* picked up on this; there are businesses closing, but for every business closing we have seen even more businesses opening across the Northern Territory. You mentioned Johnn Johnn's—but if you walked through the Darwin CBD you would see an amazing number of new businesses where people are having a good go and getting stuck into working in the Territory.

You always want to run down the Territory; that is your modus operandi. The whole conversation always seems to be about crime. I can assure Territorians that my focus is on making the Territory safe. I listened carefully to Territorians before we set our direction for our budget and aligned the dollars. Budget 2024 invests about \$1.2bn in public order and safety. There is about \$723m in social protection to deliver a range of initiatives to build a safer, fairer and more resilient community.

I have spoken loudly about the \$570m over five years to respond to recommendations from the independent police review. There has never been a larger investment into safety and police in the history of the Northern Territory.

I am more than happy to talk about crime and antisocial behaviour, and the coordination and work that has been done by the Department of the Chief Minister and Cabinet, which leads the work on community safety. Dorrelle Anderson is the deputy chief executive in Central Australia. Work is being done across the board in Chief Minister and Cabinet on specifics of safety and information in regard to the cost of crime in other agencies. Those questions should be referred to those agency heads or to NT Police.

Overall our budget invests \$1.2bn in public order and safety.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** Chief Minister, you have just heralded a huge budget figure to try to deal with these issues, but do you not acknowledge that the reason you had to increase the budget so profoundly is that we have the highest rates of crime that the Northern Territory has ever experienced?

**Ms LAWLER:** I listen to Territorians; I am out and about every day. I know that crime is the number one issue facing Territorians. The number two issue is the cost of living—equally, finding people for work. They are the top issues. A Treasurer and Chief Minister makes sure that when we start our budget process—the agencies started around November, and ministers started their work around January—we align our larger spends to what the issues are. That is what a good government does.

Yes, there is considerable investment in keeping Territorians safe. That is what a good government does. I acknowledge that the issues of crime and antisocial behaviour are faced by the Territory. We are not unique

in that; other states in Australia have seen an increase in crime and antisocial behaviour following COVID, as the figures were down during that period, but there has been an increase. Our government—and as Chief Minister I will continue to ensure that we invest in extra police and other areas, including the social determinants that may lead to a young person being involved in crime. A \$1.1bn investment in education is a reflection of that. We can continue to talk all day on the issue of crime, which I am happy to do, and on how we are investing and addressing the issues.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** Last year Estimates literally had to be shut down because opposition members were asking you questions about the cost of crime to education. You exhibited some terrible behaviour, and it had to be shut down by your own members of parliament. I understand very clearly that you do not want to talk about crime and do not want to be accountable for what has been eight years of total failure to have laws that meet community expectation, failure to drive down crime and a failure to support our police.

I also understand, as do Territorians, that your answer to that is to hide behind huge budget figures.

**Ms LAWLER:** That is not true.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** The reality is if you do not strengthen the laws and provide the framework in which we can have a safe community it does not matter how much money you throw at it. You just finished two weeks sittings of parliament where you failed to strengthen the law and put the rights of people to be safe above the rights of criminals. I will ask you again my first question. What is the total cost of this crime crisis to the Territory?

**Ms LAWLER:** First of all, I will address some mistruths you have spoken. Last year in Estimates the Member for Katherine was talking about education. She was running down education in the Northern Territory. She was running down our schools, our school staff and our principals. I would not abide by that, which is why I spoke up very strongly. She was running down our education institutions, our schools in the Northern Territory. After working for 35 years in education I found that abhorrent, so I spoke up loudly against the Member for Katherine regarding that. I hope Mark Monaghan, the current Minister for Education, will also push back because we have exceptional teachers and schools in the Northern Territory, some of the best in the country, and I will not abide by that.

In relation to your statement of the last sittings, you must have spent most of your time in the lobby in the back room because we introduced, and passed on urgency, legislation on curfew. I do not think you can get any higher level of legislation in the Northern Territory. We introduced that legislation, which obviously caught you by surprise because you did not even speak to that legislation.

You talk about crime as being the number one issue, but we did not even hear you speak on that legislation. You were not in the room when we went to consideration in detail on curfew so obviously, Leader of the Opposition ...

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** A point of order, Madam Deputy Chair! The Chief Minister is reflecting on what happens or did not happen in Chamber; she well knows she is not allowed to do it. It is not a fair representation of what happened at all. If she thinks curfew legislation is strengthening powers for police she is dreaming, because we had curfew legislation rushed through parliament which was largely supported, and you have yet to pull the trigger on it. You have done nothing. Having curfew legislation does not stop people who should not be bailed from being back on our streets. It does not stop the fact that you have raised the age of criminal responsibility, which means that young people cannot be held accountable. You can hide behind curfew all you like; people see it for what it is and that is a stunt.

**Madam DEPUTY CHAIR:** Leader of the Opposition, you had a very long question to start with, and the Chief Minister is answering the question. She said that she would withdraw those comments, and we will move on. Please continue with your answer.

**Ms LAWLER:** Yes, I will withdraw the comment reflecting on the absence of the Leader of the Opposition during the curfew debate. Our government understands the issue of crime and antisocial behaviour. We will continue to invest in our police force because that is the right thing to do. We will continue to address the long-term issues that young people face, that we face as a Northern Territory, that lead to dysfunctional families, inequity, poor education outcomes and crime in the Northern Territory.

It is not just about the things opposition members talk about, such as raising the age—which is a simplistic response to addressing youth crime—and changing the bail laws. If they think that will stop crime in the Northern Territory they are mistaken.

The Territorians I speak with understand the complexity of crime in the Northern Territory, and the things the CLP are putting forward as solutions are not. The issue of addressing crime is complex and multipronged; that is the work our government is doing. It starts with programs such as Families as First Teachers, working with mums and babies at nurse home visits. A whole continuum of work needs to be done. Investing in police is one aspect, but it is vitally important to keep our community safe.

Leader of the Opposition, I am happy to continue discussions on this issue. You have not provided Territorians with any alternative except raising the age.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** Chief Minister, this is not about me, this is about your government continuously heralding yourself as having some new Chief Minister who is completely different from your two predecessors—we are on our third Chief Minister in eight years under a Labor government. If you profess to care about crime as much as you pretend, why is it that you do not understand the cost of crime to the Northern Territory? It is not just in damage to government buildings and vehicles, and assaults on government staff. It is on opportunity cost.

Businesses such as Johnn Johnn's, the Beauty Bar and Char shut their doors for good because crime is impacting them and their staff profoundly. Darwin Cup sales are down, and tourism into the Red Centre and across the Territory is down. Qantas handballed its Singapore flights down the track because there is a lack of confidence in the Territory. A total of 868 people migrated interstate in the first quarter of this year. We have a serious crisis on our hands, and how is it that our Chief Minister and Treasurer has no concept of the cost to the Territory of Labor's crime crisis?

**Ms LAWLER:** I understand the impact of crime in the Northern Territory, which is why we continue to invest in the work that needs to be done to address crime. We have invested \$1.2bn in public order and safety, education, youth justice and resourcing Correctional Services. Our government is continuing to invest in crime for the immediate and long-term.

I will continue to work with the federal government. We have an amazing agreement with the federal government on housing in our remote communities, with \$4bn over the next 10 years. That is part of the answer on addressing crime.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** How long, Chief Minister? Michael Gunner, your first Chief Minister, talked about generational change; Natasha Fyles, the second Chief Minister, was not there long enough to do anything; and now you are talking about the long term. Territorians have suffered under this Labor government for eight years, and every year crime gets worse.

People are losing their lives, fleeing the Territory, barricading themselves in their homes and businesses, shutting down, giving up and losing hope. It is a horrific situation, yet you do not understand the opportunity cost, the cost to our economy or the actual cost to the Territory. You have done no analysis on this issue in a strategic way in order to decide how your government will go forward.

**Ms LAWLER:** Our government is aware of the impact of antisocial behaviour and crime in the Northern Territory. If you become Chief Minister I hope you will do that work, as it seems to be one that is front and centre on crime. All you talk about is crime. I can assure Territorians that I know no-one wants to see crime in the Northern Territory. All of us want to see ...

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** But what are you doing about it? That is what they want to know.

**Madam DEPUTY CHAIR:** Please stop the interjections. The Chief Minister is answering the question.

**Ms LAWLER:** Leader of the Opposition, you talk about generational change and investing in education. That is where it starts. It is not just raising the age, which is your solution to addressing crime. Your solution to address crime is to lock up more young people. At some stage they have to come back out. You are not addressing the issue of crime.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** You would rather not put criminals in prison at all.

**Ms LAWLER:** We are addressing the issue by investing an additional \$1.1bn in education. That is long-term generational change, because that is putting young people on a trajectory to employment, training and having a better life. My focus is to make sure we ...

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** How long? How many generations?

**Madam DEPUTY CHAIR:** Interjections—please, the Chief Minister is answering the question.

**Ms LAWLER:** My focus in education investment is on the long term. I also understand that we need immediacy. That involves the \$570m over five years into police. There will be another additional 200 sworn police officers in the Territory. At the end of June there will be 68 new recruits graduating through the police academy. That is the immediate work being done to ensure we have more police on the beat and more vans on the road in response to 000 and 131 444 phone calls.

It is also about investment into having additional non-sworn officers. That is the immediate work being done. You asked about immediacy; that is the immediate work. There are layers of immediate work, some of which is in regard to youths. The activities we do, the youth justice centres about to be opened and the youth hubs we put in place—there is one in Palmerston. I presume you have been there. That is the preventative work we do. It is about investment in programs such as Clontarf and Stars.

I have a Clontarf and Stars at Driver and Moulden primary schools. That is the work we are doing now to turn around young people's lives.

I did a budget speech in Alice Springs last week, which was attended by about 15 young people who were very much focused on their future and getting a job. We will continue to do that work. In Central Australia there is an additional \$250m allocated by the federal government to address issues of crime. We are doing the hard work to address crime and antisocial behaviour. We are continuing to push to ensure that Territorians are safe.

Every decision of government has an impact on something to do with addressing crime. The economy and crime—it is one with the other. If you address issues with crime, you will see increases in the economy. Unless you address the economy, you will not have the dollars to address crime.

As Chief Minister and Treasurer I continue to make sure I drive the growth of the economy in the Northern Territory and address the number one issue for Territorians, which is crime.

I could talk for the next six or seven hours about the work each agency is doing, but you will have the opportunity to talk to every individual agency about the work they are doing. We are seeing exceptional work in Territory Families, for example, as well as Education. Every bit of those agencies' work is about improving the lives of Territorians, putting them on a trajectory to a better life to reach their full potential and not to have a life of crime.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** Labor has been in power for 19 of the last 23 years, nearly 20 years. You can forgive Territorians for asking the question, 'When?' If you have not delivered a safer community—and, in fact, all the indicators are getting worse over two decades—people wonder what long-term means and how many generations, because people's fear is that there will be no-one left.

Territorians are leaving in droves. I think something like 3,000 more Territorians leave than arrive every year. Businesses are closing their doors. You just acknowledged that when you deal with crime it grows the economy. I could not agree more with that point, which is why our economy is going so badly. It is because of crime. Look at the tourism numbers and what is happening with the Darwin Cup.

You talk about taking immediate action and about 200 police over a five-year period. Five years is not immediate, Chief Minister. People want to know what you are doing right now. The answer is nothing because the time to do that was during our last two weeks of parliament, and you gave up that opportunity to strengthen the law.

Is it not the case that because of your deputy, Chansey Paech, your hands are tied—he will not let you strengthen the law—and that under a Labor government for as long as he is the deputy what we will continue to see is the rights of the offender put above the rights of people to be safe?

**Ms LAWLER:** Leader of the Opposition I think you are politicising the whole Estimates process in that comment. I think it is pure petty politics. You have an amazing opportunity here. You have some of the best public servant leaders in the Northern Territory, and you are wasting time with petty politics talking about my deputy which is, by the way, incorrect.

A couple of things I would like to correct you on—I am pleased to see the *NT News* picking up on the CLP's misinformation that is being peddled. The first one is regarding the economy. When I sit in front of you and talk about the Treasury outputs—I can assure you that our economy is actually growing in the Northern Territory so stop peddling mistruths about the economy. Our GSP is going up 2.3%. I do not know if you understand maths at all. Next financial year it is going up 7.1%. Over the forward estimates, which is this budget year and the next three, it is going to go up on average 4.1% so stop peddling those mistruths because our economy is growing very strongly.

I do not know if you understand maths or you cannot read budget books. Our population is increasing about 0.9%. If you read the budget books—Territorians can go to Treasury and Finance, [nt.gov.au](http://nt.gov.au), or wherever and have a look. You will see the facts. Our population is increasing.

Leader of the Opposition, you may be 30 years younger than me, but we have always seen Territorians come and go. That is a fact. Anywhere I travel around Australia or on any holiday I catch up with people who have lived in the Northern Territory and gone back somewhere else. That is a fact of our population.

There are more people coming to the Territory at the moment. Some of those people are migrants, which is a great thing for the Northern Territory. The Territory is built on our migrant population—good Territorians: the Greeks, Italians and Vietnamese and the families who have come to the Northern Territory. You peddle that there are people leaving the Territory; yes, there are, and if you ask those people why they are leaving there will be a number of reasons. It is often not just one reason for someone to leave.

That is the work I am doing around Middle Arm, the onshore oil and gas industry, to have new industry come to the Northern Territory where we can grow the population. Middle Arm will see an increase of about 20,000 workers. That is the work that I am doing. It is the economy. I will continue to drive the economy in the Northern Territory to make sure we see population increases. At the moment our population is increasing, and that is a fact.

You can stop peddling the misinformation about that. In relation to Darwin Cup, that is a decision of Darwin Cup. They need to make sure that they continue to be in a secure financial position. That is a reality.

We are driving down the interest rates. We have put money into cost of living in the Territory. There are Territorians doing it tough with cost of living. We understand that. It is related to interest rates going up and young people who have house loans to pay off and making decisions about where they go and how much money they spend.

We just had some big events on the weekend. We were at GleNTi. You were there; I was there. I was at the Irish Festival. There was Barunga. There were large numbers, record crowds at those events.

Leader of the Opposition, you can continue to run down the Territory and to always think about the negative, but there are plenty of people out there who had a great time on the weekend at the GleNTi, the Irish Festival and Barunga. There will be plenty of people at the Darwin Cup, I can assure you. Often Territorians make decisions at the last minute.

I will not let you talk down the economy or the Territory because this is a great place. I love the Territory. It is an amazing place. All of us in this room now are here because we want to make sure that the Territory continues to grow and be a great place.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** Do not mistake running down the economy for standing up for Territorians. That is what my team and I do every single day. You do not like these questions and would rather be anywhere else and want to make this all about me.

**Ms LAWLER:** I love these questions and being here.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** The reality is this is about the failures of your government. When you talk about going strong, you are ignoring the fact that for five-and-a-half years CommSec has ranked the Territory the worst-performing economy in the nation. You just have to look at the stagnant retail trade figures that came out a couple of weeks ago. There are plenty of economic indicators, but you do not even have to go to the data. You can just walk around and ask people.

John Koenig, the owner of Johnn Johnn's, was on the radio on 30 April. He said, 'Retailers have had our worst three months ever. Most businesses have made losses, and then you add crime.'



He went on to say, 'It is not a way to live. I have so much to lose. I have friends, family, workers. I am over it. We are all over it. Everyone has to go to work and should be able to go to work safely.'

This is this not an issue being created by the opposition. This is an issue being lived by everyday Territorians no matter where they live. People have had enough. It is impacting their lives and livelihoods. You can pretend with your head in the sand and continue to be out of touch that your miracle billions of dollars is some sort of answer.

The reality is that in 19 of the last 23 years Labor has only overseen worse outcomes for the Territory, less safety, and there is no end in sight to that because you continue to fail to strengthen the laws and do what is required to hold people accountable and have programs in place that effectively change people's behaviour. You continue to fail to invest in our prison system, in skills training, in all of these indicators.

Can I just confirm, if I go back to my original question that you have not answered, that you as Chief Minister have no idea what the total cost of crime to the Territory is?

**Ms LAWLER:** You are truly a one-trick pony. We keep hearing the same misinformation that comes from you. Just to correct the record because I do not know of these mistruths—I will not use the word 'lies'—I do not know why you continue to peddle mistruths. There is \$109m that has gone into training. We have seen more money go into training in the Northern Territory than before.

We have the federal government with the Fee-Free TAFE positions. We have a federal government that is doing exceptional work to make sure we have the academic pathways, through Jason Clare investing in education, in our universities, as well as the training pathways. That is \$109m into training in the Northern Territory. There was something like 3,370 apprentices in the Northern Territory. That is more than ever.

Do not talk about training and say that we are not investing in training. That is something I am passionate about—making sure we have more Territorians working and having pathways through education or vocational education, whether that is in urban or remote schools. It is to have more people working in the Northern Territory.

That is a strong way you can address crime as well. We are making sure that all Territorians into the future have a job and a pathway to employment, whether they are in an urban or a remote setting. That is absolutely my strong focus. I have been saying that since I came in as Chief Minister. We must have all Territorians working.

We cannot have another generation, particularly in our remote communities, of young people who are not on a pathway to employment. That means more vocational education and more opportunities for young people. We conducted the review of secondary education. I will talk more, as will the Minister for Education, about those pathways to employment.

There is a substantial increase in Corrections—about a \$57m increase into Corrections. When you say that there is no more money going into Corrections or training, that is incorrect.

You keep quoting CommSec—we hear it all the time. It shows your total lack of understanding of the CommSec report. You are a lazy politician, Leader of the Opposition, because I do not think you take the time to read these reports; you just throw out a generic line. If you read it, you will see it explain that it does a 10-year average. That 10-year average covers the time when we had the INPEX boom.

You obviously do not understand mathematics when you talk about averages. The CommSec report shows that the Northern Territory is below because of the average period over those 10 years. A better report is Deloitte's report; read it. Anybody listening today can google Deloitte. In the report our economy is the second strongest due to a number of factors.

There are good things happening in our economy. Our GSP was 2.3%, then 7.1%. Deloitte's report shows a better position for the Northern Territory and speaks highly of what is happening in the NT.

I know you want to continue to run down the Northern Territory, but we are on the cusp of some big projects. Tamboran should get to FID in the next month or so, which is exciting news. Empire Energy and Arafura Resources—I was talking to Stuart from Arafura on the plane from Alice Springs; he was at my budget speech last week—are getting close to FID. Arafura Resources will make a huge difference to the town of Alice Springs.

Those are the things you do not want to talk about, Leader of the Opposition; you just want to talk about the negatives about crime and the economy. I will stand for the good things happening in the Northern Territory. You spoke about Johnn Johnn's closing down. If you walk through the CBD you will see businesses that are opening. Kopi Stop is a great new coffee shop around the corner from Johnn Johnn's. There are new restaurants opening across the greater Darwin area. There are new restaurants and businesses opening at Gateway.

Yes, there are businesses that close. Johnn Johnn's may have been about crime, but often there are other multiple factors why a business closes. However, plenty of businesses are opening. The data shows that.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** There is no doubt in the minds of Territorians that you have your head in the sand. If you want to play tit for tat with me all day and try to diffuse every question and handball it back to something about me, that says more about your character and capability than it does about anything else.

I have asked you several times whether or not you know the total cost of crime to the Territory. You continue to talk about me and name-call me instead of answering. I take it that you do not do the work; you do not know it and you have no answer for me ...

**Ms LAWLER:** Leader of the Opposition, let us be clear; you are the one who name calls and goes to petty politics. People can read *Hansard*. Your question went on the record about running down the Deputy Chief Minister. Let us not put things out there that are incorrect.

I am happy to continue this conversation about crime in the Northern Territory. Territorians know that I do not have my head in the sand about crime. As Chief Minister I have worked hard to address the issue of crime. I will continue to do that every day, whether it be initiating the curfew in Alice Springs which provided that reprieve, the curfew legislation I introduced or the substantial amount of investment in police that will see \$570m over five years.

I know you do not necessarily understand budget processes, but they will have a large amount of money—about \$90m in this year's budget. They will be able to get stuck into recruitment.

There is substantial investment into issues and addressing crime. There is more money going to Corrections. Two women's prisons will open soon in the Territory. We will continue to do the work; you can continue to talk. If this bail legislation was so important to you, why did you not introduce it to parliament yourselves? We saw the fuel bill, which could not even be delivered in 18 months. You could have brought in bail legislation, and you did not.

We introduced and passed the curfew legislation in the last sittings of parliament.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** The CLP did bring in bail legislation on a number of occasions and Labor voted it down. That is why it did not pass.

In regard to our economy, the state final demand figures showed that for the last quarter it has gone down 7.9%, so there is ...

**Ms LAWLER:** That is, again, lies. That is volatility of those figures; you need to look at the 12-month period, not just three months.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** I do not know whether your advisers could—you can look at whatever you want to look at. We will look at the real data. No matter what question I ask, you were talking about me. Every answer you give is something about me. I am here to represent Territorians. I do not know what you are here to do, but it is very clear you are not focused on the job at hand. You are distracted by politics for someone pointing the finger.

I will give you one last opportunity. Do you know the total cost of crime to the Northern Territory?

**Ms LAWLER:** I am very much aware of the cost of crime to the Northern Territory, which is why ...

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** Being aware of it and knowing it are two different things. If you do not know what it is, you cannot do something about it.

**Madam DEPUTY CHAIR:** Leader of the Opposition, can you let the Chief Minister answer the question? I have heard the same question multiple times now. We are heading towards an hour and we have another 10 output groups to go. Please continue, Chief Minister.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** You are right, Madam Deputy Chair, and she still has not answered the question.

**Ms LAWLER:** I do know what the cost of crime is to Territorians. One crime is a crime too many. That is why I made sure in Budget 2024, as Chief Minister and Treasurer, that I lined up the major spends in the Territory to address the issue of crime. There is \$570m for Police; \$1.1bn for Education; \$4bn with the federal government for Housing; more money for Corrections and Territory Families; and \$30m for domestic violence services.

Sixty-five per cent of people in our prisons are there because of DV, so we put more money into domestic, family and sexual violence services. Leader of the Opposition, you want to paint it as me not understanding or ignoring the issue of crime, but Territorians know I understand the issue. I have made sure the budget has money in it to address the immediate issues of antisocial behaviour and crime.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** You have also made sure there is no further opportunity to strengthen the laws, because you gave away two weeks of parliament and failed to give police better powers to do with wandering, stronger bail laws and better consequences for young people. You waved off that opportunity to actually do something different to what your predecessors did, and now that opportunity is closed. That reinforces to Territorians that under a government you lead there will be no stronger laws, no better powers for police and no stronger action on crime. You have made that abundantly clear through your actions.

If you do not know the total cost of crime to the Territory, do you know how many businesses have closed as a result of crime?

**Ms LAWLER:** That is probably a question for the Business minister.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** You do not know?

**Ms LAWLER:** First and foremost, that is probably a question for the Business minister. I add that there is probably not just one thing which closes a business in the Territory. There are often multiple reasons for a business to shut down. We brought in curfew legislation in those two weeks of parliament.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** And you have not used it once.

**Ms LAWLER:** We also brought in a considerable amount of other legislation during that sittings, such as portable long-service leave, which impacts NGOs—predominantly women working in the area of DV.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** Sorry, I did not ask you what your legislative ...

**Ms LAWLER:** I am making sure you are clear that we worked very hard during sittings ...

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** I was there. I am very clear that you did not pass any laws that strengthened the law to give police better powers.

**Madam DEPUTY CHAIR:** The Chief Minister is answering the question.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** We are not interested in portable long-service leave.

**Madam DEPUTY CHAIR:** There are a lot of interjections here. Chief Minister.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** Chief Minister, when your disgraced ...

**Madam DEPUTY CHAIR:** Leader of the Opposition! Did you finish answering your question, Chief Minister?

**Ms LAWLER:** I cannot see the point in answering, as she does not listen. As soon as I ask the question she is on her phone. She is quite rude.

**Madam DEPUTY SPEAKER:** I remind everyone that there are another 10 output groups in this department.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** When the disgraced Police minister removed PALIs from bottle shops in Alice Springs without any plan in place to backfill those positions, did you support that decision?

**Ms LAWLER:** The Police minister and Police Commissioner had a plan to make sure that there were additional fully sworn constables on the beat. The PALI positions are hard to fill, and there was an opportunity to have them do a 16-week course to become a fully-fledged constable. The Kelly review had 18 recommendations, and I did not accept three. One was having security guards, not PALIs, on bottle shops. My actions speak clearly on my expectation, which is to continue to have PALIs on bottle shops in Central Australia, the Barkly and Katherine region.

The issue, as has been well documented and spoken about at length by the Minister for Police and the commissioner—you can also ask these questions of Minister Potter. It is difficult to recruit PALIs, and they want the opportunity to extend and develop their career and become fully sworn police officers.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** Did you support the decision for those PALIs to be removed from bottle shops and sent to Darwin without any plan in place? They were not backfilled, and the Members for Namatjira and Araluen could attest to that with their first-hand experience.

**Ms LAWLER:** That information is incorrect. There was a plan to make sure that there was coverage of bottle shops.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** There was no coverage of bottle shops.

**Ms LAWLER:** There was a plan in place—some bottle shops reached their 25% at certain times during the day, and my action in not accepting one of the recommendations in the Kelly review made it clear that I support having PALIs on bottle shops.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** You are not answering the question.

**Ms LAWLER:** I answered the question.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** Did you support your disgraced Police minister's decision to remove PALIs from bottle shops without any plan in place? They were not backfilled by constables, they were left vacant.

**Ms LAWLER:** There was a plan. You can talk to the Police minister or the commissioner and they will describe the plan. Our government wants to make sure that there are PALIs on bottle shops.

**Madam DEPUTY SPEAKER:** We have the Police minister next week; many of these questions are operational.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** Last week on the radio you said that the removal of mandatory sentencing was a good thing. Could you explain why you think removing minimum mandatory sentences for serious violent offenders and domestic violence offenders is a good thing?

**Ms LAWLER:** To clarify, when there is mandatory sentencing it does not matter what the action was, as there is a set sentence for that perpetrator. If there is no mandatory sentencing—you are a lawyer and you should know this—there is a process which needs to go through the court system where, instead of getting the mandatory minimum sentence, there is an opportunity for that person to get a more severe sentence. I would think with your philosophy of criminals that it would appeal to you. I do not know whether you understand the process, but with DV mandatory sentencing—this is a good question to be asking the Domestic Violence minister, Kate Worden about—it did not matter what the action was, there was a mandatory sentence. Mandatory sentencing means that it needs to follow the full court process. There is an opportunity for the person to have a more lengthy sentence.

I find domestic violence abhorrent and shocking. I was at the domestic family and sexual violence conference in Alice Springs last week and spoke to amazing people who work so hard every day to address the issue of DV in the Northern Territory.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** Do you not understand that minimum mandatory sentencing means it is a minimum. It means the person at a minimum serves a length of time. If the court finds that they need to have a longer period, they can do that. Do you understand that?

**Ms LAWLER:** I do understand that.

**Madam DEPUTY CHAIR:** Another friendly reminder, we have the Attorney-General here tomorrow if you want to ask those questions.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** I am asking directly for a quote from the Chief Minister. If you do understand that, what you said previously is nonsense.

**Ms LAWLER:** You may think it is nonsense. I have given an answer. You have the Attorney-General tomorrow and the Minister for Police. I would like to make sure that we can have not just political conversations here today. This is an Estimates process where we are supposed to be examining the budget, and I have not heard one question in relation to the outputs that we have in front of us.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** Thank you for your commentary, Chief Minister, but the reality is you are the one who supports the removal of minimum mandatory sentencing, which actually means that there is no baseline and consequence for an offender in some very serious violent offending in domestic violence situations. They are able to have a longer sentence if the judge requires, but under your weak laws it means there is no minimum required any longer, and your government supports that.

How can you say that you want to drive down crime? Your words do not match your actions. Your government has raised the age of criminal responsibility, removed breach of bail condition as an offence, not strengthened bail laws. You have taken powers away from police to deal with public drinking and problem drunks; you abolished largely minimum mandatory sentencing; you rejected calls from our parliament to strengthen the laws in a number of ways; and you just spent two weeks in parliament, your final sittings for your term, and you have not strengthened the law. All you have done is brought in curfew legislation that you have not used. Can you not see the hypocrisy? Can you not see that Territorians hear you say one thing, but your actions do not match your words?

**Ms LAWLER:** I will point out that you were probably back in the lobby at the last sittings of parliament because we also passed the Liquor Legislation Amendment Bill, which had a number of aspects to it. One was regarding public drinking, increasing fines for public drinking. It also provided our transit safety officers with the ability to stop, search and pour out grog.

Yes, we did the legislation on curfew, the liquor amendment bill, some amazing legislation around water in the Northern Territory and the portable long-service leave, which you are not interested in, but is important legislation for women.

In the last sittings there were two bills brought in regarding crime and antisocial behaviour; both were strong legislation. When I was the minister for Transport I brought in legislation for pepper spray for transit safety officers and banning on buses. We have done the hard work of addressing immediacy issues around crime and strengthening our work on crime and antisocial behaviour in the Northern Territory. These are questions you can also ask Minister Potter later this week.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** I am well aware of who we can ask questions to, Chief Minister, and you are in the hot seat today. In the CLP's view, community safety and law and order should be the number one priority of any government. It should be the responsibility of the Chief Minister so that everyone in that community, and our police, understands that the buck stops with the Chief Minister. Law and order is the single biggest issue.

You have acknowledged that crime can have a negative impact on an economy, and to have a strong economy you must have law and order under control. Your gestures for me to ask the Attorney-General, the man who believes that gaoling is failing and that raising the age of criminal responsibility and removing mandatory sentencing makes our community safer—asking me to ask him these questions is ridiculous.

You then asked me to ask your disgraced Police minister questions, when he is the person who made the decision to remove PALIs from bottle shops without any plan in place to backfill them. You can see how your actions do not match your words. If the buck really stops with you, then you should have answers to these questions. Unfortunately, it is unsurprising that you do not.

**Madam DEPUTY CHAIR:** It was me giving you some friendly reminders that there are also opportunities in the other output groups to ask those ministers.

**Ms LAWLER:** To clarify, again, your gaoling is failing. I think Gerard Maley, your deputy—you are talking about deputies. This is an example of when I am answering your questions you are touching a phone ...

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** Are you talking about me again, Chief Minister, instead of answering the question?

**Ms LAWLER:** Yes, because I find it rude that when ...

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** Do not worry, I am listening.

**Ms LAWLER:** I am older; I like that when people ...

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** You are talking rubbish and making it hard to listen to.

**Ms LAWLER:** I am older and I like—maybe that is my schoolteacher ...

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** You want me to stare at you like a pupil because you are the school principal, and I am one of your students; I have to sit here and take it ...

**Ms LAWLER:** Yes. It is just manners that when you ask somebody a question you allow them to answer and listen to the answer ...

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** I am listening; you are not answering.

**Ms LAWLER:** It is polite, that is all.

**Madam DEPUTY CHAIR:** Everybody ...

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** You are not answering. You do not know the answer.

**Madam DEPUTY CHAIR:** Excuse me. We want to get back to good, old-fashioned Estimates, please. Less talking across the table to each other. Let us go back to a question, please. Leader of the Opposition, do you have a question?

**Ms LAWLER:** I am answering. I think it is polite that people listen when they ask a question and I provide an answer.

The Member for Namaŋjira, who is sitting beside you, and your deputy, Gerard Maley, are on the public record and in the media saying that they agreed gaoling was failing. Leader of the Opposition, you probably should check some of the statements that have been made by your members. I do not need to say anything because there really was not a question, just a long rant ...

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** You are just talking about us again instead of talking about your failures and your government.

**Madam DEPUTY CHAIR:** I remind you that we are at the whole-of-agency output still.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** There were three crime rallies at the front of Parliament House and one in Alice Springs which saw tens of thousands of people coming together to express their serious concerns about the state of law and order across the Territory. The one in Alice Springs was a huge proportion of the community. I think it was about 3,500 people. Did you attend any of those rallies to hear the concerns of people coming forward in their droves to express their huge level of concern about the way the Territory was going?

**Ms LAWLER:** Those crime rallies—we are talking about two years ago, are we? This is Estimates for this period. They were a number of years ago, Leader of the Opposition. I did not attend them.

In my electorate of Drysdale I continue to listen to the people. Wherever I go across the Northern Territory I have the opportunity—I am a parliamentarian who works hard and gets out in the public every day, seven days a week. People can look at my social media and see that. I am in public venues. I have lived in the Northern Territory for 60-odd years. People know me through my work, sport and my family. I have the opportunity to talk and listen to people. I do not necessarily need to go to a rally to understand what the issues are about crime.

You have seen since I became Chief Minister on 21 December that I have worked hard to address the issues of crime in the Northern Territory. Every day every decision I make is about something to do with addressing the issue of crime and antisocial behaviour in the Northern Territory.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** It is easy to say, Chief Minister ...

**Ms LAWLER:** No, it is not easy to say; it is what I do.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** We had two weeks of parliament. What happened in parliament over two weeks does not match your words or show action, as you say it does. Your government is not strengthening the laws or giving police better powers. You are talking about big budget numbers, but there are no tangible outcomes. With 200 police over five years, that is not something immediate that police can have today or tomorrow. That is something they might have in the future.

**Ms LAWLER:** By the end of June there will be, I think, 68 police officers graduating. The Police Commissioner will be able to deploy those. He can talk about how he will deploy those; that is an operational matter.

This parliamentary sittings—you keep going back to that—there was the curfew legislation, which is the highest legislation I could bring in as Chief Minister to address an issue of crime. There was also the work on the Liquor Legislation Amendment Bill. A large amount—the vast majority—of crime in the Northern Territory, whether that is domestic violence, stealing vehicles or any other crimes, is related to alcohol. We brought in and strengthened the liquor legislation. We brought in more rules, tightening rules for public drinking and increased the fine—up to \$880—for refusing to leave premises. We did that work in that two weeks of sittings.

I have answered this question a number of times. It would be useful for these public servants to have the opportunity to answer some questions that are not necessarily just political grandstanding.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** Just to confirm the Estimates process, the questions are to government ministers. The fantastic public servants are there to support you in doing your job, not to do your job for you. That is an important clarification to make.

Chief Minister, ironically, your liquor legislation increased the penalty for people who could be fined on the spot. That is after your government made such a small fine it was barely worth even infringing people for it. We have a government that has been all over the place for eight long years, let alone the 19 out of 23 years.

Moving to the public service, seeing as you raised it, something that is hugely concerning to us is that 959 Territory public employees were subjected to an assault or criminal behaviour whilst performing their work duties. What do you have to say about that? That is nearly 1,000 public servants.

**Ms LAWLER:** Having been probably the longest-serving public servant out of our parliamentary colleagues—it is about 35 or 38 years that I have been a public servant. I do not want to see—all of us would agree; nobody wants to see—anybody injured in the workplace.

That list of 1,000 people is broad. You could break it down. You will have that opportunity when talking to the agencies. That recorded assault might be a teacher in a special school—I am sure you understand this very well, Leader of the Opposition—with a five-year-old child who is angry, has a number of learning difficulties and bites or kicks a teacher. I can talk about that from experience. It might be on that end of the scale where it is a special-ed teacher assistant in a special school and a child hits that person and lashes out because they have been told that they have to get off a bike or a playground or something like that.

You go from that level, which is recorded—it is difficult. People working in those areas understand that. I have been a principal and been bitten and scratched by little children. You understand that and try to minimise the harm to you and your staff.

Then it increases along the continuum to when you have a doctor or a nurse dealing with an alcoholic or a drug-addled person, who gets assaulted, or a police officer who gets spat at. The continuum of those 1,000 people you talk about—Leader of the Opposition, you try to emphasise how bad it is. It is bad. No-one wants to be assaulted or abused in the workplace—nobody.

Everyone has the right to go to work and feel safe. I can assure our public servants that I would back them 100% in feeling safe in the workplace. Every chief executive officer of every one of my agencies, the Commissioner of Police or the Chief Executive Officer of Health, would always work to make sure that their staff are safe and put in measures to minimise harm to staff. That could be through professional development where staff are trained to avoid situations and having support staff or additional staff in place.

I can assure you, Leader of the Opposition, as a public servant, our leaders in the public service, our ministers and I do not ever want to see any public servant be injured in their workplace. It is not acceptable. I also say to Territorians that if they are one of those people—particularly, adults—they need to think about their behaviour and not do that.

When you talk about 1,000 people you need to break down that information and look at it because some of it is being perpetrated by young people with severe disabilities or mental health issues. We do not want to see that, but that is how it happens. Bundling them all up as one is not helpful for data.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** It still shows the pressure that public servants are under and the risks in their day-to-day roles. I think last year about \$10m was being spent on security guards at our hospitals, for example. We hear constantly about incidents where police, nurses and other frontline workers are being assaulted. Why is it that your government will not support minimum mandatory sentencing for assaults on frontline workers?

**Ms LAWLER:** We make sure that all of our staff feel safe and put in place actions. That varies from making sure we have a minimum number of teachers in remote communities, police in remote communities—and when people travel. We make sure through the leadership of our government agencies that our staff are always well looked after and they have professional learning and development.

Leader of the Opposition, you look to your legislation and to things which are one-size-fits-all. If we had those 1,000 cases in front of us there would be a different reason for every one of them. Your broadbrush approach with minimum levels or mandatory sentencing does not always address the issues. It is about the preventive and making sure that things are in place, but if it does occur it is different for a five-year-old biting a teacher to a 20-year-old assaulting a worker.

We will continue to work very carefully on that. We always want to make sure that our staff are safe. When you have broad, general legislation, it does not always hit where it should hit the mark.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** Your disgraced Police minister did not face any sanctions from you after it was revealed in the media that he had made what was described as misogynistic, homophobic and racist Facebook posts. You have kept him as the Police minister, and he has called for a review into racism of our police force. How can you possibly stand by him to continue in that role, particularly when he is holding police to a higher standard than what you hold him to?

**Ms LAWLER:** That statement that you just made is incorrect. First and foremost, the examples that you have given concerning Minister Potter were Facebook posts from 2004 or 2007 ...

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** It was 2019.

**Ms LAWLER:** ... so 12 or 13 years ago.

The Police Commissioner has come out very strongly, loudly and clearly and said that he does not want to see racism in the police force. Again, most of the examples given that I have seen have been things from 2002, 2004 or 2007. Nobody wants to see racism. We value the diversity of the Northern Territory, and we do not want to see racism at all in the Northern Territory. I have been very clear about that.

It was the Police Commissioner and the Anti-Discrimination Commissioner who said that there will be a review into the police force.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** Can you not see the hypocrisy of having your disgraced Minister for Police stay in that role and be going after our police? It beggars belief. People cannot accept that you have kept him in that role, yet he is the one dictating to police an outcome regarding allegations.

**Ms LAWLER:** He is not dictating to police.

**Madam DEPUTY CHAIR:** The question when we opened this session was: are there any agency-related whole-of-government questions on budget and fiscal strategy? I feel we are starting to go a bit off course.

**Mrs LAMBLEY:** Is that an attempt to gag this important debate? It sounds like it.

**Madam DEPUTY CHAIR:** No. It is a reminder of the purpose of why we are here. We are here for the Estimates Committee to scrutinise the Appropriation Bill.



**Mrs LAMBLEY:** Why do we have an offensive, racist Police minister, who posted a Facebook post as recent as 2019, sitting in a job presiding over racism in the police force? I mean, the hypocrisy is beyond belief.

**Ms LAWLER:** That is absolutely not correct.

**Madam DEPUTY CHAIR:** Do you have questions, Leader of the Opposition?

**Mrs LAMBLEY:** The question is: what are you going to do about it, Chief Minister?

**Madam DEPUTY CHAIR:** We are still with the Leader of the Opposition.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** The questions are the same as those from the Member for Araluen. How can you continue with that position? Our police are being investigated for racism, and you are holding the Police minister to a lower standard.

**Ms LAWLER:** Just be clear, the Facebook posts—Minister Potter is the best one to answer the questions regarding Facebook posts that were from many years ago ...

**Mrs LAMBLEY:** Five years.

**Ms LAWLER:** Minister Potter is the best person to answer, Member for Araluen. I do not know, and I would not be answering honestly about what happened in 2018 or 2017 on his Facebook posts. I will answer broadly and say that I support our Police minister, who is doing an outstanding job as Police minister. I also support our Police Commissioner and the work he is doing around racism. None of us accept racism in the police force, in our community or in our society, and we will continue to work hard on that.

**Mrs LAMBLEY:** You are better than that, Chief Minister. You have lowered your standards, and you are asking the whole of the police force to accept a standard which is not in keeping with any government, let alone you personally, Eva. You can do a lot better than that.

**Madam DEPUTY CHAIR:** Do you have a question, Member for Araluen?

**Mrs LAMBLEY:** No.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** Do you not see the hypocrisy? Do you not see how this is a spectacular lack of leadership for our police?

**Ms LAWLER:** I said that you need to ask Minister Potter that question, because we are talking, from my understanding ...

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** He only has his job because of you.

**Ms LAWLER:** Leader of the Opposition, let me finish! You ask me a question and then you rudely interrupt me.

I am being clear about it. Speak to Minister Potter because he can talk about exact dates and times. My understanding is that most of the Facebook posts related to racism or the issues you refer to—some of them were 15 years ago. I also personally think that people need to be able to be forgiven for things they have learnt from. If we all look back to 15 years ago—maybe we have done or said things but have grown in 15 years. Minister Potter was a young person in the Defence Force, and the comments he made—he is a very different person from Minister Potter today. That would be the same standard that I say for police. There are probably police officers from the TRG in 2002, 2005, 2007 or whatever dates who are now very different people in the police force. We have all grown, and our understanding of cross-cultural issues has grown in the Northern Territory.

Leader of the Opposition, you are just trying to get political point scoring here, but I believe Minister Potter has changed as a person and grown, and I would say that about members of the TRG. I am not going to criticise either of those for what happened in the past.

That said, I find racism of any sort abhorrent. I value our multicultural population in the Northern Territory. Conversations about racism annoy me because it grows distrust and a wedge between our population. Instead of trying to mend it, it breaks down population. I do not want to continue to have conversations about

racism. All it does is cause inflammation and concerns for me in the Northern Territory—a place that I love, and the multiculturalism of the Northern Territory which I love.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** We understand clearly that you would love to sweep everything under the carpet.

**Ms LAWLER:** That is not true.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** The reality is that these are critically important issues. Is this one of the reasons the Member for Fannie Bay was removed from the ICAC scrutiny committee recently and replaced by the Member for Port Darwin?

**Ms LAWLER:** No, because he was the Police minister, so it was not appropriate to have a Police minister on the ICAC committee.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** Your government has been embroiled in a number of share scandals. You are the Chief Minister because of the previous Chief Minister going down under a share scandal. Your deputy, Chansey Paech, had shares in an alcohol company at the time of Stronger Futures. The expiration of Stronger Futures, without a plan, caused so much destruction across the Northern Territory.

At the time, questions were asked about whether disclosures had been properly made in Cabinet. You made a comment at a media conference that you did not hear whether the disclosure had been made. What steps have you taken to make sure this will not happen again?

**Ms LAWLER:** A couple of things. First of all, Leader of the Opposition, you had shares as well. Your husband continues to have shares. I do not know if you should be squeaky clean here ...

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** To confirm, the Ministerial Code of Conduct applies to ministers.

**Ms LAWLER:** Yes. Again, we also need to point out for the public listening that it is easy to throw rocks. People in glass houses should not throw rocks, I have been led to believe.

When I became Chief Minister I put in place a review of conflict of interest. I believe that people want to do the right thing. Ministers could have shares as long as they did not conflict with the portfolios they held. That makes it difficult at times.

I have undertaken a review of conflict of interest. Kathleen Robinson, an exceptional public servant, the former CEO of the Department of Corporate and Digital Development, is finalising the work on the conflict of interest review. I will announce that soon.

That will provide greater clarity for how people can manage conflicts for shares and declaration, but it will also give a clearer way of managing them. At the moment there are about three bits of paper that ministers have to fill in to manage conflicts or our interests.

Some of them are not clear, some are updated annually and others can be updated more regularly than that. It has been unclear, so the review by Kathleen Robinson will provide greater clarity and direction. It will have recommendations. It is also looking at having an electronic method of updating, rather than a paper one, where members will be able to update their conflicts or public interests in a much more immediate or live way.

I firmly believe that a conflict of interest and the shares saga caught out a good, exceptional, long-term politician in the Northern Territory, just through mechanisms of reporting and management.

We are putting things in place so we can have it clearer for managing conflicts. There but for the grace of God go many of us. It is difficult in the Northern Territory because it is a small jurisdiction. I have five brothers and sisters, and I know how hard it is. Some are on different committees and have different businesses. It is difficult to make sure—particularly if you lead a busy life, as do your family members. I have 14 nephews and nieces in a heap of different roles. It is difficult to continue to manage conflicts and to update that immediately.

I have been leading that work as Chief Minister to improve things for Territorians. Our Indigenous Territorians have the complexity of multiple family relationships as well. It is difficult for people like Selena Uibo, who has a broad family network through the region near Numbulwar. It is hard in the Territory because the place is small.

I have a broad friendship group. I have worked at high levels in the public sector. I know people I went to school with. There are people in high-level positions who went to Darwin High School with me. You would not necessarily see that in other states.

To manage that we need strong mechanisms in place. In Cabinet—Ken Davies and Kylie Augusta, the Secretary of Cabinet, can attest to this—we have Cabinet papers, and we declare our conflicts. We declare our conflict before the meeting. If people need to leave the room, they leave during that meeting. That is recorded in the minutes of the Cabinet meeting.

Joel Bowden has five brothers and sisters. Some of them are in high-level positions in sporting organisations, for example. We work our hardest to make sure we manage our conflicts of interest.

We have had professional development with the ICAC Commissioner. The commissioner has put online courses that we can do. The ICAC Commissioner said that a conflict is not necessarily a bad thing, either perceived or real; it is how you manage it.

It was work I did when I came in as Chief Minister to review the conflict of interest. If you have the opportunity to be in government, Leader of the Opposition, it will benefit your future people as well. It benefits all of us. None of us want to do the wrong thing. We did not get into politics to do the wrong thing; we got into politics to improve the lives of Territorians. These small things can sometimes catch out people and that is not fair.

**Madam DEPUTY CHAIR:** Leader of the Opposition; just some housekeeping for the timing of your questions. At 12.30 pm we have a scheduled break for the lunch period.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** The report being prepared by Ms Kathleen Robinson PSM was due to be handed to government by 30 April. Have you not received it?

**Ms LAWLER:** I have received it. It will go through the Cabinet process. It will be announced, probably not this week. The report will be made public. I will do a media event for that.

**Mrs LAMBLEY:** I find it staggering that in 2023 we lost a Chief Minister. We are in 2024, and it seems that the current government does not understand what a conflict of interest is and what political campaigning is. In 2020 it used taxpayer funds to campaign in three remote communities on polling day.

Chief Minister, are you saying that you are just not smart enough to get your head around those two basic concepts of politics? Having a conflict of interest is politics 101. Knowing when you are campaigning and not campaigning is also politics 101. We have heard you all morning tell us these stories about how complicated it is and how difficult it is to comprehend and comply. What are you saying, that you have a team of people who are stupid? I just do not buy it; it is rubbish.

**Ms LAWLER:** Member for Araluen, there is greater scrutiny of politicians now. I can bet my bottom dollar that if I went back to the Shane Stone era or the Everingham era ...

**Mrs LAMBLEY:** Do not deflect; answer the question.

**Ms LAWLER:** No, I am not deflecting; I am answering the question ...

**Madam DEPUTY CHAIR:** Can we let the Chief Minister answer the question?

**Mrs LAMBLEY:** It is always about someone else; talk about yourself. We are here to hear from you and your government, not what happened 10 or 15 years ago—previous Chief Ministers who have come and gone who cannot defend themselves ...

**Madam DEPUTY CHAIR:** Member for Araluen, can we please let the Chief Minister answer your question?

**Mrs LAMBLEY:** We just heard this rant, this rubbish, all morning defending the indefensible.

**Madam DEPUTY CHAIR:** No, at the moment we are just hearing you ...

**Mrs LAMBLEY:** Whatever. Gag me if you like.

**Madam DEPUTY CHAIR:** Chief Minister ...

**Ms LAWLER:** I was just explaining ...

**Mrs LAMBLEY:** People are listening to this.

**Madam DEPUTY CHAIR:** Yes, people are listening, Member for Araluen. They would like to hear the Chief Minister's answer to your question.

**Mrs LAMBLEY:** All right, I will shut up now. Answer the question.

**Ms LAWLER:** I was saying, Member for Araluen, that I think there is greater scrutiny of politicians now. I reckon if you went back and looked throughout history that all of those Chief Minister probably had shares, did not declare conflicts and did a hell of a lot of other things that we cannot do now. That is a fact. There is greater scrutiny of politicians now.

Again I say that if you look back in history, you would probably see that all of those politicians travelled out to remote communities on polling day. I bet your bottom dollar that they all had shares in a heap of different companies. I will not go into all of that.

The bottom line is there is greater scrutiny. I have come in as Chief Minister. I am working hard to make sure that people do not do the wrong thing. I look for the best in people. I am an optimist, not like the Leader of the Opposition. My glass is always half full. I believe that people get into politics for the right reason; they want to do the right thing.

It is like managing anyone in the public service; if there is a really clear job description and everybody knows what they should be doing, people are a lot happier. My leadership style is having really clear leadership, rules, regulations and guidelines, then people do the right thing.

Member for Araluen, I am not stupid. I know that things needed to be really clear and tight because there is greater scrutiny on politicians.

**Mrs LAMBLEY:** Going back to the comments you made about racism in your ranks, the history of racism and recent racism, your Police minister was involved in posting racist posts on Facebook. Your comments about how you do not like to talk about racism, you do not like to think about it ...

**Ms LAWLER:** I did not say 'think'.

**Mrs LAMBLEY:** Recently you had upstanding Aboriginal leaders in the Northern Territory calling on you to apologise for not only the behaviour of your Police minister but also your Police Commissioner.

Think about the Aboriginal people in this room. How do you think they feel about you defending the indefensible and talking about these things as if they are past tense? They are not past tense. You talk constantly about what I did in 2012 or what Adam Giles did in 2015. You were harping on about it this morning, yet there were Facebook posts put up by your Police minister as recently as 2019 and, as the Opposition Leader said, you are trying to push it under the carpet.

You cannot do that, Chief Minister. At least acknowledge it, own it and apologise to the Aboriginal people who are deeply offended by your Police Commissioner and your Police minister. If you do not, the culture within that government agency will never change. Fish rot from the head down. You have two people at the top who deeply offended 30% of the population of the Northern Territory: Aboriginal people.

I should not be having to tell you that. You need to respond in a more thoughtful and considerate way.

**Ms LAWLER:** Was there a question?

**Mrs LAMBLEY:** What will you do about it? You cannot push it under the carpet or pretend it is not there because people are calling on you to apologise.

**Ms LAWLER:** I have not pushed it under the carpet. One of the things that we can go back to is the Kelly review, probably one of the best reviews that has been done by any government in the history—I know you do not like talking about history. The Kelly review has 18 recommendations, and one of those relates to the culture of the police force and the work that the Police Commissioner needs to do.

It talks about education. To me, education rather than punitive approaches is an important way to change behaviours. It talks about an educative approach regarding changing the culture of the police force. That is what I will be doing. You will have the opportunity to talk to the commissioner. That is what his focus will be. It is about education. Nobody accepts racism across the Northern Territory; we all find it abhorrent.

I need to continue to look forward and to make sure that our police force into the future is not racist. The police force today is a very different police force from when we talked about it in 2007 and 2004.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** In 2016 your government was elected off the back of the platform of open and transparent government. As part of that you promised to publish the cost of international travel for Territorians to see. That has not been updated since 23 June. The last published report was then Minister Manison's travel to Japan and Korea. No report for ministerial travel was published when then Chief Minister Fyles attended the United States and a range of other trips, including one by the Education minister and you. Why is international travel not being recorded?

**Ms LAWLER:** I believe it is up there. The travel has been updated. We provide those details.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** As of when?

**Ms LAWLER:** I have a public servant looking at that now. Our international travel has been minimal, but it is important. I went to Singapore in October. That provided a great opportunity to talk about student accommodation. The information is on the website.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** It has not been updated since June last year. When was it updated?

**Ms DOHERTY:** I confirm that the latest information for international travel for ministers was uploaded on the website as of this morning upon transmittal to the committee.

**Ms LAWLER:** Those details are also put out in media releases. We are transparent about our travel, which has been minimal.

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The committee suspended.

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**Madam DEPUTY CHAIR:** Welcome back. We are considering the whole of agency for the Department of the Chief Minister and Cabinet.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** Chief Minister, on 31 October last year the then Chief Minister, Natasha Fyles, sent an email to all public servants notifying them that Dr Frank Daly would no longer be the CEO of the Department of the Chief Minister and Cabinet. Given her handling of the bungled Chalker exit, what happened to Dr Daly?

**Ms LAWLER:** I will pass to Ken Davies, the CEO. What do you mean by what happened to Frank Daly? Can you provide some more detail on that?

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** He suddenly—I think it was on the Saturday night he was handing out awards at the public service excellence awards and that Sunday or Monday he was no longer in that role.

**Ms LAWLER:** I think that is the answer. I do not think we need to answer any further. He was no longer in that role.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** Was this another bungled exit by the former Chief Minister, like with the former Police Commissioner?

**Ms LAWLER:** No, it was not. I think it was a very smooth exit by the then Chief Executive Officer of Chief Minister and Cabinet. What information do you have?

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** I am just asking.

On Mix 104.9 on 3 June you said words to the effect of, 'Our economy is in a good position. The economy is going well, let us be clear.' What you continue to fail to acknowledge is all of the data and anecdotal evidence coming out which shows that Territorians in business are doing it very tough, numbers are down and our economic indicators are not in good shape; for example, state final demand for the quarter is down 7.9%.

Why do you continue to ignore the fact that our economy is in such a dire state? I find this interesting because earlier in the session you clearly drew a link between crime and the economy. When crime is bad our economy does worse, and there is no question that crime is bad. How can you continue with this rhetoric about the economy doing so well when you have not delivered a single major project in the last eight years of government? People are leaving and businesses are closing their doors. Any Territorian on the street can tell you that things are really tough out there.

**Ms LAWLER:** I base my work on facts. The next opportunity that I will have is when we get to Outputs 17, 18, 19, 20, 21 and 22. As Treasurer I will be able to provide, and I can have the Under Treasurer provide, information so that it may not be seen as political. For Territorians listening, you can go to budget 2024–25 and look on the website, where it says:

*The Territory's economy is well supported by a pipeline of public sector investment projects and programs to support jobs.*

*Several large-scale private investment projects in the mining sector are also underpinning growth in 2023–24, led by the Barossa project and related investment at the Darwin LNG plant.*

I am reading from the Budget and Regional Overview, so I am talking about facts.

State final demand, which excludes trade, is forecast to grow by 1.9% in 2024–25. The quarterly figures add to the overall yearly figure. You intermingle and mix between GSP and SFD when it suits you, but gross state product is forecast to grow by 2.3% in 2024–25 before accelerating to 7.1% in 2025–26 as LNG exports from the Barossa project commence. For Territorians listening, these are the facts.

The Leader of the Opposition continues to run down the economy of the Northern Territory, and I am not sure why. I go on the facts, and I hope that the shadow Treasurer, the Member for Namatjira, also does so. This is just you talking politically, as I am sure he has read the budget books and can talk positively about our budget position.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** Presumably the budget books are based on data.

CommSec said that we were the worst-performing economy in the nation for five-and-a-half years. In December 2023 Deloitte Access Economics noted that gross state product is projected to contract in the short term. ABS data shows that dwelling approvals are down. Master Builders says that we are on track to have the lowest rate of home building since records began.

The Darwin major business group conducted its own report into the state of the economy and found that there is a terrible lack of private investment in the Territory and that the Territory will not reach its 2030 targets and will be \$6bn smaller by 2030 if private investment does not increase.

How can all those indicators be wrong?

**Ms LAWLER:** I was trying to grab my budget books rather than just the overview. I will have the opportunity to talk more about that in the Treasury outputs.

We know the issue around CommSec. You obviously do not listen and understand averages.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** How are they all wrong? You can pick one that is wrong, but how can all of them be wrong?

**Madam DEPUTY CHAIR:** The Chief Minister was answering the question.

**Ms LAWLER:** You can talk about CommSec, and we have addressed that one.

Have a look at the budget books and all the indicators that are there. The Territory economy forecast provides information on population. Employment in the Territory has trended up over the past six months and is currently at the highest levels on record. Year-on-year employment growth is expected to increase by approximately 1.5%.

I know you want to look for the bad in our economy. You talk about the population decreasing. The population is estimated to increase by 0.8% and 0.9% in 2024–25 before stabilising at around 1.1%.

The Territory economy is in a strong position, and this will continue. I was looking for the list of things that have not reached FID. There is a large number of projects that are not in this budget. Again, that is something that you do not want to hear, but all figures for the onshore oil and gas industry are not in the budget. The major projects that have not reached FID are not in our budget. We can be optimistic about our budget position and our economic outlook in the Northern Territory.

I also understand that there are families who are finding it difficult with the cost of living. That is why in this budget we invested considerable money for the cost of living for Territorians who are doing it tough.

I met with the ANZ Bank recently, which told me that there are basically two groups. There are baby boomers like me who have paid off their houses, are doing quite well and are not feeling the impact of high interest rates. There is also a group of people who have been in a good position because inflation has been low—literally, the cash rate has been low. Now they are feeling the pinch as interest rates are going up. There are two groups in our population. There is a group that continues to spend, and a group of younger people who have high mortgages and are finding the cost of living difficult.

That is why we made sure there were things in our budget to address that—an additional \$50 in Back-to-School vouchers and an additional \$50 for concessions holders. That is the two bookends of the population—people with young families and older Territorians getting an additional \$50 on top of the \$500 concession. We kept our motor vehicle registration costs down under 1%. It is again pushing the right levers to keep the cost of living down.

We know the issue of power. We have put an additional \$55m into the community service obligation to try to keep down power prices. It was good that the federal government jumped in with \$350 a year for every Australian to cover power prices.

We understand that the cost of living is impacting individuals. That said, there are plenty of businesses in the Northern Territory that are doing well. For example, our civil contractors in the construction industry are flat out. I spoke to people in the construction industry at the GlenTi. They are busy because there are plenty of roads being built in the Northern Territory. Our government has put in ...

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** Public sector projects—is that correct?

**Ms LAWLER:** A range of projects. Our government is committed to a \$4.4bn infrastructure pipeline of works. That is a good thing. The Territory has always been built on strong public infrastructure ...

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** Do you not want to see an increase in private investment?

**Ms LAWLER:** Absolutely, we want to see an increase in private investment. That is these projects. You talk about major projects that have not been completed. Northcrest is on the list of major projects. That is well and truly under way.

There are private sector projects. The Barossa project is private investment. I think it is a \$7bn private investment project. You will not get any bigger than the Barossa project unless you go back to another INPEX. It is a huge project that is under way now.

You keep saying there is no private investment. The Barossa is private investment with Santos. Stop telling lies ...

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** No, Chief Minister ...

**Ms LAWLER:** The Barossa project is a private investment project of \$7bn. Then there are ...

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** Was your government responsible for delivering the Barossa project? Is that what you are trying to claim?

**Ms LAWLER:** No. You are talking about private investment.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** You are trying to say that construction is busy. I was saying to you that it is busy, not because of private sector construction but because of public works.

**Ms LAWLER:** That is right.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** One of the criticisms of ...

**Ms LAWLER:** I then said that the Barossa is private.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** Sure, but that is not what is making ...

**Ms LAWLER:** Why do you not let me finish my conversation before you interrupt ...

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** My point is ...

**Madam DEPUTY CHAIR:** Excuse me, Leader of the Opposition! Okay, let us go back to the old-school format of where the Leader of the Opposition asks the question and the Chief Minister answers. At the moment, the Chief Minister is answering the question ...

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** She is just giving a long, rabbiting answers. She just spent 10 minutes talking about cost of living. I am asking her about the economy.

**Madam DEPUTY CHAIR:** Leader of the Opposition, you continue to interject, then change the subject and ask new questions. You kept introducing new things. Chief Minister, the ball is back in your court to answer this question.

**Ms LAWLER:** You interjected when I was talking about public spend. There is a huge public spend for infrastructure. That is what keeps our businesses busy and Territorians in jobs.

You interjected about private investment so I jumped to the Barossa project, which is private investment through Santos.

At page 23 of the Budget and Regional Overview there is a long list of the projects that have not reached FID. They are projects such as the carbon capture hub. The Member for Braitling did not even know what carbon capture was. This is a huge private investment in the Northern Territory. There are data centres as well.

There are amazing projects relating to mining, whether that is Mount Todd, Merlin Diamond Project or Nolans rare earth. None of these are in our economic forecast, and they are not in our budget at all. Even our own projects we are investing in, like AROWS—the Adelaide River Off-stream Water Storage—are not included. There is also the Middle Arm Sustainable Development Precinct.

I am optimistic about the economy. You continue to talk down the economy. The other one relates to Defence. Defence spend is huge. We have not got to that output, and I do not know if we will today. The spend with Defence is substantial. We are talking about \$17bn across the north of Australia.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** This is not a Territory project or Territory government money.

**Ms LAWLER:** What do you want? I do not understand. I do not think you understand. We have federal government investment, private investment and Northern Territory investment. That is what the economy is. There will not be one.

The CLP seems to see things in one dimension. Of course you will have private investment. There is \$7bn worth of private investment in the Barossa. There will be \$17bn worth of federal government investment. There will be the Northern Territory Government's strong investment with infrastructure. All of those add to the mix, which drives the economy and is why you are seeing those GSP and SFD results.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** All you are talking about is future things that may or may not happen. None of them seem to be within your control. I am talking about Master Builders saying that we are on track to build the least number of homes since records began. The Darwin major business group's report found that private investment is very low. We have ABS data showing, for example, population figures. There was an ABC story not that long ago saying that over 17,000 people had departed and only 14,000 had moved here, with net migration at 3,270. People are leaving. We had businesses closing their doors. We have CommSec saying that we are the worst-performing economy in the nation. All the data keeps adding up.

Is everyone wrong? Are you the only person who is right? All these other economic indicators and reports are wrong. Is that what you are saying?



**Ms LAWLER:** I am saying that you are probably just bundling them all up and providing a negative view. I have just written them down and will go through them.

Master Builders talking about private builds—first of all, let us be clear. Interest rates are high, and banks are not lending. They are two things that the Northern Territory Government cannot necessarily control. They are also coming off the back of a high build period of private homes being built. That is a fact.

Master Builders also needs to be aware—I am sure it is—that there is another factor. We have \$4bn of remote housing over the next 10 years. We also have the federal government, which will work with the Northern Territory Government to build 11,000 affordable and social housing in the Northern Territory. Every builder in the Northern Territory will be busy building homes. There will be so much work, which is why we put \$119m into training to make sure that we have the apprentices needed to build in the Northern Territory.

The private builds have been low. It goes in peaks and troughs. I understand that, but the reason for that is things that we cannot control relating to banks, bank lending and interest rates.

The next one relates to the Darwin major business group, which talked about private investment. We have substantial private investment with the Barossa project—\$7bn. Then there a whole list of projects are about to reach FID, including the D1 data centre and mining projects such as Nolans and Arafura rare earths.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** Which major project has your government delivered?

**Ms LAWLER:** They are all projects on the cusp of being delivered. The Northern Territory Government's various agencies have worked to support them to deliver. Our government has been involved in supporting the Barossa project, whether that has been through environmental approvals or liaison. They all need government to support them.

There has been substantial work on Defence; the Darwin major business group and Master Builders know better than anybody the work with Defence. There is a huge pipeline of work in Defence, so stop being negative and think about all the work happening at Tindal, Bradshaw training range and at Robertson Barracks. The Darwin major business group is aware of those big projects. Of course, we have the investment in our own infrastructure investments. We are doing the Adelaide River Off-stream Water Storage, which will be the biggest infrastructure project since the railway was built. The Northern Territory population ...

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** Chief Minister, it is all 'will be'. Everything you have talked about is in the future concept.

**Madam DEPUTY CHAIR:** Leader of the Opposition, the Chief Minister is answering the question.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** It is like telling a fairytale or she is reading me a bedtime story.

**Madam DEPUTY CHAIR:** No. The Chief Minister is answering the question.

**Ms LAWLER:** In relation to population, again you are repeating the same things that you have already asked me for today. If you go to the budget books you will see that the population has gone up by 0.8%, or the prediction in 2024–25 is 0.9%. Into the forward estimates it will go up by 1.1%, so the Northern Territory's population will increase. There are people who leave the Territory; that is a fact, as it is the sort of population we have ...

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** But there are more people leaving than coming.

**Ms LAWLER:** No, they are not. Leader of the Opposition, I thought it was just the Member for Katherine who did not understand numbers and maths. Read the budget books. Yes, there might be more interstate migration ...

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** Are these your forecasts? Do you want me to read your forecast?

**Ms LAWLER:** There are more overseas migrants coming to the Territory. Our population in the Northern Territory is growing. That is a fact. I can give you the budget books if you like. There is 0.9%, 0.8%, 1.1%, 1.1%—the population is continuing to grow in the Northern Territory. Yes, you may have anecdotally four friends you know of who have told you or your aunty or cousin or someone else that they have left the Territory. There are always people who leave the Territory. Our interstate migration has been—I think you gave the figures—800 people in the last quarter, but there is growth in our population. There is growth through

births as always, and there is growth with overseas migration, which is why I have been lobbying the federal government hard to continue to see increases in international students and migrants.

Leader of the Opposition, of course I accept Master Builders or the Darwin major business group, but you have cherrypicked the information of their work that suits your argument rather than looking at the facts and figures in the budget books. We are not even up to Treasury yet.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** Chief Minister, how long have you been Treasurer for?

**Ms LAWLER:** Two-and-a-half years or something like that.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** At a minimum, do you take any responsibility for the state of the Territory's economy under that time?

**Ms LAWLER:** I take 100% responsibility for the economy. The economy in the Northern Territory is in a good position. GSP is up by 2.3% and will accelerate to 7.1%. I accept the responsibility as Treasurer. I work every day to grow the economy, whether that is in meetings with business holders or in the work I have done concerning the onshore oil and gas industry.

We have delivered a new industry for the Northern Territory from beginning to end. When we have Tamboran reach FID in the next few weeks and we see production at the Beetaloo, it will be an amazing thing for the work that this Labor government has done.

It will go down in history as exceptional work from our government, from doing the review, the 135 recommendations, taking that social licence and the SREBA. The work we have done with a small public service to deliver a brand-new industry that will bring revenue and royalties to the Northern Territory is something that every Labor member from 2016 until 2024 can be proud of. It will go down in history as a landmark time in the Northern Territory when we delivered a completely new industry which will drive and underpin our economy into the future. You cannot say that you have done anything.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** That is extraordinary.

**Ms LAWLER:** It is truly an extraordinary, amazing achievement for a small government in Australia. Other states such, as Victoria, have backed away from doing the hard work. Our Labor government has done the hard work.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** It is an extraordinary claim because your government put a moratorium on gas, has not been able to deliver gas for the Territory for eight years and has failed to shore up gas supply for Territorians. It is an extraordinary claim for a government that has done so much damage to the Territory's reputation as a safe place to invest—and the delays in our onshore gas industry. To hang your hat on that is incredible, especially because your team is so divided. When Natasha Fyles was the Chief Minister she could not bring herself to say the word 'gas'; your candidate in Alice Springs has been on the record saying that she is against gas; your deputy, Chansey Paech is against gas; and your party is against gas.

**Ms LAWLER:** There is no question; you are providing some running commentary. Our government has taken the vast majority of the community with us, and the election is in eight weeks. The moratorium provided the opportunity to have the HFI review, to do it in a comprehensive way and to have the social licence for a clear pathway on every recommendation that needed to be implemented. That information has always been on the website, and we have been transparent.

There have been people against the onshore oil and gas industry, but we have worked our way through that, bit by bit over time, to our position now. We have shored up our supply of gas for the Northern Territory and have an agreement with Tamboran that the Territorians will get the first gas out of the Beetaloo. I am proud of the work of the Gunner government, the Natasha Fyles' government and my government to go 'from whoa to go' to get a new industry off the ground. You will never be able to say that because you will never be able to do the work we have done over the last eight years.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** Is your parliamentary team united on gas?

**Ms LAWLER:** Absolutely.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** Why did your candidate say that she does not support gas?

**Ms LAWLER:** She is not in my parliamentary team; she is a candidate? My team is supportive of the onshore oil and gas industry.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** I am confident that we will not see our pro-gas corflute in the Member for Nightcliff's electorate.

Chief Minister, you seem to like to refer to your budget books a lot so I will help you out. When it comes to population your target is to reach 300,000 by 2030, but your papers show you cannot achieve that. Is that correct?

**Ms LAWLER:** Yes, it is correct. They were stretch figures ...

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** What is a stretch figure? Is it like a yoga kind of figure or a Pilates figure?

**Madam DEPUTY SPEAKER:** Leader of the Opposition, you asked the question, the Chief Minister is answering it.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** I do want to know what a stretch figure is.

**Madam DEPUTY SPEAKER:** She is answering the question.

**Ms LAWLER:** Maybe you should do some management courses. They were figures that came out of the TERC report; they were not my figures.

**Mrs Finocchiaro** interjecting.

**Ms LAWLER:** Lia, do not do your fake laugh; it is unbecoming.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** You cannot pass the buck any more if you tried.

**Ms LAWLER:** I am not passing the buck, I will tell you where the figures came from. The \$40bn by 2030, as well as the figures on population—you can go back and look at the TERC report. Of course, we are still continuing to drive for those figures. You must have targets. By the way, Leader of the Opposition, stretch targets are targets that you will need to stretch to achieve; you will have to push to achieve those targets.

Yes, it will be a big ask. It would be a big ask when you see our increases of 1.1%. We would need at least a 3% or 4% increase in our population. That is why I have worked so hard on Middle Arm and appeared before the Senate inquiry into Middle Arm. We need projects like Middle Arm. We need 20,000 people—more staff and more employees. I will continue to drive for population numbers. I will also drive to achieve the onshore oil and gas industry and Arafura Resources—all those where we need more people in the Territory. Yes, I do not think we will reach that target.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** Is part of why you are not going to reach that target because you spent something like \$15m pursuing Boundless Possible, which clearly did not work and has been scrapped by your government?

**Ms LAWLER:** What was the question? I do not understand it. Boundless Possible was a marketing program.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** It was designed to bring people to the Territory.

**Ms LAWLER:** It was a marketing program promoting the Northern Territory.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** It did not work.

**Ms LAWLER:** I am sure it raised the profile of the Northern Territory and provided the target of promoting the Northern Territory.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** How can Territorians have confidence in what is a real target that will be achieved and what is the stretch target? How is the everyday Territorian meant to decipher between your types of targets?

**Ms LAWLER:** The everyday Territorian just wants to know that they are in a safe environment, can have a good school for their kids to go to, have great hospitals to go to, know that their kids can play sport and have the opportunity to catch up with friends, can go to festivals and can do all of those sorts of things. I do not think Territorians are all that fussed about stretch target or a target of 300,000, but it provides a focus for

public servants for the work they do and the work ministers do to push public servants and the government agencies in driving the economy and the work we all do.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** It goes to integrity because this is a number you have sprouted. You just told me that you have been the Treasurer for two-and-a-half years—this figure appeared in the last budget as well—then you tried to deflect it and say that it was the TERC report's number, not my number, even though you have adopted it in successive budgets that are your budgets. People do care about population growth and the numbers that government is talking about.

Going back to my earlier comments on crime where you have a government saying one thing but its actions do not match its words, if you are out sprouting a 300,000-strong population for the Territory when you know that there is no pathway to achieve it, how can Territorians have any confidence in the figures you are putting out there?

**Ms LAWLER:** It is still six years off 2030, so we will continue to drive our projects to get to that population. Projects like Arafura Resources that you do not support—we heard you went out with your colleagues, I think it was Littleproud, where you did not support the federal government's investment of \$840m into a rare earths project ...

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** That is absolutely untrue.

**Ms LAWLER:** No, it is true. That is what we will continue

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** Were you there, Chief Minister?

**Madam DEPUTY CHAIR:** No interjections, please.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** You were not there. She is trying to say that I said something I absolutely did not say.

**Madam DEPUTY CHAIR:** The Chief Minister is going to finish answering the question, then you can respond and ask your next question.

**Ms LAWLER:** We will continue to do the work needed to drive population growth in the Northern Territory—the work on Middle Arm and Arafura Resources. There are smaller projects, like the Darwin Convention Centre hotel with CEL Australia to build a new hotel—that is about \$100m—and we will do the headworks. It is about driving the convention market and tourism, but it is also about jobs. We need people to work in the hotel.

We have also done big work on housing and having a flow of land release across the Northern Territory, such as work in Kilgariff and the subdivisions going into Holtze and Kowandi, which is a private investment. The Larrakia Development Corporation is doing the Larrakia cultural centre, which is a \$50m-odd nice project. The NLC has another \$50m-odd to build a new headquarters at Berrimah. A subdivision is going in—I think it is Malayla—Palmerston through Larrakia Development Corporation.

We will continue to develop projects that will get us as close as we can to that 300,000 population. We have about 256,000 people in the Northern Territory; we need another 40,000. We are aiming for 20,000 for Middle Arm. We will continue to push to get to that target.

I have not heard from the Leader of the Opposition about her target population for the Territory. Will she even have a target?

That work was done through TERC. There were exceptional people on TERC. They provided those targets and what we needed to do. That is the work we are doing—implementing those TERC recommendations.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** When I asked you whether the everyday Territorian can have confidence in your numbers, you reflected and said that people just want to be safe and have a hospital they can go to ...

**Ms LAWLER:** Schools—all of those things.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** We have rolling code yellows at Royal Darwin Hospital. It is a hospital in crisis. We have crime totally out of control. The things that people care about are not under control under your government. Things have become so much worse across all of those indicators you mentioned. We cannot achieve these stretch targets. Is your \$40bn economy a stretch target?

**Ms LAWLER:** I will start with the hospital. We have amazing people who work in the hospital. One of the issues we face in the Northern Territory is that we have a chronically ill population. It is a complex population. Our government has invested in health with \$200m in the budget and an extra \$100m ongoing.

The hospital and medical places across the world—not just Australia but in the Northern Territory—are struggling to get staff. That is a fact. Leader of the Opposition, it would not be any different if you were in government or I am. Getting nurses and people to work in our hospital system across Australia and the world is hard. After COVID a large group in the medical population decided they did not want to continue their career in medicine. That is a fact.

A code yellow in our hospital is a way of managing when there is a peak. With the flu epidemic in the last few weeks, of course, you will see rises. A good Chief Minister and Treasurer lines up with the money to follow the issues. We are putting in that 32-bed modular facility—you might have seen the renders of it; it will look fantastic in the area near the car park at the end of the hospital.

That is what government does. When there are issues with Corrections, it puts more money into Corrections. There was more money for temporary cells with transportables. We have done the same with the hospital, with putting in an extra 32-bed transportable facility.

That is what a Chief Minister who is on the ball and aware of what the issues are does—makes sure she responds to that. Leader of the Opposition, I am aware of what Territorians want. In the last two budgets when I have been Treasurer I have had the opportunity to make sure the dollars line up with the issues we face as a community. That is on the record regarding police, hospitals and Corrections. I have busted a boiler to make sure we have more money for Education because I know that will be a game changer for the Northern Territory.

Territorians understand that. If a Territorian does not understand that, come and see me at the markets on a Friday night at Palmerston. I am happy to have a good, solid conversation about the work that I am doing to drive the Northern Territory forward.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** Your government committed \$10m through the Local Jobs Fund to AAI to manufacture aeroplanes in the Territory. How many planes have been made in the Territory?

**Ms LAWLER:** That is an amazing project, which is well and truly under way. They are in the process of negotiating some land at East Arm. I will not go into too many details about that in case it has not been made public. AAI will be able to produce aircraft in the Northern Territory in the future.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** Has it built any yet?

**Ms LAWLER:** You have a total lack of understanding of how you need to build an aircraft. It has prototypes and work that it is doing at the moment. It has been working with government since 2020 to establish the new flying boat manufacturing refurbishment, testing and maintenance facility in Darwin.

The Northern Territory Government provided \$3m equity to the company. AAI has drawn down \$2.5m of that loan. It will start repaying that loan in August this year. It will have a repayment schedule. It is seeking a site for the manufacturing facility at East Arm and expects it to be operational by late 2025. That is Land Development Corporation land. That is the work that is under way.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** How many stage milestone payments have been made?

**Ms LAWLER:** That will be a question for when Mr Drabsch or Alister Trier are here. We can go through that then. We can do that later. It is a great project, but it is one that has to follow through. You have a very unrealistic understanding of how you would get something like that project off the ground.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** How much money has your department allocated for treaty?

**Ms LAWLER:** Can we just check that we are in the right output? Have we moved on?

**Madam DEPUTY CHAIR:** We are still on whole-of-agency.

**Ms LAWLER:** That is one for Minister Paech. You will have to ask that one tomorrow.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** No, it is part of your department.

**Ms LAWLER:** There are lot of things that are in the Department of the Chief Minister, but it is not part of my work. It is for Minister Paech. Are we still in Output 11.1?

**Madam DEPUTY CHAIR:** We are still in whole-of-government, and we still have another 10 output groups to go for the Department of the Chief Minister and Cabinet. Following that, we have the Department of Treasury and Finance, then Territory Development talking about infrastructure. Following that, we have Industry and Trade, then Major Projects.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** Can I just confirm that the department of the Chief Minister is not responsible for treaty?

**Madam DEPUTY CHAIR:** Just one moment. I will go through the outputs of the Attorney-General.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** I do not want to get to Attorney-General and have him saying, 'You should have asked that in Chief ...

**Madam DEPUTY CHAIR:** Just bear with me for one moment. If you go to dot point five of 1.1 of Minister Paech's session tomorrow morning, you will see that the Minister for Aboriginal Affairs and Treaty is responsible for Aboriginal Affairs policy and coordination, Aboriginal lands strategic policy, negotiation of treaty or treaties and the Office of Aboriginal Affairs. Can we direct that question to Mr Paech in Output 1.0 tomorrow morning?

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** Yes. Chief Minister, do you share your deputy's view that this is a priority for the Territory?

**Ms LAWLER:** Treaty is one that was put on hold throughout the Voice referendum. Since then there have been two symposiums, one in Alice Springs and one in Darwin. The Attorney-General can provide more information. The information that came from those symposiums was that there needs to be broader understanding and consultation regarding treaty. I support that there needs to be further conversations and information regarding treaty.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** Is it a priority of your government?

**Ms LAWLER:** There are lots of priorities for my government. I have spoken broadly and strongly today that my first priority is addressing the issues of crime and antisocial behaviour in the Northern Territory. It is about growing the workforce in the Northern Territory and addressing the cost of living. There are multiple priorities that I have as Chief Minister. It is not just one or the other.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** In the last couple of days we have seen a fiasco regarding Territory Day and a lot of finger-pointing from the Minister for Major Events, from the department, from you to Major Events and the Aboriginal Areas Protection Authority. Explain to Territorians why fireworks cannot go ahead at Mindil Beach this year.

**Ms LAWLER:** I did run through this in the media yesterday. It is probably another minister ...

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** The Aboriginal Areas ...

**Ms LAWLER:** Just wait and let me finish.

**Madam DEPUTY CHAIR:** One moment, please. The Chief Minister ...

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** She just said yesterday; today the Aboriginal Areas Protection ...

**Madam DEPUTY CHAIR:** Hey, everybody! I am the Chair here. Leader of the Opposition, let the Chief Minister answer the question. In all fairness, she was answering and you jumped in again. Can we finish answering this question, then if you have follow-up, you can go there?

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** Sure, I just want to comment again ...

**Ms LAWLER:** No, let me answer.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** It needs to be updated to today. I do not need yesterday's information. It keeps changing. What is today's?

**Madam DEPUTY CHAIR:** Leader of the Opposition! Come on, fair go.

**Ms LAWLER:** The information I have has not changed since yesterday. There is a Minister for Major Events; he might be the person to answer. My understanding is that there needed to be an authority certificate to have the fireworks at Mindil Beach. Major Events had not organised that. They thought they would run out of time so they moved the event to the Waterfront. That is the situation, I believe.

I had that information passed on to me. I said at the media event, I think it was on ABC radio—I woke at 6.30 am to my own voice saying that I do not want to see Mindil Beach markets stalls' income diminished. I love Mindil Beach markets; they are truly an amazing part of the Territory and a reason people come here.

I understand that there will be opportunities for stallholders from Mindil Beach to be there for Territory Day, which is Monday 1 July, so they can gather an income. They would have possibly lost income by not having the fireworks at Mindil Beach. In future, Major Events needs to tick off all the right processes and procedures with AAPA. I think there was a breakdown in communication between AAPA and Major Events in regard to what they needed and what they did not have.

The fireworks will be at the Waterfront this year, but I think we would all love them to go back to Mindil Beach. It is beautiful seeing the fireworks over the sea, high tide or low tide.

That is where it is up to, Leader of the Opposition. I am wondering why we are getting into these small operational matters when we have important outputs to get through.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** It is a very big deal to Territorians. It is a significant day when we celebrate the achievement of self-government, which is huge in our history, and we should be proud and protective of that. Has the Territory Day fireworks at Mindil Beach ever required a certificate from AAPA before?

**Ms LAWLER:** I do not know if Territory Day has, but BASSINTHEGRASS has, and the Mindil Beach markets have, I suspect. These questions would be best answered by the Minister for Major Events rather than me. Let us face it, nobody loves Territory Day more than I do. I love it.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** You are the Chief Minister. If you wanted Territory Day to happen at Mindil Beach, you could make that decision. Is that true?

**Ms LAWLER:** No, Leader of the Opposition.

**Madam DEPUTY CHAIR:** The Chief Minister was answering the question.

**Ms LAWLER:** I do not know what sort of Chief Minister you would be, but I do not pull rank. I allow people whose responsibility it is to follow the right processes, rather than jumping in and squashing people.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** Who made the decision to move Territory Day?

**Ms LAWLER:** I would say it was the CEO of Major Events.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** Not the minister?

**Ms LAWLER:** No. I would say the CEO of Major Events would have realised. Anybody who has run events would know that you need surety. She probably worked out that she was backing up against time lines, so made a decision around that.

It will be a great Territory Day. There have been Territory Days in the past at the Waterfront.

Have you not got a conflict with the Waterfront that you should be declaring, probably right now?

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** I am not talking about the Waterfront; I am talking about Mindil Beach.

**Madam DEPUTY CHAIR:** We are still on whole-of-government outputs.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** Surely then because AAPA came out, I believe in the media this morning, and confirmed that no permit had been applied for and that no complaint had been made—does this not leave the government in a position where it could go ahead at Mindil Beach?

**Ms LAWLER:** It is a decision that has been made. I will leave that to the Major Events CEO to have those conversations or respond to them.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** Do you not think that the Minister for Major Events has anything to do with this or any responsibility?

**Ms LAWLER:** I am obviously busy in Estimates all day, so I have not had a conversation with the Minister for Major Events today.

**Madam DEPUTY CHAIR:** Leader of the Opposition, you have the Minister for Major Events at 8 am on Tuesday 18 June. That will fall into Output Group 3.0, I believe.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** I have no further questions. I have asked all my questions in the opening statement as it relates to all the other outputs. There are a few more outputs to go, but I thank all the department staff for their hard work. I know that hours and hours across weeks and weeks go into preparing your ministers whom you support in appearing.

**Ms LAWLER:** As you said, these poor people have not had an opportunity to ...

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** They have. I asked all my questions in the opening statement.

**Ms LAWLER:** No; you have not had an opportunity to talk about the work that they did. It was purely political.

**Madam DEPUTY CHAIR:** We are not finished with this agency yet. Does the Member for Araluen or the Member for Mulka have any questions?

That concludes consideration of agency-related whole-of-government questions on budget and fiscal strategy.

**OUTPUT GROUP 11.0 – ADVICE AND COORDINATION**  
**Output 11.1 – Strategic Policy Coordination and Engagement**

No questions.

**OUTPUT GROUP 12.0 – TERRITORY REGIONAL GROWTH**  
**Output 12.1 – Regional Development, Local Government and Aboriginal Interpreters**

No questions.

**OUTPUT GROUP 13.0 – INVESTMENT TERRITORY**  
**Output 13.1 – Major, Significant and Government-facilitated Projects**

**Ms LAWLER:** I have with me Kelly Ralston, the Territory Investment Commissioner, and Jason Schoolmeester, the Major Projects Commissioner. Behind me is Alister Trier, the Investment Territory and Chair Gas Taskforce.

**Mr GUYULA:** Last year I raised questions about consultation of Larrakia families on the Middle Arm development. The Senate inquiry hearings into Middle Arm held in April this year showed from all Larrakia parties and the NLC that appropriate consultation had not taken place and that free prior and informed consent had not occurred. Nigel Browne, CEO of Larrakia Development Corporation, said that support for the Middle Arm ...

**Madam DEPUTY SPEAKER:** Sorry, Member for Mulka, my apologies for interrupting. My concern is that this may be a question for Territory Development, which is Output Group 25, with Louise McCormick, after Treasury. The public servants we have here are not the ones driving the project. We will postpone.

That concludes consideration of Output 13.1 and Output Group 13.0.



**OUTPUT GROUP 14.0 – DARWIN WATERFRONT CORPORATION**  
**Output 14.1 – Darwin Waterfront Corporation**

No questions.

**Ms LAWLER:** I cannot believe the CLP has not one question about Investment Territory. Shame.

**OUTPUT GROUP 15.0 – GOVERNMENT SUPPORT**  
**Output 15.1 – Support to ministers and Leader of the Opposition**  
**Output 15.2 – Support to the Administrator**  
**Output 15.3 – Government Services**

No questions.

**OUTPUT GROUP 16.0 – CORPORATE AND SHARED SERVICES**  
**Output 16.1 – Corporate and Governance**

**Madam DEPUTY SPEAKER:** The committee will now move onto Output Group 16.0, Corporate and Shared Services, Output 16.1, Corporate and Governance. Are there any questions?

**Mr YAN:** What was the total spent settling legal matters, paying judgment or satisfying legal cost orders in the last financial year of the last reporting period?

**Mr DAVIES:** The total cost for finalised, and some ongoing beyond this financial year, for legal services expenditure was \$1,292,829m.

**Mr YAN:** Could we have a breakdown of what those legal matters were for that amount?

**Ms LAWLER:** That was a written question, and I think you have it. It was written question 693 sub-question nine.

**Mr YAN:** Do I have that in global questions?

**Mr DAVIES:** Yes, and it is itemised.

**Mr YAN:** I will go back and find that. What has been the total cost of marketing and media for your agency for the reporting period?

**Mr DAVIES:** The total cost of marketing and communications across the financial year was \$841,000 inclusive of design commission and placement costs. To give you context, that covered issues like recruitment notices, bereavement notices, office closures, cyclone awareness, Government House, NT Defence Week, Bombing of Darwin, Kite Festival, Anzac Day, voluntary assisted dying consultation and so on. There is a whole range of dot points. It has been provided in the question on notice.

**Mr YAN:** Would you say that those just listed have been the major campaigns that make up that \$841,000?

**Ms LAWLER:** There is a whole list of them. You have that list. Most of them are things that provide community information. There are shows, Activate Darwin, Remembrance Day, state funerals, the Chief Minister's Awards, antisocial behaviour, Bombing of Darwin—a whole list of things.

**Mr YAN:** I noted that there was mention of costs relating to a consultation for VAD. Is there any further ongoing costs in that space, particularly?

**Ms LAWLER:** No. That report will be completed on 31 July. The report will then sit with the department of the Chief Minister, ready for the incoming government.

**Madam DEPUTY CHAIR:** That concludes consideration of Output 16.1.

**Output 16.2 – Shared Services Received**

No questions.

### Output 16.3 – Shared Services Provided

No questions.

**Madam DEPUTY CHAIR:** That concludes consideration of Output 16.3 and Output Group 16. This concludes consideration of all outputs relating to the Department of the Chief Minister and Cabinet. On behalf of the committee I thank the departmental officers for attending today.

**Ms LAWLER:** I thank the Department of the Chief Minister and Cabinet, an exceptional group of public servants who deliver every single day for Territorians. Well done.

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The committee suspended.

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### DEPARTMENT OF TREASURY AND FINANCE

**Madam DEPUTY CHAIR:** Treasurer, I invite you to introduce the officials accompanying you and to make an opening statement regarding the Department of Treasury and Finance.

**Ms LAWLER:** I have with me the Under Treasurer, Craig Graham; Deputy Under Treasurer, Catherine Weber; Deputy Under Treasurer, Tim McManus; and Deputy Under Treasurer, Mick Butler. I have with me all of these amazing public servants who have worked hard, particularly over the last month, to deliver our budgets. Our budget day, 14 May, went smoothly. I still have not found a spelling mistake or a decimal place in the wrong spot in the budget books, and I look hard, so thank you very much to these exceptional people. A number of others are here, and I will invite them to the table as appropriate.

As Treasurer I will address the financial and economic matters related to the budget, including financial statements and fiscal strategy, Territory revenue and the Territory economy. Details on specific agency budgetary matters, including infrastructure projects, can be addressed by the ministers responsible for those portfolios. As shareholding minister, I can address budgetary questions relating to the Power and Water Corporation, Territory Generation and Jacana Energy. Operational and other policy questions relating to the three government-owned corporations should be discussed at the government-owned corporations hearing.

In addition to the whole-of-government fiscal and financial issues, I will answer questions related to the Department of Treasury and Finance as an agency, the Central Holding Authority and the Northern Territory Treasury Corporation. Furthermore, I will answer any questions in consideration of their appropriation in the 2024–25 bill.

Budget 2024 invests in the future of the Territory and is a commonsense budget that is all about lowering crime, improving community safety and getting Territorians working. It is a sound budget that sets the foundations for strong growth long term. I have already spoken at length today about the GSP, gross state product, which is forecast to grow by 2.3% before accelerating to 7.1% in 2025–26, and in 2026–27 to 4.1%, with that being the average over the forward estimates.

State final demand, which excludes trade—I have had the opportunity to talk extensively about state final demand today—is forecast to grow by 1.9% in 2024–25. We will see the strength of that being based on the Barossa project and the Darwin LNG extensions.

Household consumption is expected to contract over 2023–24 but then grow as real wages improve, as the federal government tax cuts flow into households from 1 July and the anticipated interest rate falls in 2025. We think household consumption will then increase over the 2024–25 budget.

Inflation is expected to moderate over the forecast period, easing from 3.6% in 2023–24 to average 2.4% from 2025–26. It will be in the 2% to 3% band that the RBA wants to achieve.

Employment growth is forecast to stabilise at 1.3% by 2026–27 in line with population and labour force growth and ongoing solid demand for skilled labour in the Territory. We have talked about that demand extensively today.

There is a potential upside to the economic outlook with a number of major projects on the horizon yet to reach final investment decision. The economic contributions arising from these projects are not included in

the economic forecasts. Any projects that do reach FID and commence during the forward estimates period will have a positive impact on the Territory's macroeconomic forecasts.

The 2024 budget includes \$2.2bn over four years in new policy commitments aimed at supporting health services, education, employment and training, public order and safety, costs of living, and creating work opportunities through investment in infrastructure.

We have seen a net reduction in the Territory's mining royalties forecast over the budget cycle due to the softening of key commodity prices, the impact of global and domestic inflationary pressures on the operating costs of Territory mines, and the announced closure of a mine operator and suspension of another mine operator due to the effects of Cyclone Megan.

GST revenue is expected to improve by \$750m over the budget cycle to 2026–27 when compared with the 2023–24 budget. This is primarily due to an increase in the national GST collection pools, attributable to the flow-on effects of higher inflation and strong taxable consumption as well as an increase in the NT's GST relativity for 2024–25.

Specifically, the 2024 budget projections include:

- a general government net operating balance deficit of \$410m in 2024–25 and forecast surpluses in every year in the forward estimates
- an estimated non-financial sector fiscal balance deficit of \$1.59bn in 2024–25, which is forecast to halve each subsequent year [Editor's note: correction from Treasury] ~~before returning to a surplus~~ to a deficit of \$176m in 2027–28
- net debt in the non-financial public sector of \$11.05bn in 2024–25
- net capital investment is expected to peak at \$2.07bn in 2024–25 before declining each year to \$1.2bn by 2027–28.

The 2024 infrastructure program, at \$4.2bn, represents government's commitment to investment in infrastructure across the Territory with a focus on investments to support the delivery of housing, health, education, community safety and other core government services, improve access across the Territory and develop the economy.

In 2024–25 total infrastructure payments are projected to be \$2.58bn. This record level of infrastructure expenditure includes \$1.9bn in general government expenditure and \$681m in expenditure by public non-financial corporations. That includes Power and Water, Territory Generation, Land Development Corporation and Indigenous Essential Services.

Budget 2024–25 is about community safety and getting Territorians ready for work. That is why we are investing an additional \$570m over five years to respond to recommendations of the independent police review, and fully establish the Territory Safety Division to provide rapid response to social order issues.

I am pleased that Budget 2024–25 invests a record \$1.34bn in education, including the commencement of a \$1bn funding boost over five years to improve skills and learning across all Territory schools. To achieve full funding under the better and fairer schools agreement the Commonwealth will increase its share of education investment by more than \$737m and the Territory government will increase our share by more than \$350m between 2025 and 2029.

We are all happy to take your questions.

**Madam DEPUTY CHAIR:** Do you have any questions on the opening statement?

**Mr YAN:** I thank everybody from Treasury and all public servants for the work they have done in preparing the Treasurer's response for Estimates.

You mentioned you had the opportunity to present the budget across the Territory. How did you go about that? There was a function at the Waterfront, I believe. Did you also run any ads for the budget? If you did, what was the entire cost of that campaign for the budget?

**Ms LAWLER:** There are probably two parts to this. As Treasurer I firmly believe that you need to talk to Territorians about the budget; Territorians should be informed. The number of people who are interested in the budget is probably not huge, but it is important.

On budget day, as is tradition, I made a presentation at the Waterfront; there were probably 350 people there. I made a presentation at the Palmerston Regional Business Association the following Tuesday evening; in Katherine on the Friday, and there were about 50 people in the room; and I presented last week in Alice Springs. I had the opportunity to speak at a number of venues.

For the production of the budget, some funds were expended. Most of this is not done by me or the government; it is done by the agency. Treasury and Finance as information that flows out. There was \$50,000 spent on social media, radio and print to promote the budget.

**Mr YAN:** Do you have a breakdown of what the costs were between the three?

**Ms LAWLER:** No, I do not. It was \$50,000, and social media would be a small percentage of that because it is a cheap form of advertising. It would be radio and print for the \$50,000.

**Mr YAN:** Are you able to provide a breakdown on those costs?

**Ms LAWLER:** Yes, we will take that question on notice.

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### Question on Notice No 1.3

**Madam DEPUTY CHAIR:** Member for Namatjira, please restate the question for the record.

**Mr YAN:** Can you please provide a breakdown of the \$50,000 spent for advertisement for the budget between social media, radio and print?

**Madam DEPUTY CHAIR:** Chief Minister, do you accept the question?

**Ms LAWLER:** Yes, I do.

**Madam DEPUTY CHAIR:** The question has been allocated the number 1.3.

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**Mr MALEY:** You said there was a breakdown between Treasury and the Chief Minister's department. Can you give us a breakdown on what it was? What was Treasury, and what was your department in relation to that spending?

**Ms LAWLER:** That \$50,000 I referred to is all the department spend.

**Mr MALEY:** Did the Chief Minister's department spend any?

**Ms LAWLER:** No. This is my department I am talking about. Treasury is my department. We are talking about Treasury. We spent \$50,000, which is about what they spend every year and would be standard in promoting and informing Territorians about the budget. I am here with Treasury. I am not talking about the Department of the Chief Minister and Cabinet. This is Treasury's responsibility.

**Mr YAN:** We know that after eight years of the current Labor government, the Territory is facing some fairly significant challenges and a failure in economic policy. You are quick to dismiss the CommSec report. The January 2024 quarterly report says that the Northern Territory economy has once again been ranked the lowest—66 months in a row. I have the CommSec report here.

Your government, you and previous Treasurers have always canned the CommSec report, saying that it is based on 10-year data. For instance, in the CommSec report when it talks about the future, it measures year-in, year-out quarter-on-quarter because it understands the intricacies of our economy with large projects that push a huge amount of money into our economy and grow our economy. We then lose those projects, and it drops down again. Why do you still not believe the CommSec report?

**Ms LAWLER:** I have spoken on this CommSec report at least for 45 minutes or an hour already today. I know that the CLP does not believe me. I will pass to an economist who knows what he is talking about, Mick

Butler, the Deputy Under Treasurer, so we can take the politics out of it. I talked repeatedly to your leader this morning—you were there—regarding the issue of looking at a 10-year averages and CommSec.

My response to all of that is not political. I want the Territory economy to do well. Every decision I make is about how we can drive the economy of the Northern Territory. We need more revenue in the Northern Territory. My response on CommSec is that I will not lose sleep at night because CommSec has said that our economy is not doing well. I will lose sleep if someone like Mick Butler tells me that our economy is not doing well. I am passing this to Mick, who will give you a run-down—not political, as he will tell you the facts about the economy.

**Mr BUTLER:** I think there has been a good discussion about the CommSec State of the States report and the fact that it uses a 10-year average. When it talks about the economy under-performing or performing badly in comparison to other jurisdictions, it is that comparison against the 10-year average.

We talk about the outcomes of the economic statistics and the forecasts we make. The Treasurer has said before that our estimates for 2023–24 is gross state product growth of 4.9%; state final demand at 1.7%; and the growth across the forward estimates of GSP of 4.5%; and, similarly, state final demand also growing.

When you look at other independent reporters of economic forecasts that do not rely on a 10-year average—for example, you can go to Deloitte, which puts out a quarterly report much the same as we do, forecasting economic activity—you will find that they are more buoyant on their forecast for our GSP and state final demand outcomes than we are. The Treasurer will always tell you that Treasury is conservative; that is because our methodology relies on not putting into account any future projects that have not reached final investment decision. Independent commentators like Deloitte will put in an average towards those projects and the likelihood of the projects going ahead.

For example, for 2023–24 we had a forecast in the budget of 1.7% growth for SFD. Deloitte's forecast is 4.0%, and it has us outperforming our forecast across the forward estimates. That is because Deloitte builds in some capacity for the future projects that we do not put into our forecast. There is always upside risk to our forecast because of that. That is the difference between those forecasts of economic activity compared to a comparison of economic activity that has occurred over the past decade.

**Mr YAN:** Looking at the annual growth rate from CommSec, it takes into account the 10-year average. It says that it understands that economic performance for the Northern Territory as the small, open economy is buffeted by big projects—LNG. That is why we talk about annual growth rates. Funnily enough, on some of the annual growth rates the Territory is doing reasonably well, but that is off the back of other factors, which are predominantly federal expenditure in Defence and bits and pieces like that.

Some of the figures are quite low, particularly in housing, finance and dwelling stats. That comes down to population and building and construction growth in the Northern Territory. That is a future growth rate, and CommSec says it takes into account the 10-year cycle. That is not painting a great picture for the growth in the Northern Territory in that sector. In essence, it seems you have lost control of parts of the economy.

**Ms LAWLER:** When CommSec talks about housing it is probably talking about private housing, but in the Northern Territory we have a very different picture to what happens in Victoria, New South Wales or elsewhere. We have \$4bn over the next 10 years investment by the federal government in public housing in our remote communities. That is unheralded; it is exceptional.

I remember when Gerry McCarthy announced that we would have \$1.1bn investment in housing. In Cabinet we all went, 'My goodness, that is amazing'. It has now gone to \$4bn. I heard NT Shelter talk about how good the housing announcements have been in the Northern Territory.

CommSec is looking at the private investment, but we will have huge investment in remote. Over the next five years we will have social and affordable housing. Prime Minister Anthony Albanese has set us a target of 11,000 homes in the Northern Territory. There is also about a seven-fold increase in our funding for housing in our urban settings from the federal government.

There will be substantial growth in housing in the Northern Territory; that is a fact. We will continue to work with the private sector. Whether you read *The Australian*, the *Financial Review* or even the *NT News* the builds of private housing in Australia have been soft; that is a fact. If you are a young person looking at interest rates—the good news is that interest rates are on the way down—are you going to rush to build a home when it is at 7.1%? Previously it has been less than 1% interest rate. Of course, you will not rush to do that. What you will do is continue to save as hard as you can to build up your deposit so that when interest

rates go down you can purchase or build a home. I know what you are saying, but the reality is if you are a young person, or anybody about to build a home, of course you will hold onto your cash for a bit longer to try to build up a bit more of a deposit while interest rates are so high. That is a fact.

Since COVID there has been an increase of between 30% and 40%—the Member for Nelson understands this because he delves in the infrastructure area—on steel, concrete and labour, so you are putting an increase in the cost of a build of a home. People are not rushing to build a home; that is a fact. Once we see interest rates drop to 2% to 3% band—I do not reckon we will ever see the cost of labour, cement, steel or wood drop from the 30% that it has increased to since COVID, I think it is there to stay, which impacts that area of the economy.

As Mick said, our economy is in a relatively strong position. That is also why I, as Treasurer, as well as our government over the last two terms, has diversified the economy. That is why we are building data centres. Probably five or six years ago I would not have known what a data centre was. Now we will soon have one.

The Leader of the Opposition does not like the idea of building aircrafts in the Northern Territory, but that is what is done. We continue to come up with new projects to diversify the economy so that we are not just reliant on mining, the onshore oil and gas industry or tourism. We will continue to do that work.

That is why I am developing the Adelaide River Off-stream Water Storage and putting a huge effort into Middle Arm. That is what a good government and a good Treasurer does, Member for Namatjira—try to diversify the economy. There will be big projects, but you also want the little ones in there as well.

**Mr BUTLER:** I guess the other point of context to make regarding dwelling investment and economic growth is that while you are correct that public investment strongly underpins economic growth in the Northern Territory, private investment, particularly last year and the current financial year, has been a significant contributor. While dwelling investment is down in historical terms, it is a small component of private investment at about 10%.

Business investment has been a strong contributor to private investment and, therefore, GSP growth. There is a table on page 21 of the economy book of the budget papers. You can see there that business investment is a strong contributor to economic growth in both 2023 and 2024, where we estimate it to be 9.2% growth and, going forward, further growth there.

The other point to underpin what the Treasurer said about dwelling investment—there is a chart at page 56 of the economy book that shows the breakup in dwellings under construction between the private and public sector contributions. The public sector contribution, having increased, brings the total levels of construction pretty consistent across the forward estimates. While there has been a reduction in private investment, that has been made up by that public investment in public housing.

**Mr MALEY:** Treasurer, what are you doing to increase the private housing stock?

**Ms LAWLER:** Probably the big work we are doing—you can see that work in our budget—relates to land release. That is what a government should do. It should make sure there is a solid supply of land in the Northern Territory, such as Holtze, Kowandi and Kilgariff. We are also investing \$11m in this budget for Farrar West, which is Larrakia Development Corporation land. We are putting in the headworks in for that. A good government provides the availability of land so that we can see building.

**Mr MALEY:** The UDI report says that there are approximately 3,000 blocks of land available already to be done. What about investing in a home? What are you doing to help young Territorians or any Territorians to invest in a home?

**Ms LAWLER:** There are a number of programs already. We have our first home builder \$10,000 grant in the Northern Territory. There are a number of Commonwealth programs we support relating to home building.

**Mr YAN:** Mr Butler, I want to go back to you saying that there has been significant growth in the business industry. I would hazard a guess to say that a lot of that significant growth in business in the Territory is off the back of some of the numbers we see through these reports in construction work and equipment investment based on some things that have been federally funded in the Northern Territory, being Defence and things like that. Would that be the case?

**Mr BUTLER:** We do not want to conflate the public investment occurring by Defence spending with private investment. That business investment is not part of what you would be measuring in the public investment

that comes from the Commonwealth and state level, which in itself a significant contributor to economic growth.

**Mr YAN:** Minister, you mentioned the Deloitte Access report in your opening statement. I understand that Treasury uses it to develop a lot of the figures in the budget papers. The report comes out every quarter, and the government subscribes to it. Is that correct?

**Ms LAWLER:** Looking back, I do not think I mentioned Deloitte at all in my opening statement. Which output did you want to talk about Deloitte in?

**Mr YAN:** I am sure you mentioned Deloitte in your opening statement, or since then.

**Ms LAWLER:** What do you want to know? Let us not play any games. Somebody wrote you a question and you are reading it, so just tell me what you want to know.

**Mr YAN:** You do not have to tell me what I need to ask you, Chief Minister.

**Ms LAWLER:** It seems like you are playing games, so just tell us.

**Mr YAN:** I am not playing any games; I am trying to get some answers to questions.

**Ms LAWLER:** I did not mention Deloitte in my opening address.

**Madam DEPUTY CHAIR:** To be clear, we have the section Economic Services where there are all the wonderful economic reports and analysis that the department does. The Chief Minister said that Deloitte was not in the opening statement. Chief Minister, would you like to take the question?

**Ms LAWLER:** I can take the question; that is what I just said.

**Mr YAN:** The Northern Territory Government Treasury uses Deloitte and gets access to that report every quarter; is that correct?

**Ms LAWLER:** I will pass to the Under Treasurer.

**Mr GRAHAM:** We receive independent economic commentator reports. I would not say that it is fair to say that we use them. We frame our own forecasts, but we definitely use them as a reference. We are in conversation with them to check their assumptions and understand what assumptions they are using. Essentially, we frame our own.

**Mr YAN:** The reason I ask is that Treasury, in government, puts out the quarterly report from Deloitte. You get that information, then you provide that report to Territorians.

**Mr GRAHAM:** We provide a briefing, yes.

**Mr YAN:** The March quarter report came out many months ago. We are now in June. Why have we not seen that report from March? We are about to see the second quarter report come out, and we have not seen the data from the first quarter. I would like to know where that is, because it assists in the reports you are providing, and it has provided information into the budget papers we are using today.

**Mr BUTLER:** To clarify, we subscribe to Deloitte among other commentators. We receive its quarterly reports and provide briefings to government on those reports. We do not publish their information; we provide briefings on them.

**Mr YAN:** Those reports come out quarterly through your website. Every quarter since 2021: March; June; September; and December, through until 2023. We would be due to see those March figures.

**Mr BUTLER:** I just got an update from my staff to help me with that. They have changed the terms on which we receive that, so we do not publish their information anymore. While we still brief government on it, we do not publish it on our website.

**Mr YAN:** Leading into this budget, none of us can see that data unless we subscribe to Deloitte. Is that correct?

**Ms LAWLER:** You can subscribe to Deloitte yourself and ask them to provide you with information. I think it is published anyway. You have to subscribe.

**Mr YAN:** The Northern Territory Government subscribes and gets the data, but now ...

**Ms LAWLER:** They cannot publish it.

**Mr YAN:** ... we are not allowed to publish it. The opposition, the general public, Territorians who would normally go to your website cannot access that data anymore.

**Ms LAWLER:** That is an issue to raise with Deloitte, not us. They obviously want you to subscribe to their information.

**Mr YAN:** That is why I asked the question. We have this every quarter, which provides a good snapshot and information about the budget papers we have here today, but we do not get access to this data anymore.

**Ms LAWLER:** It doesn't provide information for our budget papers, but it might provide information for you.

**Mr YAN:** That is quite interesting. Speaking about the budget and your record investment in safety and dealing with crime, we have asked over many years now whether crime has an effect on the economy and the budget. Today, for the first time, there is a commitment from your government to dealing with crime, which is the—what did you say?—\$1.2bn in public order and safety to police.

If that is not an admission that crime is having an effect on our budget and on the economy, nothing is. For 250,000 residents that equates to \$4,800 per person we are investing in public order and safety.

Now you are claiming another record of \$570m to police over five years. I would like you to explain to me and Territorians the effect that crime is having on our economy and our budget. Now we are seeing Territory money being spent in areas for public safety that could be better spent doing other things to benefit Territorians.

**Ms LAWLER:** Are you saying that you would not spend money on community safety?

**Mr YAN:** I am asking you why you are spending that much and why you have to spend that much.

**Ms LAWLER:** I am asking you ...

**Mr YAN:** I am not here to answer questions, Chief Minister. That is why you are here.

**Ms LAWLER:** It sounds like you are saying that you would not spend money on Territory safety.

**Mr YAN:** Do not verbal me, Chief Minister! I did not say that.

**Ms LAWLER:** It is a fact. I have not announced it today. This is in Budget and Regional Overview. You can look at that . It came out on 14 May. It says:

*The 2024 Budget invests \$1.2bn in public order and safety, and \$723m in social protection to deliver a range of initiatives to build safer, fairer and more resilient communities.*

As a good Treasurer I listen to Territorians and know what the issues are. I have been through all of this. I have a feeling of deja vu because I have been through this conversation this morning with the Leader of the Opposition. You were here. How about you not waste my time and the time of these people and ask some questions about the budget. We have already answered this. Look on *Hansard*. You were here this morning when I spoke for nearly two, if not three hours on this question.

We know we have to spend money on crime prevention. That is a fact. Crime and antisocial behaviour plays a big part in the money that we spend. I spoke about that for at least a couple of hours this morning.

**Mr YAN:** I have further questions on that \$1.2bn spend. If your government had been proactive about dealing with crime and antisocial behaviour issues over the last eight years, would you have not had to spend \$1.2bn on dealing with crime and antisocial behaviour? Would you be spending less?



**Ms LAWLER:** That is a hypothetical. All governments around Australia and the world have seen an increase in spend on crime and antisocial behaviour measures. You seem to think we have done nothing over eight years to address the issue of crime, which is incorrect. We have always worked hard to address the issue of crime and antisocial behaviour and always will.

If you looked at all the budget papers over the years you would see that our spend on police has increased every year that we have been in government. The number of police officers in the Northern Territory has also gone up every year we have been in government.

**Mr YAN:** I know that. We now have the highest number of police for any state or territory in the country. The weak laws go towards that specific fact. We are now spending \$75m next financial year to establish the Safety Division within Territory police; is that correct?

**Ms LAWLER:** Yes. The Territory Safety Division is an amazing group of police officers. I think the expression of interest has been out in Alice Springs recently, and there has been a really strong interest in police officers wanting to join the Territory Safety Division. It is probably more of a question for—I am getting into the operational matters—the Police Commissioner, but it will be an agile group that will be very much focused on the safety aspects for Territorians. Off the top of my head there are about 50 officers in that, but that question is probably better answered by the Minister for Police.

**Mr YAN:** Based on your own budget figures and what you have said about population, will you be able to reach your \$40bn economy by 2030?

**Ms LAWLER:** That was a TERC recommendation, and the goal is to do that. We had an output on Investment Territory and, amazingly, the CLP did not ask one question for Investment Territory. You had the Investment Commissioner and the Major Projects Commissioner here, but there was not one question from the CLP about investment.

The good news is, as the Deputy Under Treasurer Mick Butler just said, that GSP is forecast to be about 4.1% on average over the forward estimates. If it continues to grow at that rate we should get very close to that \$40bn economy in the Northern Territory. From 2027–28 onwards GSP would need to grow by 2.8% to reach a \$40bn economy by 2030. We are hearing 4.1% over the forward estimates, so if we can continue to see that GSP grow by having projects like the Barossa project; carbon capture use and storage—CCS—which will be huge; the work that is under way with Santos; the work with CSIRO; and the work with NT Government on CCS come to fruition, we will get to that \$40bn by 2030. We need GSP to continue to grow by 2.8% per annum to get to a \$40bn economy by 2030. At the moment the projections are for 4.1%.

That is the work. The budget does not include the \$57.5bn of major and significant projects. You had the opportunity to talk to Investment Territory, but nobody in the CLP asked a question of Investment Territory. Investment Territory has \$57.5bn of major and significant projects that it thinks are in the pipeline which have not reached FID. You could have clarified that \$57.5bn of major and significant projects that we think will push the economy towards that \$40bn goal.

**Mr YAN:** I am asking about your ability to reach the \$40bn economy ...

**Ms LAWLER:** The answer is yes.

**Mr YAN:** Let me finish my question. We know that you have accepted the TERC report. I spoke to you about this at the last Estimates, and we have spoken about it again today, which is around population growth. To reach the \$40bn economy through the TERC report you accepted, we need to effectively reach a population of 300,000. You said today a number of times that we are only at 0.9% population growth. We need to achieve 2.5% to 2.8% population growth to reach that 300,000 to reach effectively the \$40bn economy stated by the TERC report. Based on our current population growth of 0.9% it will take 20 to 22 years to reach 300,000 people. How do we expect to reach \$40bn if we cannot grow the population to support that economic growth?

**Ms LAWLER:** There are two separate things. I have already had a long conversation with the Leader of the Opposition on the population. The forecast we have in place is 0.91%–1.1%—by about 2027–28, the population is forecast to be approximately 265,000 people. From 2027–28 it would need to grow by about 4.2% to reach 300,000. Our current forecast in our forward estimates, this is beyond our forward estimates, is about 1.1%. We will continue to push for that. The pandemic had a significant impact on our normal migration flows, travel restrictions, economic disruption and international and interstate migration et cetera.

I am working hard to convince the federal government that we need more international students and a nuanced migration policy, and not the same as the east coast. When I meet with Treasurers from Victoria—my mate Tim Pallas—New South Wales, Victoria and the southeast section of Queensland they say that they do not want any more people and want to slow down migration. Their roads are congested and schools are full, and another 500 families means another school has to be built for \$30m to \$40m. They do not want it. I am in those meetings saying the opposite.

We want to increase our population and need to continue to push for migration and international students. They are part of the jigsaw puzzle. I am pushing for Middle Arm, which means 20,000 more workers needed in the Northern Territory. If we have jobs, the people will follow.

The Leader of the Opposition had a go at me about stretch targets and what that was. We want to work hard to get that 300,000 population, which is why we are having land releases and doing the work needed on traineeships and apprenticeships. He cannot take any of these things in isolation.

We know the population will need to grow by rates of about 4.2% beyond 2027–28 if we are to get to 300,000. It will be tough, but we will continue to do all we can through international students, international migration, and big projects such as Middle Arm and Adelaide River Off-stream Water Storage. This is where construction teams of workers will come to the Northern Territory to deliver some of those big projects, just as what happened during INPEX. We are aiming for the 300,000.

**Mr YAN:** In effect, there is no possible way we could reach that 300,000 target by 2030.

**Ms LAWLER:** There will not be any possible way under the CLP and the negative nanny such as the Leader of the Opposition and you. I will continue to work hard and focus on achieving our targets of a \$40bn economy and the population targets. We have not heard a single vision or direction from the CLP except raising the age and spit hoods. We hear nothing about its direction for the Northern Territory. Territory Labor is focused on what we can do to drive the economy.

**Mr YAN:** Forgive me if I do not share your confidence in your or your government's abilities.

**Ms LAWLER:** That is fine because I feel the same about you, Member for Namatjira. I will not lose sleep over that.

**Mr YAN:** Net debt for the non-financial public sector is predicted to hit \$11.05bn in 2024–25 for the first time in the Territory's history, with a net debt ratio of 126%. Why have you not got the debt under control?

**Ms LAWLER:** Where do I start? What would the CLP cut to bring debt under control? How many public servants would you cut?

**Mr YAN:** I am asking you why do you not have debt under control.

**Ms LAWLER:** The reality is—you will see if you look at the net debt ratio—that debt for every state in Australia is increasing. That is a fact. Debt is increasing everywhere.

Will you be the CLP that makes cuts to do that? The only way you can reduce debt once you are operational is getting into the black. That is what we are doing. You can see in the forward estimates that our target is to get to by 2025–26. We are looking to have a net operating balance into the black. Once we start getting into the black in your operating balance, we can start to pay down debt.

The fact is every state has a debt; even Western Australia, which is almost rolled in gold, has a debt. You need debt. Large amounts of our debt are our infrastructure projects. There is about \$8bn of our debt for infrastructure. Tell me which projects the CLP would not have. Of our debt, 77% or \$6.7bn can be attributed to Territory capital works projects. Tell me, would you not bituminise the Tanami, built a hospital at Palmerston or built a police station, a fire station and two schools in Palmerston? What would you not build or do? Would you not build Garramilla Boulevard or the Arnhem Highway? What are the things that you would not do as a CLP government? That is what I could have easily done. We all could have. The Deputy Chair was Treasurer for a long time as well. We could have sat on our hands and twiddled, knitted or done whatever we wanted to do and had no debt. Is that what we would get under the CLP? Would you keep debt to \$1bn or \$2bn?

We came off the back of INPEX, and we know the story about the INPEX boom. The thing that kept the Territory moving was our investment in infrastructure. I was Infrastructure minister, and I know how desperate

the civil contractors were to have us stimulate the economy, to build Gunn Point Road for example. We split that into three contracts so that three companies could keep their workers on—Ostojic, Allan King & Sons and Aldebaran. That is what we had to do to keep people in jobs in the Northern Territory after the boom of INPEX. We did that work. We have done State Square. We did the underground carpark, which the Leader of the Opposition hates but the rest of us love. We have done the work that was needed in the Territory, and that is how you end up in debt. Of that debt, 77% can be attributed to the capital projects, \$1.2bn or 13% to new leases and the remaining \$911m or 10% to funding operational deficits.

When you talk about debt—and I do not know why you talk a lot about debt—we will continue to work to pay down debt. If we did not have the debt a whole heap of people would have gone broke in the Northern Territory. Their businesses would have gone broke, and then you would have seen a huge drop in population. They would have had to pack up and leave; they would have had to sell all their equipment. When I meet with civil contractors I say to them—I saw a lot of them at the GleNTi on the weekend. They said that they were busy and flat out. They said, 'Thank you, Eva, for putting more money into infrastructure in the Northern Territory'. I said that \$2.25bn will be spent—cash for infrastructure—in the next financial year.

You can go to the GleNTi and talk to all our contractors—although I have heard that the Leader of the Opposition refuses to meet with the civil contractors—about the work you would be doing if you were in government. I am hearing that you are talking about cutting all the capital works projects.

**Mr YAN:** Thank you, minister, for that long-winded answer. I am talking about debt because it keeps increasing year on year. In the last 12 months you have managed to increase it by \$1.9bn. That would have to be a new record.

Based on your current prediction of return to surplus now anticipated in 2029–30, one year later than the 2028–29 target, how many years will it take to repay the debt, and how much interest on debt will Territorians pay over that time?

**Ms LAWLER:** I have a good Treasury adviser who just told me to remind you of GST revenue. Between 2016 and 2020 we lost about \$3bn in GST revenue. I remember when the Deputy Chair was the Treasurer and nearly in tears—she is still traumatised about the loss in GST revenue.

We could add that in there. I will pass to the Under Treasurer, who could talk to some of the things you refer to.

**Mr GRAHAM:** I believe the question was about how long it would take to repay?

**Mr YAN:** Yes. How many years will it take to repay the debt and how much interest on debt will Territorians pay over that time?

**Ms LAWLER:** That is a real hypothetical. How much do you want to pay off your debt? How much are you paying off your Visa card? You could pay \$100, \$1,000 or \$1m. There is no answer to the question in regard to how to pay down debt.

**Mr GRAHAM:** It would depend on at what point we got back to fiscal balance surplus. It would then be up to the government of the day to develop a debt repayment strategy. Given the levels of debt we may have accumulated by that point, it could take some years to repay.

The important point is to get the budget back to balance, then a pathway can be developed for a debt reduction strategy. Until we can get to that point, the focus needs to be getting the budget back to balance.

**Madam DEPUTY CHAIR:** On that note, Chief Minister, we will go to a break for 10 minutes.

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The committee suspended.

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### **Answer to Question on Notice No 1.3**

**Ms LAWLER:** Madam Deputy Chair, I have a response to question on notice 1.3. There was no print media included in that amount of money.

There was \$18,280 for social media, which is YouTube; BVOD; Channel Nine; and display boards.

Radio was \$11,338, which is Hot100; Mix104.9; Territory FM; Yolngu Radio; Gove FM; Sun FM; PAW Radio; Tourist Gold; TEABBA; 8KTR; and FNB.

Facebook was \$6,528; online media, which is News Corp, *Centralian* and *Tennant and District Times*, \$5,983; cinema, which is Val Morgan, \$3,325; and GST, \$4,546.

That adds up to a total of \$50,000. That has been the same budget for the past three years—\$50,000 for marketing and media for the budget.

I can table that if you like.

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**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** May I ask a follow-up question to that? Chief Minister, you started with social media, so are you saying that no print media was done?

**Ms LAWLER:** Yes. Only online media, so no *NT News*.

**Madam DEPUTY CHAIR:** We return to opening statement questions.

**Mr YAN:** When we were talking about debt repayments you mentioned that we do not have a debt repayment strategy in place.

**Ms LAWLER:** That is because we continue to have a debt, so we do not have a debt repayment strategy. The strategy is that we will work to have an operational surplus, then we will get to the debt strategy.

**Mr YAN:** Until you reach an operational surplus you will not consider formulating a debt repayment strategy.

**Ms LAWLER:** We will consider it. We have a Territory fiscal strategy, which has a large number of targets. We continue to work to achieve those targets and monitor where we are. One of those targets is to achieve a general government net operating balance surplus by 2028, so we are on track. We are hoping that we will be two years ahead of that target. A net operating surplus is projected from 2025–26, so two years ahead of target. One of our targets is to get to a net operating balance surplus by 2027–28; we are projected to get there two years ahead of that. We can then pay down debt.

**Mr GRAHAM:** I think it is fair to say that the focus to date has been budget repair and getting the structure of the budget back to a point where we can move towards a balanced budget. There was a period when we were in structural deficit; that was the period which coincided with the reductions in GST revenue. That prompted the plan for budget repair review chaired by John Langoulant. We had been leaning towards implementing those recommendations. As the Treasurer pointed out, we have an overarching fiscal strategy which we work towards achieving each year.

Ultimately, we need to get to the point where we can fund our capital and recurrent costs through our operating revenues. At that point we can look at a debt reduction strategy which could involve allocating a certain proportion of capital expenditure each year towards debt repayments. The amount you allocate would need to be made at that point by the government of the day because it would be offsetting expenditure that would ordinarily go to services.

**Mr YAN:** We know that the Langoulant report was commissioned in 2015. We are talking about the move to budget repair. Where are you currently at with those strategies?

**Ms LAWLER:** There were 70-something recommendations—a large number of recommendations. You can have a look online to see what we have achieved and where we are up to with all of them. We continue to adhere to and implement those recommendations.

There are 76 recommendations around improving financial management, policies and processes; increased financial accountability and transparency; and digitally transforming the NTPS to drive innovation. The government accepted 74 of those in full, in principle or in part. As of 30 June last year 64 had been fully implemented, seven had been superseded by other work, one has been deferred and the remaining two are nearly complete or under way. We will continue to deliver on those recommendations.

Key achievements that we have in place include the ECO cap. We are below our executive contract officer cap—our staffing cap. The charter of budget discipline has been implemented. One of the big ones you

probably do not hear a lot about is the centralisation of the corporate services; so HR, payroll and all those things are centralised in DCDD. That was a big move. All the infrastructure services are in DIPL. Again, that was a big move. We had that wage freeze; obviously we experienced that as parliamentarians. Another one that you do not hear a lot about is the whole-of-government program evaluation framework. Every one of our programs is evaluated; there is a rolling program of evaluations which is good because then we look at what we should continue or what we should not. There is work on chief executive and ministerial accountability responsibility and their financial performance. We know about the debt ceiling of \$15bn.

We will continue to do the work on those 76 recommendations. Anybody listening out there can have a look online to see every one of them and where we are up to with them.

**Mr YAN:** Six years on from Langouant are we still moving towards implementing those recommendations?

**Ms LAWLER:** At least 64 of them have been fully implemented, and there are some we are continuing to implement. Some might need legislation or whatever else. Seven have been superseded by other government reforms. There are two outstanding. The big one is the SAGE budget management system, which is being rolled out to agencies now. That is a large amount of work.

We will continue to make sure that all those recommendations are implemented. It has made a big difference to government.

**Mr YAN:** How much are Territorians currently paying every day to service your government's debt?

**Ms LAWLER:** The interest expenses per day will be approximately \$1.61m in the 2024–25 budget.

**Mr YAN:** Territorians are currently paying \$1.61m per day to service the current debt; is that correct?

**Ms LAWLER:** Correct.

**Mr YAN:** We are specifically here for Estimates and talking about the budget. An estimate is just that; it is an estimate. You do the absolute best that you can; I understand that. Sometimes you may be wrong; sometimes you might be right. Estimates are at least about consistency. You probably understand why Territorians and I worry about some of the figures coming out of Estimates and in the budget.

If we go back and look at historical figures we see that the 2023 budget had some of the fiscal balance at negative-\$551m. In 2023–24 that has dropped to \$1.1bn. In the 2024–25 budget that is now \$1.559bn. The forward estimates are showing figures that do not match with the previous Estimates. At times I take some of these estimates with a grain of salt because the figures do not match. It would be all right if they were at least within the ballpark, but they are not. They are not even in the car park of the ballpark. It is like we are in another country or another state.

The current budget in Budget Paper No 2 page 5 shows that the expected outcome for 2023–24 will be a deficit of \$1.559bn compared with the original budget estimate of \$1.134bn and a forward estimate in the 2022–23 budget of half-a-billion dollars. Even before the changes between the budget in May this year and the end of the year, the data shows the actual outcome for 2023–24 is over a billion dollars higher than the forward estimate just two years ago. Does that mean that the forward estimate for 2022–23 in that budget was wrong?

**Ms LAWLER:** Nothing is wrong. There can be substantial changes. Some of those are policy changes and some are non-policy changes. The classic one that is probably most important to Territorians is regarding the police review.

When those figures were done we instigated the police review on 1 September 2023. At that stage we had not planned to have a large input into the Police budget. A policy change is exactly that. We did the police review over that time. When I became Chief Minister one of the things that I continued to hear—we all hear the same thing—is that crime is the biggest issue facing Territorians.

Of course, when we started to do our budget work in January, February, March and April, we needed to put more money into Police. If I had not put more money into Police you would not see a change in these figures, and it would be easy to do. You would say, 'No, we will just put our head into the sand'. The Leader of the Opposition accuses me of that. But we did not put our heads in the sand. We said that we need to invest in police. That is a change in policy. That is \$570m over the next five years, which means a change in these figures.

That is what happens; it is the reality. Government is volatile; it is moving. The budget is volatile and moving at times. We heard the story about GST. When the Deputy Chair was Treasurer we saw a huge drop in GST. A lot of times we are at the whim of the federal government regarding GST. We do not always know exactly how much GST we will get into those outer years.

There can be policy decisions that make changes. We saw in 2024–25 from that midyear report a policy change of \$745m, with \$500m of that for police. You can tell me that you will not invest in police, and I will bet that Territorians would not be happy to hear that the CLP will not invest in police. One big policy change impacts substantially those forward estimates.

The other big one is education. The federal government says to us, 'We will give you a better deal than any other state. We will increase your funding to schools so you can have full and fair funding. However, you need to also increase your funding.'

Of course I had to say yes to that. I said yes when I was Education minister and as Treasurer. I go to my Cabinet and say, 'We need to be the first government to get full and fair funding for education. That will be a long-term game-changer for the Northern Territory. However, we needed to commit another \$375m for the feds to give us another \$753m.'

That is what you have to do. There are changes where as a government you respond to the issues about crime and the federal government offering funding on enrolments for the first time in the Northern Territory and full funding for our remote schools. You have to take it up. You have to be brave, Member for Namatjira, and not put your head under your doona and say, 'I want to get into a surplus; I cannot do this.' You have to say, 'Yes, we need to do this. This is a point in time when we have seen the demand from our community and we need to make that decision.' There are policy changes that then impact the forward estimates.

**Mr YAN:** I understand that there are policy changes that impact forward estimates. You are talking about police and education. That is close to ...

**Ms LAWLER:** They are the two biggies.

**Mr YAN:** ... \$800m over five years for those two outputs. That does not equate to a \$1bn change over two years. If you divide that it is \$200m. A lot of other policy changes equate to those ...

**Ms LAWLER:** Member for Namatjira, I could spend all day talking about those ...

**Mr YAN:** Let me finish my question. A lot of other things impact those forward estimates. Estimates need to be consistent. They are consistently out. Effectively, that means for me and Territorians the belief in what you are telling us in those estimates is not there. People do not trust the forward estimates. They are more than just volatile; they are completely wrong in some respects.

**Ms LAWLER:** I cannot think of an analogy. One of the other ones is about wages. We had a wage policy that we had to change. Obviously, we had to change the wage policy by 3%. The vast majority of our operating budget is for wages. You have changes like that.

It is like you; you do not know what your wages or your expenses will be in the future. If your fridge or car motor blows up or your roof leaks in the same fortnight, of course you will blow your budget. That is a fact.

I do not know where you are coming from with this. It shows me a lack of understanding. Of course there is the budget and the forward estimates, but things will move because there will be policy changes, wages policy changes or GST changes. That is the reality; it is not stagnant or a straight line. There will be peaks and troughs; that is the reality of any budget.

Would anybody like to add to that? Would anyone try to make the explanation clearer? Under Treasurer?

**Mr GRAHAM:** Member for Namatjira, all I can say is budgets are forward looking. They necessarily need to be. They are, essentially, a fiscal plan. Governments have the right to make decisions which affect that forward outlook. They are, essentially, forecasts, so they are subject to revision. All governments are confronted with that issue. It is heightened in the Northern Territory in that we have a relatively small budget, so any single decision can have a significant impact on that forward looking set of projections. That is the vagary of framing forward estimates and forecasts in a small jurisdiction.

**Mr YAN:** Thank you for that explanation. At the end of the day that is what I was after. The government can make those changes, with Treasury providing forward estimates, and Cabinet can then make changes and decisions which significantly change what the forward estimates look like and what the outcome is for our fiscal balance and our debt in the future.

**Ms LAWLER:** This is what government is. You are elected to represent the people. That is the wonderful thing when you get elected you represent the people. Treasury could say that we are not spending any money, we are not going to doing anything and we will all just sit on our hands, but you are elected by the people. You talk about listening to Territorians. They want to see us address the issue of crime. They want to see full funding for kids in school, for example. We listen to Territorians. They want a wage increase. That is what you have to do. In government you have to govern, and when you govern you make decisions on budget; that is a fact. You need the confidence to do that.

**Mr YAN:** Are the 2024–25 budget and forward estimates of the deficit, effectively our fiscal balance, a reasonable measure of what can be expected in those upcoming years?

**Ms LAWLER:** Yes.

**Mr YAN:** Can the community and the Legislative Assembly trust those measures based on what you have said, because they can change on a whim of Cabinet?

**Ms LAWLER:** I do not know what you are getting at, but I can tell Territorians that if the CLP gets in there will be cuts to the public service.

**Mr YAN:** That is your assessment, minister.

**Ms LAWLER:** You asked me what it was, and I have told you.

**Mr YAN:** The predicted fiscal balance for 2024–25 in the 2022–23 budget was a deficit of \$330m, then in the 2023–24 budget the estimated 2024–25 deficit was \$573m. Now we see in the 2024–25 budget papers that the deficit for 2024–25 is now \$1.5bn, which is \$1bn higher than what was predicted. Is it a fact that in most years, the following year's deficit estimates for a particular year are always far worse than the previous year's deficit estimates for that same year?

**Ms LAWLER:** I am not sure what you are trying to get at, but there has been significant investment by our government in community safety. I have said that regarding education and training. I have not even mentioned the \$200m that health needed because the demand for its services has been high; infrastructure investment; and cost-of-living pressures. The budget is the budget. That is what is there. I do not know what you are trying to get at. What do you want me to say? The budget is the budget; there it is.

**Mr YAN:** You are the Treasurer, so in essence you are responsible for the budget and for the financial position we find ourselves in today. That is why I am asking these questions. There is distrust in the estimates you are putting forward. The stuff you put forward changes on your government's whim.

**Ms LAWLER:** It does not change on my government's whim. We have the charter of budget discipline; there are two times during the year only—mid year and the full budget—when you can make a decision that involves money in Cabinet. It does not change on a whim. It changes based on considerable thought, listening to the public and working with agencies. Every budget decision we make is a carefully and strongly considered decision on the budget. Tell me the things you would not do. Would you not have funded police? Would you not have funded our hospital system? Would you have not given everybody a wage increase? Would you not have funded education? Tell me what you would not have done because that is the answer.

That is what you have to do as a minister; you work with your agency. Of course you push and drive them down as much as possible; every person or agency that comes in here—we heard it this morning from the statutory authorities saying that they want more money. I can tell you as Treasurer that every agency and statutory board comes to me saying that they want more money every year.

I have to work with Treasury officials and Cabinet. We drive it down as hard as we can, but we have to listen to the community, and the community was crying out for more police officers. That is what the review said.

I was lobbied hard about more funding for schools. I am sure Jo Hersey from Katherine, the opposition shadow for Education, would have been driven hard on that as well. There are things you have to do.

I am not sure what your issues are, but we only make those adjustments to the budget mid year and for the full budget; that is all. It is not on a whim.

I have not even started talking about government-owned corporations and Power and Water.

**Mr YAN:** Budget Paper No 2, page 5, says:

*The fiscal balance is expected to remain in deficit over the budget cycle, with a return to surplus now anticipated in 2029–30, one year later than the A plan for budget repair 2028–29 target.*

In last year's budget you said that 2026–27 was the first year of a surplus, with that surplus being \$67m. Now you are saying that the budget will not be in surplus until 2028–29, two years later again. That goes down to trust in the forward estimates and the deficit in last year's budget; they have proven to be wrong again.

Can the NT community and the Legislative Assembly trust these latest estimates of the deficit for 2028–29 which you are now claiming will in fact be a surplus?

**Ms LAWLER:** The budget is not static; it is not a straight line. Decisions are made, some of which are out of our hands—GST, for example, and the relativity around GST. Some of them you cannot predict.

The GST pool is volatile. It depends on how much the people on the east coast are spending in restaurants and cafes and on groceries. How much we get in our GST pool is volatile. I think 72% of our budget is either tied funding from the federal government or funding from the federal government. There is a huge amount of money that any Treasurer in the Northern Territory has very little control over. We want our GST to increase, but it is volatile. We have predictions for GST; sometimes they come in under and sometimes over. Deputy Under Treasurer Mick Butler talked about the conservative nature of our budget. We are always conservative.

Some of the things we heard from the CLP include that you will cut payroll tax, so there will be less revenue coming in. You will see changes in these figures because you people are already talking about cutting payroll tax. You are also talking about large amounts of money going into housing—\$52m or something like that.

You have already made policy decisions. You are not even in government and you have made election commitments that will affect these, so I do not know what you are on about when you ask, 'Are these the truth?' They change; you will change them. I think it is \$212m less revenue from our biggest revenue. Yes, we have the GST and tied fundings from the Commonwealth, but the largest amount of own-source revenue is payroll tax. That is why I am not touching payroll tax. Do you think I am stupid? I am not going to touch payroll tax because it is the largest amount of revenue we receive in the Northern Territory. You people are, though; you are changing payroll tax for only 14% of businesses that will benefit in the Territory. Eighty-six per cent are large companies that can afford payroll tax. We have the second-best payroll tax in Australia.

You are already talking about changing that. You will see these figures change by \$212m; that is what happens. I do not know if you have made that decision, but your Leader of the Opposition has come out spruiking that one. That will change this figure. Where will you get \$212m from? You will cut education—I know you will—as well as health and social services, like you did from 2012 to 2016.

Do not keep raving on about these figures; you obviously have no understanding of the process. You have talked about cutting our biggest source of revenue. That policy decision will change this figure. Talking about trust, I will be telling people that they cannot trust CLP members, because they are already talking about cutting revenue in the Northern Territory.

**Mrs LAMBLEY:** That is all very well, but you and previous Treasurers have placed us in a position of debt whereby we are paying over half-a-billion dollars a year just to service the debt. It is all very well to attack the opposition for making cuts in the form of payroll tax, but what you are doing by placing us in this extraordinary level of debt is costing us in other ways.

I am wondering if you really do have a broad and balanced view of how to manage anything, Treasurer. Your extraordinary statement that you have no plan to repay the debt, when you had to be rescued by the executive sitting next to you to talk about the fiscal plan—nothing you say is convincing me or probably anyone else that you have any better handle on the fiscal position of the Northern Territory than anyone else in this room.

**Ms LAWLER:** What is your question? You have just given me your opinion.



**Mrs LAMBLEY:** I probably do not have a question. I am just responding to hours of you contradicting yourself, confusing everyone and not making a lot of sense, at the end of the day. You are the one who has put us into \$10bn of debt. You cannot keep spending, so what is your plan? You cannot keep putting us in this extraordinary debt. Soon we will be looking at \$1bn in servicing a debt if you keep along this trajectory.

You have added \$1bn of debt for every year you have been in government. That is \$8bn of debt you have added since the likes of the former Treasurer, who is sitting over here, came to office. What is your plan to address this escalating debt and servicing it? It is outrageous to try to deflect; to say that it is someone else's fault and you have it in hand is absurd.

**Ms LAWLER:** I was just pointing out to the Member for Namatjira, who was talking about whether we can trust the figures, that they were already talking about payroll as our largest own-source revenue. Our plan is to continue to grow the economy in the Territory to \$40bn by 2030.

I have spoken many times today in regard to the projects that do not have FID—the Beetaloo, for example, will provide substantial royalties to the Northern Territory.

The Nolans rare earths project is a large injection into the Alice Springs economy with more jobs and more people.

Tennant Creek gold mining, AROWS, Middle Arm, Defence—you can go to page 23 of the budget book to see the large number of projects that have not been considered because they have not reached final investment decision. Deputy Under Treasurer Mick Butler talked about the conservative nature of our budget.

We are focused on getting to an operating surplus. As the Deputy Under Treasurer said, when we get to that is when we will pay down debt. It is as simple as that.

**Mrs LAMBLEY:** It is not a convincing story.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** They are not part of the budget because there is no certainty they will happen. What happens if none of these projects come to fruition; they have not over the last eight years of your government?

**Ms LAWLER:** There is another \$57bn worth of projects. You had the Territory Investment Commissioner here, and you did not ask one question.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** I ask you all of my questions. I do not need to speak to other people; you are the Chief Minister. The buck stops with you, and that is why I ask you my questions.

**Ms LAWLER:** Let's change the output to the Investment Territory.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** I asked them in the opening statement.

**Ms LAWLER:** No, because I did not give an opening statement.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** I asked them in the whole-of-government questions.

**Ms LAWLER:** I did not give an opening statement. You are not interested in investment in the Northern Territory, but we will continue to work hard to grow the economy, seek investment and diversify the economy. You cannot cut your way out of debt; that is a fact. We will continue to grow the economy in the Northern Territory.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** You have no confidence that those projects will go ahead. If they do not, what happens?

**Ms LAWLER:** I am confident that a lot of those projects will go ahead, and I am confident about the Defence ...

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** You have been talking about them for years. The ship lift you were talking about this morning ...

**Madam DEPUTY CHAIR:** I have let the interjections go a little bit; reign it in, please. We have an hour and 15 minutes to go.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** The ship lift is a good example of a project you have put out a press release on about 30 or 40 times. People do not have confidence that you will deliver.

**Ms LAWLER:** We will deliver, and we are delivering the ship lift. It is easy to criticise these projects, but the ship lift project will be delivered.

The other thing you can be assured of is regarding Defence; if we can get to that output, we will be able to talk about it at some stage today.

Master Builders completed that work and said that there was \$6bn worth of civil contracting in the Northern Territory. That is substantial investment that will underpin our economy. It is good, solid investment.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** Over the last eight years your government has been more focused on pet projects like the shadeless shade structure; the aboveground/underground car park; there was going to be a museum at Myilly Point at one stage; and you have just spent a few million dollars replacing the grass in the park next to Parliament House, which had perfectly good grass before that. This comes down to wasteful spending, a lack of priorities and a billion-dollar increase in debt every year that Labor has been in power. What do Territorians have to show for it?

**Ms LAWLER:** I do not know where you were when we were talking about the debt, but 77% of our debt is in relation to capital projects, so \$6.7bn can be attributed to the Territory's capital works projects.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** I heard all that.

**Ms LAWLER:** Tell me which projects you would not do. The underground car park that you talk about ...

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** If you had your time again would you build the shade structure? How much has been spent—about \$4m on that? Surely it is a lack of priorities for your government and wasteful spending.

**Ms LAWLER:** We will continue to do the big projects that deliver for Territorians. The shade structure was work on the city deal and cooling the CBD. It was a pilot project. There are people who love the shade structure. There are plenty of people who think it has been a good investment.

You hark back to those projects. There are amazing, outstanding projects we have done in the Northern Territory. I am proud to be the person who delivers the bituminising of the Tanami Highway, for example. I am proud to be the person who continues to get the money to bituminise Central Arnhem Road so you can drive from south of Katherine all the way to Nhulunbuy on a bitumen road. We will continue to work to deliver those landmark projects. The Carpentaria Highway ...

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** There is also a lot of waste. You have to acknowledge there has been a lack of priorities, significant pet projects and a lot of waste that should have been spent elsewhere. We have a hospital and a police force in crisis, yet millions have been frittered away on projects that do not make the Territory a better place, make us safer or grow our economy.

**Madam DEPUTY CHAIR:** We are still on the opening statement.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** Do not acknowledge that you have made any wrong priorities and that, for a billion dollars a year, Territorians have not gotten bang for buck under your government?

**Madam DEPUTY CHAIR:** The Chief Minister can answer that question the way she feels it needs to be answered. We are on the opening statement. We have other agencies, and I know that the Member for Mulka, for example, had a question for Territory Development. Does the shadow have more questions with regard to the opening statement ...

**Mr YAN:** Yes, I do.

**Madam DEPUTY CHAIR:** ... because we have other members on the committee.

**Mr YAN:** I go back to the fiscal strategy before moving on. In Chapter 4 the paragraph I read from Budget Paper No 2 on page 5, which I spoke about before, is repeated:

*The fiscal balance is expected to remain in deficit over the budget cycle, with a return to surplus now anticipated in 2029–30, one year later than the A plan for budget repair 2028–29 target.*

In the 'A plan for budget repair' document, what was the projected 2028–29 revenue when that plan was developed?

**Ms LAWLER:** We do not have that information on hand. You can look back on the 2019–20 budget books, if you like, and probably find it there. Google 'Treasury and Finance' and look at the 2019–20 budget and you will find that figure.

**Mr YAN:** Are you not able to provide that to me now?

**Ms LAWLER:** I can get the agency staff to find that for you, but you can do that as well as they can.

**Mr YAN:** I cannot sit here and access Google; I am asking questions currently.

**Ms LAWLER:** I will have to ask the staff to get that figure. They have until 15 July to give you that figure.

**Mr YAN:** Would it be safe to say ...

**Ms LAWLER:** Do you want that question or not? If you do, there is a process.

**Mr YAN:** Okay, I will ask it on notice.

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#### Question on Notice No 1.4

**Madam DEPUTY CHAIR:** Member for Namatjira, please restate the question for the record.

**Mr YAN:** In the 'A plan for budget repair' document, what was the projected 2028–29 revenue when that plan was developed?

**Madam DEPUTY CHAIR:** Chief Minister, do you accept the question?

**Ms LAWLER:** Yes, I do.

**Madam DEPUTY CHAIR:** The question has been allocated the number 1.4.

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**Mr YAN:** If that number is not available I could safely say that the revenue may have changed since then. What is the projected revenue for 2028–29 based on your current figures?

**Ms LAWLER:** The 2028–29 figure is beyond the forward estimates, so we do not know. I can give you 2026–27. Do you want 2026–27?

**Mr YAN:** Yes, 2026–27.

**Ms LAWLER:** Revenue for 2027–28 is \$8.259bn.

**Mr YAN:** One could safely say that the revenue projections from Langoulant's 'A plan for budget repair' in 2018 would have been on the low side. The revenue projections since then have increased, so would it be true that the NT's revenue is much higher than expected when the 'A plan for budget repair' document was done?

**Ms LAWLER:** Possibly. I do not have those figures in front of me, so we have to look it up.

Let us be clear: the CLP will cut revenue. You have talked about reducing payroll tax. All this talk of revenue and what it will be in 2028—you can do maths and take away what you will be doing, because payroll would be at least \$50m each year that you will be cutting. You need to do some sums and take away from that revenue in 2027–28 because ...

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** That is incorrect, Chief Minister, and you know it.

**Ms LAWLER:** ... you will cut revenue from payroll tax. You have already announced it as a policy position.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** You know those figures are totally incorrect.

**Ms LAWLER:** No, it is not; it is 100% correct.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** You said different numbers in parliament from what you said then.

**Ms LAWLER:** It is correct. I will find the detail about payroll tax. You are cutting ...

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** We are proud and happy to be cutting payroll tax to small business. We know your only plan for the economy is to try to tax Territorians because you cannot diversify and grow our economy and private sector investment is at all-time lows. We have to do something different if we are to expect a different outcome. Under your government it is status quo.

**Ms LAWLER:** Yes, \$50m over four years is what you will be cutting from payroll tax. You can do the maths; it is a fact.

**Mr YAN:** We are quite proud of the fact we are cutting payroll taxes to boost business and create jobs in the Territory. There are other ways to generate revenue in the Territory rather than just through payroll taxes.

**Ms LAWLER:** We would like to hear those.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** It sounds like it will just be higher taxes under your watch.

**Ms LAWLER:** No.

**Madam DEPUTY CHAIR:** Committee members! We still have a bit to get through. We have not gone through all the output groups for Treasury yet. The shadow ministers have had a lot of questions, and the other committee members have not. Away we go, back to the opening statement.

**Mr YAN:** I am happy to move into some outputs.

#### **Agency-Related Whole-of-Government Questions on Budget and Fiscal Strategy**

**Madam DEPUTY CHAIR:** The committee will now consider the estimates of proposed expenditure contained in the Appropriation (2024–25) Bill that relate to the Department of Treasury and Finance. Are there any agency-related, whole-of-government questions on budget and fiscal strategy?

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** What is the efficiency dividend that you are imposing on each agency?

**Ms LAWLER:** The efficiency dividend is 1%, but if it is a frontline agency it is a third of that.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** Which are the frontline agencies, according to you?

**Ms LAWLER:** Health, Education, Police, Corrections and parts of Territory Families.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** How does that work in practice? You have allocated their budget but will take a third of it back.

**Ms LAWLER:** That is just a third less that they are allocated.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** Why do you bother giving them the full budget in the first place if you are just going to take it back, or not give it to them?

**Ms LAWLER:** I will pass to Tim McManus, who can provide a clear explanation.

**Mr McMANUS:** Each year, agency budgets are applied a parameter around wages growth, CPI and an efficiency dividend. They are applied all together, so policy decisions are made for new funding decisions each budget or midyear report process, and those parameters—inflators and deflators—are applied in aggregate against the new funding decisions. Like the Treasurer said, a portion of their employee budget will get the wages parameter; the operational budget gets the CPI parameter; and on top of that is the efficiency dividend factor which is then applied.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** Is it applied exclusive of employment and operational to whatever is left?

**Mr McMANUS:** That is right. The grants line also gets a composite of wage growth operation, so CPI and efficiency dividend parameter.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** Why not just allocate the actual amount that they get? Why have this artificial ...

**Mr McMANUS:** They get funded a base amount, and those parameters vary each year, so the CPI is a factor of the economy and there are movements in that. Wages growth is a factor of the wages policy, then the efficiency dividend is a policy decision for government on how it wants to manage growth within costs.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** Yes, but that efficiency dividend is set, so why even pretend to allocate it when there is no intention to give it to them?

**Mr McMANUS:** It can vary each year. Like I said, each year there is a decision within budget Cabinet in regard to the efficiency dividend, whether it is 1% or increased, or decreased.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** Does that efficiency dividend then pass on to NGOs and charities through their grant funding?

**Ms LAWLER:** Yes.

**Mr McMANUS:** Yes, it does. The grant parameters which agencies pass on to NGOs—they get a composite of the wages parameter, CPI and efficiency dividend.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** What would an example be? Police is frontline, so it only has one-third efficiency; does that mean Neighbourhood Watch will get one-third less funding?

**Mr McMANUS:** They will always have their base budget funding, then the growth or otherwise is applied on that each year so they will get growth in their wages parameter in the CPI. that will be netted off by whatever the efficiency dividend is. There is usually always growth.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** That one-third will be passed onto the charities, in the example of frontline, and that will flow onto the NGOs and charities those agencies deal with?

**Mr McMANUS:** Yes, and there is some detail in the front of BP3 on what parameters are applied to the budget each year.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** What was the efficiency dividend recommended to government to apply?

**Ms LAWLER:** It was 1%, and that is what we have taken up. If you went back in history you would find that the CLP government, between 2012 and 2016, I think it got up to even 2%. We have kept ours at 1%.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** What happens if an agency does not meet the saving ratio?

**Ms LAWLER:** We see that with Health. As the Treasurer, you have to specifically give a Treasurer's Advance. We have seen that in the past where police have not been able to curtail their budget.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** And the outcome of that is?

**Ms LAWLER:** The outcome is that they have to work hard to get their budget into a better position. For example, we have given Health an additional \$200m. We have put in a committee to look at where that agency can make cost efficiencies to work out exactly where they are blowing their budget and will look at our work with the federal government on getting additional funding. You would have to be agile around the work we do with those agencies, which is the work of Treasury—that is why Treasury is not always loved, even though I love it. Some of the agency heads do not because they are always keeping a close eye on the budgets. The quarterly reports that go to ministers are to work to keep their budget in check.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** You have a committee for Health to look at how it is spending its budget. Are you not looking at a whole-of-government waste?

**Ms LAWLER:** Yes, that is always the work of Treasury. The workers meet with me as Treasurer as well. Every agency CEO has to curtail and keep their spends within their budget.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** The reality is that they are not. We are still seeing pet projects. How are they getting through and being rolled out?

**Ms LAWLER:** You talk about pet projects, but these are projects that we work around with Territorians. We get lobbied—and I am sure you do—by a heap of people about things they want to see, particularly infrastructure. If you are the Infrastructure minister you get lobbied nearly every day from the pastoral industry and NT Cattlemen’s about bituminising more roads or local government. I was in Maningrida for two days, and they want roads to homelands bituminised. We are always identifying and prioritising what the spend will be, but usually the pet projects you are talking about are regarding infrastructure.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** Territorians cannot understand your priorities. For example, in Alice Springs there has been a promise of an art gallery for a decade or so, yet a few hundred metres from where we are sitting Darwin will have a \$70m-odd dollar art gallery. People cannot understand where the priorities are. How on Earth ...

**Ms LAWLER:** What do you mean in relation to that? What are you talking about, that it has taken longer in Alice and shorter here?

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** Yes. How on Earth does Darwin get an art gallery before Alice Springs when that has been on the cards for years?

**Ms LAWLER:** You know why—we have a better council. You do not have Damien Ryan, a CLP candidate, who blocked that art gallery every step of the way. Those years when we had to compulsorily acquire the land was one of the major hold-ups. The number of times a minister has had to compulsorily acquire land from a council I could count on one hand. We had the council in Alice Springs blocking that project every step of the way.

Member for Araluen, like it or not, everybody has a different political narrative. I had to step in to actually acquire the land for a project that will transform the town of Alice Springs to have an Aboriginal art gallery that will bring tourists in and keep people in town for an extra day or two to spend money. We have commitments from the pub across the road and Alice Plaza. They will all upgrade. They want an art gallery there, yet we had to fight tooth and nail.

Here, with a council that was supportive of it, we have been able to get moving with that project. Sitzler is building the gallery here and will be building the gallery in Alice Springs. We were able to get moving much more quickly here because that is reality when you have a supportive council.

I have worked hard to make sure I have good relationships with councils. I have a great relationship now with Matt Paterson in Alice Springs, obviously a great relationship with Kon, a really good relationship with Athina and the same with our remote councils. You have to work with government and council, but we have had councils in the past that have blocked government. That is why.

The national Aboriginal art gallery—or as it is now called ATSIAGA, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Gallery of Australia—will be an amazing project once it is completed.

**Madam DEPUTY CHAIR:** That concludes consideration of agency-related whole-of-government questions on budget and fiscal strategy.

## **OUTPUT GROUP 17.0 – FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT**

### **Output 17.1 – Financial Management**

**Madam DEPUTY CHAIR:** The committee will now proceed to Output 17.0, Financial Management, Output 17.1, Financial Management. Are there any questions?

**Mr YAN:** On page 190 of the TAFR 2022–23 there is a total of Treasurer’s advances coming to \$28.725m in relation to legal costs. The Department of the Chief Minister and Cabinet had \$670,000. Can you list each of those matters, what it relates to and what was the cost for each matter?

**Ms LAWLER:** I think we need to be looking at the 2024–25 budget. We seem to be going a long way back.

**Mr YAN:** This is the only chance we get to ask about the TAFR.

**Ms LAWLER:** You could have asked in parliament. It could have been a written question. I am happy to take that on notice.

**Madam DEPUTY CHAIR:** Member for Namatjira, please restate the question for the record.

**Mr YAN:** From the TAFR there were advances of \$28.725m in relation to legal costs.

**Ms LAWLER:** No, let's be careful; there is \$28m for Chief Minister and Cabinet, Electoral Commission, Health—there are all those different agencies.

**Mr YAN:** Yes, I have questions and costs for each agency; there are four questions with costs.

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#### Question on Notice No 1.5

**Madam DEPUTY CHAIR:** Member for Namatjira, please restate the question for the record.

**Mr YAN:** For the Department of the Chief Minister and Cabinet, there is \$670,000 in the Treasurer's Advance. Please list each matter this relates to and what is the cost for each matter.

**Madam DEPUTY CHAIR:** Chief Minister, do you accept the question?

**Ms LAWLER:** Yes.

**Madam DEPUTY CHAIR:** The question has been allocated number 1.5.

**Mr YAN:** The Department of Health had \$3.63m. Can you list each matter and what it relates to?

**Ms LAWLER:** For some of those I do not think you would be able to. The agency can reply, but that would be about medical negligence and things like that with Health and hospitals, I would say. There might be some that you will not get an answer on.

**Mr YAN:** That is fine.

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#### Question on Notice No 1.6

**Madam DEPUTY CHAIR:** Member for Namatjira, please restate the question for the record.

**Mr YAN:** Minister, the Department of Health had \$3.63m. Can you list each matter, what it relates to and what was the cost for each matter?

**Madam DEPUTY CHAIR:** Chief Minister, do you accept the question?

**Ms LAWLER:** Yes.

**Madam DEPUTY CHAIR:** The question has been allocated number 1.6.

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#### Question on Notice No 1.7

**Madam DEPUTY CHAIR:** Member for Namatjira, please restate the question for the record.

**Mr YAN:** The Department of Territory Families, Housing and Communities had a \$1.737m advance. Please list each matter this relates to and what the cost is of each matter.

**Madam DEPUTY CHAIR:** Chief Minister, do you accept the question?

**Ms LAWLER:** Yes.

**Madam DEPUTY CHAIR:** The question has been allocated number 1.7.

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### Question on Notice No 1.8

**Madam DEPUTY CHAIR:** Member for Namatjira, please restate the question for the record.

**Mr YAN:** Northern Territory Police, Fire and Emergency Services had an expense and advancement of \$2.735m. Please list each matter this relates to and what the cost is for each matter.

**Madam DEPUTY CHAIR:** Treasurer, do you accept the question?

**Ms LAWLER:** I do. They are in relation to Treasurer's Advances, which are one-off, unexpected costs. There might be some things you cannot necessarily—there might be some legal issues in some of those.

**Madam DEPUTY CHAIR:** The question has been allocated the number 1.8.

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**Madam DEPUTY CHAIR:** That concludes consideration of Output Group 17.0.

#### OUTPUT GROUP 18.0 – ECONOMIC SERVICES Output 18.1 – Economic Services Output 18.2 – Payments on Behalf of Government

No questions.

**Madam DEPUTY CHAIR:** That concludes consideration of Output Group 18.0.

#### OUTPUT GROUP 19.0 – TERRITORY REVENUE Output 19.1 – Territory Revenue

**Madam DEPUTY CHAIR:** The committee will now consider Output Group 19.0, Territory Revenue, Output 19.1, Territory Revenue. Are there any questions?

**Mr YAN:** Mining and petroleum royalties have decreased \$98m compared with the 2023–24 budget estimates. How much of this is related to the mining operation closures of Peko tailings and Elmore's voluntary administration?

**Ms LAWLER:** I will pass to the Deputy Under Treasurer, but the majority of that is probably not Peko. It is more likely GEMCO.

**Mr YAN:** There are others I have questions on.

**Mr BUTLER:** Due to the confidentiality requirements under the mineral royalties legislation, we are unable to identify the royalty payments of particular miners. That would include identifying the amount of reduction that relates to a particular miner. I will say, however, that the aggregate reduction across mineral royalties relates to the closure of several mines and the suspension of operations of other ones affected by Cyclone Megan as well as, given our profit-based mineral royalty regime, some increased costs of mineral royalty-paying mines. It is an aggregate effect, a net effect, of those operations.

**Mr YAN:** Can you not provide any specifics for Core Lithium or South32, for instance?

**Mr BUTLER:** No.

**Mr YAN:** Okay, so it is an aggregate of those seven mines.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** If it is bigger than was predicted last year, what causes that? I think last budget it was about \$80m, and now it is \$98m, so what is the blowout?

**Mr BUTLER:** Is that the increase in reductions?

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** Yes, in the lost revenue going forward.

**Mr BUTLER:** The process for doing a mineral royalties forecast is liaising with mineral royalty payers, because they are best placed to make estimates of their deductible costs under the regime. We liaise with



them to get forecasts from them of their likely royalty payments, then we cross-check it ourselves with a sense of our forecasts for mineral commodity prices. They would do the expenses side of the equation. That would lead to the outcome of the forecast that we had. From then we had unexpected events, such as the suspension of operations in one case and the complete cessation of operations with Core Lithium. That is a greater reduction than we had forecast from those liaisons.

**Mr YAN:** I will quickly talk about motor vehicle tax. In the 2023–24 budget motor vehicle tax was estimated at \$87m, then revised down to \$77m. In this year's budget it is back up to \$81m. You stated in your budget paper that increased motor vehicle tax is due to revenue unit indexation and vehicle registration growth. How much additional motor vehicle tax will there be due to the increase of the revenue unit?

**Ms LAWLER:** I will take that one on notice. I will talk about how we have pushed to keep the motor vehicle registration charge increases down. Under \$10 is the cost-of-living measure that we have worked hard to do. We can take that one on notice.

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#### Question on Notice No 1.9

**Madam DEPUTY CHAIR:** Member for Namatjira, please restate the question for the record.

**Mr YAN:** How much additional motor vehicle tax will there be due to the increase of the revenue unit?

**Madam DEPUTY CHAIR:** Chief Minister, do you accept the question?

**Ms LAWLER:** Yes, I do.

**Madam DEPUTY CHAIR:** The question has been allocated the number 1.9.

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**Mr YAN:** How much additional motor vehicle tax will be attributed to growth in motor vehicle registration? How many registered vehicles have been used in this calculation?

**Ms LAWLER:** We can take that on notice.

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#### Question on Notice No 1.10

**Madam DEPUTY CHAIR:** Member for Namatjira, please restate the question for the record.

**Mr YAN:** How much additional motor vehicle tax will be attributed to growth in motor vehicle registration? How many registered vehicles have been used in this calculation?

**Madam DEPUTY CHAIR:** Chief Minister, do you accept the question?

**Ms LAWLER:** Yes, I do.

**Madam DEPUTY CHAIR:** The question has been allocated the number 1.10.

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**Mr YAN:** Motor vehicle registrations have fallen from 202,943 in July 2023 to 200,948 in April 2024. That is a reduction of 1,995. Will you be recalculating your Budget Paper No 2, because it refers to increased motor vehicle taxes due to the revenue unit indexation and vehicle registration growth, which is actually reduced?

**Mr BUTLER:** The motor vehicle taxes category includes stamp duty on motor vehicles. It is not just the number of registrations or the value of registration costs, which comes direct to the revenue; it also involves sales of new and second-hand motor vehicles for stamp duty purposes. That is the total category that is in there, so that forecast is based on all of those premises.

**Mr YAN:** Are you expecting an increase in new vehicle sales to attribute to that high revenue?

**Mr BUTLER:** It is sales and values of sales.

**Mrs LAMBLEY:** I noticed yesterday that plug-in electric vehicles do not pay car registration. How many vehicles are we talking about?

**Ms LAWLER:** That is probably a question for the minister for transport. Last I heard I think only about 60-odd. It is not a high number. When I was minister, which was probably 18 months ago, I think there were 60-odd electric vehicles. That number is increasing. It is to encourage electric vehicles. It is only 63—not a lot.

**Madam DEPUTY CHAIR:** That concludes consideration of Output 19.1.

### Output 19.2 – Home Owner Assistance

**Madam DEPUTY CHAIR:** We will now consider Output 19.2, Home Owner Assistance. Are there any questions?

**Mr YAN:** Developers, real estate agents, builders and Territorians have welcomed our \$50,000 HomeGrown Territory Program to support Territory first home owners to build their homes. Why do you continue to call this scheme—as you have categorically called it—a brain fart?

**Ms LAWLER:** Yours is an election commitment. We will have election commitments as well. We are here to talk about the budget, so I do not think there is any need to talk about your home ownership election commitment. You can talk about our home ownership incentives, as the government of the Northern Territory. I am not interested in talking about your election commitment; you should be talking to Territorians about that, not in here. Can we move on to the next one?

**Mr YAN:** You have been talking about us all day, so I thought you might like to continue.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** Is that because you called it a brain fart but now you are desperately trying to create your own policy to compete with us?

**Ms LAWLER:** No, why would I give airtime to an election commitment by the CLP?

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** You have been talking a lot about having your housing industry body come up with some recommendations for your government, because clearly the ones you have are underperforming.

**Ms LAWLER:** In government we have a housing alliance, and it will provide a report to me. I will listen to the housing alliance. I will not spend today at Estimates, where you are supposed to be analysing the budget—we have given you a lot of leeway today—giving airtime to your CLP election commitment. It may be something we never see in the future, so let us move on to our budget.

**Madam DEPUTY CHAIR:** We are at Output 19.2, Home Owner Assistance, going to the contents of the Appropriation Bill and the line agency. Are there any more questions?

**Mr YAN:** The purpose of your home ownership assistance scheme is to encourage home ownership. What are the home ownership schemes that your government administers?

**Ms LAWLER:** I will be happy to read through what we have; there are a number. First of all, the house and land package exemption provides a stamp duty exemption for home buyers who acquire a house and land package with a building contractor between 1 July 2022 and 30 June 2027. To qualify, the building contractor must have acquired the land from a developer and paid stamp duty on the value of that land.

The first home owner grant of \$10,000 for first home buyers of new homes is ongoing, with no current expiry date. That is the second one.

The home build access scheme, administered by the NT home ownership through People's Choice Credit Union, provides low deposit loans and subsidised interest loans for low to middle income earners who buy or build a new home in the Territory.

They are the three options we have to support Territorians to own their own home.

**Mr YAN:** How many first home owner grants have been issued this financial year?

**Ms LAWLER:** There have been 89 in total, at a cost of \$887,000. That is an average of about seven homeowner grants per month.

**Mr YAN:** How many were issued last financial year?

**Ms LAWLER:** We are talking about this financial year. I do not have that data in front of me.

**Mr YAN:** Are you willing to take that question on notice?

**Ms LAWLER:** Estimates is about looking at this year's budget. You should have asked that question last year. It is getting a bit tedious here.

**Madam DEPUTY CHAIR:** Will you take the question on notice?

**Ms LAWLER:** I will, otherwise they will whinge, but it is getting painful. It is now 4.20 pm; we have 40 minutes, and we still have a lot of outputs to get to.

**Madam DEPUTY CHAIR:** Member for Namatjira, please restate the question for the record.

**Mr YAN:** How many home ownership grants were issued in the financial year 2022–23?

**Madam DEPUTY CHAIR:** Chief Minister, will you accept the question?

**Ms LAWLER:** I will not, because the amazing Catherine Weber, the Deputy Under Treasurer, has just found the information. There were 140 first home owner grants in 2022–23.

**Mr YAN:** Thank you for those totals. It is a significant reduction from 2022–23 to the current year. What can you attribute this reduction to?

**Ms LAWLER:** We can attribute that to interest rates and banks not loaning. We talked about this earlier this morning. Why would anybody want to build or buy a new home when interest rates were 7%? Most people, unless really desperate to buy a home, would keep their money in the bank and continue to save and increase their deposit. Would you buy and actually chase a bank for a home loan when interest rates are that high? Most people would not, unless they have a really solid deposit, a good job and know they can cover it. A lot of average Territorians—teachers, nurses and tradies—are probably having to a good think about building a home when interest rates were high.

I also know how hard it is to get a bank loan. I have had a lot of young people talk to me about that. Even for a loan for a car or a house, it is hard to sit down with a bank and get them to give you the \$500,000 or \$600,000 you need. We understand that.

The good news is that we are seeing interest rates move back to that 2% to 3% band. It is still a lot higher than when interest rates were under 1%.

**Mr YAN:** How many stamp duty exemptions have been issued for the reporting period?

**Ms LAWLER:** Is that the house and land package exemption?

**Mr YAN:** Yes.

**Ms LAWLER:** There have been four house and land package exemption applications, three of which have been approved, for a total cost of \$72,870.

**Mr YAN:** How many HomeBuild Access approvals have been made this year?

**Ms LAWLER:** That is a question for the minister for Housing.

**Madam DEPUTY CHAIR:** That concludes consideration of Output 19.2 and Output Group 19.0.

## **OUTPUT GROUP 20.0 – SUPERANNUATION**

### **Output 20.1 – Superannuation**

No questions.

**OUTPUT GROUP 21.0 – ECONOMIC REGULATION**  
**Output 21.1 – Utilities Commission**

**Madam DEPUTY CHAIR:** The committee will now consider Output Group 21.0, Economic Regulation, Output 21.1, Utilities Commission. Are there any questions?

**Mr YAN:** The Utilities Commission annual report in 2023 reported the issuance of three new generation licences to Eni Australia Limited solar farms at Katherine, Batchelor and Manton Dam. How many kilowatts of solar energy have been exported to the grid from these licences?

**Ms LAWLER:** That is a question for the government-owned corporations scrutiny on Thursday next week.

**Mr YAN:** Are you able to provide information on how much Eni has paid in licence fees for each location?

**Ms LAWLER:** I can take that on notice.

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**Question on Notice No 1.11**

**Madam DEPUTY CHAIR:** Member for Namatjira, please restate the question for the record.

**Mr YAN:** How much has Eni paid in licence fees for the three locations of the solar farms, being Katherine, Batchelor and Manton Dam?

**Madam DEPUTY CHAIR:** Treasurer, do you accept the question?

**Ms LAWLER:** Yes, we will have to chase that with the Utilities Commissioner.

**Madam DEPUTY CHAIR:** The question has been allocated the number 1.11.

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**Madam DEPUTY CHAIR:** That concludes consideration of Output 21.1 and Output Group 21.0.

**OUTPUT GROUP 22.0 – CORPORATE AND SHARED SERVICES**  
**Output 22.1 – Corporate and Governance**  
**Output 22.2 – Shared Services Received**

No questions.

**Madam DEPUTY CHAIR:** That concludes consideration of Output 22.2 and Output Group 22.0, and concludes consideration of the outputs relating to the Department of Treasury and Finance.

**CENTRAL HOLDING AUTHORITY**

No questions.

**NT TREASURY CORPORATION**

No questions.

**Madam DEPUTY CHAIR:** On behalf of the committee, I thank the departmental officers who provided advice to the Department of Treasury and Finance today.

The committee will now move on to consider outputs relating to the Territory Development portfolio.

**Ms LAWLER:** I thank the amazing Treasury officials. I am very proud of the amazing work they do every day. Thank you to Craig, Catherine, Tim and Mick—terrific people who do an exceptional job for Territorians.

**TERRITORY DEVELOPMENT**

**DEPARTMENT OF INFRASTRUCTURE, PLANNING AND LOGISTICS**

**Mrs DEPUTY CHAIR:** Chief Minister, I invite you, as the Minister for Territory Development, to introduce your officials accompanying you and to make an opening statement regarding the Territory Development portfolio.

**Ms LAWLER:** I have Andrew Kirkman, the Chief Executive of Infrastructure, Planning and Logistics. I also have Louise McCormick, the Infrastructure Commissioner, who has a role in the Department of Infrastructure, Planning and Logistics, but is here as the Infrastructure Commissioner. I have Fotis Papadakis who is the Chief Financial Officer of DIPL.

We are running out of time. I will not read an opening statement, as much as I would love to talk about the amazing work the Infrastructure Commissioner has done on the plan and the pipeline as well as the delivery of big projects, I will not waste time because I know the Member for Mulka is waiting to ask a question.

**Mr GUYULA:** What Defence discussions are being held in relation to the Gove peninsula?

**Madam CHAIR:** I think that is the Middle Arm question. That one is tomorrow morning.

**Mr GUYULA:** Last year I raised questions about consultations with Larrakia people and families about the Middle Arm development. The Senate inquiry hearings into Middle Arm held in April this year showed from all Larrakia parties and the NLC that appropriate consultation had not taken place. That free right to informed consent has not occurred. Nigel Browne, the CEO of Larrakia Development Corporation, said that support for the Middle Arm precinct was an issue for nine family groups to decide. He stated that Larrakia people are attempting to catch up and rest relationships between government and Larrakia by having a participation and agreement-making framework that makes sure that Larrakia are an equal party. Is this NT Government in agreement with making the Larrakia people an equal party, and what does that look like from the government's perspective? Does that begin with obtaining consent for Middle Arm?

**Ms LAWLER:** Member for Mulka, that is a complex question. The land at Middle Arm is Crown land, so it is Northern Territory Government land, and we will continue to work with the Larrakia people on identified sacred sites there. We will continue to work with the Larrakia on that land. I will pass to Louise McCormick, as she can talk about the work that is under way with the Larrakia people on that Middle Arm land.

**Ms McCORMICK:** There has been some work that we started late last year with Larrakia Development Corporation with the nine families and their work with us. Since then we have been working with Larrakia Development Corporation on a framework through which we undertake that work. As an outcome of that work there should be a cultural survey of the site as well as a cultural heritage management plan that we are working on with them.

That will take a number of years. Through that process we should be able to obtain an Aboriginal Areas Protection Authority certificate. It is also part of the work we are doing through our environmental approvals and several other acts we are doing that work under.

We are definitely working alongside Larrakia, particularly the Larrakia Development Corporation as a coordinating body for the work.

In the Senate inquiry, Senator Lydia Thorpe asked a number of questions about that. There is quite a detailed answer on the Senate inquiry page from us about that, as well as from Larrakia Development Corporation which also put up their framework work.

### **Agency-Related Whole-of-Government Questions on Budget and Fiscal Strategy**

**Madam DEPUTY CHAIR:** I will go back to a bit of housekeeping and get back to the script.

The committee will now proceed to consider the estimates and proposed expenditure contained in the Appropriation Bill 2024–25 that relates to the Territory Development Corporation portfolio. Are there any agency-related whole-of-government questions on budget and fiscal strategy?

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** It is a shame in some way that you did not do an opening statement because most people are confused what this agency—you call it—is. You used to be the Infrastructure minister and have all of DIPL, then you brought in Joel Bowden to give him a little time in the sun. That guy loves a chance to talk, puff up his ego and talk about when he used to play AFL. I know you have given him an opportunity to get some experience under his belt.

However, you kept a chunk of DIPL. Why did you keep a chunk of DIPL? What is this chunk? Is it because it is all the important parts, and you do not trust him with it?

**Ms LAWLER:** Leader of the Opposition, you always go personal. As Joel would say, you play the man instead of the ball. It is always disappointing to hear your questions.

First of all Infrastructure NT was established in 2021 with the amazing Louise McCormick as the Infrastructure Commissioner. It is a first infrastructure body. Every other state has an infrastructure body—they call them I-bodies. It is not unusual.

The work of Infrastructure NT has been led by Louise. The overarching work is to have the Infrastructure plan and pipeline. That department has worked exceptionally well to develop the NT Infrastructure Strategy 2022 to 2030. We have the overarching strategy, the plan and the pipeline, which is handy because when somebody comes to me and says, 'When will you build the new school in Muirhead?' I can look at the plan and see that on the forward works.

We have the two to three-year period, the five to 10 years and beyond. That work is being done across the Northern Territory. Louise's team has been able to do the audits to be clear about where we need to replace a health centre, put in a new school or upgrade the roads.

If you have not read the NT Infrastructure Strategy as well as the plan and pipeline, do so. It is overarching.

As the Minister for Territory Development it is handy because I have a clear plan for infrastructure in the Northern Territory. Instead of it being ad hoc and people saying, 'We need a this. We need a road there. We need something there', it is all in that document. If you have not read it, make sure you do.

The infrastructure audit done last year identified six key themes that will underpin liveability in the Territory. These include increased digital connectivity—if you go into a remote community the number one issue they talk about is digital connectivity, almost above housing because we are building lots of houses in remote communities—but they want fast access to IT and to technology; increased housing supply and choice; ongoing delivery of utilities and land services; increased asset management, maintenance and funding, which we saw more money going into in our budget; land availability; and increased physical connectivity, so roads.

The work on freight and logistics is also important work that Louise leads in the Northern Territory. There was \$440m from the Australian Government for the logistic hubs and planned equity in our regional logistics hubs. I think we can all understand the importance of logistics hubs. If we had the Member for Barkly here he would be talking about that.

It is that big picture, and then there is the strategic project office of Infrastructure NT that has several teams looking at these projects. They are the Darwin Harbour infrastructure projects, which include the ship lift, Mandorah marine facility, the Frances Bay Mooring Basin lock upgrade and the Gove Port project.

The Darwin city deal includes the State Square redevelopment, the art gallery and the Liberty Square development.

The enabling infrastructure projects—the Darwin regional water supply program, which is AROWS, and Manton Dam return to service, as well as the important Tennant Creek to Darwin infrastructure corridor, which is probably one of the most important projects in the Northern Territory. That infrastructure corridor will be a gas pipeline, water, transmission lines and technology.

Middle Arm Sustainable Development Precinct also includes a renewable energy hub.

It is an overarching strategy, framework and plan that sets where government needs to go regarding infrastructure. It is vital work. Then it has the strategic project office which looks at these key projects.

Then there is DIPL, which does the day-to-day, ongoing projects, including the roads projects that need to continue, the building of a school, health upgrades and the nitty-gritty of the projects around our huge infrastructure.

That is the day work, I would call it, and then high-level strategic and big projects are the work. That is the difference. It is pretty much the same in every state regarding these infrastructure bodies.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** In other words, you kept all the important stuff so that you can have control of it, and you do not trust Joel Bowden to do that job.

**Ms LAWLER:** Not at all.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** How come it never used to be set up like this?

**Ms LAWLER:** In 2021 Infrastructure NT was set up, and there were about 12 months of me having Infrastructure as well as DIPL.

The overarching work then was on our business plan and the works we had to do with Infrastructure Australia. I thought it was important. When Natasha Fyles was Chief Minister we had discussions when we brought in two new ministers about where we should split and what we should do.

I thought it was important for Territory Development, as a lot of the projects were important ones that I had seen from the beginning. For example, this includes all the Darwin Harbour infrastructure projects, the Darwin City Deal—I have been involved in that, so I thought it was important for me to be able to continue that. Joel was coming in as a new minister. That is one of the things Territorians have to make a decision about.

To get into government you need 14 seats; you only hold seven. To win those 14 seats, you will have seven people who have never been in government. That is a tricky thing for Territorians to think about. Business leaders often talk to me about that, saying that we have people in opposition who have never been a minister, let alone seven more they need to get into government, who have never even been in parliament. It is a high risk for them, and they talk to me about that.

Our top business leaders often talk to me about that. They are worried because they know my depth and length of experience as Infrastructure minister and my work as Treasurer. They say, ‘Eva, we need you to continue, to keep going and delivering for Territorians. We are in a good place; we are delivering a lot of infrastructure, and we need you to be there.’

That is an important question. If you ever got into government you would have eight or nine ministers who have never been in government; you have only been in for six days.

We have two new ministers with Brent Potter and Joel Bowden, and I continued working with some of those really important projects. It was a good split. It provided me an opportunity to continue to work with Louise McCormick to deliver those big projects.

It is an important question. It was a good decision by Natasha Fyles when she was Chief Minister.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** Thank you, you answered my question; you did not trust him with the important stuff, as you put it.

**Ms LAWLER:** It is important to know that if you are ever in that position you have to develop people. That is what the Territory would face under a CLP government; a whole group of ministers who have never been ministers and have no idea what they are talking about.

**Mrs LAMBLEY:** It happened before, with Clare Martin in 2001. She did a good job.

**Madam DEPUTY CHAIR:** That concludes consideration of agency related whole of government questions for budget and fiscal strategy. The committee will now consider Output Group 25.

**OUTPUT GROUP 25 – INFRASTRUCTURE NT**  
**Output 25.1 – Infrastructure NT policy and development**  
**Output 25.2 – Strategic project office**

No questions.

**Madam DEPUTY CHAIR:** On behalf of the committee, I thank you for attending today.

**OUTPUT GROUP 26 – BUSINESS, INNOVATION AND WORKFORCE**

**DEPARTMENT OF INDUSTRY, TOURISM AND TRADE**

**Madam DEPUTY CHAIR:** We will get going because we have just over 10 minutes left.

Chief Minister, I invite you as the Minister for Industry and Trade to introduce the officials accompanying you and to make an opening statement regarding the Industry and Trade portfolio.

**Ms LAWLER:** I have Shaun Drabsch, the Chief Executive Officer of the Department of Industry, Tourism and Trade; Scott Lovett, Deputy Chief Executive Officer Tourism, Services and Hospitality; and Luis Da Rocha, General Manager Strategy and Policy.

I will not make an opening statement. I could probably talk for two hours on this topic. How disappointing for Territorians that we have 10 minutes to talk about Industry and Trade. The CLP opposition and Independents have managed their time terribly today. They will spend 10 minutes talking about some of the most important things in the Northern Territory—tourism and industry. It is shocking ...

**Mrs LAMBLEY:** You are wasting time talking about this.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** The irony is not lost on us that you are filling blank space at the moment.

**Ms LAWLER:** Member for Araluen, it needs to be pointed out just how abysmal it is that somebody who thinks they can lead government will spend only 10 minutes talking about industry, tourism and trade in the Northern Territory.

**Mrs LAMBLEY:** Take off your school principal hat, Eva. Come on, get on with it .

**Ms LAWLER:** It is shocking. I will be making sure that I tell Territorians about that ...

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** Look at all this bravado! What a hero. Look at her.

**Ms LAWLER:** Also, you did not ask a question about Investment Territory. It shows ...

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** You are an embarrassment.

**Ms LAWLER:** The embarrassment is you, Leader of the Opposition.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** Do you know how much you talked today? If we measured how much time you spoke today versus how many questions we asked ...

**Ms LAWLER:** You spent all the time politically grandstanding and are not interested—10 minutes on industry, tourism and trade.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** What are you doing now?

**Ms LAWLER:** It is shocking ...

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** You are listening to your own voice.

**Ms LAWLER:** Off you go; start asking questions for 10 minutes.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** Have you finished speaking? Now are we allowed to ask? The headmistress has given us the okay, Member for Araluen, to start asking questions.

**Madam DEPUTY CHAIR:** This is my last 10 minutes of glory as the Chair. Lead me to it! Come on!

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** I know; it is quite astonishing for someone who sat here and listened to her own voice and failed to answer questions all day ...

**Mrs LAMBLEY:** Let us all implode in the last 10 minutes.

**Ms LAWLER:** Every question you have put to us ...

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** She is not doing an opening statement; she just ...

**Madam DEPUTY CHAIR:** Everybody! Hey! That is enough, please. Can we get going? Let us go.



### **Agency-Related Whole-of-Government Questions on Budget and Fiscal Strategy**

**Madam DEPUTY CHAIR:** The committee will now proceed to consider the estimates of proposed expenditure contained in the Appropriation Bill 2024–25 that relates to the Department of Industry, Tourism and Trade. Are there any agency-related whole-of-government questions on budget and fiscal strategy?

Also, there are some lines within the agenda that are the responsibility of other ministers that will come up.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** When you go around the Territory talking to people doing business, they will say that it is harder to do business than ever before, and Labor continues to increase red tape. I have a good, practical example. In the hospitality industry duty managers have to apply for a licence to be gaming machine managers at venues. The duty manager has to undergo a full police clearance, fingerprints with SAFE NT and a process through NT Licensing at an NT Business Centre.

At a time when it is difficult for hospitality to attract and retain staff, there are huge wait times for this licence to take place, with up to six weeks for an appointment; four weeks for the police clearance to be returned; then a further two weeks for the Territory Business Centre to process the application. That means a venue is at risk of not being able to operate because it does not have a licensed duty manager.

However, in Katherine you can get the whole thing processed at the Katherine Police Station. You cannot do that in Darwin. This is a perfect example of red tape making it hard for publicans in Darwin, yet in other parts of the Territory it is seamless. How can you possibly explain this difference?

**Ms LAWLER:** That is an operational question, so I will pass to the Chief Executive Officer, Shaun Drabsch, who can allocate that question to one of his staff.

**Mr DRABSCH:** I am a little surprised at the six weeks appointment question you asked. Can I clarify, Leader of the Opposition, is that in relation to the application to the Territory Business Centre?

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** Yes. I will read out what we have been told. There are wait times of up to six weeks for an appointment, then a further four weeks for the police clearance to be returned and a further two weeks for the Territory Business Centre to process the application.

**Mr DRABSCH:** In regard to the reality of those time frames, I would need to take that on notice. Scott, in terms of licensing, could you make any comments on that?

**Mr LOVETT:** Sure. Basically, the identity checks are being done by SAFE NT by police. They go through a national police clearance process, and that can take time. It is a similar process that security officers go through. I am unaware of why the process is substantially different between Katherine Police Station and the SAFE NT office in Darwin. That may be due to workload and other mitigating factors. As far as licensing is concerned the process is the same, and it is a nationally articulated process that all jurisdictions follow.

**Ms LAWLER:** The department will be keen to look at why the process has taken that long. We are happy to look at the discrepancy between Katherine and Darwin.

**Madam DEPUTY CHAIR:** Do you want to put that on notice?

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** I am happy to.

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### **Question on Notice No 1.12**

**Madam DEPUTY CHAIR:** Leader of the Opposition, please restate the question for the record.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** Why is there a difference in processing a licence as a gaming machine manager between Katherine and Darwin?

**Madam DEPUTY CHAIR:** Minister, do you accept the question?

**Ms LAWLER:** Yes.

**Madam DEPUTY CHAIR:** The question has been allocated the number 1.12.

**Mr YAN:** My questions relate specifically to Licensing NT. As part of the government's liquor buyback scheme, how many businesses took up the offer to have their liquor licences bought back?

**Ms LAWLER:** We have four that were bought back at this stage.

**Mr YAN:** Do you have a cost to the Territory government on those buybacks? What did we, as a Territory government, pay for those four?

**Ms LAWLER:** That is commercial in-confidence.

**Mr YAN:** Okay. Four licences were bought back; are we not able to find out how much that buyback cost?

**Ms LAWLER:** No, because we are continuing to negotiate with a heap of other grocery store licences. We want to make sure Territorians are getting good value for their money and continue to make those prices as least impactful for government as possible. We will continue to do those negotiations.

Three licences have been—sorry, four: Parap Fine Foods, Anula Supermarket, Parap Road Store and Wanguri Supermarket.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** How much have you allocated in the budget for buybacks?

**Ms LAWLER:** I think it was about \$8m, but I would have to check that figure. I do not have the figure in front of me, but I think it was about \$8m.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** Is that out of the Department of Industry, Tourism and Trade budget?

**Ms LAWLER:** That money is probably held by Treasury until it is needed.

**Mr YAN:** Was that additional money provided to DITT, or out of existing?

**Ms LAWLER:** It would be money that has been allocated but is held by Treasury in case it is needed. I think the allocation is \$8m, but I would have to check. Four licences have been completed.

**Mr YAN:** How many businesses showed interest in the buyback scheme?

**Ms LAWLER:** I think it was 24 businesses, and we are continuing to work with—more than half of them showed an interest, and we are continuing to work with them.

**Mr YAN:** Is there any reason so few businesses took part in the buyback scheme, if 24 showed interest and there have only been four to date?

**Ms LAWLER:** We will continue to work through it, but you can work that out for yourself, Member for Namatjira. They are obviously making plenty of money and want to continue to do so. We will continue to work with them. Some of them are getting close in their negotiations, but it is part of their business plan to continue to have a liquor licence and make money from it.

**Madam DEPUTY CHAIR:** It is coming up to five o'clock, so last question.

**Mr YAN:** We know there is an \$8m allocation for the scheme. How many people are currently working on it?

**Ms LAWLER:** How many staff members?

**Mr YAN:** Yes.

**Ms LAWLER:** Is that the biggest question you have? It is your last question, and you are asking how many public servants are working on some little project? Goodness gracious!

**Mr DRABSCH:** There are a number of staff from the Department of Industry, Tourism and Trade; the Department of the Chief Minister; and a couple of other agencies—I think three in total.

**Ms LAWLER:** I probably need to check that figure. Minister Potter will be appearing as Minister for Alcohol Policy. He can probably answer those questions. He is up on Tuesday next week. You can probably go into details in this policy area next Tuesday. I would suggest that is probably a better use of time to ask him questions on that.

**Madam DEPUTY CHAIR:** That concludes Estimates for you today, Chief Minister. Thank you to the Department of Industry, Tourism and Trade for your appearance. It is great to have you here. We will see you tomorrow.

**Ms LAWLER:** I thank the Chief Executive and staff of the Department of Industry, Tourism and Trade and also Land Development Corporation—Tony Stubbin is up the back. Thank you for being patient. Thank you, everyone.

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The committee concluded.

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