



Budget Reply 2023

Labor Leader Rebecca White

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Introduction

Thank you Mr Speaker.

Today I rise to give Tasmanians a reason to believe that together we can build a better future for our State.

A reason to believe that after ten years of the health system getting worse and worse, the Labor Party has a positive alternative plan that will mean better healthcare in our community.

I rise to provide hope that after ten years in which Tasmania has gone from having the most affordable housing to the least, in which homelessness has become commonplace and in which the dream of home ownership now seems completely out of reach for a generation of Tasmanians, Labor has a plan to make renting more affordable and home ownership more achievable.

And I rise to outline for Tasmanians why a vote for Labor at the next election will be a vote for real action to reduce the cost of living pressures that have made life so hard for families right across our State.

Tasmania needs change

Mr Speaker,

I love living in Tasmania and I love our Tasmanian way of life.

I grew up on a farm in a regional community and I learned firsthand how supportive our regional communities can be.

How in hard times the Tasmanian way is to band together and lend a hand to those who need it.

And I believe a bit more of that spirit is what Tasmania needs today.

Because the fact is too many people are being left behind by this minority Liberal government.

They're waiting too long for healthcare.

They're finding it too hard to pay their bills.

They're finding it impossible to rent a house at an affordable price.

And parents like me are worried their kids will never be able to buy a home of their own.

Too many Tasmanians are missing out on the incredible opportunities this State can offer.

Which is why Tasmanians need a better government than the one they have today.

Mr Speaker,

After nearly a decade in office, this minority Liberal government is past its use-by date.

Jeremy Rockliff has lost control of his Party.

The strong, stable, majority government Tasmanians were promised is instead beset with dysfunction and instability.

Six of his MPs have quit in the two years since the last election.

Nearly half the Cabinet has resigned, or been forced to resign.

He's governing in minority with two independents effectively having a veto over his every move.

Which will make the challenge of finally addressing the crises in health, housing and with the cost of living nearly impossible.

And Mr Speaker,

These challenges will be larger still because Jeremy Rockliff has lost control of the budget.

He's sent Tasmania into a record level of debt—\$5.6 billion—with worse still to come.

His minority government will spend nearly \$900 million on interest repayments – more than they're spending building houses for Tasmanians in need.

He's wasted hundreds of millions of dollars on consultants, government advertising, travel and rorts.

And in doing so he's eroded the trust Tasmanians put in the Liberals to run the State's finances responsibly.

But Mr Speaker,

The most disheartening thing about the budget—and the reason why it shows Tasmania needs new leadership—was that it made clear that Jeremy Rockliff and his minority Liberal government are completely out of ideas.

After ten years of a health crisis, a housing crisis, and the cost of living getting worse, the only solution they have is cuts.

\$300 million ripped out of health, education and other essential public services.

That's not a plan for the future.

It's an admission of failure.

How Labor would govern

Mr Speaker,

I came of age politically in the late 1990s, when Jim Bacon and the Labor Party lifted Tasmania out of the doldrums and into the twenty-first century.

I saw how they brought Tasmania together, how they built the confidence of the entire community that there were better days ahead.

I saw them purchase the Spirits and kick off the boom in tourism.

I saw them modernise the economy with reforms to shop trading hours.

I witnessed regional communities no different to mine be transformed by the construction of the irrigation schemes.

I benefited as they built a more prosperous economy, created more opportunities for young Tasmanians, right here in Tasmania, and lifted up working people with nearly two decades of real wages growth.

And most of all, I learned that they did it by listening to the community.

Mr Speaker,

It is clear this minority Liberal government has stopped listening.

How else could their top priority for Tasmania be a billion dollar stadium in Hobart?

How else could they think the middle of a health crisis is the right time to make cuts to health funding?

Why else would they think Tasmanians will accept their broken promises that send power bills soaring?

That people will be impressed by Ministers who seek not to improve the lives of Tasmanians but to pick petty political fights?

How else could this minority government have made so many bad decisions, and got its priorities so wrong?

Mr Speaker,

I believe Tasmanians are crying out for a better type of leadership.

Leadership that listens, not because it has to, but because it actually cares what people think.

Because it believes the priorities of Tasmanians should be the priorities of the Tasmanian Government.

Tasmanians want leadership that brings people together, not because it looks good for the cameras, but because that's how good decisions and lasting change is made.

Leadership that, like the regional community that raised me, recognises we're stronger together.

And that's why the first commitment I make today is that a Labor Government I lead will have a decidedly different character to the indifferent and out of touch leadership that's on offer from the Liberals.

Mr Speaker,

A Labor government I lead will listen – and we'll listen to everyone.

Small business. Farmers. Public sector workers. Tradespeople. Young people. New Tasmanians. Older Tasmanians. Unions. Big business. The homeless and the unemployed.

We'll bring Tasmanians together, and we'll give each of them a fair hearing.

And by listening to Tasmanians we will also ensure Tasmanians' priorities are our priorities.

Better healthcare before building more stadiums. Lower power prices before pointless space programs. Affordable housing before trying to host the Commonwealth Games.

A better future for Tasmanians brought about by a government with better priorities.

And we will give the commitment, that only Labor can give, that no one will be left behind.

Because we understand that when we lift one person up, we're all lifted up.

When one young person gets an opportunity they otherwise wouldn't have, that increases opportunity for us all.

That the more people who get the chance to participate meaningfully in our economy, the stronger the economy will be for everyone.

Bringing Tasmanians together. Getting priorities right. No one left behind.

That's what a Labor government I lead will be driven by.

Right Priorities Plan

Mr Speaker,

Today I am proud to launch Labor's Right Priorities Plan.

This is a plan to start addressing Tasmania's biggest challenges.

To start repairing our health system, after a decade of neglect.

To start getting serious about making housing more affordable, after ten years of total inaction.

To start taking real steps to reduce the soaring cost of living, after too many broken promises.

And above all, to demonstrate to Tasmanians that there's a better way forward.

Health

Mr Speaker,

Having grown up in regional Tasmania, I understand the challenges and hardships we see in our cities are felt even more acutely in the regions.

As a parent raising young kids in a regional community today, I appreciate what a difference it would make to have somewhere nearby to take a sick child in the night.

And as a representative of Lyons, I hear every day from people who can't access healthcare close to where they live.

People like Sam Strecker, in the Derwent Valley, whose friends are considering moving out of the area because of a lack of local medical services.

Who have to drive their children 40 kilometres to the Royal Hobart Hospital, where they then wait four or five hours in an overcrowded Emergency Department, for something as simple as two or three stitches.

There is huge need in our regions for better access to health care. But there is a lack of local services. And this just adds pressure on our major hospitals.

There has to be a better way – and there is.

A Labor government will provide 24/7 coverage by nurse practitioners across our network of 18 regional hospitals and health facilities.

We will also provide each facility with additional nursing support from registered and enrolled nurses, we will give them access to a larger pool of allied health workers, we will supply each with a rural generalist doctor and we will provide funding for administrative support.

Once fully implemented, this will mean nearly \$30 million of new investment in our regional hospitals.

And to ensure these hospitals and health facilities have the equipment and treatment rooms they need, we will establish a \$60 million upgrade fund to get them up to scratch.

These investments will enable our network of local hospitals and health facilities to treat more Tasmanians closer to home.

They will be able to provide emergency care for unwell children in the middle of the night.

They will provide transitional or respite care for Tasmanians waiting for NDIS or Aged Care Packages.

Care for elderly patients after a fall or who are suffering from pneumonia or influenza.

Care for chronic disease patients experiencing symptoms beyond their normal profile.

Rehabilitation after serious injuries.

Basic treatments for burns, wounds and fractures.

All taking pressure off our major hospitals, and helping to slow the ever-growing need for more funding in our acute care sector by treating people sooner and closer to home.

A commonsense first step to start rebuilding Tasmania's health system.

Mr Speaker,

It's not just hospital services people in the regions miss out on.

People living in regional communities are nearly 30 per cent more likely to die after experiencing a heart attack than people in the city.

They are less likely to survive a stroke, and have worse outcomes if they do.

Because in regional communities it's harder to get an ambulance when you need it – and much harder than it used to be.

When the Liberals came to office nearly 10 years ago, 90 per cent of statewide "Code 1" ambulance callouts arrived within 24.8 minutes.

Today that figure is 34 minutes – nearly ten minutes longer after nearly ten years of Liberal government.

Tasmanians living in the regions understand that services can't always be as easy to access as they are in our cities.

But they don't accept that if they're experiencing chest pain—or any other medical emergency—they have to wait ten minutes longer for an ambulance than they did in 2014.

That's why I announce today that a Labor government will upgrade six ambulance stations across regional Tasmania to include 24/7 coverage with permanent paramedics.

That means 24/7 coverage for Queenstown, on the west coast.

24/7 coverage for Smithton and the far north west.

24/7 for Bridport, in the north east.

For Swansea, on the east coast, for Nubeena, in the south east, and for Oatlands in the midlands.

A \$3.5 million investment that means faster care in an emergency for people in every region.

That means fewer ambulances diverted from other stations, enabling paramedics and volunteers to better serve their local communities.

Peace of mind for people in the regions.

And an overdue step in the right direction after ten years of neglect from the Liberals.

Mr Speaker,

I think you would be hard pressed to find a single Tasmanian with a bad word to say about the people who work in our health system.

The nurses, paramedics, doctors and other health workers who keep our health service running every day are universally admired for their service to our community.

But I think you would be equally hard pressed to find a health worker who thinks this government has done enough to support them.

Nurses have been driven to strike action because they feel overworked and undervalued.

As one nurse from the north west said, in a desperate letter to the Premier:

"I have just completed two double shifts back to back with five hours of sleep, and need to return again in the morning for my next short-staffed shift. This isn't fair for patients, and it isn't fair for my family."

As a northern midwife, who couldn't face another understaffed shift, wrote to Jeremy Rockliff:

"Last week I resigned. I've had enough... I am proud of my colleagues who turn up every day, often for double shifts, in horrendous conditions, to continually give their all in a damaged and broken system...I want to be a proud midwife again one day. But for now, I'm out."

Doctors, who are now also taking industrial action, say our hospitals are "imploding".

They say junior doctors are being burnt out, and the government relies far, far too heavily on temporary locums.

And our paramedics, also driven to industrial action by a government that thought the solution to ramping was to permanently roster staff to the ramp, say they've "had enough" too.

Now I'm not going to pretend that overnight we will be able to fix the workforce challenges that have been allowed to grow and grow over the past ten years.

But I recognise that understaffing and overwork are at the heart of many of these issues.

That's why today I announce a Labor government will ensure all the health policies we announce are backed with genuine workforce attraction and retention measures.

And in keeping with that commitment, we will cover the HECS debt for all 90 nurse practitioners we will need to upgrade our regional hospitals.

We will cover the HECS debt for enrolled nurses who want to upskill and work as registered nurses in those same facilities, and for 30 allied health professionals.

And we will invest \$1 million to expand the training opportunities at the Rural Medical Workforce Centre to include nurse practitioner training.

More training, for more staff, to relieve pressure on the rest of the system.

A message to our dedicated health workers that a Labor government will take their concerns seriously.

And more importantly, that we'll take concrete steps to address them.

Because looking after workers is in Labor's DNA.

Housing

Mr Speaker,

The biggest change Tasmanians have experienced after ten years of Liberal government is with housing – and it hasn't been for the better.

Homelessness, once something we only saw when we went to the mainland, is now commonplace right around the State.

It's no longer surprising to see tents on the edges of our parks, rivers and highways.

And we're appalled, but not surprised, when we learn that on census night 569 Tasmanian children were homeless.

Because we know that thanks to a decade of inaction there are more than twice as many people on the waiting list for housing than there were in 2014, and they're waiting four times as long for a place to call home.

It's a shameful story of suffering for thousands and thousands of our fellow Tasmanians.

People like Nathan Fitzpatrick, who has been stuck on the housing waiting list for four years.

Whose stint in emergency accommodation is coming to an end, and who will be living on the streets next week because he's got nowhere else to go.

What have we become, when Nathan, a builder and carpenter by trade—who has spent his life building houses for others—now finds there is no support for him in his time of need?

How can Jeremy Rockliff justify spending a billion dollars to put a roof over a stadium, while doing nothing to ensure Nathan has a roof over his head?

To say this minority government has its priorities all wrong doesn't even begin to express how appalling it is.

But Mr Speaker,

Ten years of Liberal inaction on housing hasn't just affected those most in need – it has pushed tens of thousands more families to the brink with soaring rental costs.

The average rental now costs \$280 a week more than it did in 2014 – that's more than \$14,000 a year.

And these soaring prices mean there's so much competition for anything that's remotely affordable.

Anisha Wolfe applied for more than 20 rental properties – and after rejection after rejection found herself living with her four kids in her mum's spare room.

As she said recently:

"I just feel guilty that I can't do any more than what I am. I'm trying so hard to get them a home and get them security."

It's not Anisha who can be expected to try any harder.

It's not Anisha who can do any more.

And it's certainly not Anisha who should feel guilty.

Mr Speaker,

A Labor government will do everything we can to get more rental properties onto the market for families like Anisha's.

We will oversee the construction of 1,000 new, additional rental properties over the next five years, by making Tasmania the most attractive place in the nation to undertake build-to-rent developments.

We will cut in half the land tax payable on build-to-rent developments, and we'll attract institutional build-to-rent investors to Tasmania by waiving the foreign investor surcharge.

And while these types of developments are becoming increasingly common in other States like New South Wales, we recognise they're only just starting to be considered here in Tasmania.

That's why a Labor government will also undertake one of these developments ourselves – to show the local market that medium-density rental developments can make a great long term investment.

We'll provide Homes Tasmania with a \$20 million equity injection, which will enable them to undertake a 50 unit development.

Our plan will mean an average of four more rental properties coming onto the market, every single week, for the next five years.

More than 1,000 more options for families like Anisha's.

And 2,000 new jobs to keep our construction sector busy.

Mr Speaker,

There is no one policy alone that will bring an end to the housing crisis.

We need to be pulling every lever we have available to us to get more houses onto the rental market.

That's why a Labor government will also get behind innovative ways to add more supply, such as the shop-top housing development proposal recently outlined by Glenorchy Mayor Bec Thomas, and new co-ownership housing models.

Because we recognise that in an unprecedented housing crisis we need to start doing things differently – and we can't afford to let a single space go to waste.

Only by treating this crisis with the seriousness it warrants can we provide hope for renters who've seen nothing but price hikes, uncertainty and a lack of options for nearly a decade.

And only by pulling every available lever can we start to turn around a decade of Liberal failure.

Mr Speaker,

A Labor government will also put a pause on any more whole homes being transferred from rental properties to the sharing economy.

This will have no effect on people already in the short-stay business, but it will ensure there is no more damage done to the rental market.

We will say enough is enough, because it's time to start putting Tasmanians first if we're serious about improving the lives of renters.

Mr Speaker,

The rising cost of renting doesn't just make life hard today – it holds Tasmanians back from the future they dreamed for themselves and their families.

Home ownership has long been an essential part of the Tasmanian way of life.

It's been how families build wealth over the course of their life and ensure they have a secure retirement.

But after a decade of Liberal government, the dream of home ownership is for too many just that – a dream.

Because who out there can afford to save a hundred thousand dollars for a deposit, while also paying such exorbitant rents?

How many parents worry their kids will never have the opportunities they did, no matter how much they scrimp and save?

And how many young people have just given up hope?

Mr Speaker,

That's not the Tasmania I want for my kids.

It's not the Tasmania I want for anyone's kids.

That's why one of the first acts of a Labor government I lead will be to provide Homes Tasmania with \$20 million to significantly expand the MyHome program.

This will enable approximately 200 Tasmanian families to purchase a home with just a 2% deposit.

We will also extend the income caps by between 30 and 40 thousand dollars, to offer a leg up to more Tasmanians.

Because it's not just people on low incomes who are missing out now.

We will expand the program's eligibility to include joint ownership by siblings, not just couples.

And in recognition of the fact that middle-aged women are among those currently experiencing the fastest rise in housing stress, we will open the program to people who might have previously owned a home but have not done so for ten years—perhaps due to divorce or other circumstances.

And when the first group of 200 move on from the program, the funds will be reinvested, making room for 200 more.

And 200 more after that. On top of the 200 places available in the Federal Government's scheme.

Real hope for renters that there are better days ahead.

That, with a Labor government, their dream of home ownership isn't dead just yet.

Mr Speaker,

It's simply a fact that the planning scheme is not working for Tasmanians who want to build a house.

There are 15,561 vacant blocks of land zoned residential that could be built on—but aren't being built on—because of the Liberal Party's broken promise to reform the planning system.

Labor understands the need to have a fairer and simpler planning system.

Which is why we will prioritise fixing the mess the Liberals have made of the statewide planning scheme.

This will mean more land, available to more people, to build more houses, with fewer delays.

More Tasmanians in a home of their own.

And speaking of getting things done quickly, Mr Speaker,

A Labor Government will fast-track the urgent repair of 215 public houses that are currently unable to be lived in.

That so many houses could sit empty, while so many people sleep in sheds and cars and tents, says everything you need to know about how utterly careless this minority Liberal government is about fixing Tasmania's housing crisis.

A Labor government will get cracking.

And as a starting point we'll fix up these houses and get 215 families off the waiting list and into homes within months.

Cost of living

Mr Speaker,

The rising cost of living is the number one issue in Tasmania today.

Power prices are out of control, and they're pushing people like Gorden Austin—who once worked on the hydro schemes to provide Tasmania with the energy advantage we should be enjoying today—to the edge of their financial limits.

He's considering selling his family shack if he has to try to cope with another big increase in June.

The Tasmanian way of life has been put on the chopping block by this minority Liberal government.

Tasmanians like Gorden built the Hydro. We own the dams, the power lines and the retailer.

And Labor will ensure Tasmanians only pay Tasmanian prices for Tasmanian power – just as they deserve.

We will cap power price increases at 2.5 per cent per year for the next three years.

Our policy will save the average household \$500, and will save small businesses thousands.

And it will put an end to any more damage from Jeremy Rockliff's broken promise.

Mr Speaker,

In my family I see up close the pressures of running a small business, and I know just how difficult it is to deal with rising costs.

Do you put prices up, and risk losing customers to competitors?

Do you try to cut costs elsewhere to compensate?

Or do you accept lower margins, and leave less room to move in the future?

It's not an easy call – and businesses right around Tasmania are telling us they're all facing the same tough choices.

And they're also telling us the Liberals' energy hardship scheme isn't delivering for the majority of energy users.

It's complicated and it fails to deal with the size of the problem.

It's doing nothing for people like David Parkinson, of Kingston Drycleaners, who's facing price increases of nearly 70 per cent in the space of 12 months.

He's working six days a week just to keep on top of things as his expenses rise – and says he simply can't work any harder.

And frankly he shouldn't have to.

That's why a Labor Government will replace the Liberals' failed hardship scheme with a rebate, that will be applied automatically, for larger contracted customers like David.

This will ensure 100 years of investment in the Hydro delivers for Tasmanian businesses and industry, rather than mainland businesses and industry.

It will give Tasmanian businesses who compete interstate the edge they deserve over their mainland competitors.

Under Labor, Tasmania will stop importing mainland price shocks and volatility, and starting importing new jobs and industries instead.

We will ensure Tasmanian businesses only pay Tasmanian prices for Tasmanian power – just as they should.

Mr Speaker,

Labor will also do what we can to make life easier for parents, because we understand having kids can be expensive.

We'll expand the eligibility for Ticket to Play, doubling the number of parents who get help with their children's sports fees.

We'll create an excursion fund, to help schools give students more experiences without making parents pay.

We'll increase the childcare subsidies available for TAFE students, backing parents who want to learn new skills so they can provide for their kids' futures.

We'll automatically allow parents to pay school fees quarterly or by direct debit, rather than having to pay them all up front, because an education for your kids shouldn't also come with bill shock.

And we'll extend after school hours care to 10 new locations around Tasmania, giving more parents more flexibility at work.

At a total cost of \$3 million, we'll make life a little bit easier for parents with school-aged kids.

They're our future after all.

How we'll pay for it (and fix the budget)

Mr Speaker,

When the Liberals came to office in 2014, Tasmania not only had no net debt but in fact had \$200 million in reserve.

Now, ten years on, this minority Liberal government has mortgaged Tasmania's future by racking up a record debt.

\$5.6 billion – with an interest bill approaching \$900 million over the budget and forward estimates.

That's enough to permanently employ 2,000 additional nurses fix our broken health system, or to build enough houses for every single person on the waiting list.

But thanks to this minority Liberal government's reckless budget management, Tasmania will be spending the money on interest repayments instead.

Mr Speaker,

I have already outlined earlier this year how Labor would save more than \$120 million by reducing wasteful government expenses – \$30 million a year.

And I explained how a Labor government would put an end to the rorts that have seen tens of millions dished out by Liberal Ministers with clear conflicts of interest.

Today I announce a Labor government will save a further \$5 million per year by using technology to reduce avoidable travel – because when it's taxpayer money on the line, we should be using Zoom, Teams or other programs as much as possible.

These savings will more than fully offset the ongoing cost of the policies I have announced today.

By getting our priorities right, we can improve our health system, build more houses and reduce the cost of living, while simultaneously strengthening the State Budget.

Because at the end of the day, good budget management is all about priorities.

But Labor also understands that because of the mess this minority Liberal government has made of the budget, it is even more important than ever that our commitments continue to be responsible, affordable, and above all, represent smart investments.

That is why our regional health policy is not simply designed to improve health services in regional areas – though it certainly will do that.

Our policy also seeks to take pressure off our major hospitals, because we know hospital care is among the most expensive form of healthcare.

The average ED presentation costs more than \$1,000.

This government is spending \$33 million on overtime for nurses because of overcrowding and understaffing.

This government is spending \$3m a year on ramping ambulances at our hospitals.

And so if we can treat more people in their local community, we can reduce cost pressures in other parts of the system.

If each regional hospital could prevent just three people a day from going to an ED, the policy would pay for itself.

This is the sort of smart, targeted investment a Labor government will make in our health system.

The sort of investment that will enable us to get the budget back under control while also providing better services, and begin the careful, gradual and sensible repayment of the Liberals' record debt.

Conclusion

Mr Speaker,

I love Tasmania and our Tasmanian way of life.

I love our close-knit regional communities, our stunning natural scenery, our ever-growing suburbs and our vibrant major cities.

I see the huge advantages available to us as a result of 100 years of investment in the Hydro, the incredible potential of our innovative business community, and the opportunities we can create if we start truly investing in our people, and our kids in particular.

But Mr Speaker,

Like so many Tasmanians, I can also see that after ten years in office this minority Liberal Government has run out of new ideas.

How could it be any other way, when their answer to the health crisis is cuts?

When their answer to the housing crisis is business as usual?

And when their answer to the cost of living crisis is to put power prices up?

I know Tasmania can do better than that.

We have so much going for us, if only we had a government that could bring people together, get its priorities right and do everything possible to ensure no one gets left behind.

That's what Labor's Right Priority plan will mean for Tasmania – a first step towards the Tasmania we all know is possible.

A sign to Tasmanians that there's a real alternative to this failing minority Liberal government.

A real plan for better healthcare – particularly in our regions.

A real plan for more affordable housing – and genuine hope for renters.

And real help with the cost of living.

Better priorities.

From a Labor government.

For a better future for Tasmania.

Thank you Mr Speaker.