

Discharged—Senator Hume

Appointed—Senator Stoker

Public Works—Joint Statutory Committee—

Discharged—Senator Smith

Appointed—Senator Stoker

National Broadband Network—Joint Standing Committee—

Appointed—Participating member: Senator Stoker

Red Tape—Select Committee—

Appointed—Participating member: Senator Stoker

Regulations and Ordinances—Standing Committee—

Discharged—Senator Hume

Appointed—Senator Stoker

Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse—Joint Select Committee—

Appointed—Participating member: Senator Stoker

Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport Legislation and References Committees—

Appointed—Participating member: Senator Stoker

Question agreed to.

MOTIONS

Asbestos

Senator HANSON (Queensland) (16:14): I move:

That the Senate—

(a) notes the urgent need to establish an effective, safe means of eradicating asbestos from our community which does not result in landfill contamination, which in itself becomes an environmental hazard; and

(b) calls on the Government to co-ordinate a national asbestos management and disposal plan.

On Wednesday, 7 March 2018, the Asbestos Safety and Eradication Agency, the Australian government's peak advisory body on asbestos issues, released a report analysing 11 projects involving asbestos removal from buildings and seven projects involving the removal of asbestos from contaminated land. The report showcased a series of findings based on the learnings from these projects. The Asbestos Safety and Eradication Agency was established in 2013 to facilitate a national approach to managing asbestos in Australia. Preventing the risk of asbestos exposure is the agency's core purpose. When releasing this report earlier this month, the agency's CEO, Mr Peter Tighe, confirmed that the only way to reduce asbestos-related diseases in Australia is by preventing exposure to this deadly substance, and that means completely removing it from our community. However, in showcasing these projects, which the agency classes as best-practice examples of effective and safe approaches to asbestos removal, the agency failed to acknowledge that none of these projects has actually removed asbestos from our community. Instead, by landfilling the asbestos removed from these sites, these projects have simply shifted the problem from one location to another and from our generation to another.

Landfilling of asbestos, as with many other wastes, is considered best practice. The Asbestos Safety and Eradication Agency itself believes that landfilling is commonly accepted as the best way to dispose of asbestos, to minimise risks to the environment and public health. However, our country's acceptance of landfilling continually fails to acknowledge the true economic and environmental impact this has. Let me assure you: landfills are a threat to our health and to our environment. Landfills release toxins into our soil and groundwater and become environmental hazards for years. They produce leachate, which is the liquid formed when waste breaks down in the landfill and water filters through the waste. This liquid is highly toxic and can pollute the land, groundwater and waterways. Landfills produce greenhouse gases, in particular, that wreak havoc on our environment. They release fibres into the atmosphere from surface contamination caused by burrowing animals and erosion and have a serious effect on wildlife. Landfills devalue land and result in the loss of land that could be used for other purposes like housing and industry. Landfills require ongoing management and monitoring for years, and their use simply means we are passing our issues from one generation to another.

In 2014-15, Australians produced 64 million tonnes of waste. That's 2.7 tonnes per person. Most of that was from construction demolition and commercial, industrial waste. Our population is expected to grow to 40 million by 2050. This will equate to over 100 million tonnes of waste each year. Australia has a waste problem, yet nothing is being done to address this. Local government is arguing with state government that, apparently, it's not a local government responsibility but a state responsibility. State governments are fighting amongst themselves.

Just this week the Queensland Labor government sought to reintroduce a waste tax ultimately aimed at stopping New South Wales rubbish from crossing its border and making Queensland the eastern seaboard's waste dumping ground. Every day in Queensland we're taking up to 90 B-double trucks full of New South Wales waste, deadly and toxic asbestos and rubbish. Well, I've got a message for the New South Wales government, which continues to transfer its waste into my backyard of Ipswich: you can keep your own shit in your own backyard.

The ACTING DEPUTY PRESIDENT (Senator Marshall): Senator, there are generally standards applying to language in this chamber, and that is not a word that is accepted here. I would ask you not to use such a word again.

Senator HANSON: I won't be using it again; I've had my say. On a federal level, this government and the Labor Party continued to sit on their hands. The Asbestos Safety and Eradication Agency highlighted the growing waste problem and called for action by all levels of government. In December 2016, the federal government was given the opportunity to not only tackle our waste problem head-on but also lead the world in asbestos waste eradication through the introduction of thermochemical conversion technology, a process which destroys asbestos fibres and produces a non-hazardous, inert recycled material that can be used in a broad range of construction applications. This technology has a 20-year development history, with regulatory and environmental protection authority approvals in the USA to convert asbestos and to destroy PCBs. Yet, instead of embracing this technology and exploring its application in Australia, this place has instead chosen a do-nothing approach.

Is this because there are questions around the veracity of the technology? No. Is this because there are concerns regarding the project proponents? No. Is this because asbestos isn't a major issue in our present society? No. It is simply because the wheels of bureaucracy have ground to a halt. For a government that prides itself on innovation, this is simply unacceptable. The Turnbull government's own innovation statement acknowledges:

It has often been easier for government to continue with the ways things have been done rather than embrace new technological opportunities.

It's time Malcolm Turnbull and his government introduced this innovation to save communities and people's health in Australia.

Australia has the highest per capita incidence of mesothelioma in the world, with an average of 700 deaths each year. The rate of all forms of asbestos related disease is up to five times this number, resulting in approximately 4,000 deaths per year. Australia was one of the highest per capita users of asbestos-containing materials for decades until the late 1980s, and we now have to deal with the significant legacy issues associated with that use. This legacy relates not only to product contained within our homes, our workplaces and even our surrounding infrastructure but to the legacy created by our ongoing reliance on burying this hazardous material and continual contamination of our land.

If we choose to ignore the opportunity that thermochemical conversion technology presents to treat asbestos waste, we are condemning future generations of Australians—my grandchildren, your grandchildren—to dealing with this problem. Innovation is not just about robots and applications for our iPhones; it's about creating cultural change, embracing solutions for existing problems and ultimately rectifying our mistakes. One Nation, and I personally, will continue to badger this government for this thermochemical technology to come to Australia. I think it's so important. I heard about the recent fires in New South Wales, and we have an asbestos problem there now. What are they going to do with it—bury it somewhere else? And then we have the landfills that will never ever be worth anything or can never be built on.

This is a program that will actually clear land and get rid of the asbestos in our society. One fibre is all it takes. One fibre in someone's lung and it's not a matter of 'are you going to die'; it's a matter of 'when you're going to die'. Wake up and start dealing with our problem.

Senator O'SULLIVAN (Queensland) (16:24): Indeed, this notice of motion by Senator Hanson raises a very important issue. I'm a child of the 1950s. Those of us who, sadly, remember back that far know now of this hazard. As a child, we would play with asbestos. It made terrific swords, and you won the fight when you struck the other child's sword and broke it in two—releasing, I imagine, millions of these fibres into the atmosphere and certainly within close proximity to where you were.

I want to deal with Senator Hanson's motion in three parts, if I might, because, as you read it, it is itself in three parts. She notes the urgent need to establish an effective, safe means of eradicating asbestos from our community—and I'll deal with that separately to the issue of what happens with the disposal of this commodity—and the talk of coordinating a national asbestos management and disposal plan. Let me finish with that.

Senator Hanson is right to suggest that per capita we're up in the top percentage of countries whose citizens are exposed to this terrible condition resulting from inhaling asbestos, and there's a reason for that. The reason is that,

per capita, we used more asbestos in our building industry than almost every other country on earth. It was a revolutionary product of its time.

There are two types of asbestos. There's an A type and a B type, but both of them were introduced to this country in the postwar period. Again, you can still see evidence as you move around our country of what a revolutionary building material it was. It went into every aspect of construction in this country. We clearly were clueless, as a nation, about the potential problem. We built entire schools out of asbestos and asbestos related material. We built all of our homes out of it. Again, I refer back to when it was a very common practice for children to play with asbestos and punch an asbestos wall. That was when you knew you were tough and ready; you could punch a hole through an asbestos wall—and hope you didn't get the stud. It took me a while to find out that you should look for the line of nails before you threw the big right cross! Nonetheless, it was a very common practice.

But this is a very serious issue, as raised by Senator Hanson. On the question of establishing an effective, safe means of eradicating asbestos, this government has taken a very strong approach to this. Senator Hanson referred to the Asbestos Safety and Eradication Council, ASEC. As an aside, the government has just doubled the funding for this organisation. This council—I think there are nine members on it, from memory—is designed to provide advice to government and to the states and local government. It's a national resource to provide a focus on asbestos issues that go 'beyond workplace safety to encompass environmental and public health' issues. So it is unfair to say, as her motion suggests, that this government—and I'm sure there were measures under the previous government—has not established an effective, safe means of eradicating asbestos from our community. That's happening.

I know from some experience—and I hope all of my colleagues on the other side listen carefully when I say I have no business interest any longer. I was at some stage involved in quite comprehensive business exposure in construction, which many times included the removal of asbestos and asbestos products. I can tell you that there are no other products—other than solids that come from the liquid waste industry—that require such protection when they're being removed and buildings are being dismantled. The whole site has to be sealed off so that there can be no airborne transfer of these invisible fibres. The asbestos products, where possible, are wet and soaked to minimise the release of fibres in demolitions and in the removal of the material. It can only be done by professionals, so tradespeople who haven't got the special qualifications cannot be involved in this procedure. This asbestos is taken and seal-wrapped. Only certain vehicles are allowed to carry hazardous waste when there is more than 10 cubic metres of the material. It's taken off to a facility where it is dealt with according to the processes available generally through local government.

Apart from the establishment of this national resource, the regulation around dealing with asbestos products and the removal of them is largely a state responsibility. I often dislike it when others hide behind what the states need to do and what federal responsibilities are, but this area is largely covered by by-laws and regulations of local governments. The overall workplace health and safety requirements to deal with the protection of workers, and the safe and effective removal and transporting of this material and its disposal, are state government responsibilities. So I think it is unfair that Senator Hanson's motion notes 'an urgent need to establish an effective, safe means of eradicating asbestos from our community,' because I think ASEC does that. It's a competent body. It's made up of experts. It's very well funded. As I said earlier, it has now had its funding doubled. And it is a national resource.

So this is not something that is required to trickle down through federal or state or local governments. All of those bodies and identities can rely upon ASEC for information. They are a cast of professionals who are determined to do whatever is at their disposal in terms of advancing sciences to deal with this. I think it would be unfair to suggest that, confronted with the potential of a new technology that would be much better than the existing practices—thermochemical conversion—they would ignore that. These people have no stake in these matters, other than to provide the three tiers of government, and others, with the very best advice possible out there. I remain satisfied. I would need to know more about it. I don't want to challenge Senator Hanson in relation to thermochemical conversion, because it seems she has spent some time in coming to understand the technology, but I would urge her, at the earliest possible opportunity, to present what she knows of that technology to ASEC, because I imagine they would be willing to assess the potential of the technology and then recommend to governments accordingly. In fact, I would be somewhat surprised if they weren't already aware of the potential of that process for use.

The motion calls on the government to coordinate a national asbestos management and disposal plan. Again, this is some of the work of ASEC—that's one of their responsibilities—so this element of the motion is already dealt with. Senator Hanson may have a view, based on what she knows, that she doesn't think they're doing a terribly good job of that. There is no evidence before me that that's the case. My inquiries, as I prepared for this,

suggested that they are a very well respected bodies across all tiers of government. Their work is progressive. They are continuing to look. Indeed, as a result of recommendations they've made from their own due diligence and applying the science to this, there have already been massive improvements around the way that asbestos management is dealt with in this country and, indeed, asbestos is disposed of.

Senator Hanson-Young—Senator Hanson, I should say. I suspect I could have offended two senators at once there! Senator Hanson is right to say that we should take every available measure to minimise the amount of material that goes into landfill, particularly hazardous material and material that has long life, as would be the case, I suspect, with asbestos. I've got to say, the other side of the chamber, when they were in government, paid a lot of attention to this, as has our government and as we all continue to do. There has been massive progress with respect to the management of hazardous waste and, in fact, material that goes into landfill over recent decades. This government and previous governments have spent hundreds and hundreds of millions of dollars supporting technologies and practices to do with transfer stations where waste goes. Putting hazardous waste aside for a moment, that waste is separated in looking for the potential to recycle it, even if it's not cost-effective to recycle it, as is the case with many types of waste.

Senator Hanson is right to point out that, if there is any measure whatsoever that would allow us to deal with waste, particularly hazardous waste, in a way that neutralised the hazard of the waste, it should be undertaken. But it wouldn't make sense for organisations such as ASEC, which have been formed specifically with this intent, to act as she suggests. They've got no position to protect, other than their reputation at doing the work, determining best processes, technical and otherwise, and providing that contemporary advice to all levels of government and other industries in this country.

There has been a massive amount of work done to ensure that there are no asbestos products coming into this nation now. About two years ago, I recall a visit to a facility on an unrelated matter in Brisbane. It was a transit centre for goods that are both exported and imported. The principal of the company was showing me massive amounts of product in there. It looked perfectly all right to me—motorbikes, motor vehicles and other commodities that had been sitting in their facility for months and, in some cases, years. It was there because small traces—in some cases, very small traces—of asbestos had been detected. I am not even in a position to tell you which government would have been in power on the day, but I would imagine it would not matter. The Labor Party have a very, very high commitment to and pride themselves, along with our government, on creating the highest standards and safest possible environment for workers and our citizens. Billions of dollars are spent over every budget cycle to ensure, for example, that there's no contamination in our waters. We spend billions of dollars on our environment, supported by everybody, to try and protect our environment as best as we can.

When I hear that there is a process and I hear that we have a specialist professional body whose job it is to scour the planet to try and find the best possible practices and technologies to deal with the scourge of this terrible, terrible thing that produces mesothelioma, to me it denies logic that technology exists that has not been adopted. Sometimes the adoption of technologies can be slower than one would like, particularly when you've got something as serious as this. You have to be absolutely certain that the technology is foolproof and that, in being applied to deal with a serious problem, it does not create another serious problem. As undesirable as it may be that it is in landfill, if that is the best way to protect our citizens from this terrible plight, then that's what needs to happen.

I don't want to challenge the views that Senator Hanson has formed on this, because I don't have the information before me. Accordingly, I say to Senator Hanson: if she has empirical evidence—academic studies or trials from the United States or any other developed nation where they've paid attention and stuck to the scientific principles when they've looked at these matters—she ought to take it directly to ASEC so they are able to assess it. I'm certain that they'd be prepared to correspond with her and brief her if they've already done some assessment. Senator Hanson, I extend an invitation to you here, through my speech: I'll come with you. If you've got a body of academic evidence or industrial evidence that supports this as a commercially sound and superior method to deal with this terrible commodity, then I will come with you. We will go to see them together, and, as colleagues know, I won't blink when it comes to bringing people to proof on something. I'll test them. If they say it's no good, I won't leave until we know why.

We've got other measures. I imagine—and the minister may be able to nod and confirm this—ASEC is probably subject to attending estimates in some form or another, if it's a body funded by the federal government. So Senator Hanson ought to consider bringing them to estimates, at which time we can then properly evaluate, through examination of their officers, just what they are doing, what they intend to do, what their knowledge is of this thermochemical conversion process and what their assessments are to date. They may well have a perfectly sensible explanation as to why it might not work. We've had many emerging technologies over time, not just industrial technologies but biological technologies and manoeuvres. Think cane toad. I used to love the cane toads

when I was a young fellow on a Friday night with a golf stick. But, at that point, they were no further north than Townsville, and now, of course, they're even in northern Western Australia. They are a terrible scourge. There was the introduction up my way of prickly acacia, a bush that was meant to be fodder for dry times. It is now choking massive tracts of land in Central Queensland and in the Central West.

So I exercise a voice of caution with new technologies. I know nothing about this technology. I can't extend an invitation, but I'm certain that the relevant minister—I imagine it is perhaps the environment minister, given it's to do with matters of landfill—would provide Senator Hanson with a full and complete briefing with respect to this and any other emerging technologies that might be under active consideration. In the meantime, Senator Hanson, whilst I do agree with you on many occasions, I can't share your view that a government funded initiative through ASEC, when providing advice to state and federal government and to local authorities, would ignore best practice and best technology that had any potential whatsoever to provide a safer environment for the removal and disposal of asbestos and for the good health of everyone in this nation. My invitation stands. I'll wait to hear from you.

Senator KETTER (Queensland—Deputy Opposition Whip in the Senate) (16:44): I rise to support the motion that has been put forward by Senator Hanson. While I welcome her new-found interest in and awareness of this issue of asbestos, I would like to inform her that the issues that she's canvassing are matters that on this side of the chamber have been very well ventilated in recent history. I also want her to be aware that the unions, which she often pillories in this place, are at the forefront of trying to address this modern-day scourge and tragedy for working people. The unions that she criticises so vehemently have been working very hard to address this issue.

For the information of Senator Hanson, as she didn't make reference to it in her contribution today, the Senate Economics References Committee conducted an inquiry into non-conforming building products. In fact, that broader inquiry is still ongoing, but we did take the opportunity to have a particular look at asbestos, given the significance of that issue. It was part of our inquiry into non-conforming building products. The report was handed down in November of last year. I am very proud to be the chair of that committee and to be responsible for that report.

The committee conducted hearings across the country on this matter, and we heard from workers and asbestos support groups in Brisbane, Perth, Melbourne, Sydney and Adelaide. One of the things that particularly concerned me was the number of times the committee heard that frontline workers and community advocates were the last line of defence in identifying asbestos in building and consumer products. All too often it is the workers that alerted management, whether it be a building company or a subcontractor, to the fact that asbestos was being found in products—building products, in particular. But I will mention that it is not just building products. We still have asbestos coming into this country in the most surprising forms, and I will deal with that.

We've just had recent examples of asbestos being found on building sites in Brisbane, for example. We found it in the form of gasket jointing sheets on 1 William Street, Brisbane, a state government building. It was only the workers who had been trained in identification of asbestos who actually discovered this material and were able to put a halt to its installation. We also saw asbestos in unitised roof panels at Perth's children's hospital in July 2016 and asbestos-contaminated plant equipment in the Nyrstar project in Port Pirie, in South Australia, in August 2016. In many cases, what is going on here is that the asbestos material is being imported by Chinese companies from Chinese manufacturers. Yuanda Australia is a company name that has come up a number of times in the course of our inquiry.

We noted in the course of our inquiry that the national asbestos ban has been in place since 2003. That is a total ban on asbestos coming into Australia since 2003. In fact, to his credit, it was then Minister Abbott who implemented that ban at the time. However, one of the concerning aspects of the inquiry was that we found Border Force did not issue any regulatory notices until 2016, some 13 years later, to give effect to the ban and to properly notify those involved in the importation of building products as to their obligations in respect of asbestos. It was 13 years down the track. On a matter of life and death, which this is, it's not good enough.

Our inquiry also highlighted inconsistencies in the definition of asbestos used across countries around the world and how this, along with the lack of due diligence on the part of importers, has led to Australians being exposed to asbestos and is why it continues to come into the country. We know that asbestos is one of those products which has no known safe exposure limit. So, whilst we say that we have got a ban on asbestos coming into the country, unfortunately, the track record is that that ban is not effective, and more needs to be done in that regard. As Senator Hanson has noted, we have, in this country, the highest reported per capita incidence of asbestos related disease in the world. It's predicted that around 25,000 Australians will die from asbestos related disease over the next 40 years. The stories of those affected by asbestos are really heartbreaking stories.

I want to talk about the fact that what Senator Hanson is raising is, in effect, going over something of old ground. It was canvassed by the Senate Economics References Committee and was the subject of a majority set of

recommendations. Unfortunately, coalition senators did not support the majority recommendations in their entirety and they made some additional comments—and I'll talk about that. But Senator Hanson's point about having a coordinated approach to the issue of asbestos is well made. In fact, recommendation No. 1 of our inquiry was:

The committee recommends that through the Council of Australian Governments, the Australian Government pursue a coordinated and consistent whole of government approach to strengthen federal and state legislation and regulations to address the illegal importation of asbestos.

Recommendation 2 was:

The committee recommends that the Australian Government adequately fund the Asbestos Safety and Eradication Agency—

which Senator Hanson has referred to—

so it is able to deliver the next National Strategic Plan for Asbestos Management and Awareness and to carry out its other functions, both current functions and new functions set out in recommendations in this report.

This is contrary to Senator O'Sullivan's contribution, where he indicated that there has been a doubling of funding for the agency. I would be very interested in where that information is and how old that information is. During the course of our inquiry we had the opportunity of speaking with Mr Peter Tighe, the CEO of the Asbestos Safety Eradication Agency, and he raised concerns back in October about current funding arrangements and the ability to deliver on future strategic plans. I'm going to quote from Mr Tighe:

It's quite clear, though, when looking at our operational budget, including a financial report that was done in relation to the agency some 18 months ago, that the costing for operation is probably double what is in appropriation. I don't think that even touches on the work that will need to be done in relation to establishing the next phase of plans. Whilst my appointment expires in August, I'm more concerned about whether the agency would be in a position to deliver the policy position that government wants to take forward. Unless we get some appropriation that exceeds what's currently earmarked, there will be some problems.

He then went on to say that he's taken proposals to the minister and he's working with the department. I will quote him again:

The difficulty is the work that has to be done in relation to the development of the next national strategic plan, providing the evidence to the jurisdictions to support that plan and the work that is required by the group that I have in my office—we wouldn't be able to fulfil that. It would, basically, neutralise the agency, where we would have to reduce the staff dramatically to, probably, an executive officer and a chair. We still are required under our legislation to deliver certain things. I don't think we'd be able to meet the objects of our act if that money's not provided.

That's direct evidence from Mr Tighe in October of last year. That is a huge concern for people around Australia.

We want to see the government take a leadership role. They should take a leadership role in this matter. The asbestos agency, if I can call it that, is well placed to provide the planning and the research that's necessary for that, but the government does need to coordinate with other jurisdictions. It's not good enough for Senator O'Sullivan to draw out the fact that this is a state issue. I know he is not pinning his entire argument on that, but that doesn't derogate from the need for the Commonwealth to take a leadership role to address this issue. It needs a leadership role at the border to stop the material coming through but also in terms of legacy asbestos products out there, which are ticking away as a time bomb. There is a need for coordination so that that huge problem can be dealt with.

We are constantly seeing examples come up where this issue recurs. We've had the situation of the people who lived around the Wittenoom asbestos mine in Western Australia. We know that more than 2,000 people, many of them the wives and children of mine workers, have died due to exposure to asbestos at the nearby mine or in the town of Wittenoom itself. In 2014 we heard of the terrible situation of the Wunderlich factory in Victoria at a place called Sunshine North, where it emerged that dozens of people who lived around that factory had contracted cancer, asbestosis and other conditions after asbestos was left unsecured at the site. We heard of Mr Chris Frohlich, whose mother lived about a kilometre from the factory for about 20 years. She had died in September 2013 of aggressive lung cancer. Her father had died of pulmonary fibrosis and her brother of mesothelioma—a terrible tragedy. This is a product which we should give top priority in terms of attention. So I do welcome Senator Hanson's focus being put onto this issue, but there has been a lot of work already done to try to address this issue. I note that, with regard to the Senate Economics References Committee report on asbestos back in November 2017, we are waiting for a government response in relation to that aspect of the report.

The risks of asbestos remain—and not just through potential landfill contamination, as Senator Hanson has pointed out. We are now seeing the third wave of victims who might have been exposed to asbestos through DIY renovations in older homes and product importation, whether it be substations, gaskets, insulation, vehicles or even children's toys. I'll take a minute to highlight once again that we have things like children's crayons and

beaded toys being found to contain asbestos. I think a lot of people out there—particularly the mums and dads of Australia—would be very concerned to know that things like crayons have been found to contain asbestos. There is also the CSI game, named after the TV program, which involves police inspectors. Part of this toy is a package of what is known as dusting powder for fingerprints. But that dusting powder actually was found to contain asbestos. These are the sorts of things that people need to be aware of.

Products that contain certain types of talc are also known to contain asbestos. There are gloves that are known to contain asbestos, as well as fire blankets; electrical cloth and tapes; brake linings or blocks; textured paints or coatings; yarn and thread; cords and string, whether plaited or not; and mineral samples for display or therapeutic purposes. There are a whole range of products out there that have been found to contain asbestos. That is a pretty scary list, and during that inquiry I was gobsmacked when I learnt that there could be asbestos in children's toys in our country. That doesn't tell me that the issue is under control. That doesn't tell me that the government has taken all appropriate steps to address this issue.

One of the recommendations of our inquiry was that the Australian government establish a national public asbestos register. I feel particularly strongly about that matter. As I say, the mums and dads of Australia absolutely need to know if they are giving their children asbestos crayons to chew on.

I will take some time to go through some of the other recommendations from our inquiry, because they are important recommendations, and I encourage the government to provide a response to us in respect of this. Recommendation 8 was particularly important. It talked about 'mandatory asbestos awareness training for a wide range of occupations in the construction industry' and providing 'adequate funding for nationally accredited training for this purpose'. As I mentioned earlier, all too often we are finding it is actually left to the workers to discover the use of this asbestos material, and it's only because they've received this training that they are in a position to do that.

Recommendation 10 was the recommendation that the asbestos agency that I referred to 'develop a one-stop shop website to provide a single point for participants across the supply chain to access information regarding the illegal importation of asbestos'. Recommendation 20 is also worth noting:

The committee recommends that Commonwealth, state and territory governments work together to develop nationally consistent legal obligations to require the removal and/or disposal of illegally imported asbestos (if it is safe to do so following consideration of the hazards likely to be faced by the workers undertaking the work) and to make importers responsible for the cost of such removal and/or disposal of asbestos.

Finally, recommendation 25 went to the issue of the national public asbestos register, a very important initiative that I certainly commend to the government.

Senator Hanson talked about the Asbestos Safety and Eradication Agency, so I won't detail that any further, but I do think it does a lot of good work. Again, I thank Senator Hanson for raising the issue and lending her support to a cause that Labor has been pushing for years. The union movement has been pushing this issue for years. I urge Senator Hanson and others on the crossbench to take up this issue with the government and to ask the coalition to properly fund the agency so it can implement not only the work that it is currently tasked to do but also the new measures that have been recommended and that may be picked up. These are measures that can save lives going into the future.

I'd like to take the opportunity to thank others who provided evidence to the inquiry and who take up the fight against asbestos day in and day out: the ACTU; the CFMEU; the AWU; the AMWU; the ETU; the MUA; the Nurses' Union; other workers rights groups; the Australian Asbestos Network, with a special mention to Vicki Hamilton and the support and advocacy groups right across the country; and, lastly, the Queensland government, for leading the way in its response to non-conforming building products with its groundbreaking legislation on supply chain responsibility, which hopefully can be seen as a template that other jurisdictions will follow.

In conclusion: unfortunately the government senators described our recommendations as overreaching. They said that the ASEA has enough money. That's not the case. It's time for the government to step up on asbestos.

Senator MOLAN (New South Wales) (17:04): I also rise to speak to notice of motion No. 761, moved by Senator Hanson, regarding a national asbestos management and disposal plan. I thank Senator Ketter for his contribution. It was a contribution which certainly contributed to my knowledge, and I think that there are certain facts that I may be able to convey to him that answer some of the questions that he addressed as he spoke. We haven't seen any indication that the responsible body is not doing its job at this stage, but I'm now aware of Mr Tighe's requests and I think action has been taken since those, particularly during the MYEFO, and that may be where this money has come from. It would certainly be worth updating the Senate Economic References Committee on that. Perhaps action has been taken without formal notification back to the committee that this action has been taken.

I believe that the government is working to solve this scourge—and it is an incredible scourge, as Senator Ketter and Senator Hanson spoke about. It is an unbelievable situation that asbestos could get into toys and into children's crayons. I remember that over many, many years in the military it was used in ships and armoured vehicles. It was used in gloves that we used to change hot machine-gun barrels. The commonality of it created that great lottery of whether or not you got asbestos poisoning. Asbestosis existed for many, many years, and who knows why some were touched and others were not touched? So it's a very important issue. It's an enormous issue. Senator Hanson cited the statistic that 700 deaths per year are suffered in this country, and certainly it is a scourge—that is a word rarely used, but it is a scourge now and it will continue to be a scourge for some time. The value of Senate committees in addressing things like this is just becoming apparent to me, as I learn more about how the Senate operates.

Many understand the history, and we've had some exposure to the history from the last couple of speakers, but I will go through that history in a little bit more detail. An awful number of people have suffered, and many are still suffering and many will suffer as we go into the future. In last Sunday's fire at Tathra, as Senator Hanson mentioned, there was real fear about the older houses. Before the building regulations, which I know have been abused in the past, came in, many of the older houses contained asbestos, whether their owners knew it or not. Of course, when a house burns down, particularly on a day like Sunday, where the wind was in the 60- to 70-kilometres-per-hour area, it will spread anything far and wide. In my adjournment speech on Monday night, I spoke about the value of the police, who established roadblocks, often against the will of many people who wanted to get back to their places and see what had happened—and you can understand that emotional response. But the response of the New South Wales Police Force in cordoning off the area and restricting people going back to see whether they had lost their houses or not is something that, in a tragedy, all of us have got to understand. So asbestos is with us each and every day. There certainly seems to be an awareness, and let's see how we are handling that—and I'll go through that in the rest of my presentation.

The one person who seems to symbolise this tragedy is Bernie Banton. Much has been said and written about Bernie Banton. We remember the pictures of Bernie Banton, a man who used to describe himself as 'a man with a hose up his nose'. He was a man who, as a working-class hero, as many described him, led the fight against companies, such as James Hardie, that used asbestos over many, many years and a man whose family suffered incredibly from the work that they did in asbestos factories. In the end, it killed Bernie, as it has killed many, many other people.

What many people don't understand now, I think, is exactly what has been done about solving the asbestos problem. The government is determined to protect workers and the community from what we've described as the scourge of asbestos. The Australian government certainly acknowledges the significant health and community concerns, and Bernie Banton is an example of this—only one example and an example from many, many years ago, but it's still going on today.

It's a complex challenge, and the government's aim is to prevent exposure to asbestos fibres and eliminate asbestos related disease in Australia, as well as to encourage other nations to aspire to do the same. Senator Ketter mentioned the illegal importing of asbestos products by certain companies, some of them Chinese, and the speed with which that was cracked down on. As a Rural Fire Service volunteer I am subject to asbestos training on an annual basis. It's always the frontline worker or the frontline emergency responder who will see indications or the possibility of the presence of asbestos. But we do have a strict asbestos importation prohibition, and the aim of that is to protect Australian workers and the community, and there is in place a strict workplace ban on asbestos.

The Australian government has implemented a comprehensive suite of initiatives to manage the challenging problem. The Asbestos Safety and Eradication Agency has been mentioned a good deal today. It was established and is funded by the Australian government to ensure the coordinated national implementation of the National Strategic Plan for Asbestos Management and Awareness. That plan aims to prevent exposure to asbestos fibres and to eradicate asbestos related diseases by coordinating the work of the state and territory governments to prioritise areas of asbestos management and awareness. We have heard examples from various speakers today as to how that is taken on. We saw references in Senator Hanson's presentation to various technologies that she believes may provide an answer. Senator Ketter has said that this has been considered, and this is something that has to be reconciled in some way. So often, we think there is one solution to this. For most problems in the world, of course, there's never just one simple solution—one silver bullet to solve these problems.

As I said, the government has a coordinated and holistic approach. The Asbestos Interdepartmental Committee was established by the Department of Jobs and Small Business and the Department of Home Affairs to 'provide strategic direction and enable effective policy and regulatory coordination in managing asbestos issues across the supply chain' that Senator Ketter spoke about. Through Safe Work Australia, the tripartite national policy agenda on work health and safety, the safe management and handling of asbestos materials in workplaces remains an

ongoing priority for this government, and for the state and territory governments as well. The model work health and safety laws for which Safe Work Australia is responsible deal comprehensively with asbestos in the workplace, including through the implementation of a domestic prohibition on asbestos in the workplace—and we have certainly heard today about where that has been abused.

We were one of the highest per capita users of asbestos over many, many years. This is illustrated by the fact that we in Australia mined about 700,000 tonnes of asbestos ourselves, but we also imported an extraordinary 1½ million tonnes for use in manufacturing between 1930 and 1983. We have had people refer in their presentations to a number of ways that asbestos was used. The way it has been used and the way it is being used now has delivered a terrible legacy for Australia. We have described it as a scourge. It's a terrible legacy. It's projected that there will be approximately 19,400 new cases of mesothelioma diagnosed in Australia before the end of the century. We're also witnessing an increasing number of asbestos related diseases, likely caused by non-occupational exposure to asbestos. Between 1950 and 1970, Australia had the highest reported per capita incidence of asbestos related disease in the world.

We know the problem. We have looked back on it. We have heard the reports of the Senate Economics Reference Committee, which reported on this particular subject as recently as October of last year. But there is a national strategic plan, and that national strategic plan is in being and is being applied. There's got to be a coordinated national approach to tackling something like the scourge that is asbestos. So the National Strategic Plan for Asbestos Management and Awareness is a strategy to build Australia's capacity to address the risks of asbestos. The plan supports coordination and common efforts across government, with a strong emphasis on facilitating information sharing. It's got six key strategies: awareness, best practice, identification, removal, research and international leadership. That really forms the basis of every awareness course that's conducted in Australia. The plan is guided by certain principles, and those principles are: precaution, evidence based decision-making, transparency, public participation and collaboration.

Phase 1 of the plan has supported the existing risk management of asbestos and complemented this by identifying evidence and information to reduce risk. It has incorporated research projects and testing of approaches to build the evidence base, and it's because of this I would be surprised if the technical people involved in this strategic plan have not considered the technology solution that Senator Hanson's offering. The second phase of the national strategic plan will be developed during this year in consultation with state and territory governments and stakeholders.

I think this is probably relevant to the point that Senator Ketter was making. In the 2018 MYEFO budget process the government more than doubled the Asbestos Safety and Eradication Agency funding. So possibly the point that Senator Ketter made may have been addressed before MYEFO, if I've got my timing right on this. This funding ensures ASEA can continue its important work with the states and territories on asbestos management and awareness. This demonstrates the government's commitment to protecting workers and the community from Australia's deadly asbestos legacy. It's a strategic and coordinated approach, which is essential, as I said before, to achieve an end to asbestos related disease.

The function of ASEA is asbestos safety and awareness, and it will receive additional ongoing funding of \$1.7 million per year, commencing in 2018-19. ASEA's funding level will more than double from the \$1.6 million set by the previous Labor government to \$3.3 million per annum. The base level funding set by the previous government was considered inadequate for ASEA to function effectively. The government has now addressed this shortfall and secured the agency's future. The additional funding ensures ASEA can plan for the future and direct resources to longer term work that will achieve the government's goal of eradicating asbestos exposure and asbestos related diseases. We believe that this funding will ensure ASEA is well placed to coordinate the implementation of phase 2 of the National Strategic Plan for Asbestos Management and Awareness with governments at all levels and is able to partner with states and territories to drive priority work under the plan.

In 2008—and I'm sure the committee looked at this—Commonwealth, state and territory governments committed to harmonising workplace health and safety legislation and regulation. They did that by 2012 through the Inter-Governmental Agreement for Regulatory and Operational Reform in OH&S. It was under this agreement that Safe Work Australia was established to assist the Australian government in handling problems such as this. It was also as part of this overall process that the federal Safety Commissioner was established as far back as 2005. That came from the Cole royal commission into the building and construction industry, which found the safety standards in the industry to be unacceptable. The federal Safety Commissioner has legislative functions related to the compliance of building materials with the performance specifications of the National Construction Code as well as for administering the Australian Government Building and Construction Workplace Health and Safety Accreditation Scheme.

The WHS Accreditation Scheme uses Commonwealth purchasing power to improve workplace health and safety in the building and construction industry by requiring head contractors seeking to undertake Commonwealth funded building work subject to certain financial thresholds to hold the Federal Safety Commissioner's workplace health and safety accreditation. There are seven detailed criteria. I won't go through those seven detailed criteria in relation to accreditation for those companies, but we should all be aware that that situation exists, that accreditation is required and that accreditation is taken seriously.

The FSC, the Federal Safety Commissioner, has the power to suspend or revoke a company's accreditation where a condition of accreditation has been breached. This is all part of the coordinated government action and is done, in the best of government ways, by an interdepartmental committee of Commonwealth agencies, which is represented by government agencies with relevant asbestos management in Australia. So the proposition that there is a simple silver-bullet solution doesn't really hold water, for the simple fact that there is an integrated and coordinated plan and that the Senate Economics References Committee has in fact looked at other technologies.

The interdepartmental committee has in fact progressed work in a range of areas, including testing and sampling. The Department of Jobs and Small Business is currently considering amendments to the Customs (Prohibited Imports) Regulations and the Customs (Prohibited Exports) Regulations to provide improved consistency with workplace health and safety laws. The Department of Home Affairs is developing options for changes to the offences and penalties for the unlawful import and export of asbestos detailed in customs legislation. The IDC has met with the National Association of Testing Authorities to discuss asbestos testing and sampling processes, procedures and standards. CSIRO is investigating new and emerging technologies for the detection of asbestos. At the request of the IDC, Safe Work Australia is reviewing the powers of regulators to deal with the removal and disposal of asbestos that has been illegally imported and then used in workplaces. The IDC has also considered options to strengthen offences and penalties for the illegal importation of asbestos. All of this goes to the fact that this is an incredibly complex problem which is being addressed in a coordinated manner.

Senator Ketter and a number of other senators have mentioned the unlawful asbestos imports. We have a strict asbestos importation ban to protect Australian workers and the community from asbestos. The government recognises the importance of maintaining this strict prohibition and will continue to work collaboratively with all levels of government to effectively address this issue. Australian Border Force has significantly increased its operational effort towards addressing the risk of asbestos since the organisation commenced to function on 1 July 2015, with a substantial increase in the targeting and testing of at-risk goods. Examples of implementation activities include stronger engagement with industry and affected members of the public through participation in the Asbestos Safety and Eradication Agency's asbestos safety and eradication summits, refined processes to address post-border incidents with state and territory regulators, exploring new technologies identified as having potential to assist with border detection, coordination of whole-of-government consultation, enhanced guidance, and increased testing of imported goods to enhance the accuracy of profiles and alerts on asbestos.

This motion that we're discussing today really comes down to: not a simple matter; not a single silver-bullet option. Government is doing excellent work in solving this, and no silver bullet exists. (*Time expired*)

Senator SINGH (Tasmania) (17:24): It would be remiss of me to not contribute to this debate on Senator Hanson's motion on the issue of asbestos, particularly the national asbestos management plan and the issues around the disposal and eradication of asbestos, given my well-known long history of involvement in this issue, but, I have to say, it is a remarkable that, in contributing to this debate, I find myself in agreement with Senator Hanson. I think it would have to be one of the very few times, if not the only time, that I have done so since she arrived in this chamber.

What is clear, as I've been sitting in the chamber, listening to the senators who have contributed to the debate so far, is that a number of senators are learning about the complexities of managing and eradicating asbestos, and they're also learning about the health impacts. I appreciate their interest and the fact that, whether they are on the government side or on the crossbench, they are here to broaden their understanding of not only some of the work that has already been done but also work that needs to continue to be done in this area. Senator Ketter outlined very clearly the work that has already gone on in this place through his chairing of the Senate Economics References Committee inquiry into non-conforming building products and particularly the committee's interim report, which focused specifically on protecting Australians from the threat of asbestos.

I also stand here today as the co-chair of the Parliamentary Group on Asbestos Related Disease—PGARD, as it's known. It was one of the first things I set up when I started here in the Senate in 2011. That idea came from my time as a minister in the state government in Tasmania. As the minister for workplace relations and workplace safety, I was asked by the then Premier, David Bartlett, to embark on a whole-of-government strategy for the eradication and management of asbestos. It wasn't a path that Tasmania had gone down before, so it was a new policy development area. It meant doing a lot of work, firstly, in setting up a steering committee comprising a

range of people with various expertise, including people from the union movement, people from the area responsible for testing asbestos, people from the building and construction industry and also, very importantly, people from the health sphere. I wanted them to be able to provide me with advice on how we would develop such a policy and how we would move forward.

The long and the short of all of that is that we came up with a number of things, one of which was an asbestos unit within the Department of Justice. That asbestos unit looked at some of the issues that Senator Hanson outlined in her motion today, but it was a precursor to what became, under then minister Bill Shorten's leadership, a national body called the Asbestos Safety and Eradication Agency, ASEA. That looked again at having a national unit, so to speak, on how to address and deal with this terrible scourge, as Senator Molan rightly called asbestos, this deadly product.

One of the most important legacies and things I'm most proud of from my time in that role as state minister was introducing asbestos compensation legislation. Asbestos related compensation, which is a state matter, is a hotchpotch right across the country. Some states have a common-law approach; some states now have a no-fault compensation scheme, which was what I embarked on developing and which subsequently became law in Tasmania. I remember that, at the time, there was a lot of resistance from the business community, because it was going to mean a slight increase in workers compensation premiums. But, at the end of the day, it did rise above the issues of politics, as this issue should, because we were talking about the future of people's lives—people who had now contracted the disease from their time in the workplace and knew that their future was bleak because there is no cure when we talk about mesothelioma. We know, with that long latency period, which can be 20 years, 30 years or even 40 years, that that one fibre that it takes to develop an asbestos-related disease can end someone's life. And that is exactly what it has done over so many years.

Whilst compensation won't bring back their lives, in those dying days and the days leading up to them needing treatment and support from family and the medical field and changes in their home to enable them to cope and live, it was important that they were compensated. But it was also important that they were compensated because every day they went about working in a workplace without any idea that they were slowly putting themselves in a position where they could be killed by this deadly substance. Some of those workers, particularly those in Western Australia in Wittenoom, in New South Wales and right across the country, were working for a company that knew for a very, very long time, for decades, that they were putting their workers in harm's way and that they were putting their workers in a position where they were going to lose their lives. That company, of course, was James Hardie. It was an absolute disgrace. Of course, we've had documentaries, a *Four Corners* program and even movies about this, and we've also had a very good book written by Matt Peacock called *Killer Company* specifically on James Hardie and what they were doing to their workers—leaving them completely in the dark, blind to the fact that their lives were going to be shortened from being exposed to a substance that the company knew was deadly. Now we stand here in the Senate with full knowledge that asbestos is a deadly, deadly product. Yet, because of our desire to use it all those years ago in such massive amounts—more than any other OECD country; Australia used massive amounts of asbestos in a range of, I think, about 3,000 different products—it now lies in our built environment in so many different ways, and that means we do need to do something about it.

I've met some incredible people over the journey of my involvement in policy development on this issue of workplace health and safety. Tonight, Senator Molan mentioned Bernie Banton. I didn't have the privilege of meeting Bernie because he had passed away by the time I had become involved in this issue, but I have met his wife through the Bernie Banton Foundation, which she established. I also learnt a lot about Bernie's incredible stoic campaigning for justice. Of course, a person often by Bernie's side through a lot of that was Greg Combet. Greg has been an incredible shining light in exposing the nature of employers around this issue of asbestos. On top of that, there's been the AWU's Yossi Berger, an absolute walking bible of knowledge when it comes to asbestos and certainly someone I took counsel from during my time as minister in the state parliament—and I think he has continued to provide a lot of counsel for members and senators in this space. There is also someone who actually created the Asbestos Safety and Eradication Agency, and that, of course, is Bill Shorten. Bill Shorten, from day one, was incredibly committed to fighting for justice for those workers that had been exposed to asbestos, and that is why today we have the Asbestos Safety and Eradication Agency. It is through his leadership and dedication to this issue that we have come this far and that today we can at least debate the next strategic plan.

There have been a lot of people on the ground, though, who have worked absolutely unbelievably tirelessly, day in and day out, in running support organisations right across the country. Vicki Hamilton was one of them, but there have been so many others right across this country that have provided day-to-day advice and support to victims of asbestos related disease, whether it's them needing transport to hospital for treatment, navigating the legislation in their home state in relation to compensation or just advocating so strongly about needing change

here in Canberra. So I do, indeed, want to pay tribute to their ongoing dedication to fight for so many people's lives.

We are talking about a lot of people's lives. We are talking about thousands of people's lives. In fact, as many as 40,000 people will be diagnosed with an asbestos-related disease in the next 20 years. That is its long legacy. It is the long latency period, unfortunately, that asbestos has that means we'll have so many more people diagnosed. It's actually predicted that around 25,000 people will die of asbestos related diseases over the next 40 years. This is why research is so important.

I was pleased last year, with my co-chair, Russell Broadbent, to host the ANU's and the Asbestos Disease Research Institute's Associate Professor Martyn Kirk here in Parliament House. Martyn came from the National Centre for Epidemiology and Population Health at the ANU. He was here to launch the ACT's final report on asbestos health studies into the health effects of living in a house with loose-fill asbestos insulation. We know that Canberra has its own legacy here with Mr Fluffy. A lot of houses have contained Mr Fluffy and a lot of work has needed to be done to protect those residents that have had those types of houses. I also introduced Professor Ken Takahashi. He has become the new director at the Asbestos Disease Research Institute. As I said, research is going to be ever-increasingly more important because, at this point in time, we don't have a cure.

There have been some remarkable breakthroughs, like a drug called Keytruda used, in the main, to treat people with melanoma, a skin cancer, but it has actually had a positive impact on people with mesothelioma. I remember Russell and me meeting with the then minister, Sussan Ley, about this issue of how we could get Keytruda listed among those drugs that could be used for the treatment of mesothelioma. It was costing something like \$3,000 a treatment because there wasn't a line item for it. That is something I think Minister Greg Hunt should continue to pursue because, if there is no cure but there is some sort of drug that can provide some comfort and at least delay the onslaught of those symptoms from an asbestos related disease, we should be open minded about embracing that.

I will turn to the issue of illegal dumping, which I know Senator Hanson has found herself interested in. Illegal dumping has been going on for absolutely decades, and it's been going on right across the country. I do not think there is one state or territory that is immune to illegal dumping. Yes, I have heard it said a few times here today that this is a complex issue. Well, guess what? We're in the federal parliament and we're here to deal with complex issues. That's our job, all right? We have to deal with these complex issues. The buck stops with us. In fact, the buck stops with the government, but it stops by us dealing with these complex issues. How we are going to resolve the issue of illegal dumping is incredibly important. I know in Tasmania a lot of asbestos is dumped in our forests. It is costing us something like \$200,000 a year to clean up illegal dumping. That's just in a small state like Tasmania. I can't imagine what it would be in some of the bigger states. The thing is, if we don't have enough pits to have asbestos dumped in and the cost of dumping asbestos is going to be so high, then, unfortunately, certain scurrilous individuals are going to do the wrong thing. They're going to either put it in wheelie bins or dump it illegally. So it does come back to access and to cost. These two issues need to be addressed. There are some councils in Australia that have addressed them. They've addressed them really well and they've provided vouchers to their residents. There are other council areas where there is simply nowhere to dump it and, in fact, you've got to drive for miles to find somewhere that has a purpose-built facility.

These are some of the challenges that the Asbestos Safety and Eradication Agency can address in its new management plan, but, as far as instructing states and instructing councils—because it gets right down to the council level—to change their policy parameters around this, the agency is going to need support and funding as a national body to be able to push this right up to the COAG level, because that's where it really needs to sit. It is going to be very difficult for the federal government, of any persuasion, to get councils and state governments to have any interest in changing what they are doing without it, I think, being part of some kind of COAG position.

Senator Ketter has already raised a range of other issues today. The recommendations from the Senate Economics References Committee's report lays it all out—it really does. There are some excellent recommendations in that report and the federal government, the Turnbull government, needs to seriously address them. At the end of the day, do we really want to create another generation or, as they call it, a third wave of asbestos disease sufferers in Australia? I hope we certainly don't. But, if we don't want to create that, then we need a government that's going to take this issue seriously and give ASEA the funds and the teeth that it needs to do its work, and we need a minister who actually has a bit of interest in this. Over the last I don't know how many years of this government, we've had, I think, three ministers, if not more, for asbestos. I do acknowledge and give some praise to Senator Abetz because, when he was Minister for Employment, he did actually commit to tackling asbestos and he did take it quite seriously indeed. But it's been pretty much a hodgepodge approach since that time, and then there was the threat of withdrawal of the funding of the agency and the question of whether the agency would continue. There's just been absolutely no commitment, and this is an issue, as I said, that has to rise

above politics. It has to have the commitment of all sides in this place so that we can deal with some of the issues that Senator Hanson has decided she wants to get involved with today.

On the issue of illegal imports, for some time now—and I think it is one of the recommendations that Senator Ketter's report puts forward—we have been calling on the Australian government to push and push for the listing of chrysotile asbestos in annex III of the Rotterdam convention. What that means is that, on any import into Australia, it will have to be listed that it contains a hazardous substance called asbestos, and at the moment it simply doesn't. So, yes, we end up with cars like Great Wall and their asbestos brake pads. It's just ridiculous that there is no listing of chrysotile asbestos in the Rotterdam convention. That has to continue to be pushed by the federal government. At the same time, Border Force are given a lot of resources when it comes to drugs, as they should be, but, if they're not given the resources and put through the training to be able to identify asbestos and check these products before they come into our country, at the border level, then of course we'll find more examples of the kids' crayons and building materials and the like coming in. So more needs to be done by government and more commitment needs to be made if they're really serious about addressing asbestos in Australia.

Senator WILLIAMS (New South Wales—Nationals Whip in the Senate) (17:44): I rise to contribute to this debate. Mesothelioma: what a terrible disease. It's amazing—as time goes on, we learn from our mistakes. Living on the farm, moving to the Inverell area back in 1979, we had these barns there where they used to hang the tobacco, back in the old tobacco-growing days, when many Italian immigrants came there. The barns would be knocked down, and the panels probably just thrown in the dump on the farm or whatever. People were ignorant, totally ignorant, of what they were actually handling at the time, and what a dangerous, dangerous product asbestos is, and all the harm, suffering and death caused by it. It is amazing. Australia was a huge user of asbestos. It was one of the biggest users of asbestos in the world until the mid-1980s. The legacy of this, of course, is here, now, and for many years in front of us, to clean it up.

This is a good topic to talk about. I think it's something that each and every one of us across the political fields here agrees is a dangerous product. It needs to be disposed of properly. What we learn about it, as time goes on, is that the more we learn, the more we need to spread that knowledge and to clean up the whole environment for future generations. To me, that's what life is about in politics; it's about the future generations. Ask yourself one question: how are we going to leave our country for those who follow us—our kids, grandchildren and those to come after that? If we can leave the country in better shape than we inherited it, we've done a pretty good job. And when I say 'leave the country in better shape', I refer to our rivers—the pollution in the rivers—and especially our soil, our topsoil, which has to grow food for millions and millions of people in the years ahead of us. We need to protect our topsoil. Sadly, that is something not enough people pay attention to. The conservationists and the green movement are always talking about trees and so on, but what about the actual soil? The soil is a great asset we have. In talking about leaving things for future generations, asbestos is no exception.

Senator Singh, I thought, spoke very well, and I agreed with many things she said. But it is a complex challenge simply getting the environment protection authorities from the three tiers of government—from local councils to state government to federal government—working together. It does take some putting together. I'm sure Minister Scullion would be well aware of that in his portfolio. You don't just pull them together, have one meeting, and it's all hunky-dory: 'Let's all be friends and get on with the job.' It doesn't work like that, sadly. But I'm proud of the fact that the government has doubled the funding for the Asbestos Safety and Eradication Agency, ASEA, from 2018-19 onwards.

The thing is—where is all the asbestos? It is hidden behind the walls as insulation. It is hidden in the ceilings. People are probably living amongst asbestos and simply not even aware of it. I know that when I did repairs to my shearing shed years ago we bought panels—fibro. Hopefully, it didn't have asbestos in it. We put them on the sides of the shearing shed because the old ironbark slabs had deteriorated so much. But there's been too much sickness and too great a cost, both money-wise and personally, for so many people—people who've had to work with asbestos, work around that product, and, of course, who have suffered the illness and the terrible death resulting from that.

The government, through the Asbestos Safety and Eradication Agency, ASEA, has been working on the ongoing development, coordination and implementation of the National Strategic Plan for Asbestos Management and Awareness. The aim of the national strategic plan is to prevent exposure to airborne asbestos fibres in order to eliminate asbestos related disease in Australia. We know this is a long-term challenge, and it's important to ensure the plan is refreshed and remains relevant. The plan provides a framework within which states and territories are able to work cooperatively and independently to achieve set objectives. It is ensuring a coordinated effort across the country to reduce the deadly impact of asbestos on Australians, and will help put Australia at the forefront of international efforts to deal with asbestos. The plan joins all Australian jurisdictions to work together to develop

practical long-term solutions to the asbestos problem. It uses a phased approach to work together with the ultimate aim of eliminating asbestos related disease.

Senator Singh made a good point: where do you dispose of the asbestos waste? If the local government's going to charge too much, if the pits are expensive to form, then people are simply going to junk it. Out on the road at night-time, in a gully on the side of the road, on a stock route—who knows where? Just get rid of it, throw it out wherever you are, and, of course, this causes more problems, spreads the asbestos around the countryside and makes an even more widespread and bigger mess to clean up. So we must encourage those who are going to remove the asbestos to dispose of it properly and safely.

One of the big problems we face is the do-it-yourself workers at home. They might buy an old home; it might be 80 or 100 years old. It might already have been renovated perhaps in the sixties and seventies with asbestos lining, asbestos this, asbestos that—with many materials made from asbestos—and they might think: 'Well, it's getting a bit old and tattered. The paint's worn off. We'll just get the crowbar and sledgehammer and smash it all down and throw it in the bin and drop it up at the local dump. It'll be right.' How do they know what they're dealing with? Surely, one of the problems we face is education. I've got to plead ignorance here. If you give me a panel of some building material, how do I know there's asbestos in it? This is one of the problems of educating people to be well aware of what they're dealing with at the time. When it comes to the do-it-yourself worker doing those jobs on a home renovation, it might be an 800 square metre house block that has a three-bedroom home and an old shed down the back that has been there for many years. 'We'll knock the shed down.' Do they realise what they're doing with the walls et cetera? It gets worse. When you look at Western Australia, there's a problem where they had cement tiles for the roofing for houses, many of them for many years. Now they are decaying, getting old and giving off the fibres. It's a very widespread problem.

That's why, for the plan, it's important to work together to construct the best team right across all jurisdictions to see how we can deal with this. I talked about the plan providing the framework within the states and territories so they can work together. The first phase of the plan, 2014 to 2018, focused on the conducting and disseminating of research projects and the testing of approaches to gather the evidence, supporting tools and systems to identify options that reduce the risks posed by asbestos in the built environment. Strategies were identified as a means of achieving the plan and increasing the public's awareness of the health risks of asbestos. We're doing that here today by talking about it, and, hopefully, those who are listening on radio are getting a message from that. It is something I'm not an expert on, I can tell you. I need to be educated as well. There is supporting and promoting research to learn more about the product and how we can deal with it, and improving information about the identification and location of asbestos. As I said, it's about education. There is developing best practice in all aspects of asbestos management, identifying priority areas to improve the safe removal of asbestos, working to stop asbestos imports to Australia and campaigning to achieve a worldwide ban on asbestos mining and manufacturing. Those are some very important issues about the removal of asbestos. Then, where do we deposit it once it's removed? There is the safe deposit, the safe storage and the safe dumping of the product.

Australia is widely recognised for its international leadership on asbestos management. The government is impressed by the commitment all governments have shown towards the implementation of the national strategic plan to identify the priority risks of asbestos exposure in Australia and in the community. This plan must be adhered to, put together and expanded, because it's got to be a team effort right across the nation to achieve the goal, which is to make it safer for future generations and, of course, safer for those today who have to work with it. Senator Singh said the task of all levels of government in many portfolios is not complex. It may be complex; we call it complex, but that's why we're here: to solve complex issues. All levels of government across many portfolios involve asbestos—safety, public health, planning and environment to name just a few—so it is bringing departments together to work on this very issue.

Looking at New South Wales, the following case studies from ASEA's *National strategic plan for asbestos management and awareness progress report 2015-16* demonstrate best-practice initiatives to address illegal disposal practices. But here's the problem: it's very convenient to go out and do it at night, especially when you live in a rural area, as there are plenty of dirt roads et cetera and there is simply no-one about at night-time. The New South Wales Environment Protection Authority's Waste Less Recycle More initiative 'supports grant programs for local government, business, industry and the community to stimulate new investment and transform waste and recycling in New South Wales. In this case study, the New South Wales National Parks and Wildlife Service:

... used this program to identify and target hotspots of illegal dumping in two of their conservation areas. EPA funding was used to develop a strategy, gather data, clean-up dumped asbestos and install barriers, signs and surveillance cameras to deter future dumping.

But it's a big country. I'm talking about New South Wales here. There's a lot of area to watch. Surveillance cameras might be good for some areas of hotspots, but you can't have surveillance cameras all over the countryside. The report continued:

The grant funding supported the clean-up of 97 sites including over 607 tonnes of asbestos—
607 tonnes—

923 tonnes of mixed waste, 1186 tyres and 221 mattresses. Regulatory action taken resulted in 18 investigations resulting in 6 penalty notices, sites being cleaned-up by offenders and a successful court prosecution.

I mentioned the cement roofs in Western Australia. A project is currently being undertaken in Western Australia to manage asbestos cement roofs that were installed between the 1940s and 1980s throughout the state. These roofs are now 'increasingly deteriorating and coming to the end of their useful life'. To quote from the case study:

As asbestos cement roofs deteriorate they release asbestos fibres into the environment. As they age they become more brittle increasing the risk of falls and the complexity of intact sheet removal.

In other words, the older they get, the more fragile they get, and, when you try to remove them in one piece, there is more chance of them just falling apart and the fibres of course falling out. The case study continues:

Asbestos cement roofs can cause considerable contamination as a result of fires, non-compliant removal practices, and illegal dumping.

We come back to illegal dumping, which is what they are finding in Western Australia as well.

The Department of Health Western Australia is increasingly providing advice or direction to building owners recommending removal over maintenance of existing asbestos cement roofs. However, there are a number of obstacles to the safe removal and replacement of asbestos cement roofs, relating mostly to cost and a poor understanding of the legislative removal and disposal processes. The aim of the asbestos roofs project is to identify the obstacles for the removal of these products in the residential environment and investigate strategies to overcome these.

We are facing a big problem here, a big problem that's going to cost money and time and that's going to require coordination of all levels of government.

Senator Singh touched on another issue, talking about the asbestos brake pads in Chinese cars—the Great Wall, I think. This is another issue we face: imports. We need to remain vigilant to the risk of imported products containing asbestos. There's been increased focus on this issue, and the workload of the Heads of Workplace Safety Authorities Imported Materials with Asbestos Working Group and the Asbestos Interdepartmental Committee has increased as more asbestos-containing products have been identified. They have actually increased their surveillance. We have also seen more applications for permits to import asbestos-containing materials for the purpose of research, analysis or display. More requests for permits show that businesses are becoming more aware of the risk and are making efforts to ensure their products are asbestos free.

ASEA released Australia's first National Asbestos Profile at the recent Asbestos Safety and Eradication Summit. The National Asbestos Profile, NAP, supports Australia's national strategic plan and, over time, will be used to demonstrate progress made towards eliminating asbestos related diseases in Australia. I talked about the do-it-yourself builder, the home person, the renovator. They've been identified as an emerging group at risk of exposure to asbestos in the residential sector in Australia. Awareness and education are therefore key to ensuring home owners and renovators remain vigilant to the risks. The National Asbestos Profile collates a range of existing information and research data that reflect the significant impact of asbestos in Australia.

This is a big problem. I'm glad to see this motion come forward today where we can work together and highlight the dangers of asbestos, working together with the funding, knowledge, research and experience to do the best we can to protect those around it, to dispose of it, to see that it's not imported in the future and to give our children an asbestos-free Australia and world.

Debate interrupted.

DOCUMENTS

Murray-Darling Basin

Order for the Production of Documents

Senator SCULLION (Northern Territory—Minister for Indigenous Affairs and Leader of The Nationals in the Senate) (18:00): I table a document relating to the order for the productions of documents concerning the Murray-Darling Basin Authority.

BUSINESS

Leave of Absence

Senator SMITH (Western Australia—Deputy Government Whip in the Senate) (18:00): by leave—I move: