

## 2025-26 Budget Reply Speech

### Shane Rattenbury, ACT Greens Leader

This ACT Budget misses the mark. It has missed the mark on where money is being spent, and where money is being generated from. This is ACT Labor's first solo Budget in more than a decade, and it gives us a clear insight into what their real priorities look like.

On expenditure, there are vital areas in this Budget like public housing, climate and environment, and the community sector that have simply not received the investment that current and future generations so desperately need.

And on revenue, we see this Government seeking to solve its Budget shortfalls by increasing costs on everyday Canberrans rather than generating revenue from those who can – and should – pay their fair share.

A good budget invests in our people, community and the things we need to live well in Canberra. Critically it should raise revenue from those who can afford it, like big corporations, before passing on the bill to everyday people.

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The Greens recognise that we need to raise enough revenue to deliver the services that our community needs. That's why earlier this month we announced a proposal for a Big Corporations Tax – additional payroll tax on the largest organisations in our city, the likes of the big supermarkets, banks and airlines, to raise \$107 million annual revenue to pay for the services Canberrans need. This is a practical, sensible measure which would help us to raise revenue in a progressive way, and which more than 99 per cent of businesses would not pay.

Yet what the Government is proposing is the worst of all worlds. Under the euphemism of 'broadening the base', ACT Labor is proposing a reduction in the payroll tax threshold to \$1.75 million, meaning that more small, local businesses will pay.

Meanwhile, the largest businesses - who reap in much higher profits - will enjoy a lower effective payroll tax rate than what

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was anticipated prior to this Budget. And this approach will only raise half of the revenue that the ACT Greens Big Corporations Tax proposal would.

Why would you choose to make small, local businesses - who are real engines of growth and who keep their profits local - pay more payroll tax, when you could be generating the revenue from the likes of Coles, Woolworths, and the big banks? Who in the Expenditure Review Committee thought this was a good choice?

And meanwhile, Labor continues to fund the horse racing industry to the tune of \$8 million annually. At a time when we're being told the Government is making hard choices, cutting this subsidy should be an easy one

## **HEALTH**

This brings me to health funding, which the Government has identified as the centrepiece of their Budget.

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Canberrans want and deserve high quality health care, but the reality is, getting it has become harder and harder.

Our health system is clearly under pressure – rapidly growing demand, wait times for specialists well beyond clinically recommended timeframes or entirely inaccessible.

We know many hospital presentations may have been avoided by better and more preventative community care, earlier access to specialists, and more affordable visits to the GP.

We know that patients without access to a dentist are more likely to present at Emergency with dental issues and or live with chronic pain. We encourage ACT Labor to join Greens calls to bring dental into Medicare. Because that would hugely assist bridging this gap in health outcomes.

We regularly hear the Health Minister reference the failure over a decade of the Federal Liberal government to invest in primary

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health care. That is true, but after a full term of an Albanese Labor Government, has there been much change?

The ACT Treasurer is pointing to a lack of Federal funding for health, and the Federal Health Minister has publicly responded, denying the claim. With a Federal Labor Government and a Minority Labor Government here in the ACT there needs to be stronger negotiations between the two levels to ensure the ACT gets its fair share.

The ACT Greens also remain concerned that Labor are relying too heavily on shiny buildings without equal efforts in primary care, effective systems, and investment in a positive workplace culture for ACT Health. Labor's ongoing failure – at both a Territory and Federal level - to invest in preventative health is costing all of us. And ACT Labor needs to advocate to federal Labor colleagues to ensure that promises to increase bulk billing actually deliver for Canberrans.

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This Budget has proposed a \$250 health levy on all Canberrans through their rates bills – a regressive levy which doesn't take account of people's ability to pay.

Not only is this levy unfair, but it passes on the failures of both Territory and Federal Labor to create a truly universal healthcare system.

**Today I am announcing that the ACT Greens will oppose this unfair health levy in its current form. We simply cannot vote for it as it is in this Appropriation Bill.**

It is regressive and unfair, and a folly on which the Treasurer needs to reflect and change. This levy doesn't reflect the kind of city we want to build. And so we call on the Government to go back to the drawing board and come up with something more progressive. The ACT Greens solution of a Big Corporations Tax, which only the top 1% of businesses would pay and would raise double the amount generated by this levy, is a solution we'd call upon the Government to adopt.

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### HOUSING

If we want to call ourselves a truly progressive city, we need to ensure everyone has access to safe, affordable and comfortable housing. This is why the Greens have introduced a bill to make housing a human right. Increasing numbers of Canberrans are being priced out of the housing market, and our public housing wait list is sitting at over 3,000 people.

It is a backward step to see the Rent Relief Fund– a program which I introduced as Minister in a Greens-Labor Government, now being cut by a Labor minority Government. A program which has helped more than 1,400 vulnerable households maintain their tenancy, and would likely prevent many from ending up on the 3,000 long public housing waitlist.

The ACT Green's role in holding the balance of power is to push back against the government when we think they're making the wrong call. With 17 organisations sharing their fears about

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what will happen if the Rent Relief Fund is cut, this is precisely the time we need to push back.

It is baffling that the Government appears to have only committed to building 85 new public homes and 55 social homes in this Budget. While there are small steps taken towards increasing affordable housing for rent and purchase, we know that this simply won't meet urgent need.

We took a call for 10,000 public homes over the next decade to the election precisely because we know that the need for adequate housing is great and this requires a transformative approach.

Even Labor finally adopted a policy to deliver 5000 additional public, community and affordable rental properties by 2030. Yet in this 2025-26 Budget we only see a commitment for 140 additional properties , and just under \$5 million set aside for a plan, so it lacks credibility that Labor is even serious about meeting their own target.



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Instead, the Budget provides incremental solutions which just look like they will never meet demand. You just need to look around the city to see that many people are homeless, and many more are less visible, living in precarious or unsafe housing situations.

### **CLIMATE AND ENVIRONMENT**

There has been no significant uplift in funding for our decarbonisation agenda or to protect our natural environment in this budget. Yes, the ACT is a leader in decarbonisation, but there is plenty more work to be done and we cannot rest on our laurels.

Our health is intrinsically linked to the quality of the environment in our region. From the air that we breathe to the water we drink, and the diversity of nature – all of this requires investment.

Last year, spending on the environment, climate change and sustainable development represented only 3% of the budget.

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This year, proportional funding for environment, climate and sustainable development has dropped to only 2%. Funding for actual biodiversity protection and habitat restoration represents even less, at a fraction of 1%. How long must we hear that we are in a biodiversity crisis? How many more species will go extinct before we accept that what we are doing simply isn't enough?

And while we're talking about crises, the next Climate Change Strategy should begin in 2026 and is nowhere to be seen. I would have liked to see more in this Budget to indicate where the Labor party intend to go on climate action and mitigation without Greens in cabinet.

The former ACT Commissioner for Sustainability and the Environment, wrote in her foreword to her Close To The Edge report tabled to the Assembly on 15 May this year, *"Maintaining the same approach and rejecting reform is - without doubt - tacit acceptance of and contribution to the biodiversity crisis."* She

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said that *“government spending on the environment at all jurisdictional levels is meagre and demonstrably inadequate”*.

Sadly, these words are now even more true than when they were written. If Labor want to show they value biodiversity, want to stop species going extinct and restore ecosystems, this cannot happen without a fundamental shift in our policy and our environmental funding landscape.

We welcome the desperately needed funding to save the Canberra Earless Dragon from extinction, which came after extensive pressure from environment groups and the Greens. Now, call me cynical, but after watching former Environment Minister Rebecca Vassarotti struggle to get environment business cases through Cabinet, it was fascinating to see money readily made available for Earless Dragon breeding to facilitate Canberra Airport being able to develop a road through Dragon habitat.

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It's hard not to worry that this funding will merely ensure we have a few Earless Dragons behind glass at the Melbourne Zoo so our great grandchildren can still marvel at this incredible species long after they are extinct in the wild. As the Commissioner said – maintaining the same approach is a tacit acceptance of, and contribution to the biodiversity crisis. And I see no change in the approach in this budget.

There's a long list of environmental projects that a Greens budget would have prioritised. They include proper funding for strategic, long term land use planning, habitat restoration and weed management, an overhaul of our offset policy, stewardship payments for farmers' conservation efforts, funding to actually deliver a plan to phase out wood heaters, and an uplift in funding for the environmental organisations and volunteers who do all the hard conservation work for government.

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I note that revenue from the Water Abstraction Charge has increased to \$42 million this year, its highest level ever, and yet we see a collapse in expenditure compared to recent years in spending on Healthy Waterways projects, the funding for catchment management, renaturalisation of our stormwater drains and the creation of urban wetlands.

And when it comes to bold strides, we would have liked this budget to include a bigger emphasis on public and active transport.

With **transport** producing 65 per cent of all ACT emissions, the Government must concentrate more of its energy on improving the public and active transport system to make it a more viable and convenient option for more Canberrans. Light Rail is the big public transport success story of the past few years. It delivered a step change in ridership, bringing 40 per cent more people to public transport compared to buses. To make a serious dent in climate change and wellbeing, ACT Labor need

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to work with the Commonwealth to make Light Rail a funding priority and roll out the benefits to Woden, Belconnen and beyond sooner.

We have said many times, and will continue to say, that the current timeline is just not fast enough. The Government can – and should – be planning future stages while they are building current stages.

Sadly, the bungled roll out of MyWay+ is the big story of Labor and public transport this term. I wish I could be more optimistic, but I don't see much ambition on public transport this term. This is frustrating, and disappointing for Canberrans.

We need greater focus and investment in our public transport system if we want it to be a genuine, convenient and viable option for more people across our city.

Many cities globally have made great strides in getting people to use active transport – but we lack the cycle network to have

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seen that big shift here. The ACT has a full cycle network planned – we just need to invest and build it. Labor's investment is simply insufficient to make this step change.

### **COMMUNITY SECTOR**

The Treasurer has made some limited commitments to the community sector, and these will provide a little breathing space for some.

But the sector provides essential services for many vulnerable Canberrans, and has suffered significant underinvestment.

Back in 2009–10, the ACT Government invested \$130 million in the community sector – representing 3.6 per cent of the Territory's total budget, which stood at \$3.7 billion.

By 2022–23, despite the ACT's population growing by 29 per cent over that period, the share of funding allocated to the community sector had fallen to just 2.5 per cent of an \$8.28 billion budget. That shift represents a 30 per cent reduction in

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real terms. To maintain the same level of support as in 2009–10, an additional \$62 million would have been required in that year alone. Instead, this Budget offers just under \$10 million over two years, spread across 150 organisations. We will continue to make the case to ACT Labor that investment in the community sector is crucial for wellbeing across the city, as well as reducing pressure on the health system.

There are also many individual Canberrans who make invaluable contributions to our city and our people. Volunteers provide countless hours of free labour, often providing vital services which would otherwise have to be paid for. So thanking them with an \$11 charge for a Working with Vulnerable People Card seems callous and short-sighted.

If the problem is that more people are applying for the card than need it, why not re-visit the application process to help filter out those that don't? This would help stem the demand – and cost of processing applications – for Government.



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### COMMONWEALTH FUNDING

Canberra is a great city to live in. A great city that is home to many Federal Public servants who do really important work on behalf of our entire country. And it is with that in mind, ACT Labor must also ensure that Canberra gets its fair share of national funding.

The Treasurer has recognised that over 40 per cent of the workforce in the ACT is exempt from payroll tax because they are employed as public servants. This is far above the national average. Given the constitutional hurdles preventing us from changing this exemption, the ACT should be getting a better deal from the federal Government in recognition of the significant portion of the APS workforce that calls Canberra home.

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These people are, after all, working on behalf of the whole country and we need to see advocacy from the Treasurer and Chief Minister to ensure that Canberra gets a fairer share. The conditions couldn't be better – a majority Labor Government on the hill, a minority Labor Government in the ACT with Greens in the balance of power – Greens who will always demand more for Canberrans.

We Greens will be pushing ACT Labor to work harder on their federal colleagues. Harder because getting the ACT's fair share of the national pie is a much better option than a regressive \$250 health levy, a tax on small business rather than big corporations or an \$11 blanket charge for volunteers who need Working with Vulnerable People cards.

### **FAILED ICT PROJECTS**

The benefit of a small Government such as the ACT's is that lessons from one part of Government should be quickly applicable to another.

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The nearly \$80 million write down in the ACT Government's HR system is a failure of Government that they should have learned from. But with \$378 million expected to be spent on the Digital Health Record against the originally budgeted \$213 million, and the ACT Auditor General finding that services were being paid for that hadn't been received, one wonders whether any learning is happening.

As of March 2025, TCCS overspent \$8.5 million on its digital projects - and look at the results we're getting from those digital projects: MyWay+ was rolled out with a litany of bugs and errors, with scant regard for protecting the data of its users – and still isn't working as it should.

And if Labor tell you that all ICT projects overrun – a [landmark 2025 study by Oxford University](#) shows that out of more than 5,000 Government projects studied, ICT projects overran 41 per cent of the time, lower than almost all other infrastructure

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projects. That means most run to budget – which rarely seems to be the case in the ACT.

As a jurisdiction we could instead be allocating these funds to building public housing, to mitigating and adapting to climate change, and to the environment. The heart of this problem is that a complacent ACT Labor don't seem to be learning from their mistakes. Together with my ACT Greens colleagues Jo Clay, Andrew Braddock and Laura Nuttall – we will keep seeking to hold Labor to account so that they do.

## **CONCLUSION**

Canberrans deserve better than a Budget that lets the biggest corporations off the hook while asking every day Canberrans to pay more, volunteers to fork out, renters to go without, and the community sector to do more with less.

They deserve climate leadership backed by action, not the quiet dismantling of successful schemes. They deserve clean

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transport options that are convenient and reliable, the right to a home that is comfortable and affordable, and a healthy environment that sustains us all.

The ACT Greens have put forward clear, costed alternatives: a Big Corporations Tax that would raise more, hurt fewer, and fund what matters. A commitment to real housing solutions, not just modest targets. A focus on health prevention, not just shiny buildings. And serious investment in our natural environment — because there is no wellbeing without care for the climate and nature.

We don't accept that this Budget is the best we can do. And as the balance of power party in this Assembly, it is our job to push the Government to be better. So we will keep pushing for more, keep pushing for better. More fairness, more ambition. That is what Canberrans elected us Greens to do. And that is what we ACT Greens will keep doing — for the city and future we can all believe in.