**DAVID SPEERS**

I want to pay my respects to the traditional owners, the Awabakal and Worimi peoples, on whose land we’re meeting tonight.

We’re live in Newcastle, in the New South Wales Hunter Region, which is facing an enormous energy transformation. How is the move from coal to clean power impacting on the people who live here?

And Kathleen Folbigg is free. What does a pardon for the woman from this region mean for our justice system?

Joining our panel: former Newcastle Knights player Alex McKinnon; Pro Vice-Chancellor of Indigenous Strategy and Leadership at the University of Newcastle, Nathan Towney; Minister for Aged Care and Sport, Anika Wells; the Shadow Minister for Energy and Climate Change, Ted O’Brien; and Newcastle Lord Mayor Nuatali Nelmes.

And will the government meet its promise to deliver more nurses to aged care?

Hello. I’m David Speers. It’s terrific to be with you, live from the Conservatorium of Music at the University of Newcastle. And remember, you can livestream us around the country on iview and all the socials. #QandA is the hashtag. Please get involved.

Before we get started, Nathan, I want to come to you, because I understand you’d like to just say a couple of opening remarks about the person who normally sits in this chair – Stan Grant.

**NATHAN TOWNEY, UNIVERSITY OF NEWCASTLE PRO VICE-CHANCELLOR**

Yeah, thanks very much, David, and thanks very much for having me. I feel very privileged to be here. I’d also like to acknowledge that we’re meeting on the traditional lands of the Awabakal and Worimi people.

As a proud Wiradjuri man from Wellington, New South Wales, it would be remiss of me not to acknowledge the absence of Stan Grant. He’s obviously had a bit of a tough road the last few months, and I just want to shout out to Stan and say thank you for his ongoing commitment and advocacy for our mob.

But also, his situation, experiences are not isolated. And so I also want to extend that acknowledgement and thanks to all those people that turn up and advocate and, you know, really, I guess, try to fit into structures and systems that weren’t really made by us or for us, as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. So just want to say thank you to Stan. I hope you’re travelling well, brother. And yindyamarra.

**DAVID SPEERS**

Yeah, well said. Well said. Thank you for saying that, Nathan. I think that’s a sentiment that many in this room would share, no doubt about it.

Well, to get us started tonight, here’s a question from Sharon Mestern.

**SHARON MESTERN**

Good evening, everybody. And for those of you not from the Hunter, welcome.

**ANIKA WELLS, MINISTER FOR AGED CARE & SPORT**

Thank you.

**SHARON MESTERN**

My question is to the panel. 20 years after she was convicted over the death of her four babies, Kathleen Folbigg today was pardoned and freed from prison, after it was concluded there is reasonable doubt about her guilt. Considering the evidence provided in the Kathleen Folbigg case, what precedent do you think this will set, and what changes could be made to our laws to prevent this from happening again?

**DAVID SPEERS**

Sharon, thank you for the question. Lord Mayor, I might go to you first on this.

**NUATALI NELMES, LORD MAYOR OF NEWCASTLE**

Absolutely. It is a tragedy. We’ve seen four beautiful babies lost. We’ve seen a woman’s life, 20 years of her life, her marriage, so many lives, affected. And when you see that type of tragedy, you can only think, what can we do in the future to really make changes? And looking at the Attorney-General, Michael Daley, and what he has done today, under a Minns Labor government, has been the right move, I think, for Kathleen and for justice.

There’s a couple of stages to go, but in the interim, it really is the science that got us to this point. And I think the question really is, what role does science play in the judicial system, and how can we actually make sure those evidence and fact-based decisions are actually included more in that judicial process?

**DAVID SPEERS**

Yeah, it’s an interesting point. Can I ask you, as mentioned earlier, Kathleen Folbigg, from this region – do you think she would be welcomed back here?

**NUATALI NELMES**

Oh, absolutely. So, her lawyer, University of Newcastle graduate, vocal, a number of her supporters all come from Newcastle and this region that have campaigned tirelessly for her innocence and continued petition after petition to actually see the case re-examined. So, absolutely. I think you can’t underestimate the tragedy of just losing four children – I mean, I’m a mother of three – let alone going through that, and then spending 20 years in jail.

**DAVID SPEERS**

Anika Wells, let me just bring you in on this, because, I mean, this is such an extraordinary case. I think it’s fair to say we haven’t seen anything quite like it since probably Lindy Chamberlain. As the Lord Mayor says, it’s a breakthrough in science...

**ANIKA WELLS**

Mm.

**DAVID SPEERS**

...that has really led to her being pardoned. To Sharon’s question, what sort of precedent do you think this does set?

**ANIKA WELLS**

Mm. Well, I think there are two elements to this now. There’s actually what’s happened here in this case... And you have to... I mean, 20 years is such a long time to be in prison, particularly if you have always protested your innocence. So I think, let’s take a moment to think about what she and all those...you know, all those family members who loved those children must be feeling tonight.

And then for us, as public policymakers, there’s, how do we move this forward? How do we get better? And I think it raises some really interesting questions about how do we amend our justice system so that the best of science, the best of developments coming out of University of Newcastle, for example, can be used so that it doesn’t happen again. I think it’s a really interesting early decision by a new attorney-general, and I’m sort of excited by what it holds for us.

**DAVID SPEERS**

Yeah. Ted O’Brien, I mean, is there a way to ensure this sort of thing doesn’t happen again by making some of the changes that’s being suggested here?

**TED O’BRIEN, SHADOW MINISTER FOR CLIMATE CHANGE & ENERGY**

Oh, David, I think, if there are changes to be made, well, they should be. I feel as though it’s probably premature to try to get ahead and guess what precedents might be set. I think, like others, instinctively, when I heard the news, I felt it as a dad and thinking of those four little kids, you know, who lost their life. I think it’s right to talk about the evolution of science and how that can improve evidence. But I think it’s also a reminder of how timeless key principles can be. And one of those key principles is the presumption of innocence until proven guilty beyond reasonable doubt.

**DAVID SPEERS**

And do you think that happened here? Is that what you’re saying?

**TED O’BRIEN**

Well, it’s not for me to judge. And I think it would be...I think it would be inappropriate, especially given the KC hasn’t delivered the final report to the governor, too.

**DAVID SPEERS**

Nathan, let me just get your thoughts on this. Because you had something like 90 scientists say you’ve got to relook at this decision here. What does this tell us about the role of science in our legal system?

**NATHAN TOWNEY**

Yeah, it’s really important. You know, research is ever-evolving. There’s new technology all the time. And I think it’s important that we use it for our full advantage. And I think, in this case, it’s led to, you know, obviously, a good decision. I also wonder the type of precedent that it sets, how many other people are currently locked up that shouldn’t be, or that, you know, science may prove their innocence when they’ve been telling that for many years. So I hope that we’re able to find further people that are incarcerated that might be able to, you know, have their cases heard through science.

**DAVID SPEERS**

Plenty to get to tonight. Let’s move on. We’ll hear from Michael Sanderson.

**MICHAEL SANDERSON**

G’day, panel, David. My question’s for Alex. Concussion and industries in sport are often the result of violence. In ordinary life, violence against women, children, elderly people like me and in the workplace is unacceptable. Why is violence socially acceptable in the Roman Circus?

**DAVID SPEERS**

Thank you, Michael. Alex.

**ALEX McKINNON, FORMER NEWCASTLE KNIGHTS PLAYER**

Yeah, it’s a great question. I think with rugby league, a lot of contact sports, a lot of people, they love to come and see that gladiatorial element of rugby league and other contact sports. I think, as we learn more and become more understanding of the risks that are associated with head knocks, concussions, I think when we become more aware of those consequences is when we need to put things in place. It’s only been quite a recent understanding of the concussions and the head knocks and the influence it can have on people’s lives.

And I think, as well, as rugby league and other sports evolve, the athletes evolve. Rugby league’s only been a professional sport for probably 30 years now. And as people train full-time, as the game evolves, people will implement new rules, there are impacts on those. If anything, I think the game’s been quite reactive to a lot of those incidences, and I think it’s probably something that we could look at being a little bit more proactive as the rules get implemented and as people’s bodies and that change.

So, yeah, I don’t know why it is something that people love to watch. Other sports like multi... MMA, a lot of sports like that, people love to watch that type of stuff.

**DAVID SPEERS**

Cage-fighting, and that sort of thing.

**ALEX McKINNON**

Yeah.

**DAVID SPEERS**

I’m just interested. I mean... The spinal cord injury you suffered nine years ago now...

**ALEX McKINNON**

Yeah.

**DAVID SPEERS**

...while playing NRL, how did that change your attitude towards the way the game’s played and that...you know, to use Michael’s word, the violence involved?

**ALEX McKINNON**

I remember sitting in a meeting with... Every year, they send the referees around to your club to consult you on things that they like to look for and potential risks. I remember sitting there, I just wasn’t even listening. I felt invincible.

**DAVID SPEERS**

Mm-hm.

**ALEX McKINNON**

I didn’t think... I’d never had an injury in my whole career. I didn’t think I would get injured. I was 21 years old at the time when we had that meeting, and I was just oblivious to the fact that something like this could happen.

Obviously, experiencing that tackle on that night, the effects of that and the implications that’s had on my life, it’s definitely made me view sport in a completely different way. I’m definitely a lot more compassionate. I definitely watch the game hoping people don’t get injured.

I know the good things that rugby league and competitive sports bring to your life, and I wouldn’t be in the position I am today and be able to deal with the things that I deal with day to day without sport. It’s made me who I am, so I appreciate it for that.

**DAVID SPEERS**

But do you think much has changed? Because of your case and others like it, do 21-year-old, 22-year-old footy players these days, do they listen to what’s being said about the dangers, or are they still like you were back then, where they just don’t listen to that?

**ALEX McKINNON**

No. You can’t. You can’t step into that arena, compete at that high level, and be fearful.

**DAVID SPEERS**

Mm-hm.

**ALEX McKINNON**

You have no understanding of the implications and...

**DAVID SPEERS**

Need to know the risks, though, don’t you?

**ALEX McKINNON**

You do, and I think they’re...rugby league is doing their role now to do that. And I think they’ve implemented some rules, post my injury and even recently around concussion, independent doctors to police them and probably take themselves out of the opportunity for the player to hurt themselves, through judgement.

**DAVID SPEERS**

Let’s bring in Anika Wells. You’re the Minister for Sport. Is there more that you can do about that, about that awareness?

**ANIKA WELLS**

Yeah, I reckon there is. I reckon this is the biggest issue we are facing in sport in Australia. It genuinely is. I think, from speaking to people at Dementia Australia, experts like Dr Rowena Mobbs, I think, that the extent of this has been radically undocumented, or under-documented, and... I mean, I get a lot of curry about having the Aged Care and Sport ministries together. Seems like an odd mix, but this is a real opportunity to do something. I mean, CTE is an insidious early-onset form of dementia. It hits people in their 30s. So these are players who are playing from very early on, and we are only just getting good enough at recognising the symptoms for something that we cannot diagnose until after death.

So, there is about $50 million worth of federal funding that’s going into research... We’ve started a database to put together national injuries so that we can do more by way of preventative action, but I think we need to get into, is testing accessible enough? Do we need to look at MBS to make sure that we’re properly giving people the opportunity to identify these things early? We know that players’ partners are writing in their diaries, “memory loss”. We should be better as a country about doing something like that.

**DAVID SPEERS**

Are you saying, right now, in our major football codes, there is too much danger, too much physical violence?

**ANIKA WELLS**

I reckon, in our culture of sport, that we have this, “She’ll be right, mate” ethic, and that we lionise playing through injury, like that’s the ultimate test – if you can play through injury, we will canonise you in this country. And clearly the evidence is now telling us that you will not “be right, mate”, and we need to do something more about it.

**DAVID SPEERS**

So, what will you do, as the Minister for Sport?

**ANIKA WELLS**

Like I said, we’ve got an inquiry... Well, I haven’t said, but we’ve got an inquiry into concussion on foot in the Senate. It’s due to report within weeks. So, without pre-empting what recommendations may come to me out of that, I would say, are we doing enough? There’s $50 million in federal funding now – is that enough? We’re putting together a database because we need to understand who has been concussed in decades...in order to be able to better diagnose and work out what preventative action is possible. But I’m opening it up to see what else we can do.

**DAVID SPEERS**

Well, Alex, what would you say to the Minister, needs to be done?

**ALEX McKINNON**

I think, obviously, a lot of education at the lower levels around technique and that type of element of learning how to tackle and, within rugby league, particularly, I think there needs to be a lot more research placed upon the baseline testing for players from an earlier age. I know myself, when I became a professional athlete, we do a baseline test at the start of every year, which is testing your reaction skills, testing your cognitive...I suppose speed of reaction. That’s only something that you tend to do when you become in that professional environment, yeah.

**DAVID SPEERS**

Well, you talk about the need to learn how to tackle, as an example. Nathan, you’re a former NRL player, coach…rugby league player and coach.

**NATHAN TOWNEY**

Yeah, never played NRL, but...

**DAVID SPEERS**

No. But rugby league player and coach. But you...you’re actually involved in some research, as I understand it, right now, into this very issue.

**NATHAN TOWNEY**

Yeah. So, I just want to touch on something said earlier. I think the culture is starting to shift and change. I really do. And I think that we’ve got ex-players now that are really leading that charge, that are really trying to shift and change the culture from, “She’ll be right, mate.” to, “Actually, look after yourself,” because they are starting to feel those effects and they want to be able to have a positive impact on those that are playing the game now. And that’s flowing right down to, you know, junior leagues. I’ve got a nine-year-old son who’s playing his first year of rugby league this year, much to his mother’s disgust, but...

**DAVID SPEERS**

And how do you feel about that?

**NATHAN TOWNEY**

Yeah, look, I’m excited. I’ve played since I was five years old. I absolutely love the game. I played a little bit and coached the junior reps at the Bulldogs, so, you know, been heavily involved in rugby league all my life, so I have a real passion for it. But I also, now, as a dad, look at the game a little different, and the project that I’m working on is being led by Timana Tahu, an ex-player who is really trying to redefine that tackle technique that Alex sort of talked about, where, you know, from a very young age, you’re taught to basically lead with your head, and Timana really wants to cut that out of the game, and you need to shift and change that from a really young age in terms of how you teach young people how to tackle and to stay as tall as you can for as long as you can.

And, you know, I know in the game of AFL, they tell people to get their head over the ball – well, that puts your head in the firing line. And so, you know, I think we really need to…as we learn more about the impacts of brain trauma, we really need to go back to the rules of the game. We need to think about how that impacts coaching from grassroots level, right the way through, so that, over time, we can start to shift and change the game.

**DAVID SPEERS**

Yeah. Ted?

**TED O’BRIEN**

My little boy’s just started – he’s five years of age – rugby union. Mind you, it’s touch, two hands, right? It’s not full contact. Look, I... On one hand, I personally don’t want to see the physicality of some of these sports to change.

**DAVID SPEERS**

Mm-hm.

**TED O’BRIEN**

I think it’s part of the game. I think the thing that worries me most is, when you look at the statistics of concussions, the younger you are, even schoolkids, and it impacting those...the numbers who graduate, if they’re concussed while they’re at school, those sort of things are really worrying.

And so, I think there is a role for government. I think it’s in education. I think it’s definitely focusing on grassroots. I think it’s baseline testing. But a lot of onus has to be on the codes, I think, to understand how to tweak the game, to respond to the research, whatever the research shows. You don’t want politicians sitting around cabinet tables, working out how rugby league changes or how rugby union changes.

**DAVID SPEERS**

Alright. Well, we keenly anticipate that report in a few weeks’ time.

**ANIKA WELLS**

Stay tuned.

**DAVID SPEERS**

See where all of this goes. Stay tuned, indeed. Alright, now let’s hear from Arna Hickey.

**ARNA HICKEY**

Good evening. I note that Opposition Leader Peter Dutton pledged to regulate betting content by banning gambling ads on the radio during school drop-offs and pick-ups. But what about online gambling? Personally, I’ve just noticed a rise in ads on social media for lotteries recently. I note that TikTok has even expanded a controversial trial of betting partnerships. As a mother, I’m concerned. Minister Wells, is there a plan for tackling this issue?

**ANIKA WELLS**

Yes, there is, Arna. Thank you for the question. I agree with you. I find the ads bloody annoying and I think the fact, like you say... Now, I’m not allowed on TikTok, ‘cause I’m a member of the government, not allowed it on my phone, so I watch things that go nuts on TikTok four weeks later on Instagram, like the elder millennial that I am...

**DAVID SPEERS**

Plenty of your colleagues are on TikTok, I should point out.

**ANIKA WELLS**

Yeah. Well, I’m speaking to my experience...

**DAVID SPEERS**

(LAUGHS) OK.

**ANIKA WELLS**

...and Arna’s question, and that is why, months into the new government, Amanda Rishworth, who’s the Minister for Social Services, which takes into account all of these things, put out an inquiry that the House of Reps Committee is looking into, into online gambling, and it really speaks to all the things that you just talked about in your question.

Is it fit for purpose when we look at the platforms and ways that people view and interact with sport, particularly these days? It’s no longer one TV in the house with a channel changer, you know, that Dad’s in charge of. People view these things through all different mediums, and we need to make sure that our codes are up to scratch.

So, is there a plan? Yes. Can I tell it to you tonight? No, because the inquiry is still on foot and the recommendations will be handed down soon.

**DAVID SPEERS**

And, Ted O’Brien, you know, Peter Dutton did promise, or announce, a policy of banning the gambling ads during the footy broadcast before and after on TV.

**TED O’BRIEN**

Yeah.

**DAVID SPEERS**

What about social media, as Arna’s asking about there? A lot of kids are there on social media. Would it also make sense to ban it there as well?

**TED O’BRIEN**

Well, I think Peter taking the leadership role in that, he said pretty clearly, you know, something along the lines of, “Footy time is family time.” And families nowadays don’t always just sit around the TV and look at commercial television, right? They look at every potential vehicle that they can. So I think the problem exists across multiple platforms. I think we should recognise it is difficult to keep ahead of technology, but the intent should be there, so let’s see what reports come out. Certainly, you know, Peter Dutton taking the lead on this, that certainly won’t change, and we will be as constructive as we can be.

**DAVID SPEERS**

Just from the two politicians here, it sounds like a bit of, “Let’s wait and see.” Can I just get a principle position, though, from you both?

**TED O’BRIEN**

My very clear principle position is it doesn’t matter what platform.

**DAVID SPEERS**

So, social media – ban the gambling ads.

**TED O’BRIEN**

It doesn’t matter what platform, if you are able. But it’s the ‘able’, it’s the ‘how’. The devil in the detail is always on that, right?

**DAVID SPEERS**

Alright, well...

**TED O’BRIEN**

But as a principle, yeah, for me.

**DAVID SPEERS**

Yeah, alright. And, well, just to be sure, you’re also, Anika Wells, saying, on social media, gambling ads should go?

**ANIKA WELLS**

No, I’m going to wait for the...

**DAVID SPEERS**

Alright.

**ANIKA WELLS**

...very considered work of my friend and colleague, Peta Murphy...

**DAVID SPEERS**

OK.

**ANIKA WELLS**

...to hand down recommendations.

**DAVID SPEERS**

Lord Mayor, let me ask you, what do you think is...on this issue?

**NUATALI NELMES**

Look, I think it’s a great question, and it’s a decent lag time in responding to, basically, online gambling, whether it’s social media or online. That’s been prevalent for years, like, right throughout a Coalition government. It’s proliferated on all forms of social media, but particularly online. There’s been this really narrow focus about traditional methods of gambling and regulating those. Well, this has just been blowing out for over a decade. This is not a new issue. It’s the same issue with vaping. I mean, there’s regulation now. The kids have been vaping for years. Like, it just... There’s such a lag time between responding in a legislative way to those type of issues. So, I would have expected this to have been done in the previous government’s time, to be honest with you.

**DAVID SPEERS**

Yeah, Alex, I’m just interested, from a professional football point of view, has it changed the culture of sport, or at least how we consume sport, all the gambling ads?

**ALEX McKINNON**

I don’t think so. I think I, as an adult, recognise them a little bit more now. I like to watch Channel Nine still, just due to some commentators on there, and I definitely see the ads pop up a bit more. Also, I think, with gambling itself, there probably needs to be a little bit more education at the earlier ages, whether it’s 16, 17, 18, in schools. There’s a reality that people are going to gamble.

**DAVID SPEERS**

Mm.

**ALEX McKINNON**

Just when you turn 18, there’s no real education around it and it’s a free-for-all. So, I think it’s understanding that it’s probably part of life, and being able to provide people with that education is really important.

**DAVID SPEERS**

Now, shortly, we’re going to be discussing nuclear energy, which is, in fact, the topic of our online poll tonight. And we’re asking you, should Australia invest in nuclear power?

**TITLE**

Should Australia invest in nuclear power?

**DAVID SPEERS**

Cast your votes on our Facebook and Twitter accounts, and we’ll bring you the results a little later. Alright, time to hear from our next questioner, Craig Doyle.

**CRAIG DOYLE**

Good evening, David. Good evening, panel. With Newcastle being the largest coal-exporting city in the world – it has infrastructure that other nations would be very envious of – and thousands in the Hunter Valley employed productively extracting and producing coal, my question is – how can anyone support the quick shutdown of the coal industry and the effect it’ll have on this community, Newcastle and the Hunter Valley, whilst other nations remain untouched?

**DAVID SPEERS**

Ted O’Brien, let me go to you first on that.

**TED O’BRIEN**

I think, Craig, if I heard you correctly, there’s sort of two parts to that. One is the export of coal and the other is coal-fired power generators being used within the region. Look, when it comes to the export of coal, I don’t believe we should be shutting that down. I think there is a moral aspect to this argument that is often not spoken about. There are countries in the world that rely on that coal just to keep the lights on. Some of these countries simply do not have electricity for their citizens. They’re slowly but surely trying to get it. If they don’t use Australian coal, then they’re going to use substitutes that will also, most likely, have a worse impact on the global environment. I think we should continue to export coal and I think the Hunter has a very important role to play in that.

**DAVID SPEERS**

Can I just clarify, though – do you still support the target of net zero by 2050?

**TED O’BRIEN**

Correct. We do.

**DAVID SPEERS**

And do you support the government’s Net Zero Authority that they’re setting up? Because Craig’s question goes to whether you support bodies that would see the end of coal. Do you support this body?

**TED O’BRIEN**

Let’s wait to see what the government delivers on it. They haven’t provided the detail yet. By the title of it, it sounds good. I think there is a real issue here, though, and it particularly goes to the second part, if I may, which is the coal-fired power stations here in the Hunter. I mean, if you look at Liddell closing recently... And I’ve got no criticism of AGL. I think they actually did as good a job as any company could in looking at how to manage that for the workforce. But the majority of Liddell’s workforce went to Bayswater, another coal-fired power station, and most of the others retired. And so we’ve got to be very careful about promises that, once you close down coal-fired power stations, there’s going to be a clean energy zone that’s going to pick up all the workers and everyone’s going to be OK. That’s not going to be the case at the moment.

**DAVID SPEERS**

But isn’t that why you’d need a Net Zero Authority? I mean, even the Business Council says they support this idea to help regions like this, to help workers like this.

**TED O’BRIEN**

Yeah, again, David, I’ve got no criticism of an announcement that has a title. We’ll have to wait to see what the detail is. But it is a real issue because we’ve got to be careful that people aren’t sold false promises.

**DAVID SPEERS**

Mm.

**TED O’BRIEN**

This is going to be really tough. I have a problem with coal-fired power stations being closed before there is an alternative up and running. You don’t turn off one system without having another one there in its place.

**DAVID SPEERS**

And all the coal-fired power stations that closed when you were in office?

**TED O’BRIEN**

Sorry – were they all closed?

**DAVID SPEERS**

No, the ones that did close on your watch, did you have a problem with those as well?

**TED O’BRIEN**

Any closure of a coal-fired power station that risks reliability in the grid, increases in prices, or a workforce that’s not going to be looked after, I’ve got a problem. If you look at Liddell, which, while closed only a month or so ago, was announced under the Coalition’s watch, we upped our investment in renewables, we invested in the Kurri Kurri gas plant, and we negotiated an extension of Liddell, so it didn’t close early.

**DAVID SPEERS**

Alright. Anika Wells...

**TED O’BRIEN**

And these are the actions we need and we’re not seeing from the current government whatsoever.

**DAVID SPEERS**

Just, Anika Wells, let me bring you to Craig’s question, because, you know, clearly, there is a concern about the impact of some of the Labor government’s policies when it comes to the transition to net zero. What do you say to those concerns?

**ANIKA WELLS**

Yeah, Craig, I’d say that Novocastrians are at the front, and forefront, of our thinking when it comes to how we transition to our renewable future. I mean, Newcastle and the Hunter have powered this country for generations, and we want to make sure that you continue to power this country for generations to come. And that’s why we announced the Net Zero Authority right here. That’s why we’ve got a renewables hub at the university. You would have seen that we’ve gazetted for wind power. There’s green hydro operating out of the port.

I mean, these are all exciting opportunities, using places like the University of Newcastle to help skill and transition workers through to an exciting renewables superpower. I mean, I think... You said that the Liddell closure just happened about a month ago. I know we’re going to nuclear. I don’t want to pre-empt you, David. It’s your show. But I think, Ted, you can’t run these kinds of arguments here in Newcastle without answering, for Novocastrians, is your proposal that Liddell should become a nuclear power plant?

**DAVID SPEERS**

We’ll get to that. We’ll get to nuclear. Sorry. We’ll get to nuclear.

**TED O’BRIEN**

I’m happy to leave it, David. You’re the chief.

**DAVID SPEERS**

Just to be clear with you, Minister, are you saying coal-fired power in Australia does need to shut down, though?

**ANIKA WELLS**

I think we have always been... I mean, I’m from Queensland. We have always been clear-eyed about needing to do this in a way that takes everyone with us.

**DAVID SPEERS**

Yes, but are you saying...

**ANIKA WELLS**

I think we are doing that.

**DAVID SPEERS**

...coal-fired power needs to shut down?

**ANIKA WELLS**

That is not what I am saying. I’m saying that we...I think there’s a role for it to play. It is currently doing that job. But our focus, as a federal government, must be where we’re going, and where we’re going...

**DAVID SPEERS**

We’re going to net zero. We’re going to net zero.

**ANIKA WELLS**

Yeah.

**DAVID SPEERS**

Can you have net zero with coal-fired power?

**ANIKA WELLS**

Look, I’ll take Chris Bowen’s advice on that.

**DAVID SPEERS**

You must have an idea. You don’t know whether we’ll have coal-fired power?

**ANIKA WELLS**

I think that we are... Sorry, my focus has been on what we’re doing with renewables. I think that the transition will allow people to continue to work in those jobs that they have here, in the years to come, whilst we build up our capacity to go to a renewables future.

**DAVID SPEERS**

It seems, Lord Mayor, there’s some difficulty in saying, “We’re going to stop using coal-fired power.” You’re the Lord Mayor of Newcastle. Are you able to say it?

**NUATALI NELMES**

Oh, absolutely. But to be very clear, there are some...several holes in the Shadow Minister’s arguments in terms of where we export coal to at the moment and what they use it for. Like, our major export partner is Japan. I think that they have other forms of energy, and they’ve got their own net zero plans. I think it’s a really big furphy to say that we have to export coal forever because other countries need it.

We need to actually be taking leadership on this, and the leadership is because there are currently 15,000 jobs tied to that industry here in this region. And that’s exactly why the Net Zero Authority is important and is a fantastic announcement. We have worked, through the Coalition years, as a collective, here in this region, setting up our own Hunter Jobs Alliance, working with different NGOs. We’ve adopted a climate emergency here at the City of Newcastle. We’ve adopted the Paris climate targets. We have done everything we can to say, “This is coming. We need a plan.” And the Net Zero Authority transitions us, transitions those 15,000 jobs.

**DAVID SPEERS**

Well...

**NUATALI NELMES**

That’s the point.

**NATHAN TOWNEY**

David?

**DAVID SPEERS**

Well, as promised, we are going to talk nuclear power.

**NATHAN TOWNEY**

David, can I add something there?

**DAVID SPEERS**

Yes, just quickly.

**NATHAN TOWNEY**

I just think, going back to Craig’s question... I don’t think it can be a quick transition. It has to be something that’s staged over time, and there needs to be a really strategic plan around that, and the university plays a critical role in that. There are two big pieces of work that are happening at the moment, the university in partnership with the University of New South Wales, and really thinking about what that transition might look like.

And so, you know, we need skilled...a skilled workforce to be able to transition. It might not be this generation that that impacts, it might be the next, but we need... You know, we’re setting up a skilled training centre in partnership with TAFE and the state and federal governments. And so there is a plan, but it is going to take time, and we’re lucky that, in this region, we have a university that’s really going to help take the lead in that.

**NUATALI NELMES**

Yep.

**TED O’BRIEN**

I enjoyed what you said. I agree entirely. And, David, I think this is the big issue nowadays, right? The question is, how do we get to mid-century? How do we get to 2050 carbon neutrality? That demands a debate about physics, engineering, economics, an implementation plan, right? And so...

**NUATALI NELMES**

With all due respect, it doesn’t demand a debate. It demands action. We need action, not a debate.

**TED O’BRIEN**

Sure. Sure. And so... And so... If that’s the case, then I ask the Minister, or the Mayor, what action are we going to take? So, let’s take Eraring. We’ve talked about Liddell. That’s closed. Eraring’s the next one. That represents nearly 25% of New South Wales’s electricity. That’s going to be going off the grid 2025. There is no guarantee of a replacement. None. So, my question to you is, you want action? Tell us, what action is there? What would you like?

**NUATALI NELMES**

I have a lot of faith... I have a lot of faith in this new federal government, because they have actually put money into this region. With the Net Zero Authority, they’ve put money into hydrogen hubs at the port, they’ve put money into R&D at the university. This is what we needed a decade ago and we didn’t get it.

**TED O’BRIEN**

Well, you got $100 billion for a hydrogen hub. You got money for the university. So, you had all that, other than this transition authority. Is that the action?

**NUATALI NELMES**

There is a lot more action needed. When you’re transitioning these jobs...You’ve got to remember, we also have had the gazettal of offshore wind here in this region.

**TED O’BRIEN**

Yes.

**NUATALI NELMES**

Now, that is very significant in terms of jobs. And what you’re doing when you’re looking at offshore wind as an option for this region, it’s actually a skill-set match, which is really important when you’re looking at what type of jobs are currently able to be employed in an energy-intensive industry like the Hunter Region. And how do we transition those high-value jobs into similar jobs? And that’s why offshore wind is so attractive.

I know the Maritime Union of Australia have been campaigning for quite some time, and it took forever in your government to get the legislation through just to allow us to investigate it. And now it’s finally going ahead, and that consultation has been going on now for a couple of months. These are really, really important steps – steps that should have been taken years ago. And the work that this government’s going to have to do is to truncate the time line of getting that work done in that transition period to meet net zero.

**DAVID SPEERS**

Well, we’ve got to move on.

**TED O’BRIEN**

Well, we... So... OK.

**DAVID SPEERS**

We’re going to go to our next question...

**TED O’BRIEN**

No problem.

**DAVID SPEERS**

...which is from Nick Cook. Nick? Yes, Nick.

**NICK COOK**

Sorry, David. I didn’t hear over the applause. So, my question is for the Shadow Minister. So, whilst I agree with your general statement that Australia needs a mix of energy technology to meet its needs, the Coalition party banned nuclear energy production back in the late ‘90s. So why try and restart the debate when we need action and projects to start as soon as possible, not continue a conversation about a technology that takes years to implement?

**TED O’BRIEN**

Nick, thank you. Look, I think... Here’s my starting point, at least. We’ve already talked about 2050. We’ve talked about the priority is how we get there. The principle, if you like, that I think we should adopt as a nation is one of having all technologies on the table, an ‘all the above’ approach. I personally don’t have a favourite technology. The mayor’s talked about offshore wind. Big fan of offshore wind. Name a technology. I’ll say, “Big fan.”

This is going to be so difficult. So difficult. It would be irresponsible for a government to leave a technology off the table. Now, with that said, the technology that we are examining, as a Coalition, when it comes to nuclear, is next-generation, zero-emissions nuclear technology. This is a technology that is used across the world. There are 32 countries today that use nuclear energy. They’re wanting more. You have up to 50 additional nations – 50 – that are exploring introducing nuclear energy for the very first time. And there’s a reason they are doing that – it is a clean technology. The next-generation, zero-emissions nuclear ramps up and ramps down to work as a partner with renewables.

So, it’s not a fight. It’s not a zero-sum here. It’s about how we diversify the mix so it can work together in a decarbonised environment. The rest of the world is saying, “Nuclear is affordable. It works. We want it.” In Australia, our argument is we should be seriously considering it.

**DAVID SPEERS**

But in Australia – just to be clear what the experts are saying – the head of Australia’s nuclear energy regulator said just last month that, even if the ban were lifted today, you’d be lucky to have anything in operation for, potentially, 15 years. That’s the expert view.

**TED O’BRIEN**

Well, that’s one expert view, David, and we can’t...and we can’t discount...

**DAVID SPEERS**

The nuclear energy regulator.

**TED O’BRIEN**

No, no, I’m not...

**DAVID SPEERS**

I’ll give you another one.

**TED O’BRIEN**

I’m not discounting...

**DAVID SPEERS**

The CSIRO...

**TED O’BRIEN**

Sure.

**DAVID SPEERS**

...and the Australian Energy Market Operator have also recently said it just doesn’t provide an economically competitive solution. They reckon, even if you halve the capital cost right now, it’d still cost between 130-300 bucks per megawatt hour. That’s way more than renewables.

**TED O’BRIEN**

So, can I address both of those? Is that alright? So, look, on CSIRO, a lot of their view gets expressed in a document called GenCost, which, anybody who’s been following, is, in fact, a very controversial document for these very figures.

**DAVID SPEERS**

What, the CSIRO and AEMO, they’re controversial?

**TED O’BRIEN**

Correct. Correct.

**DAVID SPEERS**

The Australian Energy Market Operator and the CSIRO?

**TED O’BRIEN**

Can you hear me out, David? So, I actually chaired a parliamentary inquiry last term of government into nuclear energy. And when I queried the agencies on this, they admitted they have never done a comprehensive study on nuclear energy. They haven’t done the work. What they’ve done is they’ve outsourced it. And, of course, those who are against the particular technology hang off their brand as if they’ve done some comprehensive study.

I tell you who has done the study. The Japanese have done the study, which was mentioned before. The Japanese have done the study, and I’ve seen the figures and I’ve had them published. Nuclear energy gets the prices down. If you look at South Korea, nuclear energy gets their prices down. If you look at Canada, nuclear energy gets the prices down. You see, what some people will say is, they’ll talk about generating electricity. What ultimately counts is the entire supply chain, what everybody here pays at home, what businesses pay at work. And those countries that have nuclear energy, you pay less.

**DAVID SPEERS**

Alright, let’s hear from...

**TED O’BRIEN**

And that’s the beauty of it.

**DAVID SPEERS**

OK, let’s hear from a few others on this. Is it worth at least having on the table, Anika Wells?

**ANIKA WELLS**

No! And you still haven’t answered whether or not you want it to go to Liddell Power Station. Like, who is going to house your nuclear solution? And I don’t think you’ve also answered David’s question about how you’re going to do it faster than 15 years’ time.

**TED O’BRIEN**

So, I’m happy to have another go at that, but why don’t you answer David’s question first?

**ANIKA WELLS**

Sorry, David, I’ve lost...

**DAVID SPEERS**

OK, I think your answer’s clear. It’s not on the table. You don’t think it should be looked at at all.

**ANIKA WELLS**

No, thank you. Yeah.

**DAVID SPEERS**

OK. Nathan, Alex, either of you have thoughts on...?

**ALEX McKINNON**

My question is, why was it banned in the country 30 years ago? And is that still an issue today? Like, I’m only 31 years old. It’s obviously been banned for a period of time in this country. My education on it is obviously limited. But why is that education, or why is that information being limited to the country, and why was it banned, for my own understanding?

**NATHAN TOWNEY**

There is a history of nuclear testing in this country as well. I just want to remind people about Maralinga in South Australia, and, you know, that’s a... We’ve got history there, and that had a major impact on Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander people in those communities. So, you know, I think we need to...we need to acknowledge that history as well.

**DAVID SPEERS**

Well, that association, of course, we’re talking here about nuclear energy, but why was it banned?

**TED O’BRIEN**

To be honest, Alex, I can’t talk to the history of actually why...

**ALEX McKINNON**

OK.

**TED O’BRIEN**

...the ban first came in place.

**ALEX McKINNON**

Yep.

**TED O’BRIEN**

It certainly was before I was there, too.

**ALEX McKINNON**

No worries.

**TED O’BRIEN**

I do know that was under...when John Howard was prime minister, and he’s certainly very public saying that we should be considering nuclear energy.

**DAVID SPEERS**

Let’s see what the room thinks. Maybe we’ll get a show of hands quickly. Nuclear power in this region, for example, this part of Australia. Put your hand up if you think it’s a good idea. Alright. And put your hand up if you really don’t think it’s a good idea.

**MAN 1**

No!

**MAN 2**

Nuclear free zone!

**DAVID SPEERS**

There we go. I think we’ve got a slightly higher majority for the noes.

**WOMAN**

(CALLS OUT INDISTINCTLY)

**DAVID SPEERS**

We’ll bring our online poll to you a little later in the program, too, once we’ve got those results in as well.

If you are just joining us, you’re watching Q+A live with Alex McKinnon, Nathan Towney, Anika Wells, Ted O’Brien and Nuatali Nelmes. Next...

**TED O’BRIEN**

Do you want me to deal with timing questions, David, or later?

**DAVID SPEERS**

Look, we’ll maybe...

**ANIKA WELLS**

We’re good, thanks, Ted.

**TED O’BRIEN**

OK. Good.

**DAVID SPEERS**

...follow that up later if we have time.

**TED O’BRIEN**

No problem.

**DAVID SPEERS**

Thank you.

**TED O’BRIEN**

No problem.

**DAVID SPEERS**

Next, we’ll hear from Maria Capozzi.

**MARIA CAPOZZI**

Good evening, panel. My question is for the Minister, Anika Wells, and it’s about, the Minister has suggested that having registered nurse 24/7 in the aged care sector is going to fix the aged care sector problem. Can the Minister share with us, how is this going to take form?

**DAVID SPEERS**

Minister.

**ANIKA WELLS**

Yeah, thank you, Maria. And thank you for your interest in aged care. I think one of the things that aged care has suffered from for a long time is not being enough in the spotlight of national policymaking, so I welcome the chance to talk about it here. I don’t shy away from the fact that aged care is in crisis and that I inherited a sector in crisis.

So, whilst I genuinely believe that our 24/7 nursing policy, which was a recommendation of the Royal Commission, will genuinely assist to lift the standard of care for older people in this country, by no means do I think that that is a silver bullet that will do away years and years of neglect in the sector. I would like to reassure you and plenty of other people who want to see the standard of care lifted in this country, that the vast majority of facilities already have 24/7 nursing as we speak now. And we have legislated for 24/7 nursing to be the policy in this country for 1 July.

**DAVID SPEERS**

Let me just jump in there.

**ANIKA WELLS**

Yes.

**DAVID SPEERS**

Because your clear promise was to have all aged care facilities 24/7 registered nurses by July.

**ANIKA WELLS**

Yeah.

**DAVID SPEERS**

The Coalition at the time said that’s not going to happen, and now we know it’s not going to happen.

**ANIKA WELLS**

Yeah.

**DAVID SPEERS**

How many are going to have 24/7 nursing, how many aren’t, from 1 July?

**ANIKA WELLS**

Yeah, so, we don’t require people to report on their 24/7 nursing policy until July 1 starts.

**DAVID SPEERS**

So you don’t know?

**ANIKA WELLS**

So that will open... We don’t have exact figures. We’ve got various kind of... The department’s obviously in touch with the 2,700 facilities we have in the country.

**DAVID SPEERS**

Is there a guesstimate?

**ANIKA WELLS**

We have a working sense, but it honestly changes day to day.

**DAVID SPEERS**

What’s the working sense?

**ANIKA WELLS**

I wouldn’t want to reveal it, because it changes day to day and because we also know a lot of people I’ve been around...

**DAVID SPEERS**

So, yeah, someone shouts out, “What was it yesterday?” Are we talking about 80%, 90%? 50%? How many...

**ANIKA WELLS**

Yesterday was Sunday, and we don’t ask for public servants to work on Sunday.

**DAVID SPEERS**

Or Friday. Friday. Let’s go with Friday. What was the most recent number that stuck in your mind?

**ANIKA WELLS**

Well, look, I honestly would have... It would have probably been asked at Estimates, I think. But can I say, the point of this is...

**DAVID SPEERS**

You don’t have a number, just to be clear?

**ANIKA WELLS**

Well, what I’m trying to say, David, is that a lot of people have told us at this point that they’re going to do it from 1 July, but they’re not doing it yet. So even that number isn’t an accurate number of what it’s going to look like 1 August, when the first monthly report comes in. But I also think the point is it’s not an over/under 1 July test.

**DAVID SPEERS**

Well, this was the clear promise, though.

**ANIKA WELLS**

It is. It is.

**DAVID SPEERS**

Sorry to butt in, but it was a very clear promise.

**ANIKA WELLS**

Yes.

**DAVID SPEERS**

And now you can’t even say, from 1 July, 1 August, how many facilities are going to have around-the-clock nursing?

**ANIKA WELLS**

Well, I can tell you the vast majority are. And that, for those that won’t reach it, for many, if not most, for very legitimate reasons, like crippling workforce shortages, particularly in the regions. I was at Wallsend Manor today, talking to your staff and personal carers out there about what that has been like for you through COVID. For many valid reasons, some people will not get there, so we are actively working with them to get there as quickly as possible after 1 July. Because, at the end of the day, this was a recommendation of the Royal Commission, because people deserve to have nurses there all of the time. So we will just get there as quickly as we possibly can.

**DAVID SPEERS**

Alright. Maria, just quickly, let me come back to you there. Are you satisfied with that answer?

**MARIA CAPOZZI**

No.

**ANIKA WELLS**

OK. How can I help? (LAUGHS)

**MARIA CAPOZZI**

No.

**DAVID SPEERS**

And, Maria, perhaps you could just tell us a bit about your background as well, if you wouldn’t mind.

**MARIA CAPOZZI**

I’m a nurse, a registered nurse for 46 years in Australia.

**ANIKA WELLS**

Thank you.

**MARIA CAPOZZI**

And I’ll tell you that nurses in aged care... Now, there have been for years a registered nurse every shift, but there’s one registered nurse for 100-150 patients – clients, I should call them, or residents. There’s a nurse, one registered nurse with a DECT phone and two, three levels of a lot of wards spread around.

**ANIKA WELLS**

Yep.

**MARIA CAPOZZI**

And that person, it’s only to cover legally the requirement under the Act. The union has got to come in, and there’s a couple of things. Education of the carers needs to way go up. Two, the number of registered nurses of course increase in ratio to the level of care.

**ANIKA WELLS**

Mm-hm.

**MARIA CAPOZZI**

The aged care, it’s independent living, medium level care, hostel care, special care or dementia unit, acute care, depending. You can have a registered nurse in the hostel quite comfortably supervising independent living residents, 20 of them. But you put it in acute care, today, a registered nurse is dumped, is lumped with 100, 150. And I can give you reports, names.

**ANIKA WELLS**

No, I agree. I absolutely agree. I absolutely agree with all of the things that you...

**MARIA CAPOZZI**

And just saying, “We’ll put registered nurse,” will not solve the problem. It’s not a plan. It’s not.

**ANIKA WELLS**

Which is why it’s one of many elements. We’ve got more than 100 reform projects under way in aged care. That is one of many, many things we’re doing. And the other thing I’d point out, thank you for working as a nurse for 46 years. That is why we are putting $11.3 billion to giving a pay rise to our nurses and personal carers in aged care, to try and help more people feel like the work you do is meaningful and that they want to come and do it with you, and we’ll try and ease these crippling workforce shortages. But it will take a long time. I accept that.

**DAVID SPEERS**

Alright. Alex... I’ll just get Alex to weigh in on this one, too.

**ALEX McKINNON**

I use a support worker every single day. Without them, my life is not functional. I see a nurse every fortnight to once a month. Every time I speak to these students who are support workers... And they work tirelessly, they are so compassionate and loving. And when a ratio is so in demand, their care is so stretched, it puts a massive strain on them. We obviously, at the moment, are seeing a shortage in staff of registered nurses and support workers, and there needs to be something more enticing and to show that we really do care.

The degrees are really expensive, and incorporating in those degrees is long placement hours that are unpaid. These people are very skilled. There needs to be a change in the way that these people get their degrees, and whether they have experience in support work or in aged care, there needs to be some crossover, and they get...they don’t get paid to do placement, and the placement is quite extensive. It takes them away from their day-to-day work and it puts even more stress on them when they’re trying to advance their life.

**DAVID SPEERS**

Look, Maria, thank you very much for the question, prompting some discussion, no doubt about that. Our next question comes from Danielle Whyte.

**DANIELLE WHYTE**

I work for the Car to Home Project, which allows people who are experiencing homelessness and rough sleeping in their cars a safe place to park, whilst having access to services. Every day I see the impact that having no affordable rentals, a social housing system which is broken and limiting emergency accommodation to only 28 days per year has on people in our region. And now we see that the Hunter has one of the largest increases of homelessness in the country.

However, I drive through suburbs each day with social housing and see homes that are boarded up and uninhabitable due to a lack of proper planning. When will we stop passing the buck between federal, state and local governments and come up with a decent long-term plan involving corporates, construction, overseas and economic models and a transparency around council planning? And how will you stop mandating from happening and support agencies that are already exhausted and at capacity deliver a message of hope to people today?

**DAVID SPEERS**

Danielle, just if I can... Thank you for the question. And we did get quite a lot of questions about the housing crisis tonight. Just explain to us what your project that you work on actually involves. Give us a sense of how many cars with people having to sleep in them you’re dealing with.

**DANIELLE WHYTE**

We take calls every day from people who are distressed and are unable to have a roof over their head, whether that’s temporary accommodation or whether it’s in a vehicle. And sleeping in a vehicle is not a comfortable place to be. And it’s a reality of Newcastle. You can walk around any car park and you will see people sleeping in their cars. So we take calls and we bring them in and we allow them to park safely, but also allow them to have access to laundry, kitchen and bathroom facilities.

But our goal, every person that comes to our service, is that they don’t remain in their car. And it’s impossible for us to be able to do our jobs, because there is nothing out there that we can offer them. There is no affordable rentals around. There is nothing under $500. If you’ve got someone on Centrelink, there is no way that they can possibly afford that. And when there’s no collaboration as far as trying to sort out the social housing system, which is broken in this country, you can’t give hope to people.

**DAVID SPEERS**

Look, thank you very much for the question there, Danielle. Lord Mayor, let me come to you on this. Is this happening across Newcastle? And how on earth is it acceptable?

**NUATALI NELMES**

Yeah, absolutely. Danielle is right. That is happening across Newcastle, and it is obviously a horrible situation. It takes quite some time to get to this point, and what I find really interesting at my level of government is we are, you know, a rate-capped... We don’t have the budgets of state or federal government, but we tend to run around trying to patch all the holes. And in New South Wales, where we are at the moment, in Newcastle, the Hunter, it has been wall-to-wall Coalition governments. And it’s been exceptionally difficult to watch the cuts at both levels to the agencies, mostly state government agencies...

**DAVID SPEERS**

OK, I’ll jump in there because you’ve now got wall-to-wall Labor, you know, local, state, federal here. And the question is about where’s the plan?

**NUATALI NELMES**

That’s the issue, because we’ve had those governments in place for quite some time that provide the planning and the funding for those services. So I do a lot of work, obviously, with the community, and what they have experienced in terms of their service cuts, it’s going to take years, literally years. It’s like trying to fix aged care. Years to actually build back up all of the services that were cut, all of the homelessness services, all of the temporary accommodation or the meanwhile housing. They’ve all been cut or sold. So they all have to be built back up again to actually house our community that needs to be housed.

I have a number of issues with how that whole sector works between levels of government. Because if you were actually giving the funding straight to us at a local level, I think we would spend it a lot better. That’s how I actually think we could solve this.

**DAVID SPEERS**

That’s your message to the federal and state government – give you, the local government, more money. Let me just bring in...

**NUATALI NELMES**

Well, yeah, give the local operators the money to do it.

**DAVID SPEERS**

Nathan, what’s your view on this? I mean, is enough being done, or is it the reality, as the Lord Mayor says, that it will take years to fix?

**NATHAN TOWNEY**

Yeah, I think we need to look at it from a short-term solution, because it’s a crisis now. And so we... I think we need to, we need to be thinking about short-term strategies and long-term strategies. And it’s not isolated to Newcastle. This is a national crisis. You know, if you start adding some other things to family situations, things like domestic violence, you know, there are...it is a national crisis.

And the services here locally, I have a lot to do with – I’m a member of the Hunter White Ribbon Committee – and you see it firsthand, you know, and how under-resourced these services are. And we need...like I said, I think we need a short-term fix. But we also then... It requires collaboration – collaboration across, you know, lots of different organisations, services, so that there’s a coordinated approach for that short-term strategies, but then also a long-term plan.

**DAVID SPEERS**

Just a very quick comment from the two federal representatives here. Ted O’Brien, the Coalition’s voting against the Housing Australia Future Fund.

**TED O’BRIEN**

Correct.

**DAVID SPEERS**

Do you agree there’s a crisis, though, right now?

**TED O’BRIEN**

Absolutely, there is a crisis. We don’t believe what the government has put forward is the solution.

**DAVID SPEERS**

What is the solution?

**TED O’BRIEN**

Look, I think there’s various aspects. The number one thing, if we go to what the solution is, it’s supply. We need more supply. Again, the question then is, well, how do we get more supply? The government has changed a lot of the Coalition’s policies, where we had supply coming on the market. Unfortunately, our new dwelling approval rates are now as low as they were under the Gillard government. They’ve totally plummeted. So supply is going backwards because the entire policy suite has changed. The government’s fund, I don’t think is going to work.

**DAVID SPEERS**

Well, Anika Wells, let me get a comment from you on that. Is...? I mean the fund, you still don’t have the support from the Greens or the Coalition on it, but do you need to do more than what you’re offering?

**ANIKA WELLS**

Well, I think, to note there, we don’t have support from the Greens or the Libs, but we have support from everybody else. We have support from all state housing ministers, all serious housing advocacy groups, because this is a $10 billion injection into a crisis. And I think even if you would like to see more done, let’s start with that and get it under way. It could have been legislated months ago at this point. So let’s start there and then keep working on it.

**TED O’BRIEN**

But it’s not really $10 billion, though, is it, Anika? I mean, it’s a $10 billion capital fund. It’s based on debt, not equity. So you’re probably paying 4%, $400 million a year just on interest payments and then the return you get through your investment, you’ll use that return to build houses. That doesn’t sound like urgency to solve a crisis.

**DAVID SPEERS**

Well, we need to move on, but it is one element that the government has on the table on this issue.

We can bring you now the results of our online poll as well. And we asked, should Australia invest in nuclear power?

**TITLE**

Should Australia invest in nuclear power?

Yes 61%

No 32%

Unsure 7%

**DAVID SPEERS**

Almost 16,000 of you responded and here’s how you voted. 61% of you say yes! 32% say no. And 7% are unsure. So, there you go.

We’ve got time to finish tonight’s discussion with one more question. Here’s Mark Burslem.

**MARK BURSLEM**

Hello, panel. I’ve enjoyed the discussion about the green initiatives or the environmental initiatives for the Hunter Region. I think that’s the way we’ve got to go. And the support for the mayor is fantastic. But what I find difficult is that your...the...your support for that contrasts starkly with your support for the high-octane, high-polluting event that is V8 Supercars. Every year, Newcastle is subjected to weeks and weeks of road closures and often 24-hour construction of barricades for this event that endures...that endangers the Heritage precinct, restricts residents’ access to their houses, and has a detrimental effect on many small businesses. My question is, doesn’t your support and that of the Newcastle Council for Supercars suggest that all other environmental activities of the council is simply greenwashing?

**AUDIENCE MEMBERS**

(MURMUR AGREEMENT)

**DAVID SPEERS**

It is a bit of a hot topic, Lord Mayor. What’s your answer?

**NUATALI NELMES**

Look, prior to COVID, we had a visitor economy worth over $1 billion in this region and several hundred thousand jobs attached to that economy. And what we have done in the transformation of Newcastle over the last eight years has been significant amount of investment into new housing and into development and also having major events in the city. Now, we have a suite of major events. One of them has been Supercars, and that event is the largest event in terms of visitation, averaging at about 150,000 people for a weekend. Each event attracts around $32 million of economic injection into our local economy.

**DAVID SPEERS**

Supercars, though?

**NUATALI NELMES**

Yeah, just Supercars, just that event. So that is why the council wanted to look at how can we actually activate the city, attract events to the city, change the view people had of Newcastle as a steel city. And it did that. It was very successful at doing that in a very short period of time.

**DAVID SPEERS**

But you’ve got small businesses... I mean, is it true some of them have to close their doors for nine or ten weeks?

**AUDIENCE MEMBERS**

(CALL OUT INDISTINCTLY)

**NUATALI NELMES**

The Supercars have a bump-in period of about five weeks, and the road closures start the week before. But what we have done is we’re listening to our local community. Now, it obviously has a huge economic benefit. So our airport, it will be every year, on that weekend, the busiest day of people through that airport. We...

**DAVID SPEERS**

But when you say... Sorry, we’re running out of time. When you say you’re listening to the community, you’re saying you’re open to change on this?

**NUATALI NELMES**

Well, we’re not sure until the New South Wales government gives us an indication if there will be a five-year extension. So, we could have had our last race. So it’s a bit of a moot point at the moment.

**DAVID SPEERS**

Right.

**NUATALI NELMES**

We’ve done a huge range of community consultation. We’ve gone out, opened it out online, had 10,000 responses. We’re going to take all that into consideration, talk to the new Sports Minister, if they want to do an extension, then that is something council will have to consider. But it has been very successful in terms of economic benefit to the region and also attracting visitors to our region. And that’s the point of these large events.

**DAVID SPEERS**

Alright. Thank you for the answer. Thank you, Mark, for the question on that.

That is all we have time for tonight. Big thanks to our panel: Alex McKinnon, Nathan Towney, Anika Wells, Ted O’Brien and Nuatali Nelmes. And thank you for joining the conversation and sharing your stories and your questions tonight. They were terrific. It’s been great to be here in Newcastle.

**DAVID SPEERS**

Next week, Patricia Karvelas will be with you live from Sydney. Head to our website to register to be in the audience. Goodnight.