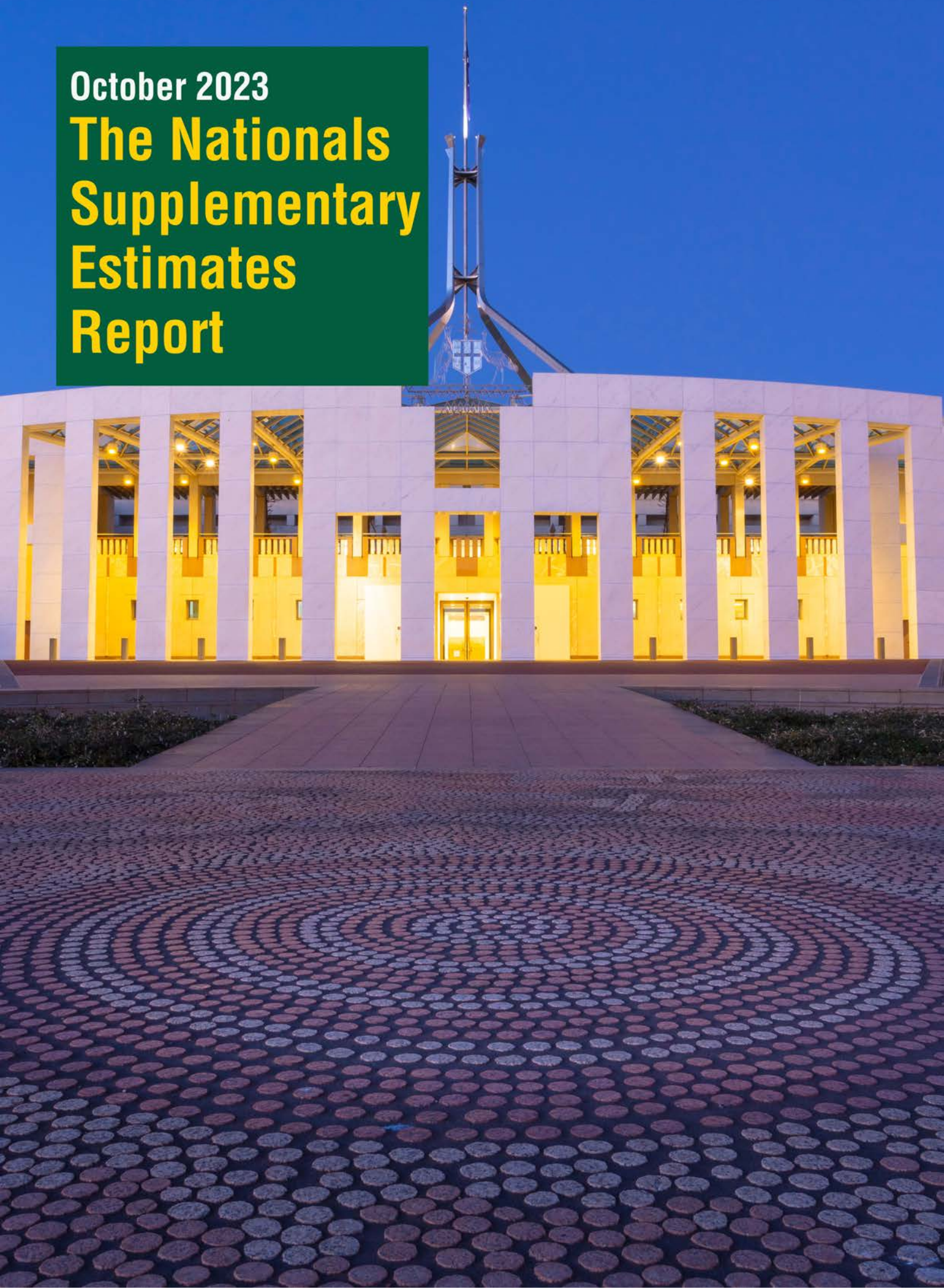


October 2023

The Nationals Supplementary Estimates Report



NATIONALS SENATE TEAM



SENATOR THE HON BRIDGET MCKENZIE

Leader of the Nationals in the Senate
Shadow Minister for Infrastructure, Transport
and Regional Development



SENATOR PERIN DAVEY

Deputy Leader of the Nationals in the Senate
Deputy Leader of the Nationals
Shadow Minister for Water and Emergency
Management



SENATOR SUSAN MCDONALD

Shadow Minister for Resources
and Northern Australia



SENATOR JACINTA NAMPIJINPA PRICE

Shadow Minister for Indigenous Australians



SENATOR ROSS CADELL

Nationals Whip in the Senate
Member of Environment and Communications
Legislation Committee



SENATOR THE HON MATT CANAVAN

Deputy Chair of Rural and Regional Affairs and
Transport Legislation Committee

Estimates Wrap up

Senate estimates are a crucial part of the Australian parliamentary system, ensuring transparency and accountability in government operations. Supplementary Budget estimates hearings were held from 23 to 27 October 2023.

Key issues on the agenda included the failings of the Government's "Same Job Same Pay" disaster, which the ABC's own managing director could not explain. If a Corporation as large, and as intimately involved with the government, as the ABC, doesn't understand the impact of these laws or how they will be implemented, how can Labor expect small family businesses across the country to cope with the changes. Labor's "Same Job Same Pay" bill is the bill all Australians will have to pay.



Committees examined a wide range of issues relating to Commonwealth expenditure, public funds and administration, including:

- Assistance to Australian citizens in Israel, Lebanon and Gaza
- Governance and integrity in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations and agencies
- Possible reduction in the number of Australia Post outlets
- Lifting the quality of aged care services
- 90 Day Review of Infrastructure
- Live exports and fishing

The Finance and Public Administration Committee heard evidence from 16 witnesses from four Land Councils appearing together in its cross-portfolio Indigenous matters hearing.

The Environment and Communications cross-portfolio Water matters hearing was postponed until the inquiry into the water sharing bill reports to the Senate in the first sitting week in November. The Water matters cross-portfolio day usually examines specific policy regarding the Murray Darling Basin Plan and water infrastructure across the nation.



Infrastructure

The Government's 90-day Infrastructure review now sits at 190 days (06/11/23).

Under questioning from Nationals Senators, the DITRDCA admitted the Review won't be released until MYEFO. This scenario will take the review well past 200 days.

Meanwhile, the Department revealed an additional \$3 billion in cuts to infrastructure road and rail projects since the May 2023 budget, to prop up the budget surplus.

This is on top of Labor's \$9.6 billion cuts and delays to infrastructure projects in its first budget. Nationals Senators questioning also exposed the Government is pressuring recipients of local and community grants (made by previous Coalition government) to exclude non-Labor local MPs from attending events to open taxpayer funded community infrastructure.

During Monday's Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport hearing, The Nationals uncovered a damning Capability Review of the Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development, Communications, and the Arts. The department was revealed to have an attrition rate about twice that of other government departments and alarming culture issues within the department were exposed.

Under questioning by Senator McKenzie, Department head Mr Jim Betts confirmed allegations of a "hotties list" in the graduate program and other allegations of harassment. Mr Betts revealed further details on the matter, telling the committee the department was first made aware of the list in March, a formal complaint was made in May, and that the department had failed to source the alleged list or determine who in the graduate program was involved.

Mr Betts confirmed he had not informed the Minister of the alleged list but had discussed the allegations with the Australian Public Service Commissioner.

Following revelations of the alleged “hotties list”, Senator McKenzie questioned the Public Service Commissioner on Tuesday regarding his knowledge of the matter. The Minister for the Public Service was also in attendance at the hearing and Senator McKenzie secured a commitment from the Government to set a minimum standard of training for all new graduates in the wake of the ‘hotties list’ revelations.

The Commissioner also admitted the Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development, Communications and the Arts had made a mistake in circulating pro-Voice referendum content at the request of Minister McBain. The APSC admitted the Minister should not have asked that of the department.

Fresh from the recent Senate Select Committee inquiry into Bilateral Air Service Agreements which exposed the Albanese Government’s favouritism of Qantas, questioning uncovered Qantas freight planes have been granted a special 12-month deal to break the Sydney airport curfew. An admission was made that the Member for Grayndler, Prime Minister Albanese, was consulted on the matter, yet the Minister for Transport was not.

Critically, the special arrangements were originally introduced during COVID, but have been extended without explanation for a further 12 months.

Mobile Blackspots

We heard the disastrous outcome of Minister’s Rowland’s decision to hand-pick 54 sites for Mobile Black Spot Funding before the last election. After the department assessed the sites, nearly a quarter of the Minister’s list failed to make the final cut, including five in the electorate of Eden-Monaro.

An extract of a letter from Labor MP, Kristy McBain to a constituent, promised “that a Labor Government will invest \$500,000 to improve mobile coverage in Wee Jasper.” But the department had not funded the Wee Jasper site due to “extremely high costs and did not represent value for money.” It was put to the department that the then-Shadow Minister had misled local communities.

It was put to the Assistant Minister at the desk that this affair was “highly embarrassing for the Government.” When the Coalition pressed the issue, the Labor chair of the committee cut the broadcast and adjourned the hearing into a private meeting. Meanwhile the Auditor-General is continuing his investigation into this affair.



Forestry

Only minutes after trying to boast about Labor's efforts to increase Australia's plantation estate, Forestry Minister Murray Watt's mismanagement of the issue was laid bare when he admitted he was unaware of an Albanese Government Bill that will trigger the opposite outcome.

Senator Watt was questioned on his knowledge about – and, more specifically, his position as Forestry Minister on – the Treasury Laws Amendment (Making Multinationals Pay Their Fair Share—Integrity and Transparency) Bill 2023.



During the exchange, and notwithstanding that the Bill was introduced to the Parliament more than four months ago, he was at a loss to provide any detail about his understanding of the Bill and the damage, if passed, that it would inflict on the plantation forestry sector.

The Australian Forest Products Association has estimated that the financial impact of the Bill would cause an approximately \$20 million loss to plantation companies every year. Haplessly, Senator Watt confessed that “I have not seen (that submission), personally”, and that he wasn't even across the broader content of the Bill either. When asked if the Albanese Government was working on a resolution to this very serious problem, he extraordinarily said, “I'd have to find out”.

RBA

Under questioning by Senators, the RBA Governor Michelle Bullock conceded that Labor's fiscal policy was “broadly neutral” rather than contractionary. By failing to run a contractionary fiscal policy over the last 18 months, Labor has fuelled inflation and increasing interest rates.

The evidence from the RBA demonstrates Labor's economic incompetence. Failing to help the RBA fight inflation by reducing spending, Labor is directly responsible for higher interest rates and persistent high inflation. Labor has had 18 months to get the budget into a contractionary position and with international turmoil upon us, Labor may have missed the window to smash inflation.

Australia's core inflation of 5.2 per cent is higher than almost any major advanced economy, including Germany, France, the US, Japan and Canada. Labor's economic agenda is only making it worse.

Indigenous cultural heritage laws

Labor's election promise to create standalone Federal Indigenous cultural heritage protection laws is now in tatters. Officials from the Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water (DCCEEW) admitted that it was now "unclear" if the Albanese Government would introduce the new laws in this term of Parliament.

The officials also undercut Federal Labor's denials earlier this year that they had not been chastened by the Western Australian Labor Government's disastrous experience in attempting to introduce similar laws.

As The West Australian newspaper reported, when asked "whether the debacle in WA influenced the process of designing a Federal regime, (DCCEEW) acknowledged there were lessons to be learnt".

That the future of any new Federal Indigenous cultural heritage protection legislation should now be so clouded represents a total reversal from the Albanese Government – and the responsible Minister, Tanya Plibersek, who said on 24 November 2022 that "there's never been a better moment" to progress such laws.



Indigenous Education

The Albanese Government failed to provide any assurances during Senate Estimates that it would deliver Yipirinya School's on-country satellite school proposal at Burt Creek north of Alice Springs.

This follows the Government's broken promise to deliver \$40 million to schools to support community safety initiatives under the Alice Springs community safety package.

The Coalition has forced an embarrassed Albanese Government into reviewing the costs of a charity contracted to deliver four remote Indigenous boarding schools, two of which were axed by Labor in its May Budget.

Under questioning the Department of Education conceded it had commenced an investigation into Studio Schools' operations including the payment of \$600,000 per annum to two senior executives. The review was commenced after the Shadow Minister wrote to Education Minister Jason Clare seeking an urgent action.

North Australian Aboriginal Justice Agency

The Attorney-General's Department revealed it recommended an external audit be conducted into the troubled North Australian Aboriginal Justice Agency (NAAJA), which has faced allegations of corruption, fraud and a mass exodus of staff.

But Attorney-General Mark Dreyfus and his Department appear unwilling to get directly involved in holding NAAJA to account. The recommendation of an audit was revealed during questioning from Shadow Minister for Indigenous Australians Senator Jacinta Nampijinpa Price in a Senate estimates hearing. The AGD also revealed NAAJA received millions of dollars of additional Federal Government funding on top of the widely reported \$83 million over five years from the National Legal Assistance Partnership.

National Indigenous Australians Agency

Coalition Indigenous Senators and Shadow Ministers, Jacinta Nampijinpa Price and Kerryne Liddle, have uncovered the peak federal Government body responsible for Aboriginal affairs, the National Indigenous Australians Agency, is conducting investigations into 15 cases of potential fraud in grants they handed out.

When pressed by Senator Nampijinpa Price, Integrity Group Manager Sean Worth conceded the monetary figure attached to those 15 fraud investigations totals \$12 million.

'There's three matters before the courts that total just over \$3.5million,' he added.

Minutes earlier, Mr Worth argued it is not yet possible to 'quantify any potential losses due to fraud' due to the nature of such investigations.

The allegations of large-scale fraud worth \$12 million involve grants handed out by the [NIAA](#), which employs more than 1,400 staff across Australia and costs \$2.1billion a year to run.



Australia Post

Back in June 2020, the-then Labor Shadow Communications Minister posted on social media that “Labor vows to oppose Australia Post cuts.”

During Estimates this week we heard that under Labor, Australia Post is closing its Perth Gateway Facility and redirecting the sorting of incoming international mail to Sydney and Melbourne, effective from 27 October. The Perth facility has also been home to personnel from Australian Border Force and Biosecurity Operations.

We also heard that Australia Post is now sending out letters to targeted 12 Licensed Post Office licensees, offering to buy back their licences. Australia Post said it had made 274 offers in metropolitan areas, with the majority in NSW and Victoria.



Environment

There seems to be no Government knowledge of what taxpayer-funded Defender’s Office is defending.

It was already bad enough that, last year, the Government allocated over \$8 million of taxpayers’ money to a radical environmental organisation called the Environmental Defenders’ Office (EDO). Now it turns out that the relevant Department knows nothing about most high-profile legal cases that the EDO has been running.

Asked about the EDO’s involvement in cases involving each of Raelene Cooper and Emil Davey, DCCEEW officials admitted that they were “certainly not...aware of what they’re spending”.

This is despite the fact that Ms Cooper’s injunction has, very consequentially, caused work to cease on the Scarborough Gas Project. Similarly, Mr Davey has allegedly been directly and indirectly involved in a number of highly damaging, disruptive and violent public protests – including one that forced the evacuation of Woodside Energy’s headquarters and another that involved the threatening trespass of the private residence of the company’s CEO, Meg O’Neill, and her family.



Agriculture and Farmers

Australian farmers are rightly feeling under siege by the Albanese Government, with shattered investment confidence that will flow to increased grocery bills. In Estimates Minister Watt shunned fears raised by damning National Farmers' Federation (NFF) survey results from 1600 farmers across Australia, including the detrimental impact of Labor policies on agriculture and the regions.

The NFF's survey results showed that a majority of farmers think the Federal Government's policies are harming the industry and one in three farmers are less positive about the future of farming than they were 12 months ago. It takes a special talent by Agriculture Minister Murray Watt to lose the confidence of Australian farmers, all within 12 months.

Separately, in extraordinary testimony, the Australian Bureau of Agricultural and Resource Economics Executive Director, Dr Jared Greenville, claimed that there was no link between lower sheep prices and the phaseout policy. Although he also admitted that ABARES had not done the work.

Dr Greenville would not answer when asked if he believed the live sheep policy had had no impact on livestock prices "because we haven't done the specific bit of work." He told the Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport Committee that the bureau had not analysed the impact of the policy on livestock values nor spoken to any farmers.

Minister for Agriculture Murray Watt told Senate Estimates he would receive the live sheep phaseout panel report that day (24/10/23) and intended to release it publicly, but did not give a date.

Under questioning by Senator Canavan, Minister Watt said he expected the report would make recommendations on a phaseout date, which is widely expected to be in the current term of government.



The ABC

The Coalition grilled ABC officials, particularly over its coverage of the Hamas attacks on Israel learning that an ABC journalist, Tom Joyner, who labelled claims regarding the killing of babies as “bullsh*t” had been “rotated out of Israel” and the matter was now subject to an investigation.

The ABC was forced to defend an interview on 7.30 with a Hamas representative, which the committee was told had “legitimised terrorism”. The Managing Director refused to say sorry, regarding a defamation case involving former special forces commando, Heston Russell. We heard that the ABC’s legal costs in the case were around \$800,000, so far.

The committee was also told the ABC had spent \$150,000 in travel costs sending 44 staff to cover the 2023 Garma Festival at Gulkula, in northeast Arnhem Land.

Labor’s “Same Job, Same Pay”, IR bill is so complicated, and has the potential for so many unintended consequences, that not even the Managing Director of the ABC understands the potential ramifications on his workforce.



Junior public servants allegedly made 'hotties list' that ranked female colleagues, Senate hears

theguardian

Federal Agriculture Minister Murray Watt had early briefing on how to shut down WA's live sheep exports

The West Australian

Albanese's high speed rail agency on a slow track, saying it's busy with 'strategic plan'

theguardian

'We might need to go again': Bullock opens door to rate rise as RBA assesses inflation threats

The Sydney Morning Herald

Heat on ABC over voice, Garma spending

 **THE AUSTRALIAN**

16:10

MONDAY, 6 NOVEMBER

DAY
190

Labor's 90 Day
Infrastructure Review

OVERDUE



Reminder

Over 400 projects are delayed & waiting



Reminder

Labor said this would be a “snap” review



Reminder

Minister, what's the delay?