

CORRECTED VERSION

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into 2002–03 budget estimates

Melbourne – 18 June 2002

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Ms M. Delahunty, Minister for Women's Affairs;
Mr Y. Blacher, Acting Secretary, Department of Premier and Cabinet; and
Ms S. Hamilton, Director, Office of Women's Policy.

The CHAIRMAN — I declare open this hearing of the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee on the budget estimates for the women's affairs, arts and planning portfolios. I welcome the Honourable Mary Delahunty, Minister for Women's Affairs; Mr Yehudi Blacher, acting secretary, Department of Premier and Cabinet; Ms Sue Hamilton, director, Office of Women's Policy; departmental officers, members of the public and the media.

All evidence taken by this committee is taken under the provisions of the Parliamentary Committees Act and is protected from judicial review. However, any comments made outside of the precincts of the hearing are not protected by parliamentary privilege. All evidence given today is being recorded. Witnesses will be provided with proof versions of the transcript early next week. Before I call on the minister to give a brief presentation on the more complex financial and performance information that relates to the budget estimates for the portfolios of women's affairs and the arts, I ask that all mobile telephones be turned off.

I invite the minister to give the committee a brief overview of her responsibilities under these portfolios.

Ms DELAHUNTY — I am pleased to present to the committee the 2002–03 budget estimates for the women's affairs portfolio. The Office of Women's Policy is a small unit, as the committee would know, within the Department of Premier and Cabinet. At the moment the unit comprises about 15 staff — 14.6 effective full time. The office's budget for 2001–02 was \$1.6 million, and it will rise to \$1.8 million in 2002–03.

The Office of Women's Policy has two broad themes to its work: advancing the forward plan for women, and community engagement. This is done by providing strategic policy advice to government on the key issues of concern to women working collaboratively across government and certainly with the community, and also monitoring specific initiatives. The office provides information to the women of Victoria and consults them. It also researches and identifies trends and issues on the needs of women and effective methods to address those.

In regard to the achievements for the year 2001–02 the first update report to the forward plan was released in December 2001. This details the key achievements since the release of the forward plan. We can say consulting with women is certainly an achievement this year: almost 600 women were formally consulted with through the Consultative Forum program; 180 at the second annual women's summit; about 125 at Fostering Links and Leadership — women's leadership is another focus of the work we are doing in the Office of Women's Policy; and 130 indigenous women attended a two-day Our Voices conference held this year.

We also appointed an Indigenous Women Going Places ministerial advisory committee. This provides the mechanism to consult directly and exclusively with indigenous women. This will foster local community-based solutions to the quite substantial problems in many cases faced by indigenous women.

A substantial achievement is also that women represented 36 per cent of positions on boards and committees as at June 2001. That is an increase of about 6 per cent since the Bracks government came into office. Further achievements include progressing the women's safety strategy — that is a big focus for this year and next year; reducing violence against women; and taking responsibility — those are programs for men.

We also recognise the achievements of Victorian women through celebrating and saluting leading women on the Victorian honour roll. Twenty more women were inducted into the honour roll on this International Women's Day. This is an ongoing commitment, as the committee will probably know, which will culminate in the centenary of women's suffrage in Victoria in 2008.

Also on International Women's Day the honour roll of Victorian women Olympians and Paralympians was launched. All Victorian women who represented Australia in either Olympic or Paralympic competition were included in the honour role. Ongoing work, research and consultation around work and family issues — high-order issues for women — will be the focus of the third annual women's summit next month.

So briefly, in conclusion, the priorities for 2002–03 include implementing the women's safety strategy. This is a whole-of-government approach to reducing violence against women. The strategy was provided for in new funding initiatives announced in the 2002 budget. In regard to advancing women's leadership, again the Women's Community Leadership Grants program and the Women's Rural Bursary program will put money into those leadership and mentoring programs.

In progressing work and family issues, we are doing a lot of work with Industrial Relations Victoria at present and of course the summit will be held on 17 July. We will continue the essence of the work of the Office of Women's Policy, which is to manage the community engagement program, the summit and regular consultative forums and regular meetings which occur with women's organisations and peak bodies right across the state.

The CHAIRMAN — I take you to an issue that I recall we spent a great deal of time talking about last year — that is, the issue of the portrayal of women in outdoor advertising. What has the government been doing since last year when we discussed this matter in response to the recommendations of the report on the portrayal of women in outdoor advertising, which I think you received? Has the government acted on the recommendations of that report?

Ms DELAHUNTY — Mr Chairman, you are quite right, this has been a significant issue for women. I read the transcript and you spent a little bit of time on it last year, and that is appropriate; it is an important issue for women. The committee was formed, I think, in March 2001 and was chaired by Judy Maddigan, the Deputy Speaker. It involved quite a cross-section of representatives from the media, the advertising industry itself, and also representatives of government. It took a lot of submissions from across the state. For the committee's information, the outstanding feature of those submissions was the number of young women who put in submissions, particularly schoolgirls, who made it clear that they felt uncomfortable about inappropriate billboard advertising. Often billboards were above and near school bus shelters or tram stops where they had to stand and wait for public transport to take them to and from school.

The recommendations came to us in April this year, and they were clear. The committee recommended a version of the Canadian template, which is the development of advertising guidelines on gender portrayal, so this applies not just to women but also to men. The key consultation revealed, if you like, a view that we can have a self-regulated industry, that the industry would welcome appropriate guidelines representing the community's view, and that the government would support that by taking a leadership role in developing the guidelines, which we have agreed to do.

The government's formal response today is that it is announcing that it will be establishing those guidelines, that they will be based on appropriate gender portrayal of both men and women in outdoor billboard advertising, that it will develop a charter based on those guidelines, and that the government itself will take a lead in encouraging those industries and businesses that want to do business with government to take account of the guidelines which it is developing for outdoor advertising.

We have accepted the recommendation that there should be awards for good practice within and beyond the advertising industry, so that those companies that create exciting, provocative and effective advertising should be rewarded if they do it in a way that is not demeaning to either men or women or outside the government's guidelines, and therefore the community standards.

We are certainly doing further research on women in advertising beyond billboard advertising. We will take this issue to the ministerial conference on the status of women this week, where ministers around the country are particularly interested in following Victoria's lead on and around these guidelines. The Office of Women's Policy will work with the Department of Education and Training to ensure that the issues raised concerning the portrayal of women will be incorporated into the development of the gender education strategy which is being developed for Victorian schools. We are also looking to distribute the guidelines to key industry stakeholders and encourage, as we said, a benchmark for what is best practice.

We should be very pleased with the work of that committee, which was led by Judy Maddigan. It has been a very expansive and effective job, and the government has been pleased to respond in this way with the development of appropriate guidelines and by taking the national leadership.

Mr CLARK — I refer to performance measures within the women's policy output group. This was something the committee commented on last year and recommended changes to the performance measures to ensure they were more focused on outcomes rather than measuring inputs or process as the performance measures did last year. There has been no change to the performance measures from last year despite the committee's recommendation. Can you tell the committee what consideration has been given to this issue and what the women's policy area can do to set out in advance what it aims to achieve and then report to the Parliament and to the public on how it has performed against achieving those outcomes?

Ms DELAHUNTY — If you look at budget paper 3, page 288 — which is the page to which you are referring — under 'Quantity', for example, 'Number of briefs and responses to correspondence', which is clearly outlined as one performance measure, and 'Women attending consultation forums/summit', you can see those performance measures rising, as you would expect given the focus of the government on consultation and dialogue with women, and indeed the amount of effort the Office of Women's Policy is putting into this.

The performance measures are there for the committee and for the public to examine. There is a focus on maintaining some consistency from year to year. The focus of the Department of Premier and Cabinet, of which we like to think the Office of Women's Policy is an important part, is on maintaining that consistency from year to year, and it is very much on how to monitor the performance within the existing measures. Certainly you can see, for example, 'Client satisfaction with advice provided' and 'Participant satisfaction with consultation forums' and 'Timeliness', which is another performance measure that the Office of Women's Policy is providing on time good-quality cabinet submissions and briefing requests at the top figure of 100.

Mr CLARK — What I am getting at is that these measure what you are doing in performing your job but they do not measure what you are achieving — for example, in women's leadership or women's safety — and what it is you are setting out to achieve as results. How can you or anybody else tell if you have been successful if there are no measures set for achievements rather than inputs?

Ms DELAHUNTY — That is a fair question. You raised the issue of women's safety, for example, or women's leadership or women's consultative programs. With the women's leadership programs you can clearly see — and I think I reported that in the presentation — the increase in the number of women who are in positions as chair or members of boards or committees. An increase of 6 per cent is a strong performance measure and evidence of improvement, certainly on what we inherited. The numbers of women who will receive the leadership grants will be clear once all those applications have been assessed, and that is another performance measure.

It is a fair question about the women's safety strategy and how we assess the amount of money. In this year's budget I think there is \$3.4 million going into the women's safety strategy and I will be asking that question about assessing how that money is spent and what effectiveness it has. These questions really are largely questions directed to Treasury and Finance which put the budget papers together.

Mr HOLDING — I refer to the women's safety strategy you mentioned just towards the conclusion of your previous answer. In the presentation that you gave to the committee earlier you said there were two key papers that had been released as part of the development of the women's safety strategy. One of those is the key direction in women's safety, a coordinated approach to reducing violence against women, which was released for comment in February 2002.

I wonder if you can provide the committee with some information about the status of the development of this strategy and the funds that have been allocated for its implementation in 2002–03? During your presentation you intimated that there were some programs targeted towards men as part of the strategy; could you provide the committee with some information about that aspect of the development and implementation of the strategy?

Ms DELAHUNTY — This is an important part of the work that the Office of Women's Policy has been doing for a couple of years, even before I became minister. It is one of the top-order issues. The two top-order issues for women, according to the consultation, are women's leadership — women's involvement in the decisions of our time — and women's safety. Women's safety is an issue for women regardless of where they live or work in Victoria — city or country — and regardless of their economic status. Whether it is domestic violence within the home or a sense of violence outside the home it is the second top-order issue for women. The Office of Women's Policy has done a terrific amount of work to identify the most effective way to begin to combat that. The Office of Women's Policy with its 15 people will not do it alone. This is a social problem. We have, if you like, a culture where it is still not seen as a taboo to hit a woman. We have to change that culture. I guess we work on several fronts.

To go to your question, the government released two papers this year. The first is headed 'Key directions in women's safety'. It is a coordinated approach to reducing violence against women. We are working across portfolios; we cannot do this alone. The Office of Women's Policy is a change agent working with government departments. The second paper was headed 'Taking responsibility: a framework for developing best practice in programs for men who use violence towards family members'. These two papers are driving the policy.

The key directions document was based on consultation undertaken right across the state. The issues were: strong support for women's safety; a need to address the connections between family violence and child protection — that is becoming an issue of the cycle of violence perpetuated through the generations; a need to change the perpetrator behaviour — mostly men; a need to improve responses from police; a need for consistency of approach to women experiencing violence, from a range of community agencies — it is bringing the agencies into a coordinated approach and we all sign up, if you like, to a similar template; the need for more accommodation options; and the need to incorporate education and school responses in the prevention of violence.

We provided new funding in this budget for two specific areas. Before I go to that, I would like to mention the responses from the police. We have had a terrific response from the police, particularly from the Chief Commissioner of Police, Christine Nixon. She is working very closely with the government to review the training that police officers receive about dealing with women and violence, particularly what we call 'domestics'. She is changing the culture in the police force — it is not 'just a domestic', it is an assault, and police have to respond on that basis. We are working at a similar target from different angles.

The funding of approximately \$3.4 million will go to two key areas. The first is to improve and increase housing options available for women in situations of family violence. We have found that women do escape to refuges, but they are only short-term emergency refuges. Clearly we need housing that will provide women with shelter but not take them too far from their children's schools or any other support services they might be attached to. This will be a private brokerage program run through the Office of Housing to provide a range of housing options for women escaping violence.

The second focus will be to enhance the capacity of local communities to prevent and respond to violence against women. This will be delivered through the Department of Human Services. Already we have a network of community service workers. This money will add to that network but will specifically provide support for women who are escaping violence. I think they are called domestic violence networkers in the colloquial form.

Programs for men is an important issue. The framework of the document headed 'Taking responsibility: a framework for developing best practice in programs for men who use domestic violence towards family members' — God, what a title — is to look at changing men's behaviour. Firstly, hopefully the community culture will say it is not on to abuse or hit your wife or partner; that is assault and it is not your right to do that. Secondly, we are working with the Department of Justice so that through the courts there will be a program to direct men who are violent against domestic partners to undertake anger management programs. We are working on several fronts. We will have more announcements about further development in the women's safety strategy later in the year.

Mr DAVIS — Last year at public accounts one of the issues discussed was the issue of the Queen Victoria Women's Centre. There were findings from a ministerial advisory committee that the centre had failed to achieve a self-funding level. The ministerial advisory committee made a number of recommendations, and following the hearings last year this committee recommended that the government develop a comprehensive strategy for the ongoing operation of the Queen Victoria Women's Centre based on the findings of the ministerial advisory committee. Perhaps you would care to advise us as to where that is. It is my understanding that there is still no comprehensive strategy in place.

Ms DELAHUNTY — God, this has been a saga! It is a good question. This is one of those iconic issues for women, particularly women of our generation. We see this as a sacred site for women but of course it has to be something that women want to use and identify with. That is right across the generations. I think it is fair to say that women of my generation identify very strongly with it but at the moment younger women do not. That is part of what we are trying to do to address that.

I feel that the management structure — if you like, the template that we inherited — was not a very satisfactory one. That has been exacerbated by the fact that the Queen Victoria site is in the middle of a building site. It is in the middle of being developed as the Queen Victoria village, so it is hardly a very attractive place where women want to go at the moment, but that will change. We certainly believe that the Queen Victoria site is important; I am passionate about it. At the moment we have established a full complement of trust members. We have appointed a new chair and we have completed the numbers on the trust. That is the beginning of the metamorphosis of the Queen Victoria Women's Centre. The chair has substantial financial experience and is well aware of the challenge around self-funding.

We want to create in the Queen Victoria Women's Centre a virtual centre for women. It will be an attractive place to drop into, but not for every woman in Victoria. Part of our policy is access and participation in most things we do and we believe that if we can connect the Queen Victoria centre through the communication medium of today, the Internet, we will find that it will play an important part in spreading the word around to all women of what is available for women, whether it is education, training, travel, advice about domestic violence and certainly advice about health. I think you will find that we will have a bit more to say about that very shortly.

However, in terms of your specific question, we now have a full complement on the trust and a new chair. Part of the job of that chair and new committee is to complete the comprehensive strategy to manage not only the building but more importantly to make that building and what it can offer accessible to women.

Mr DAVIS — So there is not yet an agreed strategy in place, is that correct? You have the board members in place but there is not yet an agreed strategy.

Ms DELAHUNTY — There is an agreed strategy, yes, and that is being put in place at the moment. It is a strategy that is predicated on two things: one, access, and two, an appropriate role for the Queen Victoria centre post the building phase that surrounds it at the moment.

Mr DAVIS — Is there a copy of that strategy available by any chance?

Ms DELAHUNTY — No, there would not be a copy available publicly yet, but we are about to announce that in the very near future. It certainly will be made available to the public and to this committee.

The CHAIRMAN — Minister, late last year — I think towards the end of November — you announced the establishment of an indigenous women's advisory committee, which obviously was to make it easier and more effective for indigenous women to be able to take part in decision-making within Victoria. Could you advise flowing from that announcement what processes have now been put in place to ensure consultation with indigenous women throughout the state?

Ms DELAHUNTY — This is an important part of our work. The consultation has shown us very clearly that indigenous women face very specific challenges. We can respond, as the commonwealth does, and try to merge women's issues and indigenous women's issues into every other portfolio and let them sink or swim. We do not hold that view. We take the view that indigenous women have severe disadvantages in many cases, but they also have a great advantage in that they are leaders in their own communities in many cases. So we are replicating that by developing an Indigenous Women Going Places ministerial advisory committee, which was the indigenous women's choice of title. It is a positive choice — Indigenous Women Going Places. This is the first of its kind I am told in Australia. It has nine members and was chosen through a process involving obviously the indigenous community in a very democratic way. It will basically support and assist in the planning of a consultative forum for indigenous women — in fact, we have just had that consultative forum. I spoke at it. It will ensure that priorities identified at the forum are addressed by the responsible agencies. That is what we are in the process of doing. It will foster and support the development of locally community-based solutions. That is really important for indigenous women. What will work in Mildura will not work in Maribyrnong, and it is sending that message very clearly to us.

The other aspect of the work of this advisory committee which I believe is important and may be of interest to the committee is that this indigenous women's advisory committee will work with organisations right across the nation at all levels of government — at local government, on a regional basis, certainly on a state basis and on a national level. Again we have some interest from other states in the sort of work we are doing.

We had a two-day forum in April and May this year. The outcomes of that forum are being considered by the committee and will be presented later this week in Darwin at the indigenous women's gathering. The work plan at the moment is being developed in order to prioritise some of the issues. That will be the biggest challenge and certainly from what we saw at the two-day forum there is a plethora of issues, and the skill of this committee will be to prioritise.

One of the biggest issues is safety in indigenous women. I should have mentioned that that is also part of our safety strategy. We are developing a specific indigenous family violence strategy for Victoria and will be working very closely with Aboriginal Affairs Victoria and the Victorian Aboriginal Justice Agreement which of course was developed through the Department of Justice. The consultative mechanism contrasts pretty substantially with what we again inherited. We are actually talking to women and that takes some time. We have been doing that and we are now starting to respond with programs.

I do not think there is anything else that I particularly want to add. I think that is probably enough, Mr Chairman.

The CHAIRMAN — Thank you.

Mr CLARK — We have touched on the women's community leadership program previously. I gather the grants program was launched in March this year. Can you tell the committee what the total amount of grants funding is intended to provide under this program in the forthcoming financial year? What are the particular goals that you hope to achieve with the program in this coming financial year and what arrangements have been made to ensure that women in rural communities are looked after and properly recognised under this grants program?

Ms DELAHUNTY — I think that is important. We have some outstanding leaders in our rural communities. Often that is forgotten, but particularly in agriculture and in community affairs. In regional Victoria it is the women who are clearly outstripping the men, if I can be as sexist as that. We are very conscious of supporting rural women. That has been a feature of past Labor governments and it is obviously a feature of this government as we return the regions to their rightful place.

The women's community leadership grants program is being conducted in partnership with other government departments. Over \$90 000 is available for the grants. This will be broken down to provide financial support for individual women. That is up to \$2000 per woman, or up to \$5000 for groups. They will be undertaking training and development or leadership activities. It will assist women in their leadership roles. It is quite eclectic. The grants are available in 10 categories in general, so that just about covers everyone — economics, emergency management, community safety, health, community services, community of women's health, housing, disability, family support, family and domestic violence, and advancement of consumer protection, which is a big emerging issue for women.

The call for applications, you are quite right, was May this year, and they will close on 5 July. Everywhere we go we are publicising these grants and making sure that women both in regional Victoria and indigenous women and women of ethnic backgrounds also have access to these leadership programs.

There will also be rural women's bursaries. This program is conducted in partnership with the rural women's network, which is a feisty and very effective network right across the state, and the Department of Natural Resources and Environment. There are 20 bursaries of \$2000 each to assist rural women to undertake leadership opportunities. It is estimated that \$20 000 will be provided to the bursary program to assist women. I think that is a fairly good method. They are application based, so it is a competitive process. It can cover experience in local government. I have certainly seen a lot of woman who are very interested in local government feeling that if they can apply for a leadership grant like this, get some leadership training and mentoring, they might feel more equipped to put their hands up for local government in particular.

The CHAIRMAN — Thank you, Minister. That concludes the time allocated for women's affairs. I thank Ms Hamilton and Mr Blacher for their attendance.

Witnesses withdrew.