

# CORRECTED VERSION

## PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE

### Inquiry into 2003–04 budget estimates

Melbourne – 13 May 2003

#### Members

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Ms C. M. Campbell  
Mr R. W. Clark  
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Ms D. L. Green  
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Mr G. K. Rich-Phillips  
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Chair: Ms C. M. Campbell  
Deputy Chair: Mr B. Forwood

#### Staff

Executive Officer: Ms M. Cornwell

#### Witnesses

Mr S. Bracks, Premier and Minister for Multicultural Affairs;  
Mr Y. Blacher, Secretary;  
Mr S. Mather, Corporate Finance, Department for Victorian Communities; and  
Ms E. Jensen, Director, Victorian Office of Multicultural Affairs.

**The CHAIR** — Good afternoon. I declare open the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee hearings on the budget estimates for 2003–04. I welcome the Honourable Steve Bracks, Premier of Victoria and Minister for Multicultural Affairs; Mr Yehudi Blacher, Secretary of the Department for Victorian Communities; Ms Elizabeth Jensen, Director, Victorian Office of Multicultural Affairs; and Mr Stephen Mather, Corporate Finance, Department for Victorian Communities.

All evidence taken before this committee is taken under the provisions of the Parliamentary Committees Act and is protected from judicial review. However, any comments made outside the precincts of the hearing are not protected by parliamentary privilege. All evidence given today is recorded. Witnesses will be provided with proof versions of the transcript early next week.

Before I call on the Minister for Multicultural Affairs and Mr Blacher to give a brief presentation on the more complex financial and performance indicators, I ask that all mobile phones be turned off and any pagers be turned to silence. Twenty-five minutes have been allocated for Multicultural Affairs. I now invite the Premier to make his presentation.

**Mr BRACKS** — Thank you for the opportunity to appear before this committee hearing of the budget estimates. At the outset I will make a short introduction on multicultural affairs as the Minister for Multicultural Affairs. Also, through the Chair, I guess I should mention again as I have mentioned on previous occasions that I am very proud and pleased to attend this hearing of the budget estimates for the Department of Multicultural Affairs and to support the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee. I note that every minister will be presenting before the committee, which is appropriate. I also note that was not the case before we came to office. In fact I think the Premier never attended a Public Accounts and Estimates Committee hearing, ministers were rotated during the year's presentation and not all ministers were represented on every occasion, so I am very pleased to be here.

I will go through some of the outlines of the multicultural affairs portfolio. We made exceptional progress in 2002–03, and I outline some of the changes of 2002–03, particularly the frameworks for monitoring performance and the major strategic priorities and initiatives we have put in place to continue to support communities and departments.

Before I do that I would like to report to the committee that since the committee last examined the estimates we now have a new Department for Victorian Communities, which is probably the single most significant change which has occurred in the multicultural affairs portfolio and other related portfolios which are now part of the new Department for Victorian Communities.

The primary role of the Department for Victorian Communities is to give practical effect to strengthening communities and integrated services across Victoria. The inclusion of multicultural affairs in the Department for Victorian Communities will strengthen that focus and also the focus on multicultural affairs more widely than what is singly achieved through other departmental responsibilities which are now in place.

I will go to some of the achievements in several categories. First of all, frameworks. We as a government launched our cultural diversity policy on 31 October 2002. It outlines the Victorian government's achievements to date and future priorities as well. The whole-of-government multicultural affairs framework, which I reported on at the last Public Accounts and Estimates Committee, continues to be a very high priority for our government. The reporting framework enables the government to trace how departments have progressed against policy objectives, and results from departments and all public reports can be discussed in community consultation. We have made a conscious decision as a government that multicultural affairs does not rest with just the Department of Victorian Communities or the multicultural portfolio; it is in education, in health and at the present time in a whole range of other departmental objectives — a whole-of-government objective is integral to how to do it, and that is how the department and portfolio is framed up.

Going on to major strategic projects, language services strategy continues to be a major focus. The 2002–03 budget allocated \$2 million over four years to support strategic improvements for the delivery of interpreting and translating assistance in Victoria. Ten projects were launched in October 2002, including improvements to awareness training of hospital staff, scholarships for people to train as interpreters in small community languages and making multilingual-translated health information more acceptable.

Another major strategic project is the skilled migration of population policy. We have committed ourselves to increasing the number of skilled and business migrants coming to Victoria. We have an objective of reaching a share of the total business of skilled migration by 2006–07 of 25 per cent, and we have come from a base when we came to office of about 18 per cent — a very low base. We are currently running at about 23 per cent of the share in

Australia. We have also committed in this budget \$6 million over four years to assist in promoting opportunities for skilled and business migrants to come to Victoria and to come as well to regional Victoria.

Local government analysis is another important major project of the department. We are now analysing the responsiveness of local government to culturally diverse communities. Surveys have been sent out by our department to 79 local councils with a 70 per cent return rate. We are grateful to councils for working with us and cooperating on those surveys. Over 400 people have attended the local consultations, and a final report is being prepared by the Victorian Multicultural Commission for consideration by the government.

I will move on to other achievements. Going to the community grants program, as members of the committee are probably aware the community grants program provides funding for community organisations under the categories of partnerships, community building, ethnic schools, organisational support and multicultural festivals and events. We have allocated further \$1 million from the Community Support Fund, which enables three other areas to be undertaken, and they include community strengthening, a migrant and refugee women's support program and a community heritage program. Funding has been increased from \$750 000 for these programs when we came to office to about 2.8 million now, which includes the extra \$1 million for these new programs. An additional \$1.2 million over four years was committed from the 2003–04 budget.

Community consultation continues to be a high priority of the Victorian Multicultural Commission. It plays an important role in informing government on issues of major importance to communities.

For the first time we have initiated a Cultural Diversity Week. The inaugural Cultural Diversity Week was celebrated between 17 and 23 March this year. Over 70 community groups and schools across Victoria were involved, with organised activities ranging from seminars to multicultural festivals. Important events occurred, including the multicultural media expo at Federation Square to promote multicultural media as important conduits to their communities and also the Premier's gala dinner, which was a feature of that. The inaugural awards were held in December 2002. The awards were presented at Government House in recognition of the achievements in multicultural affairs of certain individuals. The 2001 census data is an important tool that is used by the department as well.

I will go to the key priorities for 2003–04 to finish. On performance reporting, the creation of the new Department for Victorian Communities provides a unique opportunity to ensure consistent reporting across the whole of government on a number of important population groups, which was one of key aims of bringing this department into place. We have asked the new department to provide a simple and effective framework for reporting on multicultural, women's, youth and indigenous affairs, and I am sure that will be of great assistance to this committee with that consistent reporting framework in the future. It will lead to a better understanding of government performance across those four areas.

Language services is also a key priority in 2003–04. Further projects over the next three years will include increasing the availability of translated information across government, access to interpreters in emergency situations and in the courts, addressing gaps in the supply of interpreters and interpreter awareness training across government agencies.

Finally, on the multicultural affairs act, we committed in our second term of office to bringing in a multicultural affairs act. An act is in place in several other Australian states — South Australia and New South Wales in particular. We will begin the work on that act and the consultation required for the implementation of that policy in this coming financial year, and that will also be an important focus of the work of the Victorian Multicultural Commission, the Victorian Office of Multicultural Affairs and the department more broadly. That is an overview of the department.

**The CHAIR** — Thank you, Premier. Twenty-five minutes have been allocated for questions for the Minister for Multicultural Affairs.

Going to the first question, I notice that in budget paper 2 at page 97 reference is made to promoting the value of a cohesive and inclusive society. Can you tell us a little of the government's approach to asylum seekers, particularly those experiencing financial hardship? Can you also inform my committee what other measures the government has taken to assist these communities?

**Mr BRACKS** — It is a continuing concern of our government that there has been considerable cost shifting between the commonwealth and the states on support for temporary permit visa (TPV) holders, and that cost shifting has meant that we have had to pick up through the Department of Human Services (DHS) a whole

series of programmatic responsibilities which otherwise would have been the commonwealth's responsibility in this area. We have consistently argued the case to the commonwealth: I have argued the case to the Prime Minister and the minister assisting me on multicultural affairs has argued the case to the federal Minister for Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs, Mr Ruddock, that we want a better cooperative arrangement between the states and the commonwealth.

Nevertheless we do have responsibilities, and we have accepted in this budget significant responsibility for TPV holders. This budget contains a further amount of \$100 000 for emergency grants to asylum seekers experiencing particular hardship, those who do not fit into any particular category — and a lot of them do not; they slip between the cracks but need immediate emergency response and support. Largely the responsibility has rested with community organisations and churches because governments have effectively not taken up their responsibilities in this area. We will do our part. We are still waiting for a sensible, cooperative approach that each state and territory can have with the commonwealth. In the meantime we have allocated support in this budget.

Also, in October 2002 we announced more than \$1.1 million in programs and initiatives funded through the DHS aimed at supporting refugees and temporary protection visa holders as well and the funding and supporting of those individuals is working through the system. I do not believe it is sufficient and that we need a national approach and not just a compensatory approach, which is largely what is happening around the country.

**Mr FORWOOD** — Premier, you would be aware that the minister assisting you on multicultural affairs, Mr Pandazopoulos, is being investigated by the Equal Opportunity Commission for an alleged breach of the Racial and Religious Tolerance Act. Is the government paying the minister's legal fees? If so, how much are they and from which output group are they coming?

**Mr BRACKS** — The matter is currently being heard, as I understand, through the Equal Opportunity Commission. I cannot comment on the details of that because it is before the commission, and you did not particularly ask that question.

**The CHAIR** — The question in relation to the budget is that if any fees are paid, from which output group?

**Mr FORWOOD** — And how much.

**Mr BRACKS** — I think in this case I will take advice and report back to the committee because we are not sure whether in fact the matter will be pursued before the commission. It has to reserve its judgment on whether the case is sufficient to be pursued, and if that is the case it may be that no costs will be incurred. I will take some further advice. I cannot comment on the details of the case, but I will take some further advice on whether the matter is pursued and therefore report to the committee.

**Ms ROMANES** — In budget paper 2 at page 90 the government commits to listening to local communities. In this context, what sorts of measures are being taken to maintain harmony in Victoria with respect to recent events in Iraq?

**Mr BRACKS** — The Victorian government has had a good record through some significant events that have happened in our region and worldwide, the tragic events of 11 September and their aftermath and the effect on some of our multicultural populations here in Victoria. I believe that the Victorian Office of Multicultural Affairs and the Victorian Multicultural Commission (VMC) worked effectively with communities in setting up help lines, in making sure that we did not have significant disruption or unrest as part of that. The same response was followed following the tragic bombing in Bali, and again, as part of the response to the Iraq war.

We have provided more than \$80 000 to community groups to provide immediate counselling and support to those affected by war and to assist in strengthening ties within and between communities as a direct response to the recent world events. We have also provided \$20 000 through the VMC to establish a help line coordinated by the Islamic Council of Victoria. We did something similar post-11 September which worked effectively. Not so much because there are a lot of calls on the line — there are some calls — but it at least gives access immediately to assistance and support for those communities or individuals who might feel under pressure and stress. For example, young people from our Islamic communities might be going to school and might feel intimidated just in the transport to school. Having access to a help line with immediate assistance and support is very useful, and we found that worked effectively and well post-11 September and we believe it will work well currently.

We are also relaunching the racial harmony television community service announcements. I want to place on record here at the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee the acknowledgment from our government of the support we have received from the major networks in putting on those free-to-air community announcements promoting racial harmony. We are again putting those to air as part of the effort to make sure we can immediately, after the Iraq war, have a lot of support around Victoria for those people who might find themselves in a more difficult situation.

The response has been in keeping with what we have done in the past. The role and function of the Victorian Multicultural Commission is to consult with community organisations and groups, and it is doubling its efforts in meeting with the Islamic community and others over this period also.

**Mr RICH-PHILLIPS** — Premier, during the election campaign a grant was promised to the Greek community in Frankston. I understand you and the then candidate for Frankston appeared in Frankston and presented to the Greek community a dummy cheque for \$50 000. On it were the words, 'Pay Greek orthodox community of Frankston the sum of \$50 000 for a re-elected Bracks government'. Against what criteria was that grant made to the Greek community in Frankston? What program was that part of and have those funds been paid?

**The CHAIR** — And how it relates to the budget papers, Mr Rich-Phillips.

**Mr RICH-PHILLIPS** — In respect of the upcoming budget, the grants program for the Victorian Office of Multicultural Affairs.

**Mr BRACKS** — It actually comes under the auspices of the VMC which administers the grants program. It independently assesses the grants program and makes a recommendation to the government — to me as minister. I have, on all occasions I have been the minister, supported those recommendations. They are independently determined through the VMC itself.

Can I correct you on one fundamental matter. I think you referred in your question to my being there. I was not, so that part of your question was erroneous. You referred to a dummy cheque. I think it was a local candidate, now the member, who was presenting a graphic description of the commitment of the government, which is already determined by the VMC, as a way of publicising the good work the government has done to support that particular group. Again, I stress that these grants are determined independently by the commission. On advice given to me — and I have not on any occasion in the last four years been in a position to vary that advice — I have supported it, as I did on this occasion.

**Mr RICH-PHILLIPS** — That had already been through the process and signed off?

**Mr BRACKS** — My understanding is that it was already supported, yes.

**Mr MERLINO** — In budget paper 2 at page 97, the government states that it has increased funding for the VMC grants program by \$1.2 million. Can you please inform us about the different types of grants available and how they assist these communities?

**Mr BRACKS** — This really backs up some of the things I said in the introduction to my answer to the question from Mr Rich-Phillips as well, that we have increased the funding to community organisations under the Victorian Multicultural Commission grants. When we came to office we had a grants program which totalled about \$780 000; it is now about \$2.8 million.

The new money that we are proposing, \$1.2 million, which is the increase, will go in the current forward estimates period to community organisations under different categories. One is community partnerships, for those that can demonstrate that they have undertaken community partnerships and have presented a submission on that basis. Community building is in taking responsibility for themselves to help themselves and their community and having projects which are demonstrated to make a difference on that basis.

Ethnic schools — I think we are increasing the amount of money that is paid to ethnic schools in Victoria from \$90 to \$100. It increases progressively over a period of time and it is going up further. There is administrative and organisational support to some of the key peak and other organisations.

Members will be pleased to know that in regard to some of the multicultural festivals and events that all members on all sides of Parliament go to, this new money will go to assist and support the funding of those festivals in the future.

**Mr CLARK** — Can you tell the committee whether it is intended that languages other than English (LOTE) will continue to be taught in government schools from prep to year 10 and, if so, what strategies the multicultural section of the Department for Victorian Communities has to promote effectiveness of LOTE learning?

**Mr BRACKS** — Yes. It is a good story here. We are improving languages-other-than-English teaching, but we are allocating an additional \$6 million over four years for various strategies, including the establishment of additional centres of excellence in languages at the secondary level. That probably goes to the question you are asking. We will have a certain number of those around the state. I think the Minister for Education and Training announced those recently. We are boosting the Victorian School of Languages budget. As members know, that goes to a wide range of age groups. As I have already mentioned, we are increasing the per capita grant for ethnic schools to \$100, and we are doubling the professional development grants program with support from the Department of Education and Training as well. We are also boosting some of the funding to non-government schools in need, which include multicultural community schools, which will have some consequential improvements also.

**Ms GREEN** — How does Victoria's position compare to other states in regard to the skilled migration program committed to in budget paper 2 on page 97, and what means is the government using to increase and improve this intake?

**Mr BRACKS** — Our performance in the past has been very poor. If you look at some of the figures on skilled and business migration going back to the period in 2001–02 just after we came to office, we received about 17 per cent of Australian business migrants. You have to remember that Victoria represents 25 per cent of the nation's population and about 25 per cent of the economy. At the time we were getting about 17 per cent of the business migration here to Victoria compared with New South Wales, which was getting about 28 per cent; Queensland, which was getting about 17 per cent; and Western Australia, which was getting about 24 per cent.

We plan to be much more aggressive in attracting skilled and business migration to Victoria. As I mentioned in the presentation, we want to lift our level from the current level, which has already increased from 17 per cent to 23 per cent, to 25 per cent in the 2006–07 period. In this budget we have allocated about \$6 million over the four-year period to support councils and other community groups to attract business and skilled migration to their regions to assist with housing, other support services and information to those migrants in making the choice on whether to settle in Victoria or in other states.

I have to say that when I move around Victoria, particularly around some of our country regions, there is a great deal of support for increasing our skilled and business migration intake into some of our regional areas in Victoria. For example, yesterday I was in Horsham as part of our community cabinet program and there was significant support from the council and other community groups for encouraging more migrants to come to that region to take up some of the skilled jobs and to fit in with some of the skill shortage problems there. I know that is the case in a lot of regions, and I have to say we have not been competitive with other states.

If you look at what Queensland or Western Australia have done, they have been aggressive in the marketplace; they have marketed themselves internationally as the place of destination when people arrive in Australia. We have fallen behind. Whilst there have been some improvements in Victoria, we certainly intend over the next four years to improve our performance significantly to attract those skilled migrants to Victoria and therefore generate demand in those regional economies as well as part of that.

**Mr FORWOOD** — The response of the department to the committee's inquiries shows that 449 full-time equivalent people are working in the output staffing group, community building and information services. That is made up of a number of different policy areas and it is not possible to tell from it how many work in multicultural affairs, how many work in women's policy, and how many work in community building and information services. I wonder if you could get the department to provide the committee with a breakdown of the 450 people across each of the groups internal to that output group.

**Mr BRACKS** — I am sure we could do that. In fact I can remember signing off a question on notice on this basis — not from you but from one of your colleagues — and I am sure we could regenerate that information for the purposes of this committee as well.

**Mr DONNELLAN** — I notice budget paper 3 at page 407 covers the area of language services. Can you inform the committee how the government is assisting newly arrived communities with interpreting and translation services like those that the more established communities have access to?



**Mr BRACKS** — Again, as I mentioned in the introduction, there is a strong emphasis of this and in the coming years, particularly of 2002–03. We have allocated \$2 million over four years to improve language services in three key areas. The first is the supply and quality of interpreters, particularly in rural and regional areas. That is an important focus and, not surprisingly, there are problems in getting the right number of skilled interpreters in some of these regions. Another area is making sure we have those interpreters for newly emerging communities and some of our new languages. In Victoria, for example, we have people from about 140 different countries who have settled here. Some of those are not numerous, and yet they still rely on translation services and we need to provide them for some of those new migrants who have settled here. The other area is the number of women interpreters, which has been a clear target for us to increase as well; we are down on the number of people we require in that area. So this new allocation of \$2 million will assist in and support that.

We are also looking at a Victorian interpreter card, which will identify a person's preferred language and their need for an interpreter, making it much easier to ask for assistance for a government or community agency as a result of that. Just the request to find an interpreter is not that easy in lots of ways, so the interpreter card will be very useful in that.

Interpreter awareness and training in government agencies will be progressively integrated into ongoing staff training programs in government agencies so they are much more sensitive and aware of the requirements in their normal course of business. We are pursuing interpreter training scholarships at RMIT. In 2003 these were targeted at people who speak newly emerging languages in Victoria, including Assyrian, Dhari, Amorro and very many others — I think you need an interpreter to work out the pronunciation of the languages as well! So we will be looking at the specialist areas as well.

**Mr CLARK** — In appendix A of budget paper 2, at page 252, the Department of Victorian Communities is required to achieve savings or cuts of \$1.2 million in total under the heading 'General efficiencies in government administration'. What proportion of that is to be achieved in those areas of the department under your responsibility, and how will that amount be achieved?

**Mr BRACKS** — The proportion in each of the portfolio areas within the department is yet to be finally determined. That will be determined over the coming period. It will be in non-service delivery areas: in potential duplication, which always occurs in any department; in better ways of undertaking administration; and in better and more coordinated approaches. But at this stage we have not finalised down to a particular portfolio subset the amount that will be in each area. That will be determined in due course.

**Mr CLARK** — How is the \$1.2 million calculated given that you have not determined the breakdown?

**Mr BRACKS** — The overall departmental figure?

**Mr CLARK** — Yes.

**Mr BRACKS** — As you know, in the budget we have set the figure of \$141 million. I am just thinking some of that was specific. I will check that. If I can just qualify, I think it was general across each department. There may be some specific cuts as part of that as well. These are achievable. These were allocated on the size of departments, clearly the output of each department, and they were allocated on that basis.

If you look back to our very first year when we first came to office in our first budget we actually achieved about \$90 million of savings. They were savings in administration, advertising, consultancies and supply of consumables. We believe we can achieve savings of \$140 million in the next four years, given that in our first year we achieved savings of \$90 million. As the Treasurer described, obviously no-one likes a cut, but we believe we can do it with a little pain, not major pain.

**Ms ROMANES** — On page 97 of budget paper 2 you talk about promoting the values of a tolerant Victorian community. I understand that today the government launched training materials with Football Victoria. How did this project come about, and can you tell us what impact you anticipate it will have?

**Mr BRACKS** — I think it will have a big impact. We know that one of the best instruments in Victoria for promoting tolerance and harmony and promoting our multicultural community has been sport and in particular football. What has been achieved in the Australian Football League has been a standout in Australian terms: in role models which have been there in most clubs and in the policy of the AFL. Following the implementation of the Racial and Religious Tolerance Act we are now working at a state level with Football Victoria to look at the better

encouragement of young people from our multicultural communities to get involved in sport at all levels, and particularly to get involved in football in this case.

It was launched today by the Minister assisting the Premier on Multicultural Affairs and Football Victoria. It has been developed to encourage leagues and clubs to look at ways of attracting higher levels of participation from the diverse population groups in Victoria, to minimise the negative impact of any vilification on people participating in those sports, to suggest some practical and sensible ways that clubs can raise awareness and change attitudes, to implement initiatives to address tolerance and to ensure that participants and supporters are aware of the act itself and the new measures that have been taken in Victoria.

I believe it will be a very important instrument, as it has been more broadly across Australia through the AFL. As part of the project Football Victoria has developed a video model and league policies and other resources for rollout during the 2003 football season, and so we will see that rolling out this season.

**The CHAIR** — Thank you, Premier. That concludes our section on multicultural affairs.

**Witnesses withdrew.**



