

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the 2023–24 Budget Estimates

Melbourne – Thursday 8 June 2023

MEMBERS

Sarah Connolly – Chair

Nicholas McGowan – Deputy Chair

Michael Galea

Paul Hamer

Mathew Hilakari

Lauren Kathage

Bev McArthur

Danny O’Brien

Ellen Sandell

WITNESSES

Ms Maree Edwards, Speaker, Legislative Assembly,

Mr Shaun Leane, President, Legislative Council,

Ms Trish Burrows, Secretary, Department of Parliamentary Services,

Ms Bridget Noonan, Clerk of the Legislative Assembly, and

Mr Robert McDonald, Clerk of the Legislative Council, Parliament of Victoria.

The CHAIR: I declare open this hearing of the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee.

I ask that mobile telephones please be turned to silent.

On behalf of the Parliament, the committee is conducting this Inquiry into the 2023–24 Budget Estimates. The committee's aim is to scrutinise public administration and finance to improve outcomes for the Victorian community.

I advise that all evidence taken by the committee is protected by parliamentary privilege. However, comments repeated outside this hearing may not be protected by this privilege.

As Chair I expect that committee members will be respectful towards witnesses, the Victorian community joining the hearing via the live stream and other committee members.

Witnesses will be provided with a proof version of the transcript to check. Verified transcripts, presentations and handouts will be placed on the committee's website.

I welcome our two Presiding Officers the Honourable Maree Edwards and the Honourable Shaun Leane as well as officers from the Department of Parliamentary Services. Ms Edwards and Mr Leane, I am going to ask you to make an opening presentation of no more than 5 minutes. This will be followed by questions from the committee. Your time will start now.

Shaun LEANE: Thank you. And thanks to the Chair and the committee for having us to present today and asking us questions.

Visual presentation.

Shaun LEANE: With this financial coming year our aspirations are pretty much as far as what we have deemed in our strategic planning for the future of the term. And if I could start by acknowledging the traditional owners and all the peoples of Victoria, and I also acknowledge the work they have done with us, and we will talk a bit about that later, but I also acknowledge that we are really keen to do more work with the traditional owners as far as the Parliament.

I might go to the next slide. I suppose as departments and as POs and the core business of the Parliament we see one of our really important core businesses is to support the members of Parliament to be the best representatives of people they represent, and we plan to do that in a number of ways, which are indicated in those slides and more. But we also are really aware and conscious of the great people that work in our electoral offices, the electorate officers. We are planning to engage with them even more, as we have done in previous terms. And just one of the ways we are doing that – and this is probably unique; we think it is a world first – is we are going to have a conference for electoral officers soon to be able to impart on us their experiences and how we can assist them better.

Maree EDWARDS: Yes. Thanks, Shaun. Thank you, Chair, and thank you, committee members. And can I thank you for the work that you have been doing. I know it is a long haul for you all, so thank you so much. As Shaun mentioned, opening up the Parliament to the people is part of our strategic plan going forward. It has always been the people's place, the people's building, and we want to make sure that it stays that way. But just to give you some examples there of recent engagement, particularly we are very proud of our engagement and education program. The education program has been going gangbusters really, but you can see there just some

examples: there are 9300 public tour visitors, 2360 group tour visitors as well as other tours as well, 6906 school student visitors and 4106 parliamentary role-play participants, and we are very grateful to parliamentary staff who engage in these programs and do a power of work travelling across Victoria to our schools in regional Victoria as well of course but also supporting school students across the Parliament. We want to make sure that democracy is well and truly part of the curriculum, and this is one way that we are doing that. We have been recognised with a national award for our parliamentary program with the Victoria University, so we are also very proud of that.

We have introduced an Auslan parliamentary bulletin, and this is part of our broader engagement with being a more inclusive Parliament to make sure that we have access for people with disabilities, access for LGBTIQ+ as well as our First Nations people, so we are working very hard to make sure that the Parliament remains the Parliament for the people.

I will just talk a bit about some of the things that we have done recently, and you would be familiar of course with the International Women's Day event that we held here recently in March. It was the first time we have really done a big event for International Women's Day, and of course we held it in Queen's Hall. We invited all members of Parliament to bring a local hero from their electorate to celebrate them and the work that they do in their community, and it was very well received by the members. It was a really good day, actually; I really enjoyed it. But one of the things about doing that was also acknowledging that it was 100 years since the legislation was introduced to the Parliament to allow women to run as candidates in elections. And also you may have noticed we mixed up the portraits in Queen's Hall and brought out some portraits of women. The Parliament has a very broad collection of art, and we thought it was really good to rotate some of that through Queen's Hall to give people a view of exactly what the collection looks like. And part of the International Women's Day was bringing forward the portraits of some women that have not been displayed publicly for a long time.

Shaun LEANE: Five minutes goes really quickly. We had a few more slides, but –

The CHAIR: It certainly does. Wait until you get to 7 minutes.

Shaun LEANE: We are very proud of the work that the Parliament is doing.

The CHAIR: Thank you. The first 7 minutes is going to go to Mr McGowan.

Nicholas McGOWAN: Thank you very much. Ms Edwards, I am going to try and go through as many questions as I can because we have reasonably limited times, so if you need to direct it to somebody else, please do that. How many security incidents have there been over the past 12 months?

Maree EDWARDS: Thank you, Mr McGowan, for that question in relation to security. One of the things that we have discussed about talking about security in a public forum is actually the risk that that brings, and while I am happy to throw to our Secretary for that exact figure, our preference would be that any security questions that you would like answered be answered in camera.

Nicholas McGOWAN: Yes. No problem at all. Thank you. If I can have that one taken on notice.

Maree EDWARDS: I can take that one on notice.

Nicholas McGOWAN: Awesome. That would be great. And the same thing for security incidents in terms of cyber security, I guess for the same reasons.

Maree EDWARDS: Yes.

Nicholas McGOWAN: That would be great. Thank you. Speaker Brooks in May 2020 I think committed to the previous PAEC to explore protections for MPs. I was looking for some update, but again, if you want to take that on notice, perhaps I can receive that.

Maree EDWARDS: In terms of security?

Nicholas McGOWAN: Yes.

Maree EDWARDS: Yes, we will take that on notice.

Nicholas McGOWAN: Okay. That would be fantastic. Incidentally, I just noticed there are different practices in both chambers in respect to the prayer and how that occurs – in the lower house there is a different procedure, whereas in the upper house it varies between the two. Is there a reason for that?

Shaun LEANE: Look, as far as a PAEC hearing and the forward estimates and the funding of the Parliament, those procedures do not come in line with PAEC's remit, I would say. I am happy to be corrected by the Chair, but –

Danny O'BRIEN: I think he is inviting you to jump in and protect him from this one.

Shaun LEANE: No, it is not about getting protected, it is about the rules.

The CHAIR: Mr O'Brien, Mr Leane, thank you for your comments. Mr McGowan, could you please keep your questions relevant to the inquiry before us.

Nicholas McGOWAN: I think they were relevant, but I will move on. This is a question with respect to IBAC and its investigations. 'Proportion of complex IBAC investigations completed within 540 days' – the target for that was 60 per cent, but IBAC only completed 50 per cent in that time. This is budget paper 3, page 364. What was the cause of the major shortfall in 2022–23 in meeting that target?

Shaun LEANE: Can you repeat that question?

Maree EDWARDS: Is that in relation to IBAC? Are you referring to IBAC?

Nicholas McGOWAN: That is right.

Maree EDWARDS: The Presiding Officers have no involvement with IBAC.

Nicholas McGOWAN: You do not have an officer here from IBAC? There is no officer to answer that question today on any IBAC matters? Okay.

Bob Smith, a former President, had plans for the Legislative Council in terms of its composition and its layout. Do you know whether those plans were ever progressed or whether there is any consideration for changing the layout of the Legislative Council?

Shaun LEANE: Can I ask what you mean by the term 'layout'? Do you mean the physical –

Nicholas McGOWAN: In terms of future expenditure, the physical layout of the chamber.

Shaun LEANE: The physical layout of the chamber? I am unaware of those plans. As far as budgetary matters, I am not too sure if we have got any plans whatsoever to change the actual chamber. We might, but there are always improvements. I know we did some work on the audio, the microphones and things like that, to bring us sort of more into a modern space, but I have to say I have not studied Bob Smith's intentions, and I can say I do not have any intentions to change the composition at this point.

Nicholas McGOWAN: Okay, thank you.

Danny O'BRIEN: Can I just jump in, just on the earlier question the Deputy Chair actually asked. The question about protections for members was not literally close protection – personal protection. It related last year to the issue where in federal Parliament there is specific legislation that protects members of Parliament and I think public servants from certain threats and the like, and that was what former Speaker Brooks said he was investigating and happy to have that conversation on. I think you are probably aware there has been at least one member of Parliament who has publicly commented on the sort of threats that she has been getting in the last couple of months. So it is not really something that is sensitive in a security matter. I am just wondering whether you could provide some more on that.

Maree EDWARDS: Yes, I understand where you are coming from, Mr – can I call you Danny?

Danny O'BRIEN: No, Mr O'Brien.

Maree EDWARDS: I understand what you are referring to. I think in terms of broader security – and the member that you are referring to has a social media issue – there are conversations about protections, but ultimately if that is a matter for the houses of the Parliament, we will accept what the houses of the Parliament decide on. We are looking at other measures in relation to security, but as I said, a lot of those I would prefer to discuss either offline or in camera.

Danny O'BRIEN: Yes. I certainly do not want to go into the individual member's circumstance, but in terms of specific protections in law, is that really a question, then, for us to just take up with the Attorney?

Maree EDWARDS: That is a matter for the houses to determine if there is legislation that is required to implement those changes.

Danny O'BRIEN: Okay. As the Deputy Chair indicated, I think the former Speaker did say he would follow up on it, so if there is anything further you can provide to the committee on notice –

Maree EDWARDS: Yes, I can throw to the Secretary if she would like to add to any of that, but I do think it is a matter for the government and the houses to decide as to legislation or protections that might be required.

Danny O'BRIEN: Sure. Thank you.

Nicholas McGOWAN: Ms Edwards, are you able to enlighten me as to why there is a funding decrease for the Legislative Council?

Maree EDWARDS: A funding decrease for the Legislative Council – are you referring to Legislative Council standing committees?

Nicholas McGOWAN: No, the Legislative Council itself, in the budget papers.

Maree EDWARDS: The only decrease I think you would find in the budget papers is in relation to the standing committees for the Legislative Council, and I think –

Shaun LEANE: Robert might –

Maree EDWARDS: Yes, it is the Legislative Council budget. Robert, did you want to speak to it?

Robert McDONALD: Yes. There was some funding that had been provided in a previous ERC bid for a fixed period for Council standing committees. That funding was not renewed in full; it was renewed in part, which reflects the reduction in funding for the next financial year.

Nicholas McGOWAN: And do you know the quantum of that reduction?

Robert McDONALD: It is about \$280,000.

Nicholas McGOWAN: Is that over the forward estimates or for the one year?

Robert McDONALD: For one year.

Nicholas McGOWAN: And then going after that –

Robert McDONALD: After that it will return to its fully funded level.

The CHAIR: Mr McGowan, your time is up. We are going to go to Ms Kathage.

Lauren KATHAGE: Thank you, Chair, President, Speaker, officers. I want to take us to your questionnaire responses and in particular your responses to question 2 on pages 6 and 7 relating to your community engagement program. And also in your presentation you referred to the International Women's Day event. It was, I agree, excellent. One of my guests was one of the first ever female apprentices in Parliament House, who did a lot of the gold paintwork around the place. One of your staff was kind enough to show her around the places she had worked all those decades ago – so that real connection there between Parliament and the people. But there was not just the women's day event, there were lots of other events. Speaker and President, can you outline the benefit of these activities to the Victorian community.

Maree EDWARDS: Did you want to go first?

Shaun LEANE: Sure. We have got a goal to bring people or communities or groups into Parliament that might not necessarily have been here before. I have got to agree that International Women's Day was a great success, and all credit to – can I call you Maree?

Maree EDWARDS: I do not know.

Shaun LEANE: Anyway, all credit to Maree. We have had similar things. We got the Salvos to launch their cookbook in Queen's Hall. Something that I took away was that some of their volunteers, who have come through some hard times to get to the point that they can actually volunteer and help other people at the Salvation Army, made comments in there, going, 'Wow. I can't believe we're here.' We know that this place, taking away COVID, is a public building. It is the Victorian people's building. We want people that might think that way, who go 'Wow. I didn't know I could come here,' to come to this place.

Something we have got planned towards the end of the year is we are going to get *The Big Issue* to launch their calendar and bring in some of their people – the franchisees. It is a similar thing where they come in here and go, 'Wow. How fantastic's this?' We mentioned the First People of Victoria, who look at this building in a different way to how we might, and we have got work to do. As I said before, we appreciate the First Peoples that have worked with us on a number of issues, particularly getting our RAP through. There are a number of people that are Victorians we really want to proactively engage, whether that be in this building or, as Maree mentioned, in outreach and the work done by the communications team and the education team and the teams that do work with the school groups. Did you want to add to that?

Maree EDWARDS: The important work that we are doing with students and young people – I do not think we can underestimate that, because it is about the promotion of democracy. It is about promoting an understanding of how Parliament works and the benefits of Parliament. It is about having access to Parliament, whether that be an online access, which we have really stepped up for our students in schools across both secondary and primary schools, or a whole range of programs now available to teachers and students to engage with Parliament and parliamentary democracy.

In about three weeks time we are having our Youth Parliament, which is something that we have been doing for a long, long time, but the engagement with young people through the Youth Parliament is really quite extensive now. Interestingly, in the breakdown of who those students are that participate in the Youth Parliament – it is not just about the Youth Parliament; they also participate in the youth press gallery – the young people identified themselves, and this is about inclusivity: about 36 per cent were from CALD backgrounds, 37 per cent were LGBTIQ+, 5 per cent were Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and 24 per cent had a disability. This is an example, if you like, of how we are trying to be a more inclusive Parliament but also broaden our education spread.

We also have a wonderful program, which I am not sure the committee is aware of or indeed the broader community is aware of. It is a First Nations group called Aboriginal Change Makers, and it is a teaching resource for Victorian schools. It tells stories of political and social activity, self-determination and empowerment as well as the struggle for recognition in the face of our colonising society. This resource is something that we are very proud of. It has been visited by our twin parliaments as well and by representatives who were here at the last POCC conference last year. It is a fantastic resource and one that we are very proud of.

In terms of what you are referring to about International Women's Day, one of the things that I did not get to do in the initial presentation was highlight when I was talking about the portraits in Queen's Hall that many of those portraits of our former premiers hanging in Queen's Hall were actually painted by women artists – something that was not widely known. I was keen to make sure that we had plaques put next to those portraits to identify who those artists were, because many of them were women. I think it is really important. We talk a lot about the history of this Parliament, but often it is the women in the Parliament that have not been acknowledged, and that is why we have commissioned portraits for our first woman Speaker Judy Maddigan and our first woman President Monica Gould. I believe the President and I both thought it was high time that we acknowledged those women in a much greater way, so that work has gone out for tender. We are very happy about that.

Lauren KATHAGE: Potentially the first female –

Maree EDWARDS: The first woman Speaker.

Lauren KATHAGE: I think we are looking at another.

Maree EDWARDS: The first woman Clerk of the Parliaments –

Lauren KATHAGE: When will you be sitting for a portrait, Bridget?

Maree EDWARDS: We also have the first woman as Usher of the Black Rod, and we also have our first woman Secretary.

The CHAIR: Thank you. The next 7 minutes I am going to hand back to the Deputy Chair – oh, Mr O’Brien.

Danny O’BRIEN: We are throwing it around a bit. Sorry, Chair. Can I ask a question of the Secretary: the 3000 to 4000 cuts to the VPS – does that apply to Parliament staff as well?

Trish BURROWS: No. Those only apply to government departments. We do not get a direction from government in relation to employment.

Danny O’BRIEN: Okay. Subject to the earlier question about IBAC, I have to confess I have been on this committee forever and previously on the old IBAC committee. I still do not understand for IBAC, VAGO, PBO et cetera how their budgets are set. The Secretary is probably the person to answer it, but can you give me a brief idea of the process?

Trish BURROWS: We do not have anything to do with those independent parliamentary bodies. You would have to direct the inquiry to those bodies or their –

Danny O’BRIEN: Right. So as far as you are aware – and this was my vague understanding – they literally go directly either to Treasury or DPC for their budget discussions?

Trish BURROWS: I have got no information to help in relation to their budgets.

Danny O’BRIEN: Okay. I wonder, Chair, whether we need to have a separate session at some stage to allow those agencies to come in.

Anyway, the other one is: Speaker and President, I thought that our public galleries were open. Can you confirm whether they are or not? I know we have school groups coming in, which is why I thought they were open, but are they open to the general public?

Shaun LEANE: They have not been open, and getting back to – as the Speaker said, we have had a number of security issues to work through. We are happy to give in camera some understanding of what we have had to work through. We have wanted them open – do not get us wrong; we have wanted them open. They will be open in the next sitting week.

Danny O’BRIEN: Right.

Shaun LEANE: But we have had some issues and advice to work through. Getting back to our presentation and how our job is to promote democracy and support it, we will have them open.

Danny O’BRIEN: So have they literally not been reopened since COVID?

Maree EDWARDS: The public has been able to come to Parliament as long as they are with a pass holder, and that has been in place since COVID, really, but I think it is important to remember that the heightened security risks that existed throughout that time have had to be worked through, and the department, to their credit – and the clerks of course – have done a power of work to enable the public galleries to be open next sitting week.

Danny O'BRIEN: Okay. That is very pleasing to hear. As I said, I thought that they were because there have been school groups in and just assumed that there were members of the public, and it is pretty concerning that we have not had them open.

Shaun LEANE: We do not disagree with you, but we have been in an environment where we have not been able to do that. We do not disagree with you that it is disappointing, but it will be remedied in a safe manner by the next time we sit.

Danny O'BRIEN: Okay. Deputy Chair, have you –

Nicholas McGOWAN: My question is to the Secretary. It is just in respect of the works that are ongoing. My understanding was that there was some suggestion – or it actually is the case – that the opposition will move back to the Parliament. Is that correct, or am I incorrect in that?

Trish BURROWS: That is a matter for the Presiding Officers as to how the facilities –

Shaun LEANE: There has been discussion with the opposition about moving back. It is a brand new building that will be accessible, I think, towards the middle of next year. There have been discussions. We will respect the opposition's opinion, but I think they have been progressing really well. The real idea around the new couple of levels has been that we have had such a demand on meeting rooms, committee rooms and other areas of this building and that we can free up area in here. The other issue is that we really want to work on disability access, which we admit we need to find ways to improve, so the remit about those new levels will give us that opportunity to give us options for this particular building, getting back to that we want to make this building accessible to every Victorian.

Nicholas McGOWAN: Is there any long-term plan to bring the media back here?

Shaun LEANE: No, there is no plan at this stage, but if they approached us we would obviously consider all reasonable approaches.

Nicholas McGOWAN: Do we know how much the current accommodation costs the taxpayer? I assume that comes from this budget, Secretary, is that correct, for the gallery?

Trish BURROWS: I understand it is paid for out of the DPC budget.

Nicholas McGOWAN: DPC budget?

Trish BURROWS: Yes. I do not have a line item for that.

Nicholas McGOWAN: Okay, thank you.

Maree EDWARDS: One of the advantages of having the east wing and the redevelopment there is it just opens up more opportunities, irrespective of whether the opposition chooses to move or not, and those conversations are obviously ongoing. But it just opens up a whole new range of possibilities in terms of committee rooms, in terms of meeting space and in terms of office space. Given this building is so old and the heritage that is attached to it, change is very challenging and change is very expensive. But I think as a Parliament we have to move with the times and we have to make this building, as Shaun said, accessible to everyone. I think it is going to be a good outcome whichever way it lands.

Nicholas McGOWAN: Okay. Does the budget as it currently sits allow for the new determination that will be shortly handed down – the determination by the tribunal in respect of wages, EOs et cetera?

Trish BURROWS: No, it will not. What happens is if there is a change by the independent tribunal we then work out the balance that is required to come across and the Presiding Officers write to the Treasurer to advise the Treasurer of how much that is.

Nicholas McGOWAN: Okay. So you do not anticipate that in advance? You do not project or estimate what that might look like?

Trish BURROWS: No. That is a matter for the tribunal entirely.

Nicholas McGOWAN: Okay. So that will be done obviously in the next couple of months, I would think, after the determination.

Shaun LEANE: We have to respect their independence, so until they tell us their position, we do not know.

Nicholas McGOWAN: Thank you.

Danny O'BRIEN: In the brief time I have left, I will not bother asking a question.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr O'Brien. That would be a first. We will now go to Mr Galea.

Michael GALEA: Thank you, Chair. Good afternoon, Presiding Officers, clerks and Secretary. Thank you for joining us. Presiding Officers, if I can start with you, obviously I think we can all agree that we want the Parliament to be as accessible to all as possible. President, you spoke really well previously about this is not just a place of politicians, it is a place for the whole public. As well of course we have a lot of staff working here, both in the Parliament and for the members, and journalists and other visitors as well. One part of accessibility that I would like to ask you about is when they do come in, and that is the catering. I think we can all agree that our catering staff do an outstanding job. They have certainly been amazing to us all this week for PAEC as well. Some – in fact I would say a lot – of the food choices have been a bit more towards, can I say, the posh end of the scale, which is great to have. But have there been any initiatives looked at to get some more, shall we say, staple foods: things like sausage rolls, tomato sauce, all that sort of stuff –

Nicholas McGOWAN: Party pies.

Michael GALEA: Party pies – so that when people do come into the Parliament, and hopefully many, many more people will come into the Parliament over the coming years who have never perhaps been here before, we have some more choices.

Maree EDWARDS: Thank you so much, Mr Galea.

Shaun LEANE: Can I just briefly?

Maree EDWARDS: I know what you want to say.

Shaun LEANE: The Speaker has been passionate about this as well, and it has been her passion. But you mentioned the sausage rolls. The Parliament sausage rolls are legendary.

Maree EDWARDS: They have their own social media hashtag.

Michael GALEA: I have never had one.

Shaun LEANE: It has got its own social media, and if you follow the media personnel's Twitter accounts, they talk about sausage rolls.

Maree EDWARDS: #SpringStreetSausageRolls.

Shaun LEANE: But in all seriousness I will hand over to the Speaker.

Michael GALEA: I have heard about them, and I have never had one. I would love to try one.

Maree EDWARDS: Thank you, Mr Galea, for your question. Yes, it has been an issue of contention for a very long time, and it came down to a couple of things: access to the members dining room and the price and quality of food that was being served. You would have noticed – I hope you would have noticed, and I hope you have tried the Speaker's double fried chips; they are the best – that there have been some significant changes to the menu and also the set-up in the members dining room and Strangers Corridor to make it more open, more inclusive and more welcoming to visitors in particular. Anyone with a pass can use the members dining room up until 6 pm, when it is then only for members, and we have changed the menu. What we have tried to do with the menu is, after much toing and froing and negotiation, around making it less expensive but also having meals on that menu that members in particular and staff, who are often in a hurry and only have 1 hour for lunch, can have that are nutritious, not as expensive as a \$50 steak and something that is quick. It has I think been well received. I have had a few complaints. The expensive menu is still there, particularly for high

dining if members bring guests in for evening meals. That high-quality menu is still in existence, but we wanted to make it more of a cafe style. There is still more work to be done on that, but I think we are making progress. Change is not easy when things have been done the same for a very long time, so I hope that anyone who is watching this live stream will come to the members dining room and try the new menu.

Michael GALEA: Of course. And I would also like to acknowledge the immense work that the catering team, through the department, did during COVID as well – a lot of charity work.

Maree EDWARDS: Indeed, and our chef, who is quite extraordinary.

Michael GALEA: It is incredible, yes.

Maree EDWARDS: And the staff, who do an amazing job.

Michael GALEA: They really, really do. I would also maybe, perhaps as a question on notice, like to see when we can get the sausage rolls, but I will move on to another topic.

Maree EDWARDS: I was going to bring in a tray of sausage rolls, but apparently they had sold out.

Michael GALEA: Very good. If I can ask about the Youth Parliament, those statistics that you mentioned just previously were really quite impressive as to the participation from all sorts of different young Victorians in that program. What is the age range of the participants?

Maree EDWARDS: It is 7 per cent secondary schools, 8 per cent TAFE, 77 per cent undergraduate and 8 per cent postgraduate.

Michael GALEA: All right, wonderful.

Maree EDWARDS: So it is a range of ages. If you get a chance in three weeks time to come down to see the Youth Parliament sitting, I would encourage that because it is an eye-opener to how smart and knowledgeable and indeed how inquisitive these young people are about the democratic process, how great it is to see them engaged in a debate and how well they do it. Many of our acting chairs – and certainly I did it when I was Deputy Speaker – sit and chair those debates, and it is quite extraordinary to see the level of engagement of these young people. There are a lot of departments who are engaged in this Youth Parliament. You have got Hansard, you have got the communications team and you have got assistant clerks, who are coming to have some experience of managing the chamber, and acting speakers, who chair the debates. So it really is engaging the whole of the Parliament and the staff as well when Youth Parliament is sitting here, but it is something that we want to encourage and make sure continues and draws on a wide range of students from not just metropolitan Melbourne of course but right across Victoria.

Michael GALEA: I was actually just going to ask – I am assuming there is quite a lot of regional participation in this as well – is it targeted across the whole state?

Maree EDWARDS: Yes, so 23 per cent were from regional and rural and 70 per cent metro at the last one; 84 per cent women – female; 7 per cent non-binary; and 7 per cent preferred not to say. But like I said, the breakdown between the increasing number of students from non-English-speaking backgrounds has been quite noticeable and also the increasing number of students with a disability.

Shaun LEANE: Yes, it is fantastic.

Maree EDWARDS: It is about being inclusive of every student.

Michael GALEA: And I know it is a relatively small number from secondary school. Do you know how many private versus public?

Shaun LEANE: Take that on notice?

Maree EDWARDS: I take that one on notice, but from my own experience – and I do not want to highlight this too much – there does tend to be a leaning more towards the independent and Catholic schools.

Michael GALEA: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you. We are going to go to Mrs McArthur for the next 7 minutes.

Bev McARTHUR: Thank you, Chair. President, you instituted a system whereby the kitchen, during COVID, provided meals for the Salvation Army and the homeless. Are we still doing that?

Shaun LEANE: No, that particular program ceased. There were a number of charities – the Salvation Army, the Father Bob foundation and St Mary’s House of Welcome. I am forgetting a few, and I apologise. The issue that they had when we had discussions with them was that they do this fantastic work in making healthy meals available to people in need out of tiny little kitchens, and because of the restrictions that we had in the COVID time, those kitchens just could not be operational under the rules. Discussions we had with them were that, ‘We’ve got three big industrial kitchens here.’ We were not sitting, and we also wanted to make sure – we mentioned the fantastic catering staff, who are I suppose all our friends and work colleagues in this place – that we kept them gainfully occupied so they could produce the packaged meals. When society opened up and those smaller kitchens that the charities use could be used again, it was not necessary. But we have maintained really good relationships with all those groups, and we still are finding ways – if we can assist them, we still are. The Parliament – we want to be part of the community and we want to be acknowledged as part of the community. We are really keen to look at more ways that we can be seen as part of the greater community.

Bev McARTHUR: Do we have a figure attached to how much this has cost?

Shaun LEANE: I suppose that will be in previous budgets, but we are happy to take that on notice.

Bev McARTHUR: Thank you very much. Thank you, President. I am just curious: what is happening to Victoria and Albert, who seemed to be boxed up upstairs somewhere?

Maree EDWARDS: Who?

Bev McARTHUR: Victoria and Albert.

The CHAIR: Queen Victoria.

Shaun LEANE: The portraits of Victoria and Albert. Did you want to answer that one?

Maree EDWARDS: Like much of the artwork around this building, a lot of it is in storage, simply because there is not enough space to display it. I do not know – maybe I am unique in this, but I would have thought that most of the women in this Parliament would be overwhelmed by the number of portraits of males that line the walls of this building and the number of marble statues of men that are around the passages and the corridors of this building, but there is a lot of artwork that Parliament is responsible for. Some of it needs restoration occasionally, so that is being undertaken.

Shaun LEANE: And construction work too.

Maree EDWARDS: The construction work has meant that some pieces have had to be moved around, but the reality is that we have an amazing collection –

Bev McARTHUR: I am happy to relocate it to my office.

Maree EDWARDS: Well, we will have to negotiate that, Mrs McArthur.

Bev McARTHUR: I am fond of Victoria and Albert. I have got no problem with Victoria and Albert.

A member: Victoria or Albert.

Bev McARTHUR: Victoria or Albert.

Shaun LEANE: Yes. We are open to expressions of interest.

Maree EDWARDS: Yes. If I could just clarify, I think that one is related to the building works.

Bev McARTHUR: Okay. They seem to be well boxed up.

Maree EDWARDS: There is no scheme to remove her from the building.

Bev McARTHUR: They are not going to permanently end up in the garage?

Maree EDWARDS: No.

Bev McARTHUR: Good.

Bev McARTHUR: I am just wondering also about the restoration works to Parliament and the cost and if there are any blowouts, for example. Where are we up to with all these restoration works? I feel I might be dead before they are completed.

Danny O'BRIEN: I feel like I might be dead.

Bev McARTHUR: Mr O'Brien thinks he will be dead too.

Shaun LEANE: We are happy to give you –

Bev McARTHUR: Give us an update?

Shaun LEANE: We are happy to give you the figures. We will take it on notice. Correct me if I am wrong, I think it is called stage 14 at this stage.

Trish BURROWS: Stage 13 of the stoneworks.

Bev McARTHUR: Thirteen.

Shaun LEANE: Stage 13 of the stoneworks. But the good news –

Members interjecting.

Shaun LEANE: Yes. It is not that bad – it is 13. But the good news I can give you, Mrs McArthur, is that that is the last stage. The reason stage 1 started and continued all the way to stage 13 is that parts of the building were falling off. Parts of the stonework were actually coming away. There was a group of MPs having a discussion one day and a big rock from the building fell off between them. So it was assessed, and then it was assessed that there was a lot of stonework that needed to be repointed. And so if they are going to be up there, let us do a really good job of it. So the good news is I think it is the middle of next year that we are –

Trish BURROWS: During the next financial year.

Shaun LEANE: Next financial year.

Bev McARTHUR: All finished!

Maree EDWARDS: The facade.

Shaun LEANE: The facade is gone, the middle of next year –

Danny O'BRIEN: We start on the inside.

Maree EDWARDS: However, then they will have to start again!

Shaun LEANE: No, they are not going to start again.

Maree EDWARDS: No, they are not. I retract that.

Shaun LEANE: In our parliamentary lifetimes they are not going to start again.

Bev McARTHUR: Oh, excellent.

Maree EDWARDS: And members will be pleased to know the works on the east wing will be finished in the first half of next year.

Bev McARTHUR: So is there a budget that we are working to?

Maree EDWARDS: Yes.

Shaun LEANE: We will supply you with the financial figures around the stoneworks and any other –

Bev McARTHUR: And talking of the stonework, could I just get an assurance that if you are using any bluestone, it is coming from Bamstone in western Victoria and not China?

Shaun LEANE: We will get you where the stone is coming from.

Bev McARTHUR: That would be very good. We would like to think we are using local western Victoria stone.

Trish BURROWS: No, it is local. It is local stone. The stone is not bluestone.

Maree EDWARDS: It is all local.

Bev McARTHUR: It is all local? I got a bit of a message that there might be some –

Maree EDWARDS: Yes, and where we can in the building works, you would maybe not have noticed, certainly we try to retain the character of the heritage of the building, and that means using as much of previous materials that we have had to work with. So the bluestone, for example, in the east wing –

Bev McARTHUR: Bamstone. Bamstone is the one.

Shaun LEANE: Sandstone.

Trish BURROWS: Sandstone.

Maree EDWARDS: Yes, they are all being used and cleaned.

The CHAIR: Apologies, Mrs McArthur. As much as I hate to interrupt that session, we are going to hand over to Mr Hamer for the next 7 minutes.

Paul HAMER: Thank you, Speaker, President and officers. I would like to speak about the school programs. You always are seeing school groups come through, and just looking at the numbers that you put in the presentation, they are quite amazing. I assume that that is for this last financial year – 7000 student visitors.

Maree EDWARDS: Is that from the slide you are referring to?

Paul HAMER: Yes.

Maree EDWARDS: Yes, that is right. In the last financial year.

Paul HAMER: I was wondering if you could just expand maybe about the different programs that are offered to school students. Like you have got the sort of role-play –

Maree EDWARDS: I will not go into great detail because it is quite an extensive program and it covers both the parliamentary processes and broader democracy information if you like. We do a lot of role-plays. You may have seen in Queen's Hall just today, and also in the Assembly, that there is a big screen set up. And so we have lots of IT that presents who the Usher of the Black Rod is, what the mace stands for, who the President is, who the Speaker is, who the Clerk is and what they do, what Hansard does. So it explains all of the different departments as well. The outreach program does a lot of role-playing. One of the things I am very keen on is – the federal Speaker when I met with him was explaining to me about the process around community engagement and education with the federal Parliament, and one of the things they do with the federal Parliament is the Speaker actually goes out to the schools and participates in those role-plays, so we are very keen to engage in that process. They also present the school with a miniature mace and dispatch box as, you know, something as a keepsake from the Parliament. So there is a lot that we do that probably is difficult for me to go into in great detail, but it is about parliamentary processes, how a Bill goes through the house, those types

of things, but also about democracy more broadly, how we got to where we are, the history of the Parliament if you like.

Paul HAMER: And just looking through that, further on the presentation – you have got five regional school hub visits. Is that visits to regional centres basically just explaining what the Parliament is and what the Parliament process is?

Maree EDWARDS: Yes. So, for example, a regional hub might include – I will use my own electorate as an example – a trip to Castlemaine that would include schools from Kyneton or Daylesford as well, so it is like a hub where they have a central location and bring them all together. It is capturing as many students in regional communities as we can.

Paul HAMER: And what does that mean for the schools? What are they doing through that?

Maree EDWARDS: Well, they all have as part of their curriculum, particularly in grades 5 and 6, a politics, civics – I think it goes for a whole term. You, as members, might get invited out to your school to present to the grade 5s and 6s on what you do as a local member et cetera. It is part of their curriculum, really. It is part of their civics program.

Paul HAMER: Obviously there is a distance issue for some of the regional schools, but are there opportunities to improve regional access to the Parliament, particularly as an institution, as a building and as a historic part of the state?

Maree EDWARDS: Absolutely, yes. It is a very expensive exercise for a regional school geographically far away from Melbourne to bring their students to Melbourne. Hence we have the online learning courses for both the students and the teachers to participate, but there is nothing like actually being present in the Parliament and seeing it for yourself. I think the reduction in the regional train fares might make a difference to how some students might be able to travel to Melbourne. I think that is a good thing. We also have the schools excursion fund, which I think schools can access to allow students to participate in parliamentary processes and school tours and visits. It is challenging, but one of the things in terms of the outreach is to try and get to those schools that cannot come to Melbourne. Taking the Parliament to them is the alternative, and I think, from my perspective, I would like to see more of that. I would like to see greater engagement with our regional schools – rural schools, smaller schools, schools that might not normally have been able to bring their students to Melbourne for an excursion. I think there is definitely room for further outreach.

Paul HAMER: And the online incursions – would you know whether they are weighted more towards those regional schools?

Maree EDWARDS: Yes. We do have a breakdown. I am very pleased to say that my electorate had 17 schools that participated – in Bendigo West – in that process, and I think only two of those actually came to Parliament, so 15 of those schools participated in the online learning tools.

Paul HAMER: The online incursions program – was that something that was first developed through COVID, or was that something that had been in place before then?

Maree EDWARDS: It had already been there, but I think the access was extended and the programs were more developed throughout COVID, particularly as a lot of schools, obviously, were not in session. Students were learning from home, so having access to that online information was invaluable, but Trish might be able to add to some of that, or Bridget may be, about our education outreach.

Bridget NOONAN: Very quickly – and thank you for your interest and the committee's interest – the Department of the Legislative Assembly runs the tours program, and the Speaker covered some of the numbers at the outset. I think when I spoke to the committee last year I said, as we were coming out of the worst of the pandemic, it was interesting to see whether there would still be uptake for the online incursions, and when the Speaker read out that figure of just over 5000 students at the start I thought, 'Oh, gosh, have I given her the wrong number? That seems like too many.' But that really is the number who have participated, and we are getting better at catching data on who is not participating, so we hope to target those schools in the future.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Ms Noonan. I am going to go to Ms Sandell for 7 minutes.

Ellen SANDELL: Thank you. Good afternoon, everyone. I want to take you back to Legislative Council standing committees funding. Mr McDonald, you said that there had been a reduction. We are hearing that committees are struggling with an increased workload and are already looking at shortening inquiries due to limited secretariat support. I am just wondering: will this funding cut impact secretariat support, or will secretariat support be increased to cope with the demand that we are seeing?

Shaun LEANE: The answer to your second question is yes, and we are working towards a couple more research officers.

Ellen SANDELL: Great.

Shaun LEANE: We did in the budget get commitment to the second, third and fourth years of this term as far as committee funding goes. We had a situation where committee funding was only guaranteed for every two years, and we advocated that that does not make sense – the funding should be committed for the whole term. We need it to work on this year, this financial year, as far as making sure we have got enough funding for the extra resources that we need for the demand of the committees, and we will be able to achieve that.

Ellen SANDELL: Great.

Shaun LEANE: One of the issues is that I think we can support the committees with those sorts of resources. Mr Galea, I am not too sure if you would nod your head, but I think the issue is the actual MPs on the committee, and the time and them making quorum for the demands of the number of references that we are getting is probably a bigger issue for the committees than us being able to support them.

Ellen SANDELL: Okay, thank you. Appreciate that. I want to ask about staff. This one might be one for the Secretary. Electorate officers – obviously they have an EBA and they have got a whole process of collective bargaining and everything like that, but the current parliamentary advisers do not have those same rights. For example, my understanding is that the current parliamentary adviser agreement is due to expire at the end of this month but there has not been an engagement process with them to enable them to bargain, or even with the non-government party leaders, about what happens. That creates uncertainty for people who should have some rights and certainty around their employment. Can you speak to why that is happening?

Trish BURROWS: The first part of that question in relation to the collective agreement, so parliamentary advisers – the entitlement to that comes through the legislation, and the entitlement exists with the non-government parties and the minor parties in that those not in opposition have delegated that employment power.

Ellen SANDELL: Yes, we understand that.

Trish BURROWS: So all separate employers, not one employer. So when that came to pass, a collective agreement was negotiated as opposed to an enterprise agreement. And you are quite right, that is due to conclude in the coming weeks. We are about to issue advice to parliamentary advisers to participate in an EBA-like process, I guess, given it is a collective agreement, to get the input in relation to those terms and conditions, which borrow heavily of course from the electorate officers EBA and the parliamentary officers EBA and for that matter the VPS EBA. That process will kick off. It will take some time to conclude, and in the meantime the current collective agreement will continue in the same way as if it was an EBA-like process. But also engaging the employees, because there are seven employees of the current parliamentary advisers, so making sure they are engaged.

Ellen SANDELL: But they have not been – I guess just why the delay? Because we have not been engaged as their employers yet, and it is only weeks until their agreement ends.

Trish BURROWS: The agreement does not end so much as continues. It does not end and there will be nothing in place – the agreement continues until there is a new agreement.

Ellen SANDELL: That did actually happen last time, though. This happened – it ended and there was nothing in place.

Trish BURROWS: Right.

Ellen SANDELL: Before your time perhaps.

Trish BURROWS: Sure. But there will be communication out very shortly. It is definitely in draft form, and I apologise that it has not gone out earlier.

Ellen SANDELL: Thank you. Appreciate that. My final question: can we please get a new bike shed? There is not enough room in the bike shed.

Shaun LEANE: Really?

Ellen SANDELL: Yes. Sorry, I know it is a bit glib, but the bike parking is frequently full.

Maree EDWARDS: Certainly happy to look into that, Ellen. I know there is an increase in members and staff – the Clerk occasionally rides her bike as well – who are riding their bikes in to Parliament, so, yes, happy to look into that.

Ellen SANDELL: That would be wonderful, thank you. No further questions.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Ms Sandell. We will go straight to Mr Hilakari.

Mathew HILAKARI: President, Speaker and officials, thank you so much. We really appreciate your time this afternoon. There has been a lot of insightful commentary and information. I might take you to the DPS questionnaire, question 22, page 42, but also in your presentation where we did not quite get to supporting our Pacific partners, a really important program in my view around democratic engagement with other parliaments. I would like to in the first instance just take you to our engagement with Fiji's Parliament and outline some of the benefits that that relationship has both ways – so the exchange, because it is not a one-way exchange.

Maree EDWARDS: Thank you for that question. This is a very important part of what we do with our Pacific partners and our twinning parliaments of Fiji, Nauru and Tuvalu – or 'Tuvalu' or whichever way you say it.

Mathew HILAKARI: I will get to those two in a moment, have no doubt.

Maree EDWARDS: My first experience with our Pacific partners was at the Presiding Officers and clerks conference last year, which was held here in Melbourne – I think a week after I was elected Speaker, so I was kind of thrown in the deep end. But, can I say, it was a very good experience and a great learning curve as well, particularly in relation to trying to understand exactly what this twinning looked like, what sort of supports we provide to our Pacific partners and what benefit we gain from having them as partners as well. One of the highlights of that conference was the opening of the Davui room over at 55 St Andrews Place, which was opened by me and the Fijian Speaker. It is basically a room that is dedicated to our Fijian partners and an acknowledgement of that friendship – just honouring that partnership, I suppose. But it was probably a good acknowledgement of where we have been and how far we have come in relation to that. Of course the next Presiding Officers and clerks conference is coming up in the Solomon Islands, and that will obviously be a further opportunity to engage with our Pacific partners and build on those relationships.

I think we have assisted the Nauru Parliament with strategic planning workshops. We have provided committee staff to a floating budget office to support Fiji's secretariat with budget analysis, just as an example of some of the ways that we assist our Pacific partners. I think for a little more detail around that I will throw to Bridget, because Bridget is very involved in this and does a power of work with our Pacific partners and that engagement.

Bridget NOONAN: Sure. Thanks, Speaker. And thanks for the question. Just by way of background for perhaps newer members, our relationship with our Pacific partners is auspiced through our Commonwealth Parliamentary Association branch. That is not unique to us in Victoria; each of the Australian members of the CPA are twinned with a Pacific partner, and as the Speaker said, our branch is twinned with Fiji, Nauru and Tuvalu. But I need to acknowledge at this point that, specifically in our relationship with Fiji, a lot of that is funded specifically by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. So where the CPA sponsors a lot of twinning activity throughout the region, DFAT have specifically funded us over a period of time to provide some support to and capacity building in Fiji. We work very closely with DFAT and the United Nations Development Programme, who have an office in Fiji to identify the needs there. But, as the Speaker said, I think we see it very much as a partnership, and the Presiding Officers and clerks conference was a really good

opportunity to get together with our colleagues and share topics of interest. You know, you were chatting to the Fiji Speaker about issues to do with committee resourcing and question time, and it is a really good collaborative relationship.

Shaun LEANE: If I could just add, it is amazing work, and all credit to the clerks of both chambers and also DPS, which gets involved with some logistics. It is something that as members of the Victorian Parliament we all should feel proud and feel ownership of. The more that we can give you information about the work that has been done, I think it would be a benefit for all of us.

Mathew HILAKARI: I am just going to take you to closed captioning for broadcast and implementing Auslan, so quite a different conversation piece. Accessibility is not just being able to get into the building, it is also being able to access committees like this online. I know there are elements of these hearings which are produced for Auslan – not this session – but also closed captioning, or putting the words up on the screen, is something that I am hoping you can maybe talk to. I am not sure if it fits with the Secretary.

Maree EDWARDS: Yes. Look, we have in place our *Disability Action and Inclusion Plan*, and that includes the Auslan program and having Auslan interpreters, like we did at the opening of the 60th Parliament, but there is so much more to do. It is not just the facility. This building is just not accessible in many places to people with disabilities on the physical side. But there is also the other side of disabilities that we need to do better at, and Auslan is something I am very keen to promote and see expanded. Maybe this will be a surprise to the Secretary and the Clerk, but I would like to see training for our attendants and potentially staff and potentially members as well about learning Auslan, so that it is always here, there is always someone here in the building who can be an Auslan interpreter. It is just about making sure that we do not always have to bring in an Auslan interpreter – that we actually have the capacity within our own building and our own staff and our own people to actually assist with that.

Mathew HILAKARI: In the 30 seconds left, could I just go to captioning and the next steps that we might take? I am happy to take it on notice as well.

Trish BURROWS: A number of parliaments have been investigating what is suitable. The Australian Parliament has got it going. If you watch the Australian Parliament, you will notice that it rarely syncs with the voice, and that is because obviously there is a delay between audio and video. New South Wales has trialled quite a bit as well. The team from Vic Parl have been looking at what New South Wales has been doing, and we have trialled a little bit down here. At the moment the truth is there is not a system that works great. I also have watched a bit of the House of Commons; it also does not work. But we are looking at trying to convert to less worry about it being completely accurate in words and more about: does it communicate what is being said? So that is the next stage of investigation, which we will work with the Presiding Officers on.

Mathew HILAKARI: Thank you so much. Thank you.

Nicholas McGOWAN: On a point of order –

The CHAIR: Thank you, Ms Burrows. On a point of order –

Nicholas McGOWAN: Just two quick points of order in one, if I can. The first point of order is perhaps if I can suggest that between this year and next year we work with the Presiding Officers perhaps to look at something like an in camera session, so we can look at the security aspects. That is just a suggestion, so I would like to leave that with you, if I can.

The other thing I wanted to say to Bridget, Trish and Robert in a presumptuous way on behalf of all the new members of Parliament is thank you to your staff for your unending patience with our silly questions and from time to time complaints – and, you know, a little moaning here and there – because I know it must be a lot. We have a lot of new members, particularly in the Council, with half the Council being turned over in this last election. I wanted to thank you all, because it has taken an Orwellian effort and I appreciate it very much – and I think that goes right across the divides. Thank you very much, and that includes the Presiding Officers too.

Danny O'BRIEN: And I endorse the comments on the menu – much better.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Presiding Officers and officials, thank you very much for appearing before us today. The committee is now going to follow up on any questions taken on notice in writing, and responses will be required within five working days of the committee's request.

I thank all ministers and officers who have given evidence to the committee today, as well as Hansard, the committee secretariat and parliamentary attendants.

I also want to thank our hospitality staff – who keep us full of fabulous caffeine; their coffee is fantastic – and security and cleaning staff who have looked after all of us today.

The committee will resume its consideration of the 2023–24 budget estimates tomorrow, Friday 9 June, at 8:30 am.

I declare this hearing adjourned.

Committee adjourned.