

# CORRECTED TRANSCRIPT

## PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE

### **Inquiry into budget estimates 2005–06**

Melbourne — 3 June 2005

#### Members

Mr W. R. Baxter

Ms C. M. Campbell

Mr R. W. Clark

Mr B. Forwood

Ms D. L. Green

Mr J. Merlino

Mr G. K. Rich-Phillips

Ms G. D. Romanes

Mr A. Somyurek

Chair: Ms C. M. Campbell

Deputy Chair: Mr B. Forwood

#### Staff

Executive Officer: Ms M. Cornwell

#### Witnesses

Mr G. Jennings, Minister for Aboriginal Affairs;

Mr T. Healy, acting secretary;

Ms A. Jurjevic, executive director, Aboriginal Affairs Victoria; and

Mr S. Gregory, chief finance officer, Department for Victorian Communities.

**The CHAIR** — I declare open the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee hearings on the budget estimates for the portfolios of Aboriginal affairs and aged care. I welcome Mr Gavin Jennings, Minister for Aboriginal Affairs and Minister for Aged Care; Mr Terry Healy, acting secretary, Department for Victorian Communities, Ms Angela Jurjevic, executive director, Aboriginal Affairs Victoria, and Mr Stephen Gregory, chief financial officer, Department for Victorian Communities, departmental officers, members of the public and media.

In accordance with the guidelines for public hearings, I remind members of the public they cannot participate in the committee's proceedings. Only officers of the PAEC secretariat are to approach PAEC members. Departmental officers, as requested by the minister or his chief of staff, can approach the table during the hearings. Members of the media are also requested to observe the guidelines. 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 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 their transcript as soon as it becomes available. Could those who have mobile phones please turn them off and pagers be put to silent.

Minister, I call on you to give a brief presentation on the more complex financial and performance information that relates to the budget estimates for the Aboriginal affairs portfolio.

**Mr JENNINGS** — I thank the Chair of the committee and the majority of the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee, and I will provide you with some appraisal of what the government is trying to achieve through the portfolio of Aboriginal affairs. I have furnished committee members with a copy of the brief presentation I will provide.

**Overheads shown.**

**Mr JENNINGS** — There are a number of objectives the government tries to achieve in this portfolio, in particular to support Aboriginal communities in the name of undoing the damage of dispossession and ongoing disadvantage that Aboriginal people continue to face. We want to do that by strengthening the capacities of Aboriginal communities in the name of building a positive future. We believe there are a number of interlinking strategies we support through my output measures that I will be reporting to the committee today, and a number of other government programs designed to increase the recognition and respect shown by members of our community more broadly to members of the Aboriginal community, and hopefully that is reciprocated in the spirit of reconciliation. We certainly want to build on a method that the committee has probably heard on a number of occasions from ministers from the Department for Victorian Communities talking about the appropriateness of partnership and collaboration. Certainly that is a method we intend to adopt within programs in Aboriginal affairs. Clearly within the framework of the Department for Victorian Communities we try to ensure the integration and whole-of-government approach to significant community-based issues.

Our specific priorities that you will see in the budget and the ongoing programs of Aboriginal affairs, as I indicated, are designed to redress dispossession of land and culture, redressing the impact of those past injustices, and we want to make sure we support leadership development in the Aboriginal communities and have specific programs designed to improve the capacity of Aboriginal community organisations and the capacities of individuals and families within the Aboriginal community. During the course of this year an important way in which we will be doing that and to ensure the most effective delivery of government services is to develop the whole-of-government approach. You will see from the slide on the growth in Aboriginal Affairs Victoria's annual budget that there has been significant increase over the period of the Bracks government, but in particular from the graph that indicates the significant rise in the budget expenditure through Aboriginal Affairs Victoria from \$9.3 million in 1999–2000 to, in the most recent budget, the equivalent programmatic figure for the output of AAV of \$19.3 million. Mr Forwood and I have had a bit of fun in the past about whether that is an exponential growth in the graph —

**Mr FORWOOD** — You went back and read last year's transcript.

**Mr JENNINGS** — No, it was indelibly imprinted on my brain. I have great confidence in the escalator factor; whether it actually satisfies you technically on the basis of being exponential is another thing that we might leave for further consideration. It is certainly a significant increase during the life of our government; there is no doubt about that.

**Ms ROMANES** — It is beginning to be exponential.

**Mr JENNINGS** — I am setting quite a benchmark for myself, aren't I, even though I keep on returning to Public Accounts and Estimates Committee? Most importantly, there are a range of specific measures that we think will improve the daily lives of members of the Aboriginal community. Whilst we share a bit of a joke in relation to the numbers, the most important thing over time is that this will measure the effectiveness of these programs in improving the daily lives of Aboriginal people.

The portfolio focus for 2005–06, as I have indicated to the committee, is it is our intention to try to provide greater coordination across whole of government. One allocation that was in our output is \$810 000 over two years to enhance Aboriginal Affairs Victoria's capacity to develop service agreements with Aboriginal community organisations. I know an issue this committee has been very concerned about is some degree of transparency and some connection between programs the government provides and outcomes. This will be the prime vehicle for those indicators and target outcomes to be measured within a service agreement. We want to streamline service agreements for Aboriginal community organisations; rather than having a multiplicity of service agreements, to enter into a single service agreement with the Victorian government. That in itself is quite an exercise — to break down those silos, to establish pooled integration of funding within a single agreement that has clear accountability measures. That is what we will be embarking upon in this financial year. Similarly we want to make sure that Aboriginal community organisations are on a sound footing in terms of the asset-based facilities they operate out of. We have embarked upon an \$800 000 program in this year. We have identified funds to support the assessment of that asset base to introduce some urgent works if there are some occupational health and safety and fire issues that may be appropriately needed to be dealt with and to establish an ongoing asset program. Our friends in the Department of Treasury and Finance are very happy to embark upon that journey with us knowing full well that it is incumbent upon us to ensure that Aboriginal community organisations operate out of safe community facilities that will be accessible in the future to Aboriginal communities.

Most members of the upper house of the committee know I have spent quite a bit of time dealing with cultural heritage matters which will culminate in the delivery of a new cultural heritage piece of legislation into the Parliament later this year. I am pleased to say we have some degree of cooperation with our commonwealth brothers and sisters who recognise that it may be appropriate to repeal the commonwealth act and to allow such a bill to proceed in the state of Victoria.

**The CHAIR** — One thing about exponential factors is that you will have to use that to get through the rest of your slides in the 10 minutes allocated.

**Mr JENNINGS** — How am I going:

**The CHAIR** — About a minute and a half left.

**Mr JENNINGS** — The portfolio focus for 2005–06 will be to support land and economic development. We recognise that the budget identified \$9.6 million to allow for the purchase of some parcels of land that may be under the control of Aboriginal people, but equally as important, to develop some infrastructure particularly around cultural heritage and tourism potential that will also see the ongoing social and economic development of Aboriginal people throughout the state, starting with a proposal in south-west Victoria. We have allocated \$5.1 million to provide support to members of the stolen generation, those who have lost their loved ones through various child protection and other child-related matters — families who have been lost to one another for many years. We have allocated \$5.1 million to support an organisation that will provide services ranging from counselling, advocacy and education on the needs of those people.

We have allocated \$3.2 million to the community at Lake Tyers as a community rebuilding and restoration of services as an important step in the community rebuilding process in Lake Tyers. In the last year it builds on a number of successes we have had in terms of the Constitution (Recognition of Aboriginal People) Bill. The Parliament of Victoria introduced the first amendment to our constitution, which was the first in the nation, to have recognition of Aboriginal people within our constitution. I have embarked upon extensive consultations with Aboriginal people about that matter, about whole-of-government approach, and about cultural heritage matters. We have embarked upon the community renewal program at Lake Tyers, there is the stolen generation and heritage partnerships with a number of Aboriginal communities in particularly sensitive cultural heritage locations throughout Victoria, and we are establishing a cultural heritage strategy to augment our new legislation.

We recognise that it is incumbent upon us to support people in their training for those heritage services so that there is a capacity within Aboriginal communities to undertake that quality work, whether it be investigatory or whether it be to provide advice about how precious cultural heritage could be protected into the future. We recognise there is a need to support Aboriginal community organisations and have done work to increase the capacity for Aboriginal community organisations. I will not talk about a range of other initiatives in other portfolios because they are not in my output group, but I will let the committee know about the number of investments which include \$7 million in chronic health; \$12 million in child protection and family arrangements so that Aboriginal people are cared for; \$2.4 million in family violence programs; and some assistance for Reconciliation Victoria.

**The CHAIR** — I want to take you to whole-of-government matters in your portfolio. Could you tell us about the progress that has been made in relation to the whole-of-government approach to Aboriginal affairs? I notice you did not get much of a chance to do those in the slides, but perhaps you could expand in your answer.

**Mr JENNINGS** — We recognise that it is important for the government — —

**The CHAIR** — I am sorry, and I also should say that I try to keep people to about 4-minute answers.

**Mr JENNINGS** — I am much better at keeping to 4 minutes, as members of the upper house know. What we are trying to do is to ensure that the duplication of effort experienced by Aboriginal people in their dealings with government is minimised. That is one overriding objective of a whole-of-government approach. We think that far too often Aboriginal community organisations are stretched far too thinly by the same people being involved in not only the accountability measures within their responsibility but also embarking upon all the consultative mechanisms involved in dealing with government. The same people turn up quite often to the health forum, the justice forum, and the education forum. While there will be an ongoing need for there to be good lines of communication between community members and portfolios, and ministers who are responsible for those programs, there is a nurtured need, in my view which is shared certainly by Aboriginal people, and I am pleased to say by my colleagues in the Bracks government, that we need to streamline those processes.

We are embarking on a new round of discussions with Aboriginal people with some options papers about how that might be best streamlined in the next few months. Particularly in light of the demise of ATSIC this is an important issue. In fact, the commonwealth government at this time would be quite happy at this stage to piggyback off our consultative processes. They recognise that it would be a plus if we can have one streamlined process and would be useful for both jurisdictions. Consultation is important. Equally as important is the development of service agreements which will bring together both funding streams that are currently isolated from problematic outcomes or another, and also provides some degree of accountability. The issue that the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee has raised before is about the degree of accountability and delivery of agreed indicators. Those are the things that we see as a feature of those service agreements.

**The CHAIR** — How many meetings are you expecting all these people to go to in order to concertina it into a whole-of-government approach, and what are the time lines we are looking at for a whole-of-government agreement?

**Mr JENNINGS** — It is our intention during the life of all the funding arrangements within the next financial year to deliver single service agreements during that period of time, so that answers the second question. The answer to the first question as to when that will happen and be implemented, whilst I appreciate the interest and the pressing nature of the committee's concern — except to make sure that that is appropriately balanced — my enthusiasm and your enthusiasm must be appropriately balanced by the buy-in by Aboriginal people. I am hoping to visit them within the next few months.

**The CHAIR** — You will not have months and years of more meetings?

**Mr JENNINGS** — No.

**Mr FORWOOD** — It is rather up to them, I think. I refer to pages 49 and 50 of BP 3 which indicate that the benchmarks for indigenous students reaching national benchmarks for years 3 and 5 are substantially below those for non-indigenous students. If you look at the reading one for year 3 it is 70 per cent, for non-indigenous students is 92 per cent. At the back of the budget papers at page 341 it says:

The number of indigenous Victorians and indigenous Australians achieving national benchmarks was consistently and substantially below average figures.

I know this is an education issue — —

**Mr JENNINGS** — I knew you were about to qualify that.

**Mr FORWOOD** — I know it is, but I know also that you are concerned about it. The first thing I am interested in is why are the benchmarks not being set higher — in other words, why are we consistently accepting that this is the way it is, and can you tell us what drive and impetus you are putting in to new programs to address this? I am sure you would agree that if we start addressing this then we have a better chance of addressing the other things as we go on.

**Mr JENNINGS** — As a starting point, and I do not anticipate that this is the first question that has been asked outside my portfolio — I appreciate that Mr Forwood has already acknowledged that in his question — I imagine that a lot of the interest at the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee may be on areas that are outside my output areas that I am actually reporting to you. I want to acknowledge that straight away. I embark regularly with my ministerial colleagues, through the Minister for Education and Training, through the social development committee of cabinet, through the cabinet process and at a formal level we discuss regularly the intention of the government to try to correct what Mr Forwood has correctly identified as being unacceptable standards of achievement that Aboriginal children are currently experiencing in school, and exercising our minds about the way in which we can turn that around. This is something that I know that the Minister for Education and Training is concerned about and the Department of Education and Training is concerned about. I have no doubt about this.

As recently as Monday of this week I met with the leadership of the indigenous stakeholder body within education to discuss ways in which it can achieve better outcomes for kids. Our conversation was in light of the whole of government approach. I actually wanted to assure them that their investment in their consultative mechanisms, their support for Koori educators — that my desire to drive a whole-of-government agenda would not jeopardise their 20 years of investment. You will appreciate that that was an important thing for me to square away with them, because there is a level of expertise and commitment that they have. So that is an indicator of my interest in education.

I have also travelled to Shepparton in the not-too-distant past to observe an approach to learning that has been brought to Victoria from the Hebrew University, a program that has been trialled in a number of different communities, including four schools in Shepparton and other locations, with the desire — Mr Healy has just reminded me of the spelling of its name. It is pronounced ‘Yachad’, and is spelt ‘Y-A-C-H-A-D’. Good on you, Mr Healy, for being part of the team. I might have been able to remember that myself, but he was brought in to provide me with a bit of support! The program is designed to be tailored to the individual need of each child and have an accelerated learning program. That process is 6 months into a pilot for the next 18 months. It is an example of an innovative approach to try to turn those statistics around. The minister for education, I am sure if you actually raised the same question with her when she was here, would have talked about the significant changes currently being made to the way in which Koori Open Door Education schools operate within the state of Victoria — or maybe you have not spoken to the minister for education yet.

**Mr FORWOOD** — Yes, we have, but we did not talk about that.

**Mr JENNINGS** — As we speak, significant reforms are being brought into the KODE schools this year — they are Koori-only schools — in a number of locations. There are four of them across the state, with particular emphasis on providing resources and better support to teachers in those environments so that they can generate better outcomes for children. So, as I have indicated to the committee, there is a variety of ways and strategies that are being adopted at present to address these circumstances. I find it totally unacceptable that we have a differentiation in the benchmarks that we apply to any kids in Victoria, and I am sure that is philosophically shared by the minister for education and the team who support her in leading to these measures. The only justification at this point in time is a sense of the order of magnitude, the scale and the rate of change that is feasible and realistic, not because the aspiration is set lower.

**Mr FORWOOD** — I would like to see — and I am sure you would — next year's target set higher and the achieving of higher targets, because I do not think we can just continue to have the parallel tram tracks, accepting that it is lower. So it would be good if that would happen.

**The CHAIR** — Minister, I do not expect you to have these figures here with you, but could you provide the committee, through the Department of Human Services, with the kinder participation rate of indigenous children? I know that post-2000 there was a considerable investment of time and energy into improving the participation rate and a significant investment in preschools. I would imagine that there would be a correlation in years to come between increasing participation in preschool and better outcomes later on, so it would be interesting if that could be provided. I would not expect you to have it here with you.

**Ms ROMANES** — Minister, I think we all know how important land and culture are to Aboriginal people. In budget paper 3, under 'New measures' on pages 247 and 248, there are measures that relate to the number of community land initiatives established, and over the page the approved land initiatives established within stipulated time frames. Can you tell the committee what action the government is taking to address the dispossession of Aboriginal land and culture in Victoria?

**Mr JENNINGS** — Thank you for asking a question about something which I think has the potential to be a bit of a breakthrough in terms of our relationship with Aboriginal people on the basis of greater access to control of land and management of land. Most members of our community know of the expression of desire for our Aboriginal people to be reconciled to the land and to have control over the land and that it is very important to them both in terms of the spiritual connection and in terms of the cultural heritage, and indeed to be able to provide a social and economic base. The government has tried to achieve those multiple objectives by providing funds for both the purchase of some parcels of land and for infrastructure and some value adding to be associated with those parcels of land, particularly at this early stage, through the prism of cultural heritage protection, interpretation and building a viable base for tourism activities.

We think there is great potential to work in collaboration with Aboriginal people on these projects. We have great confidence that we can leverage off far greater outcomes than the budget allocation itself by a collaborative approach with the Indigenous Land Corporation, which is a commonwealth body that has significant funds available in the trust to support land purchase and infrastructure development for Aboriginal people. We think that by working in collaboration we can achieve great things in terms of trying to turn around this urgent, heartfelt desire for affiliation with the land, the control of land, the control of land management matters and, as I have indicated, to develop tourism-based enterprises in many Aboriginal communities.

We are not necessarily forcing people to go into tourism at all, but we think there is an extraordinary array of natural and cultural heritage features within Victoria that otherwise may not be known by members of our community generally or the tourists who come here. And Lake Condah is one of those locations — an extraordinary place, where there is evidence of continual habitation within the lava flow from Mount Eccles to the sea, where Aboriginal people have lived for perhaps 10 000 years on a continual basis, cultivating a fishing industry — eel traps out of that lava flow. It is quite an extraordinary manipulation of the natural environment to enable a sustainable way of life for those tens of thousands of years. That is an extraordinary thing that very few people in Australia understand. Very few people have gone there and understand the significance of that pattern of habitation. It is something I think that is pretty unique in the world. So we are not just talking about something that may be of marginal interest in cultural heritage terms or tourism potential, but something that could be quite significant and which has been quite latent in the Victoria community.

So we are starting modestly within our first year of the application of this funding. We are aiming for three such agreements during the course of this year. If we exceed that target, I will be extremely happy, but we want to make the appropriate steps in the next few years to hopefully get over this hurdle, one jurisdiction after another. It has not been achieved in Victoria in the past, and we hope we will be able to.

**Mr CLARK** — I refer to Lake Tyers and the program you referred to with \$3.2 million over four years for community renewal, and I also refer to budget paper 3, page 248, which has a performance measure of Lake Tyers projects completed within set time frames — 100 per cent for 2005–06. Does that performance measure mean that all of the projects are intended to be completed within the 2005–06 financial year? Has an administrator now been appointed to Lake Tyers as provided for in the legislation that went through Parliament last year? And without repeating what is already in the *A Fairer Victoria* document, can you tell me a bit more about the objective

of training residents to undertake urgent works for the community, And does the program address what I understand is a very low rate of school attendance by children living at Lake Tyers?

**Mr JENNINGS** — That was a pretty comprehensive set of questions. I thank you for your interest in what is a very important community building program which will be embarked upon over a number of years. Clearly the \$3.2 million is not allocated within a single year. Indeed, we estimate that over the next four years the projects will be front-end loaded to the extent of a bit over \$500 000 this year, a bit under \$500 000 the following year and about \$200 000 in each of the following two years. To answer your last question, we understand the importance of making sure that children have a connection with school so the very first project — even before this budget came out — was a breakfast program designed to encourage the school-aged children to come together and have a nutritional breakfast and then go on to school. That was the very first project we embarked upon even prior to the legislative change, even prior to the administrator being appointed.

The administrator was appointed just on Christmas time last year. His name is Bob Brewster and by this time he has established his relationships with the Aboriginal community. He has embarked upon a work program and will assist us in the management of these projects. He will provide support and guidance to other people who will be employed under this program to undertake community coordination and other management roles there.

There is an allocation of money within this funding for training, particularly out of the training centre on Lake Tyers itself to try to add to the wherewithal of people living in this community. I am pleased to say that we have some encouraging indications at this point in time that the commonwealth may join us in this community rebuilding program. I cannot say that it has absolutely wholeheartedly committed to the funding but we think we are making positive strides to get it to assist in the rebuilding and renovation of houses on Lake Tyers. I for one will welcome the commonwealth's support for this community rebuilding. I think that pretty much covers it.

**Mr CLARK** — I also asked if you could add anything to the program for the training of residents to undertake urgent works.

**Mr JENNINGS** — The training regime we will embark upon within the training centre will range from governance capacity — it is our intention to have a return to community control so we are wanting to support the governance capacity of individuals living in the community; that is one set of training capacity — to programs in terms of job readiness for a range of occupations.

Obviously within one training regime you cannot be overly adventurous about what the range of occupations will be but one of the areas will be manual work that relates to that reconstruction and rebuilding of local communities. There will be sewerage work, road work, houses will be rebuilt and a community centre will be established there. The very sorry situation is there are a number of people who have had qualifications or have had jobs in those industries in the past so we are not actually starting from scratch — we are retraining some people who have already demonstrated some capacities in construction, landscaping and other activities. We want to build them back up to be job ready. We are confident that we can achieve a lot through this program.

**Mr FORWOOD** — Just a quick supplementary question, on page 248 of budget paper 3 the measure says, 'Lake Tyers projects: completed within set timeframes' and the target is 100 per cent. You have just told the committee that the Lake Tyers' projects will be going over more than one year so I am not sure that this is the most useful measure the committee could have. Perhaps we should have the number of projects you anticipate doing this year. The way this is outlined I am not sure it provides any information at all.

**Mr JENNINGS** — Let me take that one on the chin and let me volley it back. One of the reasons we cannot do it at this moment is while I was optimistic about the commonwealth I am waiting for it to agree to what its money can do. When I know that and the community knows that, we will be able to stage-manage those programs in a slightly different way.

**The CHAIR** — By way of supplementary on Lake Tyers, are you saying that the training of the community members from Lake Tyers is primarily in relation to the construction and building industry? Is the nature of their training solely for that site or beyond? I picked up that you might be doing the training on the site to have them work ready to move off Lake Tyers. Have I picked that up correctly?

**Mr JENNINGS** — It is both. In the long term you want people to be able to be engaged in ongoing employment. There is a limited amount of reconstruction work that will take place at Lake Tyers. It may take a few years but you want them to be in full-time, long-term employment.

**The CHAIR** — There is plenty of work down around Metung — they cannot find workers. Baseline levels of performance in relation to Lake Tyers, — do you have any comments on that?

**Mr JENNINGS** — Which one?

**The CHAIR** — The performance measure. You made the point that it was 100 per cent.

**Mr JENNINGS** — I took that one on the chin. I know you may have thought my answer was a bit cute but the reality is if the commonwealth money comes and is spent on housing, our money can be spent on road building, sewerage and the community facilities. If the commonwealth money does not come, it might be incumbent upon us to do housing and sewerage — they are different projects. That is why they are interrelated. Clearly while we want to rebuild the community infrastructure, you cannot necessarily do that at the expense of the houses.

**The CHAIR** — But that still goes to the point of how many houses. The performance measure — what is it you wish to achieve with the Victorian money?

**Mr JENNINGS** — I understood that.

**Ms GREEN** — I refer you to page 10 of budget paper 3 which refers to funding provided for the needs of the stolen generations — \$2.1 million over preceding years and \$5.1 million over the next four years. Could you update the committee on how this funding has assisted in addressing the needs of the stolen generations?

**Mr JENNINGS** — Thank you for that. On the steps of Parliament House on the National Day of Healing, which was previously known as Sorry Day, I talked to the assembled crowd about the program the government announced as part of the budget. During the course of the day I took that further by appointing a board to take up the responsibility to meet the needs of the people who have become known to be members of the stolen generations. We are talking about people who have effectively lost contact with their families.

A lot of Aboriginal people who have come from all over Australia to live in our community, as well as people who have grown up in Victoria, may have lost contact with their families for a variety of reasons. In some jurisdictions across the country there were some policies where Aboriginal children were forcibly removed from their parents with little policy justification other than to protect the child from what might be a degraded life by basically taking them out of the community. That happened over many decades. In Victoria that was not so much a conscious policy intention — I am sure on many occasions it was undertaken with the best of intentions and in the name of child protection methods. However, it has meant that thousands of Aboriginal people around Australia, many of them living in Victoria, have lost contact with their loved ones for decades. Many Aboriginal adults never in their memory had any connection with their parents in the time they grew up and have lost connection with their aunts and uncles and extended family. This service will enable people to trace their family trees using public records and other forms of information that can be used to trace family trees.

We have already established an extensive database that we have funded in a preliminary way through the Koori Heritage Trust. They have established a great database of family connections. Once those families can be traced, there will be an active program to try to reconnect those individuals. It is very hard for any of us sitting around this room to understand the profound emotional nature of that reconnection — that sense of loss, that sense of grieving, that sense of anticipation and anxiety about such a reconnection being made. This service will provide support — counselling support, guidance support and emotional support — to enable people to make those reconnections and make them in a positive way.

There may be ongoing needs for counselling once those connections have been made — there certainly will be — so that will be a primary role of the organisation. Another ongoing role will be to provide our community more generally with advice about the range of issues that have been thrown up to the surface, one of which would be current child protection methods. Even though in the state of Victoria at this point in time there is a clear policy principle which says that Aboriginal children taken out of the care of their parents should be placed with Aboriginal families, because of the level of disadvantage experienced by most Aboriginal families in the state of Victoria, that



means that there is a shortage of viable foster families for children to go into. So, whilst it is certainly not our intention to replicate the history of stolen generations, by default unless you address the capacity and wherewithal of those foster families you can repeat some of those sorry circumstances of the past. Not only did we make the announcements about the stolen generations organisation, we also made significant investment in terms of support for Aboriginal families, both the natural families and the foster families — the families which provide foster care. So there is almost twice as much investment within this budget to deal with those issues — to deal with the here and now whilst we are trying to play that supportive role for the stolen generations.

**The CHAIR** — Minister, I let you go a bit longer on that question, because it was a long tale to tell, but we have three more to get through. If you could curtail your answers that would be appreciated — as much information as required, but not quite as extensive.

**Mr FORWOOD** — This is a simple question, but thank you for your last answer. Minister, I refer you to page 401 of BP 3, which refers to the discontinued measures. While I am delighted to see that the measure of tabling your annual report has vanished, I am less sanguine about the fact that you have decided to delete the issue over which we have argued for the last two years — that is, the number of times the Premier's Aboriginal Advisory Council has met. My first question is: how many times has it met this year, and how many times do you anticipate it will meet in the forthcoming year? And can you explain to the committee why you have decided to delete a measure, other than the fact that it has caused you embarrassment in the past?

**Mr JENNINGS** — I do not think it ever caused me embarrassment. It may be that I could not give you the optimum answer from my perspective, but it certainly was not because I was very embarrassed by it. Earlier in my presentation I talked about the way in which we want to concertina the consultative mechanisms and how we want to establish a representative body to take up the space that had been previously taken by ATSIC. We think that is something that would be very attractive to Aboriginal people and also very useful in their interaction with government. The prime reason we have taken out the Premier's Aboriginal Advisory Council's measure is that up until now the council has comprised the Premier, myself and the three elected representatives of ATSIC. That is the way it has been constituted.

Clearly with the demise of ATSIC it is no longer appropriate for that to be the method of engagement with the Aboriginal community at the level of the Premier. So in the models for consultation with Aboriginal people and how that representative body may come together there are some proposals for the executive or peak of those representative structures to be the body that meets with the Premier and me to discuss these whole-of-government measures. The question first of all is whether that is acceptable to Aboriginal people. I think it makes sense that it will be. I think the Premier's expectation is that it will be. That will be the expectation that comes out of the consultation with Aboriginal people. When they consider this issue about who will meet, I think there should also be a discussion about how often we meet — whether it is appropriate to meet three, four or half a dozen times. I meet with members of the Aboriginal community pretty regularly, so from my perspective it would not worry me if it were about 100 times, but other people may think that is too much.

**Mr MERLINO** — Minister, I refer you to budget paper 3, page 247, and the output initiative around formal consultations. Could you please comment on the implications of the commonwealth's new arrangements for indigenous affairs for Victoria's indigenous communities?

**Mr JENNINGS** — I will make you all happy by saying that I gave half of my answer to the previous question to saying effectively that there needs to be a replacement for ATSIC and that we are embarking on a measure to try to replace it in a way that will be acceptable not only to the state of Victoria but also to the commonwealth, so that will be good. The second part of the answer relates to the way in which the commonwealth is currently considering program redesign and priorities in terms of meeting the agenda. This is something my colleagues in the upper house have heard me talk about previously during question time — 4 minutes always! The concern is that the focus of the commonwealth at the moment is on remote communities. It has defined the problem of Aboriginal people as being one experienced by people who are living in remote areas. That is not just my postulating on this, the evidence is there. If you have a look at the shared responsibility agreements that the commonwealth has tried to enter into with the Aboriginal communities, you see they are all in northern and Western Australia. It has not focused on trying to reach new agreements with any Aboriginal communities in south-east Australia — anywhere east of South Australia, and certainly none in the state of Victoria. That is a concern.

As you all know because you have heard me say it before, the life expectancy of Aboriginal people in Victoria is virtually the same as the life expectancy of Aboriginal people who live in remote areas of Australia. That is why I am worried about the current focus. As laudable as it may be for the commonwealth to want to reinvest in communities — let us not argue the toss about that; good on them if they reinvest in any community and support it — it is certainly not at the moment looking at Victoria and the situation for Victorian Aboriginal people.

**Mr CLARK** — Minister, I refer you to budget paper 3, page 247, and to the first performance indicator under the indigenous community and cultural development output group — that is, ‘Aboriginal community-building grants: number approved’. As you will see, the actual and target up to 2005–06 has been 28, for 2005–06 it is shown as being 20–27. Given that the introductory description of that output group talks about working in partnership with Victorian Aboriginal communities and their organisations to increase participation in partnerships with government, can you explain why the number of approved grants is expected to fall next financial year? Can you also provide the committee with a list of the 28-odd grants that are expected to be provided this financial year?

**Mr JENNINGS** — The answer to your first question is that we made a decision that the performance measure is a little bit restrictive, because we have not necessarily reduced the amount of funding that has been available. Twenty-eight was a good, educated guess about the shape and size of the funding submissions that were made to us and how they actually met the needs of Aboriginal community organisations to enhance their capacity. But a prescriptive number does not necessarily mean much in terms of the target. It may well be that you have 20 better projects that actually cost you the same amount of money as 28 ordinary ones. Really, numbers 20 to 27 are there to provide us with a bit of flexibility to have larger grants out of the same pool of money to improve the organisational capacity of communities in particular. That is the reason why that flexibility range has been done: it enables us to give some larger grants. The answer to the next part of your question is: I have got them; do you want me to give them to you?

**Mr FORWOOD** — On notice will be fine.

**The CHAIR** — I saw the look on the Hansard reporter’s face!

**Mr JENNINGS** — I can do it as quickly as you like.

**The CHAIR** — It would be useful if one of you could provide those to the secretariat. That would be most appreciated. Thank you to Ms Angela Jurjevic, Mr Terry Healy and Mr Stephen Gregory for your attendance today — and I am sorry, Stephen, that we did not ask you any specific questions.

**Witnesses withdrew.**