

CORRECTED TRANSCRIPT

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into 2004–05 budget estimates

Melbourne – 18 May 2004

Members

Mr W. R. Baxter

Ms C. M. Campbell

Mr R. W. Clark

Mr L. A. Donnellan

Mr B. Forwood

Ms D. L. Green

Mr J. Merlino

Mr G. K. Rich-Phillips

Ms G. D. Romanes

Chair: Ms C. M. Campbell

Deputy Chair: Mr B. Forwood

Staff

Executive Officer: Ms M. Cornwell

Witnesses

Mr S. Bracks, Minister for Multicultural Affairs;

Mr Y. Blacher, Secretary;

Ms L. Hill, executive director, corporate and organisational development division;
and

Ms B. Mountjouris, acting director, Victorian Office of Multicultural Affairs,
Department for Victorian Communities.

The CHAIR — Welcome. I declare open the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee hearings on the budget estimates for 2004-2005. I welcome the Honourable Steve Bracks, Premier of Victoria and Minister for Multicultural Affairs; Mr Yehudi Blacher, Secretary of the Department for Victorian Communities; Ms Barbara Mountjouris, acting director, Victorian Office of Multicultural Affairs; and Ms L. Hill, executive director, corporate and organisational development, Department for Victorian Communities. All evidence taken by this committee is taken the provisions of the Parliamentary Committees Act and is protected from judicial review. However, any comments made outside the precincts of this hearing are not protected by parliamentary privilege. All evidence given today is being recorded. Witnesses will be provided with proof versions of the transcript early next week. Premier, over to you, and we look forward to your presentation.

Mr BRACKS — Thank you, Chair; and to the members of the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee, I am very pleased to be here again. As I have mentioned on previous occasions, I take seriously the accountability requirements of executive government, and, of course, the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee is one of the primary committees that has that responsibility to ensure that there is some opportunity for Parliament to examine the work of the executive, which I know you do in a very capable way. This is the fifth occasion on which I have been able to present before the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee, both as the Minister for Multicultural Affairs and the Premier and, on the first occasion, as Treasurer as well, so I am pleased to be here.

I will go to some of the slides which provide an overview of the work of the Victorian Office of Multicultural Affairs and some of the work which is associated with the budget which has just been presented. Obviously we do not have an overhead presentation with this, but I think it is self-evident. If I can address the record in multicultural affairs over the last 12 months, some of the significant achievements which are identified as part of the budget process are the frameworks underpinning our approach to multicultural affairs, the major strategic projects which we have in place for 2003-04, initiatives we have put in place to continue to support communities and departments and key priorities for the coming year. The policy contains four key principles. The first is valuing diversity. This provides information to the community and guidance to departments and agencies. The second is reducing inequality. The third is encouraging participation. The fourth is promoting the social, cultural and economic benefits of cultural diversity for all Victorians. We have a whole-of-government multicultural affairs reporting framework. I think I reported on the last couple of occasions that it has been the policy of our government to see multicultural affairs not as a discrete subset of any one department but something for which health and education, justice and a whole range of other departments that have equal responsibility for.

This year we completed a second year of reporting under the framework and the results of that reporting are detailed in the annual report. We also have a whole-of-government report which I think has just been distributed which provides more accountability for the work of the Victorian Office of Multicultural Affairs and obviously is a good statement of what we have achieved and what we plan to do. The Victorian Multicultural Commission conducts community consultation on the results and achievements outlined in departmental reports and provides feedback to government.

I will go to some major strategic projects. In language services first of all, it is a key initiative of the government to improve the delivery of interpreting and translating services in Victoria. The 2002-03 budget allocated \$2 million over four years to the strategy, and some key achievements to date include providing scholarships for people to train as interpreters in rare and emerging languages, creating a health translations web site within the Department of Human Services, subsidising interpreter courses in rare and emerging languages and the release of our policy and guidelines on the use of interpreters and translators.

The second major strategic project was the skilled migration strategy, and probably since I last reported to the committee that has been significantly developed. I am pleased to announce that I was able to launch on 30 April with my parliamentary colleague the Minister for Employment and Youth Affairs, Jacinta Allan, our skilled migration strategy from 2004 to 2007. The strategy is funded and has included in this budget funding for \$6 million over four years. The budget is designed to increase skilled migration to Victoria, including addressing skill shortages in regional Victoria, which is a particular focus as well. This has three major components. One is an international and domestic marketing strategy, and I can elaborate on that further if you wish, a regional migration incentive fund and targeted programs to help local communities. We have also supported the work through a new web site. One of the areas that was discovered through the work that was done in preparation of the skilled migration policy was that the major source of information from individuals who are deciding where to live and reside and to shift to was a well-resourced, well-developed and comprehensive web site. That was one of the key

things they required to make their decision, and that has been included as part of the \$6 million contribution in the policy announcement.

The third major strategic project is the Victorian Multicultural Commission Act. In 2002 we made a commitment to develop a revamp of the existing act which governs the Victorian Multicultural Commission. A discussion paper has now been produced and we have distributed a copy of that to members. That is more work that has occurred recently, and after a period of input and consolidation it will lead to a better informed capacity to bring into legislation a revamped act. It does not propose any significant new measures but rather replaces the existing act, modernises it and recognises the contribution that is made by many people in our community as well.

Achievements in 2003–04 include the Victorian Multicultural Commission grants program. We have increased that in this budget, as you have probably noticed in the output measures, from \$750 000 which was the case when we came to office to \$2.85 million currently, so there has been a significant progressive increase to quite a high level currently. The funding has included in 2003–04, \$700 000 from the Community Support Fund and additional funding of \$300 000 per annum — \$1.2 million — over four years.

Community consultation is really the fundamental work of the Victorian Multicultural Commission. It does a very good job on this and has done so for years and years and will continue to do that very well and effectively. It is anticipated in 2003–04 that 55 community consultations will have been held. Of the consultations conducted, 15 were of local government authorities around the state as well. Cultural Diversity Week is another initiative which supports communities and departments. It was celebrated from 17 to 23 March and provided around 130 grants to primary and secondary schools for that program. Victorian awards for multicultural excellence is also something which is now a regular feature each year as part of my work as minister, and of the people who assist me as minister, and 120 awards across seven categories were made, and they are indeed seen now as quite an important contribution to recognising and valuing the people who make a great contribution to our community who have moved here and settled here and have given back in a significant way. The VOMA and VMC web sites obviously have been maintained.

The key priorities for 2004–05 — I will finish here, Chair — the whole-of-government performance reporting, this year the Department for Victorian Communities, a new department, provided a streamlined framework for reporting on multicultural women's, youth and indigenous affairs — and I think in a much more superior way too. The department reports from a common reporting template, and I know this is probably of interest to the committee as I know it is something it assiduously examines, looking year to year and comparison to comparison, and we have a template for these reporting arrangements in the future in these areas in DVC. We will continue multicultural reporting under a streamlined framework in the coming years.

Language services — the positive impact to date of the language service strategy will be strengthened by the continuation of existing projects and by the commencement of new projects including establishing the education pathways to interpreter training, developing multimedia interpreter training awareness tools and creating an interpreter symbol for use in government agencies.

On the Victorian Multicultural Commission Act, as I have mentioned already, we are proceeding with that consultation. If I could just add to the comments I have made and indicate that we have a panel which is dealing with the discussion paper, and that panel is chaired by John Neiuwenhuysen who has done work for all governments in the past and is a very well-respected person in our community, assisted by two former ministers, Maureen Lyster and Haddon Storey. It will be a three-person team conducting those discussions around Victoria. Summaries of the discussion paper have been translated into 21 languages and are available on request from the VOMA web site.

In conclusion could I say, Chair, that I am very proud of the achievements we have made to date. We have given life to the whole-of-government effort that we said we would do; we have some significant new initiatives as part of this budget that you are analysing, and I believe these new initiatives will further enable us to be more comprehensive in the way we deal with multicultural affairs.

The CHAIR — The first question that I would put to you, Premier, is on the Victorian Multicultural Commission grants program you have outlined in the overheads. Could you please elaborate a little on how those programs strengthen ethnic communities and how you intend to measure that?

Mr BRACKS — Yes. As I mentioned in the overview, we have lifted the effort in relation to grants, and they are as a consequence more comprehensive and on a wider range of areas assisting and supporting our multicultural community of Victoria. There are certain categories which form the criteria for assessing whether or not funding is applied and whether or not groups receive that funding. They include community strengthening; migrant and refugee women's support, which is one of the key highlight areas for this year; community heritage organisation support; multicultural senior citizens organisation support — that would probably be an area where there has been a significant increase in effort too; after-school ethnic schools; building and facilities improvement; community partnerships; and multicultural festivals and events.

As I mentioned, the current annual grants program is now \$2.85 million. That is a significant increase, probably about two-thirds greater than it was when we came to government, so it reflects a significant broadening of the program, and I think it is having a big impact. As I move around Victoria I note that some of those essential and necessary matters to support organisations are being met in a more comprehensive way. When you think of all the volunteer support that goes into the many, many multicultural organisations, the government's role is really to provide the basic support and assistance enabling the volunteers not to be out of pocket and therefore to support others who are settling and doing that necessary work as well. I think that is what we are doing in a better way.

Mr FORWOOD — Premier, on page 240 of budget paper 3, the major outputs group 'Skilled migration unit — services provided to migrants and employers' shows that there has been a drop from 11 408 in 2002–03 to just under 6 000 this year, going up a bit next year. Firstly, I want to make the comment that I would have thought a more useful measure would be how many skilled migrants you anticipate you will attract, and I wonder if you could provide that information to the committee.

Mr BRACKS — Yes.

Mr FORWOOD — I would also be interested to know why the measure of services has dropped so significantly.

Mr BRACKS — Yes. If I can just make reference to that, I might ask the secretary to comment as well if he would like to, or the acting head might want to comment. We have lifted our proportion of skilled migrants coming to Victoria now to just under 25 per cent, which represents roughly the population share that Victoria has. The skilled migration share some four and a half years ago was under 20 per cent — I think it was somewhere between 15 and 18 per cent — so the effort has been lifted overall. Obviously we would like more, and we have a bigger target. That is what this represents, so we are actually aggressively going after a larger number of overseas skilled migrants because we believe that will drive a better outcome in our economy. It will be better for diversity and better for all those things which we value dearly in Victoria. So we are aggressively seeking to increase that, and that is why we are putting some stretch targets in place for that as well. Would the secretary like to comment?

Mr BLACHER — Just to clarify, that is a component of the employment programs, which will be dealt with at another time in PAEC. That is a component that actually sits within the pre-existing employment programs, and they relate to inquiries by employers, and the amount of funds that have gone into this area more broadly have been supplemented by the skilled migration program, which the Premier outlined previously.

Mr FORWOOD — How many are we expecting? What is the target in numbers for skilled migrants?

Mr BRACKS — In numbers? We are looking at more of a percentage, where we are seeking 25 per cent share of the total skilled migration that comes to this country.

Mr FORWOOD — Do we know what the federal government's — —

Mr BRACKS — Now, I can comment on this issue. I was going to comment on this later as well. We have been working with the commonwealth government. I actually met with Minister Ruddock when he had that responsibility, and subsequently we have reaffirmed that with Minister Vanstone. We have a commonwealth-state working party looking at how Victoria can get a greater share of the migrants to come to Australia. If I can just go to the numbers, we want to increase the number of skilled migrants settling in rural and regional Victoria from approximately 200 each year to 1000 each year by 2006–07, so it is not an insignificant increase, it is a fair increase, even though the sort of global numbers are not big. It is a very competitive market. We know, for example, that some countries, and some states in some countries, are very competitive in the marketplace. Some

provinces in Canada, for example, are out there with agents actively recruiting for their own provinces, and this is becoming a very competitive arrangement.

We are advantaged in Australia, I have to say, by having other states which are less aggressive in seeking to have skilled migrations. Just as an aside, when I met with Minister Ruddock, he was quite pleased with the fact that I was approaching him to set up a working party to look at a greater share of the overall numbers of skilled migrants coming to Victoria because he said he had a similar group, a working party in New South Wales, which was looking at discouraging people from going to New South Wales, so we were actually in a pretty good position on that one.

Ms ROMANES — Premier, you began by emphasising the importance of cultural diversity, and I ask if you would advise the committee on how the government is delivering on its election policy paper outlining its population and diversity policy. I am referring to budget paper 3.

Mr BRACKS — Budget paper 3. Thank you very much for that question. The population diversity policy does outline three broad areas: growing the state's population — I mentioned that earlier; supporting our multicultural community; and promoting tolerance and diversity. There are some key ways we are going about that. One that I have mentioned already — but it is a major new initiative in this budget so it is worth reiterating — is that we have applied \$6 million to assist in our skilled migration strategy to increase our share of that in the future. We have an ambition to increase our overall population to 6 million people by the year 2025. That is our ambition. We have also set a separate target for regional Victoria: we want to seek a growth in regional Victoria of 1.25 per cent per annum; that is our ambition over that period as well. They are the two key targets.

I have mentioned in passing that we have some strategies in place to achieve that, and one is the Commonwealth Victorian Working Party on Migration 2003. We have received significant cooperation from the commonwealth in our efforts to increase our share of skilled migration, and we are working with the commonwealth on the final report, which will be released reasonably soon. We will be happy to furnish the committee with a copy of that report once it is completed.

I will now go to the particular strategies that we have for our own funding, and there are three components. One is a domestic and international communications strategy, including the new web site that I mentioned in the preamble. It is a comprehensive web site, and we are spending, I think, about half a million dollars on this very comprehensive, well-resourced and supported site. It will be the primary tool for people to discover why Victoria is a great place to live. We will be having direct contact with every person who makes an inquiry with the Australian government about coming to Australia, to persuade them to come to Victoria. That will include direct-mail letters, and it will include a response once there is a connection on the web site with some support material to be sent out. We are also providing some support within that \$6 million to councils and other groups around Victoria to assist with the settlement of people so that they can provide extra support for language services, housing and other key issues which arise. They can assist and support people coming to our state. It is quite a strong push.

Mr CLARK — Given the whole-of-government role that you have as Minister for Multicultural Affairs in relation to multicultural matters, and in particular in relation to the interpreting and translating facility which you touched on in your overview, can you tell us why it was that the Central Health Interpreter Service was discontinued? Has the funding that was provided for that, which I gather was \$1.8 million, been diverted or redirected into other translation services? What have you been doing, as minister, to ensure that the government achieves a level of interpreting and translating services that is adequate in the areas of work performed by the Central Health Interpreter Service?

Mr BRACKS — Can I make it abundantly clear to the committee that we are not reducing our effort. These are administrative changes which are being undertaken to look at better delivery of interpreting services in the future. The Central Health Interpreter Service closed on 26 March. It did, as you are aware, provide interpreters to the health sector for many years. The CHIS committee decided to close the organisation due to ongoing financial difficulties, so we had to reorganise the service and provide a continuing and ongoing interpreter service in the future. The Department of Human Services has committed to purchasing the \$1.8 million of interpreting services from CHIS this financial year. The remaining funding has now been redirected to ensure continuity of service for the community through allocated funding — that is, to hospitals and health agencies to enable them to directly purchase interpreting services. All the funds will be redirected in that area and to Language Link to enable small rural and regional services, and small-use community health centres to access interpreting services. I stress again

that there is no reduction in effort. We have resolved a financial issue that CHIS had; we are giving the purchasing power to hospitals; and we are supporting smaller communities as well.

Ms GREEN — Premier, in your presentation you referred to the communications policy. Could you advise the committee on whether the multicultural communications policy target has been met for this year?

Mr BRACKS — I must admit that whenever you are talking to the ethnic media this always comes up as a topic for discussion. I can report to the committee that we are getting close to meeting our target of 5 per cent ‘purchase or buy’ in ethnic media from Victoria. We are firmly committed to allocating that minimum 5 per cent in the future. When we came to office there was only 2.27 per cent of campaign advertising — that is all there was of government. When we were looking at public education and other campaigns we found that only 2.27 per cent was spent in ethnic media. I can report to the committee that during the last quarter of the 2003 calendar year the government spent 5.2 per cent of its campaign advertising expenditure in the ethnic media, and thus we have met our target for the first time. It has taken some time, I agree — four and a half years — but we have met it; and we have been progressively increasing it to achieve that outcome. Our task now is to ensure that we continue to use the ethnic media as a key source to get out to the many and diverse people in Victoria, in addition to the central and statewide media as well.

Mr RICH-PHILLIPS — I would like to ask the Premier about the Victorian Multicultural Commission publication *Multicultural Victoria*. In the winter–spring 2002 edition there were 26 references to yourself and 12 photographs, and that was the edition immediately prior to the last state election. In the next issue, the summer–autumn 2003 issue, there were 12 references to the Premier and no less than 17 photographs.

Mr BRACKS — What date was that one?

Mr RICH-PHILLIPS — That is the summer–autumn 2003 edition, the one following the election.

Mr BRACKS — After the election — well, it is consistent.

Mr RICH-PHILLIPS — It contains a message from George Lekakis praising you on your re-election. In the most recent edition, the winter–spring 2003 edition, there is only one mention of the Premier, but three photographs. I would like to ask you how much the VMC spends on producing this publication, and putting aside the interests of your media unit, is it money well spent?

Mr BRACKS — I will just get you the figure, if you like.

Mr CLARK — The opposition did not feature in that publication at all.

Mr BRACKS — Thank you for the question; I am happy to answer it. I have an aggregate figure here. I do not have the disaggregated figure for that particular publication, but if you take *Multicultural Victoria*, the quarterly newsletter; the Cultural Diversity Week kits; the community grants guidelines, and the annual report, the total publication expenditure between July 2003 and April 2004, for that 12 months, was \$162 989.71 — 71 cents, it is good to be reporting on that, too!

The CHAIR — We appreciate the accuracy.

Mr BRACKS — That is an important communication tool. I am the Minister for Multicultural Affairs. How they editorialise and how they decide on the placement is really up to them.

Mr MERLINO — Premier, can you outline to the committee the major challenges that will impact on the multicultural affairs portfolio for 2004–05?

Mr BRACKS — Thank you for your question. I think the key challenge will be ensuring that we meet our key population targets, and we have progressed on the way to achieving that. As I mentioned, we have committed to a growth in our population to 6 million people by 2025. We also have committed to increasing the population in regional and country Victoria, and we are taking steps to achieve that. This does require cooperation right around Victoria. It requires cooperation from councils, from key employer and other groups in our community to commit to that effort to try and encourage a greater population growth for our state. I have to say that we are getting a lot of support for that. There is really very little opposition in Victoria to our efforts to try and increase our population, to

try and get more skilled migrants into Victoria, and to therefore be in a much better position in the future as well. That would be one of the biggest challenges that we have.

I guess the other big challenge is the need to do what we do well in Victoria in the future as well. We are probably the most tolerant, open community in Australia. We have had a bipartisan position, and we still have, supporting our multicultural communities. That has been a great credit to all of us in Victoria. That is under some pressure and stress around the world, including Australia, and I commend all political parties in Victoria who have not strayed from that effort to make sure that we are one of the most tolerant, open and supportive communities in Victoria for migrants coming to settle in our state — and I think we do it very well, by the way.

Mr BAXTER — I have a follow-up to Ms Green's question about advertising in the ethnic press, and campaign advertisements, as you refer to them. What proportion of that increase you referred to has come about by the insertion of large advertisements attacking the federal government for its alleged misdeeds?

Mr BRACKS — I do not think any of that has been associated with the Fair Share campaign. I will check that comprehensively for you, Bill, but I think you will find that the Department of Human Services has been one of the biggest purchasers of advertising space. That has been one of the bigger ones. Transport, I think, has done some. It has been about services, really. It has not been about our central campaign, which was limited and targeted on certain sections of the media around a fair share for Victoria. The answer is — and I will check that comprehensively and let you know by the end of the PAEC — I do not think it has spent anything at all.

Mr DONNELLAN — The 2004–05 budget paper 3 shows that 10 projects were targeted this year under the language services strategy initiative. Can you provide details of these projects?

Mr BRACKS — You are referring to page 243, is that right?

Mr DONNELLAN — Yes.

Mr BRACKS — The 12 projects have commenced or some of them are continuing in 2003–04. They include some scholarships for training interpreters in rare and emerging languages. I mentioned that. This is a gap which we have identified which needs resourcing and supporting. Remember, of course, that we have people from almost 140 different countries who have settled in Victoria, numerous languages which are spoken, and there are some areas which are more difficult than others. We need to be able to support those as well. That is an effort we are undertaking.

We subsidise the RMIT interpreter training courses in Timorese, Somali and Hakka. We have bridging courses to prepare Somali speakers for interpreter training. Obviously we do not have people currently and we need to do that. We have interpreter awareness training in government agencies, including hospitals; improved payments under the Victorian public service language allowance program; continuing development of interpreter symbol and whole-of-government interpreter signage. It is pretty important that we have a recognised iconic symbol that people can identify and then go for further help on. That is something which is being initiated. We have a translated health information online catalogue; development of multimedia training tools in the health sector; and a family violence project to develop policies and protocols for language services in the new family violence division of the Magistrates Court. It was announced by the Attorney-General recently that we would have that division, and we need to have the capacity for interpreter support people who are presenting there but who are not able to speak fluent English. We have development of data standards to provide information for evidence-based planning and service delivery and development of contract standards to improve funding and purchasing arrangements. A number of those, as I mentioned, are new, but a number are continuing as well and will mean that we have a much more comprehensive effort in this area in the future.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much, Premier. That concludes the component of the hearing on multicultural affairs.

Witnesses withdrew.