

VERIFIED TRANSCRIPT

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into budget estimates 2006-07

Melbourne — 5 June 2006

Members

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Witnesses

Mr S. Bracks, Minister for Multicultural Affairs;

Mr Y. Blacher, secretary;

Ms B. Mountjouris, director, Victorian Office of Multicultural Affairs; and

Mr J. MacIssac, director, Office of Senior Victorians, and veterans unit, Department for Victorian Communities.

The CHAIR — Welcome. I declare open the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee hearings on the budget estimates for 2006–07. I welcome the Honourable Steve Bracks, Premier of Victoria, Minister for Multicultural Affairs and minister responsible for veterans affairs; Mr Yehudi Blacher, secretary, Department for Victorian Communities; Ms Barbara Mountjouris, director, Victorian Office of Multicultural Affairs; Mr James MacIssac, director, Office of Senior Victorians and Veterans Victoria; departmental officers; members of the public and media.

In accordance with the guidelines for public hearings I remind members of the public that they cannot participate in the committee proceedings. Only officers of the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee secretariat are to approach PAEC members. Departmental officers, as requested by the minister or his chief of staff, can approach the table during the hearing. Members of the media are also requested to observe the guidelines for filming or recording proceedings in the Legislative Council Committee Room. 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 the transcript. I ask that all mobile phones be turned off and any pagers be put to silent.

Premier, could you give a brief presentation on the more complex financial and performance information for veterans affairs and multicultural affairs?

Mr BRACKS — Thank you very much, Chair, and I also thank members of the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee. With me today are Yehudi Blacher, the head of the Department for Victorian Communities; Barbara Mountjouris from the department; and also James MacIsaac, who heads up the veterans unit within the Department for Victorian Communities. I will go on to multicultural affairs very soon.

I suppose I should say from the outset — and I think the committee is aware of this — that this is the seventh occasion on which I have had the opportunity to present before the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee, this time not only as Premier but also as minister responsible for veterans affairs. I have made the point every year that that was not the pattern before we came to office.

Mr FORWOOD — We never used to meet at 4 o'clock, did we?

Mr BRACKS — It was not the pattern before I came to office, and over the last seven years I have attended every one of those. I understand that some accusations were made by the opposition about my attendance here at 4 o'clock. That was the arrangement which we fixed with the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee.

Mr FORWOOD — At your insistence.

Mr BRACKS — It was the first possible arrangement we had. I am very happy to be here, and I am very happy to change the circumstance, which was that the Premier did not attend for the seven years of the previous government.

Slides shown.

Mr BRACKS — If I can go to veterans affairs, the first part of the portfolio, we are committed to ensuring that ex-servicemen and women are remembered, honoured and supported in recognition of the service they have offered to their nation, and by educating generations of Victorians we do honour that service in a significant way.

In 2004 I announced that I would assume responsibility for veterans affairs issues at the state level to give veterans — ex-servicemen and women — a clear and prominent voice in government. Since then our key priorities have been to strengthen commemoration, education and support to veterans, and to create a more coordinated approach to issuing effective veterans across the government.

We recognise that there is a changing need of our ageing veterans community, as well as increasing interest amongst the wider community in Australia's service history. The veterans unit within the Department for Victorian Communities has provided operational support in order to coordinate activities across government. We have established important relationships with key ex-service organisations and implemented a number of initiatives.

The next slide is headed 'Achievements 2005–06', and I will briefly mention them. There is the Victorian Spirit of Anzac schools prize, including a government-led trip. The second Victorian Spirit of Anzac occurred, resulting in

10 winning students representing schools from across Victoria touring sites of significance — this time to Singapore, Vietnam and Japan.

We conducted a second round of the restoring community war memorials grants program, a new program and one which had enormous demands from right across Victoria, and as you will see in the matters ahead we have had to increase that further.

We have provided an additional \$250 000 in operational funding to support the Shrine of Remembrance. It has been very successful, the attendance has been enormous, and that helps with the educational functions at the shrine as part of the \$1.1 million commitment.

We have provided \$500 000 of assistance to the shrine for the construction of a new Shrine Education Centre, which was opened in November 2005. There is a new Victorian veterans web site, which has consolidated a lot of the different services from before. We also had a reception at Government House to mark the 60th anniversary of victory in the Pacific.

In the area of support and whole-of-government coordination we have established a veterans unit, as I mentioned, within the department. We have continued the successful implementation of transport initiatives, including free travel for veterans and war widows on the Victorian public transport network on 24, 25 and 26 April — the days preceding and following that event. We have provided veterans holding a DVA gold or white card who do not already receive travel concession to receive the same concessions on all V/Line and metro services as pension cardholders.

The Veterans Act, as most members of Parliament would know, has been passed with support from all members of Parliament. We have provided \$50 000 to support the annual Anzac Day activities — the dawn service, the gunfire breakfast, the Anzac Day parade — and an additional \$100 000 to the shrine to complete the business case for the proposed galleries of remembrance. The key priority for the 2006-07 financial year is the implementation of the Veterans Act. It has been established under legislation and this year will see the implementation of that new act.

New initiatives to further develop and expand commemoration education activities in this budget include an additional \$250 000 to enable more communities to restore their local war memorials with support from that new program. As I have mentioned, it has been extraordinarily successful. A new \$250 000 commemoration and education program will support significant statewide commemorations such as Vietnam Veterans Day and activities such as the protection of war memorials, honour boards and memorabilia as well.

There will be additional funding of \$160 000 per annum to support the spread of the Anzac program for the next event. Of course, we have some other matters in other portfolios which may not be apparent in the DVC presentation on the budget but are in other budgets. New rehab facilities for veterans including a gym and hydrotherapy pool will be funded at the redeveloped Austin and Mercy hospitals on the Heidelberg Repatriation Hospital site as part of a \$9 million investment in mental health and rehab services.

In partnership with the RSL, \$2 million will be provided over two years from the Community Support Fund to redevelop underutilised RSL facilities for use by the wider community, if that is requested by the RSL more broadly as part of a \$3.5 million building facilities fund. There is ongoing support for the Shrine of Remembrance and other activities, including continuation of support through additional operating funding of \$1.1 million over four years, which we announced in the last budget, and continuing support for key commemoration events that I have mentioned before. They are the major highlights of the portfolio.

The CHAIR — Thank you, Premier. Could I go to your first slide in relation to commemoration.

Mr FORWOOD — Excuse me, Chair.

The CHAIR — Do you want to do both slides now?

Mr FORWOOD — We have half an hour for multicultural affairs.

The CHAIR — Could you go on to multicultural affairs as well, Premier?

Mr BRACKS — Sure. Again I am very pleased to present before the committee on the multicultural affairs portfolio, which I also have ministerial responsibility for.

The achievements in 2005-06 are multicultural and multifaith harmony. We are leading Australia in the promotion of that harmony. In September last year I hosted a forum with faith and community leaders which agreed on the importance of promoting racial and religious tolerance and promoting multicultural harmony. Those matters were also taken to COAG for consideration and concurrent activity around the country.

As agreed at the forum, I acted to clarify the operation of the Racial and Religious Tolerance Act by introducing amendments to the act and to the Equal Opportunity Act. That was an outcome of that forum at that time. That has occurred and gone through the house.

On the language services strategy, over 40 projects have been implemented during the four years of the strategy. This year we released a national interpreter symbol and the Victorian Interpreter Card, which are two very important initiatives to make asking for language assistance easier for our migrant communities.

We have implemented both components of our refugees support package, and they have progressed well during 2005-06. Seven new programs have commenced through the refugee brokerage program to improve access to services for newly arrived refugees and, under the refugee nurse initiative, eight new specialist nurses — about 4.5 effective full time — have commenced in community health centres across Melbourne and Victoria to assist refugees to access appropriate local health services. This year VMC has granted 1059 grants worth more than \$1.3 million to over 800 organisations

Finally, the new initiatives for 2006-07 go into three categories: promoting multifaith and multicultural harmony; in the budget we have allocated \$2 million over four years to fund initiatives to strengthen and promote Victoria's racial and religious tolerance and multicultural diversity. They will include strategies to support our Islamic community and interfaith initiatives, and to promote educational awareness of racial and religious tolerance more broadly.

We are extending the language services strategy. The positive impact of the strategy will be strengthened by a new budget allocation of \$3 million over the next four years to continue existing projects and to commence some new projects. We have increased funding for the Victorian Multicultural Commission's community grants program from \$750 000 six and a half years ago to \$2.85 million last year, and from next year the grants program will increase to \$3.6 million. I should add that for the first time it will include \$600 000 for multicultural festivals. It is becoming increasingly expensive to underpin those and there will be a separate allocation within the \$3.6 million for that. I am very proud of the achievements we have had in multicultural affairs, and I am happy to answer any questions on this and other matters.

The CHAIR — Thank you, Premier. I would like to refer to veterans affairs, and particularly to your first slide. You outlined 'commemoration'. What is allocated in the budget to educate the wider community about the service of our veterans and the sacrifice of Victorians in wartime?

Mr BRACKS — Thank you, Chair. In the middle of 2004 I announced that the state government and Melbourne City Council would each provide annual funding of about \$50 000 to assist in the staging of the Anzac Day parade and commemoration services. That payment was in recognition of the enormous and growing interest in Anzac Day, which has been increasing each year. This ongoing funding is provided to the Victorian branch of the RSL which organises many of the commemoration events, including the gunfire breakfast and the Anzac Day parade.

This year free travel on Victorian public transport, including Metcard and V/Line ticket services, was also extended. We have also allocated \$700 000 to support local communities to restore, prepare, protect and enhance Victorian war memorials, as I mentioned. Some 62 projects were funded in the first round of funding in 2004-05 and in the new allocation in the budget we expect that something like 87 different projects will be funded for those restoration projects. About \$394 000 will be expended as well.

We have allocated \$250 000 in the budget for statewide events as well. There are a large number of those, including the battle for Long Tan in Vietnam and the 60th anniversary of the Victory in the Pacific event are examples. Additional funding of \$160 000 has been allocated to support the Spirit of Anzac Prize. I mentioned the other matters in my introduction as well.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much.

Mr FORWOOD — I would like to address multicultural affairs if I could, Premier. I know you would be aware that total costs this year are \$10.7 million and some of that will go to multicultural harmony initiatives. In the interests of multicultural harmony, what action do you intend to take to remedy the damage done by your handpicked parliamentary candidate, Khalil Eideh? Will you apologise to Victoria's Jewish community for his comments in his letter to the Syrian President? More to the point, what action will you take to ensure that an agent for a foreign government is not elected to the Victorian Parliament?

Mr BRACKS — Thank you.

The CHAIR — In relation to this particular question, there is no budget expenditure for candidates for the ALP. We have to relate this to budget matters that affect the Victorian public service and Victorian expenditure.

Mr FORWOOD — I know you are sensitive about this issue, but this talks about \$10.7 million and 'racial harmony'. This letter says 'at a time when the danger and threat from the Zionists is increasing'. This is your candidate, and the Premier ought be entitled to answer the question.

The CHAIR — The Premier only has to answer matters that relate to the Victorian government budget.

Mr BRACKS — I am happy to answer the general question.

The CHAIR — If you want to answer it in a general nature, you can.

Mr BRACKS — I thank the Deputy Chair for his question. We have a considerable resource in multicultural affairs for racial harmony. I am very proud of our record, and I am very proud of the record of every one of our MPs in promoting that. I fully expect that will be the case in the future as well.

Mr FORWOOD — That's it, is it? What about the specific questions? Are you not going to do something about this?

Mr BRACKS — I have answered the general parts of your question.

Ms ROMANES — My question relates to the veterans affairs portfolio, regarding the newly legislated Victorian Veterans Council. Can you explain more about what exactly its role is and when the council will be operational?

Mr BRACKS — A lot of consultation went into the development of the veterans council, and it really is a recognition of the ageing of our veterans community and the need to have a coordinated effort around the state to carry on the legacy which has been there previously as well.

A key aspect of the legislation that went through the house recently is the establishment of a veterans council. It will provide advice to the government on a wide range of issues relating to veterans; to distribute the Anzac Day Proceeds Fund for welfare purposes; and administer the new Victorian Veterans Fund, which will focus on education and commemoration. It will also provide strategic oversight of the sector.

I am very pleased that Major-General Peter Haddad, who has retired more recently as the head of the Australian Defence Forces based in Victoria, agreed to act as the inaugural chairperson of the Victorian Veterans Council; and along with the appointment of Mr Peter Leifman as deputy chairperson, I believe they will do an excellent job as inaugural chairs of that committee.

The selection of the balance of the council members is taking place through a merit-based selection process based on the skills requirement which was specified in the act itself, which has now passed. I expect the council to be fully operational by about July this year and therefore be able to coordinate that activity in the future for future generations of veterans. I am very pleased that we enjoyed support right across both houses for that initiative.

Mr FORWOOD — Do you accept that Mr Eideh's comments in his two letters to the Syrian President have caused damage to Victoria's multicultural harmony; and given former Premier Kennett's vehement opposition to Hansonism, will you now take similar steps in relation to Mr Eideh's attack on Victoria's Jewish community?

Ms GREEN — Bill, he never appeared before this committee.

The CHAIR — In relation to this particular question — —

Mr BRACKS — I have to relate it to the budget, okay. In relation to multiculturalism, I am probably one of the strongest leaders or premiers who have been very strong on multiculturalism. I will ensure that is a continued feature of our government in the future, and every member of Parliament will adhere to those arrangements as they have in the past.

Mr MERLINO — I would like to ask you, Premier, a question on multicultural affairs as well. Can you advise the committee of the highlights, challenges and issues the portfolio has faced over the past 12 months and how they have been addressed?

Mr BRACKS — There have been a few, of course, and international events have been most significant and put pressure on the many, many communities that have settled here in Victoria, and ensuring that we have racial and religious harmony has been very important. Also some recent events in last 12 months in Australia — the events in Sydney probably feature most significantly — put pressure on us to ensure that we have strong racial harmony here in Victoria.

In September 2005, as I mentioned, I held a multifaith leaders forum at which we launched the Just Like You campaign. I should congratulate the major networks for their support by what was effectively free time which was given by most of the networks for the Just Like You campaign. It cost about \$200 000 to produce in conjunction with Channel 31, but the actual cost of putting that on was borne by the stations themselves, which I think is a great achievement. I want to place on record my support for the radio, TV, print and the major media outlets for what they have done in that area in ensuring that was continued at a greater level than it otherwise could have been.

As you mentioned, recent events in Australia and overseas have placed some strains on different communities. We are committed to ensuring Victorians continue to live harmoniously together and that the right to practise different faiths, speak freely, celebrate cultural diversity and live without discrimination and vilification will be assured in the future. That is why we have allocated so much resources to multicultural affairs and it is such a high priority for our government.

Mr CLARK — Premier, you referred in your presentation and in some of your answers to the importance of multiculturalism. You may be aware that the director of the Victorian Office of Multicultural Affairs in 2004 went to a conference in Prato, Italy, to investigate, amongst other things, the success of multiculturalism and whether it is time to develop alternative approaches as a guide to public policy. In light of this, are you contemplating any significant changes to the policy on multiculturalism as it is applied in Victoria in the course of the 2006–07 year?

Mr BRACKS — I thank the member for Box Hill for his question. There is a great interest in what we do in Victoria and a great interest worldwide. We have had so many people coming here from so many countries jurisdictions to see what we do well. Arguably Melbourne and Toronto are seen as the shining lights of what was the successful implementation of multiculturalism over a long period of time. Part of that also means as well learning from other jurisdictions and other countries. I know there is an issue in Italy more broadly and, of course, we would want to absorb any lessons that we could take into account from that.

You asked in your question, did we have a significant redirection in multicultural affairs? — no, we do not have a significant redirection, but it does not mean that we cannot develop further from the policies we have now or that we cannot learn more. We are open to new suggestions and new ideas. This is an issue that occurs right around the world, one for which we have some leadership but also one which, I fully admit, we can certainly do better in the future as well. Does that sufficiently answer your question?

Mr FORWOOD — You did not ask me that, did you?

Mr BRACKS — No, it was just was there a particular issue on Italy? That was all.

Mr CLARK — No, the conference was in Italy, but the question was: were you proposing a radical departure from multiculturalism as it is being pursued to date.

The CHAIR — Mr Clark, we know you have got a radical departure under way. Mr Somyurek.

Mr SOMYUREK — Premier, sticking to the theme of multiculturalism, can you please advise the committee on the progress made in implementing the recommendations of PAEC report no. 59 of 2004–05, particularly in relation to VMC grants, whole-of-government reporting with respect to the Multicultural Victoria Act and the language services projects?

Mr BRACKS — PAEC did make some significant suggestions on how we could deal with some of the output measures, not just input, on the last occasion that PAEC presented its report to the Parliament itself. PAEC made two recommendations relating to multicultural affairs. I might in answer to your question just go through what we have done since PAEC made those recommendations.

The first was that all departments review existing performance measures and focus on developing more outcome-based measures. That was the first recommendation. The department has implemented an ongoing review of performance measures through a performance measure improvement program. Those results are: in 2005–06 a new measure to more accurately monitor Victorian multicultural grants outcomes was introduced, and that was a direct result of the PAEC recommendation — not only inputs, not only the grants you give an organisation, but also the outcomes from that grant. In 2006–07 two measures have been discontinued in accord with the general recommendations of PAEC.

On page 412 of budget paper 3 the number of briefs and cabinet submissions and briefing requests met by due dates has been changed and replaced with a more meaningful measure: multicultural projects completed within the required time frame, which I think was a good recommendation of the PAEC to undertake. Language services projects will continue in 2006–07, having received budget funding. Reporting on the performances initiative is monitored through the number of language service projects implemented performance measure, so it is a new measure in place.

The second recommendation was that performance indicators be developed for a whole-of-government report. That was the other part of it. We have been working with departments to identify performance indicators for the reporting areas under the act. The extent to which departments can provide outcome-based data depends on the data collection systems and their associated costs to produce such data. This is a matter for the consideration of other departments. I have written to departments in fact to see whether we can get some commonality in these arrangements. Each department is asked to annually provide performance measures or other evidence to demonstrate that outcomes are being achieved in relation to multicultural initiatives. We have taken seriously the recommendations of the PAEC on the last occasion and better focused that on performance indicators and outcomes.

Mr RICH-PHILLIPS — Premier, on the issue of media monitoring within the Office of Multicultural Affairs, a document released to the opposition showed that for one of the months in the previous financial year, the office spent \$19 000 in a single month on media monitoring. Can you tell the committee, please, how much was spent for the full financial year and why it is necessary for the Office of Multicultural Affairs to spend that sort of money on media monitoring?

Mr BRACKS — At the last PAEC presentation I indicated that we would be not proceeding with contracts for media monitoring but would do that in-house across departments. I do not have the savings here — it was in the estimates of the previous financial year — but I can get those to you and submit to the committee what those savings were. But they were considerable savings by using in-house facilities to do what otherwise you would contract to do. We did save in the millions of dollars across the board.

This is one of the participations of one of the departments in that function which otherwise would contract with some of the major media monitoring companies, so this is really the function of a whole-of-government effort to ensure that there are some cost savings in media monitoring; it is a function which can be undertaken easily and effectively without having to, in our case, resort to very expensive contracts which can lock you in for some time, so it was a saving identified last time. As to the particular component as part of this, could I try and get some details and submit that to the committee?

Mr RICH-PHILLIPS — Thank you. Could I clarify that all your media monitoring for multicultural affairs is now in-house?

Mr BRACKS — For all areas of government, we do not contract any more. I wish I had the savings listed in the transcript of the last PAEC hearings. It was a considerable saving.

Mr RICH-PHILLIPS — Previously you were spending millions of dollars on it?

Mr BRACKS — Previously companies would bid. It was a system we carried over from previous administrations around the country. Previously bids were received for media monitoring services. Those bids were accepted for a period of time. We have cancelled that, and we believe it can be done cheaper.

Ms GREEN — Premier, are you satisfied with the level of representation of members of culturally and linguistically diverse communities on government boards and committees at this point in time?

Mr BRACKS — It has improved significantly. It has been one of our objectives to improve the diversity and the diverse representation on government boards and other key organisations within government. In 2005 we established a register so that we could utilise the best talents of the Victorian community more broadly — a Victorian multicultural register that would help boards and committees reflect the interests, skills and background of the broader company.

It provides a central point for government departments to locate people interested in being appointed to their boards and committees. Provisional information on a cultural background by people registering with the government is voluntary — I should stress that. It is a matter that they can choose to submit, but it is up to them. There are currently 110 people on the register who have identified themselves as being from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. Departments use the register when they want to locate potential appointments to boards and committees.

Our whole-of-government report of multicultural affairs includes information on the CALD representation on which government boards and committees occur. The 2004–05 report, which will be tabled in both houses of Parliament later this month, includes these details. Data for 2005–06 will be collected after the end of this financial year. I note that the reported proportions of CALD background members may be underrepresented, given that the provision of information on that background is voluntary, but we have tried through the central register to give support to departments so they can have a central clearing house for those arrangements to occur.

Mr BAXTER — On multicultural affairs, I assume the department gives you policy advice and, that being so, in taking into account that the Snowy Mountains scheme was built by migrants 50 or so —

Mr BRACKS — That's a good link, Bill; that is clever.

Ms GREEN — That's a long bow.

Mr BAXTER — It is all right for Ms Green to say it is a long bow.

Mr BRACKS — No, I said it is clever.

Mr BAXTER — In many cases it was their first job in Australia, getting their toe on the rung of the ladder. How is it, then, that you did not discern that the sale of that icon would generate such angst amongst our community, many of them from multicultural backgrounds, who had worked on it?

Mr BRACKS — Thank you for your question. We are certainly aware that this is an iconic project which was developed in Australia and which has a central place in what was really one of the great infrastructure projects that Australia has undertaken — I agree with that. Many people from many nations worked on the scheme. For that reason, when the public float was recommended, firstly, by New South Wales, then by the commonwealth and subsequently by our government — and I will go through those details at any time you wish — we ensured and insisted that as many people as possible from diverse backgrounds had access to that float — that is, mums and dads across Australia had access to it — and there was a ceiling on a large shareholding to ensure there was as wide as possible representation. Of course that float will not proceed, and I am happy to talk about that later in the day as well, but I do recognise that history, and I appreciate it has been a great history.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much. That concludes the time allocated for the first section of your portfolios, and I thank Mr Blacher and departmental officers for their attendance. I would appreciate it if the next group would come forward.

Witnesses withdrew.