

VERIFIED TRANSCRIPT

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into budget estimates 2006-07

Melbourne — 4 July 2006

Members

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Witnesses

Mr J. Thwaites, Minister for Victorian Communities;

Mr Y. Blacher, secretary;

Mr D. Ferrie, acting executive director, community strengthening and volunteering; and

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

The CHAIR — Good morning. I declare open the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee hearings on the 2006–07 budget estimates for the portfolios of environment, water and Victorian communities. I welcome the minister; the secretary of the department, Mr Yehudi Blacher; Mr Damian Ferrie, acting executive director, community strengthening and volunteering; and Mr Stephen Gregory, chief finance officer from the Department for Victorian Communities. I also welcome departmental officers, members of the public and media.

In accordance with guidelines for public hearings, I remind members of the public they cannot participate in committee 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.

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 and witnesses will be provided with proof versions of the transcript via email for their verification. Minister, this year, if you wish, we are also putting onto the web site with the transcripts any overheads, to assist people in understanding the context of the *Hansard*.

Could those of you who may not have done so already please turn off mobile phones. Minister, I call on you to give a 5-minute presentation on the more complex performance and financial measures in this portfolio of Victorian communities.

Slides shown.

Mr THWAITES — I thank the committee for its time. First I will put the Department for Victorian Communities work in the context of A Fairer Victoria. This is the government's social policy strategy, which we announced in last year's budget together with \$788 million of initiatives, and this year we built on that with a further package of \$851 million of initiatives. We have retained the same key themes and strategies this year as with last year, and the progress report shows we are making inroads into disadvantage.

This year we gave a heightened focus to particular areas: disadvantage locations and growth areas, particularly looking at growth areas on the edge of Melbourne and some smaller rural areas that are subject to disadvantage; prioritising the early years of a child's life; greater response to homelessness; support for flexible transport solutions; and increased access to services for multicultural communities.

That is the broad context for the Department for Victorian Communities. Looking more specifically at the department we see it is our mission to make a real difference, to reduce disadvantage, to bring people together and to build stronger communities. We are doing that by engaging with local communities through principally our local teams and these local teams of DVC staff who work across all areas of DVC and are able to coordinate with other departments as well. We have had tremendous success around the state in places like Bendigo and in the west of the state where these local teams, because they are on the ground, can bring together a lot of parties to get a good result. It has shown this does work.

We have also taken a major role in developing partnerships between government and local government. We see that as one of our most important functions, and we do that through programs like the flexible transport solutions, community building initiatives and community renewal.

If we turn to grants, what we seek to do is leverage investment from other sources, principally local government. We do this through the Victorian Community Support Fund grants. In 2005–06, 134 grants totalling more than \$20 million have been approved and this is the traditional Community Support Fund grants. It is important to note the difference between what is approved, which is committed, but it does not mean it is spent. I assume there will be questions about what has been spent, but we commit to a project in a particular year and then we spend it, and it actually takes usually about two to three years to spend the money. Our experience frankly is that the projects take a little longer than the council initially hopes in their initial proposal.

We have three different types of Community Support Fund grants: strengthening communities, which is 38 per cent, planning and building community infrastructure. Essentially what happens is that you usually get a planning grant first. A small rural community may seek to set up a planning grant for a particular project and will get that — it might be \$15 000, \$20 000, that sort of amount. Then if that planning grant proves it is a good project, they will apply for an infrastructure grant to, say, build a community centre. There are a number of major projects around the state where community centres are being built.

The CHAIR — Minister, you are over halfway through your 5 minutes.

Mr THWAITES — Yes. I am over halfway through my slides, too. In terms of community strengthening in action, there is a case study of Caroline Springs. The interesting thing about this one is that it is a partnership involving the developer of the project, Delfin Lend Lease.

The next slide shows we have done some research on indicators of community strengths. I will not go into all the details of that, but essentially what that shows is that in Caroline Springs, where we have done this community building project, we have got very high levels of community strength when measured by things like people feeling safe in their community, people believing that the community gives them a chance to feel valued and that multiculturalism makes the area better — a whole range of different community strengthening indicators. You will see that in the blue colour in the middle. Caroline Springs seems to be doing very well by comparison with the metropolitan average and the state average.

I will refer to some of the new initiatives for Victorian communities this year. An interesting one is \$4.7 million for the no-interest loans scheme. Essentially these are low-interest loans for people on very low incomes for things like when they have not got money for a fridge or to pay the car registration. That has been done in a very good partnership way with the ANZ and National banks and with the Good Shepherd organisation. What we are going to do is have about 3800 of these low-interest loans. Interestingly the debt rate of these is almost nil; they are almost all fully paid. Finally you will see there some of the other new initiatives.

If we move to the last slide, it sets out the expenditure from the Community Support Fund which I think in the previous year you have sought, so we have stuck it in here.

The CHAIR — And Mr Forwood is not here to enjoy it!

Mr THWAITES — Once again it is important to note these are not commitments; this is the actual expenditure in 2005–06. The total expenditure from the fund is \$119 million, understanding that that is a percentage of the revenue that comes through the gaming machines, which is broken up into three general areas.

Firstly, in the middle of the slide is \$23.3 million for gambling services including financial counselling and research. That is not a program controlled by DVC, but that funding goes out to the various gambling service programs. The second, over on the right, is a number of grant programs that are also largely not controlled by DVC, although some of them are, that total \$63 million. For example, sport, which is part of DVC, gets \$31 million; then there are human services, the arts, libraries, justice, and you can read the rest. They are programs that I do not control; they are programs that the various ministers control.

Over on the left you will see \$30.4 million for Victorian community support grants, what I guess was traditionally known as the Community Support Fund, but we are calling them something different because there is a confusion between the Community Support Fund, which is \$119 million, and the grants, which are \$30 million, and of those, \$1.2 million goes into planning, \$17.2 million into community strengthening and \$12 million into community infrastructure.

The CHAIR — Thank you, Minister, and in particular thank you for the detail in those slides. It is very helpful when we write our report.

In your presentation you mentioned \$18.3 million has been allocated to flexible transport. Could you give us more detail on that in terms of expenditure and how it will assist communities?

Mr THWAITES — \$18.3 million has been allocated over four years to flexible transport initiatives. There are two components to this. The first is a significant expansion of the transport connections program, and the second is funding for some new low-cost services and transport projects that are identified by local communities.

The transport connections program has already started as a pilot in a number of areas, basically in regional Victoria. The whole idea of this is to come up with much more flexible approaches to transport in areas that do not have so much public transport — for example, linking in the local taxi service, the HACC community base and potentially whatever public transport there is, and arranging a much better use of those services. We have had situations in some regional areas where HACC buses have been half empty because they do not operate at the right times. Another option would be to use school buses at times when they are not being used for schools.

The idea is to basically have a facilitator who is paid to work with the local communities and work out the best local transport solutions and then implement them. Funding for that is jointly managed by DOI and DVC, although essentially it is a DOI role to allocate small amounts to help particular transport projects. Sometimes it can be a simple solution. For example, through one of our community building projects we developed a local transport timetable. There might be three or four different operators in a region and the average person does not know when services can be used, so it is a matter of putting all that together in a flexible way.

Mr CLARK — My question also relates to flexibility in the context of the Community Support Fund. I refer to the final slide you presented to us. First of all, in terms of government policy, what flexibility is there between the proportions that are allocated to the three main heads you referred to? Then, within each of those heads — particularly the first and the third — what flexibility is there to respond to changing needs and applications from time to time and to what extent have these funding streams in effect become ongoing programs?

Mr THWAITES — When you refer to the three, are you talking about the first layer of three — Victorian community, gambling and community services?

Mr CLARK — Yes, the community support grants, the gambling services and the community services and grants programs.

Mr THWAITES — Okay. It is governed by the act; that is the first thing. The second thing is the first call is gambling services, and we have continued to build that amount up and invest more as we see that as a priority. Beyond that, it is governed by the act, but then the government makes decisions as to allocation.

We do that on the basis of seeking to have a reasonably fair base for the Community Support Fund. We agreed some two years ago that there should be around \$20 million available this year to commit to gambling services from the Community Support Fund, so we set a base for that. The government made a number of commitments in the last election and prior to that which are also being fulfilled.

In terms of long-term flexibility, essentially we seek, first, to have a reasonably fair split-up between the different areas, giving gambling the first call and, as I said, to continue to support and increase gaming services; second, to have a reasonable base for the Community Support Fund; and third, depending upon the amount of money that is over, to make an assessment of where it should be allocated. The change has been the reduction in revenue after the smoking bans were introduced, which meant that there was somewhat less money to spend.

Mr CLARK — Just for example, going forward two years from now, how much of the fund would be uncommitted?

Mr THWAITES — A relatively small amount because there is not a lot of additional money coming into the Community Support Fund. The revenues have been fairly constrained after the smoking bans and we already have commitments — remembering the commitments we have made over the last three years are going to be spent over the next one to three years. So there is not a lot of extra flexibility there. As I said, we have enough so that we can make commitments of around \$20 million a year.

Mr BAXTER — Minister, in terms of the \$30.4 million, the traditional CSF, how are the applications running compared with the \$30 million? Are you getting many more or is it roughly in balance?

Mr THWAITES — Obviously there are more applications than there are funds, but it goes through a pretty rigorous process when every council or whoever puts in an application. It is then considered by the department. They assess it and give a recommendation on the basis of different aspects of the proposal. Then it goes to the Community Support Fund advisory council and then they make recommendations. Then, if it is more than \$50 000, it goes to a cabinet subcommittee; if it is less than \$50 000, I can approve it.

In terms of the percentage, I cannot give you the precise percentage, but it is fair to say that a fairly substantial percentage of the applications end up getting funding. What often happens, though, is that quite a bit of work has to be done by the proponent to improve the bid and encourage people to take more partnership roles.

Mr BAXTER — So those that get through all the hurdles have a fair prospect of being funded over time; it is in balance to that extent, is it?

Mr THWAITES — Yes.

Ms ROMANES — Minister, in your presentation you talked about the Caroline Springs partnership. Something seems to be going very well there, according to the community strength indicators. Can you tell the committee what is unique about the department's work with this community and what elements of that work will be able to be replicated in other communities?

Mr THWAITES — I suppose there are two things that are unique about it: first, that it involves a major housing developer, Delfin, and second that this was a project that started when the development started. Usually with community building what we are doing is going into an existing community and talking to the people there and building up a community program. Here, from the bottom up — as soon as the housing development was started, virtually, or fairly shortly after that — this community building project started. The benefit of that is that you get a strong community spirit going from the start of a new development.

I think we have probably all heard of anecdotal reports of new housing developments in areas being set up without any basic infrastructure or community facilities or community spirit and people being isolated and lonely in a number of these places. The theory behind this is to have the new development really starting from scratch as a strong community.

The community strengthening indicators indicate that this works and this does provide a demonstration for what we might try to replicate in other new growth areas, working with the developer and the local community from the start. It is all things, like community safety, education, child care, libraries, transport — all of that together. If you plan it and the local community runs it and controls it then you get much better outcomes.

Mr RICH-PHILLIPS — I would like to ask you about staffing in DVC. Obviously the biggest change the department has undergone this year is the Commonwealth Games and the conclusion of that function in March and April. Although it is reflected in your level of funding, there does not appear to be any reflection of that in the departmental staffing level. Can you tell the committee what the peak staffing level was for the Office of Commonwealth Games Coordination and how that has drawn down to 30 June and how you expect that to wind up, I guess, by the end of this calendar year?

Mr THWAITES — The details of that probably should be asked of the minister who is responsible in terms of the Office of Commonwealth Games Coordination, but I can indicate that there was a peak in departmental employment around March at the time of the games and that went up to 921, and it is expected that the numbers for 30 June will be 758.6, so you are looking at around 150 less staff.

Mr RICH-PHILLIPS — Those people were all accommodated as fixed term and casual on the DVC payroll within the 12 months between the two reporting dates you have given this committee?

Mr THWAITES — That is my understanding.

Mr BLACHER — There was a component of the staff that had been hired previously and there will be a small number who will be there post 30 June, but the vast majority were effectively hired during that period on and off the payroll.

Mr RICH-PHILLIPS — Do you know what the impact would be post 30 June in terms of winding up OCGC. Will people be deployed elsewhere in DVC or do you expect people to leave the payroll?

Mr BLACHER — It will be a combination of both. There are some on fixed-term contracts, some are departmental staff and some will go to other departments.

Mr RICH-PHILLIPS — Do you have a rough idea of numbers?

Mr BLACHER — Probably around 20 will be left post 30 June.

Mr SOMYUREK — Minister, your second-last slide mentioned the no-interest loan scheme which will be increased from \$850 to around \$3800 this year. In making reference to this loan you made a passing reference to the NAB essentially. Will the government be redelivering this scheme in partnership with other organisations such as the NAB, and how will these partnerships benefit the community?

Mr THWAITES — The government will not be delivering the scheme. The government is providing some funds for it, but the scheme has been jointly delivered by Good Shepherd youth and family services and the

National Australia Bank. The NAB will be providing some \$3.3 million in loan capital, so that leverage is the government's expenditure which is about \$3 million, so it is doubling the amount of money available. The Good Shepherd organisation essentially delivers it, so it is people that it sees in its work who are very poor, very often single parents struggling with some of the basics, as I said before, not having a fridge, not having a washing machine, and they are often people who have had very little credit experience or poor credit history.

One of the purposes of this program is not only to provide the funds for the particular article but to actually give people some level of financial knowledge and understanding and skill in repaying loans. It is something that you can say we have worked well with the federal government on because it has agreed that there can be direct debt payments through Centrelink payments so people can get their Centrelink amounts deducted to repay the loan. The result of this is that we have an extraordinary high return rate and people then get a good credit record and they can go off and borrow through the normal system. The aim of this is to actually move people to a situation where they can borrow in the normal market rather than what is happening now where there are loan sharks and pay-day lenders who are out there lending at very high interest rates.

These are people who cannot afford that, so it is a system that works very well. The other half of it is the ANZ, so there is the NAB one and there is also an ANZ project which we are working on. This project looks particularly at how people can build up some funds for their children's education. The original pilot project was based in Shepparton and built up there. We expanded that, and it has been making loans to Iraqi families in Shepparton, for example, who can put aside some money for their kids' education and learn financial skills. The ANZ has been very committed to this as a way for the community to become more and more skilled in financial services. Obviously that is a good thing for the community and is good for the banks as well. This is a really positive program. The other party, I should say, in the ANZ one is the Brotherhood of St Laurence, so it is engaged in this too and is delivering financial expertise to the people who are borrowing the money.

Mr SOMYUREK — When you say that the beneficiaries of these loans have been Iraqi families in Shepparton, I assume you are referring to refugees?

Mr THWAITES — They are, I think, largely refugees — I am not sure. That is an example. The program started in Shepparton generally. We then got an application to extend it to the Iraqi families there. There is a substantial Iraqi community there, and we provided some extra funds for that so that the translators and others could be involved to extend the program to them. That is just a example. There are many other people in the community — —

Mr SOMYUREK — My question was going to basically relate to the fact that surely the federal government should be responsible for settlement services of refugees. I find it a bit strange that the state government has to assist in that regard.

Mr THWAITES — We do provide a lot of services for people on the basis that they are now part of the Australian community. That community is a very important part of the wider community, and we believe it is appropriate that they get access to this program as well.

Mr BAXTER — Minister, in your opening presentation you talked about community strengthening and you mentioned suburban areas and disadvantaged small country towns, which I assume is a bit like dealing with chalk and cheese in terms of assessing applications and priorities. How is that done, or is there an arbitrary split-up of what goes to the country or what goes to the suburbs? Is there a mechanism for determining those priorities?

Mr THWAITES — My answer should be in two parts. First, a substantial amount of the funds go to what we call the community building initiative, which we launched last year. The community building initiative is a \$10 million investment over four years. This is allocated just to small country towns basically. There are 19 communities supported by the community building initiative spanning 23 local government areas and 102 small towns. This has been an incredibly successful project.

Small towns are interesting. They face a lot of challenges, but they already have huge community strength and, as you would well know, giving them that little bit of extra money through this program allows them to leverage a lot of advantages. What we have done with these 19 programs, which will link a whole lot of small towns in a region, is that they get some funds for small projects, for facilitation. As an example, in the first round of this, say, in St Arnaud, they got together and decided they needed a theatre, so they built a theatre which has been really successful thing. So they have got a theatre up there.

In Lang Lang, I think it was, they needed a medical centre and they got together; this provided the funds to do all the planning, lobbying and whatever else that was needed to obtain and build a medical centre. In answer to your question, we say we need to actually set aside some funds specifically for small rural towns, knowing that in many ways they are probably doing it hardest in an economic sense, whereas the larger regional towns are booming economically.

In terms of the actual Community Support Fund, what we do is assess projects on their merits. To be frank, what we find is that the country applications tend to be pretty good anyway. Because they do have good levels of community support, they put together pretty comprehensive applications and so overall country towns and country regions participate very significantly in the Community Support Fund. We list them all and I think you will see that in proportion to their population it would probably be fair to say that there would be a bigger return from the Community Support Fund than the state average for most of the areas.

The biggest challenge we face is in areas of the state that have not got traditional mechanisms for putting applications together and in fact that tends to be more in some parts of Melbourne — some parts of the western suburbs, for example, where we have had to provide some assistance to those areas to actually put forward applications, whereas we have never had a lot of trouble in country areas for getting applications.

Ms GREEN — Minister, in your presentation you mentioned addressing the needs of disadvantaged locations. Could you explain to the committee the difference between community renewal and neighbourhood renewal?

Mr THWAITES — The committee is probably aware of neighbourhood renewal which is a program that is run through DHS and is the responsibility of the Minister for Housing. Neighbourhood renewal takes on areas in the ministry of housing which have been pretty degraded over years — that need a physical upgrade. What neighbourhood renewal does is provide that physical upgrade, but it does it using community building principles. That means essentially the local community decides how the area will be upgraded, the local community gets to do the upgrade themselves, in many cases so they get jobs, painting, building fences et cetera, and the very fact that the local community has run the project gives them much more pride and ownership in it and also a lot of capacity; it builds their capacity. That has been a program we have run in neighbourhood renewal. It has been enormously successful, one of the most successful community building projects, I think, around the country and it is acknowledged as such.

What we are doing this year is announcing that start of that principle in non-ministry of housing areas, but that are very much in need of extra support — for example, one area is Laverton where we are going to be doing this. Laverton is an area where traditionally there was a lot of federal government housing which, if you go and have a look at it, a lot of it now is fairly degraded. The community there has said, 'We would like to build up our area and improve it' and the government is going to get behind that. This year, as part of A Fairer Victoria, we have announced that there will be some \$7.5 million available for community renewal projects throughout the state and we will seek to get a balance between urban and regional but it will be targeting areas that have some significant level of disadvantage.

Mr CLARK — My question follows on from Mr Rich-Phillips's earlier question about staffing. You told us that as at 30 June 2006 you were expecting to have 758.6 EFT staff and that includes about 20 remaining from the Commonwealth Games. The departmental response to our questionnaire also estimated that as at 30 June 2007 the department would have 788 staff, so when you allow for the 20 remaining at June 2006 from the Commonwealth Games, that implies an overall increase of about 50 in the 2006–07 year. Can you tell the committee what areas these approximately 50 additional staff are going to be working in, and do you think that the extra increase in employment is justified?

Mr THWAITES — Yes. I will go through the areas. Flexible transport solutions, which I indicated before, are the projects around the state particularly in regional areas which will be employing transport facilitators in each of those areas.

Mr CLARK — Do you have approximate numbers for those?

Mr THWAITES — We can get some numbers. There are additional staff that will be going into the AAV indigenous area — Aboriginal Affairs Victoria. That comes out of the initiatives in A Fairer Victoria, so there are a number of new initiatives in A Fairer Victoria in the indigenous area. There will be some small number of extra

staff for the no-interest loans program; there might be one or two in the administration of that, and similarly for community renewal. Essentially there are new projects that we are announcing as part of A Fairer Victoria which will have a small number of extra staff attached. There are some extra staff involved with valuing Victoria's seniors, which is Minister Jennings's area. There are a few new extra initiatives in the Office for Youth and there will be a few extra staff in the community engagement area — local presence teams. Essentially the extra staffing is as set out in the new initiatives in A Fairer Victoria.

Mr CLARK — If you can come back to us with a breakdown of that number, that would be good.

Mr THWAITES — They are only estimates at this stage.

Mr CLARK — Still.

The CHAIR — Thank you, Minister. I would like to take you to page 259 of budget paper 3 and the measure of volunteering small grants. There is \$21 million allocated to the volunteering community and enterprise strategy that has been expended in 2005-06. Could you detail to the committee some of those initiatives?

Mr THWAITES — Yes. As the Chair would know, volunteering is very significant. You as minister presided over the Year of the Volunteer, and it makes a huge beneficial difference to Victoria. Some of the key initiatives of the small volunteer grants — we have distributed some 613 small grants totalling around \$2 million. These have been enormously successful. The purpose of the grants is to assist small community organisations to attract new volunteers, particularly new volunteers from different cultural backgrounds and perhaps volunteers who would not otherwise have joined that organisation; for example, trying to encourage different cultural and linguistic groups into volunteering, or encouraging people with disabilities into volunteering, so getting groups to be not so much recipients of volunteerism but to become volunteers themselves. It has been a very successful program.

We have also invested about \$434 000 into community capacity-building grounds for the volunteer resource centres. We have these volunteer resource centres around the state which do a great job supporting volunteers in the region, but they do it with very little funding and so we have provided some extra funding to assist them. We have set up a very successful partnership with the Municipal Association of Victoria to link councils into volunteering. Many of them are already involved but a number are not, so we have done a joint project with the MAV to achieve that.

We are also, through this area, supporting community enterprises, which are small not-for-profit businesses that give local people a chance to get work skills. They may not necessarily want to work full time, but they can be part of an enterprise — for example, the Sorghum Sisters who are a Horn of Africa catering company just nearby in Glenyys's area. They provide catering for a school, but they will also do it on a contract basis. That is a really exciting area too where people are getting work skills for an occupation and they are learning things they may need if they want to go on to employment.

The final thing I want to mention is the Commonwealth Games, because of course the Commonwealth Games was a huge volunteering effort. We are now working with a number of those volunteers to see if they would be interested in continuing to volunteer in other ways, and we have projects to encourage that as well.

Mr RICH-PHILLIPS — Minister, can I take you to page 120 of budget paper 4, which is the operating statement for the Department for Victorian Communities, and the line headed 'Employee benefits' which shows for 2004-05 actual expenditure of \$53.6 million, for 2005-06 a budget of \$53.3 million, and for 2005-06 a revised actual of \$66.4 million before dropping back to \$58 million for the coming year. I assume that the increase to \$66 million reflects the increase in part-time staff that were taken on for OCGC, as you and Mr Blacher spoke about before. But given that that was a foreseeable expense — everybody knew you would take on part-time staff for the duration of the Commonwealth Games — why was that not reflected in the 2005-06 budget?

Mr THWAITES — I will take some advice on that, as it is not my portfolio responsibility.

Mr RICH-PHILLIPS — But you are the lead minister for the department.

Mr THWAITES — Yes, but I will take some advice on that.

Mr GREGORY — I suppose the issue was that in relation to the Commonwealth Games a lot of funds were held in contingency until they worked through where they were going to allocate them. There were issues of

perhaps M2006 might undertake the activity, and it would be in grant form or it would be in salaries, and it was not really until probably about July of the last financial year that the actual splits between salaries and grants and that sort of stuff were finalised, so really the increase in salaries was funded out of the funds within the Commonwealth Games. There was a view that staff would increase, but the actual size and levels were not actually established in numbers at that stage.

Mr RICH-PHILLIPS — Should that not then have been reflected in a drop in grants?

Mr GREGORY — It is really a cut in the supplies and services. If you look at supplies and services, it is down about \$30 million. That is really a reallocation up to the salaries line in relation to ongoing.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much to the people from the Department for Victorian Communities. We appreciate yet again your involvement in estimates hearings. Transcripts will be emailed to the witnesses who have spoken in the next couple of days. You have two working days to confirm those Hansard transcripts. I also want to put on record our appreciation to staff from the Department for Victorian Communities for compiling the answers to our questionnaire and for the information that will be furnished in future.

Thank you, minister, and thank you to your advisers.

Witnesses withdrew.