

# VERIFIED TRANSCRIPT

## PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE

### Inquiry into 2007—08 budget estimates

Melbourne—3 May 2007

#### Members

Mr G. Barber	Mr G. Rich-Phillips
Mr R. Dalla-Riva	Mr R. Scott
Ms J. Graley	Mr R. Stensholt
Ms J. Munt	Dr W. Sykes
Mr M. Pakula	Mr K. Wells

Chair: Mr B. Stensholt  
Deputy Chair: Mr K. Wells

#### Staff

Business Support Officer: Ms J. Nathan

#### Witnesses

Mr S. Bracks, Minister for Multicultural Affairs and Minister for Veterans Affairs;  
Mr Y. Blacher, secretary;  
Mr S. Gregory, chief financial officer;  
Mr G. Lekakis, chairperson, Victorian Multicultural Commission; and  
Mr J. MacIsaac, executive director, youth, seniors, veterans and disability, Department for Victorian Communities.

**The CHAIR**—Right, Premier. I welcome Yehudi Blacher, secretary to the Department for Victorian Communities; Stephen Gregory, chief financial officer, Department for Victorian Communities; George Lekakis, chairperson, Victorian Multicultural Commission; and James MacIsaac, executive director, youth, seniors, veterans and disability, and departmental officers. Premier, I ask for your presentation on your more complex matters regarding multicultural affairs and veterans affairs.

**Mr BRACKS**—Thank you, Chair.

**The CHAIR**—You have about 35 minutes for this.

**Mr BRACKS**—Yes, I will do my best possible. Thank you, Chair. I will deal with multicultural affairs first and veterans affairs second. I think that was the understanding. Achievements in 2006-07: if I can go to that first on the slide presentation—there should be something circulating around committee members—multicultural and multifaith harmony as part of A Fairer Victoria 2, Progress and Next Steps, \$2.1 million was provided over four years to fund initiatives that bring different faiths and community groups together to promote multifaith and multicultural harmony. The Multifaith Multicultural Youth Forum held in July 2006 was the first of its kind in Victoria. It was an important opportunity to improve dialogue between young people from a range of cultural and faith backgrounds, and that was very successful.

Secondly, in 2006-07 the Language Services Strategy, as part of Fairer Victoria again \$3.1 million was allocated to extend the Language Services Strategy for a further four years. The second phase will focus on CALD communities, refugees and mental health clients. We have rolled out the new Australian interpreter symbol and the Victorian interpreter card with over 169,500 distributed by 31 March as well. We have made significant progress in delivering the refugee brokerage program. The projects in partnership with refugee communities, including brokering access for refugee groups to local community recreation facilities, and assisting emerging groups as well. The total number of projects will soon increase to nine.

The VMC grants: I think most members here would be familiar with the grant program. Of course, we have increased the grant program and in this budget we have extra resources for the VMC grants as well. Since 1999 we have increased it from \$750,000 under the previous government to now \$3 million in 2006-07. From July 2006 to April 2007 the VMC provided about 1,575 grants worth more than \$2.3 million. In accord with what I submitted earlier, we will have more efficiency in the delivery of that in the future. The grants program continues to grow in popularity every year. There is no shortage of applicants, I have to say. I congratulate the VMC for the rigour they show in the application of those grants.

The merger of VOMA into the VMC: as you know, we committed in the budget in our commitments for a third term to the merger of the department into the VMC in order to produce a saving and in order to streamline services and facilities to the multicultural communities. The view of the government was that whether it was the Premier or another minister, they will receive from their own department's advice, as they will from the VMC, and we did not require therefore a Victorian Office of Multicultural Affairs to achieve that aim. I am very pleased to see in the budget that that has been—

**The bells having rung.**

**The CHAIR**—Thank you, Premier. We need to suspend our hearing again.

**Hearing suspended.**

**The CHAIR**—We are back in session.

**Mr BRACKS**—Thank you, Chair.

**The CHAIR**—Thank you, Premier.

**Mr BRACKS**—As I mentioned just briefly, the merger of VOMA into VMC has captured an extra \$1 million which enables us to put that into direct outcomes for the many multicultural communities and the grant program itself. New budget initiatives. Three major cultural precincts to be refurbished: Lygon, Lonsdale and Little Bourke Streets. An \$8 million investment to restore the key laneways, undertake street beautification and boost resources to communities to showcase their cultural heritage. We are increasing the funding of the volunteer Ethnic Communities Council of Victoria. That is going to increase from \$180,000 to \$250,000, and we are establishing a new multicultural centre in Geelong with up to \$1 million in matched funding.

Increased budget initiatives: increasing funding to VMC's—multicultural communities—community grants program; additional funding of \$4 million over four years. Increased funding for community harmony initiatives with additional funding of \$2 million over two years. So, Chair, I think you want me to go onto veterans affairs?

**The CHAIR**—Yes, please. That would be great.

**Mr BRACKS**—There is an overarching principle committed to ensuring that ex-servicemen and women are remembered, are honoured and are supported in recognition of the service they have offered their nation. In 2004 I announced that I would assume responsibility for all veterans affairs. Previously it was associated with several ministers; the consumer affairs minister, the health minister and other ministers. I assumed total responsibility for that and I think that has been an important and significant initiative. Since then our key priorities have been to strengthen commemoration, education and support to veterans and to create a more coordinated approach to issues affecting our veteran communities.

We have realised the changing needs of our ageing community, as well as the increased interest amongst young people, are important as a focus for the future. The veterans unit within the Department of Victorian Communities has provided operational support to coordinate activities across government. The achievements in 2006-07. Still, as I reported last year, one of our great achievements has been the Victorian Spirit of Anzac schools competition including an overseas study tour. The third tour has just finished successfully across Europe and into Gallipoli as well.

Restoring community war memorials grant program. I know many members have taken advantage of that. Many communities have utilised that and we are seeing the upgrade of those regional memorials right around the state. Fifty thousand dollars for Anzac Day activities. That is now free travel before, during and after for three days. That enables our veterans to come in for commemoration activities and assistance to support those events. The Shrine of Remembrance and ongoing support. As you know, the undercroft has been redeveloped, the education facilities are in place and we have provided more support operationally and for programs for the education officers to undertake their work. We have had a record number of young people and students going through that centre. It is outstanding.

The Victorian Veterans Council and Victorian Veterans Fund which was a reform that went through our parliament, recognising that we needed to consolidate that and to adhere to the original principles that those funds were created on, and the Veterans Heritage Working Group to protect and display Victoria's related heritage. The key priorities for 2007-08 in the budget—and I will finish here.

Commemoration and education activities: we have in this budget \$2 million over four years to support the continued development of the Veteran Commemorative and Education Agenda and extending the Restoring Community War Memorials Grants for a further four years. There is still some work to be done and I imagine once we finish it there is probably even more work to be done to those we finished in the first round. There is a case to be put not only for the permanent memorials but some of the honour boards, for example, which are not captured by the static memorials in communities. Those honour boards are quite significant in a whole

range of communities, whether you go to Melbourne High School or other schools. You will see those honour boards and there is some work to be done there. We are keen on looking at changes in that area.

The Victoria Spirit of ANZAC prize: the 2007 tour is completed. The 2008 tour will be selected on the basis of every education region for government and private schools. The Shrine of Remembrance: \$200,000 to upgrade the public address system; it is a bit patchy and needs to be improved. New budget measures, and probably the biggest of those is not contained within the Department of Victorian Communities but in the Department of Human Services—and that is, a new mental health facility at Heidelberg that has been roundly praised and supported. It does not say here, but from memory it is about \$10 million that we are providing to that. I know the veteran community have sought that for a long time. If you see it, you will see what needs to be done and I am looking forward very much to that upgrade happening as well. Chair, thank you very much for the opportunity.

**The CHAIR**—Thank you, Premier. We will take questions on either of the portfolios. Ms Munt?

**Ms MUNT**—Premier, could you please detail for me what new measures is introducing through the 2007-08 budget to commemorate the service of our veterans.

**Mr BRACKS**—Thank you for your question. That enables me to elaborate on matters I was not able to cover in that report. The interest from the community in commemorating the sacrifice of the servicemen and women in engagements and conflicts overseas continues to grow; we only have to look at the new records being established for attendance at Anzac Day services each year, and particularly the number of young people involved in the parade, not only in Melbourne but in regional and suburban centres all round Victoria. This interest in our service history is demonstrated by the growing participation of school students. That has probably been the biggest change that we have seen over the last two to three years. The Anzac prize is recognition of that but you will see that involvement in all communities.

In this context there has been considerable interest in commemorating significant anniversaries, such as the 40th anniversary of the Battle of Long Tan that occurred in August last year. We contributed \$20,000 to help the Victorian Vietnam Veterans Association make that commemoration the outstanding success that it was. This year we have another important anniversary, members of the committee should note: the 65th anniversary of the battle for Australia, effectively—the heroic decision made to redirect our troops to defend Australia at Kokoda, which arguably saved the nation by halting the advance of the Japanese from a staging post at Port Moresby—and the Battle of the Coral Sea which brought the war to our doorstep as well. I think that will be a very important and moving event.

In recognition of this interest by the community, the government in its recent election policy committed to invest \$2 million over the next four years to support ceremonial events and commemorative initiatives. We have delivered on our election commitment by allocating this funding in the budget for 2007-08 and the subsequent three years. The funding will be used to support commemorative events and the implementation of a range of initiatives including upgrading the memorial to our World War II commandos at Tidal River, undertaking an inventory of Victoria's war memorials and developing a guidebook to Victoria's wartime heritage. This funding will go for another four years.

**The bells having rung.**

**The CHAIR**—We will once again take a break.

**Hearing suspended.**

**The CHAIR**—We have reconvened. We have agreed we will finish at six o'clock and if you have any questions, you can put them on notice. We might pass to Richard to ask a question.

**Mr DALLA-RIVA**—In relation to the \$14 million that you proposed to strengthen multicultural Victoria, you allocated \$8 million for cultural precincts which you indicated earlier. You also suggested \$4 million to boost the Victorian Multicultural Commission's community grants, \$2 million over two years for community harmony. Is that new, additional money or is that existing money that is already in the system?

**Mr BRACKS**—The money for the ethnic precincts—Lygon Street, Little Bourke Street and Lonsdale Street—is new money because that was a new allocation. In relation to the grants program, as I mentioned before, from the abolition of VOMA we captured \$1 million. In effect, we have a \$1 million extra capacity to put into other programs that we had. The money for the other matters raised there—the matters I have referred you and you have referred to—is new money. The Hope Centre is new money.

**Mr DALLA-RIVA**—With the \$1 million savings that you are proposing with the merger, how are you planning to gain that money? Are you proposing to make any staff redundant or is it garnered? As a subset to that question, is the merger as a result—my understanding is that VOMA and VMC cannot get on together?

**Mr BRACKS**—No. It is to do with the fact that, as I mentioned before, myself as Multicultural Affairs Minister, or any other minister, will have from their department advice which they will receive after the Victorian Multicultural Commission would submit its advice as well. That would happen as normal course of business. The whole Department of Premier and Cabinet, for example, is available to me. The whole of the department is also available to Daniel Andrews, the minister assisting me in multicultural affairs. We felt that was a duplication on which we could make a saving and we wanted to put more resources into front-line services to assist our multicultural communities. Those front-line services, including the grants program, included the extra money for the ethnic precincts. We think that is money better targeted.

In relation to staff that were there, we are expanding other areas of the public sector and they have been allocated jobs in other parts of the public sector, so no jobs were lost.

**Mr DALLA-RIVA**—And they get on well together?

**Mr BRACKS**—Well, VOMA does not exist, but, yes, they used to get on famously. They used to love each other.

**The CHAIR**—Thanks very much, Premier. That concludes the consideration of budget estimates for the portfolios of Premier and Cabinet and Multicultural Affairs and Veterans Affairs. There are a couple of questions to take on notice. If they are passed to me, I will pass them to Yehudi. It has been a very useful session. I thank the Premier and Mr Blacher and the departmental officers for their attendance. Where questions are taken on notice, the committee will follow them up with you in writing at a later date and request that written responses to these matters be provided within 30 days and they will form part of one of our reports to parliament. Thank you very much.

**Witnesses withdrew.**