

VERIFIED TRANSCRIPT

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into budget estimates 2008–09

Melbourne — 12 May 2008

Members

Mr G. Barber	Mr G. Rich-Phillips
Mr R. Dalla-Riva	Mr R. Scott
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Mr W. Noonan	Dr W. Sykes
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Witnesses

Mr J. Brumby, 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;
Mr J. MacIsaac, Executive Director, People and Communities; and
Mr A Robinson, Minister Assisting the Premier on Veterans' Affairs.

The CHAIR — I welcome the Premier as Minister for Multicultural Affairs and Minister for Veterans Affairs; Mr Yehudi Blacher, Secretary of the Department of Planning and Community Development; Stephen Gregory, chief financial officer; George Lekakis, chairperson of the Victorian Multicultural Commission and James MacIsaac, executive director, and departmental officers. I call on the Premier to make a presentation of about 5 minutes.

Mr BRUMBY — With me I have the chair of the Victorian Multicultural Commission, George Lekakis, and the Secretary of the Department of Planning and Community Development, Yehudi Blacher. I will just quickly run through the slides. I am obviously aware we are running out of time. If there is anything that Mr Lekakis would like to add to what is in the slides on the VMC, I am sure he will.

The CHAIR — We will take both portfolios together — multicultural affairs and veterans affairs together.

Overheads shown.

Mr BRUMBY — I refer firstly to multicultural affairs. Obviously diversity is one of our greatest strengths, and I made the point in my Australia Day speech actually, that there are three defining elements of our character as a state; I thought multiculturalism and diversity was one of those. I have always believed that, and I think it is such an extraordinary strength for us. On Australia Day we launched the book *All Of Us* and that was, I think, a great way to tell that story about diversity.

We have consolidated Victorian Office of Multicultural Affairs into the Victorian Multicultural Commission, and that has freed up, George, I think around \$1 million per annum through streamlining and operations?

Mr LEKAKIS — Yes.

Mr BRUMBY — This money has been returned to the community as additional grants. The VMC community grants program in 2007-08 — there was approximately 4.5 million. Again, I just stress that, if I might, in answer to a previous question from Mr Gordon Rich-Phillips, I am told that is a sixfold increase. Sorry, it might have been Richard's question on the budget. That is a sixfold increase. So, again, it is another example of where we are spending — —

Mr DALLA-RIVA — It is still not 90 per cent.

Mr BRUMBY — Well over 90 per cent; it is 500 per cent. By the way the figure on health I did get for you — —

The CHAIR — We are also interested in what is happening in the future, too.

Mr BRUMBY — The figure on health is 112 per cent. That has gone to something like 2500 grants to around 1600 community organisations. I know as a local member just how well these grants are received and how much they help build a stronger community.

There are also multifaith and multicultural harmony issues — 2.1 million over the four years, and in the 2007-08 budget we added \$2 million over two years to this commitment. These are important. Again, if you compare our state — I will not name any other states, but if you compare our state to some of the others in this area of multiculturalism, of migration, of diversity, I think we have a far more harmonious community than many others, particularly others around the world, and that is the case because we work on it to get it right, and there is a lot of goodwill and good faith right across communities, and these grants help in those regards.

In terms of other achievements, the refugee brokerage program has been very successful. It develops community capacity, leadership, youth activity, and there have been nine partnership projects in Melbourne and regional Victoria that we have funded across country Victoria and across metropolitan Melbourne. The language services strategy: in the 2006 budget we committed 3.1 million over four years to language services, and in the last year 11 new projects were targeted.

The cultural precincts enhancement fund: in the 2007-08 budget we committed 8 million over three years to enhance Melbourne's three key cultural precincts — as you know, Little Bourke, Lygon and Lonsdale streets. There is a huge amount of work which has been done to engage those three communities, and we are working

closely with the City of Melbourne, and funding announcements I think are anticipated in the not-too-distant future. I think it is true to say that our \$8 million investment there will leverage additional funding.

The Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria core funding has been increased from \$180 000 to \$250 000 per annum for four years. It provides a range of advocacy advice and services to government in areas such as multicultural aged care, equal opportunity policy, housing and employment discrimination. In Geelong: I think we have mentioned the DW Hope Centre — \$1 million has been committed to that, and the commonwealth has also committed 1.5 million.

Finally, if I can, just go to the third slide — interpreting and translating. Last week's budget committed 2 million over two years towards further improvements and 800 000 to enhance the skills of the interpreter workforce, 200 000 for technology improvements in interpreting services, and a further 1 million for government agencies to increase their purchase of interpreting and translating services.

Finally, if I can just say, we have a whole-of-government focus, a strong focus on CALD populations access to government services. If you look in the health area for example — justice, education and health — there is 17.7 million which will benefit emerging refugee communities. That will pay for additional nurses for the refugee health nurse program, liaison officers for refugee communities to navigate the justice system and specialised tutoring and additional support for refugee school children. It shows our commitment in this area. Victoria is playing its role in the world, I think, but it is also making sure that we get the best settlement arrangements possible in our state and build strong communities off the back of a very diverse populations.

The CHAIR — Okay. If you could refer quickly to veterans affairs.

Mr BRUMBY — Yes, quickly on veterans affairs. The minister, Tony Robinson, is of course here as well. I am honoured to be both the Minister for Multicultural Affairs and the Minister for Veterans' Affairs. We have got a few slides on veterans.

One point I will make is, as we get closer to the centenary of Anzac Day in 2015, that I wrote to the former Prime Minister about this issue, that it would be great to have obviously major national celebrations leading up to Anzac Day in 2015, and that Victoria could play a special role in this regard. I suggested we might be the location for the first meeting of a new centenary of Anzac national committee.

Mr BARBER — You said celebration; did you mean commemoration?

Mr BRUMBY — No, I think both actually, because you commemorate Anzac Day but you celebrate the values that Anzac Day epitomises. They are the traditional values of mateship, comradeship, sacrifice, bravery and courage. So I think it is correct to say both. I think that is what veterans would say as well. So we are moving towards that. During that period, of course, the national government was here in Melbourne. So the federal Parliament was located here in Melbourne, so I think we can play a special role to mark that centenary in 2015.

Just in terms of some of the challenges going forward — and the graph behind you there — the key issue is obviously the ageing of our veterans population. There is significant demographic change. From a state government point of view, it is about how we maintain the services, how we support groups like the RSL and others. The average age of World War II veterans is currently 85.7 years. My father is one of those; Dad is 83. As you saw in the media, I walked with him this year on Anzac Day. He was on the *Quiberon*. There is only eight of them now that walk on Anzac Day.

So maintaining services and support for the veterans community is going to be important. At the same time, too, maintaining the services going forward on Anzac Day will also be important. I think you are going to see this continuing growth in the number of people who attend the dawn service. This year we saw something like 35 000 people attend the dawn service. We have certainly seen that resurgence in community interest.

Just very quickly, in terms of the commemoration in education, the spirit of Anzac prize; this is a fantastic program. The 2008 study tour this year went through Singapore and Greece I think. That is right. There is ongoing support to the shrine. I also visited Tidal River earlier this year for the unveiling of the commando memorial there.

On key priorities, as I said, encouraging early planning for the centenary of Anzac in 2015; responding to the recommendations from the Victorian Veterans Council's Victorian veterans sector study; the new budget measures;

we are helping with digitising military unit histories; and working with the Australian Centre for the Moving Image to develop a series of oral histories — that has been obviously well received.

The repat hospital — the 15.5 million there — is a major investment. There is 14.5 million there for the centre for trauma-related mental health to support veteran and non-veterans mental health and wellbeing needs. Of course there is the continuing activity, the study tour and the restoring community war memorials grants program. From my movements around the state, I know that is a very popular program. I have been to little country towns where I have seen two or three members of the same family up there on the honour roll who lost their lives in the First World War. So to restore those memorials is a very positive thing for the local community so that we remember, for all time, the extraordinary contribution that those towns and communities made.

The CHAIR — Are there questions on either of those portfolios?

Mr SCOTT — I noted in your presentation you touched upon the trauma-related mental health services. Can you outline in more detail the initiatives that are in the current budget to address the mental health of veterans? I know it is a particular issue for a number of veterans in the community.

Mr BRUMBY — In terms of veterans mental health, I am advised that 59 per cent of Victorians veterans are aged between 80 and 90 years, and as I indicated a moment ago, the average age is now 85.7. Because of their ages and their service histories, their community has specific needs relating to health and wellbeing. I think that is reflected in the commitment that we made to the Heidelberg repat hospital.

In particular the government's policy Respecting Victoria's Veterans committed to developing a new mental health facility that incorporates the veterans psychiatry unit at the Heidelberg repat hospital. As I mentioned in the slide presentation, this is called the centre for trauma-related mental health. That facility will also support other trauma survivors, and it includes a 20-bed unit for inpatient treatment; 1.5 million was allocated in the 2007–08 budget for design and site preparation; and 15.5 million was allocated in the 2008–09 budget. I think that is very positive, and those projects are being coordinated by the Department of Human Services.

Mr BARBER — Premier, totally or permanently incapacitated veterans are likely to have a lot of medical appointments, obviously, but some of those same disabilities make it very difficult for them to access public transport. Is there anything in the forward estimates to provide state concessions on CityLink e-tags and/or has that been considered by the state government?

Mr BRUMBY — To my knowledge it has not been considered. It is unlikely, although obviously not impossible, if a veteran is not physically able to use public transport then they probably do not have a drivers licence either, if their physical condition is such that they cannot use public transport. I am not aware that that matter has been raised. There are, obviously, a range of programs through the taxi service, I understand — I do not have the details of those; I am happy to get them to you — where, particularly for medical appointments and others, support is provided.

The CHAIR — We can ask the Minister for Roads and Ports.

Mr BRUMBY — I will get that information.

The CHAIR — The DVA provides a lot of support, too.

Mr NOONAN — Can I go to the multicultural affairs area? You talked briefly about a refugee support strategy. I wonder if you could elaborate on that and also advise how the initiatives announced in the 08–09 budget will strengthen the government's reputation as a leader in the area of multicultural affairs?

Mr BRUMBY — As I mentioned before, on the refugee brokerage program, we have committed 3.1 million for this over the four-year period — that is, 2005–06 through to 08–09. That is to support local communities and particularly partnership-based approaches, to improve the use of existing services by refugee communities. In 2007–08, the program fully met its budget output measure. It funded nine partnership projects. They were in Warrnambool, Colac, Shepparton, Hume, Brimbank, Greater Dandenong, Casey, Maribyrnong, Hobsons Bay, Melbourne, Moreland, Yarra, Moonee Valley, Darebin, Banyule, Whittlesea, Wyndham and Melton. Some of those, of course, were grouped geographically. In this financial year the program has worked with in excess of 40 refugee communities across 16 locations. One example of a strategic program outcome was the initial

stages of developing a small number of community enterprises — businesses, for example, that provide refugee women with the opportunity to learn how to run a business.

We think these programs are extremely important. I repeat what I said before: in this area I think we have the right programs in place to support these communities. As you know, many of these families come from areas where they have been exposed to civil war, poverty and death for years and years. They come here, and it is a big adjustment. They need support. They get some of that support from the federal government, but it is not always enough. We are providing additional support, and I believe it is making a difference. Certainly the partnership approach is the key to its success, I think.

Dr SYKES — I would like to ask a question in relation to the Spirit of Anzac schools competition, which is in budget paper 3, page 193, but before I do I would like to preface my question by saying that I certainly share the view of the Premier about the growing importance of Anzac Day and also taking the opportunity to publicly put on the record my gratitude to the minister responsible, Mr Tony Robinson, and David Roberts for involving me in the commemorative services in France, where I participated in the commemorative services at Villers-Bretonneux and nearby communities.

We agree that it is important to continue to grow the spirit of Anzac and, as has been indicated, the veterans ages are increasing, and therefore there is a need to recruit young people to take over the reins. I note in relation to the spirit of Anzac schools competition that the number of participants has decreased — they were at 241 in 06–07 and they have dropped to 183 in 07–08. I am wondering, is there is an explanation for that? Is it related to funding? Is it related to toughening of the criteria? If so, what is being done to address that issue and get the numbers back up so that we can have more and more young people involved?

Mr BRUMBY — We certainly want to see more young people involved. Thank you, too, for your comments thanking the minister assisting the Minister for Veterans' Affairs — I am the minister, as you know — and thank you for your comments supporting the minister assisting in terms of your travel. I should say in terms of the Western Front and Villers-Bretonneux, as I indicated in my speech at the Anzac Day lunch this year, my great-uncle, Ernest Brumby, lost his life at Pozieres. Like many of them there, he lasted two days. If you read the history of that area — and you are lucky, you have seen it firsthand; I have not seen it, I have only read the history of that area — you realise the extraordinary and unbelievable loss of life. In terms of the Spirit of Anzac competition numbers, I will get advice on that. The funding has not changed, so I guess it is just the numbers who are applying?

When it goes to Gallipoli, the numbers go up. Can I just say more generally, that since 2004–05 more than 750 Victorian students from across the state have participated and as a result, ~39 year-9 students have been selected to participate in the 2005–06–07 and 2008 tours. So the participation is very strong indeed; 10 students were involved in the 2008 tour and 7 adults accompanied them on that trip. Perhaps the minister assisting me —

The CHAIR — Yes, we welcome the Minister Assisting the Premier on Veterans' Affairs, Tony Robinson, to join the hearing.

Mr BRUMBY — Do you have any comments to add?

Mr ROBINSON — Thanks, Premier. Just two comments to Dr Sykes. Firstly, the numbers do tend to ebb and flow a little depending on whether the trip goes to Gallipoli. I think we have done four trips and one has included Gallipoli. This year it was Greece and Crete so we have experienced a little bit of a fall-off but we do appreciate the fact. I think next year we may go back to Gallipoli so we expect that there will be a pick up there.

Secondly, whilst overseas — and you have alluded to the recent visit — I spoke to the Western Australian school group; their competition, unlike ours, runs for all secondary students from year 7 through to year 11 and ours only runs for year 9 students. I think proportionately they get far fewer applications than you would think compared to us. They have five times as many applicants but I think they have less than twice the number of submissions.

The other point is the number of submissions does not always reflect the interest. Sometimes schools just do not get to the deadline in time. These numbers will go up and down a little bit year to year.

The CHAIR — Thank you, Premier and Minister. We always welcome ministers to appear before us; we actually like and encourage it.

Mr PAKULA — Premier, my question is on the multicultural affairs portfolio. I note on page 279 of budget paper 3 there is an amount over the forward estimates period of \$8 million — —

Mr BRUMBY — Sorry, what page?

Mr PAKULA — Page 279 of budget paper 3. There is an amount of 8 million set aside over the forward estimates for the development of the cultural precincts or the ethnic precincts, and my query is about the community consultation that will go along with it. What arrangements have been put in place to consult with those communities about the development of those precincts over that period?

Mr BRUMBY — My understanding is that there has been a very large amount of consultation which has taken place. The initiative is administered by the Victorian Multicultural Commission in partnership with the City of Melbourne and the Italian, Greek and Chinese communities. The consultation is being led through the commission and by the Minister Assisting the Premier on Multicultural Affairs, James Merlino. There has been a huge amount of interest in these cultural precincts and the enhancement fund. As I said before, it is anticipated that the first projects to be funded will be announced in the not-too-distant future.

It is anticipated that the total expenditure in these three precincts will significantly exceed the \$8 million, and that is because there will be third party leveraging, there will be other groups that want to contribute, and I think this will be a great initiative in terms of ensuring that we have the enhancements in these areas, that we want to recognise the extraordinary contribution of these communities and the role of these precincts.

I might ask whether the VMC chairman also wants to say a couple of words about the consultation process?

Mr LEKAKIS — Yes. In June–July we commenced a major information strategy to inform all stakeholders in the precincts. We then hosted specific stakeholder meetings of each precinct with nominated people from the local chambers of commerce, community representatives and a whole host of other interested parties. All three precinct stakeholder meetings have met. They have agreed on some of the key priorities for the physical and other community enhancements in the three precincts. We have thus received all applications regarding those improvements, and we are on the verge of negotiating with the City of Melbourne.

When you are dealing with footpaths, extensions and enhancements, glass screens, lighting, gateway markers, arches and a myriad of other issues that communities and local businesses want in those precincts, we have to have extensive negotiations with the City of Melbourne to realise those. The budget is there from the state government point of view, and we are looking at what the community can add to the individual projects and of course what the City of Melbourne will add as well.

It has earmarked specific initiatives within its budget cycle over the next three years for major project improvements in those precincts, and we are currently negotiating the details of where they will spend their dollars and where the state government can make improvements as well.

But let me assure you that the stakeholders have met, they have prioritised and everybody is clear within those communities exactly what improvements they seek from those precincts and the money that we are going to invest.

Mr DALLA-RIVA — Premier, I refer you to budget paper 3 on page 193 in respect of multicultural affairs, and I note that the total output costs running into the 08–09 year is going from about 10.4 million to 14.1 million. In that component I gather that the Victorian Multicultural Commission receives an amount for the publication it sends out to various stakeholders. You are probably aware of the publication — I can't think of it offhand.

Mr LEKAKIS — *Multicultural Victoria*.

Mr DALLA-RIVA — It knew it was something like that — *Multicultural Victoria*. Are you aware of the recent one that I must say had quite a substantial number of ministers, ministers assisting the Premier, lots of Labor MPs peppered throughout the document, and do you think that is a fair representation when you are meant to be in a portfolio that really should be non-partisan?

The CHAIR — Premier, we are really dealing with the estimates, but I am sure we can organise a few photos for Richard in the next one.

Mr DALLA-RIVA — Is that a reasonable expenditure of money in a portfolio — —

Mr BRUMBY — I have not seen the publication, but I do know about the multicultural dinner which I attended a month ago. It was the first I had attended as Premier, and it was a fantastic night. I know on that night there was every group there. The Leader of the Opposition and his wife sat on the main table with me and my wife that night. I spoke; the Leader of the Opposition spoke after me, and he had the same time. It was a completely even-handed event. I might say that it has not always been that way, when I think back to the 1990s.

I have not seen the publication. I can only assume the reason ministers are there is because we make a lot of announcements. I do not know if my photo is in there but I do know — —

Mr DALLA-RIVA — A few times.

Mr BRUMBY — I do know in terms of multicultural affairs — —

Mr DALLA-RIVA — Fair enough. That is not the issue. If you had seen the publication, Premier, you would see that in a portfolio that should be fairly balanced — it just appeared significantly one way.

Mr BRUMBY — I will certainly have a look at it. I know that in my area there are a huge number of events I have done in this area. Again I am just trying to think — there was the event we had at Parliament House with the Vietnamese welfare group. Ministers make a lot of grants, and presumably because they make grants, that is why they are in it.

Mr DALLA-RIVA — You give me some money to make a grant and I'm sure I will be in the publication.

Mr BRUMBY — You know how that works.

The CHAIR — Thank you, Premier. I note that Mr Barber has a couple of questions he wishes to put on notice, namely: is there any provision in the budget for the creation of the culturally linguistic and diverse older persons action plan, which is in the ALP 2006 election platform, and what is that provision; and will funding for the new workforce partnership program continue at least until any federal funding takes it place? He has put those on notice.

There are a number of others which are put on notice too, Premier. We would like you, if you can, to provide written responses to those within 30 days so we can end up doing our reports in a timely fashion.

That concludes the consideration of the budget estimates for the portfolios of Premier and Cabinet, Multicultural Affairs' and Veterans Affairs. I thank the Premier and the Minister assisting the Premier on Veterans' Affairs, Mr Robinson, Multicultural Affairs and Veterans' Affairs staff. It has been a very good session. Where questions were taken on notice, as I mentioned, the answers are to be provided, and the Hansard transcript will be distributed in the next day or two.

Committee adjourned.