

VERIFIED VERSION

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Budget Estimates 2015–16

Melbourne — 21 May 2015

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Witnesses

Ms Natalie Hutchins, Minister for Aboriginal Affairs,

Ms Rebecca Falkingham, Deputy Secretary, Social Policy and Service Delivery Reform, Department of Premier and Cabinet;

Ms Angela Singh, Executive Director,

Ms Athena Andriotis, Director, Strategic Policy and Coordination, and

Ms Jane Sweeney, Director, Heritage Services, Office of Aboriginal Affairs Victoria.

The CHAIR — I declare open the public hearings for the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee inquiry into the 2015–16 budget estimates. All mobile telephones should now be turned to silent.

I would like to welcome to the hearing the Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, the Honourable Natalie Hutchins, MP; Ms Rebecca Falkingham, Deputy Secretary, Social Policy and Service Delivery Reform, Department of Premier and Cabinet; Ms Angela Singh, Executive Director, Office of Aboriginal Affairs Victoria; Ms Athena Andriotis, Director, Strategic Policy and Coordination, Office of Aboriginal Affairs Victoria; and Ms Jane Sweeney, Director, Heritage Services, Office of Aboriginal Affairs Victoria.

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All evidence given today is being recorded by Hansard. You will be provided with proof versions of the transcript for verification as soon as available. Verified transcripts, PowerPoint presentations and handouts will be placed on the committee's website as soon as possible.

Departmental officers may approach the table during the hearing to provide information to the witnesses if requested, by leave of myself. However, written communication to witnesses can only be provided via officers of the PAEC secretariat. Members of the public gallery cannot participate in the committee's proceedings in any way.

Members of the media are to observe the following guidelines: cameras must remain focused only on the persons speaking; operators must not pan the public gallery, the committee or witnesses; and filming and recording must cease immediately at the completion of the hearing.

I now invite the witness to make a very brief opening statement of no more than 5 minutes. This will be followed by questions from the committee.

Visual presentation.

Ms HUTCHINS — Thanks to the committee for being able to present. I thought I would start my presentation with just a snapshot around Aboriginal Victoria and just the demographics. It is quite relevant to where the policy streams need to go. There are over 51 000 Aboriginal Victorians, as estimated by the ABS. By 2026 we estimate that that will grow to over 70 000. Fifty per cent of Aboriginal Victorians live in regional Victoria and are gathered around particular areas, such as Mildura, around Gippsland, around Shepparton and the Echuca-Moama area. The median age, which is a very significant difference between Aboriginal Victorians and non-Aboriginal Victorians, is 22 years old, whereas the median age for non-Aboriginal people is 37, which makes for a very young population we are dealing with.

There is strong leadership and a diverse range of voices, which I learnt first and foremost in doing a listening tour of Victoria as a new minister back in January. I have to say that no two groups were the same, and their needs and wants and desires were quite different. Key stakeholders in the Aboriginal sector include statewide organisations; regional partners; local cooperatives; Traditional Owners, including Registered Aboriginal Parties, which we call RAPs; Local Indigenous Networks, which we often refer to as LINs; and Aboriginal community members.

For the interest of the committee I have just put a graph up there which shows the growth in the Local Indigenous Networks. I had the pleasure just two weeks ago of attending the first statewide meeting of the Local Indigenous Networks. As you can see, they have grown to over 2000 participants across the state, and they really connect in with local communities. What I have put there also, which is in a bigger version in the handout, is the Registered Aboriginal Parties map. All of those Registered Aboriginal Parties currently cover 60 per cent of Victoria, and there are RAP applications in the other areas that are shaded in white that are under consideration at the moment. It has been great progress that we have made in the last 10 years in moving towards Registered Aboriginal Parties.

In terms of our commitments to Closing the Gap, on 19 March we hosted an amazing ceremony downstairs in Queen's Hall to acknowledge Closing the Gap and where we are in the spirit of partnership and bipartisanship across the other parties in Parliament. The Premier made it pretty clear then through his speech that self-determination was at the centre of our policy going forward. In that, it is reflected in the budget, with a commitment of \$30.2 million to Aboriginal affairs in this year's budget. We have put a lot of time and effort into making sure that we have Aboriginal people at the table and that their voices are heard rather than speaking for them.

It was Aboriginal people's voices that were heard and acknowledged, and only just two days ago the Premier chaired a gathering of Aboriginal community in the cabinet room and really gave the time to listen to what the core issues were and how we can move forward as a state in reaching self-determination. As I mentioned earlier as well, I attended the first statewide gathering of Victorian Local Indigenous Networks, the LINs. By defining our approach through the lens of self-determination, that is how we will be progressing all of our policy and implementing budget commitments.

Just in terms of the detail of the budget commitments, the Aboriginal cultural heritage strategy is our strong commitment to empowering Traditional Owners; \$20.9 million has been committed to strengthening Victoria's Aboriginal cultural heritage system, which is administered by the Registered Aboriginal Parties that have been defined in various areas of Victoria. Whilst there are a lot of acronyms in this portfolio, let me just break it down — that is to say that the Registered Aboriginal Parties, where they are operating, are operating extremely successfully. They have had their ups and downs over the years, but where they are operating and they are having a say over the land — they are at the table and in the field with developers in preserving cultural heritage but also being engaged by local councils and developers — we are seeing a huge growth in pride, respect and connectedness.

We also have a commitment for a Victorian Aboriginal Economic Strategy — \$4.5 million over four years — and that is to establish and grow partnerships that can lead to further opportunities for employment for Aboriginal people. Aboriginal Victorians are four times more likely to be unemployed than non-Aboriginal Victorians. Really what we want to do is establish a Victorian Aboriginal Economic Board, which has been a policy for a number of years but not put into action, and to reach out to partners in a range of sectors to come to the table to work with us in trying to grow Aboriginal employment. I think there are some real opportunities down the track in the area of tourism as well.

The Aboriginal Leadership and Self-Determination Program, which is \$3.5 million over four years, is to enhance the governance of Aboriginal organisations, to build and support reconciliation and help them to connect out to local communities further. We have dedicated \$1.3 million to reducing family violence so that we can address some of the high-risk communities' immediate needs and to also target awareness campaigns over the coming 12 months and ensure that we are supporting Aboriginal communities, because we have certainly been out there encouraging them, to be putting forward submissions to the Family Violence Royal Commission and making sure that we have support for them in putting evidence forward through support for the service providers in supporting those who are going to tell the story through that process.

Finally, I have just added that map to the presentation in a bigger version so that it is there. I am not sure how many Victorians are quite aware of this map, and it is something I am keen to promote as the minister — and maybe to new members of Parliament who are not familiar with it. That represents a great snapshot of the history of Victorian Aboriginals, and of course we still have the white unmarked areas there that we are really working hard through the Victorian Aboriginal Heritage Council to move forward and get some recognition where we can. That is where I will leave it.

The CHAIR — Thank you, Minister. I will lead off with the first question. In the context of the 2015–16 budget and your own portfolio responsibilities, can you inform the committee how this budget acquits *Labor's Financial Statement*?

Ms HUTCHINS — I think the key elements in the LFS that go to the heart of what we want to offer to Victorian Aboriginals in terms of opportunity are all of our work and commitment around getting people back to work and getting more job opportunities for more people across Victoria, but making sure that we have some special programs in place for Victorian Aboriginal people. I guess that is first and foremost addressed by strengthening current Aboriginal communities and making sure there are opportunities there, but making sure that we fight to extend every new job opportunity and every opportunity to support a better life for Aboriginal

children, as well as whatever security we can offer and whatever engagement we can offer in terms of engagement in school and job opportunities and pathways to job opportunities.

I guess our strong commitment to Closing the Gap and trying to tackle some of those issues is probably at the core of our focus, and also ensuring that we empower those bodies that are there, such as the RAPs, to deliver at the forefront. The commitment we have made in the budget of \$30.2 million represents an increase from the last budget of \$26 million, so it is a major investment. We are very much looking to strengthen and empower those communities to be able to deliver, thrive and find their own job opportunities where they are established through the management of land and the management of cultural heritage where possible.

Our other budgetary commitments, which I touched on in the presentation, include reducing family violence — targeting \$1.3 million at that. I have to say that as the new minister to this portfolio probably the two things that keep me awake at night in this portfolio are unfortunately the high levels of family violence and reporting but also the high levels of Aboriginal children moving into out-of-home care. They are two areas that are extremely important for us to continue to tackle and support. I feel that we have not made the gains that we should have over the years, and that means that we need to get back to basics and have the conversation with Aboriginal leaders and with communities about how we best move forward in those two areas, making sure that we have the right support bases.

I had the opportunity to visit a women's and children's Aboriginal-specific refuge that deals with victims of family violence and to speak to victims one-on-one about their desire to get out of the cycle of family violence. It was not something that was just affecting their immediate family and their children, but something that had affected them as children as well. I think we sometimes underestimate the impact on Aboriginal Victorians of colonisation and the effects there, but also stolen generations and the movement from traditional lands of people, and how that has impacted on generation after generation through disadvantage and harm, and in some cases trauma, for families and for children who are now adults and parents themselves. Tackling that is quite important, and I am hoping that there will be opportunities and voices heard during the Royal Commission into Family Violence which will lead us to more long-term prevention and support. Also I think the other strategies we are using, such as supporting economic strategy, heritage strategy and self-determination, are all things that will help us in tackling all of the disadvantage that unfortunately we see in pockets of Aboriginal communities.

Mr DIMOPOULOS — This is not a point of order, but I think it is noteworthy given what the minister has just said and the topic we are on that for the first time in these hearings the entire witness bench is women — talented women. I do not think we have had that in the last two weeks. Sorry — we have had talented women, but we have not had a full witness table of women. I think, given the topic we are on in terms of Indigenous Victorians, while the size of the population group is different, it would be nice to aim for something proportionally equivalent in terms of the future of Aboriginal Victorians in the politics and the governance of this state.

Mr MORRIS — Minister, this is a question genuinely seeking information, so if you can take it in that spirit, I would appreciate it. Budget paper 3, page 254 — which is not DPC, it is HHS — refers to figures on Aboriginal children in care. The reason I have referred to that section is that there was funding for the Aboriginal kinship care program, which I understand was funded under the former government through to 17–18. I am wondering, given your portfolio responsibilities, whether you can advise us — we cannot find it in the budget — if it is in fact in the budget, and if it is not, what is intended to replace the program, which I understood was of great value to some 170 children and young people.

Ms HUTCHINS — The kinship program?

Mr MORRIS — Yes.

Ms HUTCHINS — Thank you for your question. Of course I have overall responsibility for the delivery of the Victorian Aboriginal Affairs Framework, which we developed in consultation and which the department over time has fine-tuned, with Aboriginal voices included. I have just outlined the complexities linked to intergenerational issues of domestic violence and poverty, housing, instability, substance abuse and alcohol abuse. These are some of the drivers as to why we have such high levels of Aboriginal children compared to non-Aboriginal children in the out-of-home care system. Yes, the kinship program is an important program. The Victorian commissioner for Aboriginal children and young people is undertaking the Taskforce 1000 work. It is that work, which I believe he is around two-thirds of the way through — —

Ms SINGH — Approaching half.

Ms HUTCHINS — Sorry, he is around halfway through his work. That review will help us to better model how we move forward in providing that kinship program, but there is \$1.8 million allocated to respond to the findings of that task force. I do not anticipate it is going to be a long process, because I know he has moved through those issues quickly. But quite often in his work of going into the depths of looking at those cases there are some circumstances, particularly where the child is no longer living within country or where the family is, where it can take a little longer to get to the bottom of a particular case. But certainly I look forward to the outcomes of that work to then model and go forward with that \$1.8 million on how we best address kinship.

There is no doubt that Aboriginal children thrive where they are connected with culture. There is no doubt about that. We need to make sure as a state government that where children are in out-of-home care, if they not placed with Aboriginal families, they have that connection back to culture and that that is supported. I am proud that we have a made commitment overall to strengthen child protection and to have a look at this issue with a \$250 million commitment overall, and I know that the Minister for Families and Children is very committed to helping and focusing on Aboriginal children too.

Mr MORRIS — Again, I am seeking information, but my interpretation of your response, Minister, is that the program is no longer funded. Is that an accurate interpretation? And if it is not, where is the money, basically?

Ms HUTCHINS — It has not been my information that the program has ended. But it is probably a question better directed to the Minister for Families and Children, because it actually falls within her portfolio. I am informed, and I have been briefed, that the Aboriginal Commissioner for Children's work with Taskforce 1000 has been given a boost through the budget to continue that work, and it is that work that is going to shape an even better kinship program at the end of the day.

Ms FALKINGHAM — There is significant new money, as you know, in relation to both out-of-home care and child protection, and we are happy to get that information for you from the minister. For example, there is the family-led decision-making commitment that is in this year's budget. There will be a significant component of working very closely with Aboriginal families in relation to that, and working with the Commissioner, but we will get you the specific information around the program.

Mr MORRIS — Thank you for that.

The CHAIR — Ms Pennicuik is ill today, but I understand that Ms Shing has a question on her behalf.

Ms SHING — Thank you, Chair, I do. Thank you, Minister, and thank you departmental officials. It is fantastic to see an all-woman line-up at the table, with representatives of both the parliamentary and the public service space. I am very welcoming of that. I am asking this question on behalf of the Greens member, Sue Pennicuik, so if you could imagine me as being somebody that I am not, that would be fantastic. I would like to take you to budget paper 3, page 92 — —

Mr O'Brien interjected.

Ms SHING — Sorry, Danny?

Mr MORRIS — I am sure she is watching.

Ms SHING — I have been enduring these slings and arrows all week. It is lucky I have a hide like a rhino! I refer to the Aboriginal Economic Strategy set out on page 92 of BP3, and Ms Pennicuik is interested to ask: what is the current level of Aboriginal employment in the Victorian public sector, and how is it defined broadly? For example, in the case of agencies such as Parks Victoria and the central government sector, are they broken down by agency? What measures are in place to boost this number, whatever it might be, depending on the definitional issues, and to meet the targets? Ms Pennicuik notes that certain agencies have Aboriginal employment plans but they mainly predate the 2013 strategy. This was a key priority, according to Ms Pennicuik, in the strategy that was launched in 2013, when the number was between 0.8 per cent centrally and 0.3 per cent more broadly, with the aspirational target of achieving 1 per cent by 2018. Could you perhaps elaborate, in the first instance, on definitional issues around the breakdown of public sector numbers, and also then talk about what objectives have been put in place to meet the target as set out in the 2013 document?

Ms HUTCHINS — Thank you for the question.

Ms SINGH — The public sector is inclusive of the public service and agencies, and the public service is just the departments.

Ms HUTCHINS — That is an important definition, because it is two different things, and it gives two different outcomes, so I just asked for that definition to be included before my answer. Obviously economic development is the key priority in moving Aboriginal people forward and making sure that there is opportunity. We cannot skirt around that as employers in the public sector. We need to make sure we are on track for delivering on those targets that we have put in place. Unfortunately the reality is that over the last few years we have slipped backwards in that area. We have not met our target of 1 per cent, and in fact the definition has been slightly tweaked by the previous government to actually loosen that up.

Currently the public sector has a 0.3 per cent level of employment of Aboriginal people, and the public service has a 0.8 per cent level. So there is some way for us to go in engaging and making sure we have stepping stones in place. I have to say, in doing my listening tour, I found that as much as it was a listening tour of Aboriginal communities in regional Victoria, it was also a questioning tour. A lot of questions were thrown at me as well, and one of those was, ‘Do we have a single Aboriginal person in the Victorian public service or in the Victorian Parliament who is involved in drafting legislation?’. Of course we have public servants across the board, and we have some fantastic public servants in OAAV, but I was unable to answer that question at the time it was thrown at me. It was a very legitimate question to be asked around that, and I think it is extremely important that if we do not have someone engaged in that role, particularly when the legislation is directly affecting Aboriginal people, that we have a process that is open and transparent to ensure that they know and they are engaged in any legislation that is brought forward and there is consultation that has happened.

I also need to put on the table that there is a Secretaries Leadership Group across all departments now that is headed up by Chris Eccles, who is Secretary of the Department of Premier and Cabinet, and who actually has chaired one or two meetings so far this year. I was privileged to be at the first one to talk about this very issue — and there are many issues of Aboriginal affairs — and how we can better coordinate across departments. The very issue around talking to secretaries around employment opportunities for Aboriginal Victorians in the public sector is something the secretaries are going to report back to me on — not only where we have good results but where we are lacking and how we can better move forward with engaging Aboriginal people.

Mr D. O’BRIEN — Chair, could I ask the minister to again give the figures on employment in the public sector.

Ms HUTCHINS — The public sector is 0.3 per cent and the public service is 0.8 per cent.

Mr D. O’BRIEN — As a percentage of Aboriginal people in positions?

Ms HUTCHINS — Yes.

Mr D. O’BRIEN — What is the statewide percentage of the population, do you know?

Ms HUTCHINS — Our target is 1 per cent.

Mr D. O’BRIEN — No, sorry, the Aboriginal population as a percentage of the total population.

Ms HUTCHINS — It is 0.9 per cent.

Mr D. O’BRIEN — Thank you.

Ms HUTCHINS — And our target is 1 per cent.

Ms WARD — Can I have my question now?

Mr D. O’BRIEN — Sorry, I was just seeking clarification.

Ms SHING — Ms Pennicuik did not have a supplementary to that question, before we go onto the next item.

Mr D. O'BRIEN — I took it for her.

Ms WARD — You did.

Ms SHING — I will cede that to Mr O'Brien.

The CHAIR — I think we have time for one more question.

Ms WARD — Wominjeka! Thank you very much for coming today. As someone who worked for a minister for Indigenous affairs, as I am sure you can imagine, I have a strong interest in this portfolio area. Minister, can I ask you to turn to budget paper 3, page 94, and the Aboriginal Leadership and Self-Determination Program. I know that the Closing the Gap strategy has been going for a number of years. I am particularly interested if you could highlight to us how this program will help reach towards that goal.

Ms HUTCHINS — Thank you for the question. I have talked a little bit about self-determination already. What we mean by that is having Aboriginal leaders in community making decisions and being respected by government agencies at all levels of government, particularly service deliverers in that region or in that suburb, wherever it may be, but also engagement with community with respect and authority. They are kind of the underpinning things. I have witnessed, in the short time I have been minister, where we have successful self-determination operating, particularly within the Registered Aboriginal Parties, we see a real confidence in the local Aboriginal people. We see management over land, we see management over Aboriginal employment locally and we see much broader engagement with Aboriginal community and a better relationship between Aboriginal community and non-Aboriginal community in those areas. It is within those RAPs that I have seen real success stories through my visits and a real sense of pride of culture that is not only shared within the community but also within the broader community. There is a real sense of respect.

In terms of our budget commitments, there are probably two major components, which are supporting those RAPs to operate, because in listening I heard that they were struggling to meet their administrative cost demands. They are, in the main, renting premises and just making sure that they are keeping their head above water in meeting the increased costs of survival in their RAP status. But they also need to be able to extend their own leadership skills. That is what the \$3.5 million that we talk about for Aboriginal Leadership and Self-Determination is about providing, whether it be additional training or mentoring into those areas to ensure that we have in particular Aboriginal people in the CEO roles of some of these organisations. Whilst we will have Traditional Owners and local Aboriginal people as part of the management committees and being involved in the day-to-day running, we do not always have Aboriginal CEOs. That is something that we really need to take the next step towards. That is a fantastic initiative for us to support out there in the field. There is a certificate IV and units that we will be looking to support. That is both in a governance sense and in a cultural heritage management sense as well.

Ms WARD — Ngoon godgin.

The CHAIR — Thank you, Minister.

Ms HUTCHINS — If I could, Chair, can I finish by making sure I acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we meet, all of those of the Kulin nations and their elders past and present.

The CHAIR — Thank you, Minister.

Witnesses withdrew.