

TRANSCRIPT

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Budget Estimates 2018–19

Melbourne — 14 June 2018

Members

Mr Danny Pearson — Chair

Ms Sue Pennicuik

Mr David Morris — Deputy Chair

Ms Harriet Shing

Mr Steve Dimopoulos

Mr Tim Smith

Mr Danny O'Brien

Ms Vicki Ward

Ms Fiona Patten

Witnesses

Ms Natalie Hutchins, Minister for Aboriginal Affairs,

Ms Rebecca Falkingham, Deputy Secretary, Social Policy,

Mr Josh Smith, Executive Director, Aboriginal Victoria, and

Ms Taryn Lee, Director, Aboriginal Affairs Policy, Department of Premier and Cabinet.

The CHAIR — I declare open the public hearings for the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee inquiry into the 2018–19 budget estimates.

All mobile telephones should now be turned to silent.

I would like to welcome the Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, the Honourable Natalie Hutchins, MP; Ms Rebecca Falkingham, Deputy Secretary, Social Policy, Department of Premier and Cabinet; Mr Josh Smith, Executive Director, Aboriginal Victoria; and Ms Taryn Lee, Director, Aboriginal Affairs policy.

All evidence is taken by this committee under the provisions of the Parliamentary Committees Act, attracts parliamentary privilege and is protected from judicial review. Any comments made outside the hearing, including on social media, are not afforded such privilege.

The committee does not require witnesses to be sworn, but questions must be answered fully, accurately and truthfully. Witnesses found to be giving false or misleading evidence may be in contempt of Parliament and subject to penalty.

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, any PowerPoint presentations and handouts will be placed on the committee's website as soon as possible.

Witness advisers 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 must remain focused only on the persons speaking. Any filming and recording must cease immediately at the completion of the hearing.

I 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 — If I could go straight to the first slide, which is about an Aboriginal affairs portfolio overview and self-determination, the government will continue to transfer decision-making resources and ownership of policy, programs and services to Aboriginal communities in recognition of self-determination and that it is a human right. The significant reform agenda is designed to empower Aboriginal Victorians and reframe their relationship with our state government, and they include Aboriginal cultural heritage protection, Aboriginal economic development, advancing treaty, community engagement and whole-of-government coordination and reform.

Our total investment in this space is 115.3 million. The output initiative breakdown is on the screen before you now and provides that funding over five years across government to support Aboriginal Victorians in delivering the government's commitment to advancing Aboriginal self-determination. It builds on the extensive investment provided back in the 17–18 budget of \$100 million to support Aboriginal self-determination, health, education and treaty.

Some of the key investments that are before us in the 18–19 budget across government include the very significant contribution of 47.3 million over four years for the Aboriginal children and families agreement to tackle Aboriginal kids in out-of-home care and provide Aboriginal child protection; 13.5 million over four years for the Aboriginal 10-year family violence plan to support a strong, integrated Aboriginal workforce and family violence prevention sector; and \$4 million over one year for Aboriginal health, wellbeing and safety mental health demonstration projects, which are extremely important, particularly when you take into consideration the high levels of suicide that are experienced in the Aboriginal community.

Specifically in budget 2018–19 the Aboriginal portfolio itself has \$43.6 million in total investment, and that breaks down to a \$23 million commitment over the next three years for the Munarra Centre for Regional Excellence in Shepparton, which will be a state-of-the-art centre for excellence in sports, health science and education, and has been long sought after by the local community and the broader community; \$9 million over four years for traditional owner self-determination, including additional resources for traditional owner groups,

the Right People for Country program, and for the native title unit to improve native title recognition and settlement processes; \$9 million over a year to support the next phase of the treaty process, including the establishment of the Aboriginal Representative Body, which is outlined in BP3, page 3; and 2.6 million over four years to ensure ongoing sustainable funding for the Koorie Heritage Trust as well.

On the next slide we have the pathway to advancing treaty, just to spell out for the committee how intense the work has been over the last two and a half years in regards to the process of treaty. That is pretty self-explanatory there, with a culmination of a commitment for an Aboriginal representative body to be in place by the middle of next year.

In terms of Aboriginal cultural heritage protection, the map that is on the screen, which is similar to a map that I distributed last year at PAEC for the information of committee members, the big notable change on this is that we now have a new registered Aboriginal party, which is the Bunurong, which is the brown section at the bottom of that map, which is a new decision on behalf of the Heritage Council and was determined under the Aboriginal Heritage Act. I know the print is very fine in this but it also goes to giving information about the number of cultural heritage management plans in each one of these RAP areas, but also the registered sites of Aboriginal significance as well in each one of those.

The next slide is the Koorie Heritage Trust — and for any of the committee members who have not visited the Koorie Heritage Trust, I strongly advise that you drop in. It is in Federation Square and it is just a wonderful place. It has 55 000 visitors every year and did have in the last 12 months. It not only houses amazing activities to preserve Aboriginal culture and heritage but it also provides the Koori oral heritage program, which is a significant piece of history for Victoria which develops the collection of oral recordings of Aboriginal culture and heritage in this state, as well as a massive collection of beautiful artefacts and historical artefacts that have been collected over time. They also manage the family history service, which is a genealogy research service for stolen generations members to be able to find the connection to the families that they lost.

Finally, we have a new initiative, called the Deadly Questions campaign, which was launched just a few weeks ago, which again is part of the government's commitment to self-determination and treaty. The campaign is led by Aboriginal Victoria to drive awareness amongst all Victorians around the rich and diverse cultures of Aboriginal Victorians, and the Deadly Questions website itself lets you find out everything that you want to know about Aboriginal culture by being able to ask any question and getting a reply. There are around 25 questions that have been pre-recorded — or is it more than that? It is about that. Pre-recorded in terms of being asked, with the answers from prominent Aboriginal Victorians, and it is a really great resource for all of community and really builds upon our work for treaty.

The CHAIR — Thank you, Minister. Now we will have government questions until 12.01 p.m. In light of Ms Shing's refusal to withdraw in the previous session, Ms Shing will have no further questions this morning.

Ms WARD — Minister, can I firstly start by saying how in fact it is very difficult to describe the experience of being in the Parliament and not only hearing language spoken but also sung, and I want to thank you very much for the work that you and your department have done to enable us as parliamentarians but also our community to have that. As I said, I have no words to describe how incredible that experience was, so thank you.

Minister, can I get you to talk us through the treaty, budget paper 3, page 5, and you also referred to it in your presentation regarding treaty and self-determination. Can you please talk us through how the budget will help with the process of treaty but also the consultations that were conducted in leading up to the bill being introduced?

Ms HUTCHINS — Certainly our commitment to the treaty process has been not only committed to in practice with the amount of consultation that has been undertaken but also committed to through our budget commitments, and the \$9 million that has come out of this year's budget for the next 12 months to really embed an Aboriginal Representative Body but also that builds upon the \$28.5 million in the previous year's budget, which has allowed us to form both an Aboriginal Treaty Advancement Commission and appoint a commissioner and also undertake well over 30 different forums, treaty circles, regional forums, over the last two and a half years to engage as many Aboriginal Victorians as possible in this process. We have also had plenty of online communication. We estimate that we have reached out to around 7000 and made contact with 7000 Aboriginal Victorians. We still have a long way to go in continuing that conversation, and we

acknowledge that we still have a long way to go to ensure that we are having the conversation with broader community as well and seeking their support. That is partly why we have done the Deadly Questions campaign, to start to get that conversation, dispel the myths and get that conversation out there happening.

Certainly in this year's budget the next step really focuses in on being prepared for treaty negotiations and having the Aboriginal Representative Body and, until that body is in place, continuing to support an Aboriginal working group — in which we have some really fantastic leaders of the Aboriginal community — and to have them on board. I was really pleased to meet with our newest registered Aboriginal party just two weeks ago, the Bunurong, and to talk to them about this process. They are very supportive of the process. They have had their own discussions. They have formulated their own opinions around this process and how we move forward, and I congratulate them as well. I have also met with the Federation of Victorian Traditional Owner Corporations, which is the peak body for the registered Aboriginal parties. They have been very supportive of the process that we have taken with treaty, and of course they have been very big advocates of the bill that is currently before the house.

Ms WARD — Thank you. Before we move to Mr Dimopoulos, I also want to thank you for the work with acknowledging Aunty Pam Pederson on the Victorian Honour Roll of Women as an Eltham woman. She is fantastic to have not only in our own local community but also across Victoria.

Mr DIMOPOULOS — Welcome to you, Minister, and the officers. Just in relation to one of your answers to Ms Ward's question about the Aboriginal Representative Body, I note that budget paper 3, page 5, makes an investment in relation to that body. Can you give us a bit of a sense of how your activities will be undertaken?

Ms HUTCHINS — Yes, thanks. I know it is a lot for PAEC members to absorb, but the processes that we went through, which I have outlined in the overheads in part of the presentation, go through a pretty long pathway of things that we have done to get to this point. One of those things was to establish a community assembly of Aboriginal Victorians to consider the questions of what an Aboriginal representative body would look like and how it could be formed. They considered questions such as who should get a vote and a say in the formation of a body, who should be able to stand and what are the areas of representation in terms of region versus cities in that. They did a power of work over around a six-week period of considering, being informed and being educated on all of the issues and then having quite detailed debate around that.

They presented their findings in a report to the Aboriginal Treaty Working Group. That Aboriginal Treaty Working Group, made up of pretty significant leaders across this state, then made their recommendations to myself for the purposes of the legislation, but also a copy was provided to the new commissioner, Jill Gallagher, around the outcomes of that. It is her primary job at the moment to engage with Aboriginal Victorians to continue to, I guess, get valuable input, community support and community dialogue and discussion around both the treaty process but also the formation of an Aboriginal representative body in this state. We cannot have a truly equal dialogue on treaty unless we have a well-resourced and supported Aboriginal body to sit at the table with government.

Mr DIMOPOULOS — I agree, Minister. I spoke on the bill, and I think one of the most heartening parts of the package and the bill was the funding for the Aboriginal community or the first peoples community being on a fairly equal playing field with the state of Victoria.

I just wanted to move into the same budget paper but in relation to the investment in the Aboriginal Community Infrastructure Fund on page 307. Can you give us a sense of the kind of projects that that will fund — in less than a minute?

Ms HUTCHINS — Sure. The Aboriginal Community Infrastructure Fund was something that just got dissolved many years ago, and unfortunately there are many organisations around the state that have not been able to upgrade and improve their facilities that are delivering really key services to Aboriginal communities. So this is a 14 million commitment over four years to deliver basically new infrastructure support to Aboriginal organisations that are delivering the really important services to Aboriginal communities in place. Improving that infrastructure is really vital in supporting self-determination.

Mr DIMOPOULOS — Does that include kinders or other community centres and that kind of —

Ms HUTCHINS — It is open to any Aboriginal organisation that —

Mr DIMOPOULOS — For physical infrastructure.

Ms HUTCHINS — Yes, around improving their physical infrastructure. There was an example of a funding announcement that I made —

The CHAIR — Order! The Deputy Chair until 12.10 p.m.

Mr MORRIS — Minister, budget paper 3, page 4, talks about funding for the Munarra centre in Shepparton, but my question relates to another centre, which I know you are familiar with — the iconic Bangerang Cultural Centre, which is obviously a centre of vital importance to the Bangerang people, unfortunately now closed. When operating it usually hosted 5000 or so school students a year, and obviously it is an important place for that community to learn, teach and practise their culture. As I think you know, there is an effort by the local community to have it reopened. Do you support the centre reopening, and will you support it financially?

Ms HUTCHINS — I thank the member for his question. The state government has not supported the underlying funding for this sort of cultural centre in the past. They have been recipients of some one-off grants around cultural programs in the past, way before my time, but certainly at no stage has the state government been a core funder of their administration in the past. In fact my information is that the cultural centre actually has some funds available to them which are being held by the federal government in terms of a property sale that happened. They have access to some sort of very low income off the interest of the sale of that land, but the caveat over that money is actually held by the federal government into the future.

We do have opportunities for the Bangerang Cultural Centre to be able to apply for some funding in terms of the facility funding that we have just talked about, but there is not a mechanism under our current funding structure that gives ongoing administrative support to any cultural centre around the state. I am not sure if Rebecca wants to add to that.

Ms FALKINGHAM — No.

Mr MORRIS — Thank you for that. Do you agree that the centre is important to the Bangerang people?

Ms HUTCHINS — Absolutely. I recognise that it has got great cultural significance to the Bangerang people. I have visited there myself. I am happy for my department to talk to them further about how they can gain support under the current programs we have got, but currently there is not a source of operational funding for these sorts of centres.

Mr MORRIS — I understand. Yes. The centre, as you know, operated for 36 years until recently. Would you be prepared to meet with representatives of the Bangerang people to discuss a potential future for the centre?

Ms HUTCHINS — I did speak to one of their organisers/owners just a few weeks ago in a very informal way, and I did make that offer. I would like for my department to meet with them first to explore some options, but of course I intend on visiting that region in the next few months, so I would be happy to meet with them.

Mr MORRIS — Thank you. I move to a different subject — that is, smoking cessation, particularly of Aboriginal mothers, which is budget paper 3, page 245. While there is some commentary in there, I just want to drill down a little further in terms of the regions.

There are some Australian Institute of Health and Welfare figures that have been produced. The title of the table is 'Percentage of women who gave birth and smoked during pregnancy, for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander mothers, by primary health network area'. Those figures indicate that the Murray region is, I think, the worst performing area, with a smoking rate of 54.7 per cent — sorry, the third worst in Australia, but the worst in Victoria — and Gippsland primary health has a percentage of 53 per cent. Can I ask you, Minister, whether there are specific programs that could have been introduced at a state level to combat these extraordinarily high regional figures?

Ms HUTCHINS — I thank the member for his question. This is a really important health question for Aboriginal Victorians. Yes, there is overrepresentation in the figures for regional areas as well, but we have been resourcing Aboriginal organisations, in particular the health organisations, and also the wraparound

services that come with those health organisations. We find that we have significant success in terms of engaging local Aboriginal communities where there is a wraparound service like a cultural centre or a neighbourhood centre that is attached and located close to the health centre — we have some pretty good outcomes.

Certainly in our Aboriginal affairs report that was tabled in November last year, we have acknowledged in that that smoking during the second half of pregnancy rates are down — from 40 per cent, which is extremely high, in the 2007–08 report to 32 per cent. So we are making some progress, but we have still got a long way to go. We are making progress in reducing the smoking rates for Aboriginal people aged 15 years and older in general: it is down from — in the same period, from 2007–08 — 47 per cent to 39 per cent. Again, the figures that we have reduced it to are still high and there is still a lot of work to go. I do notice that the Quit campaign is a big presence at all of the sporting events that I attend in the Aboriginal community, and we will continue to do that along with the push for reducing soft drink consumption as well.

Mr MORRIS — Thank you. I want to come back to that, but I just want to move back to the Shepparton cultural centre — the Bangerang Cultural Centre. Minister, you indicated that you would be happy to meet with them after discussion with the department. Can I take that as an indication of support for the cause — not obviously a specific offer of funding, but support for the cause?

Ms HUTCHINS — I am not going to pre-empt any meeting with the community, particularly when we have not funded this sort of cultural centre for operational purposes before. We have given one-off grants to support specific projects, but I am not going to pre-empt that. I know that my department of Aboriginal affairs will be meeting with them. When I am in the region I would be happy to meet with them, but I am not going to make any commitments here today.

Mr MORRIS — Okay. Thank you. Going back to the smoking cessation figures, you were talking about figures in the high 30s, which is obviously high, but as I mentioned with Murray and Gippsland, it is 54 and 53 per cent respectively. Do you have any insight into why the efforts to reduce rates of smoking by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women in these two areas have been apparently ineffective?

Ms HUTCHINS — I am sorry?

Mr MORRIS — Apparently ineffective, given that we are talking about 54.7 — nearly 55 per cent — in Murray and 53 per cent in the Gippsland primary health network area.

Ms HUTCHINS — I think overall in the main we have seen a 10 per cent drop in the figures that I quoted before. The overall figures that are in our report show that we are making some progress, but again tackling —

Mr MORRIS — These are extraordinarily high by national standards, though, these two regions — and it is these two I am particularly interested in.

Ms HUTCHINS — Yes, and it might be that the health services in those areas may need to have some more support in reaching out, but we know —

The CHAIR — Order! Mr Dimopoulos has got some questions to read on behalf of Ms Pennicuik, on notice.

Mr DIMOPOULOS — On behalf of Ms Pennicuik, regarding budget paper 3, page 3, the Aboriginal affairs output: my question relates to treaty expenditure in budget paper 3, detailed on pages 3, 5 and 308. The government has allocated \$9 million for the election of an independent Aboriginal representative body and to continue the government's preparation for treaty.

Firstly, we are getting very mixed messages, including that the commissioner will continue consultations on the Aboriginal representative body, including on the recommendations of the community assembly, yet according to this budget item it seems clearly locked in that elections will take place. So can the minister clarify that?

Secondly, how much of the \$9 million will be spent on holding elections versus other items? For example, how much will be spent on community consultations, on establishing the elders council and on other items?

That is the end of the questions. In order to make sure they are read entirely as they were written, without any interruptions, I will give them to Hansard.

The CHAIR — I would like to thank the witnesses for their attendance: the Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, the Honourable Natalie Hutchins, MP; Ms Falkingham; Mr Smith and Ms Lee. The committee will follow up on any questions taken on notice in writing. A written response should be provided within 10 business days of that request.

Witnesses withdrew.