



## **SAMANTHA RATNAM MLC**

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23 April 2021

Dear PAEC

#### **AGV submission to inquiry into the PBO**

Thank you for the opportunity to provide a submission to PAEC's inquiry into the Parliamentary Budget Officer.

The Victorian Greens MPs have made good use of the PBO since its commencement in 2018. We have been impressed by the PBO's responsiveness, professionalism and the standard of the work produced.

In our view it has made a significant contribution to Victorian democracy. As the Treasurer noted in his second reading speech on the legislation establishing the PBO:

"An effective and independent PBO supports open and democratic government by:

- strengthening public debate throughout the parliamentary term;
- levelling the playing field in relation to financial expertise between government and the opposition, minor parties and independent MPs;
- facilitating iterative policy development by parties and MPs;
- encouraging parties and MPs to release independently costed policies earlier to gain credibility with the electorate; and
- providing the community with credible, independent and timely information to help inform their voting decisions."

We believe the PBO's work has indeed contributed in these ways to a more open and democratic government and parliament in Victoria.

We submit it is incumbent on the government to ensure appropriate long term financial and other support to the PBO for it to adequately meet its objectives in informing policy development and public debate in Parliament and the Victorian community.

#### **PBO functions and performance**

The two primary functions of the PBO are to provide policy costings for members of parliament on the policies they develop and propose to the Victorian community; and advice on financial, fiscal or economic matters. The Victorian Greens MPs have utilised both of these services regularly since the PBO was first established.

We used the costing services to cost our 2018 election platform and we publicly released those costings as we released our policies. The PBO 2018 election costing web page indicates we were likely the biggest users of the PBO in the lead up to the 2018 election. We certainly released more PBO costings publicly than any other party.

Since the last election we have utilised both the costing service for further policy development and also the advice service. Both services have been invaluable in ensuring the public can understand the budgetary impacts of our policy proposals but also in ensuring we have the information we need to hold robust public debates on issues of importance to the community.

Since the election we have released costings or advice on establishing pill testing services, both front-of-house at festivals and events but also a fixed testing site; the state of glass recycling in Victoria; the cost of establishing a plastics recycling centre; increasing public transport services and building bike lanes. We have also released a costing to demonstrate the savings to be made from ending native forest logging, even with a significant investment in a transition plan. These have all added to the public debate on these important issues.

We also appreciate and value the PBO's budget analysis and its public awareness advice. Access by the community to independent budget analysis and independent advice on areas of interest such as school funding and revenue trends is important and helps ensure political debate on these areas is open and transparent. We look forward to future public awareness advice providing similar transparency in other areas of the budget and Victoria's economy.

The PBO's COVID policy tracker is another very useful project. All the announcements the government was making to assist the Victorian community through the pandemic were all in one place and provided greater transparency on where support was being directed.

### **Issues with data and timeliness**

The main concern we have had with the provision of services is timeliness. On multiple occasions the PBO has been unable to provide us with a costing or advice in a timely manner.

We appreciate that some of our requests have been complicated and have required the PBO to undertake complex work that takes time. The PBO has been excellent in keeping us informed of the progress of our requests and the delays they may be experiencing and the reasons why.

However, many of our costing and advice requests have not been able to be completed by the PBO within reasonable time frames due to the relevant government department either refusing to provide the necessary information, taking in excess of a month and on occasion more than three months to provide information, or providing incomplete information.

While we are not privy to the negotiations and discussion between the PBO and various departments we are informed by the PBO of delays in completing our requests that are a result of information requests not being complied with.

We have generally been patient around delays, particularly with the additional pressures on departments due to the COVID-19 pandemic. We understand there will be occasions where it may take time to compile relevant information. However, there have also been instances where a department's reluctance or outright refusal to provide necessary information cannot be justified and indicate a broader problem of a reluctance to engage with the PBO.

We note the PBO's annual report outlines in some detail the overall statistics around timeliness and completeness of information requests. Those statistics are consistent with our experience. In particular, we have found requests for costings or advice that require information from the Department of Transport to either take a very long time or the PBO has needed to complete the

costing without government information. This has occurred in relation to issues from constructing a bike lanes and road projects, to public transport services.

More recently we are still waiting after more than four months for requests relating to housing that have been held up as a result of the Department of Housing not providing relevant information. It should be noted we aren't referring here to information that departments have a reason not to provide, for example information that could identify people, but information that falls within the types of information the PBO can request under the Act.

It is not acceptable for the public service to stymie the work of the PBO by failing to provide or delaying the provision of relevant data.

We understand that governments do not like scrutiny but scrutiny is vital for making a system of government democratic.

Without more timely access from government departments to necessary information it is difficult for the PBO to support open and democratic government. It also impacts two of the key ways the establishment of the PBO seeks to increase democracy in Victoria. That is, by hampering the levelling of the playing field in relation to financial expertise between government and the opposition, minor parties and independent MPs, and by undermining the ability of the community to have access to credible, independent and timely information to help inform their voting decisions.

We submit the Act should be amended to strengthen the requirements for government departments to provide information to the PBO in a timely manner. In lieu of legislative change, it is incumbent upon Ministers to ensure a culture of compliance within their departments.

#### **Other improvements**

As noted above, along with the specific costing and advice we request of the PBO, we also value their public awareness work. We believe the Victorian PBO should have greater scope, like the Commonwealth PBO, to undertake budgetary or fiscal analyses of its own initiative. The Commonwealth PBO regularly produces research reports on specific aspects of the Commonwealth budget and significant areas of fiscal policy that have added to public debate on matters including the Jobseeker payment, the impacts of an ageing population, and trends in GST.

We would also note that going into an election year and with a significantly expanded cross bench it is very likely the PBO will need more resources to complete election costings and pre-election reports in a timely manner. We encourage the government to ensure the PBO has the resources necessary to undertake its vital work.

Thank you for your consideration of our submission. I am happy to answer any further questions the committee may have.

Yours sincerely

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**Dr Samantha Ratnam**  
**Leader of the Victorian Greens**