

# **PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE**

## **Inquiry into the 2023–24 Budget Estimates**

Melbourne – Wednesday 7 June 2023

### **MEMBERS**

Sarah Connolly – Chair

Nicholas McGowan – Deputy Chair

Michael Galea

Paul Hamer

Mathew Hilakari

Lauren Kathage

Bev McArthur

Danny O’Brien

Ellen Sandell

**WITNESSES**

Mr Colin Brooks MP, Minister for Multicultural Affairs,

Ms Louise Perry, Deputy Secretary, Fairer Victoria, Engagement and Coordination,

Ms Kate Berry, Acting Executive Director, Women, Equality and Multicultural Affairs, and

Ms Rachel Cecilio, Director, Multicultural Affairs Policy, Department of Families, Fairness and Housing.

**The CHAIR:** I declare open this hearing of the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee.

I ask that mobile telephones please be turned to silent.

On behalf of the Parliament, the committee is conducting this Inquiry into the 2023–24 Budget Estimates. The committee's aim is to scrutinise public administration and finance to improve outcomes for the Victorian community.

I advise that all evidence taken by the committee is protected by parliamentary privilege. However, comments repeated outside this hearing may not be protected by this privilege.

As Chair I expect that committee members will be respectful towards witnesses, the Victorian community joining the hearing via the live stream and other committee members.

Witnesses will be provided with a proof version of the transcript to check. Verified transcripts, presentations and handouts will be placed on the committee's website.

I welcome the Minister for Multicultural Affairs the Honourable Colin Brooks as well as officers from the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing. You are very much welcome. Minister, I will invite you to make an opening statement or presentation of no more than 5 minutes, and this will be followed by questions from the committee. Your time starts now.

**Colin BROOKS:** Thank you very much, Chair. Thanks again to the committee for having us today to present on the multicultural affairs portfolio, in particular our investments in the 2023–24 state budget.

I will begin by acknowledging the traditional owners and paying my respects to elders past and present.

I also introduce the committee to the officials at the table here. Lou Perry is the Secretary – Deputy Secretary – at Fairer Victoria. That was a promotion.

**Louise PERRY:** Thank you, Minister.

**Colin BROOKS:** It is only a matter of time. Kate Berry is the Executive Director at Fairer Victoria, and Rachel Cecilio is Director of multicultural in the department as well.

**Visual presentation.**

**Colin BROOKS:** Chair, Victorians come from almost 200 countries. They speak 260 languages and follow 135 faiths. The multicultural affairs portfolio is dedicated to supporting the needs of Victoria's multicultural and multifaith communities. We do this by celebrating and sharing diverse cultures and traditions; delivering programs to improve the inclusion and participation of multicultural Victorians; supporting accessible and culturally appropriate services, communication and information; including the voice of multicultural communities in government work; and supporting newly arrived communities alongside Commonwealth services. The heart of this work is collaboration with the community, as evidenced by the establishment of the government's anti-racism task force and the Victorian African Communities Committee.

I will jump to the next slide. The past 12 months have seen many programs delivered that supported and improved outcomes for multicultural communities. There are a lot of numbers here, but it is important to show the enormity of the work that has been underway: 458 festivals and events were supported to support to promote cultural diversity; funding was provided for 33 infrastructure upgrades and new builds to provide safe

and inclusive community spaces; 77 organisations received capacity building funding to support sustainability and growth; and more than 1000 multicultural seniors groups were funded to build stronger connections with their communities – and don't we love those multicultural seniors groups?

The portfolio also supported important whole-of-government reforms. This included leading a community-led campaign uniting the Jewish, Hindu, Buddhist and Jain communities to educate Victorians about the sacred swastika following the ban of the hateful Nazi symbol. And drawing on the lessons from COVID-19, partnerships with local community organisations were established to deliver tailored communications and culturally appropriate relief for multicultural Victorians impacted by the floods back in October 2022.

Next slide. Since coming to office the government has proudly invested over \$500 million through the Victorian multicultural affairs portfolio to support Victoria's diverse multicultural communities. This graph illustrates the critical role the portfolio played to support Victoria's response to the pandemic between 2019 and 2022, with a commensurate increase in funding as part of the government's pandemic response. During this time the portfolio's deep community connections were leveraged to provide targeted funding for community-led, tailored supports and information. In this budget our government is investing around \$120 million in Victoria's multicultural communities, with funding for festivals, infrastructure, education and support programs. Of this investment \$77.5 million over four years will be delivered through the multicultural affairs portfolio, continuing our commitment to an inclusive, engaged and harmonious community.

Next slide. Of the total \$77.5 million investment made in this year's state budget, a total of \$69.7 million over four years will deliver the government's election commitments for multicultural and multifaith communities. There is \$40 million for the Multicultural Community Infrastructure Fund to upgrade and build multicultural community facilities through six community funds and grants, representing an increase of almost \$6 million in funding for the 2023–24 year compared to 2022–23; \$12 million for multicultural festivals and events to deliver 27 significant festivals in a competitive grants round, representing an increase of almost \$2.5 million for 2023–24 compared to 2022–23; \$9.8 million to support the work of the Ethnic Communities Council of Victoria and the Bachar Houli Foundation, build on the *Victorian African Communities Action Plan* and support multicultural museums; \$6 million to go towards delivering anti-vilification campaigns to combat antisemitism and Islamophobia; \$1.5 million for a dedicated grants program to support Victorian multicultural media organisations – this is a reform and investment in the sector which was advocated for and which we as a government are proud to be delivering; and also \$450,000 that will support multicultural organisations.

**The CHAIR:** Apologies, Minister. I will cut you off there. I will go to Mr McGowan for the first 8 minutes.

**Nicholas McGOWAN:** Thank you, Minister, for that. I am just looking and following up from your presentation too on the \$69.7 million. When I look at page 174, I can see the \$61.6 million for 2023–24. Where has the remainder come from?

**Colin BROOKS:** Page 174 of budget paper –

**Nicholas McGOWAN:** Page 174, yes. It says: 2023–24 budget – \$61.6 million, but the figure we have got up there is \$69.7 million. It might be contained elsewhere, but I am just trying to understand the difference.

**Colin BROOKS:** Yes. We will get that for you.

**Kate BERRY:** Is this the departmental output budget for 2023–24?

**Nicholas McGOWAN:** Correct.

**Kate BERRY:** So that is the department's budget for 2023–24 but not the investment made in the 2023–24 budget, which is \$77.5 million.

**Nicholas McGOWAN:** That is a different figure again, so 77 –

**Colin BROOKS:** \$77.5 million, and then the \$120 million that I mentioned – in the form of accountability, that \$120 million is multicultural-specific projects that are funded in other department's budgets. For example, with the business precincts, there is \$10 million for those multicultural business precincts that are delivered under the small business portfolio.

**Nicholas McGOWAN:** So the \$69.7 million is not necessarily just your portfolio; that might also include initiatives from other portfolios. Am I following that correctly?

**Louise PERRY:** No. The \$69.7 million is for the election commitments in the multicultural affairs portfolio, the \$77.5 million is the budget for multicultural affairs over four years and the output for 2023–24 is \$61.6 million.

**Nicholas McGOWAN:** Right. Okay. In respect to 2020–21 we are coming off a base of \$105.4 million. Why is there a reduction from then to now, because obviously that is a significant reduction when we take the \$77.5 million compared to the \$105.4 million.

**Louise PERRY:** Sorry, can you repeat the question? It is a lot of numbers.

**Nicholas McGOWAN:** Sure. In 2020–21 the revised output budget for multicultural affairs policy programs amounted to \$105.4 million for Victoria's multicultural communities.

**Colin BROOKS:** Sorry, where is that figure at, Mr McGowan?

**Louise PERRY:** Where is that figure?

**Colin BROOKS:** Where is that figure?

**Nicholas McGOWAN:** That is from the previous budget figures. I am happy for you to take that on notice.

**Colin BROOKS:** Yes, we might take that one on notice.

**Nicholas McGOWAN:** Okay. Thank you.

**Colin BROOKS:** We might be comparing different items.

**Louise PERRY:** What page are you on?

**Colin BROOKS:** It is the previous budget papers I think he is referring to.

**Louise PERRY:** Okay.

**Nicholas McGOWAN:** I will move on. If I can get that on notice, that would be great, and you can provide further detail if you need to. Minister, I refer you to budget paper 2, page 17, and the budget initiative relating to:

... \$6 million to fund anti-vilification campaigns to counter discrimination and prejudice against Victoria's Jewish and Islamic communities.

Can you please outline for the committee the detail and the plans and advise the specific separate funding amounts for the campaigns, both for the Jewish and Islamic communities?

**Colin BROOKS:** These are really important election commitments – and it is a good question, Mr McGowan – election commitments that we made in response to concerns raised by both of those communities, the Jewish community and Islamic community, around the rise of Islamophobia and antisemitism. It was actually really good the other day to attend the Israel independence function with the Premier and the Leader of the Opposition, where there was a really strong level of bipartisan support for this sort of work, the antisemitism work and the anti-vilification work that the government has embarked on. That is the first point I would make. In relation to these two funds which we took to the election, there is a \$3 million commitment to each of those. We will engage constructively. We have already had some very fruitful conversations with leadership in both of those communities, but we will continue to engage with them on the best way to roll out both of those campaigns now that this funding has been provided in the budget.

**Nicholas McGOWAN:** Minister, do you anticipate that there are other multicultural communities who might also receive support for similar anti-vilification campaigns?

**Colin BROOKS:** The government has established an Anti-Racism Taskforce with representation from the Victorian Multicultural Commission, the Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission, the

Ethnic Communities Council of Victoria and a range of other independent community representatives, if you like, doing a power of work. It is chaired by the Parliamentary Secretary for Multicultural Affairs and Sheena Watt, a member of the upper house. That is developing a statewide anti-racism strategy. It will be the first, I think, of its kind in the country, and we are producing that for the very reason that I think you are getting to, which is that there are instances of racism still unfortunately that many of our communities face. The work that that task force is doing in developing the strategy will be deliberately focused on targeting racism wherever it raises its ugly head.

**Nicholas McGOWAN:** Thank you, Minister. Minister, is consideration given to where these communities are located – in particular, in Victoria is there a differential between regional and metropolitan areas? What consideration has been given to that?

**Colin BROOKS:** In terms of the Islamophobia and antisemitism campaigns, as I say, we will engage with the communities to deliver the campaign. We will be guided in many respects by the work with those communities that we do. I came into this portfolio, as you know, at the election and at the end, if you like, or the result of the work that had been done on banning the Nazi symbol, the Hakenkreuz. The level of cooperation between the Jewish community and the Buddhist, the Jain and the Hindu communities, where they had that different use of the symbol – in one case a longstanding holy, peaceful use of that symbol which in another context is seen as the hateful symbol of Nazi ideology. The level of cooperation between all of those different multicultural groups was really heartening. The community education campaign that was run was an example of that working together. I am really confident, given the conversations we have already had with the Islamic community and the Jewish community, about how we will be able to roll this out in a constructive way.

**Nicholas McGOWAN:** Sure. Thank you, Minister. Excuse me as I rush through this; we have limited time.

**Colin BROOKS:** That is all right.

**Nicholas McGOWAN:** Budget paper 2, page 17 – just in respect to the \$17 million that has been provided for multicultural traders associations, I am wondering whether you can advise which associations will receive some funding from that initiative.

**Louise PERRY:** Sorry, I did not hear the question.

**Colin BROOKS:** Traders associations.

**Nicholas McGOWAN:** The multicultural traders associations, yes.

**Colin BROOKS:** That sits within the small business portfolio, not the multicultural budget.

**Nicholas McGOWAN:** Right, okay. So you do not have any oversight or make recommendations in respect to which ones merit those?

**Colin BROOKS:** No. I am not sure if we will be consulted, but it is not our portfolio area.

**Louise PERRY:** No. I mean, we are a lens portfolio, so we engage really heavily across government. They seek our advice, and we give it to them, on how best to disburse funds like that.

**Nicholas McGOWAN:** Okay. Did you provide advice in respect to that program, do you recall?

**Louise PERRY:** I do not recall, no. But I can go and have a look at what information is available.

**Nicholas McGOWAN:** If you would not mind, that would be great. Thank you. In respect to the multicultural festivals, are you able to provide a breakdown of which festivals received funding? I know there is quite a large volume; I would not expect you to go through them now, particularly given the time I have got.

**Colin BROOKS:** There are a number festivals that have been explicitly funded because they are large, significant festivals.

**Nicholas McGOWAN:** Do you mind if you take that on notice to provide it to me later? Because obviously it is way too large.

**Colin BROOKS:** Yes, absolutely. I was going to make the point that there is also a small grants program at the end of that as well for supporting festivals that are not specifically mentioned. But yes, we will get back to you on that one.

**Nicholas McGOWAN:** And likewise, in respect to multicultural community infrastructure projects, I know there are 33 of those. I am trying to understand the geographic spread of those. Are you able to go through that with me at the moment?

**Louise PERRY:** The spread of the multicultural infrastructure?

**Nicholas McGOWAN:** Yes. I just want to know where they are and what they actually specifically funded.

**Louise PERRY:** Yes. So we have got –

**Nicholas McGOWAN:** And if we run out of time, please take it on notice.

**Colin BROOKS:** Okay.

**The CHAIR:** Apologies, Mr McGowan. We will go to Mr Hamer for the next 11 minutes of questions.

**Paul HAMER:** Thank you very much, Minister and department officials. Look, can I just start by – you mentioned just in your response to Mr McGowan the \$6 million for anti-vilification measures, half of which is to go to the Jewish community, and I just wanted to thank you and the department for making that commitment. Being a member of that community and being involved in anti-racism activities in a previous life within the community, I know how much of a difference that will make and how important that is broadly to the community, so I do thank you for that.

You also mentioned in your response a broader Anti-Racism Taskforce. Obviously, as the Member for Box Hill, I represent a very large Chinese community that comes from many parts of the world, not just mainland China, and the community has experienced quite a large level of discrimination and racism that has, certainly from their reports to me, increased over the last few years. And I was wondering, just in terms of some of the initiatives that you were mentioning to Mr McGowan, what opportunities there are for that voice from the Chinese community to be heard within that?

**Colin BROOKS:** Thanks, Mr Hamer, for the question. And I think you make a really pertinent observation. Unfortunately, I think Chinese Victorians in particular have become collateral damage, for want of a better term, in what is a legitimate national security debate. Sometimes the language used – some proponents do not separate our legitimate debate on national security from our wonderful Chinese community that lives here in Victoria. And I have heard from members of the Chinese community who feel that they have had their loyalty and commitment to Australia repeatedly questioned. They or their children have been subjected to racism. So it is really concerning for all of us as Victorians that such a wonderful part of our multicultural community is – from what I am picking up, and you have just explained it as well – feeling that sense of racism and feeling like they are not part of the broader Victorian community.

Recently I just was out at the Chinese Association of Victoria with the Member for Bayswater talking to members of that community, and they raised those very concerns at that meeting. And I undertook at that discussion to raise their concerns and concerns I had had raised with me previously with the federal minister at the ministerial council for multicultural ministers, which was held in Sydney last week – that is, the federal Minister for Immigration, Citizenship and Multicultural Affairs. And I did that. I raised that in the meeting, and it was a discussion point that I think most ministers around the table agreed with. Of course it is important that we can have a serious discussion about national security; it is just important that when we do it, we use a language and we do it in a way that ensures that our Chinese community know that we value and respect their contribution as Australians.

You go to the point about what we can do about it, and it flows back to that point that I was talking about in answer to Mr McGowan's question around the Anti-Racism Taskforce and the work that that task force is doing. It goes to the work also of the Attorney-General in terms of the anti-vilification reforms, the review of the *Racial and Religious Tolerance Act*, which is a piece of work that we have committed to. The anti-racism strategy that the task force is developing will deliver a five-year plan for us to tackle racism, as I said, wherever

and whenever it raises its ugly head. And I know that all of us want to see a proud, vibrant, multicultural community where everybody feels valued, and nobody feels targeted or separated based on their race or their culture.

**Paul HAMER:** Thank you, Minister. Those words are very comforting for my community.

If I could just take you to the multicultural festivals that you started referring to in your answer to Mr McGowan. I know in our own community there has been a commitment for, I think it is, \$100,000 each year for the next four years for the Lunar New Year festival. I was just wondering if you could outline how this funding and how the broader funding program for multicultural festivals will benefit our multicultural communities across the state.

**Colin BROOKS:** One of the best parts of my job is going to so many wonderful cultural events. It is a fantastic experience, and I see many of you around this table at these events. I just wanted to point out – and I think this is a bipartisan, non-political view that we all share, which is our –

**Ellen SANDELL:** Tripartisan.

**Colin BROOKS:** Tripartisan, yes. Sorry, Ellen. I forgot you were here. Sorry about that.

**Michael GALEA:** What happened to the Nationals?

**Colin BROOKS:** Our multipartisan view is that our cultural diversity is our great strength. I think Victoria does multiculturalism better than just about anywhere in the world. Our New South Wales colleagues did not like me saying that last week in Sydney, but I think we do. We support and enrich our cultural communities, those diverse multicultural communities, so we know that we cannot take that for granted. We need to keep investing in and nurturing our wonderful multicultural communities, which is why the multicultural affairs portfolio works to deliver the strategies and the policies and the programs that meet the diverse needs of Victoria's multicultural communities whilst also promoting greater understanding and cohesion.

I just want to point out that since 2014 the multicultural festivals and events program has provided over \$24 million to support nearly 10,000 festivals and events, which is a huge undertaking. So our government of course knows how important it is to support multicultural, multifaith communities to reconnect and to celebrate their cultures and traditions. And to this end in this budget, in the 2023–24 budget, we are delivering \$12 million to continue to support multicultural festivals and events right across Victoria. It is a position we took to the election. Through this investment we are providing long-term certainty by providing four-year funding to more than 25 state-significant multicultural festivals and events as opposed to the previous year-on-year funding, thereby reducing the burden on organisers – often volunteer organisers – to make applications year in and year out and the event planning complexities that that approach entails.

So I am really happy to see in this budget that I can advise the committee that funding from this investment will go towards festivals and events such as the Lonsdale Greek festival, the Pako festival in Geelong, the Melbourne Italian Festa, the Tamil Festival Australia, the Hispanic–Latin American festival, the Springvale Lunar New Year, the Victorian Mosque Open Day, the African Music and Cultural Festival, the Polish Festival at Fed Square and also the Turkish centenary celebration, which of course falls this year. And Mr Hamer, the question you asked – I absolutely confirm that I am delighted that the investment also includes \$100,000 a year each year over four years for the Whitehorse Lunar New Year festival in Box Hill, which of course I had the pleasure of joining you at earlier this year and Prime Minister Anthony Albanese had the pleasure of joining us at as well. In the last year alone, the current financial year, we estimate that more than 1.3 million people will have attended events and festivals that celebrate our wonderful multicultural communities through our multicultural festivals and events fund.

Likewise we know that every community deserves great spaces in which to come together and celebrate and share culture and tradition, and of course our multicultural communities are no different. Since 2014 our Multicultural Community Infrastructure Fund has provided some \$26.6 million to support 524 projects – we are moving on to infrastructure now – and now it will deliver \$40 million to build, upgrade and renovate new community infrastructure for multicultural and multifaith communities. This will ensure community upgrades large and small can be delivered in every corner of our state, supporting multicultural and multifaith Victorians wherever they live. Funding will be allocated through targeted funding of 42 projects – this part answering the

question I think Mr McGowan asked before – in a competitive and merit-based grants program to the tune of \$20 million, which will be open for community groups to apply and submit applications to to fund community projects in the second half of the year.

Funding from this investment will go to upgrades and renovations at the Croatian community centre and the Serbian centre in Keysborough, as a couple of examples, along with the Bendigo Islamic Community Centre, the Australian Bosnian Islamic Centre in Deer Park, the Armenian Community Centre in Brandon Park and of course many more. We will also fund two brand new Indian community centres, one in Melbourne's south-east and one in Melbourne's west. We are also delighted to be providing a \$2.5 million contribution for a new Chinese community hub in Box Hill and another \$250,000 for the Fo Guang Shan temple, which I think is in your electorate, Mr Hamer.

**Nicholas McGOWAN:** And mine.

**Colin BROOKS:** And Mr McGowan's as well.

**The CHAIR:** A bit of jealousy up this end.

**Colin BROOKS:** Does the upper house count? Yes, it does.

**Nicholas McGOWAN:** Oh, savage blow.

**Colin BROOKS:** I waited until you had done your questions. As well as the greater Victorian Chinese community and diaspora of course – everyone benefits from that project.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Minister. The last 3 minutes will now go to Ms Sandell.

**Ellen SANDELL:** Thank you, Chair. I cannot ask a lot in 3 minutes, but let me have a shot. Quite recently the Legal and Social Issues Committee ran a parliamentary inquiry into extremism, with some very good recommendations. The government is yet to respond to those. I know you talk about your anti-racism strategy, which is great, but could you tell us when the government is planning to respond and whether there are other recommendations in there you might adopt?

**Colin BROOKS:** I cannot tell you exactly when the government will respond, but it will respond in the very near future.

**Ellen SANDELL:** One of the greatest threats to our multicultural community at the moment is the rise of the far right and that form of extremism. Can you talk a bit about any programs the government is implementing to combat the rise of that far-right extremism?

**Colin BROOKS:** The most immediate request from many people who are concerned about the rise of the extreme right and the sort of issues we had with Nazis parading around the front steps of this very building obviously is to work further than the ban on the Nazi Hakenkreuz and ban the Nazi salute. There are those antisemitism and anti-Islamophobia campaigns that I mentioned before – \$3 million in each – and now that the funding is provided in this budget that allows us to kick that work off. They will all have, I think, a lens on the very issue that you are referring to. And then of course as the work on the ban of the Nazi salute is underway, so too is the work that builds on that, which is the review of the *Racial and Religious Tolerance Act*, so the broader reform to our anti-vilification protections. Both the Premier and I am sure the Attorney-General have indicated publicly that that will be looking at both broadening the attributes under that Act – broadening it from racial and religious but also looking at other attributes, but also something that has been raised with me by many members of our multicultural communities is to give the Act more teeth so that when people are vilifying others there is recourse and sanction involved in the Act.

**Ellen SANDELL:** What is the time line on that, because there is not specific funding in the budget for that, is there?

**Colin BROOKS:** If I can take that on notice. The Attorney-General is in control of that process, but I know that work has definitely started on that. We have certainly assisted with some funding from our department for the consultation that is so important, and consultation is critical. We found that out through the banning of the Nazi salute, which is a much more narrow piece of work than, for example, broader anti-vilification



protections. In making sure that there are not unintended consequences, we have properly consulted with a range of different groups. And just that issue I mentioned before around the use of the Nazi symbol in a peaceful sense by the Jain, Buddhist and Hindu communities highlights that need to be really careful and step through this in a careful way.

**Ellen SANDELL:** Okay. Thank you. And funding for multicultural communities and –

**The CHAIR:** Apologies, Ms Sandell.

**Ellen SANDELL:** That was a short 3 minutes.

**The CHAIR:** Minister, department officials –

**Colin BROOKS:** That is it?

**The CHAIR:** the time has come. Thank you very much for appearing before the committee this afternoon. The committee will follow up on any questions taken on notice in writing, and responses are required within five working days of the committee's request. The committee is now going to take a short break before beginning its consideration of the Tourism, Sport and Major Events portfolio. I declare this hearing adjourned.

**Witnesses withdrew.**