

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

Inquiry into sustainable employment for disadvantaged jobseekers

Bendigo—Tuesday, 22 October 2019

MEMBERS

Mr John Eren—Chair

Mr Gary Blackwood—Deputy Chair

Ms Juliana Addison

Ms Sarah Connolly

Mr Brad Rowswell

Ms Steph Ryan

Ms Kat Theophanous

WITNESS

Ms Rhianna Kerr.

The CHAIR: I firstly acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the land on which we meet, and I pay my respects to their elders past, present and emerging.

Thank you for being here for this very important hearing that we are holding in regional Victoria. I will just let you know some of the rights that you have as a guest invited to make a presentation. All evidence taken by this Committee is protected by parliamentary privilege. Therefore you are protected against any action for what you say here today, but if you go outside and repeat the same things, including on social media, those comments may not be protected by this privilege. You will be provided with a proof version of the transcript for you to check. Verified transcripts, PowerPoint presentations and handouts will be placed on the Committee's website as soon as possible.

I think you are going to give us a 5-minute presentation, and then we will proceed to ask questions after that. Thanks again for being here.

Ms KERR: I would also like to acknowledge my ancestors, the Dja Dja Wurrung people, and acknowledge their connection to this Country for many, many, many years now. My name is Rhianna Kerr. I am a full-time employee at Dja Dja Wurrung Clans Aboriginal Corporation, but before I start I would like to say I am not speaking on behalf of the Corporation, I am not speaking on behalf of all Aboriginal people. I cannot do that. I do not speak on behalf of my mob. I am speaking from my own personal experiences today and about things that I think need to change within getting young people into employment, so not speaking just as an Aboriginal person but someone who is also only 21.

I am the Cultural Heritage Project Officer for Ceremony and Administration at Dja Dja Wurrung Clans Aboriginal Corporation. I started my full-time role five months ago. Prior to that I was employed through Parks Victoria with the Dja Dja Wurrung Ranger Program. I was there for 12 months, but prior to my first full-time job I struggled like I never had before. I bounced from casual job to casual job for the better part of two and a half years before I found full-time work. Listening to what a lot of people have had to say since I have been here on employment programs and what employment agencies are doing for young people, I did not have that support. When I was only 18, which was not that long ago, I was on Centrelink as a jobseeker. I had no support from my job agency. I was told, 'You need to apply for 20 jobs every month'. There are only so many jobs you can apply for, yet we are still told, 'Just apply for what's out there. It doesn't matter what it is as long as you're getting into work'. I do understand that this may have changed since I was 18, but a lot of what I was told was, 'Just apply for it. It doesn't matter what it is as long as you're working', which I wholeheartedly disagree with. No-one had any interest in what I wanted to do with my life or what I was interested in, and no-one wanted to help me get to where I wanted to be. Granted at that time I did not know where I wanted to be, and throughout high school I also did not have that support from my teachers and my mentors. I was told, 'If you graduate Year 12 with a VCE certificate, it'll be easy for you to find work'. That was not the case at all. I struggled for a really, really long time trying to find work. I ended up moving to and from Queensland because I could not find a full-time job.

In 2016, the year I was 18, I applied for well over 150 jobs and did not get a single one of them, because I did not have the experience that was being asked for to fulfil the role. Every entry-level job I found I applied for, no matter what industry it was in, no matter what it was doing, I still never got calls back, never got interviews—nothing—because I did not have the experience. So it is not just being an Aboriginal person and how that can be very disadvantageous—is that a word?—or how that can be a disadvantage at the best of times; it is young people as well. My partner is 22 years old and has only just landed a full-time contract after two and a half years of looking. One of my best friends is in casual work but is still being made to do Work for the Dole with Centrelink because she has no experience in any field other than retail and hospitality but there are no opportunities to gain experience to fulfil the roles and what they are asking for.

I personally do not think there are enough traineeships, even within Indigenous organisations like the one that I work for. We have no opportunities for traineeships to get our young people in. Our young people are our leaders for the future, and we are not doing enough to provide them with the opportunities to take on the roles that we are advertising for. In 20 years time we would like to see the Dja Dja Wurrung Clans Aboriginal Corporation solely run by Traditional Owners. That seems very far-fetched at the moment because the roles

that we are advertising our people do not have the skills to fulfil, and it is very disheartening. I am the youngest person at my workplace by 10 years. I do not think that is okay. I will leave it at that.

Mr ROWSWELL: I disagree with you. I do not think young people are the leaders of the future. I think young people are the leaders that our community needs today, and I can see that you are a young leader in your community now—so firstly congratulations for that.

Ms KERR: Thank you.

Mr ROWSWELL: But with leadership comes responsibility. You have outlined some of the concerns you have. What do you see as the solutions?

Ms KERR: Unfortunately a lot of young Aboriginal people have no desire to be in a workforce and have no desire to want to work. With our Dja Dja Wurrung Ranger Program, which coincides with our Joint Management Plan with Parks Victoria and our Recognition and Settlement Agreement, we have designated Aboriginal positions, but no-one wants to apply for them. And I think a lot of the issue is on our own end, that we are not doing what it takes to keep young people interested in applying for the full-time jobs that we are offering. And that in itself is a very big headache to even think about—that we are not doing what it takes for our people

I am unsure of how it will be fixed but I can only hope that, with the elders of my community, everyone can come together and find a reasonable solution. You know, these guys need to step up. Because our elders are not going to be here forever—they cannot lead us forever—we need to take charge and make these decisions on our own behalf, which is exactly what I am trying to do within my organisation at just 21.

I do have a very good background behind me. My dad was at the organisation for 14 years and my sister was there for eight and a half, so I am a lot luckier than a lot of my cousins and a lot of the people in my community in that it was about who I knew, not what I knew. I got my foot in the door at a very young age in a casual sense, but not everyone has that opportunity. I think a lot of bias does come into it at times and we need to find a way to eliminate those risk factors.

Ms THEOPHANOUS: Thank you, Rhianna. Thank you for sharing your personal story and your challenges. I guess my question goes to: looking back at your 18-year-old self and when you were going through that, what would you say to her and what sorts of supports would she have benefited from back then when she was struggling to find work?

Ms KERR: If I was to sit down face to face with my 18-year-old self, I would probably say, ‘Don’t get so down on yourself. It will all come together, but it’s going to take time. You’re going to go through a lot of jobs that you hate—that you don’t want to do—but it’s a stepping stone. You will be okay. Don’t freak out. It’s going to be fine’. I think support that I would have loved to have had at that age was someone to sit down with one on one, so I was not just another name on a list, someone who was actually invested in what my interests were and how to get me from point A to point B instead of, ‘Go and apply for all of these. You’ll be fine’.

Mr BLACKWOOD: Rhianna, your mental toughness and resilience is quite inspiring and amazing. But in terms of mentors, I guess I can make the assumption that an Aboriginal mentor would be more effective for people of your clan, but would non-Aboriginal mentors help as well? Is there a place for that?

Ms KERR: I think so. The way Aboriginal people think can be seen as very different to how non-Aboriginal people think. We have a different thought process. We view things in a different manner. But having a non-Indigenous mentor as well can also help to keep you grounded. Mob works very differently to how the real world works, and having that other figure there to keep you grounded and ‘It’s all good and fine that you would like to do this, but you have to do this first to get to that point’ would be really beneficial for people as well.

Mr BLACKWOOD: Thank you.

Ms ADDISON: Thank you as well. You have got me thinking about a lot of things. Particularly, the Government is currently offering free TAFE and I drove past Bendigo TAFE on my way here. Is that something that your friendship group is aware of, is interested in? Do you see it as a pathway?

Ms KERR: Yes, absolutely.

Ms ADDISON: Is this idea getting some resonance amongst you and your mates?

Ms KERR: Yes. We are well aware that there are free TAFE courses, and I myself have looked into them, because it has taken me four years but I would like to go back and study. But the TAFE courses that are being offered are not of any interest to me. I think they are very specific and I do not think there is an overly wide range, because obviously everyone is not interested in the same thing. Myself and my partner, we are two very, very different people. He is, 'Yeah, hands-on, let me work with my hands', whereas I am, 'Yeah, put me behind a desk in front of a computer and let me do what I do'; so I think there needs to be more of a broader range of opportunities. I do not know if that has been done or not, but maybe a survey could go out that says, 'What are you interested in, and we'll see what we can do'.

Ms ADDISON: Yes, because there are 30 courses. It is not the whole of TAFE.

Ms KERR: It is not large.

Ms ADDISON: And it certainly has looked at the Victorian economy and skill shortages and stuff like that, but that is interesting feedback. Do you have any friends who are doing it at this stage?

Ms KERR: No, not that I know of.

Ms CONNOLLY: What do you think, Rhianna, at school—so before you turned 18 but if you reflect back on at school—what do you think that the school could have done better or the careers counsellor? Do you think you got the right guidance? I think it is appalling you had to apply for that many jobs, actually appalling.

Ms KERR: So I actually grew up in Shepparton. I did not grow up in Bendigo. When I was halfway through year 12 I wanted to drop out because I was struggling with my subjects. I had no support from my house leaders or my teachers to help better myself and want to be at school. I said to my mum four months before my graduation, 'I'm going to drop out and find a full-time job because I can't do this anymore'. It was almost forced upon me that I had to go to university. I was part of a program called the Aspiration Initiative from the time I was in year 8 until the year after I graduated high school, and their main goal was to get people into university, get Aboriginal people into university. I did not want to go, and I was very much in a sense forced to attend something that I did not want to do. I lasted six weeks at La Trobe before I dropped out because it was not what I wanted to do, but no-one took that into account. With my high school teachers, obviously I studied VCE and I was told, 'You have to have a good ATAR, otherwise you're not going to get anywhere'. After I graduated from high school and landed my job at Parks Victoria I basically said, 'You don't need an ATAR to get to where you want to be. It's not the most important thing in the world. Don't let teachers and parents instil that in you that you have to have a good ATAR to get somewhere in life. It is possible without it'.

Ms CONNOLLY: Just further on that, do you think that for school leavers from grades 10 and 11, there is an impression that it is easy to get a job?

Ms KERR: Yes. I was told, 'If you graduate high school from Year 12, it will be easier for you to find a job because it will look better on your résumé that you have stuck it out and completed it'. That was not the case at all—absolutely not.

Ms CONNOLLY: And did you have any conversations with career counsellors?

Ms KERR: I did. Being one of six Aboriginal kids who graduated in my level, which was four years ago today—whoo hoo; go me—the careers counsellor that I had was looking after 180 other kids. I went to Wanganui Park Secondary College in Shepparton, and we had the largest graduating class the school had ever seen, yet only six of us were Aboriginal kids out of 180. So among having to deal with every other student who does not know what they want to do, I think if there were a couple of career advisers maybe it would have made it a bit easier and a bit better to sit down and talk to someone one on one, but having one career adviser to 180 kids, it was never going to work.

The CHAIR: Rhianna, can I ask: just in relation to unconscious bias, do think that there is an issue out there amongst employers and the wider community about unconscious bias? What can the State Government do to alleviate that unconscious bias?

Ms KERR: I think a lot of people need to be more open to employing people who do not have experience. Obviously experience is preferred, but in my personal experience everyone will always go for someone who has the experience because they do not have to train them. They do not have to show them how things are done. They do not want to put the time or the effort into that person if they can hire someone who already has that, so I think people need to be more open-minded when they are taking on new employees, not just Aboriginal employees but young employees, because if you are 18 and you are fresh out of high school you are not going to have any experience working in a real-world job like administration. Hospitality potentially, because most people will work casually throughout high school, but if you are wanting to move into administration or something but you are not ready to go to university, where do those opportunities come from?

Ms ADDISON: Can I just quickly follow up out of interest. You went to La Trobe. I am a former schoolteacher, so I have watched kids finish school. They have been very supported through school, then they have got to university and they are like free-range. No-one really cares if they turn up or not. No-one is actually tracking them. There is no roll being taken and stuff like that. Could La Trobe have done anything to keep you engaged, or had you really said, 'This is not for me right now'? Could you have got more support at uni?

Ms KERR: I think if I had had more support from the career education officer who was there at the time—I do not know if he still is—I might have stuck it out and tried to keep going. I think a large part of it was I did not know if what I was studying was what I wanted to do. I started with a diploma of health science to move into sport and exercise science. I also started four and a half weeks late and was expected by every single one of my teachers to be up to speed within a week, and I did not have the backup from the career education support officer at La Trobe to be like, 'She started late. Give her some time to catch up. It's a lot of work to catch up on'. So I hit my six-week mark, I left one day and I never went back. It wasn't the right time for me to be studying, and the fact that I didn't want to study did not help. I was going to please other people, but it has also taken me four years to actually find something that I would like to study that coincides with my role at the Corporation.

Ms CONNOLLY: Do you think, if you reflect again back, because you are so young—I am at my 20th high school reunion year; you can see how old I am—

Ms KERR: I am five years next year.

Ms CONNOLLY: You sort of said you did not really know what you wanted to do. What do you think about traineeships? Work experience you do for, what, a week once in your school life. Do you think that is something there needs to be more focus on—a traineeship? Do you think a week is enough in one sort of industry to realise what—

Ms KERR: Absolutely not. No. I had done work experience at a primary school as a PE teacher. I had done work experience at a high school as a PE teacher for one day a week for six months, and it completely steered me away from it, which I guess is the beauty of doing work experience. My mindset at the time was, 'I want to be a teacher', and then I went and taught and absolutely hated it. So I do not think one week in your whole time of being at high school is anywhere near enough. I think throughout Year 12 I changed my mind six times on what I wanted to do, and I never pursued any of those things. I am not doing any of those things now. So, yeah, one week is definitely not enough.

The CHAIR: Can I just ask: tourism is obviously on the rise, particularly Indigenous and Aboriginal tourism. Is there any opportunity to encourage Aboriginal small businesses to be starting to set up in relation to preparing for that tourism boom?

Ms KERR: Absolutely. My older sister has actually recently established her own business called Wartakan, which in Dja Dja Wurrung language means 'I come with purpose'. It is a consultancy agency around the legalities of cultural heritage management plans as well as cultural tours out on Country for people. I believe she is the only member of Dja Dja Wurrung Clans Aboriginal Corporation who has her own business in that

field. I think as an Aboriginal person it is a scary concept to start your own business and run your own business and do Traditional Owner business on Country for your own people. It is a terrifying concept. I think that is why there are next to no businesses for Aboriginal people run by Aboriginal people, besides the Corporation, obviously.

The CHAIR: So how can Government help with that?

Ms KERR: More incentives towards it. I know there are already a lot of incentives for small businesses, especially businesses that are starting up, but I think a lot of Aboriginal people do not know about them. So the communication of them to Indigenous organisations like Dja Dja Wurrung, like Djandak, that would be very, very beneficial for their members and the community members around them as well.

Ms ADDISON: Just going back, you spoke about the ranger program. Can you tell us a little bit more about that and why it was good?

Ms KERR: Yes, absolutely. So the Dja Dja Wurrung Ranger Program was established five years ago. It was an agreement between the State and Dja Dja Wurrung Clans Aboriginal Corporation coinciding with the recognition and settlement agreement, which was established I believe in 2013, to ensure there is always a position for an Indigenous person within a government organisation. The Dja Dja Wurrung Ranger Program consists currently of the team leader, two Dja Dja Wurrung Rangers, a cultural heritage ranger and two more people that sit under them. There is also the project officer for the implementation of the joint management plan, which actually launched in September last year. It is basically getting Indigenous people into these roles, upskilling them, making them realise exactly what it is they would like to do and then moving them on so someone else can move into it. That is exactly what I did. I was in my role for 12 months and said, 'No, I do not want to do this anymore; I want to go and do this instead', and now I am managing and coordinating events and ceremony bookings as well as delivering them with the Corporation. I could not be happier in my role. It is an incredible opportunity to be able to briefly educate people and make a difference.

Ms ADDISON: That is fantastic. I am just going to drill right down now. With the ranger program, was that based within the government department of parks or within the Corporation?

Ms KERR: Within the government department of parks. At the DELWP office out in Epsom, on the Parks Victoria's side of the building, there is the Dja Dja Wurrung Ranger pod. That is where everyone sits. They all coincide together there with the Bendigo ranger team as well as all the other ranger teams around the Central Goldfields area.

Ms ADDISON: So potentially there are opportunities then for people to move into government departments?

Ms KERR: Correct.

Ms ADDISON: You were very interested in cultural heritage and that is why you pivoted to the Corporation?

Ms KERR: All the way back, yes. I was an employee of the Corporation for two years as a casual employee prior to going to Parks Victoria, and everyone goes home at some point, which is exactly what I did. But, yeah, the entirety of the Dja Dja Wurrung Ranger Program is to provide more government opportunities to Traditional Owners. My cousin Diarna started at Parks Victoria, was there for 12 months and then moved into the wildlife enforcement team with DELWP and has been there ever since. So it provides those opportunities to young Dja Dja Wurrung Traditional Owners to get into government work.

Ms ADDISON: Fantastic.

Ms CONNOLLY: We talked about the sort of support you needed to get the job, and the skills.

Ms KERR: Yes.

Ms CONNOLLY: What about post-placement? Do you feel like there was a time when it would have been good to have support early on, or for the first year? I think you said you have been in this role for five months.

Ms KERR: Yes.

Ms CONNOLLY: So ongoing support to make sure that you are flourishing in a role that you like doing, and what other skills you could do. If you are not going to get that advice from home, from Mum and Dad and family members, do you think that there is a need for young people to have that?

Ms KERR: Definitely. As I said before, I am a lot luckier than a lot of people who are my age. I have an incredible management team that I report to within the organisation who are not Indigenous. However, they want to see the goals and the aspirations of our Dhelkunya Dja management plan achieved. I am about to start studying my diploma of business for event management and marketing to further move on into my bachelor of business. It has taken me four years to find something that I love and I enjoy and I really want to do, and my management team is behind me 100% of the way because the job that I do is a very specific skill set. I cannot do what I am doing anywhere else in the country without a qualification to back it up.

Obviously I am not going to be at the Corporation forever—I would like to see someone else move into my role and take it over. However, my managers also know that I cannot do anything else without a qualification to back it up, so they are supporting my study plans and my working plans. I recently had a knee reconstruction, which they have been incredible about. I have an amazing support network behind me now that I am in a full-time role. Prior to that I did not have it.

Mr ROWSWELL: You have got an amazing story, and your pathway has been inspirational in many ways—overcoming adversity and other challenges that life has thrown at you. Have you ever considered—or maybe you are doing this at the moment—sharing your story with other groups of young people? Maybe even going back to your old high school and speaking to the Year 12s.

Ms KERR: I have.

Mr ROWSWELL: You have?

Ms KERR: I have thought about it. Not long after I started at Parks Victoria I actually attended the Indigenous employment expo at Bendigo TAFE and got to speak to the Year 10 group of people about my journey and the steps that I needed to take to get to where I am and what battles I faced physically and mentally but that I got to where I wanted to be at the time and that it was really, really important for them to not give up on what they wanted to do. I might start a side business of going around to schools and maybe sharing my story with them. The reason I do what I do is that I just want to make a difference. I want to make a change for the better, not just within my community but the wider community as well. I believe that starts from a very young age. I did not start learning about my culture until I was 18. That was only three years ago. I have moved mountains, essentially, to get where I am now, and I think it is really important for people who are in Year 9, 10, 11 and 12 to know that anything is possible, and they can do it too.

Mr ROWSWELL: Local government elections, October 2020—I want to see you there, okay?

Ms KERR: It is not my time yet.

Ms ADDISON: I like the ‘yet’. I do like the ‘yet’.

Ms KERR: It is not my time yet. I am only 21.

Mr ROWSWELL: Hey, I am 33. I am one of the youngest members of Parliament. Come on, put your hand up.

Ms KERR: No, I did actually figure out a couple of weeks ago that just within the Corporation, not including enterprise, which is a second entity that works on natural resource management, I am the youngest employee by 10 years. It hurts my soul to know that I am the youngest person in my organisation by 10 years, which I do not think is okay—there needs to be more people like me in there. But we will get there one day.

The CHAIR: Hopefully they are listening right now.

Ms KERR: Fingers crossed.

The CHAIR: So you will be a great mentor, and I think part of the challenge for Government is finding mentors like you and having an appropriate program to make sure that your talent, your skills and what you have lived through you can pass on to some of those younger ones coming through the ranks, and the challenges that they should expect. I reckon that is something that Government can do in terms of a mentoring program.

Ms KERR: You can get my number off Kerryn if you want. She has got it.

The CHAIR: Thank you for being here.

Ms KERR: No worries. Thank you so much for having me.

Witness withdrew.