

VERIFIED VERSION

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into budget estimates 2014–15

Melbourne — 21 May 2014

Members

Mr N. Angus

Ms J. Garrett

Mr D. Morris

Mr D. R. J. O'Brien

Mr C. Ondarchie

Mr M. Pakula

Mr R. Scott

Chair: Mr D. Morris

Deputy Chair: Mr M. Pakula

Staff

Executive Officer: Ms V. Cheong

Witnesses

Mr T. Bull, Minister for Aboriginal Affairs,

Mr A. Tongue, Secretary, and

Ms A. Singh, Executive Director, Office of Aboriginal Affairs Victoria, Department of Premier and Cabinet.

**Necessary corrections to be notified to
executive officer of committee**

The CHAIR — I declare open hearing no. 33 of the estimates hearings for 2014. I welcome the Honourable Tim Bull to deal with the portfolio of Aboriginal affairs, and from the Department of Premier and Cabinet the Secretary, Mr Andrew Tongue, and the Executive Director of the Office of Aboriginal Affairs Victoria, Ms Angela Singh.

In accordance with practice in recent years these hearings are being webcast on the parliamentary website. In accordance with the guidelines for public hearings I remind members of the public gallery that they cannot participate in any way in the committee's proceedings. Departmental officers may approach the table during the hearing to provide information to the minister or other witnesses if requested, by leave of me. Written communication to witnesses can only be provided via officers of the PAEC secretariat. Members of the media are requested to observe the guidelines for filming or recording proceedings in the Legislative Council Committee Room. That includes remaining focused on the person speaking and not panning the public gallery, the committee or witnesses. Filming and recording must cease immediately at the completion of the hearing or during any breaks.

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 are not protected by parliamentary privilege, including any comments made on social media from the hearing itself. The committee does not require witnesses to be sworn, but I remind you all that questions must be answered in full and with accuracy and truthfulness. Any persons 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 fact verification within two working days of the hearing. PowerPoint presentations will be placed on the committee's website as soon as they become available. Verified transcripts will be placed on the website within five days of receipt.

Following a presentation by the minister, committee members will ask questions relating to this inquiry. Generally the procedure followed will be that relating to questions in the Legislative Assembly. Sessional orders provide a time limit for answers to questions without notice of 4 minutes, while standing orders do not permit supplementary questions. It is my intention to exercise discretion in both these matters; however, I do request that each question be answered as succinctly as is reasonable, recognising that these are often matters of some complexity.

I ask that all mobile telephones be turned off or to silent. The minister now has an opportunity for a brief presentation of no more than 5 minutes on the budget estimates for the Aboriginal Affairs portfolio. Welcome, Minister.

Overheads shown.

Mr BULL — Thank you, Chair, for the opportunity to present to the committee today. Victoria's Aboriginal population is growing, as we see on the screen. Today, according to the most recent ABS figures, there are now over 50 000 Aboriginal people living in Victoria. This is an increase from the 47 000 reported in the 2011 census and represents a significant increase in the population over the past few years.

The increase not only reflects higher birth rates and more Aboriginal people moving to Victoria but also reflects that Aboriginal people are more confident to identify, and this is a very welcome outcome. It gives the government confidence that through our policies, programs and services, and through the hard work of Aboriginal communities themselves, more Aboriginal people have a strong sense of their identity. Over half of Victoria's Aboriginal population lives in regional Victoria. The median age of Aboriginal Victorians is 22 years, and this provides both a great opportunity as well as challenges.

Earlier this year I had the honour of tabling the *Victorian Government Aboriginal Affairs Report 2013* in Parliament. The Victorian government is committed to closing the gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Victorians. The report lists achievements in 2013 and identifies areas where improved effort is required. The latest data indicates a number of important achievements in education and health, which demonstrate Victoria is making progress in enhancing the lives of Aboriginal people. Concerns remain in several key areas, which will require further attention. With the support of my colleagues in human services, employment, health, education and justice, and by working in partnership with Aboriginal Victorians, I know we can continue to make a difference.

The 2014–15 state budget provides approximately \$4.2 million for a number of important initiatives. Firstly, \$525 000 is provided to coordinate the delivery of the Victorian Aboriginal Economic Strategy by drawing on the advice of the Victorian Aboriginal Economic Board, which I intend to establish in coming months. The board is central to ensuring Victoria's business sectors play a key role in building jobs and business opportunities for all Aboriginal Victorians.

The largest funded initiative in this year's budget is the \$3.1 million provided to progress action consistent with this government's responses to the parliamentary inquiry into the establishment and effectiveness of registered Aboriginal parties — or RAPs, as we know them — and the review of the Aboriginal Heritage Act 2006. In addition \$488 000 is provided over the next four years to support the Lake Tyers Aboriginal Trust transition to self-governance. Another \$80 000 is provided to develop school curriculum material, drawing on the very successful Victorian Indigenous Honour Roll.

I am very proud of the government's achievements and incredible level of activity over the last year. In 2013–14 the government delivered significant work, including the induction of a further 14 people onto the Victorian Indigenous Honour Roll. The roadshow is currently touring the state, providing an opportunity to share the powerful stories of the inductees with the Victorian community and encourage further nominations from across Victoria.

We also continue to strengthen government engagement with Victorian Aboriginal communities. Three Ministerial Round Tables were held last year with Aboriginal leaders, women and registered Aboriginal parties. The Round Tables are an important mechanism to engage with communities and inform government direction.

Following amendments to the Aboriginal Lands Act in 2013, the government established the Lake Tyers Aboriginal Trust Board to act as an administrator. This is an important step towards the transition to community self-governance at Lake Tyers, subject to community readiness.

We made an ongoing protection declaration at Point Ritchie in August last year. This declaration allows for special protection for significant Aboriginal cultural heritage, which is amongst the most fragile of cultural remains in Victoria. The Victorian Aboriginal Heritage Council appointed Victoria's 10th registered Aboriginal party, Eastern Maar, in December. The appointment area includes parts of the Moyne and Southern Grampians shires. There has also been considerable cross-government effort to close the gaps by all Victorian ministers as outlined on the slide. I am confident that by continuing to work with Aboriginal communities we will achieve improved outcomes for Aboriginal Victorians and in the long term close the gap.

Lastly, we have produced a map of each committee member's electorate that includes known Aboriginal places and objects on the Victorian Aboriginal heritage register. These places and objects include scarred trees, rock art sites, stone artefacts, shell middens and places of cultural and historical significance. Also included for your information is detail on the registered Aboriginal party, local Indigenous network and a number of other cultural heritage management plans and archaeological surveys that have been undertaken in your area. We will make that available to members of the committee after the hearing.

The CHAIR — We have until 11.30 a.m. for questions, and I will start. Minister, could you outline to the committee the budget initiatives in this portfolio which will strengthen Victorian communities both in the coming year and over the forward estimates period?

Mr BULL — The Victorian government's 2014–15 budget will build a better Victoria with job-creating infrastructure and generally stronger local communities. It builds on our measures to grow the economy and create more jobs. It also builds on our record investments in health, education and in regional Victoria to support our ever-growing population. Aboriginal Victorians, who are a rapidly growing population, will benefit from commitments in this budget, including those relating to infrastructure investment as well as investments in health and education. Important services will continue to be provided in other portfolios — services that are universally available as well as services that better meet the needs of Aboriginal Victorians and which very importantly reduce disadvantage.

The coalition government's commitment to closing the gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people is further supported in this budget through a number of exciting targeted initiatives. In the Aboriginal affairs portfolio \$3.1 million has been provided for the Aboriginal cultural heritage strategy. This includes operational

support for registered Aboriginal parties. That will continue, as will the delivery of a certificate IV in Aboriginal Cultural Heritage Management and the Right People for Country program.

Support has also been provided to implement this government's responses to the parliamentary inquiry into the establishment and effectiveness of registered Aboriginal parties and review of the Aboriginal Heritage Act 2006. \$525 000 has been allocated to support coordination of the Victorian Aboriginal Economic Strategy and the realisation of partnerships with the private sector to enhance job and business opportunities for Aboriginal Victorians.

We will also support the Lake Tyers Aboriginal Trust to transition to self-governance through an allocation of \$488 000 over four years; and \$80 000 will support the development of school curriculum material which will draw on the very popular Victorian Indigenous Honour Roll. In addition to funding within my own portfolio, funding of \$5.5 million has been allocated in the community services portfolio to deliver Aboriginal kinship care support services, responding to this government's commitment under the Victorian Aboriginal Affairs Framework to support vulnerable Aboriginal children and families. Support for stronger local communities will be provided through both of these new initiatives and through the broader Aboriginal affairs portfolio budget.

Specific activities to support communities include Local Indigenous Networks, or LINs, which are located across Victoria. Participation across the 39 LINs continues to grow in this state with over 2000 participants. Each LIN is progressing their community plans including actioning priorities across a range of areas, such as cultural and community strengthening, supporting young people, and also employment and education, which are two very important areas.

There is support for the Koori Youth Council, which provides a voice for Aboriginal people aged 16 to 25 and a mechanism to provide advice to government and community organisations on issues which affect young people. I have met with that group, and they are very impressive young people. There is \$200 000 per year in support for Reconciliation Victoria, which supports a range of local-level reconciliation activities right across the state, including planning events in partnership with local government and the Aboriginal community to celebrate National Reconciliation Week, which is next week, Chair, from 27 May to 3 June.

This government's whole-of-government approach to Aboriginal affairs needs to be recognised; it is a whole-of-government approach. All portfolios are contributing to this effort, including a record investment in health, in relation to closing the gap initiatives.

Mr PAKULA — Minister, in your presentation you made reference to the Victorian Government Aboriginal Affairs Report, and you went through a number of measures or indicators in the areas where you said more work needs to be done, one of them being smoking rates. Can you take us through what specific budget outputs within your portfolio, or specific programs that you are responsible for are helping to deal with the matter of Aboriginal smoking rates, which are as I understand it about 40 per cent compared to 15 per cent for the community at large.

Mr BULL — You are quite right in pointing out that a number of areas, including smoking, are areas of concern. Whilst the report identifies that we have made progress in a number of areas, that is one area where clearly more work needs to be done. Also there are some aspects of education where we have had very good outcomes but other areas where we need a higher level of input to ensure those figures are trending in the right direction and we are indeed getting better outcomes.

In relation to smoking specifically we have VicHealth of course, of which up until recently I was a board member, that has been very active in promoting the anti-smoking message, not just solely across the Aboriginal community but across the wider Victorian society, identifying health risks and all the issues that go with people who are smoking. I have been talking with the various representative Aboriginal bodies to ensure that I am across all of the issues that are confronting our Aboriginal community. Some of the issues that have been raised with me include the very point that you raise — smoking. They also include some of the issues around truancy. I am currently in the process of continuing to engage with those agencies to ensure we can work together to address those very issues you raise.

Mr PAKULA — Minister, amongst the other matters that you made reference to as needing further attention within that Aboriginal Affairs Report were the matters of Aboriginal adults in the justice system and the reoffending rates of Aboriginal adults in the justice system. I suppose what I am trying to understand is, apart

from your consulting or being in dialogue with ministers with line responsibility, what specific actions or responsibilities are there within your portfolio, budget allocations and outputs that deal with those matters from an Indigenous point of view specifically; or is it your role simply to liaise with other ministers in regard to them?

Mr BULL — It certainly is to liaise with other ministers; that is certainly one of my roles. A number of those issues, as you point out, Mr Pakula, relate to justice. We obviously have our own Department of Justice involved in areas related to in our own portfolio. We have the smoking issues and, to particularly take your point a little bit further, issues to do with pregnant mothers have been identified as a specific area within that of smoking, which obviously falls under the Department of Health. Obviously truancy issues fall under the issues of the Minister for Education. I think particularly in relation to the very point you raise relating to smoking and health, we have seen a significant investment in our health department, which obviously does not fall within my jurisdiction, to address a number of those issues that are specific to our Aboriginal community — around a \$60 million investment to address all those issues across that sector that relate to the health department.

The one thing I would like to say about the areas of concern that have been identified in the Victorian Aboriginal Affairs Report is that there has been a strong recognition from this government, previous governments and other jurisdictions that these require a generational change. These are things that cannot be switched on and off overnight, and we will see some variances as we progress through time. But obviously the role of my government — sorry, my portfolio within the government — is to ensure that these issues of concern are being addressed in the respective portfolios in which they fall.

Mr ANGUS — Minister, I refer you to budget paper 3, page 217, which lists the department's objectives of supporting and strengthening communities, promoting social cohesion and enhanced engagement; and also on page 218, specifically noting the performance measure for award ceremonies held for the Victorian Indigenous Honour Roll. Can you provide the committee with an update on the progress of this initiative in building community engagement and understanding of Victoria's Aboriginal communities?

Mr BULL — Yes, certainly. Thank you, Mr Angus, for your question. The Victorian Indigenous Honour Roll is indeed an absolutely fantastic initiative. It was established to formally acknowledge and celebrate the achievements of Aboriginal Victorians, both past and present. In its inaugural year of 2011 the Honour Roll received 44 nominations, and from those 44 nominations 20 Aboriginal Victorians were inducted. In its second year 35 nominations were received and a further 15 Aboriginal Victorians were inducted. Last year we received 38 nominations and 14 people were inducted. I think that speaks for itself in relation to the level of interest.

In its first three years of operation the Honour Roll has recognised the achievements, all up, of 49 exceptional Aboriginal people. Each one of the current inductees has been a high achiever in various fields, which include arts, sport, education, community service, military service, and in some cases it is a combination of more than one of those. Their life stories are presented in the Honour Roll book, which is permanently on display here at Victoria's Parliament House, to record their legacy for future generations.

Each year 10 Aboriginal nominees will now be inducted into the Honour Roll. This may include joint nominations for members of a family or a group who have made an important contribution to the community, and we have recently seen that occur. At present the Honour Roll book has left what we call its permanent home, at Parliament House, and is on its annual travelling roadshow around the state of Victoria, so we take these great stories out to the people of Victoria. This year the Honour Roll book has already visited Ballarat, Morwell, Bendigo and Dandenong, and this week it has opened in Echuca. I had the pleasure of launching the Honour Roll when it visited both Ballarat and Bendigo.

The roadshow celebrates the achievements of the 49 inductees and indeed encourages more nominations from across the state. Nominations are currently open, and they close on 23 May. I understand from the Office of Aboriginal Affairs Victoria (OAAV) that that demand and interest that I spoke about earlier is continuing and that we already have a high number of nominations for induction. Access to the Honour Roll is readily available through the Department of Premier and Cabinet's website as well.

The Honour Roll was a 2010 election commitment of this government and was funded in the 2011–12 state budget at \$120 000 per year over a period of four years. The OAAV's 2013–14 budget has allocated 143 000 for the Honour Roll program, of which \$24 000 goes to the cost of implementing the roadshow that I have

previously mentioned. The third Honour Roll induction event took place on 18 December 2013, and at that ceremony 14 Aboriginal Victorians were inducted. For the first time the Honour Roll included a joint induction of five members from the Lovett family from western Victoria whose military service actually expanded to the two world wars, so with the Anzac centenary coming up, I thought it was very pertinent that that occurred.

Nominations are assessed by an advisory panel made up of respected Aboriginal Victorians, and these people come from a range of backgrounds. Two current panel members, Joan Vickery, AO, and Kevin Coombs, OAM — I had the pleasure of meeting Kevin recently — were themselves inducted onto the Honour Roll in 2011 and 2012 respectively before they joined the panel to make these very important assessments.

I am delighted to confirm that the performance measures outlined in the budget papers relating to this have been met. We look forward to the Honour Roll continuing to be very well supported and very popular amongst the wider Victorian community. I encourage everybody who has not already seen it to make sure that they do.

Mr SCOTT — Minister, I refer you to budget paper 3, page 218. There is a performance measure ‘Governance training programs implemented’. There are some very high level figures about the number of programs implemented, but I am really wanting to understand the effectiveness and see what measurements are taken within the department or what information you can provide to the committee — for example: how many participants have gone on to positions of management or taken up governance position in their organisations, and does the government have any actual outcome targets for the results of the programs rather than just the governance training being implemented?

Mr BULL — Thank you for your question, Mr Scott. This government certainly recognises the important role that our Aboriginal organisations play in service provisions and community strengthening, and these points you refer to are very important in that regard.

The governance training program has been an important investment that supports Aboriginal organisations. The program began in 2006 and is managed by the Office of Aboriginal Affairs Victoria through a partnership with the registrar of Indigenous organisations and Consumer Affairs Victoria. Since the commencement of the program 1059 Aboriginal participants have engaged in an introductory workshop, a certificate IV course or a diploma program — which, I think, are the figures you are looking for — and for many this has led to other opportunities.

I understand the compliance by Aboriginal community organisations with the Victorian regulatory requirements has improved over that period as a result of those people picking up that level of expertise through those very programs to which you refer. I also understand the constitutions of some Aboriginal organisations now require board members to undertake that particular level of appropriate governance training to which these budget papers refer. We will be supporting a further two inductions to corporate governance workshops in Melbourne and in Shepparton in the first half of this year. The intention is to target an approximate attendance of 40 participants in those. Delivery of these workshops will see our targets in budget paper 3 met. In 2014–15 we will support the delivery of a further two governance workshops as well.

We will explore how the training sector in relation to the delivery of these courses can best respond to future demand for this type of course as part of our continued commitment to support the Aboriginal sector. We have prioritised funding from the governance training programs to support the Victorian Aboriginal Economic Strategy, which was released in December 2013. I am sure that this very important strategy will result in positive outcomes for a whole range of people right across the sector in relation to employment and training. The government recognises clearly the importance of this. This new strategy has the strong support of the Aboriginal community and the broader business community, and that was confirmed through an extensive and targeted consultation process that we undertook with those various agencies across the state last year. It will specifically focus on building and leveraging strong partnerships with industry — which is very important — academic institutions, Aboriginal businesses, business leaders and communities.

Mr SCOTT — By way of a supplementary, Minister, you made reference to organisations which have put in requirements for governance training in their constitutions. Can that information on which organisations have done so be provided to the committee, even if it is on notice?

Mr BULL — I can answer that for you, Mr Scott. We have registered Aboriginal parties, we have a number of local Indigenous network groups across the state and we have boards at Lake Tyers and Framlingham that all

benefit, obviously, from improved outcomes in relation to governance training. Specifically where those people have ended up sitting on those boards and committees is something I would have to get back to you on if you are warranting that level of detail. But generally speaking they are the other types of organisations that benefit from an administration and management perspective through the additional expertise of these people having undertaken these courses and programs.

The CHAIR — Are you seeking that?

Mr SCOTT — Yes.

The CHAIR — If you could, Minister, that would be helpful. We have got 2 minutes left, Mr O'Brien.

Mr O'BRIEN — Minister, I refer to budget paper 3, page 44, noting a continuation of funding to support Victoria's Aboriginal cultural heritage management system, and I ask: could you provide some further advice to this committee about how this initiative will assist in protecting cultural heritage and implementing the government's responses to the recommendations arising out of both the review of the Aboriginal Heritage Act 2006 and the parliamentary inquiry into the establishment and effectiveness of RAPs?

The CHAIR — Notwithstanding the comprehensive question, Minister, this is an opportunity for a succinct answer.

Mr BULL — Thank you, Chair, and I thank Mr O'Brien for his question. As members of the committee will know, the Victorian government undertook and completed a parliamentary inquiry into the establishment and effectiveness of registered Aboriginal parties and a review of the Aboriginal Heritage Act 2006.

The Victorian government is obviously strongly committed to Aboriginal cultural heritage and identified four principles for responding to both the inquiry and the review of the Act. The first of those is ensuring the primacy of traditional owners in cultural heritage protection and management through effective, accountable and transparent decision making, through having sustainable registered Aboriginal parties, through having an efficient and effective best practice Aboriginal cultural heritage management system and also through certainty for all land users.

The government responded in 2013 to both the inquiry and the review with a number of proposed amendments to the Act and policy proposals to improve the efficiency of Victoria's Aboriginal cultural heritage management and protection system. I anticipate being able to undertake further consultation with the many stakeholders in this area in relation to these proposals over the coming weeks. In this regard I note that I had a very positive opportunity to meet with representatives of all registered Aboriginal parties at the twice yearly RAP forum, which was held in Torquay just last week, where these very issues to which you are referring, Mr O'Brien, were indeed discussed. I am pleased to confirm that new funding of \$3.1 million in this year's budget will enhance the protection of Victoria's Aboriginal cultural heritage. Given the limited amount of time, I will touch on just some of the details of that.

The fact that we have 35 000 Aboriginal cultural heritage places and objects listed right across Victoria on the Victorian Aboriginal heritage register speaks of why this investment and support are required. They are significant as part of the shared cultural heritage of all people, and particularly significant to Victoria's Aboriginal population. Our cultural heritage provides direct and ongoing connections to land and country, reinforcing cultural identity and improving wellbeing for Aboriginal people. I know this is something on which this government has very strong bipartisan support.

The CHAIR — Thank you, Minister. As I indicated, we are out of time on the Aboriginal affairs portfolio. There is one matter on notice, which we will write to you about and seek a response within 21 days. I thank the secretary and Ms Singh for their attendance. We will have a quick turnaround and resume with local government.

Witnesses withdrew.