

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

Inquiry into sustainable employment for disadvantaged jobseekers

Warragul—Wednesday, 11 December 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 Cheryl Drayton, Elder, Kurnai community.

The CHAIR: Thank you for attending. Firstly, I would like to acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the land on which we meet, and I pay my respects to their elders past, present and future. Thank you for being here today. As you can see, it is being recorded by Hansard, and you are protected by privilege as long as you say the things in here and not outside. If you say some of the comments outside, you may not be protected by that privilege. You will get a transcript of your evidence and you can proofread that. If you can make an opening statement, and then we will ask questions as we go. Thank you for being here.

Ms DRAYTON: I would like to welcome you to our Country today. I am going to be controversial because the Gunai I do not acknowledge, because they are not a tribe. In our Kurnai language it means ‘another Black man’, and this is because of colonisation. So I welcome you lot into Gippsland and on your travels throughout Gippsland. By acknowledging your presence it means you will be protected as you walk on Kurnai land, so I welcome you.

The CHAIR: Thank you.

Ms DRAYTON: It is a pleasure to be here today because I think there are a lot of things that over the course of time have not resonated for Aboriginal people, and I think it still goes on. I think the current legislation, which is the Aboriginal framework which has taken place, is problematic in some ways, and I understand government hands are tied to some degree, but how do you get the Aboriginal people to have the capacity to actually build upon those frameworks with support from government? So if you look at the framework and the self-determination in itself—strategy and community-led—all those things were important to local communities to take up the mantle of being able to speak for themselves and not through the people, organisations and the committees that are handpicked by government, because they do not have our authority to speak on our behalf. So again it is problematic in that they need to actually have the relationship with the community. They are Melbourne-based peak bodies, whereas out here we still operate basically on our tribal grounds and as tribal people, and also it is problematic due to the colonisation that has occurred through people coming on Country and our not knowing who they are, and they are perpetrating problems around their identity versus the original inhabitants and descendants at the time. So this is problematic all across Victoria, and I hear it and see it all the time.

As a Chair on the Family Violence Caucus for inner Gippsland—so we do Baw Baw, Bass Coast, South Gippsland and Latrobe Valley—it is up to the people to resolve some of this stuff and it comes back to the work situation as well. I think the people in Baw Baw have got a better rate of employment throughout the region, and so the majority in Baw Baw have had employment opportunities, but then some of them are short-term in that they are actually related to traineeships, but it is about the longevity of people sustaining it. And if you want to ask me questions, stop me, because I will just keep talking. But I think the problematic thing is that kids are dropping out of school, and those kids who are dropping out of school are the kids who have no role models and who have not had working parents in their lives. The people that are balanced in the community have gone on to secure employment with service provision in the health region and some have worked in the employment region.

My background: I spent 20-odd years in the Commonwealth Employment Service, so I am well in tune with what employment aspirations are. But the barriers for our lot are that they are not socially accepted, and they do not go out and they are not playing sport in amongst the regions. They are fearful of the racism that goes on all the time, and I think that that is changing. It is certainly changing here in Baw Baw. The welcome to Country, the Indigenous rounds—all those things are making non-Aboriginal people understand what it is. And so the clubs are getting behind those people who play for them and are talking about what we can do better. So that is a positive start.

I think the other side of it is that we as people, the Aboriginal people, need to be able to come together and to work with the group to actually lay down—because you do not get it when you work with the employment agencies, because they do not have the time. You have to have time to spend with people, talking about and facilitating their own values and then saying, ‘Well, okay. They’re barriers. What are we going to do about it? What are you going to do about it?’. So you are giving the ownership back to the people, and they are not being forced to do something that they do not need to do.

Ms CONNOLLY: Can I just interrupt and ask you a question there? Would you say in your experience that you know of places locally that are culturally safe for Aboriginal people? At other hearings we have talked about a culturally safe space for people of Aboriginal heritage and them flourishing. Would you say that that exists here in this Shire?

Ms DRAYTON: No.

Ms CONNOLLY: Okay.

Ms DRAYTON: This is complicated because you have got government, who have given a consent to determination to the people, and the administration for that under native title becomes problematic. And so you have got these compounding issues and you have got organisations from the federal government and the state government who do not understand it, do not want to know about it. And so there are toothless tigers in it. The Aboriginal framework itself, with community-led and self-determination, are the ones that are going to actually tear apart some of those toothless tigers, because they are going to have to act to get outcomes, and there are no outcomes at the moment.

So going back to that, I think that we have to work through and identify those problems. And again, I sit on that many committees. I sit on the Governance Committee for DHHS, and it is about the Aboriginal organisations and their service delivery to people. If you look at the Aboriginal organisations, they do not employ any blackfellas. Now, I use the word 'blackfellas' because that is what I am used to. So at the end of the day they are negligent, because we do not have the skills that are required to do the work within their organisations. So we get the menial jobs, like being at the front desk so that the mob coming in will feel comfortable about that. But the real jobs are not there; they are taken up by non-Aboriginal people who have got the skills. So what we have to do is capacity-build our people to actually get to a point of being able to be competitive, and that does not come overnight; that comes with a lot of training and a lot of goodwill.

A lot of our people have returned to studies, but at the same time returning to studies and then applying for jobs means that you have to have the knowledge and the skills to be able to be competitive. It is as simple as that. And when I have sat on panels listening to our lot, they are unable to tell you what the detriments are to Aboriginal health, what the detriments are to Aboriginal housing. All of these things they do not know anything about. So it makes them non-competitive in trying to actually tick off that they have a good understanding of it.

Ms CONNOLLY: What do you think the Victorian Government should be seeking to do to support employers—how to do that to make their workplaces culturally safe? What would you say to us? If you could change something to make workplaces more culturally safe, that we should go away and think about recommendations for, what would that be? You have talked about employing Aboriginal people in Aboriginal services locally. What other types of things do you think?

Ms DRAYTON: I am going to be entrepreneurial about this now. There are not enough positions in the Aboriginal organisations that suit people. But what I know as a fact is that when you have a group of Aboriginal people working together, doing things on Country, it becomes a different kettle of fish. They are out there with like-minded people; they are out there with their own kind. There is no racism. There is no bullying. There is a job to be done. You can find that sort of on-the-job training with returning to studies, for example, and because we are so close to Melbourne, we could do these things. We could set up a flower-growing farm that would then support the flower industry because we are only an hour and a bit out of town. So you can do that. I would not want a permit to do it, but you could certainly go to the bush and you could collect the wildflowers that are out there in season and be able to take them into the markets, which would be a way of getting financial processes back towards supporting them. You would not be able to do it straight up, but if you were to stagger this in a way where you could actually work with the organisation—

We have a little organisation here called Kurnai Nations. We are basically an organisation that gets grants money and then we support the communities, whether it is kids who do not have enough money to play sport or they need to have their fees paid for, and we certainly support the ones that do the Aboriginal carnival, the football carnival.

But there are ways, and working on Country is one way of actually getting people to commit. So you start off slowly because they do not come from families that have role models. So you say, 'You come and work with us for three days'. We could have a native nursery going. We could have the flower industry going. We could be the catalyst for looking after some of the reserves around the place. We could be the catalyst for the roadside garbage that is being left. When I look at all these things, where people go to Hungry Jack's and throw out their paper and do all this sort of stuff, I just think we are not teaching people the sentiment. If we go back to Keep Australia Beautiful, that was the right way: there was hardly any rubbish along the road—and now it is just full of rubbish. So I see working on Country is a way. GLaWAC, the Gunaikurnai down in Bairnsdale, they have rangers. I think to some degree in order to grow people they actually must work with them one on one and listen to their problems and then transfer that into an educational component where they can pick up tickets. A lot of our people already have tickets. They have got their tickets for machinery and that sort of stuff, but they cannot get the jobs.

The CHAIR: Cheryl, can I just ask, what do you think is the biggest barrier for Aboriginal jobseekers? Can you identify a couple of issues?

Ms DRAYTON: Yes, racism. Racism—and it may not be direct racism. It might be inadvertent racism around jokes and that sort of stuff. And they want out. Wanting out is for people who cannot articulate, who are withdrawn, reserved people when it comes to being out in society. You do not see blackfellas walking down the streets. You do not see them in supermarkets because of that. I think at the end of the day they can work really well and be productive when they work together, so I think there are a couple of those things. But I think the other side of that is their social skills are not there; the cost to get licences and to buy cars to get to and from jobs is not there. And it is because they have not had that exposure to the outside world in the way that I have had it. Thank God for parents who did all the right things for us. But I think at the end of the day if you do not have that, you do not get anywhere.

Mr BLACKWOOD: Cheryl, we have talked about this before, about the young fellas working on Country, and we talked about getting the departments to be more aware of that, like Parks Victoria, for example, to actually set up programs so, as you say, three days a week we could have young fellas working out there with them on their own Country. There obviously is more to do in that space for us in government—governments of all persuasions.

Ms DRAYTON: The procurement that you have got at the moment is unknown to the organisations and even to the people, and how do you go about doing the tendering process and then getting a look-in? That is the sort of bigger picture stuff as well. But I think that there has to be bipartisan agreement that in order for these people to get, to learn and to do work, there needs to be an access point where if they are doing three days a week, they are not hounded by Centrelink to go and look for jobs. And I think in our case here in Baw Baw and the elders group, if we were able to get something like that going, then it would be well enshrined to make sure that it was successful. So I think it is working with the group. But it is also teaching them about what the regulations are that they need to understand—and this is about OH&S issues, this is about commitment, it is about a whole range of things, and you cannot do that in an hour or half an hour if you have got a Centrelink appointment as well as one with the job network services. There is not enough time, and you need to have that one-to-one basis.

Mr BLACKWOOD: Thanks, Cheryl.

Ms RYAN: I was just going to say on that point that I think I picked up from you a couple of times that you are concerned that the job agencies in particular are, I guess, not actually sitting down and doing that one on one identification with people. How do you think the system needs to be changed there? Is that a problem of them just pushing to hit targets all the time so they are not necessarily taking that individual support? Is it a lack of willingness to do it? Or is it the pressure from government to tick boxes?

Ms DRAYTON: I think it is the pressure of ticking the box to say that they have actually done it. An outcome for us is something where at the end of the day somebody gets to a doctors appointment and then seeks medical services. An outcome for us is that somebody goes in, they are heard and they are listened to and a referral is given. So again it is about the data collection of everything, because what I see in Gippsland, all across Gippsland, is that Aboriginal people are not accessing and do not have many choices to do things, so

there are no outcomes. To be honest, the organisations are stretched to be able to understand what they are supposed to do because of the vast numbers that come through the door. But I think the only way to resolve the employment of the disadvantaged, and it does not matter whether you are black, white or brindle, is to actually—

If I go back to when we grew up and the Shire had its parks and gardens, all of the stone walls that you see in Drouin and Warragul were done by the blackfellas. So again Leo—and I cannot think of Leo's other name—was the manager at Parks, and so they built that. There were the CD programs; they did footpaths. There was all that sort of stuff that went on. What we should be doing as a collective of people is looking at how we actually teach both black and white and put in some effort—and I do not say that it would be millions—to actually support the growth of them developing their work commitments. And I say this in all earnestness: idle hands, idle minds create problematic things in terms of drug and alcohol addiction. So if you were to actually give them the onus of coming there and saying, 'You're coming for three days a week. Here's what we're going to do. You're going to be working with community members who have got skills to be able to do that'—and there are quite a few community members in this community that have got those skills. So it is our problem and we have to really be able to turn it around in ways. But it is your problem, because you have to recognise that we want to change. So it is working in tandem to be able to do that.

Mr BLACKWOOD: What do you think that we as a government could do, and I am talking bipartisan here, in terms of, as you mentioned, you being entrepreneurs and setting up your own business and having Aboriginal people working with Aboriginal people? What do you think government could do more to assist you in that space?

Ms DRAYTON: I think that for some of the stuff the onus really is again on us to actually step up to the plate and do that, but we as a community need to be able to write our own briefs around health, education, employment and aged care. All of those things, because we are expected to be a part of the community. Well, you do not see blackfellas in aged-care units, because they cannot afford it for one. So we have to look at: how are we going to be beneficial and how does that then resonate? If you have home and community care programs, you will have an employment stream that sits alongside that where they work with the community.

The young ones will work with the community. They go and get their ticket for aged-care support or they go and do a community services certificate. So again it is about doing that stuff, and it is not about joining a fraternity of an aged-care group. It is about being able to stay in your home and be supported in the home. The other side of that is that not a lot of them can afford to have lawnmowers and that sort of stuff, so the other side of that is they could be the catalysts for doing gardens. Again, that would then clean up the person's house and give them some pride around the fact that they could be doing that, and it would be teaching the young ones of that commitment. It is the commitment that is missing by the Aboriginal people themselves because of those barriers, so they do not bother.

We have got 500 people in Baw Baw. There are a lot of young kids between the ages of 14 and 20. If you got them now, you would actually steer them onto the right track, and you would work with them to facilitate commitment to work and then to do the training on the job.

The CHAIR: Thanks for being here, Cheryl.

Ms DRAYTON: No worries.

Witness withdrew.