

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into budget estimates 2009–10

Melbourne — 11 May 2009

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Witnesses

Mr J. Brumby, Minister for Multicultural Affairs,
Mr G. Lekakis, Chair, Victorian Multicultural Commission,
Ms H. Silver, Secretary, and
Mr P. Reed, Deputy Secretary, Government and Corporate Group, Department of Premier and Cabinet.

The CHAIR — We welcome the Premier as the Minister for Multicultural Affairs; Mr George Lekakis, the chair of the Victorian Multicultural Commission; and again Ms Silver and Mr Reed from the Department of Premier and Cabinet. I call on the Premier to give a brief presentation of no more than 5 minutes on the more complex information relating to multicultural affairs.

Overheads shown.

Mr BRUMBY — On multicultural affairs I welcome to the table the head of the Victorian Multicultural Commission, George Lekakis. I will quickly run through some slides on the multicultural commission.

As you know, it is an independent statutory authority which provides advice to the government regarding our culturally, linguistically and religiously diverse society. In 2008 we amended the act to enhance the whole-of-government approach to require government departments to report on their responses and to formalise the merger. Following on from those amendments to the act, the Victorian Multicultural Commission, which was then a division of the Department of Planning and Community Development, was established as an administrative office related to the Department of Premier and Cabinet, and that occurred effective from 1 January 2009. I think that transition has been very smooth, and for me as Minister for Multicultural Affairs — although of course I always got very good service from the Department of Planning and Community Development — it is fantastic to have the Victorian Multicultural Commission located as a unit within the Department of Premier and Cabinet.

In terms of achievements. Turning to diversity, I think we saw that played out. We have seen so many examples of that across the state. In the bushfires so many different groups of different faiths across our community — the Buddhist faith, the Hindu faith. The Greek community, at the Antipodes Festival on 21 March the Greek community presented me with a very large cheque that it had raised through the Greek radio station and elsewhere towards the bushfires. Again diversity is a great strength.

We have also released the new multicultural policy — All of Us. We have made some amendments to the Multicultural Victoria Act. We also have the Cultural Precincts Enhancement Fund, which is something we promised at the last election. This is \$8 million over three years. I should say in relation to this that the demand on this fund has been huge, as you might expect. We have actually supplemented the fund, and you will see that in the budget papers. We have added an extra \$2 million to the fund, and that means it is now a \$10 million fund. I announced the first substantial funding from that to the Greek community on the Saturday night at the Antipodes Festival, and we will be doing the Italian community and the Chinese community very shortly.

Other achievements over the last year include the harmony initiative, with an additional \$2 million over two years. The latest budget has committed a further \$2 million over two years to continue this initiative. The Parliament of the World's Religions: this is going to be a very big event for Melbourne; it is coming in December with 5000 delegates. It will showcase our diversity internationally. Of course it will be held at the new convention centre, the biggest and greenest anywhere in Australia. We have committed \$2 million, the federal government \$2 million and the Melbourne City Council \$500 000. This is going to be a big event and a very important branding exercise for us.

On VMC community grants, the grants program for 2008–09 was something like \$4.6 million. I think that is a five or sixfold increase over the last decade. One of the programs I am very proud of as well is the refugee brokerage program. We are getting a number of refugees in our state, and this assists them. I think in 2008–09 we funded 11 partnership projects, and we are currently assisting something like 9000 individual refugees.

The next slide covers community harmony — boosting our multicultural advantage. This year's budget committed \$2 million over two years to further strengthen Victoria's community harmony.

This is a very well-regarded program amongst the multicultural community. As I said, on the refugee action program — \$2 million over two years to continue with the refugee action program. There is an additional \$200 000 allocated for a continued contribution towards refugee nursing. I might say it was great this morning when I launched the 2009–10 Victorian volunteer plan with Minister Batchelor.

We did that at the Adult Multicultural Education Services centre. One of the young volunteers, Jane, who spoke there this morning is a second or third-year uni student. She is an expert on English. She has been doing English tutoring as a volunteer for a Sudanese woman, a refugee, for the last year and making great progress. It is a lovely story about volunteering but also about assisting with refugees.

Finally can I say, Chair, in terms of the budget overview, if you take into consideration both the appropriations and CSF funding, you see that overall funding for multicultural affairs in 2009–10 is \$14.9 million. That is a very substantial amount indeed and a very big increase I think on where we have been in the last decade.